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**PEDAGOGIES OF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY
AMERICAN SEWING CIRCLES**

A Dissertation in

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and

Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the relationships between historical sewing circles and one formed on the Penn State campus. Through critical and feminist pedagogical theories, I discovered similar behaviors within both. Race, class, and lifestyle differences define most circles including present-day groups. Despite tendencies to socially divide, I found sewing circles to provide a space for communities of women to advise, guide, and support one another through personal and professional challenges. Either a necessity or leisurely technique of hand needlework was central to most women's lives. Whether making for survival in preindustrial times, to sell items to raise money for war or other political causes, or for pleasure, women periodically assembled in homes or churches to sew, knit, quilt – and talk. Inspired by interracial groups formed during abolition and the intergenerational group that characterized my campus circle, I theorize an emancipatory pedagogy through the living aesthetics emerging within the sewing circle.

Potentially, this space can be reclaimed for aesthetic and sociopolitical bonds to be established among women. Collegial leadership is crucial in this endeavor. Pivotal to practicing an emancipatory pedagogy is the process of critical reflection a leader/teacher must undergo in order to uncover their unconscious prejudices and agendas. If done successfully, such a leader can generate a sewing circle that works toward social transformation. I suggest that via the marginalized stitch, women can begin to break socio-politically constructed hierarchies absorbed under a society dominated by Enlightenment-based patriarchal values. In the sewing circle, women and men can possibly form coalitions to help end gendered, class, and racial discrimination– in cafés, conference rooms, galleries - and in the classroom.

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Dedication

I dedicate my dissertation to Ms. Mindy Boffemmyer, Lecturer and Undergraduate Director of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Penn State. Throughout my four years as a graduate student, Mindy encouraged and challenged my thinking. An extraordinarily generous and gifted scholar, Mindy always made time to talk over coffee or dinner. Her friendship is an immeasurable gift.

Chapter One: Situating the Theory and Method of the Sewing Circle

In January of 2014, I formed a sewing circle on Penn State's University Park campus. I completed course requirements for a doctoral degree, and began studying sewing circles that had met for various reasons throughout American history. Initially, I began the circle to observe what would emerge within this casual and traditional female space, and how it may relate to similar groups that met in the past. Although largely ignored in academic discourse, American sewing circles have been studied by a handful of historians and sewing enthusiasts (Ferraro, Hedges, & Silber, 1987; Lipsett, 1985, 1991; Macdonald, 1988). Historically, American women demonstrated paradoxical behaviors within their sewing bees. While middle class women sewed for charity that supported a penniless widow or orphan child, they refused to socialize with poor people. Hypocrisy ran rampant particularly during abolition, when most female anti-slavery bees prohibited freed black women from joining! For every woman who bravely faced social disgrace for defying gender, class, and racial norms, dozens of others separated their sociopolitical sewing from action. Living within an Enlightenment culture dominated by Anglo-European hetero-patriarchal values, women, consciously or not, continued acting out socially acceptable feminine behaviors within their circles.

Despite such contradictions, the sewing circle cultivated varying degrees of female support networks. Although consistently divided by family, neighborhood, church affiliation, race, and class, sewing circles provided a space for women to participate in sociopolitical causes throughout the history of United States. Theorizing within this relational frame, I began to explore a sewing circle meeting within a large, research-driven University and its outgrowth, a small, isolated college town. In the campus setting, I hoped to attract a variety of participants, drawing from students, faculty, and staff

ranging in age, gender, race, and sociocultural backgrounds. Further, I sought to create a group in the spirit of inclusion; knitters, embroiderers, crocheters, cross-stitchers, and quilters of any skill level were welcome! During the year and a half of its existence, my sewing circle underwent various changes. Various combinations of the academic and social calendars of members, as well as location impacted participation. Consequently, I identify narratives emerging from each place accordingly. The women's studies and the gallery circles met on campus; a coffee shop located in a nearby town housed the café circle.

Informed by my personal history with the stitch, my sewing groups, and research on past American sewing circles, as well as feminist aesthetic and pedagogical theories, I explore the following questions in this dissertation:

- What have been the pedagogical functions of historical and contemporary sewing circles assembling in the United States?
- What sociopolitical values have they expressed in both objects and behaviors?
- How may the sewing circle's pedagogical and sociopolitical functions shape an emancipatory feminist pedagogy rooted in the stitch?

With these questions in mind, I searched for theories and methods within qualitative research designs that would, on paper, mirror the multiple conversations occurring during a meeting of hand sewers. The approach had to be based on shared stories, one where multiple relationships could be created across time and changing sociopolitical and aesthetic standpoints.

Method of Stories: Narrative Inquiry

“Maybe stories are just data with a soul.” Brené Brown (2010)

Building upon 20 years of using stories and their relationships as central to her research methodologies, Canadian scholar D. Jean Clandinin’s (2013) crafted an approach that also incorporates critical and feminist research concepts. In *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*, Clandinin addresses both the researchers’ and participants’ perspectives. Her approach includes the sociopolitical viewpoints of both the participants and researcher to be interwoven throughout the text. Echoing the sewing circle on paper, narrative inquiry is propelled by the concepts emerging from all of the selected stories. Hence, my analysis is shaped and reshaped by the relationships between and amongst my personal stories, those from historical sewing circles, and the narratives manifesting in my Penn State sewing groups.

Inquiry through collective storytelling is not new in critical teaching and learning approaches. Patricia Cranton (2006) and bell hooks (1994) first uncover, and then confront their and their students’ preconceived beliefs through thought, discussion, and reflective writing. Both root their theories within those of Paulo Freire, a Brazilian activist scholar. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1989) outlined his initial discoveries while teaching illiterate Brazilian peasants how to read. Their stories merge with Freire’s recollections as a schoolboy and university student. Freire and his students’ narratives inform one another. After analyzing these stories, Freire identified what he calls the “banking system of education,” where an assumed “all-knowing” teacher dictates or, “deposits” information to students. The students, in turn, prove their mastery

of the deposited knowledge by memorizing and “withdrawing” the teacher’s knowledge in order to pass exams designed and evaluated by this same “master” teacher.

But Freire saw the broader ramifications of his “banking system of education.” The “master teacher” also manifested as priest, father, mother, and social and political leaders. Narratives reinforcing the peasants’ “natural” unequal socioeconomic status were further reinforced by images pervading mass media. His “peasant-students” never thought to question that perhaps their situation was indeed constructed by social and legal codes designed to serve wealthy segments of Brazilian society. Through a series of critical questions designed to allow the peasant-students to slowly understand and question their habits of being, Freire successfully taught them to read both words and their oppression. From this emancipatory knowledge, the peasants collectively began to form strategies to fight against their unnatural poverty and suffering.

Theorizing from the margins, Freire (1989) identified his consciousness raising technique as *conscientization*, where people learn “to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions... and to take action against oppressive elements of this reality” (p. 19). Freire contends that informed action through this praxis of critical pedagogy potentially leads to sociopolitical transformation of both teacher and students. In *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning: A Guide for Educators of Adults*, teacher Patricia Cranton (2006) builds upon Freire’s critical and collective pedagogical approach in adult education courses.

Transformative Learning Theory

Cranton’s (2006) pedagogical processes require both her and her non-traditional students to experience forms of Freire’s conscientization. Returning to school motivated

by opportunities for promotions and salary increases or to change careers, Cranton teaches mostly white, middle-aged, working class adults. In her text, Cranton weaves stories of insecure adult students who continue to see themselves as adolescents who felt alienated during their compulsory schooling, with her approaches to helping them overcome these fears. Her classes are self-directed seminars where students share ideas and work together. Cranton and her class generated a learning environment that encouraged social interaction and relationship building between and amongst students. She believes that this familiarity breeds trust and security. Ultimately, Cranton's goal is to cultivate a Freirean redemptive educational experience for both teacher and student. Teaching becomes a form of social practice. Yet, a teacher's ability to become "authentic" is pivotal to generating this engaged, emancipatory learning space.

Cranton defines authenticity as a practice by which an educator examines and revises unconscious assumptions by focusing on "self-awareness, awareness of others, relationships, context and critical reflection" (Cranton, 2006, p. 113). Educators wishing to establish a learning environment based upon trust and mutual respect must recognize that vulnerability and risk are inherent in this process. Some teachers, Cranton discovered, feared that becoming too self-revealing during class discussions would impair their ability to assess student performance. Unfortunately, this vulnerability is seen as a weakness in academia (Brown, 2010, 2015; Cranton, 2006; hooks, 1994). Authenticity challenges the typical classroom binary defined by the dominant teacher and acquiescent student.

Thus, Cranton urges teachers to strive towards openness to liberate themselves and students from pervading hierarchies between teacher and student in order to

challenge the unequal boundaries that the banking system of education demands: “Not only does authenticity in teaching help create honest and open relationships with students, but it also serves as a model for learners working to define who they are” (Cranton, 2006, p. 115).

Cranton’s (2006) transformative learning theory incorporates a series of critical reflective questions that assist both teacher and learner to examine how beliefs lead to their judgments and actions. These questions, found in tables 1.1 and 1.2 below, address human habits of mind and kinds of knowledge:

Table 1.1: Reflective Questions for Habits of Mind

Reflection		Habit of mind	
	Psychological	Sociolinguistic	Epistemic
Content	What do I believe about myself?	What are the social norms?	What knowledge do I have?
Process	How have I come to have this perception of myself?	How have these social norms been influential?	How did I obtain this knowledge?
Premise	Why should I question this perception?	Why are these norms important?	Why do I need or not need this knowledge?
	Moral– ethical	Philosophical	Aesthetic
Content	What are my values?	What is my worldview?	What do I find beautiful?
Process	How have my values formed?	How have I come to hold this world view?	How have my views of beauty been shaped?
Premise	Why are my values important?	Why do I stay with this world view?	Why do I care about beauty?

Table 1.1 Source: Cranton, 2006, p. 36-37

Table 1.2: Reflective Questions for Kinds of Knowledge

Reflection		Knowledge	
	Instrumental	Communicative	Emancipatory
Content	What are the facts?	What do others say about this issue?	What are my assumptions?
Process	How do I know this is true?	How did I integrate others points of view?	How do I know my assumptions are valid?
Premise	Why is this knowledge important to me?	Why should I believe in this conclusion?	Why should I or shouldn't I revise my perspective?

Table 1.2 Source: Cranton, 2006, p. 36-37.

One of Cranton's goals in applying these questions is to help her learners understand how their conscious and unconscious beliefs affect their behaviors towards themselves and others. These questions offer teachers and students a concise model to investigate and critically reflect upon how thoughts and feelings generate behaviors.

Cranton's form of educational activism sparks the process of questioning assumptions to empower collective learning. Such critique, however, leads both teacher and learners to also recognize how the university functions within paradox: as an institution, academia can both breed and contest the banking system's culture of domination and subordination. Critical reflection forces professors and students to question academic requirements, teaching methods, and the categorical and hierarchical relationships built within its operations. bell hooks (1994) confronted these paradoxes inherent in a place that allegedly encourages intellectual risk. As a young college student and mature professor, hooks discovered that instead of academic freedom, she found the rigid banking system embedded within the lecture hall, and inside faculty and administrative offices.

Theoretical Transgressions in the Liberal Arts Classroom

In *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*, hooks (1994) develops her feminist, critical approach to pedagogy. Driven by Freire's conscientization and Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh's idea of teacher as healer, hooks theorizes from her marginalized position as a black female professor within the white patriarchal university. While Cranton roots her transformative educator in authenticity, self-actualization drives hooks. Her teacher becomes self-actualized by attaining a degree of intellectual and spiritual unity. The self-actualized professor must first achieve

personal and professional wholeness by integrating their spiritual well being with their intellectual capacities in order to practice engaged pedagogy.

Engaged pedagogy, according to hooks, emphasizes union of body, mind, and spirit. Both teacher and student strive to link academic discourse with everyday living. Inspired by Hanh, hooks (1994) also saw the teacher as potential healer, one who is “actively committed to the process of self actualization that promotes their own well being if they are to teach in a manner that empower students.” (p.15) Hooks recalled her professors who were “book smart” but often “unfit for social interaction,” which prevented them from developing relationships of mutual respect and trust among their students. Indeed, hooks (1994) asks how could an alcoholic, abuser or abused adult empower students?

This support reinforces the dualistic separation of public and private, encouraging teachers and students to see no connection between life practices, habits of being, and the roles of professors. The idea of the intellectual questing for a union of mind, body, and spirit had been replaced with notions that being smart meant that one was inherently emotionally unstable and that the best in oneself emerge in one’s academic work. This meant that whether academics were drug addicts, alcoholics, batterers, or sexual abusers, the only important aspect of our identity was whether or not our minds functioned, whether we were able to do our jobs in the classroom. The self was presumably emptied out the moment the threshold was crossed, leaving in place only an objective mind – free of experiences and biases. (pp. 16-17)

Self-actualized teachers have a better chance at authentically practicing engaged pedagogy, which emphasizes the constructivist classroom. In this transgressive space, both students and teacher co-create and challenge preconceived knowledge. Within this university culture of dysfunction, hooks also addresses the fear and competition undergirding academia. Due to the virulent assessments generated by academic policies propelling tenure committees, professors are discouraged from taking risks that they perceive as damaging to their professional reputations. Ultimately, their attitude prevented them from building community between and amongst other faculty, administration, and students. hooks resisted this culture of estrangement. Instead, she practiced an emancipatory pedagogy that challenged gender, race, and classed norms in her undergraduate courses. She also sought to establish trusting relationships with both students and colleagues. Wholeness, driven by difference and vulnerability, inspired her socially engaged pedagogy.

So far my methodology is drawn from critical and feminist pedagogical practices within the humanities. Throughout their research and teaching, Clandinin, Cranton, and hooks adapt analytical, relational narrative inquiry to build and understand communities of learners. They transform the rigid lecture hall into liberating spaces, full of risk, possibility and reward. Each provides examples of how information is shaped, questioned, and reshaped by students and teachers. Clandinin, Cranton, and hooks believed that the classroom is a form of engaged, social practice. Their teaching styles also mirror constructivist pedagogy (Walker, 2001). Working in the liberal arts, their curricula only incorporated writing and discussion. In the studio art room, where making is central, Marilyn G. Stewart and Sidney Walker's (2005) teaching approach uses

critical, social, and constructivist theories. Their research in art education shows how teachers and students co-create the ideas, activities, and processes applied in the K-12 art room. Inherent in their work is the tension between everyday experiences of beauty and with objects and installations classified as “art” that are included in conventional art history texts. These classifications took root in western aesthetics, a philosophy of art whose heritage is traced to the Renaissance but officially emerged during the Enlightenment.

Western Aesthetics

One of “the” stories of western art making began with Italian painter and architect Giorgio Vasari’s (1991) book, *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects, from Cimabue to Our Times*. The invented ideology converging genius, gender, and art making abilities began in this classic Renaissance text published in 1568 (Chadwick, 2012; Parker and Pollock, 1981). Although many daughters of those most excellent artists labored in their father’s workshops, Vasari tended to ignore their contributions. In Vasari’s text, women artists were featured as oddities (Chadwick, 2012). Crafted by male German intellectuals, aesthetics and the discipline of art history emerged during the Enlightenment. The term aesthetics first appeared in 1735, in the pages of German student Alexander Baumgartner master’s thesis on poetry (Koren, 2010). As Leonard Koren (2010) explains, the meaning of aesthetics evolved throughout the eighteenth century, and eventually became a branch of western philosophy dealing with the nature of art rooted in German philosopher Immanuel Kant’s ideas of beauty. Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1964) was originally published in 1790. In his treatise, Kant explored and gave conditions to the question, what is art? According to Marilyn Stewart

(1997), objects under consideration fell within the Renaissance categories of painting and sculpture. Kant developed the concepts of “disinterestedness” and “taste” in aesthetic experience, and his contributions began legitimizing arguments to make art history a discipline within the liberal arts (Koren, 2010). According to Preziosi (2009), one of the first art history texts rooted in Kantian aesthetics appeared in the 18th century by German archeologist Winckelmann (1969); Swiss art historian, Wölfflin (1932) expanded the subject in the twentieth century by introducing a methodology, which included the psychological implications of art appreciation.

The Enlightenment criteria undergirding the story of western art making excluded women whether they worked in the fine arts or not. Categorized as “amateurs” or “hobbyists,” women artists became increasingly marginalized as the twentieth century progressed, especially during the emergence of New York as the center of the international fine art world after World War II (Chadwick, 2012; Guerilla Girls, 1998; Parker and Pollock, 1981). In relatively recent art histories focused on the United States, notably Robert Hughes’ (1999) *American Visions: American visions: The epic history of art in America*, the artwork of recognized women artists is almost completely omitted. Thus, the majority of artists who continue to be featured in the art press, whose work is bought, sold, exhibited, promoted, studied, and collected, are made by Euro-American white heterosexual men (Guerilla Girls, 1998; Reilly, 2005). Further, studio art pedagogies emerging from these gendered philosophies perpetuate its dominating unequal aesthetic. Hence, objects and media categorized as “art,” deemed worthy of preservation and inclusion in western art histories depend upon the gender, race, and class of the artist.

Throughout the twentieth century, photographers both female and male also had to fight the art world in order to establish their medium as fine art (Smith, 2010; Sontag, 2001). Because of its ease of use, many art critics and art historians saw photography as a medium ancillary to the fine arts, or as a tool for mass media and hobbyists (Rosenblum, 2007). However, it was this very characteristic of mainstream photography that gave oppressed groups a way to create their images of their lives. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the import of the simple camera, and the “snapshots” they produced, in resisting stereotypical representations of both sewing circles and African-Americans. Fortunately, some scholars, including Stewart (1997), view these “traditional” categories framing art works as increasingly problematic (Koren, 2010; Pasztory, 2005; Saito, 2001, 2007). Despite their work, contemporary art history persists in being centered on Western ideas of art, rooted in Western aesthetics that tend to privilege traditional disciplines of painting and sculpture (Pasztory, 2005).

Both Stewart and Walker (2005) explore how many students come to take for granted prescribed notions of art embedded in western aesthetics. Many of the questions Stewart and Walker ask of themselves and their students concerning the nature of art and beauty are similar to those driving Cranton's (2006) transformative teaching practice. Their strategies blend individual and collective activities. Students work individually or in groups to make and analyze their work in a variety of media. Urging students to take a more active approach to looking at art, Stewart and Walker (2005) encourage them to create a kinesthetic, embodied relationship to a work by asking them to mimic the gestures they see in a painting or sculpture. Another central tenet to Stewart and Walker's studio pedagogy is their emphasis on the impacts of mass media or visual culture on their

students (hooks, 1996; Mirzoeff, 2009; Mitchell, 2005; Sontag, 2001; Tavin, 2003). In their curricula, photography, film, and advertising are contextualized as both art and everyday aesthetic encounter. Stewart and Walker explore how these mainstream visual experiences influence students' ideas of beauty. Hence, Stewart and Walker's theory is structured around the relationships between visual culture and western art history. In their reflective, constructivist teaching, they and their students together unpack sociopolitical messages embedded in both art and mass media by analyzing how language and students' personal and social contexts shape their interpretations. By guiding students to question their assumptions about the content expressed in visual culture and art, Stewart and Walker reveal how students unconsciously absorb constructed sociopolitical norms that perpetuate gendered, classed, and raced hierarchies.

Stewart and Walker (2005) expand the diversity of objects and encounters worthy of aesthetic consideration that sit outside of the western art canon. Inexplicably, they exclude the skills of sewing and sewing circles as a form of social art practice. Although their students study the aesthetic impacts of skateboard culture, decode messages expressed on a container of laundry detergent, and discuss the debates surrounding Richard Serra's public art piece, *Tilted Arc*, the stitch eludes their analysis. In an earlier study devoted to critical aesthetics, Stewart (1997) considered quilts as an artistic object, but failed to discourse on any communal or individual practices of quilt making. Even in the inclusive art education theories of Stewart and Walker, hand needlework and sewing circles continued to resist critical pedagogical and aesthetic consideration.

Despite their resistance to western aesthetic criteria, Stewart and Walker often apply art history's specialized categories created for objects made by those whose work is

considered outside western art's philosophical parameters. Hence, instead of fine art, things made by women and cultures of the Global South are labeled under studio craft, fiber arts, applied arts, folk art, indigenous art, and decorative arts. Each of these classifications, however, implies that amateurs or hobbyists, rather than professional artists trained in academic art contexts, are making these objects (Auther, 2010; Pasztory, 2005). Along with the myth of the genius artist is that of the professional, whose studio work overshadows all aspects of their lives. Most artists fail to earn a living on sales of their work, and must work another job. Often, that position, including university teaching, is omitted from their C.V. (Michels, 2009) The gendered hobbyist/ amateur – artist/professional binary emerges. The hobbyist, whose work is done for enjoyment, is constructed against the professional artist working on intellectually challenging and worthwhile projects. Labor trumps leisure in this competitive, inverse relationship.

Writing during the women's liberation movement, feminist art critic Lucy Lippard (1978) challenged the hobby/art binary. She argued that all makers “make nothings into somethings” seeking “to transform and give meaning to all things...Good taste will not be standardized in museums, but will vary from place to place, home to home” (Lippard, 1978, p. 138). Yet many leaders of the women's movement mirrored those of the 19th women's rights movement, and continued to look askance at stitching as emblematic of oppression rooted in imprisoning domestic gender norms (Cott, 1987; Macdonald, 1988). While the feminist art programs at Fresno and CalArts (Gerhardt, 2012) made the home and domestic arts central in their art curricula, feminist art histories (Chadwick, 2012; Slatkin, 1997), exhibitions (Harris and Nochlin, 1976) and essays (Nochlin, 1988) continued to be framed by Western aesthetic criteria. White Euro-

American women working in the traditional fine art disciplines were the majority of artists discussed and featured. Although failing to completely dismantle perpetuating exclusionary epistemic beliefs about what defines “art” in the Western canon, these feminist art scholars began writing new stories of art, with women as central rather than peripheral figures.

Fiberartists in the art world

Stewart and Walker (2005) were not alone in omitting textile-related media from their pedagogy. Art critics blatantly ignored shows in major museums featuring fiber work in the early sixties (Auther, 2010). Nevertheless, supported by feminist art critics, many women working in traditional textile processes launched successful careers in the art world during the late 60s and 70s (Auther, 2010; Lippard, 1995). Nevertheless, as art historian Elissa Auther (2010) observed, all faced a double bind when crossing the threshold of the gallery or museum space. According to Auther (2010), because these artists used media associated with domesticity, most, to varying degrees, had to “assimilate” their work to fit western aesthetic standards of concept, intention, and formal values. Some separated their “art” from others whose work is associated with “craft” as defined by western aesthetics. Others contextualized their approaches to “craft” in subtle, amicable discussions. Such discursive aesthetics divided recognized fiber artists. These stories, Auther believes, are related more to modernism than tradition. Yet, these attitudes held by recognized women artists in the art world using fiber alienated those whose textile work respected and celebrated the heritage of women’s handiwork. However, the latter represented the specter haunting all fiber art shown in the art world: that of the amateur/hobbyist.

Hence, female artists who identified their art solely with women's work risked severing any link to art history and art world legitimacy. One of those was Harmony Hammond. Hammond's *Floorpieces*, described by critic Susan Heinemann, were belittled as "gaily colored...small and decorative...rugs..." (Auther, p. 141). Heinemann and others saw the work only as a strange variation on traditional women's handicrafts and domestic objects, and described and reviewed the work as such. Their epistemic beliefs about art and women's place prevented them from seeing and interpreting the work outside of the contexts of "home and handicraft." Auther (2010) makes visible the divisions between and among women using fiber in their work. These challenges mirrored the larger debates about the differences between "art" and "craft," assigning craft to the practical and art to the intentional and conceptual. Rooted in western aesthetics, the rhetoric surrounding craft dictates that women's handicraft cannot achieve the formal and intellectual rigor of "art."

If critical art educators such as Stewart and Walker had difficulty in completely overcoming the inherent sexism and racism undergirding art history, then most art historians and critics addressing new relational forms of art making within the art world could hardly be expected to deviate from western aesthetics. Predictably, the prominent scholars associated with the canon of social art practice also excluded all forms of needlework - collective or otherwise - from critical consideration (Bourriaud, 2002; Bishop, 2004, 2006, 2012; Kester, 2004; Kwon, 1997, 2002). Strict adherence to western aesthetic criteria as defined earlier precluded any projects related to women's work. All disregarded even *The Dinner Party*, a socially engaged art work cited in most art history textbooks that incorporated a collaborative embroidery workshop (Gerhard, 2012). Many

of the social projects featured in these texts tended to reinforce western patriarchal relationships of dominance and submissiveness, with critics, artists, and art institutions' agendas controlling outcomes of participants or viewers (Kwon, 2002).

While Stewart and Walker (2005) challenged the dominance of western aesthetics in art education, others argued from the philosophical foundations of aesthetics. Yuriko Saito (2001, 2007) recognized the seemingly insurmountable barriers surrounding social art practices that seek to mimic everyday experiences. She suggests that these works rid themselves of their traditional "art-hood," in favor of presenting "the message, idea, and the like in the best design possible, so that it fulfills the aesthetic, educational, and practical mission within peoples' everyday life" (Saito, 2007, p. 251). According to western aesthetics, the traditional criteria of art are based upon the artist-author controlling all aspects of an artwork's material and relational outcomes. Artists working within social art practice tended to create staged rather than emergent relationships that privilege the artist – author (Bishop, 2004, 2006, 2012). A casual, participant driven sewing circle and its natural organic flows of participation and conversation preclude it as a form to be seriously studied within such standards. Ultimately, Saito argues that the gaps between social life and art as defined by western aesthetics appear unbridgeable.

Social practices within Everyday Aesthetics

Ignoring the rich diversity of aesthetic objects impoverishes the scope of aesthetics in two respects. First, it represents a rather parochial viewpoint unique to modern western aesthetic theories, which presupposes the institutionalized art world and certain cultural and economic conditions. Second, it unduly limits the

range of aesthetic issues by implying that only those related to art are worthwhile for theoretical analysis. (Saito, 2001, p. 88)

My vision of social art practice is aligned with that of Saito. She, along with other aestheticians, expanded the definition of aesthetics to philosophize about beauty found in social and domestic life (Berlant, 1992, 1997; Higgins, 1996; Leddy, 1995; Light and Smith, 2005; Melchionne, 1998; Ziff, 1997). They, along with Saito, ground their ideas in Kant's principles of beauty, insisting that everyday aesthetics complements rather than opposes those of western aesthetics,. However, Saito's version includes pedagogical, racial, and gendered perspectives that reflect her teaching experiences at The Rhode Island School of Design, her Japanese background, and attitudes toward cleanliness and tidiness.

Three examples inform her analysis, drawn from her teaching, ethnic, and feminist viewpoints. First, while participating in critiques of both fine arts and design students, Saito questioned why each department followed different aesthetic criteria when evaluating student work. She concluded that this practice deprives all art disciplines of expanding critical discussions regarding beauty, composition, and expression. Essential aesthetic insights, including a painting and sculpture's relationship to the private or public space where it may be exhibited, are lost when rigid aesthetic boundaries replace critical, constructivist critique. Second, in her native Japan, the tea ceremony is considered an art form. Tea is often served in worn, chipped ceramic cups in modest, mud huts and more formal settings. Simplicity is intrinsic to the humble sense of beauty pervading the activity. Here, Saito argues the absurdity of identifying this ancient tradition as non-art, simply because it cannot be classifying in the Western canon.

Finally, building upon the earlier work of Thomas Leddy (1995), Saito examines ideas of beauty surrounding the home and body. In many societies, particularly those influenced by Anglo European culture, aesthetic standards of cleaning, cooking, and eating have more serious ramifications for women than men, since these are associated with house work (Douglas, 2003). The evolution of separate spheres between women and men began between the late 16th and 19th centuries in Europe and the United States (Cott, 1997; Davidoff and Hall, 2002). Judith Brown (1970) saw women's work develop as a series of gendered task assignments made by early humans to better ensure their survival. Later, I will discuss this in more detail. In her version of everyday aesthetics, Saito incorporates women's work.

Yet, like Stewart and Walker, Saito also failed to include the traditional textile labor of women into her aesthetic discourse. Her omission is startling, considering the importance of textiles in Japanese culture. The exclusions of women's textile labor dominating western art persisted within her philosophy of everyday beauty. However, by including the tea ceremony and traditional woman's household tasks within a serious aesthetic philosophy, Saito's theory offered me an essential methodology to frame my sewing circle. The complementarity of western and everyday aesthetics intrigued me. In her role as cultural critic, bell hooks (1990, 1994, 1995, 1996) defines a related but decidedly more activist stance toward aesthetics, linking beauty with politics. Her theory is rooted in the everyday cultural life of poor African-Americans. hooks believes that black aesthetics must encompass the diversity of experiences within communities of color; they need not emerge from western art nor should they be prescriptive or rigid (hooks, 1995, p. 69)

In *Art on my mind: Visual politics* (1995), hooks turns to her maternal grandparents, Sarah Oldham and Daddy Gus, to formulate ordinary aesthetics. Her grandparents lived within an ideology of restoration and reclamation rooted in slave life. By doing so, they resisted degrading visual representations of African-Americans and the materialism espoused by white capitalism. In hooks' definition, both photography and the stitch play crucial roles in people of color rejecting their sociopolitical subordination. Moreover, spirituality is as central to hooks' philosophy of beauty as it is in her pedagogy.

Mending over Materialism: Ordinary Aesthetics

As a quiltmaker she was constantly creating new worlds, discovering new patterns, different shapes. To her it was the uniqueness of the individual body, look, and soul that mattered. From her I learned the appropriateness of being myself. (hooks, 1995, p.119)

While Cranton's and hooks' classrooms use critical reflective writing and discussion to achieve authentic and self-actualization, hooks' grandmother found self-expression and self-actualization through her quilting. hooks (1990, 1995, 1995) developed ordinary aesthetics by comparing the homes of her parents and maternal grandparents. Both her mother and grandmother believed in the power of beautiful objects. They disagreed, however, as to what objects and interiors expressed their definitions of beauty. hooks argued that her parents strove to achieve middle-class status by emulating what the magazines, advertisements, and material culture of white society demanded. In order to imitate these ideals, hooks' mother filled their house with store

bought things; but instead of beauty, hooks saw a cluttered, ugly, soulless interior. Also, hooks recognized how her mother's spending was socialized, fueled by white middle class female gender norms in a patriarchal capitalist society.

Conversely, hooks' illiterate maternal grandparents preferred a home containing the bare essentials, most of which they had either made or adapted to suit their needs. Her grandmother made quilts in the same manner as her slave forebears, improvising with colors and proportions according to whatever scraps of cloth she had. hooks' grandfather routinely rescued and fixed discarded objects he found worthy of restoring, telling her that "spirits lived there" (hooks, 1995, p. 121). Her grandparents' concept of beauty lay not in the amount of purchased items that accorded her mother a false sense of class status, but in the joy and pleasure they found tending to the care and making of gardens, quilts, home, and land.

The Japanese brewed and served tea in chipped clay pots and cups while socializing in mud huts; in a related American context, Sarah Oldham and Daddy Gus retained the aesthetics of the poor but emancipated slave: They preferred living in their simple, rural shack. In it, they created a "sacred place" filled with peace and serenity for the young hooks. While her mother conformed to a beauty reinforced by dominant white standards that willfully ignored or provided negative stereotypes of African-Americans, hooks' grandparents proudly preserved lifestyles similar to that of their ancestors. Inspired by an installation of rooms by Buddhist monk Chogyam Trungpa, hooks (1990) recognized aesthetics as not merely philosophical or theoretical: "it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming. It is not organic" (p. 104).

Hooks' mother embraced the beauty found in material wealth, rejecting the love of mending and repurposing that drove hooks' grandparents lives. Despite their aesthetic differences, the camera allowed mother, daughter, and granddaughter to represent their lives in ways that defied racist images dominating segregated America. In hooks' theory, the debates surrounding photography's stature as a fine art are irrelevant. Instead, pictures or "snapshots" gave black people freedom to create their visual stories. The camera, hooks (1995) asserted, allowed African-Americans to create and share images of themselves, their families, friends, and their everyday experiences. Her maternal grandparents home became a personal gallery. Sarah Oldham carefully chose and placed each photograph according to her curatorial ideas. She was called a "keeper of walls...visits to her house were like trips to a gallery or museum," experiences denied hooks and her community due to racial segregation (hooks, 1995, p. 61). Many black people filled the walls of their homes with these photographs of family and friends.

Their snapshots countered racist narratives evoked by denigrating images found "on salt shakers, cookie jars, pancake boxes" (hooks, 1995, p. 59). hooks argued for more vigilance regarding cultural representations of African-American life, and for photography's centrality to black activism. hooks' inclusion of the photograph forced me to think more about its place in representing my sewing circle. I recognized how my informal images, originally taken strictly for data collection, resisted the monopoly of various stereotypes permeating historical and contemporary craft discourses. The ordinary camera and smart phone now became as pivotal to my research and studio practice as the needle.

In summary, I frame my study of American sewing circles in socially engaged pedagogies born from the liberal and visual arts. With their emphasis on consciousness raising through critical reflection, Cranton's and hooks' students write and discuss their way to social transformation. Stewart and Walker (2005) also implement the critical approaches of Cranton and hooks, but within the studio arts. Here, students and teacher construct learning through both making and analysis of fine art and the visual culture bombarding their daily lives. By situating the sewing circle within the ordinary aesthetics of hooks (1995) and the everyday aesthetics of Saito (2007), I can build a theory that merges feminist pedagogy with marginalized activities of hand needlework and representations of the needle worker. Together, these scholars resist American sociopolitical domination and subordination pervading the liberal and studio art classroom and western aesthetics. Instead, they reveal the agency within the experiences and aesthetics of non-western cultures and poor black and white women. They merge mind, body, and spirit, and acknowledge joy and pleasure as we challenge our assumptions through critical thinking and mindful making. But before I proceed with applying these concepts to specific sewing circles meeting throughout United States history, I must address a much larger question: why are women associated with textile production in the first place?

Gendered Task Assignment and the Hand Needle

Scholar Judith Brown (1970) analyzed a variety of non-industrialized cultures and the nature of their gendered task assignments. As in rural Europe and North America, in order to survive, farm families had to complete certain tasks at specific times according to the season. These tasks had to be done well enough to feed, clothe, and keep their

families warm. They patterned their lives according to the weather, always vulnerable to unexpected natural disasters. Therefore, families collectively kept themselves alive by designating certain jobs that ensured their comfort and survival. In *Note on the division of labor by sex*, Brown (1970) explains why women in many but not all agrarian societies across cultures were responsible for textile manufacture and food preparation.

Biologically, what would be the most efficient tasks given to men and women that would ensure the survival of their families? Brown (1970) stresses that these assignments were not centered on a man's or a woman's ability. Instead, they were assigned according to their suitability to keep children and families alive. A woman could hunt and build shelters; but, because she bore and breast-fed children, some early societies concluded that women as a group could be relied upon to care for children while constructing textiles. Hand textile work could be interrupted and resumed with little risk to its completion. As women kept food from spoiling, watered an herb garden, milked cows, fed hungry babies, and prevented toddlers from wandering too close to a boiling pot, they could raise flax and cotton to spin and create textiles and fibers to sew and knit clothing and home goods. Men, on the other hand, could be relied upon as a group to herd animals, hunt, and build without distractions of children to watch and feed.

Therefore, Brown (1970) believed that long ago the reliability of keeping humans alive, not ability to do a task, drove numerous cultures to make these gendered work decisions. Women's child rearing and household multi-tasking were as essential as men's activities in a rural transactional economy. Yet, as Europe's intellectual life centered increasingly on universities and the Church, and its economy evolved from farms to factories, women and their rural tasks became increasingly associated as their

only abilities. Outcomes of these social and cultural transitions became glaringly clear during the Enlightenment, which occurred between the early 17th to late 18th centuries. European male intellectuals reignited a centuries old debate: What are women's intellectual, physical, and spiritual capacities compared to those of men? What is their proper role in society?

The Emergence of Women's "Natural" Ability

French philosophe Jean-Jacques Rousseau engaged with this question in his fiction. In both *La Nouvelle Heloise* (1761; 1993) and *Emile* (1762; 1997), Rousseau crafted female characters and situations that attempted to show how their "sex" infiltrated their mind, body, and soul (Riley, 1988). Feminist philosopher Denise Riley (1988) contends that within his plots, Rousseau summarized the final verdict on the discourse: unlike men, women "became" a sex, and all of their "natural" abilities linked to their sex remain in the family and the household. He concluded that only white middle class Anglo-European men were rational, logical human beings capable of leadership in government and commerce within both private and public realms. Any human being without these traits was deemed irrational and inferior, incapable of logic, intellectual discourse, and artistic achievement. These humans included not only white European women, but also the working class and colonized people of color whose cultures developed outside of the Anglo-European model (Chadwick, 2012; McClintock, 1995; Stoler, 1995).

These ideas reinforced constructed gender, racial, and class divisions, creating a "banking system" of socialization institutionalized through legal and social codes. Consequently, women's earlier gendered household assignment of keeping their families

alive became regarded as their only physical and intellectual abilities. Female gender, class, and racial scripts, now philosophically grounded, became “innate,” constructed from their biology. Women, in varying degrees according to class and race, could rarely overcome their overall incapability to think critically and make wise, rational family or community decisions.

The inevitable outcome of such beliefs was the exclusion of women from universities and from commercial and public life. If seen alone while in public, women risked verbal and physical abuse by men; in some European cities, police had the authority to arrest them for suspected prostitution (Solnit, 2000). These interdictions prevented or severely hampered women from achieving any intellectual growth or exercising sociopolitical rights. Further, without a voice or representation within their communities and governments, and without the knowledge of female intellectuals, women found it difficult, if not impossible, to envision their equality to and independence from men (Lerner, 1986; 1993). These barriers plagued women for centuries in their struggle to define their roles and relationships to worlds beyond their front doors.

Historian Gerda Lerner (1993) stresses how these systematic deprivations severely impaired women’s abilities to think through their intellectual, social, and political marginalization. Hence, women’s lives became socially structured and lawfully encoded by a patriarchal banking system that further solidified during the Enlightenment. As previously discussed, the term aesthetics emerged during this time in a master’s thesis on poetics by German scholar Alex Baumgartner; in ensuing centuries, the term developed its rigid, hegemonic westernized cultural meaning (Koren, 2010). Yet, when

women finally won the rights to form or enter schools, universities, or professions, the cumulative effects of their isolation appeared in their actions.

Unconsciously or not, as “other” than man, women felt that they had to conform to patriarchal standards, often maintaining their hierarchical structures. These issues continue to haunt women in academia, as many of the scholars previously discussed provide stories of the challenges they and their students confronted in cultivating holistic models of education. hooks believes that academic institutions, even those that include courses in gender, African-American, and African studies, often retard community. Built upon the Enlightenment sociopolitical structures of domination and subordination, the University breeds fear and competition, particularly when faculty or administration attempts to alter institutionalized pedagogy and curricula. The constant standardized assessments that faculty face, which include teaching, service, and publication, feed into this seemingly unending cycle that is difficult to change (Penn State Human Resources, 2010). Ultimately, the tenure track system tends to breed competition rather than collectivity. Such policies discourage reforms even in the “creative” disciplines of studio art and liberal arts.

This tense atmosphere continues to prohibit the inclusion of any activity associated with the traditional female task assignments given to women in academic classrooms. While woodworking and automobile mechanics also appeared in compulsory school curricula, these subjects tended to be classified as industrial arts or vocational training, skills that were often performed outside of the home and offered a living wage (Gordon, 2004). Sewing or home economics rarely escaped the mantle of the domestic or its relationship to free or cheap labor to done solely by women. Hence, textile skills

remain excluded from Liberal and Studio Arts curricula, categorized as women's work and therefore, deemed trivial. Consequently, few scholars considered what happens within a female social form of everyday making - the sewing circle - in their pedagogy and research. Sewing circles and their related techniques remain outside of current educational theory and praxis. While thinking and knitting through the texts above to form the theoretical and contextual foundations for my ideas, I discovered that part of my inability to merge my passions of art teaching, art making, and research into one studio practice were built into societal and political constructs embedded in the European and American academy itself. No model existed whose practice centered on hand stitch work.

Establishing my sewing circle in this space of cumulative marginalization of needlework became, in some ways, a form of activism. But within the traditional fine arts, some scholars had begun questioning the dominant ideas of generating "respectable" scholarly research. Graeme Sullivan (2005) is one of those thinkers who investigated how the visual arts are a legitimate, alternative way of accessing and creating knowledge. His philosophy asserts that artists have always constructed theories out of their studio practices. According to Sullivan, thinking, planning, experimenting and researching concepts are integral to the making of artwork. These processes parallel those done by ethnographers and scientists. In Sullivan's model, theory and practice merge as the methods, media, and products of artists influence one another. Despite his focus on artists critically validated in the fine art world, I discovered an approach of blending my sewing circle, its participants, the objects they hand made, and our discussions into my thinking, study, and research on sewing circles. As both participant and researcher, I too could knit while observing their conversations and behaviors. Under this example, my stitching,

pedagogy, and research united into one “studio” practice. Thus grounded in Sullivan’s arts-based research paradigm, I began examining this trivialized female social form, and discover its possible applications within private and public pedagogy and scholarship.

I have introduced a chorus of scholars working in the humanities and visual arts who exemplify for me the surprising sources of knowledge and critique emerging while engaging in forms of narrative. Through the sharing of stories, each challenges pervasive models of teaching and learning (Cranton, 2006; hooks, 1994; Stewart and Walker, 2005), aesthetics (hooks, 1995; Saito, 2007; Stewart, 1997), and research (Sullivan, 2005). By rooting my study in critically reflecting upon and merging these theories, methods, and practices of pedagogy, art, and knowledge production, I found examples from which to develop my own emancipatory pedagogy through hand needlework. With these ideas in mind, I also wish to uncover possible manifestations of engaged, constructivist teaching and learning within historical sewing circles and my own. Finally, in asking what have been the intended and unintended pedagogical functions of historical and contemporary sewing circles assembling in the United States, I seek to discover relationships among sewing circles in formal and informal classrooms and other public spaces. The chapters that follow begin this exploration.

After contextualizing the sewing circle within women’s gendered task assignments and how these were constructed as women’s only physical and intellectual abilities, I begin with the sewing circle’s role in the early American home. Chapter Two explores stories related to household sewing circles assembling in colonial New England, the plantation mansion, slave quarters, and a home on the Western frontier. Additionally, I examine an urban Southern family who chose not to train their older daughters in

sewing or domestic responsibilities, and the social and personal outcomes of that decision. Sewing circles forming to support war and social causes are addressed in Chapter Three. I reveal how sewing for the Revolution and the Civil War were key to the colonies winning their independence from England and for the Republic to retain unity. Further, these narratives express how Yankee women both broke from and maintained their gender norms.

Similar behaviors emerged with temperance and abolition. Many women were willing to speak in public, sew, and sell politically charged needlework to fund these efforts. Yet, with one notable exception, most female anti-slavery advocates retained strict racial boundaries in both public and private circles. Other causes, however, cultivated more interracial cooperation. The Underground Railroad, the Contraband Relief Association, and other related efforts to support emancipated slaves attracted principled Yankees willing to risk social disgrace, and, in some instances, their lives, to work toward sociopolitical equality. Then, in Chapter Four I introduce the sewing circles I began at Penn State. I describe and analyze what teaching manifested within one made up of only university students and faculty and another formed mostly of middle aged, long-term residents of State College. Drawing upon my observations and discoveries occurring in the campus and café circles, I am forced to confront the discomfort I felt between my roles as a researcher and participant in Chapter Five. Here, I explore how these tensions affected my relationships with my participants and in my theorizing a critical pedagogy.

Despite the divides that occurred amongst the participants and myself, I argue that the mediated sewing circle potentially heals divisions. If framed within a collective and

critically reflective pedagogy, the sewing circle may be an ideal form to establish friendships among strangers where they can think, write, and discuss, while stitching through their differences in order to understand them. I assert that the facilitated sewing circle has the potential to guide its participants into degrees of sociopolitical transformation in public space and in the academic classroom.

In Chapter Five, I piece my own approach to teaching and learning from my experiences in my sewing circles. Within these critical, feminist, and arts-driven pedagogical, aesthetic, and research theories I have outlined, I merged my own studio and socially engaged art practices within the collective hand stitch, developing a theory I identify as an emancipatory pedagogy through the everyday activism of a sewing circle. Further, building upon the everyday and ordinary aesthetics of Saito and hooks, I define the sewing circle as a living aesthetics, a way of making that can seamlessly integrate life and learning. With my theory developed, I also address how my circles succeeded in overcoming some divides while preserving others.

Since few written entries survive of conversations occurring within historical sewing circles, I rely on texts from the literature on women's textiles, from autobiographies of prominent women who either participated in a circle or who discuss the role stitching had in their lives, and from rare surviving images of bees. Thus, I seek to supplement the lost voices of those women assiduously sewing, knitting, and quilting while talking about their lives. Finally, I include images taken during my sewing circle meetings to generate further narrative and insight into the nature of these groups. With my needle now threaded, I am ready to make my first stitch into the social and cultural cloth of American sewing circles.

Chapter Two: Pedagogies of Domestic Sewing Circles

The Home Sewing Circle in the New England Colonies

The amount of textile labor accomplished by early American domestic sewing circles is astounding. A brief inventory includes the weaving, knitting, and sewing of blankets, blouses or “shirtwaists,” sweaters, pants, skirts, dresses, undergarments, stockings, socks, curtains, towels, sheets, jackets, and any other cloth good that a family needed (Ferraro, Hedges, & Silber, 1987). According to Ferraro, Hedges, and Silber (1987), in colonial New England family, boys and girls as young as two learned to sew. A journal entry written in 1775 describes the life and typical manual labor of a poor Yankee farm girl.

Fix’d gown for Prude,—Mend Mothers Riding Hood, Spun short thread,—Fix’d two gowns for Welsh’s girls,—Carded tow,—Spun linen,—Worked on Cheese basket,—Hatchel’d flax with Hannah, we did 51 lbs. a piece,—pleated and iron,—read a sermon of Dodridge’s,—Spooled a piece,—Milked the cows,—Spun linen, did 50 knots,—Made a broom of Guinea wheat straw,—Spun thread to whiten,—set a Red dye,—Had two scholars from Mrs. Taylor’s,—I carded 2 pounds of whole wool and felt,—Spun harness wine,—Scoured the pewter,—Ague in my face,—Ellen was spark’d last night,—spun the red to whiten—Went to Mr. Otis’s and made them a swinging visit—Israel said I might ride his Jade—Prude stayed at home and learned Eve’s Dream by heart. (Merriam, 1987, p. 257)

This brief passage illustrates the pedagogical function of this one colonial sewing circle: the seed to sewn objects they produced for their families. The young girl’s journal entry echoes centuries of manual domestic textile labor articulated by Judith Brown (1970). Serving to teach the girl her pivotal role in the rural household, her mother, and,

likely, older sisters appear within her list of chores accomplished. They participated in a socially engaged pedagogy dominated by their female task assignments. The spun flax and carded wool, along with the red dye bath, are outcomes of the necessary skills learned from her female family circle.

Bartering flourished before the capitalist economy arrived; some of the girl's mending may have been done in exchange for goods. Although some of her time was set aside for religious study and socializing, the young colonial girl devoted the bulk of her energies toward preparing raw materials to be knitted, felted, or woven into useful domestic items. Her world revolves around her house and her hands. The rustic household was a sensuous space. Touch dominated most activities for both men and women. Unfortunately they had little time to reap the rewards of a job well done before moving onto the next task. Their work merged body and mind; their finished goods embodied the expedient technique demanded of necessity. This sensuousness found within the arduous work of hand spinning and weaving is neither romanticized nor complained about in the girl's writing: they are tasks to be completed.

Of significance for my study are three observations embedded in her journal entry. The first is that the poor farm girl is literate and knows basic arithmetic. Decades before Yankee women equaled men in literacy, she left her deceptively simple record for us to examine. Second, no mention was made of quilting, long thought to be a colonial activity. Early colonial settler women had no time to quilt; their time was devoted to food preparation and simple textile creation (Garoutte, 1981). hooks' (1995) and Saito's (2007) ordinary, everyday aesthetics prevailed in Yankee New England. Here, handicraft

merged with life. Both women and men literally made their homes. They co-constructed their domestic lives in the poor, interdependent agrarian economy.

Although men materialize in her entry, they are not a father or brothers. Instead Mr. Otis and Israel appeared to be neighbors. Regardless, all-female kin relied upon husbands and fathers for their sociopolitical and economic well being. Injury or death of a husband could wreak havoc in their lives. As Cott (1997) writes, legal codes, socially reinforced by parents, community, and church, ensured women's total dependence upon men. The poor girl's sociopolitical place within both family and colony is paradoxical. Despite the pivotal role her activities play in the success of her home and community, she is also powerless to alter her socioeconomic welfare.

As Judith Brown noted, the act of making a stitch was not originally meant to oppress Anglo-European women. Domestic manual textile manufacture, along with preparing food, tending to both farm animals and a vegetable garden while watching children, gave families a better chance at survival. But centuries of patriarchy, reinforced by government and religious institutions, arrived with Anglo-Europeans colonizing North America. Racism too prevailed; in 1620, one of the first slave ships arrived in Virginia, carrying Africans forcibly removed from their villages (Tobin and Dobard, 1999). Meanwhile, Puritans and indentured servants sailing on the Mayflower disembarked on the coast of North America; they looked forward to worshipping in peace and to a better life than the one left behind in tumultuous England. Yet, the sociopolitical and spiritual landscape of Puritan New England became as rigid and paranoid as the Britain they fled (Bacon, 1986). From the beginning, a culture of domination and subordination grounded the institutional and societal evolution of the United States. Within this culture, where

men dominated women and Africans, hand needlework transformed from a strategy for family survival to one attempting to keep women from achieving intellectual, political, spiritual, and professional equity with men.

Perhaps the most conscious example of the continuation of white propertied men's sociopolitical domination over women is found within letters exchanged between one of the authors of the US Constitution, John Adams, and his wife, Abigail. Despite enjoying a well matched marriage, Abigail asked John to "remember the ladies" as American leaders prepared to declare their independence from the Crown:

I have sometimes been ready to think that the passion for Liberty cannot be Equally Strong in the Breasts of those who have been accustomed to deprive their fellow Creatures of theirs. Of this I am certain that it is not founded upon that generous and christian principal of doing to others as we would that others should do unto us...I feel very differently at the approach of spring to what I did a month ago. We knew not then whether we could plant or sow with safety, whether when we had toiled we could reap the fruits of our own industry, whether we could rest in our own Cottages, or whether we should not be driven from the sea coasts to seek shelter in the wilderness, but now we feel as if we might sit under our own vine and eat the good of the land... I long to hear that you have declared an independency -- and by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies, and be more generous and favourable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands. Remember all Men would be tyrants if they could. If perticular care and attention is not paid to the Laidies we

are determined to foment a Rebellion, and will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation. Lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of Sense in all Ages abhor those customs which treat us only as the vassals of your Sex. Regard us then as Beings placed by providence under your protection and in imitation of the Supream Being make use of that power only for our happiness. (Adams, A., Adams to J. Adams, March 31, 1776)

Abigail situates her demand to include women in their democratic government within the Christian principle, treat others as you would want to be treated. Also, she alludes to the vulnerability surrounding their wealthy rural life. War created instability even for the most privileged. Below is her husband's response.

As to your extraordinary Code of Laws, I cannot but laugh. We have been told that our Struggle has loosened the bands of Government every where. That Children and Apprentices were disobedient -- that schools and Colledges were grown turbulent -- that Indians slighted their Guardians and Negroes grew insolent to their Masters. But your Letter was the first Intimation that another Tribe more numerous and powerfull than all the rest were grown discontented. -- This is rather too coarse a Compliment but you are so saucy, I wont blot it out. Depend upon it, We know better than to repeal our Masculine systems. Altho they are in full Force, you know they are little more than Theory. We dare not exert our Power in its full Latitude. We are obliged to go fair, and softly, and in Practice you know We are the subjects. We have only the Name of Masters, and rather than give up this, which would compleatly subject Us to the Despotism of

the Petticoat, I hope General Washington, and all our brave Heroes would fight.

(Adams, J., Adams to A. Adams, April 14, 1776)

John Adams critically thought about the ramifications of gender equity within the formation of the United States. Male despotism was infinitely better than that of “the petticoat.” He was fully conscious of the gendered and racial hierarchy of his time, and he and his fellow founding fathers had no intentions of changing this order. Abigail’s request generated John’s response that outlined the gender and racial discrimination infusing American democracy in both northern and southern colonies. Many prosperous northern leaders, including William Penn, owned slaves (Harper, 2002). Later in John’s letter, women are cataloged with the rest of what he considered dependent and ungrateful slaves, Indians, children, and students. Couched in chivalry, Adams knew that to retain gender and racial domination, theory was insufficient. He may have laughed at first, but he made clear his belief that American democracy would only be constructed with privileged white males in control.

As a member of the colonial elite, Abigail Adams had the education and time to critically reflect upon the true meaning of democracy and how it affected her as a woman. Unlike many women of her class, however, she experienced a significant moment of consciousness raising during the Revolution. Since she enjoyed a mutually respectful and intelligent relationship with her husband, she felt comfortable to write him of her true political feelings. Over time, however, the “saucy” Abigail Adams returned to her primary role as caretaker and wife. At age 50, she wrote a letter from her domestic sphere, which included her knitting. Abigail soothes her lonely husband:

the knitting work and Needle are a great relief in these long winter Evenings which you, poor Gentleman cannot use. Like Mr. Solus in the play, you want a wife to hover about you, to bind up your temples, to mix your Books and to pour out your Coffe, but dont you know, that you will prize her the more for feeling the want of her for a time? (Adams, A., Adams to J. Adams, December 6, 1794)

Once John Adams' Enlightenment-based gender and racial hierarchies were enshrined in the United States Constitution, two philosophies emerged concerning women's roles in 19th century America: The Cult of Domesticity or the Cult of True Womanhood (Welter, 1966) and Republican Motherhood (Kerber, 1976). The cult reflected Enlightenment, specifically Rousseau's beliefs that women's natural *abilities* lay in her devotion to husband, children, household, God, and needle. Industriousness characterized the true women's home life. Republican motherhood, however, took on a political tone; many men and women believed that in order to raise democratic citizens, women, to a degree, must be educated.

Republican Motherhood (Kerber, 1976) recognized women's sociopolitical role as wives and mothers. Clinton (1999) writes that to ensure the success of the new Republic, only mothers with enough knowledge of virtue and ethics could raise sons and discipline husbands to be moral, responsible citizens. Hence, women strove to serve as model wives and mothers for daughters to follow suit. Working within both ideologies, early women's activists first strove to open doors that finally allowed girls to be educated in public schools and women to earn degrees in newly established colleges and seminaries; surprisingly, many included needlework in their curricula. Full political participation was never a goal in these movements; domesticity, womanhood, and

motherhood meant deferring and submitting to husbands in most family affairs (Lerner, 1994). As Cott (1997) notes, real or perceived deviance from the cult's norms made certain women socially and economically vulnerable: widows, unmarried and poor white women, as well as enslaved and freed black women, were at risk within in these patriarchal forms of gender control.

Pedagogies and Social Practices of Colonial Sewing Circles

Although each of these narratives describes individual women, colonial sewing circles included kin and neighbors. Hence, women across generations but within the same class met to sew and talk about their lives. We will never know exactly what was discussed for lack of written records, but for sure, some women accepted their roles while others rebelled. Some poor and wealthy women like Abigail Adams likely hated their gendered household tasks but had little choice but to perform them. Most poor women living in Colonial New England were illiterate.

Surprisingly, the Yankee farm girl featured in this chapter somehow received a basic education that allowed her to read religious tracts and write in her journal. She had neither the time nor inclination to question her role as a woman dependent upon men for her social and legal security. Unfortunately, even an educated woman like Abigail Adams could do little to change her own sociopolitical status. Likely, she too observed the racial hierarchies detailed in her husband's letter. Still, Abigail Adams shows that some elite women could see through some of the hypocrisy of American democracy. I will explore those women and their sociopolitical sewing circles in Chapter Three. The next section focuses on the 19th century sewing circles impact upon the education of northern and southern girls. I will explore how each perpetuated and disrupted their “natural” domestic

sphere. Four stories across time, class, and race, show how these circles perpetuated and, in some cases, altered the cultures of domination and subordination infusing the cult of domesticity. I examine groups occupying vastly different places on the social and racial spectrum in Antebellum America: An urban Southern Belle, a house slave and plantation mistress, slaves, and a newly married Yankee girl homesteading on the Wisconsin frontier. Each represents the precarious and paradoxical positions women had while living in democracy that perpetuated gender and racial domination set forth since the first white settler and slave ship arrived in the New World.

Wealthy Northern and Southern women's lives before industrialization differed from the lives of poor Yankees. Their mothers would be responsible for training them not in textile manufacture, but to supervise their family's farms or plantations. Their obligations revolved around managing servants and house slaves, as well as their own social calendars and charitable activities (Clinton, 1999). The needle played a leisurely role in their lives. Betty Ring (1993) discovered that many middle and upper class girls attended dame schools to learn how to embroider. Embroidery had a royal heritage; it symbolized the family's wealth and social class (Frye, 2010). Hence, a girl could express her prowess as a needle worker only if her family had the socioeconomic means to give her the leisure time to stitch. Often, her finished sampler was framed and hung in a conspicuous part of the home, a prized possession that was passed on from generation to generation. Figure 2.1 is an early sampler made in Pennsylvania.

Figure 2.1: Sampler by Mary Emlen, age 12 in 1799.



Source: <http://www.antiquesamplers.org/items/show/92>

Between 1800 and 1835, teaching young girls and some boys how to embroider allowed penniless widows to earn an income (Ring, 1993). While the dame school supported the widows, and taught girls how to read and stitch, their pedagogical function reinforced the unequal gender norms pervading both north and south. The religious undertones of the samplers preserved girl's submission to the Christian God who served as a metaphor for their father and future husbands (Ring, 1993). Social expectations drove the circle. And, though many young girls may have enjoyed the sensuous aspects of needle, floss, and linen, no doubt there were as many who hated to sew (Willard, 1883). Nevertheless, privileged girls had little choice but to learn embroidery in order to show and to prove their natural femininity (Clinton, 1999; Parker, 1989). The outcomes of embroidery, framed work or embellishment of cloth related more to western aesthetics; nonetheless, as an art form it was never seriously considered in the western art canon because of its association with women, (Parker, 1989; Parker & Pollock, 1981). In their

charitable work, however, wealthy girls made items that were practical and therefore closely aligned with those considered a part of ordinary, everyday aesthetics (hooks, 1995; Saito, 2007).

Republican Motherhood, the Southern Belle and the Stitch

Anya Jabour (2011) wrote extensively about one Southern family who, for a time, resisted the cult of domesticity while raising their daughters. Instead, William and Elizabeth Wirt eschewed both the cult and the dame in favor of an education undergirded by Republican Motherhood. The Wirt family exemplified evolving educational ideas concerning wealthy southern white women. Belonging to the southern professional class, both parents had received elite educations for their time. William Wirt was a successful lawyer who was often away. Their household included paid servants and between five and ten slaves.

Jabour (2011) writes that along with many other wealthy southern parents married shortly after the signing of the US Constitution, the Wirts absorbed the rhetoric surrounding republican motherhood, and committed to educating their daughters as classical scholars. Under the tutelage of their father, the two elder daughters, Laura and Elizabeth, learned Greek, Latin, physics and chemistry. Unlike the typical wealthy southern girl, it appears that instead of learning embroidery they were sent to a series of seminaries and private tutors. In fact, the only sewing circle they participated in was for a church-related charity supporting Liberia, the colony in West Africa formed to “re settle” freed slaves. On Saturday afternoons, both Laura and Elizabeth struggled to make purses and pincushions to sell for the charities’ benefit. The girls’ scholarship overshadowed their social lives, religious study, benevolence, and sewing.

But when they reached early adulthood and adolescence, the Wirts saw their grave error. At ages 21 and 15 respectively, neither Laura nor Elizabeth could run their mother's household. Instead, they preferred their books to debuts, socializing, and sewing. The Wirts learned quickly that women were not "naturally" endowed to domestic life. By this time, the cult of domesticity overshadowed the more progressive Republican Motherhood philosophy. Henceforth, the Wirts' childrearing strategies changed drastically with successive girl children. Mrs. Wirt replaced her husband, as supervisor of their younger daughters' education, which was appropriate to their gender and class. Along with a more modest liberal arts education, they also learned how to supervise servants and slaves, entertain guests and suitors, and to sew. Time was also devoted to attending church and reading the Bible. Often, the Wirt girls learned these behaviors from both their mother and from local neighborhood intergenerational groups of women who were either relatives or a part of their Episcopalian church. With them, they worked toward self-improvement and benevolence, behaviors expected of elite southern women.

Eventually, the youngest Wirt girls' charity efforts virtually replaced scholarly instruction. They devoted time sewing clothes for the poor on behalf of the Dorcas Society and other charities. The impact of their more focused religious instruction inspired them to engage their house slaves and servants in singing hymns and saying prayers with their family. They even went so far as to teach slave children how to read. The Wirts' younger daughters learned that their job as southern women was lifelong service to husbands, children, and church benevolence.

Pedagogies and Social Practices of the Elite Urban Southern Sewing Circle

Pedagogically and socially, the teaching functions of the two Wirt family circles, the first aimed at the older daughters and the second designed for the younger daughters, could not have been more contrasting. In the first, William Wirt transgressed his own parental boundaries as father by being the sole educator of his older daughters. Rather than training them to be Republican mothers, he educated them to be scholarly Republican women. Their intellectual prowess equaled or surpassed those of their male peers. Laura and Elizabeth Wirt proved that women are made, not born. They illustrated that women's domestic abilities according to the cult of domesticity were anything but natural; these tasks had to be learned and were entirely socially constructed. Their hand sewing experience was limited to the Liberian society, an irony since the girls lived in a slaveholding home. The small pincushions and purses, made to sell at church events, represented a far more privileged aesthetic work than the ordinary, everyday textile labor of the Yankee farm girl. Laura and Elizabeth appeared to have lacked the skill or the passion to stitch; a few hours of church charity sewing served as an aside to their serious studies.

However, the girls paid a price for their erudition. Their father almost totally disassociated himself from them; as a result they experienced bouts of physical and mental illness. Unfortunately, for Laura and Elizabeth, the only professions remotely open to single Southern women were housekeeper, seamstress, or governess. Unlike the Grimké's, who after critically reflecting upon their paradoxical and immoral stance as women and slaveholders joined the antislavery movement, Laura and Elizabeth capitulated to their social expectations (Ginzberg, 2000). Both married. Their traumatic

and unfair experiences failed to make them antislavery or women's rights advocates. Although they may have shared words about their predicament privately, neither fought against their parent's desires. They reflected the intellectual but nevertheless dependent wife and mother as exemplified by Abigail Adams. The classical education Laura and Elizabeth received did not alter their attitudes toward gender or race in their household. Ironically, what little sewing they did went toward an effort to ship emancipated slaves back to Africa, then considered a moderate effort to deal with free black people. But neither they nor their family had any intentions of freeing their slaves, even if it was to send them out of the United States. The passion they felt for book learning was eventually replaced by marriage, family, and supervising an urban elite southern household. Racial and gendered hierarchies remained intact.

The more traditional education of the younger girls aligned with the values infusing the cult of domesticity. Increasingly, supervising the household, sewing, religion, and charitable work became central to the younger Wirt daughters' lives. Their socially engaged pedagogy included older women from their church and community to ensure that the girls perpetuated their gendered expectations as urban Southern girls. Their charitable sewing was far more sophisticated and utilitarian than that of their older siblings. The clothes they hand sewed for the Dorcas' poor symbolized an everyday, ordinary aesthetic far removed from their own elite worlds.

Elizabeth and William Wirt learned that their misguided but well intentioned educational ideas concerning their daughters would cause them to be socially disgraced. Hence, they sought not to repeat them. Still, despite the religious fervor of the younger girls and their new attitudes toward their house slaves, they to failed to see them as

equals, and emancipate them. Again, the gender and racial hierarchy's infusing their society, religion, and class overshadowed any critically reflective attempts to alter dominating and submissive roles that they enacted over others. Finally, none of the Wirt girls could politically confront their vulnerability as dependents without the legal rights necessary within a patriarchal American democracy.

Pedagogies of the Slave and Mistress Circles

Republican Motherhood may have caused some Southern parents to transgress boundaries of what defined a cultivated southern daughter, but neither the Wirt girls' education nor their social status could enable them to enter male only professions or to critically reflect upon how their dependence related to that of their slaves. Without critically engaging in painful self-actualization, the Wirt girls' scholarly knowledge failed to generate a consciousness analytical enough to take action, either to work toward women's rights or abolition.

As Tobin and Dobard (1999) reveal, slaves were not allowed to speak their language upon their arrival in the American colonies. Laws prohibited owners from teaching them to read and write. Despite those prohibitions, some slaveholders, like the younger Wirt daughters, broke this law. Still, most slaves remained illiterate, relying on the coded language they created in conversation and in songs to pass along important news or information. The brutal impacts of gender and racial subordination, however, fell to slave women. Daily, they faced multiple threats of being sold and removed from their families and sexual assault. Female house slaves navigated contrasting worlds within the plantation mansion and slave shacks. In their sewing circles, they witnessed the dizzying

sociopolitical disparities among poor black and wealthy white southern society.

Uncertainty ruled their lives.

The quality of the house slaves' life depended upon their relationship to their mistress. The female house slave could be punished or sold for any perceived or suspected rebelliousness (Fry, 1990). Jane Arthur Bond understood the perils of living life as a piece of property vulnerable to the sexual coercion of her Master and anger from her mistress. Historian Gladys Marie Fry (1990) describes her life. Born into a Kentucky plantation in 1848, Jane was given to Belinda Arthur as a wedding gift from her father. Shortly thereafter, Arthur's husband, Preston Bond, a Methodist minister, began raping Jane. Relations between house slave and mistress grew tense. But White Southern women refused to blame sexual transgressions on their husbands. Rather, they believed that black women seduced them. This unjust stigma of sexual promiscuity dogged relations between white and freed black women in both the north and south well after the Civil War ended.

After the birth her second son, Jane was removed from the service of Belinda and Preston. She once again was given as a wedding present to Preston's sister, Rebecca. Fortunately for both house slave and mistress, the plantation master appeared to leave Jane alone. The two women, shown in Figure 2.2, formed a close relationship, and made many quilts together. Bond, like many other house slaves in antebellum society, learned the traditional patterns derived from the Anglo-American foursquare patch. The images of the preserved quilts made by both Jane and Rebecca reveal their skillful needlework, color sense, and variations of the traditional American quilt square designs.

Pedagogies and Social Practices of the Mistress and Slave Sewing Circle

Figure 2.2: Jane Bond and Rebecca Bond circa 1850



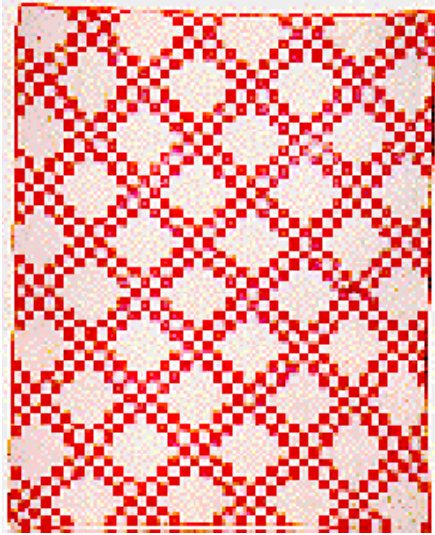
Source: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/bond.html>

The overriding socially engaged pedagogy of the female domestic slave was to learn as quickly as possible how to navigate a society dominated by master, mistress, and children. Jane was given as a wedding gift and forced to leave her former master and any family ties to begin life anew, twice. Her relationships with the newlyweds Belinda and Preston Bond were far from peaceful. Being a man of God did not stop Preston from exerting domination over his female slave. His behavior was sanctioned by Southern white male society and the sociopolitical patriarchy undergirding American democracy. Jane incurred the unjust wrath of her mistress, caught in the crossfire between husband and wife, as the victim of sexual abuse. In a world ruled by denial and fear, Belinda inflicted the abuse and anger she felt toward her husband upon her innocent house slave. Mercifully, Jane was given away once again as another wedding gift to Rebecca Bond,

who proved to be at least a pleasant mistress. Still, as close as Rebecca was to Jane, she never emancipated her. Rebecca either refused or was unable to critically reflect upon the injustices surrounding slavery and her relationship with Jane; hence, she experienced no degree of consciousness raising. Ultimately, after the Civil War, Jane returned to her original owner's household, the Arthur's (Frye, 1990). Ironically, the women's equality emerged within their joint handwork. Their fabrics, color, and patterns show their passion for composition within the ordinary, everyday aesthetics occurring within their piecing and quilting.

Frye (1990) observed that many house slaves like Jane absorbed their mistresses' aesthetics and merged them the appliqué and tied or knotted approaches from their ancestors in West Africa. For those house and field slaves, however, quilting and sewing took on more poignant significance than the handwork done in white women's households. Late into the evening, women could sew and spend rare time alone or with female kin and fellow slaves. A quilt made by Jane Bond and Rebecca Routt is shown in Figure 2.3.

Figure 2.3: Quilt made by Jane Arthur Bond and Rebecca Bond Routt



Source: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/bond.html>

Stitching in Slave Quarters

As Fry (1990) notes, slaves spent their free time weaving and sewing clothes and quilts for their homes and families. At night, when they finished their work for the plantation, families gathered in slave quarters to spend precious moments together. Owners allowed slaves to hold quilting parties on Saturday afternoons, national and local holidays and during bad weather. Organized by the “quilting manager” who usually served as a house slave, “Quiltings” included singing and dancing. During this time, slaves also took the opportunity to exchange “gossip” and to court. These rare instances of respite gave slave women the opportunity to sew, talk about their lives, and keep a semblance of continuity in their fragile community. The plantation master also knew that working together, slaves could finish quilts much faster than alone. Collectively, they often produced three to twelve quilts per event.

Pedagogies and Social Practices of the Slave Sewing Circle

During these intimate “things,” house slaves informed field hands of any news concerning the plantation family by using coded language (Fry, 1990, p. 64). Africans brought their oral and textile traditions that routinely incorporated coded spoken and visual language. For enslaved people who were legally banned from learning to read and write, codes in speech and cloth became essential to survival, and possible freedom. Slave girls were educated early to the perils of their labor. Figure 2.4 shows an African-American couple in their home.

Figure 2.4: Interior of an African-American cabin, late nineteenth century



Source: <http://www.texasbeyonhistory.net/ransom/images/life-fire-sm.jpg>

Quilting and sewing done within slave quarters allowed some peace and solitude for slave women, but it also must have given the chance for female kin to school girl children on not only how to sew, mend, and perform routine household chores, but also how to navigate and endure the difficult lives that lay ahead. No doubt, before leaving her original master, Jane Bond received a similar education. As a descendent of slaves,

hooks' grandmother, Sarah Oldham, talked about the meditative healing aspect quilting gave to black women in bondage. Living lives completely dominated by white owners, slave women experienced some freedom while piecing. Within the quilt, black women could choose, arrange, and sew designs as they pleased.

Within their households, slaves had some relief from their otherwise precarious existence. Their collective pedagogies were rooted in a survival far different from that of the poor Yankee farm girl. Although much of their rural life revolved around manual labor, their lives were not their own. Vulnerable to the whims of the plantation family, slaves worked together to devise strategies of support. Consciousness-raising was a part of their lives as one can barely imagine the anger at being called a piece of property. Rebellion simmered at the doors of many slave shacks. While sewing, women merged survival and ordinary, everyday aesthetics with extraordinary moments of solitude and freedom. In their quilts, slave women could express their loaded feelings about their lives while enjoying a sensuous passion for needle, thread, and cloth. Perhaps their sociopolitical vulnerability was, for a moment, transcended into an abstract language expressing their future emancipation and justice. For them, activism through the secret language permeating their spirituals, language, and textiles was a way of resisting both the physical and psychological dominance of white people. Figure 2.5 is an example of an antebellum slave quilt.

Fig. 2.5: Black Family Album, 1854



Source: <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~ug97/quilt/atrad.html>

While Jane and Rebecca Bond quilted together in the antebellum south, and slave women engaged in forms of everyday activism and aesthetics to deal with their burdens, a young middle-class Yankee woman prepared for her marriage and move out west. But by steadfastly upholding the cult of domesticity's values, Ellen Spaulding Reed ultimately lost her life.

A Western Frontier Sewing Bee

Lipsett (1991) constructed Ellen Spaulding Reed's story from letters that began with her marriage to her first cousin, Willard, in 1854, until her death in Glendale, Wisconsin in the summer of 1858. Spaulding Reed's fraternal ancestors arrived on the Mayflower. Her extended family lived in either Massachusetts or in her hometown of Ludlow, Vermont, where her father ran a successful granary. Her close family lived in comfort; the Spaulding women, who received basic educations, spent much time sewing, quilting and socializing together and with friends. They did not appear to participate in any charity efforts sponsored by their Methodist Episcopal Church or other activist work.

The Spaulding women epitomized the cult of domesticity. Their lives revolved around the home and hearth in Ludlow. After her engagement, Ellen's older sister Lenora made a bridal friendship quilt for her to take to Wisconsin. Neighbors, friends, and relatives signed their own block.

As a poor young man with no future prospects in New England, Willard Reed ventured west on the advice of a relative enjoying success in Wisconsin. After a hasty, informal marriage ceremony in Ludlow on 1 September 1854, Ellen and Willard Reed left for the arduous journey to Burke, Wisconsin. However, they traveled by trains and coaches rather than covered wagons. Ellen's father Stegman not only paid for their travel, but he also underwrote the bulk of their initial expenses, including the land chosen by Willard to homestead. Primitive frontier life became a reality for Spaulding Reed immediately upon her arrival in Burke. Instead of living a wealthier version of the life she left in Vermont, Spaulding Reed moved into a two-room log cabin recently constructed by her husband that was miles away from the new town of Madison. Burke lacked a church, store, and most importantly, Yankees. Spaulding Reed's neighbors were recent immigrants from Norway who spoke no English. Recognizing their shared poverty and loneliness, she nevertheless refused to socialize with them. Yet, the privileged Yankee young woman had to make her own soap and churn her own butter as the poor Yankee farm girl did in 1775. The lovely dresses and fabrics shipped from her parents' house arrived six months later, destroyed by the crude shipment methods of mid 19th century America.

Despite her increasingly dire economic and living circumstances, Spaulding Reed refused to confront the effects that her husband's inept financial decisions had upon her

life. What little social life she enjoyed after first arriving quickly ended. Local women whose husbands built thriving businesses snubbed Spaulding Reed during the only quilting bee she attended. Her clothes and demeanor began to reflect her poverty. Despite this, she continued to perpetuate the class and racial discrimination rampant in Antebellum America. She wrote to her mother that certain couples refrained from visiting her and her husband, treating them “as if we were Negroes...I expect they were afraid they should get bit” (Lispett, 1991, p. 52, 49). But loneliness drove Spaulding Reed out of her domestic sphere. She joined her husband and other men in “splitting rails” - chopping logs - to make fences to border their homestead.

Living within the culture of domesticity and her husband’s legally sanctioned control over her life, Spaulding Reed was powerless to alter her situation. Her previous social status also derived from a male, her successful father; she stubbornly maintained this status psychologically. For some solace, she pieced together quilts from the scraps of cloth in her bag brought from Ludlow. For a short time, she had visitors and took care of an orphan cousin. After year and a half of living in Burke, her husband Willard sold their land and moved them to Northern Wisconsin. In isolated Glendale, Wisconsin, Spaulding Reed lived in what could only be described as a slave shack: a one-room shanty. Shortly after the move, she visited Vermont, and remained for over six months. But her upbringing, both inside her home and maintained by her Church, forced her to return to her husband. Too proud to tell the truth about her life, Spaulding Reed was already stricken with tuberculosis. Childless, lonely, and in the advanced stages of her illness, her unsuspecting parents arrived for a visit just before her death in July 1858. Shocked at the

penurious state of their living conditions, the distraught Spaulding's waited for winter to take their daughter's body home to Vermont.

Pedagogies and Social Practices of the Frontier Sewing Circle

Figure 2.6: Quilting bee, Pendroy, ND, 1888.



Source: <http://civilwarquilts.blogspot.com/2014/09/accurate-quilting-frames-for-civil-war.html>

The pedagogical function of Spaulding Reed's family circle instilled the cult of domesticity, which included obedience to husband. Spaulding Reed wished to be a part of a Frontier quilting bee similar to the one shown in Figure 2.6, but due to her penury, she was excluded from such gatherings. Instead of becoming politicized by her experience, Spaulding Reed acquiesced to the cult and society's gender norms. Her upbringing forced her to return to a life of hardship, poverty, loneliness, and boredom. The frontier was no place for a privileged young woman dreaming of a large house in which to socialize, entertain, exchange calling cards, and impress her family. Although her bridal friendship quilt, made within the purview of ordinary, everyday aesthetics, was a keepsake to be

treasured and displayed for show and company. Unfortunately for Spaulding Reed, her sister's gift remained packed, safe from the hazards of poor frontier life. The signed quilt represented a life and lifestyle left behind, that of a privileged homogenous Yankee middle class community. No poor white or black signatures graced any of her quilt blocks. Motherhood also proved elusive, as Spaulding Reed failed to get pregnant. Ultimately, she depended upon her incompetent husband, as she was incapable of leaving him socio-politically and economically. Yet, without her, Willard Reed's frontier life would have remained a dream; he depended upon her father Stegman to fund their life in Wisconsin.

Summary of Pedagogical and Social Practices of American Domestic Sewing Circles

The previous accounts look at the pedagogical impacts of sewing bees on women's lives. Although the conversations among these household sewing groups are undocumented, informed assumptions can be gleaned by their outcomes. Socio-politically, what emerged within the context of women's sewing groups across time and space in Antebellum America was that girls were trained in their proper spheres and activities within the household and in society. Living within hierarchies of domination and subordination, mothers, female relatives, and neighbors ensured that girls would perform their female gender norms. Social expectations centered on submissiveness, further reinforced by religion and later advice literature catering to the increasing number of literate white women. Women's dependency upon men for their socioeconomic welfare made life difficult. Yet, white women, wealthy and poor, continued to discriminate against foreign white immigrants from Europe as educated Southern elite women refused to emancipate their slaves despite their devotion to God and charity.

The denial of related sociopolitical stratifications separating women of class and race was so strong that most either failed or refused to acknowledge them. The most elite education could neither politically activate nor change Laura and Elizabeth Wirt's destiny. Arguably, the most subjugated women, female slaves, were the most activist because they confronted sociopolitical hypocrisy and tyranny daily. But while Laura and Elizabeth Wirt disdained the stitch, slaves like Jane Bond found a rare source of freedom in her quilting. Meantime, a lonely and despondent Ellen Spalding Reed may have sat on a Saturday afternoon in her shack in Wisconsin, piecing together precious scraps of cloth while at the same time down South a group of slaves rejoiced during their quilting, watching others sing and dance in their own primitive homes. Without any legal or social precedent, none of these women could step out of their sphere and into independent lives. Women deprived of a critically and socially engaged constructivist education were generally prohibited from reflecting upon and pursuing the paradoxes that they were living, which was a sociopolitical banking system of gender, class, and race inequities.

Significantly, not one of middle-class white women discussed became involved in the socio-political causes then enveloping 19th century America: temperance and abolition. Despite these contradictory behaviors, many women living during the Revolution and Antebellum America participated in efforts beyond those associated with their families. During the Revolution and Civil War, women were pivotal to the colonies winning independence from England and in preserving the union. Further, their work against slavery and alcohol also transformed the nation. In the next chapter, I discuss the pedagogical and sociopolitical impacts of sewing circles upon the wars, and during Temperance and Abolition.

Chapter Three: Pedagogies of The Sociopolitical Stitch

As the previous chapter shows, the majority of women in the New England colonies and newly independent United States experienced the legally encoded and socially sanctioned white masculine system of domination as expressed in John Adams' letter to his wife Abigail. John Adams' "theory" was already routinely practiced inside the poor Yankee home, the Plantation mansion, the slave shack, and the western homestead. Within these domestic contexts, women could do little to change their absolute dependence upon fathers, husbands, or slave masters. Despite their inability to alter their situations and their refusal to acknowledge the paradox of slavery, the Anglo-American household and church-based sewing circles maintained strict gendered, class, and racial stratifications. Regardless of their sociopolitical status in the Founding Fathers' eyes, however, women supportive of the political events sweeping the United States made time to help and raise money through their needles and organizational skills. As anger mounted toward Great Britain's tax, import and export policies, New England women retaliated. Cross-class and church coalitions formed around textiles. Patriotism temporarily blurred socioeconomic and religious divisions.

Stitching The American Revolution

British sanctions on imported dry goods roused both colonial women and men grown accustomed to choosing from a variety of fabrics with a range of prices. Anne Macdonald's (1988) comprehensive history of textile's role in the Revolution reveals the passion with which pro-Independence colonists embraced "old fashioned" methods of hand textile production. The labor dominating the poor rural Yankee girl's life as discussed in Chapter Two, that of spinning, weaving, and knitting, served as a method of protest injustices inflicted by the Crown for even the upper classes to embrace.

“Homespun” dress marked those supporting independence. Temporarily, class divisions between Anglo-Americans narrowed for the cause. Wealthy women enthusiastically joined the war driven Church sponsored spinning and knitting bees. In 1765, the Daughters of Liberty emerged from the radical Sons of Liberty, declaring that British manufacturers would be driven out of business due to their members returning to home cloth production and shunning their imports. Women’s role as buyer of the family goods became pivotal in colonial resistance. Hence, shopping also became a form of effective activism. By boycotting British fabrics and reverting to intensive domestic textile manufacture, women stood ready to contribute equally toward the Revolution.

Full of patriotic zeal, sewing bees turned competitive. People became obsessed in discovering and rewarding those who could produce the most cloth or hand made items in the shortest amount of time. Contests pitting congregations, single and married women, cities and towns, and elder and younger people, became celebrations. People picnicked while watching the spectacles; men sang the new songs of freedom, composed by the Sons of Liberty (Macdonald, 1988, p. 29). Families joined the homespun cause; newspapers regularly featured their seemingly impossible feats of cloth production. Such publicity also served to pressure those less than enthusiastic to support the country’s independence. Eventually, church bees and Colonial households clothed and blanketed their local militias and, eventually, the Continental Army.

But within war activated sewing circles, the paradoxes facing Democratic ideas concerning women continued emerging. Many female colonists loyal to Independence relished their newfound activist roles in their work for the cause. Friends of Martha Washington formed a sewing circle in her husband’s honor. The George Washington

Sewing Circle membership, however, had no intention of weaving cloth or making garments for soldiers. Instead the wealthy matrons donated money they collected by knocking on privileged doors in Philadelphia. As Macdonald (1988) writes, their brazen actions inspired other upper class women to do the same, irking husbands at this unacceptable but now patriotic behavior. The George Washington's Sewing Circle's sole intention was to give their monies to erratically paid soldiers. Yet, when Mrs. Washington outlined the circle's wishes to her husband, the general rejected them. Initially, he planned to buy new shirts for his infantry, but changed his mind. Why buy them new shirts, he reasoned, when the women could make them? The money went elsewhere. Angered, the circles members refused to sew the shirts. Impervious, the General insisted. Eventually, the matrons capitulated to his demands, and made 2,200 shirts. Disappointed but determined to personalize their contribution to the cause, they labeled each shirt with their names, establishing a brief but profound connection to soldiers. Washington's refusal to honor the matrons' request aired his inability to acknowledge the sewing circle's participation outside of their "natural" abilities associated with their household roles. Yet, their fundraising and sewing was as essential to winning the war as the fighting. Their social standing, however, could not prevent their wishes from being disregarded. Even in the name of supporting the Commander in Chief's efforts toward independence, these elite women were virtually silenced and forced to acquiesce to Washington (Macdonald, 1988, p. 41)

The Revolutionary Sewing Circle as Social Practice

In sewing circles meeting during the American Revolution, family, church, and community united, for the most part, to fight against the British. The conversations

among these historical activist bees are undocumented, but clearly many women discussed and took action in the name of independence. Colonial women of all classes transgressed to a degree their domestic spheres by forming textile activist groups. Their activities impacted merchants through their returning to home cloth making. Poor families contributed by producing extra fabric for the soldiers. Hence, hooks' (1995) and Saito's (2007) ordinary, everyday aesthetics propelled cloth production for the Revolution. Figure 3.1 shows two women in a staged colonial sewing circle.

Figure 3.1: Colonial Sewing Circle Reenactment



Source: <https://s-media-cache-ak0.pinimg.com/236x/08/b2/fb/08b2fb22d1e233d7b86bbcf041721369.jpg>

Both men and women sympathetic to independence experienced forms of consciousness raising, spurred by what they viewed as England's economic injustice. Women discovered that they too were essential to the war's success; however, while class lines blurred, gender expectations remained. The assertive behaviors of the George Washington sewing circle's membership annoyed the general. Despite their generous financial contribution, he resolutely refused to comply with their demands. No woman – not even his wife – was going to tell General George Washington what to do! Like his peer, John Adams, he had complete sociopolitical control over Martha and the ladies of “his” circle. By making them sew the shirts, Washington returned them to their proper and naturalized place, performing their centuries old Anglo-European gendered task assignments (Brown, 1970).

The wealthy Philadelphia matrons, on the other hand, had to be persuaded to do his bidding. Macdonald (1988) reports that they were incensed by his request, and wanted recognition not for their needlework, but for stepping outside of their sphere to help pay desperate soldiers for the fighting they were doing on behalf of all colonists! It is highly unlikely that these privileged women sewed their and their family's wardrobes; instead, they either purchased or employed seamstresses to do so. Embroidery, the hand needlework activity of wealthy Anglo-European women for centuries, was part of their leisurely lives (Frye, 2010; Parker, 1989). However, they capitulated. Through their sewing, the matrons expressed a more personal sociopolitical gesture for the cold and hungry soldiers by claiming authorship: they signed each one they made before sending to the Continental Army.

The George Washington Sewing Circle's boldness shared the fate of Abigail Adams "saucy" request for sociopolitical equality, which was willfully ignored by her husband. Dependence upon rather than independence from men ruled nearly all aspects of their lives. In turn, surely even Abigail Adams could not see through the hypocrisy of the rhetoric surrounding American independence as it applied to poor white people, freed blacks, and slaves. Likely she, her husband, and the matrons agreed that neither slaves nor servants could ever be their sociopolitical equals.

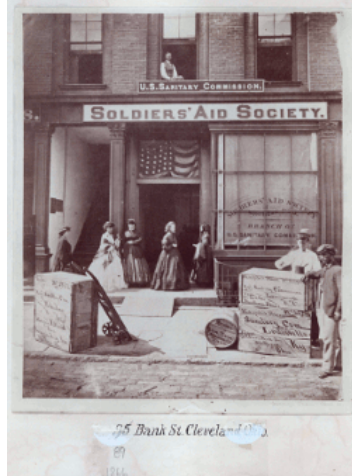
Once American independence from Great Britain was accomplished, Yankee women turned to the social ills fuelled by liquor and slavery. Many women became involved in Temperance and Abolition movements after the Revolution. Through their needles, women sympathetic to these causes raised funds and expressed their views. However, others picked up where Abigail Adams and members of the George Washington Sewing Circle left off, boldly stepping out of their domestic spheres by doing cross-country lectures on the evils of chattel slavery and alcohol.

Debates during the ratification of the Constitution, however, revealed the disunity between North and South, one that worsened over time. Ultimately, the two economic systems that developed within the new Republic, one dependent upon cheap white or freed black labor, the other on slavery, led to the Civil War in 1861. Continuing to live within absorbed systems of gender and racial domination and subordination, Union and Confederate women heeded the calls of their government and once again began sewing for their armies. Trained by decades of organized church-based sewing groups, Northern women sought to unite their efforts toward preserving the Union.

The Civil War Stitch

Historians Ferrero, Hedges, and Silber (1987) and Anne Macdonald (1988) chronicle the sewing efforts of Union and Confederate women to support their soldiers during The War Between the States. Northern women, however, had to first overcome social, religious, and political rifts. Hence, a massive marketing effort took place to unite Northern women to support the Union Army with their needlework. Through this effort, women overcame social, religious, political, and territorial rivalries. As Macdonald (1988) notes, after 4,000 leaders of Soldiers Aid Societies met to consolidate their activities to support the Union Army, they agreed to form the US Sanitary Commission. Men and women congregating in and outside of a sanitary commission office are shown in Figure 3.2.

Figure 3.2: Soldiers Aid Society/US Sanitary Commission Office, Cleveland, OH



Source: <http://www.wrhs.org/research/library/significant-collections/civil-war/>

As a private organization that worked with the Federal war department and medical bureau, the commission also oversaw and supported the deplorable Union war hospitals, supplying them with nurses, bedding, food, and medicine. Volunteers gave

essential moral support to the wounded. Southern women attempted to do the same, but distances between plantations, and lack of factories and infrastructure hampered their efforts.

Although officially led by men, the US Sanitary Commission was ultimately funded and run by women. Under their direction, stockings, blankets, food, clothing, letter paper, among other items, were sent to one of a handful of central offices located in major cities. They knit and sewed everything from socks, shirts, and underwear, to handkerchiefs, slippers, and bandages. The New York branch alone sent 26,000 quilts to the front (Ferrero, Hedges, & Silber, 1987). Women working at Commission offices had the arduous job of inspecting, stamping, and repacking every single item before it was shipped to the Union Army (Livermore, 1889). Notes to soldiers frequently accompanied the goods. Most sought to encourage the soldiers. As a commission worker, Mary Livermore (1889) made note of the more poignant and humorous messages: A widow sent her recently deceased husband's stockings intended for him; another included a romantic pitch, complete with physical description and a warning to pass the note and item on if the recipient was married!

Freedwomen formed their own Soldiers Aid Societies in 1863, before black men were able to enlist in the Union Army (Frank, 2013). But due to racial prejudice inherent in the North, they lacked the money and time to provide support equal to that of their white counterparts. Their subjugated position in Yankee society allowed them to work only low paying jobs with long hours; many labored as washerwomen (Harper, 2002). These black societies, however, suspected the sanitary workers of discriminating against their local white and, later, black soldiers. Therefore, they tended to donate their

handwork directly to regiments they supported. In the South, many Colored Aid Societies formed in Union Army camps, where emancipated women followed husbands, brothers, and sons (Hardin, Smith, McDaniel, 2015). Like colonial women's efforts in the Revolution, these activities of the Colored Aid Societies and the Sanitary Commission played as important a role in the Civil War's outcome as the fighting. Through their needlework, women at home gave material and emotional comforts sorely lacking on the battlefield.

Sanitary Fairs raised money for the Commission's activities, replicating the success of their precursor, Anti-slavery fairs. Women sold needlework, antiques, and art from booths. The huge events were held in Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Boston, and other northern cities (Ferrero, Hedges, & Silber, 1987). However, like the matrons of the George Washington's Sewing Circle, husbands and political leaders became wary of women's new roles outside of their homes. While one speaker proclaimed that "the American woman is no doll, no plaything" (Macdonald, 1988, p. 114), others were less enthusiastic. Union General William Tecumseh Sherman acquiesced to his wife Ellen's involvement in the fairs only after writing, "I don't approve of ladies selling things at a table... It merely looks unbecoming..." (Macdonald, 1988, p. 112). Incensed that neither she nor any women who ran the Chicago fair could sign contracts "without spousal guarantees," the conservative Sanitary Fair leader Mary Livermore (1889) became a women's rights activist.

In her autobiographical writings published in 1889 and 1899, Mary Livermore stitched a paradoxical, often contradictory portrait of the gaps between her beliefs and actions that so many Yankee women of her generation shared. Born in Boston's North

End in 1820, Livermore was the daughter of a strict God fearing Calvinist father. She grew up in the shadow of the old North Church among Yankee neighbors of similar class. After piecing together an education, which included dame schools, the unmarried 19 year old left New England for three years to work as a governess on a Virginian plantation. Shortly after her return to Boston, she married a Unitarian minister and moved to Fall River, Massachusetts, where she assisted her husband's social, spiritual, and activist efforts, which included Temperance and Abolition.

Eventually, the couple moved to Chicago, where Livermore became the organizer of one of the largest Civil War fund raising efforts through her work for the Sanitary Commission. In recalling her commission work, however, Livermore made no mention of freedwomen's involvement. Despite her detailed accounts as a witness of routine abuse of slaves perpetrated by her employers, Livermore chose not to recruit emancipated women to Sanitary Commission efforts. She did not work for abolition in tandem with her commission service nor did she support activities for emancipated slaves when the war ended.

The Civil War Sewing Circle as Social Practice

Pedagogies of the Civil War sewing circles were similar to those of the Revolution. Patriotism temporarily united the Northern Yankee women's separate sewing activities to help soldiers on behalf of the Union. But the enormous effort required to unite the various sewing and quilting bees spoke to the complex divisions separating even Yankee women. Regardless, women sewed to support soldiers who were fathers, husbands, sons, or male relatives, as their predecessors had done during the Revolution. War had a familiar face. And once again, women provided psychic and emotional

comfort through their needles and sold the handwork to raise money to pay for its massive expenditures. An engraving of a sanitary fair is shown in Figure 3.3.

Figure 3.3: Brooklyn Sanitary Fair, 1864



Source: **By** Online Collection of Brooklyn Museum; Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 2008, 22.1908_PS2.jpg, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=10186792>

The discussions among Civil War sewing groups were not recorded; yet through their writing and behaviors, women also routinely stepped out of their sphere, competently supervising all aspects of plantations, farms and businesses in the absence of men (Macdonald, 1988). But some Yankee women failed to see their contradictory behavior when observing émigré or slave women. Mary Livermore (1899) was distressed while watching immigrant women doing farm labor while travelling across the country by train, failing to relate her own transgressive activities while running one of the largest US Sanitary Fairs! Further, Yankee men continue to be threatened by women acting out

of their prescribed feminine roles by merely selling handwork at fundraising events. Unfortunately, few images of Sanitary Fairs and commission offices survive. An engraving that reproduced a picture of a local sanitary commission office omitted the women in the photograph; their presence was literally erased (Ferraro, Hedges, & Silber, 1987). The United States Sanitary Commission's pivotal role in the Union victory remains invisible in mainstream history texts and popular Civil War narratives. While the US Sanitary Commission's fundraising and material services supported Union battlefields and hospitals, Yankee members maintained class and racial prejudice. In a war that emancipated slaves, strong Sanitary leaders like Mary Livermore could not overcome their xenophobic attitudes.

Despite witnessing the realities of slavery on a Virginia plantation, Livermore made no effort to reach out to either Colored Aid Societies or freedwomen in the course of her Commission work. She shared the attitudes lurking within the George Washington Sewing Circle membership and Abigail Adams, both of whom only recognized their peers as sociopolitical equals. Although Livermore's consciousness regarding her own subordinate position in American democracy was raised through her Sanitary Commission work, she could not envision sociopolitical equality with her servants or freed slaves. True democracy and Union remained as elusive as ever. Gender, race, and class lines prevailed within the sewing circles of the Civil War. When the war ended, many women like Livermore became active in women's rights or temperance. Few joined efforts to support emancipated slaves. A quilt made by Massachusetts Sanitary Commission members is shown in Figure 3.4.

Figure 3.4: Sanitary Commission Quilt, Album Pattern, The Ladies of the Fort Hill Sewing Circle, 1864, Hingham, Massachusetts



Source: <http://worldquilts.quiltstudy.org/americanstory/node/6213>

Livermore's (1899) early support for temperance, however, incurred abuse from angered male parishioners. Disgusted by their drunken behavior during a fund raising event held at their home in Stafford, Connecticut, Livermore's husband voted in favor of the Maine Liquor Law of 1850. In retaliation, the men threatened Livermore's family. Shortly thereafter, her husband resigned from his ministry. But even after living three years of plantation life, Livermore joined many of her fellow Yankee women in abandoning the need to support transition efforts for freed men and women's relief. Instead she worked toward suffrage while many other Yankee women joined the burgeoning post-Civil War temperance movement.

Temperance initiatives, however, began well before the Maine Liquor Law of 1850; they lurked during the ratification of the Constitution in 1787. The issue linking drinking to domestic violence and a family's financial ruin resurged, as former soldiers suffering physical and psychic wounds from war experiences were susceptible to the bottle as a cheap and easy way to deal with their trauma. Like the Civil War itself, this movement also had a face of a father, brother, cousin, or friend. Alcoholism devastated men, women and children's lives across race and class.

Temperance

The Temperance movement began around the same time as abolition. Although its appearance as a growing political force emerged with the victory of the Maine Liquor Law of 1850, the movement flourished after the Civil War. As Ferraro, Hedges, and Silber (1987) report, the Women's Christian Temperance Union formed in 1874 to help organize fundraising campaigns to support its leaders' publications and lecture tours. Unlike the Sanitary Commission, women officially ran and operated the WCTU. In 1879, the board of directors elected the single minded, coalition driven Yankee, Frances Willard, as the organization's president. From her election until her death in 1898, membership soared. Members were an eclectic mix of the Northeast, Midwest, and Southern chapters that drew white protestant middle class and working class women as well as African American women. Like the matrons soliciting for money in the streets of Philadelphia during the Revolution and the salesladies at the Civil War Sanitary Fairs, Temperance members were willing to risk public and private outrage by straying from their domestic sphere in the name of social reform. Since most of these conservative women initially shied away from the lectern for fear of being "desexed," Willard (1883)

found a way to “feminize” - hence make acceptable - the lectern to overcome public resistance. Temperance workers “staged” the lecture area, evoking a middle class parlor. They surrounded the space with velvet and silk curtains, and added a table topped with flowers and fruit.

As a dutiful but rebellious Yankee girl, Willard (1883) labored for years to finish a childhood embroidery sampler; however, she understood sewing and quilting’s central role in her members’ daily lives. In her Temperance crusade, Willard used embroidery and the quilt as sociopolitical weapons. Temperance members politicized hand towels and banners, among other items, by embroidering them with temperance slogans. Although it is unclear when the quilt pattern “snake in the grass” became “drunkard’s path,” it was adopted by Temperance as a political symbol by the end of the 19th century. The political culmination of Temperance efforts, however, transpired in an enormous work displayed at the Chicago's World Columbian Exposition in 1893. The WCTU’s polyglot petition called for an international end to the alcohol and drug trade. Made up of hundreds of yards of cloth, the petition contained over 7 million signatures collected from over 50 countries. Shortly thereafter, the petition was presented to Congress and President Grover Cleveland. According to Ferraro, Hedges, and Silber (1987), perhaps the most poignant Temperance textile, The Crusade Quilt, was made in honor of Eliza Jane Trumble Thompson, who led the famed Ohio Crusade of 1873. Exhibited at the 1878 National WCTU Convention in Baltimore, each quilt square represented a different state and contained three thousand signatures of devoted members. Willard (1883) believed that these activist banner quilts ought to be symbols of protest related to both innocent women burned at the stake in colonial Massachusetts and those helpless female

slaves auctioned on the block in South Carolina. Unfortunately, Willard's rhetoric and relations concerning African Americans was dogged with contradiction and racism. The Crusade Quilt is shown in Figure 3.5.

Figure 3.5: The Crusade Quilt, Ohio WCTU members, Hillsboro, Ohio, 1876, silk



Source: <https://crusadingquilts.files.wordpress.com/2013/04/crusade-quilt.jpg>

Despite this public outcry against slavery, Willard's relationship to freed black women suffered from Yankee prejudice. Willard supported African American members to lead Temperance efforts among their people, but alienated herself from them due to her inability to overcome her own personal beliefs that echoed the rifts between white and black membership. Yet, Willard regularly published editorials from her black leaders in the WCTU's newspaper, the *Union Signal*. As Superintendent of Colored Work, Sarah J. W. Early lectured and distributed temperance literature throughout the South. Her swift reaction to the patronizing attitudes of white southern temperance leaders was published

in *The Union Signal*. In the letter, Early (1888) made a point to remind white members to strive toward racial equality, arguing that all are created equal before God.

Another tireless black Temperance worker was Amanda Berry Smith, who worked as a self appointed missionary in the American colony of Liberia, initially established as a Christian resettlement program for freed slaves by the American Colonization Society in 1816 (Yarema, 2006). Devoted to God, Smith attempted to evangelize “native” Liberians into Christianity and temperance, but with little success. Willard and Smith co-wrote an article about their friendship that appeared in the *Union Signal* (Willard and Smith, 1888). But her views concerning African Americans became increasingly clear - and problematic - within her lectures and writings. Hence, Willard’s relationships with her black membership appeared superficial. Although sympathetic of their efforts, Willard and most temperance members drew clear racial boundaries. In a presidential address given during the organization’s national conference held in Cleveland in 1894, Willard (1894) accepted the South’s socially and legally encoded color line, and implied that lynching was acceptable for the immoral act of interracial sex. Women of a New Hampshire chapter of the WCTU are seen in Figure 3.6.

Temperance Sewing Circles as Social Practice

Figure 3.6: WCTU members of the New Hampshire chapter, 1888.



Source: Credit: Keene Public Library; Historical Society of Cheshire County.
http://blog.genealogybank.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/photo-1116-2015-wctu-new-hampshire-chapter.png?pq=1&prebuy=no&kbid=69919&intver=&s_referrer=Social&utm_source=Social&s_trackval=SM_Blog_doclink_1510_00&utm_campaign=SM_Blog_doclink_1510_00&s_siteloc=Blog&utm_medium=Blog

Despite having God behind their collective needles in their crusade against liquor, the intersection of gender and race discrimination prevented a truly interracial temperance organization from forming. Willard did not act alone in Temperance work or in their quilting bees; the undocumented discussions that occurred throughout temperance groups tended to agree with the racist beliefs pervading the United States. Pedagogically, gendered, raced, and classed Christian imperatives overruled sociopolitical equality among temperance workers. However, Willard took more sociopolitical risks as a Yankee woman living under the cult of domesticity. Although she rejected the needle in her personal life, Willard strategically employed it to raise money and support temperance. Furthermore, by exploiting women's piety and needle skills, Willard attempted to keep

American society free from the evils of alcohol. Yet Willard was unable to overcome the deep ethnic, class, and racial prejudices of her times.

Still, Frances Willard's racist and insincere relationships to her black temperance leaders were not as problematic as Mary Livermore who chose not to engage at all with black women, slave or free. Despite being an eyewitness to the realities of slavery, Livermore made no attempts at reaching out to black women before, during, or after her work in the US Sanitary Commission. Whereas, the needlework emerging from temperance, particularly their quilts and petitions, however, were truly a blend of hooks' (1995) and Saito's (2007) ordinary, everyday aesthetics, where activism merged with cloth and hand work. The closest temperance workers came to approaching a global sisterhood was found within the polyglot petition. If Northern and Southern white women failed to overcome their prejudices toward black women personally, their embroidered signatures sent to the US government symbolized theoretical unity.

Fortunately, enough Yankee women felt compelled to help their Black sisters. As Shirley Yee (1992) explains, the antislavery movement began when freed black people living under the racial prejudices prevalent in Northern cities formed their own lobby. In order to rally enough support for abolition, however, they needed a strong white leader. Once freedmen convinced the moderate Yankee activist William Lloyd Garrison that repatriating emancipated slaves to Liberia was another form of domination, abolition gained momentum. White leadership proved pivotal to attracting broader Yankee support.

Abolition and The Stitch

Lucy Larcom (1961) recalled how she and her fellow female textile operatives became involved in abolition. In Lowell, Massachusetts, antislavery advocate John

Greenleaf Whittier gave lectures, where he established the mill girls' connection to the supply chain economics of slavery. Also, he emphasized the girls' shared gendered relationship to slave women. In so doing, Whittier argued that it was the mill girls' moral imperative to help save and free their helpless slave sisters living within with the plantation culture of physical and spiritual domination. An image of the Lowell Offering is shown in Figure 3.7.

Figure 3.7: Cover of Lowell Offering, written by factory girls, August 1845



Source: <http://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/001180073>

Creating these links helped abolitionists to recruit many mill girls to their cause. A collection of anti-slavery poems and lectures by Whittier inspired the young operative Larcom to write a poem, *Weaving*, that connected her role in weaving “a hideous tapestry of exploitation,” with her oppressed black slave “sisters” (Larcom, 1980, p. 231, 255). Whittier’s visit helped mill girls recognize how the natural, coarse cotton fabric they

wove originated from the raw cotton hand picked by slaves; once woven, the material was shipped back to the plantations as cloth used to clothe slaves and use as a backing for quilts (Ferraro, Hedges, & Silber, 1987, p.41); slave cloth, he argued, was woven with oppression. These strategies fuelled the female abolition movement, whose strength soon outpaced the efforts of their male counterparts.

As Ferraro, Hedges, and Silber (1987) report, the female led crusade against slavery was funded and conducted in similar ways to temperance; some helped through their needles while others preferred the pen and the lectern. Anti-slavery fairs, established to raise funds for abolition efforts, often ran for days at a time. Soon, these became the major source of financing abolition campaigns, a model later followed by the US Sanitary Commission. Needle cases and quilts with images of chained black men or embroidered with anti-slavery sayings sat alongside household items and clothing, including shawls, neckties, coats, cuffs, and afghans.

Freed black women living in Salem Massachusetts formed one of the first female anti-slavery groups (Hicks, 2003). Abolition groups, however, immediately confronted the color line. Most White women refused to sit next to a black woman; others selected “respectable” black women members; still others prohibited black women from joining their groups (Ginzburg, 2000). Like Livermore and Willard, most Yankee women failed to see the hypocrisy in their actions. The majority supported the cause with their sewing and petitions, but maintained their distance from freedwomen and men, refusing to acknowledge them as their sociopolitical equals.

Pedagogies and Social Practices of Abolition Sewing Circles

Socially and pedagogically, the majority of female-led antislavery groups supported the moral imperatives propelling the movement: That slavery cannot be tolerated in a country rooted in Christian principles. Slaves' souls, not slaves' sociopolitical equality, motivated the women to engage in the cause, particularly by making and selling their hand needlework. As Lori Ginzberg (2000) writes, Yankee women already risked social slights and disapproval from family and friends due to their involvement with abolition. A white middle class woman seen with a black woman, courted nearly guaranteed social disgrace, possible expulsion from their community or physical or mental abuse. Hence, most Yankee women belonged to either all white groups or those that enforced segregated seating areas for black membership. Most northern white women found it far easier to stitch, write, or petition in support of abolition than treat freed women as sociopolitical equals. As an abstract moral effort, female anti-slavery advocates merged God, justice, and their needles within their activism. Again, Yankee women's handwork emerged through an ordinary, everyday, aesthetics (hooks, 1995; Saito, 2007), motivated by ethical more than social and political change for enslaved people. Despite little documentation of the collective conversations within Abolition bees, most members' actions drew racial and classed boundaries. Fortunately, there were rare exceptions. An image pervading the Abolition movement is reproduced in Figure 3.8.

Figure 3.8: Abolition Image



Source: <http://adventistpeace.typepad.com/peacemessenger/2007/10/angelina-grimké.html>

The most successful female biracial abolition group formed in 1833. The Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society's membership included wealthy black and middle class white women membership. Many of its most prominent Yankee members belong to the Society of Friends. Freedwomen, Charlotte Forten, her daughters Sarah and Margarita, and Harriet Forten Purvis, joined Quakers Lucretia Mott, Sarah Pugh, and recent converts Sarah and Angelina Grimké, to work toward racial equality. In her comprehensive history of Quaker feminism, Margaret Hope Bacon (1986) writes that Quaker founder George Fox instituted a more meditative style of worship and allowed women to "prophesy" in his church. This practice nurtured a more gender equitable religious community unparalleled in history of religions emerging from 17th century England. Although not all branches of Friends followed suit, collectively led Friends' meetings allowed women extraordinary opportunities to speak in public and run their own church business meetings.

As Bacon (1986) notes, the Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society's racially desegregated policies and female public speakers generated hatred amongst many Philadelphians. Due to their scandalous behaviors, the group had difficulties renting space to hold events. Nevertheless, they raised enough money to build a space in Philadelphia dedicated to their anti-slavery and other reform activities. Pennsylvania Hall opened on May 14, 1838. While the American Convention of Antislavery Women met inside its doors, a mob surrounded the hall shouting abuse and throwing stones through the windows. Amid the violence, the membership refused to end the biracial proceedings. On the evening of May 17, however, the outraged mob had other ideas. They set fire to and destroyed Pennsylvania Hall; the Philadelphia police and fire fighters ignored the scene. Undaunted, the committed antislavery group later met in the schoolhouse of member Sarah Pugh.

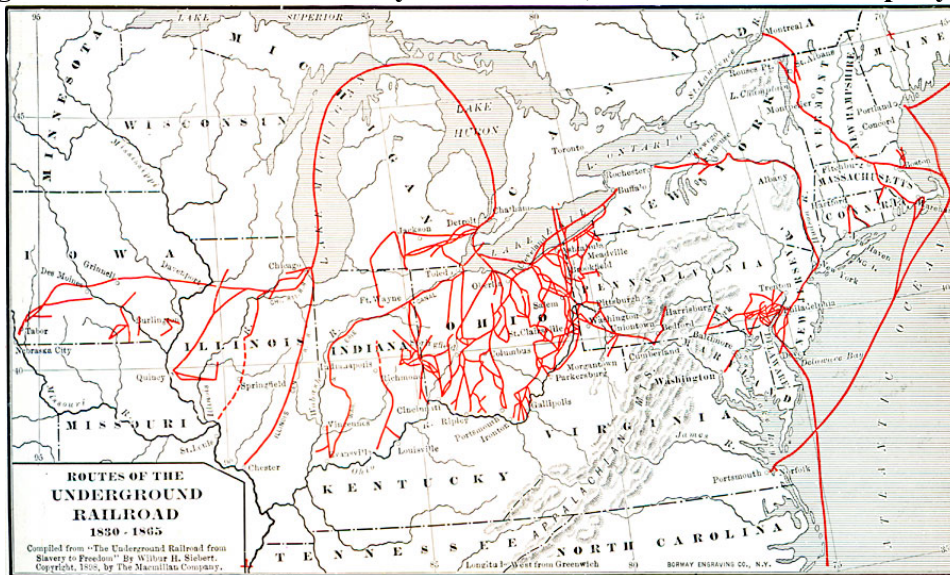
In spite of the violence their actions provoked, the Quaker- and black-led Philadelphia Female Antislavery Society honored their commitment to both the emancipation of slaves and racial equality. Pedagogically, Quaker and black women merged the stitch with the theory, method, and practice of Christian democratic principles. They recognized the crucial piece of emancipation: sociopolitical equality of African Americans. Through their needles, speeches, articles, petitions, meetings, and conventions, they expressed their deep moral and sociopolitical commitment to living a truly democratic life. Unlike Livermore or Willard, Quaker women practiced what they preached. More than any other Protestant religious sect, many Quakers experienced true consciousness raising. Their critical engagement with all facets of oppression allowed them to transcend 19th American societies' constructed gender, race, and class divisions.

Hence, many Quaker women and men not only participated in abolition, but they also worked in the Underground Railroad, and later freedmen and women's relief efforts.

The Underground Railroad

Formed in 1830, the Underground Railroad assisted escaped slaves to follow specific routes to Canada, where slavery was banned. Journalist Jacquelin Tobin and historian Raymond Dobard (1999) provide a detailed account of the Underground Railroad and the pivotal role quilts had in its success. The operation applied language surrounding the then newly constructed railroads as a metaphor for their work. Therefore, “conductors” (Yankees or freed slaves) led “passengers” (fugitive slaves) at certain points to safe houses, referred to as “stations,” where they could rest, eat, and prepare for their next move. In between stations, conductors provided food and reassurance while risking their lives leading runaway slaves along the various routes across the United States. Crucial to the project's success was establishing trust amongst Yankee members, Southern sympathizers, and freed and enslaved black people. Many Quaker families housed escaped slaves. By 1850, abolition gained momentum in the North due to both decades of Abolitionists' campaigns and the passing of a more draconian Fugitive Slave Law. These factors also expanded Yankee participation in the Underground Railroad network, a map of which is shown in Figure 3.9.

Figure 3.9: Map of the Underground Railroad by Wilbur H. Siebert, 'The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom', The Macmillan Company, 1898



Source: <https://towsonglenarmfreakouts.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/underground-railroad-map.jpg>

In the course of their treacherous quest, slaves looked for quilts coded with specific stitches and patterns whose meaning directed their journey. Tobin and Dobard (1999) discovered that house slaves learned the language via the secret network. House slaves then “trained” future escapees by constructing a “sampler” quilt containing the blocks, colors, knots, stitches, and grids that “mapped” their journey. These, along with the rest of the estates’ quilts, were regularly “aired out” to dry outside. Information regarding these stitched and spoken codes was transmitted in multiple settings: in slave songs or “spirituals,” in daily conversations in the slave quarters, and during “quiltings” or quilt parties discussed in Chapter Two. Traditional quilt blocks often received new names during the course of US history; within the context of the fugitive slave network, the names converged Christian and political significance. For example, the Biblical Jacob’s Ladder block, a pattern with alternating dark and light colors, became

Underground Railroad due its ability to indicate direction. The Drunkard's Path block formerly known as Snake in the Grass, took on yet another meaning. Used in Temperance quilts as a symbol against alcoholism, within the context of the Underground Railroad, the block told fugitives to stagger or double back on their path in order to avoid slave hunters (Burns and Bouchard, 2003). An example of each block is shown in Figure 3.10.

Figure 3.10: Underground Railroad Sampler Quilt with coded blocks.



Source: https://www.quiltinaday.com/shoponline/books_display.asp?i=1497 (Burns and Bouchard, 2003)

Quilts made the perfect foil for circumventing the fugitive slave law. Illiterate slaves whose lives revolved around coded language both spoken and sung, could grasp the visual languages of quilt blocks. The most famous conductor of the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman, sewed fabric scraps while hiding in the woods during the day, before guiding escapees during the night along their route (Tobin and Dobard, 1999, pp. 62-63). By limiting their communication to coded speech, color, stitches, and knots, all Underground Railroad members minimized their possibility of being caught. By simply revising their meanings for fugitive slaves and fellow sympathizers, Underground

Railroad quilts allowed women to actively participate in the emancipation of slaves, transforming slaves' lives through their needles. Their principles and behaviors echoed those of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. Everyday quilting became politicized but with far more dangerous implications than those incurred by temperance women. In the Underground Railroad, the everyday, ordinary aesthetic of quilt blocks became a form of everyday activism that helped hundreds of slaves escape to Canada.

Both during and after the Civil War, former slaves desperately needed assistance in order transition to their new lives as wage earning, independent people. Most women's history texts construct a linear chronology that begins with abolition and ends with the civil war. With the Union restored, abolition ends and the stories of temperance and women's suffrage begin. A huge gap exists between abolition and, logically, emancipation. The issue of freed slaves as internal refugees in the United States is invisible in women's and mainstream history texts. Why did Northern women and men abandon the relief efforts supporting recently freed slaves?

The Contraband Relief Association

Initially, female slaves followed husbands, fathers, and sons to the Union Army camps (Hardin, Smith, & McDaniel, 2015). In 1861, house slave Elizabeth Keckley (1968) bought her and her son's freedom through her excellent needle skills. Eventually, she became the personal "modiste" of Mrs. Mary Todd Lincoln, living a charmed life in the White House. A formal portrait of Keckley is reproduced in Figure 3.11.

Figure 3.11: Elizabeth Keckley in the Jefferson Fine Art Gallery, Richmond, VA



Source: Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection, courtesy of the Indiana State Museum and Allen County Public Library
http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/07/mrs-keckley-has-met-with-great-success/?_r=0

But Keckley did not abandon her people, and in 1862 formed the Contraband Relief Association in Washington, DC. Although Keckley's (1968) autobiography, *Behind the Scenes: Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House*, devotes only one chapter to the association, it offers insight into their difficult positions. She and the privileged members of her "colored" church started the relief camps to support the needs of freed men and women. Following the fundraising model of the Sanitary Fairs, Keckley and others hand made and sold items to raise money for their activities. Again, the ordinary, everyday aesthetics of needlework became pivotal in funding the relief services provided by Keckley and her church. Serving as a mid 19th century refugee

camp, workers attempted to provide former slaves with basic food and shelter as they arrived with nothing but the clothes they wore.

Bacon (1986) reveals that Quaker women also volunteered to help the association. Some also began their own relief efforts in other parts of the country after the war ended. Nonetheless, the Contraband Relief Association and other activities begun by both black and Quaker women failed to attract the enthusiasm of former abolitionists. One Quaker woman made clear her opinion concerning the hypocrisy of former anti-slavery advocates. While working at a contraband camp, Cornelia Hancock wrote a letter to her mother expressing her anger at Yankee abolitionists. Hancock witnessed “so much talking and so little acting...,” demanding “where are the people who have been professing such strong abolition... the last 30 years?” (MacDonald, 1988, p. 114) Hancock received a shipment of hand knitted socks made by members of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, one of their last group activities before they disbanded. Regardless, Abolition failed to transition into a movement toward racial equality and justice; groups parted at war’s end. Many of the Philadelphia abolitionists joined women’s rights groups. Regardless, the gendered and racist culture dominating Yankee and Southern society continued unabated throughout the United States. Clearly, abolition was driven by Christian ideals rather than sociopolitical practice.

Disoriented, uneducated, and for the most part, ill equipped to live life as independent people, emancipated slaves suffered the accumulated psychic and emotional damage of generations of forced servitude. Many ex-slaves returned to their former plantations desperate for work. Some chose to remain in the service of previous masters (Fry, 1990). Clearly, former slaves needed more than money to transition to a free and

independent lifestyle. Yet, even Keckley devotes one brief chapter to them in her association's camp. She distances her privileged self from their poverty and ignorance. But her impatience to detail her charmed life as Mrs. Lincoln's confidante spoke to her vulnerability as a freed black woman in a White dominated society. If Keckley argued that the sociopolitical equity of freed men and women was both a black and Yankee matter, she would lose not only her social and economic status, but her Northern and Southern clients and readers. Although no mention of Yankee volunteers enters Keckley's narrative, some, like Quaker Cornelia Hancock, assisted ex-slaves driven by their need to act. The lack of comprehensive interim programs for freed men and women reflects the deep racial realities facing the new Union. Christian beliefs and convictions aside, when the war ended, former male and female anti-slavery advocates' abandoned the plight of freed slaves. An illustration of a schoolroom situated in a Freedman's Bureau in Virginia is shown in Figure 3.12.

The Underground Railroad and Contraband Relief Sewing Circles as Pedagogy and Social Practice

Figure 3.12: The Misses Cooke's school room, Freedman's Bureau, Richmond, Virginia, 1866



Source: By Jas. E. Taylor. - Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division
Washington, D.C. 20540 USA [1], Public Domain,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20738503>

The pedagogy and social practices of the Underground Railroad, the Contraband Relief Association, and other relief efforts echoed those practiced in the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society: they merged the stitch with making gender and racial equality a reality in American society. People working within these groups believed not only in the moral evil of slavery, but also the sociopolitical injustices black people endured due to their race. Regardless of the social, physical, and sometimes life threatening risks, women of both races working in these efforts acted upon their convictions. They drew no border between theory, method, and practice. In these circles, any writing or literal discussion concerning codes or secret members meant persecution

or death; hence, the actions of the members revealed their true commitment to racial equity.

Summary of the Pedagogical and Social Practices of Activist Sewing Circles

With the exception of Quaker women, most abolitionists refused to change their racist attitudes. They ignored Keckley and Hancock's call for assistance in transitioning people whom once lived as slaves into living on their own. Instead, Yankee women active in the US Sanitary Commission or in antislavery tended to become temperance or women's rights advocates. The overwhelming gendered and racist pedagogies absorbed in the domestic, social, and political circles discussed thus far persisted through the end of the 19th into the twentieth century. However, the disruption of racial and gender inequality within the Underground Railroad, the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, the Contraband Relief Association and other related support efforts for freed slaves propelled future social transformation, which culminated in the mid to late twentieth century Civil Rights and women's liberation movements.

Meanwhile, the women's rights movement, specifically the fight for women's suffrage, along with Temperance, took center stage in post Civil War politics. While Temperance women embraced the stitch, most suffragettes rejected needlework in any form (Cott, 1987). Regardless, as Kyra E. Hicks (2003) and Anne Macdonald (1988) show, women in great numbers across race and class continued to knit, embroider, and quilt. Many women's publications, among them *Good Housekeeping*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *McCall's*, *Vogue*, and *Ladies Home Journal*, replaced *Godey's Lady's Book* when it ceased publication in 1878 (Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, 2016). Eager to sell and expand their market, their advertisers separated "real" women – those who continued

to sew or knit – from those wanting the vote (Macdonald, 1988). But the face of women's needlework remained firmly white and middle class (Hicks, 2003; Macdonald, 1988). These publications persisted in featuring only privileged white women in their pages. Kyra E. Hicks' (2003) comprehensive sourcebook featuring African American quilting begins to address historical omissions by these and other mainstream periodicals. After the Civil War and during the twentieth century, black women's needlework was overlooked in American craft texts.

The Ordinary, Everyday Twentieth Century Stitch

After the Civil War, women increasingly purchased fabrics, clothing, and home goods as industrialization made textiles more affordable. Although sewing circles continued, for the majority of American women, their necessity for their family's survival evaporated. By 1902, bees were being reimagined and replayed by women hosting "old fashioned quilting" parties (Gordon and Horton, 2009). Only poor women continued to sew out of necessity, either for their households or as poorly paid piece workers in sweatshops (Beardsley, 2002). For the middle and upper classes, stitching became a hobby, done at one's leisure as embroidery had been for centuries. Middle class sewing circles evolved, but were now more firmly identified as a casual social activity (Stoller, 2003). Still, sewing retained its associations with normalized, classed, and raced femininity. Girls continued to learn sewing skills in a variety of settings, including all girls' clubs and as vocational training in public and private schools (Hicks, 2003; Johnson, 2000; Woody, 1929).

Despite its Enlightenment-rooted associations with housework, needlework continued to open educational doors to women during the twentieth century, as it had

during the dame school of Colonial New England. Land grant universities established under the Morrill Act created separate curricula for women that emphasized domestic skills (Macdonald, 1988). In 1899, sewing manuals for young girls appeared when home economics developed into an academic discipline, led by college-educated women (Heggestad, 2016; Klickmann, 1899). Needle arts became a “serious” subject rather than a communal task to be taught by female family members. Regardless of its label, domestic science never became a permanent part of the liberal or studio art disciplines. By the late twentieth century, home economics disappeared as an academic major when the women’s liberation movement forced colleges and universities to lift their admission restrictions to women (Cott, 1987; Heggestad, 2016).

Similar to the first women’s rights movement that began a hundred years earlier, sewing inherited its oppressive mantel during “second wave” feminism (Stoller, 2003). Yet, after the 9/11 attacks, hand needlework resurfaced as a popular craft among young and early middle aged American women (Robertson, 2011). I witnessed this phenomenon in 2004, while working at a yarn shop in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Whether knitting for a cause (Greer, 2008), charity (Christiansen & Shirobayashi, 2011) or pleasure (Melville, 2002; Stoller, 2003), a variety of new handwork texts crowded bookshelves. Women opened brick and mortar or online stores to cater to new clientele while existing shops and large craft chains rushed to stock the latest yarns and patterns designed by newly celebrated designers or celebrities. Some started websites featuring their activist craft efforts (Greer, 2008, 2011, 2014; Moore and Prain, 2009). While working in that yarn shop, I did not recall one pattern, magazine, or book that focused solely on black or poor women’s handwork or patterns. Ten years later, working within this racist and classed

craft context, I began my sewing circle at Penn State, hoping to change this persistent narrative.

In the next chapter, I explore the sewing circle that evolved from my original group formed on the Penn State campus. Through our hand needlework, I observed what emerged pedagogically and socially within the context of a large research university and its environs. When I began my campus sewing circle, I sought to imagine what might have transpired between and among groups of women throughout American history as they knitted or sewed, either for a cause, their families, or for themselves. Casting on the unknown, I began to knit their stories alongside those that manifested in my study.

Chapter Four: Pedagogies of the Campus and Town Sewing Circles

“ I couldn’t wait to get here! I needed to talk to a bunch of intelligent women.”

Participant, Café Sewing Circle, Summer 2014

From January 2014 until May 2015, I held lead a series of sewing circles on and near Penn State’s University Park campus. I began with one question: what would emerge in a sewing circle? Then, friends and I invited knitters, embroiderers, quilters, crocheters, and cross-stitchers to participate. Pedagogically, much emerged. Over the course of sixteen months, I recognized that our passion for stitching tended to transcend social boundaries. Hand needlework done collectively had an ability to establish ranges of formal and informal relationships between and among strangers. Overall, I discovered a fertile space full of pedagogical potential. I saw how women’s shared passion for the stitch, at times could transcend differences in age, race, and lifestyle. Some members developed casual acquaintances while others solidified pre-existing friendships. Participants generously offered to help one another with technical challenges, materials, or tools. Other support systems manifested to help women navigate the vicissitudes of graduate school, aging parents, or unexpected retirement.

Participation constantly changed according to a variety of factors. Social and academic calendars or bus schedules influenced attendance. Other issues emerged as well. Age, professional status, and personal responsibilities also impacted membership and group dynamics. Although the sewing circles retained an intergenerational membership, groups tended to split according to combinations of age, relationship, and professional status. Despite these divides, gestures of camaraderie emerged before each

event, starting with the question: What are you making? Then, members enthusiastically began a “show and tell,” followed by conversations about yarns and patterns for the next project or a new local or online source or materials.

What distinguished my campus and town circles from our historical precedents was that we chose to engage in manual handwork. None of us had to sew, knit or embroider for survival or to retain gender and social status. My group met by choice, motivated by pleasure and community. At any time, we could stop knitting or sewing without harming our family, social positions, or gendered expectations. We did not have to make any item for our homes, kin, mistresses, or even ourselves. Further, we did not have to “prove” our femininity and potential as wives. Ironically, we relished hand needlework due to the respite it provided from either studies or, in some cases, husbands and children!

Making the First Stitch: The Women’s Studies Circle

Initially, my sewing circle met in the women's studies conference room inside the Willard Building on the Penn State campus the last two Tuesdays of each month. What attracted me to this location was its convenience and space, which had been reconfigured by some of the women studies faculty. Unlike most conference rooms, the long rectangular meeting table stood to one side of the room, leaving a large open space that could be rearranged in any form. Also, there was a loveseat and overstuffed chair, enabling the space to “read” as a living room as opposed to a place for formal meetings. Once I secured the space, I began spreading the word about my sewing circle in classes, hallways, parties, and on my daily walks to and from campus; I never had to formally “recruit” participants.

Attendance at the bimonthly meetings ranged from two to seven participants. The two women's studies faculty who joined were from former English and Dutch colonies. They were married, childless, and between the ages of 45 and 55. Graduate students between the ages of 23 and 30 sporadically participated; of mixed working and middle class backgrounds, they represented the sciences, public health, sports medicine, liberal arts, education, and visual art. Only one was married; the rest were either single or dating. One faculty member and one graduate student identified as women of color; a gay male joined as well. The rest of the students and faculty were of Anglo-European descent. None were originally from Pennsylvania; most did not know each other before joining the sewing circle. Figure 4.1 shows members of the Women's Studies Circle.

Figure 4.1: The Women's Studies Circle



An image from this evening deceives: Five young people appear engrossed in their sewing or knitting. But conversation flowed amongst them despite many of them meeting for the first time that evening. The stitch, as well as our shared status as graduate students, seemed to nurture a fast familiarity amongst us. During this session, we shared

information about farmer's markets and craft supply shops. Participants also shared stories about the social appeal of sewing groups, their stitching processes, and how they learned to sew. We discussed differences in research reporting between the humanities and sciences, as well as gender discrimination practiced by the sports-related department. One of the art students discussed a lecture by a potter on craft, sharing it with the education, science, and English students. A brief sampling of specific discussions that occurred during this and other sessions reveals a variety of themes that emerged during the two to three hour time period.

Emma and I were in a women's studies class together last fall. She joined the circle after seeing my post on Facebook. As I prepared a small quilt square for her to practice the backstitch, I reflected upon my love of teaching, even in such a simple, informal setting. I had not been in the classroom since the spring of 2012, and felt deprived of its pleasures. Emma's real achievement that evening, however, was not quilting, but mending a large hole in her favorite coat's pocket. "I did it! I did it!" she repeated, exuberant at her accomplishment. "Maybe I'll make a pillow next."

While Jamie remained silent, Darlene talked incessantly about her grandmother and mother as she slowly sewed pillows for her boyfriend's birthday gift. When Emma began discussing her research on a popular girl's doll, Darlene's eyes lit up. "My mother has every single one she got as a kid in the '50's! They are all wrapped up in their original packaging! I'll take pictures next time I'm home." Emma too was excited, looking for more vintage versions of the doll. Darlene continued, "My mother and grandmother made them clothes, they're so tiny, I'll bring them in some time." Emma discovered an important source of data that Darlene was happy to share.

Then, Darlene told a story of a peer in her sports-related program who was refused a letter of recommendation by her male adviser because “he had already written one for a female student.” The advisees applied to different jobs; therefore, no conflict of interest applied to the advisor’s decision. Apparently, in physical education, this male professor believed he could only give one woman a letter in order to keep his standing as an objective evaluator of his students! Both Emma and I directed Darlene to campus groups that dealt with faculty-student discrimination. Other, more positive discipline-related practices were discussed. Mary spoke about the collaborative nature of research and writing expected in selenology. In fact, the sciences generally frowned upon articles written by one author, disrupting many of the assumptions we working within education and humanities had about the myth of the lone scientist working in their lab. Since collective research writing is discouraged in our disciplines, we assumed that all subject areas did the same, especially science!

Like most of the participants, Mary joined the circle neither to learn a new technique, nor to get advice on knitting patterns or yarns. She came for the company. However, she stirred a debate concerning the pace of knitting. “I’m not interested in knitting something fast. That’s why I knit with sock yarn. It takes forever, but I enjoy its fineness, the process of knitting.” The other knitters disagreed; they preferred the speed given by working with bulky weight yarn and large needles. They wanted to finish their knitted projects quickly. But the two grads most opposed to “slow knitting” were ceramicists. I wondered how their visual arts practice impacted their views toward their extracurricular handwork. Differences between materials and processes aside, the overwhelming majority of members knit some form of scarf, a practical item that could

be put to use immediately in the freezing February temperatures we routinely experienced in State College. Toward the end of our meeting, Ethan asked, “Hey, why don’t you create a closed Facebook group? That way we can share resources.” I agreed, ready to observe how Facebook would impact our group’s dynamics.

Two women’s studies affiliated faculty members joined during the next session. Both Greta and Remy grew up abroad, experiencing the challenges of living through colonial and post-colonial life. As the more regular participant of the two, Greta enjoyed being able to sit, knit, and talk. The circle provided a temporary respite from the pressures felt by a professor seeking tenure. Though neither Greta nor Remy could stay for long periods, all appreciated their presence. Without fail, both asked each graduate student about their work, genuinely eager to learn about students’ research topics or studio concepts. I too enjoyed their company and, at times, smiled at their behaviors. Once, Greta walked in with a fistful of bamboo needles. She sat down, took a couple of needles out from her pack, and began casting on the pale blue wool I gave to her out of my yarn “stash.” “What are you making?” I asked. “I don’t know, I’m just knitting!” Greta smiled. Earlier, she shared with us her spectacular sampler she made during her schooldays.

A little later, Remy arrived to work on a quilt block inspired by animals. As she discussed the intricacies of hand quilting with passion and excitement, we marveled at the stunning red jacket she wore, and made. Recently hired, Remy held a distinguished faculty position in the arts, and could only attend a handful of meetings; yet I established a relationship with another likeminded feminist scholar-crafter within academia who I would later see while shopping at the local chain fabric store.

Greta and Remy also helped me confront my insecurity concerning how I was collecting data. Originally, I planned to keep a research journal and take notes during sessions. Afterwards, I would revisit my notes, reflect, and analyze them. Additionally, I took images of sessions with my phone, as documenting the circle was an important part of altering stereotypes surrounding this feminine form of meeting. One day, after reviewing the multiple research methods I had learned during my methodology courses, I decided I had to broaden my documentation types in order to “code” my discoveries. Although I felt the practice invasive, I included video as part of my data collection. As much as I hated dissecting my stories, I felt that this practice would enable me to make more substantial “generalizations” about my “findings.”

But when I began videoing the group with my phone, participants reacted immediately. “Uh, oh, Laura’s shooting, we have to be careful about what we’re saying.” They felt inhibited. I felt I had breached an unspoken pact of trust. Perceiving my distress, Greta reassured me. “Laura, if it doesn't feel right, don't do it.” I believed that I had to use those methods to legitimize my already unconventional research topic. “Ok everyone,” I announced. “I’m not going to film our meetings anymore, sorry!” I stuck to my original practice of writing mainly after our gatherings. Having trusted, supportive faculty participants transformed beliefs I absorbed throughout my academic training concerning “legitimate” scholarly methods. Greta encouraged me to trust my intuition.

As a beginner knitter but seasoned academic, Greta discussed the thorny subject of academic writing style. She spoke of her journey to finding and owning her voice as she composed within creative and scholarly worlds, advocating an aesthetics of authorship. Due to the exclusive academic crowd, the women's studies circle confronted

issues concerning research or life on campus. A cultural homogeneity surrounded our meetings, further solidified by our enjoyment of hand needlework. Rarely did discussions waver from the topics previously discussed. Still, I found much to contemplate after our sessions ended.

Pedagogies and Social Practices of the Women's Studies Sewing Circle

Like most historical sewing circles, our group shared a specific set of cultural experiences. But instead of assembling out of necessity or sociopolitical concerns, we bonded because of our related academic lives. We did not knit for our families, church charity, a sociopolitical cause, or for war. We knit and sewed as a group of graduate students and faculty working within the frame of a large prestigious research university that welcomed, at least on paper, women, people of color and those identifying as gay or transgender. We acted out of assumptions and habits of mind gleaned not only from our homes but also from our academic mentors, peers, and advisors. Although enriched educationally, we were deprived of engaging in informal social spaces due to the nature of our disciplines, where students tended to remain with peers because of the lack of opportunities to engage across disciplines. In the women's studies sewing circle, I was able to share both the skill of sewing and create a new community within Penn State. Our needlework was central to our meeting, but we could also discuss our lives outside of the university.

Socially and politically, the women study circle's offered support systems and guidance to some of its participants. Faculty and students provided advice to combat discrimination between adviser and advisee. They encouraged me in my role as researcher to break rigid ideas of data collection, and trust my instincts. Further, the

group became an informal space of networking that helped some students further their research projects. But the academic space also prevented our group from meeting consistently. Once I created a private Facebook group, many members stopped coming, feeling the pressures of schoolwork and other social and academic obligations. The extracurricular nature of the circle prevented many from meeting regularly. Most of the initial participants returned to socializing with colleagues within their programs.

The pedagogical functions and social practices of the women's studies circle were framed within our demanding academic schedule, which tended to influence the simple nature of our knitting or sewing projects. Ordinary, everyday aesthetics (hooks, 1995; Saito, 2007) dominated our techniques and objects. The overwhelming majority of participants knit some form of scarf, using a straightforward stockinette stitch. Although our leisurely stitching related more to the wealthy embroiderers of the past, our hand work shared the practical aesthetics driving the historical home, activists, and war-driven bees. Complex knitting or sewing had no place in this academic sewing circle. Generally, we made things that could be finished relatively quickly and be worn immediately during the cold winter months.

By late early spring, participation dramatically dropped. The pressures of mid-semester were upon us. During a meeting in late March, a new member changed the sewing circle's direction. Encouraged by a mutual friend of ours, Naomi walked into the women's studies conference room with multiple knitting projects. Her husband joined the Penn State faculty in 1991. They raised two sons in State College. Already a grandmother, Naomi shared a comprehensive history of both town and institution, told with sarcasm and humor. "Knitting is like breathing to me...it's a habit I have instead of

a psychoanalyst,” she said. Forcibly “retired” from the medical field, Naomi recently returned from a sabbatical spent overseas with her husband. Already a long-term member of other knitting groups, she agreed to spread the word among friends who would feel comfortable in this more eclectic setting. Due to the dwindling numbers of students and faculty, I decided to start a separate meeting with her in a café. The time had come to go public, and incorporate coffee and sweets into the circle’s routine.

New Stitch Patterns: The Café Circle.

As promised, Naomi brought along knitters she knew through her involvement in a couple of other groups meeting on and off the campus for decades. At first, the new members enjoyed being a part of my intergenerational circle that welcomed any stitch technique. Local groups focused only on knitting or embroidery, and tended to attract only women near or in retirement age. After our first Friday afternoon meeting at the beginning of April, the café circle expanded dramatically to include more local knitters and new faculty and graduate students. Suddenly, I found myself immersed in an entirely new group of beginner and advanced knitters who enthusiastically embraced the weekly gatherings. I created a mailing list with a free software program to email reminders of meeting dates and times, and to manage the growing subscribers. I also shared information sent to me from circle members regarding yarn sales, coupons, and local fiber events.

Before settling on a permanent location, we sampled a variety of coffee shop chains able to seat comfortably anywhere from five to fifteen participants. Finally, we chose one situated in a renovated Victorian home in a village a short distance from the campus. Depending upon the weather, we sat outside under the protective shade of

umbrellas or inside, where we dominated the main café space. “We are Victorian ladies gone awry,” I remarked, as we rearranged period tables and chairs around the large glass topped coffee table. I enjoyed patronizing the café both for its domestic atmosphere and because it was family owned.

The café circle enlarged the women’s studies participant pool. The eight women who joined Naomi were between the ages of 45 and 75. All were Anglo-European and middle class. Most were sixty years old. They enjoyed long marriages while raising a couple of children in the town. One was married and childless; another never married. Three were full-time homemakers; one had a ten year old. All, however, were either temporarily or permanently out of the workforce, but had earned at least an undergraduate degree. Although some had graduated from Penn State, none grew up in the area. During our initial introductions, these women spoke about their former jobs, most of which were linked directly or indirectly to the University. Annabelle, Janine, Liza, Diane, Breanne, Lila, Ella, Eleanor, Sherrie, and Lola knew each other, directly or indirectly, either through their involvement in other knitting groups, their places of worship, their former department positions or their husbands’ work. Members of the Café Circle are shown in Figure 4.2.

Figure 4.2: The Café Circle



All joined Naomi in reminiscing about the changes they witnessed while living twenty to forty years in the township, sharing stories about couples, children, families, and distant relatives, as well as long closed shops and bars. Many had recently become or were on the verge of becoming grandmothers. Some faced the challenges of caring for aging parents. These conversations, tinged with humor, helped them ease the difficulties while dealing with stubborn or unsympathetic siblings. They also spoke of upcoming trips, either related to family or their husband's research.

During the month of May, Diane brought centerpieces to each café circle meeting. The majority of these were flowers carefully selected from her garden. On one occasion, she brought several maquettes designed by a fellow member of the opera club. The hand cut figures, inspired by the main characters in *La Traviata*, kept close watch as we knit and sipped coffee. In an evangelical moment, Diane saw an older women sitting alone. "I'm going to ask her to join us" But the woman answered brusquely, "I don't know how to knit." Deflated but undaunted, Diane returned to her seat, where we all shared a laugh over her well-intentioned invitation. Despite this "rejection," I noticed how our presence

affected the café. I spied patrons glued to their computer screens pause, smiling at our crowd of irrepressible hand stitchers.

The knitter closest to me in age and background was Annabelle. Both of us were in our late forties and had attended college within the Boston area. She grew up in New Jersey, the daughter of second-generation ethnic working class parents. Our similarities ended there. Shortly after graduation, Annabelle was married with a baby whereas I was on a plane to London to do volunteer work with the homeless. After a few moves during her husband's pursuit of tenure, she conducted enrichment programs for students out of her home while raising her three children. After earning a teaching credential at the university, Annabelle worked for three years in a school district outside of State College. Dissatisfied with the school's culture and lack of support toward her ideas concerning her health curricula, however, she resigned.

Annabelle, like many of the others, partook in several knitting groups, including one at the local yarn shop. She announced in one café meeting that a local fiber festival was happening nearby in a couple of weeks. Many thought about joining and driving together. But the more they discussed this idea, the less likely it seemed possible; family responsibilities and other social engagements prevented many from committing. Generously, she invited me to join her and her sons in the hour-long ride to the grounds. At the festival, we were overwhelmed by the choices of handspun and hand dyed fibers from vendors working in Pennsylvania, New York, and Virginia. We favored sellers who sold kettle dyed angora for such reasonable prices we kept double checking the price tags. The boys ran around eating every fried dish in sight as we decided what yarn and color to buy. I was happy to spend time with a peer outside of my academic world.

As we sped along the back roads skirting across acres of farms, Annabelle detailed her teaching experiences. I listened as she spoke of her distress felt at the overwhelming cultural and social insistence from students' parents: they must never leave home, family is first. Despite the lack of jobs and professional opportunities within the derelict old town, students acquiesced to family pressure. "Most of them live on some government assistance. It kills me to see recent graduates pump my gas." Criticized by both faculty and administration for her "rigorous" curricula, Annabelle finally quit. She became so distraught over her thwarted attempts to help students see alternatives to their family's demands that her health deteriorated. I could only listen and sympathize. Yet, I saw that she continued to suffer, still reeling from a culture so alien to her. Unsure of her next move, Annabelle returned to full time homemaking.

Many of the non-working women shared Annabelle's disillusionment concerning their former university jobs. They admitted to having difficulty during their recent transition from full time work to retirement. As I got to know them, they expressed anger at feeling forced out as management treated them with increasing disrespect or ignored their suggestions as to the future directions of their departments or positions. Much later I understood that they too shared frustrations similar to those harbored by Annabelle. Their festering resentment eventually impacted their participation in a later sewing circle. Meanwhile, they spoke of their former roles. Janine worked on the university's first ecological initiatives while Sherrie and Ella worked together in funding science projects. Lila and Diane operated small businesses that involved sewing. Diane designed and manufactured children's bags; Lila continued to do custom clothing, upholstery, and

alterations in her home. Although their husbands remained the major breadwinners, most stayed home for a time, working periodically while raising their children.

Regardless of their professional or personal status, the non-working crowd knit incessantly. Most learned from their mothers, grandmothers, or another female relative. Serious discussions over yarn, needle, gauge swatches, and stitch patterns pervaded nearly every meeting. Part of their transition to retirement manifested in their knitting practice. Freed from their teaching or office jobs, finished items rolled off of their hands at superhuman speeds. Increasingly, they discussed projects they planned to make. Ella and Sherrie had worked together and knit for years. Ella wanted to design a shawl pattern inspired by stunning abstract paintings done by her sister and brother in law. Sherrie was the only “charity knitter,” and finished infant hats and cancer caps by the dozen. When Sherrie talked about spinning and dyeing her own yarns, we all encouraged her to sell them at our circle gatherings. Sherrie demurred, replying that she did not think they were “good enough” to sell. At one café event, Ella brought in vintage Straedaker patterns, including a Fair Isle design that every teenage girl and I wore in the early 1980’s. Both shared their gauge swatches of intricate stitch patterns and yarn types, labeled with care.

As spring moved into summer, my sewing circle drew aspiring knitters, crocheters, rebel cross-stitchers, and embroiderers. All were sent by other faculty or by participants. Temporarily released from coursework and teaching, new graduate students and faculty joined the new café circle crowd. A few activist needle workers joined. Suzanne recently completed her Ph.D. in molecular biology and sought to merge her embroidery with science. A new lecturer in Spanish, Nancy designed a cross-stitched sampler incorporating traditional borders with feminist phrases. Their intentions and

work opposed that of the morally invested samplers designed by the “Dame” of colonial New England! Annabelle met Tammy at the local library’s knitting group. She knit sweaters to “gauge”- the correct size - a skill that eluded me. In her mid-thirties, Tammy was a tenure track faculty member in health science. She too spread the word of my circle to knitters in her department. One of her department’s graduate students, Bonnie, wanted to revisit crochet. Shortly thereafter, a group of her friends periodically joined us. I met Mirabelle, a first year English Ph.D., at a party. Since her best friend knit, she decided to learn as well. Leanne, a zoology student, saw us in the café, and asked if she could join. A dedicated crocheter, she was making her wedding dress from fine oatmeal colored linen. She brought along a couple of peers in her program who cross-stitched traditional floral motifs.

Suddenly I lost track of how students discovered the circle as it continued to morph and change its composition. These circles were filled with laughter, silence, and excitement as we dominated the café, emptied by departing students and faculty. The campus assemblage was middle class and between the ages of 25 and 35. Analogous to the women’s studies circle demographic, they represented a mix of youth, women of color, and needlework techniques outside of knitting and crochet. The combination of attendees navigating different stages of a woman’s lifespan led me to believe that the group achieved enough diversity. Regardless of age or personal or professional status, members could engage in one or more of the multiple conversations being held.

Although she grew up in the southwest, Bonnie’s parents were born in Central Africa. Her mother taught her to crochet a year earlier, but she needed a refresher in the basic techniques. When knitters or crocheters encountered any difficulty, we turned to

our group of experts who consistently participated, Lila and Janine, for assistance. They were the café circle's other pair of long-term knitters and friends. Although never professionally connected as Sherrie and Ella once were, Janine and Lila shared a special friendship bonded by daughters of similar age. Also central to their relationship was their hand knitting.

Lacking crochet skills, I asked Janine if she could teach Bonnie. Despite her reservations, Bonnie caught on almost immediately. After a couple of weeks, she began compulsively crocheting afghans and scarves by the half dozen, giving them to friends and family. She rivaled many of non-working crowd in "production." Disillusioned with her dissertation topic, Bonnie crocheted and avoided writing. During one café meeting we sat at a table, somewhat apart from the crowd. "If I could, I'd switch to philosophy," she admitted to me after a discussion about her dilemma, shared by many of the very young doctoral students. To their surprise and distress, as they progressed through their programs, they also matured. Many discovered that they left their original research concepts far behind. I listened and sympathized with her plight. "Look at it this way, when you finish, you can retool your research to incorporate philosophy in your field." Little consolation for someone already six years into her program, but she appreciated my insight. While she was home on break, Bonnie sent me a gift of two yards of material. In the note enclosed, she told me that her crochet work brought her closer to her mother. They both chose the fabric, a colorful print inspired by Central African motifs.

During one mid-summer meeting, Mirabelle and I formed an intimate café circle of two. She also discussed her doubts about whether she would continue with her program. During a contemporary literature course she took during her second semester,

an unmarried female professor told the young female students that “every kid you have is a book you didn't write.” Women had to choose between academia and motherhood. No discussion regarding equitable domestic arrangements ensued! We discussed how this female professor reaffirmed traditional gender norms and binaries in her well intentioned but discriminatory pedagogy.

After each sewing circle meeting passed, I noticed that people sat next to their friends and peers. Divisions arose due to lack of lifestyle and intellectual similarities. At one meeting, Mirabelle commented on a remark made by Naomi during one of the large intergenerational gatherings occurring couple of weeks earlier. “She said that we were self selecting who we sat next to. I totally disagreed. If anything, I thought she and some of the older ladies automatically sat next to one another. I sat next to them a few times before I started knitting, but I had nothing in common with them. They just talked about their families so I didn't sit next to them again.” The borders between family life and that of the single young graduate student began to surface.

The novelty of the intergenerational circle began to morph into two distinct communities of women living very different lives: the young grads and the older, long term residents of State College. As single, middle-aged women, Tammy, Edith and I could relate, on certain levels, to both groups. I started to recognize that once the conversation about what we were making transitioned to more personal topics, both groups, consciously or not, chose not to make an effort to engage with one another. Friends sat with friends. Truthfully, I also began avoiding sitting next to some members of the non-working crowd for the same reason as Mirabelle. Later, I came to realize that

many in that group disliked talking about any university related matter due to their overall anger at the institution.

Yet, as the summer progressed, even the retired crowd dwindled. By August, many left State College to visit family or friends before school started. When September arrived, I was surprised to find that only the non-working group rejoined me at the café. I discovered that course loads, meetings, teaching, grading, combined with their social lives, or the bus schedule, kept the graduates and faculty away. The non-working women became the sole group meeting at the café, talking exclusively about their families and local news. Suddenly, I found myself an outsider to this social and cultural milieu. Satisfied knitting amongst familiar faces, the non-working women rarely asked about the whereabouts of the students and faculty. But I missed the campus crowd.

In this socially and culturally homogenous group, tensions arose between my roles as researcher and participant. These feelings intensified as the café circle became oriented toward the lives of the non-working women. As a researcher, I continued to observe and allow participants to construct the content of circle discussions. But as a participant, I was disappointed that the non-working members failed to inquire about my own life. Throughout adulthood, I grew accustomed to this behavior emerging from middle class women leading hetero-normative lives. I accepted their unintended exclusion without much thought. In the café circle, however, I sought to recapture the inclusion that originally occurred between both groups.

Pedagogies and Social Practices of the Café Sewing Circle

Pedagogically, the café sewing circle retained some similarities to that of the women's studies circle. Middle class, educated women of different ages, races, and

lifestyles met to talk over their hand needlework. Most knit, but some embroidered or crocheted. Others cross-stitched. The customary greeting amongst all, “what are you making?” followed by a “show and tell” continued unabated, as it had in the women studies’ circle. Participants shared information not only about yarn, patterns, and online sources of materials, but also about area events, such as farmer’s markets, yoga studios, and Amish delis. Since few of the non-working women had Facebook accounts, I shared information in my weekly email reminders. In this group, however, few learned to sew or knit in school; most learned from a mother, grandmother, or aunt. In addition to making new acquaintances, relationships between friends and family strengthened over learning how to use a pair of knitting needles or a crochet hook. Knitting gave Mirabelle another bond to her “super crafty” best friend; Bonnie felt closer to her mother as they crocheted together.

Some forms of activist needlework work emerged within both the non-working and campus groups. Sherrie was our sole charity knitter. But sociopolitical issues in and outside of academia influenced some knitters. Nancy and Suzanne wanted to disrupt patriarchy and science through their cross-stitching and embroidery while Janine and Lila expressed anger at the military by yarn bombing a local tank. Otherwise, as in the women’s studies group, most of the café circle members made wearable, practical items. Only a handful of cross-stitchers and embroiderers made framed work, but the overwhelming majority of knitters and crocheters made at least one scarf. Most made some variation on the currently popular infinity design. The grandmothers knit adorable infant clothing and stuffed animals. While reviewing the images of my sewing circle, I observed how each participant worked within their own sense of beauty in color, pattern,

and particular hand process. Despite some sociocultural differences, the sociopolitical values expressed by the hand work in the café circle were identical to those manifesting inside the women's studies circle: most of our work was firmly rooted within ordinary and everyday aesthetics.

Irrespective of age or marital status, all members had enough leisure time to participate. No member worked a steady part-time or 9 to 5 job. Faculty and students of color joined the white non-working women to form an intergenerational and interracial circle. For a couple of sessions participants mixed and mingled before the semester ended. As the weeks passed, however, groups tended to split across relationship, age, and professional status. Graduates tended to sit with peers, while the longtime suburban residents sat with friends or new acquaintances sharing similar lifestyles.

Hence, two communities developed out of the Café Circle: One made up of women over 48 and in the midst of life transitions; the other composed of grads and faculty similar to those who joined the women's studies circle. Boundaries manifested when subgroups had little in common. Instead of making a concerted effort to mingle and get to know each other, members tended to engage with peers. The non-working women formed their own support networks centered on the specific issues they faced, specifically but not exclusively forced retirement, adult children, grandchildren, and aging parents. Meanwhile, the academic support group that appeared within the women studies circle reemerged in the café. Students could talk with faculty or amongst one another about their difficulties within their departments or their writing. Hence, the café circle provided two lifestyle-specific safe spaces where members could vent, seek guidance, or listen to one another's stories. Nonetheless, the stitch continued to unify both groups. The older

woman helped me teach beginner graduate students how to knit or crochet. All wanted to know what each person was making, and what patterns and yarn they were using.

With the conscious intention of reengaging students and faculty, I decided to transition to another campus venue. My visual arts assistantship gave me access to the student-run Zoller gallery. The possibilities of a sewing circle meeting within the charged space of Western aesthetics – the white cube of the art gallery – excited me. Further, I hoped to attract undergraduate and graduate art students who had a difficult time leaving their studios. Another essential ingredient to our circle events, however, was food and beverages. Fortunately, the gallery sat adjacent to a popular café, separated only by sliding glass doors. I pondered how visual arts students, faculty, and staff might react to this new phenomenon within their academic worlds. At the end of October, we began alternating sewing circle meetings between the gallery and the off-campus café, inaugurating another transition within the life of the circle. Once I received permission from my school's director and the exhibiting graduate and undergraduate students, I transitioned the circle's Friday afternoon meetings to the campus gallery.

But unconscious pedagogical tremors between my roles as researcher and participant asserted themselves throughout the café circle. My initial emergent-driven narrative inquiry into the sewing circle collided with my efforts to retain the intergenerational and interracial aspects that manifested during the early weeks of the café circle. Internally, I became critical of the non-working women for not making more efforts at engaging the graduate students in discussions. As the weeks progressed, I slowly detached myself from the non-working women's group because I lacked any connection to their family or neighborhood-oriented discussions. Suddenly, our shared

love of the stitch was not enough for me to continue meeting in café. Over time, I learned that the gallery circle proved crucial to my critical reflective pursuit of my overt and covert pedagogical intentions.

Chapter Five: Authentic Pedagogy through the Gallery Sewing Circle

“Aesthetics then is more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty; it is a way of inhabiting space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming. It is not organic.” (hooks, 1995, p. 65)

In response to changing demographics, I began to recognize unconscious goals I set for the circle. As researcher I sought to observe and let members construct the content of the circle. But in my role as participant, I struggled to stay engaged with the non-working women’s group. An agenda materialized in reaction to the tensions I felt between my roles as both researcher and participant. Why did I want the non-working women and the graduate students to interact more? Suddenly, I wanted the circle to disrupt age and lifestyle-related divisions. Further, I recognized that once the non-working women ceased talking about their knitting or professional lives, and only discussed their families, I too had little in common with them. Like Mirabelle, I avoided sitting near them. Worse, my internalized resentment overshadowed our interactions: I felt increasingly alienated and invisible while sitting with them.

This discomfort led me to slowly reevaluate my role and the objectives of my sewing circle, an issue that never arose during the woman’s studies circle. My conscious reason to relocate back to the campus was initially to recapture students and faculty participants. Also, I wanted to retain the circle’s intergenerational aspect that I saw as potentially altering age and lifestyle boundaries between women. Since the non-working women knew the campus, I never thought about the impact my decision might have on their attendance. The compactness and integration of the town and the campus made it accessible to all. Additionally, I wanted to explore the relationship between the ordinary,

everyday aesthetics imbuing the sewing circle and western aesthetics that framed the work made by the fine art students. With these intentions, I transitioned the café circle to the gallery.

Crafting in the Cube: The Gallery Circle

As I anticipated, the new venue once again brought new faces. The faculty and graduate students who had attended the café circle rejoined and brought peers. Graduate and undergraduate sculpture students sat with us to knit for brief periods at the two long card tables, enjoying this new ongoing gallery event. Two of the non-working women, Naomi and Diane, served as docents for the university's art gallery. Before sitting down to knit, they took time to study the exhibitions and, if possible, talk to the students about their work. Both enjoyed engaging with the ceramicists, sculptors, and painters who often paused to chat while on their way to their studios. The Gallery Circle is shown in Figure 5.1.

Figure 5.1: The Gallery Circle



Most of the sewing circle participants, however, had visited neither an art gallery nor a museum. Yet, they enjoyed being a part of the school's "art scene." During the first gallery circle, Naomi commented, "What we are doing isn't art." The issue of hand needlework as art versus craft did not erupt within either the Women's Studies or Café Circle, despite art students and faculty being participants in these groups. In making this site transition, however, I was indifferent as to whether or not the infinity scarf she was knitting was "art." Rather, the critical, reflective pedagogical questions that hooks (1994) and Cranton (2006) forced me to ask in this setting were: Who and what had shaped my ideas about art and beauty? How did I absorb these definitions? How did they impact my art, teaching, and scholarly career?

Emergent Associations between the Gallery and the Sewing Circle

Increasingly, the sewing circle itself appeared to be the everyday, socially engaged art form to address these questions. What fascinated me was how the ordinary sewing circle and the fine art gallery affected one another. Soon, our weekly meetings became routine form of social practice in the gallery. In fact, the casualness of the circle and the array of women participating attracted more non-art students and staff to enter the gallery, curious as to what we were doing. Since the gallery's sliding glass doors abutted a busy café, students and staff from across the campus saw the activities and shows going on inside. Here, multiple aesthetic philosophies emerged within the now more socially engaged gallery space. The sewing circle worked alongside the student artists and gallery staff, each making something or offering technical assistance using different processes within a personal aesthetics.

Naomi and Debra may have separated their knitting from their docent work at the museum; nevertheless, they embodied both western and ordinary, everyday aesthetics (hooks, 1995; Saito, 2007). I saw the circles' connection to their museum responsibilities, which required them to establish connections between museum visitors and the museum's collection. Similarly, the circle expanded relationships I had established among visual arts faculty and staff. I also associated the conviviality of the circle with the traditional gallery opening, where visitors and friends ate and drank in celebration of the artist's exhibition. Such events served as important milestones to artists as personal and professional communities assembled to support their efforts. Nobody celebrated more than the fine art students when the kind managers at the gallery café gave us their Friday leftovers after they closed at 5PM. We all reaped the benefits of my long established relationship with the café staff! They too became part of our collective domestic exhibition space.

While the sewing circle met in the gallery, the space lost some of its mystery. In turn, the circle inherited some of the critical aesthetic consideration accorded to the exhibition. In essence, the sewing circle became a work of art by encouraging people outside of the art school to engage with participants, exhibitors, art students, and gallery staff. Further, it impelled some art students to either reengage with or learn how to sew or knit, a skill excluded from their fine arts courses. People could engage with both the exhibition and the circle. By inserting the sewing circle into the gallery, I crossed the line between Western aesthetics and every day phenomena. But rather than transgressing the intellectually constructed boundaries of the gallery, I saw the gallery circle as a new community of makers working within it. This new community was similar to the two

different generational groups that had fused within the sewing circle itself. Although they sat separately, from my standpoint, both the non-working and campus members were a part of the sewing circle and gallery's broader collective of artist and crafters. In this setting, my work as gallery manager merged with my leadership of and participation in my sewing circle, echoing my goals of integrating my art, pedagogy, and research practices (Sullivan, 2005).

I believed that the sewing circle's presence in the gallery expanded and questioned its assumed western aesthetic-based meanings. On the one hand, the gallery could absorb more of the lightheartedness that characterized the sewing circle. On the other hand, the sewing circle could be more critical of its demographic-related separations and questioning if these or other cultural divides affected the objects made. Nevertheless, the boundaries between art and women's work began to blur. As stated in Chapter One, the sewing circle's association with Euro-American gendered task assignment – women's work - excluded it from the social practice canon. However, the circle's presence in the gallery supported Saito's (2007) suggestion that indeed, everyday and Western aesthetics could complement one another as long as both lost what Saito called their "art-hood." In a student-run gallery, where the process of making and exhibiting were far more collective and public than galleries commercially run, I witnessed the expansion of the liminal space between Western and everyday aesthetics. Seeing the potential merging of both aesthetic philosophies encouraged me that perhaps the gap formed between the non-working women and the grads might too be bridged in the gallery space.

Pedagogical and Social Tensions in the Gallery Circles

Although the two communities of non-working and campus women returned, they persisted in their self-imposed segregated seating arrangement. The new setting, however, did attract new participants. Graduate and undergraduate students from the visual and liberal arts were eager to knit or crochet. Mimi, an administrator working in the College of Art and Architecture joined, eager to learn how to knit using her recently deceased grandmother's materials. I was pleased that she was willing to participate after working 9-5; although many administrative staff knit or quilt, and expressed interest in participating, they usually wanted to go home after a long day's work. Seasoned and new stitchers worked in the gallery that had become a comforting space to me due to my assistantship. Despite this familiarity, the discomfort manifesting between my roles as researcher and participant escalated. The boundaries between the graduates and the non-working women remained. A couple of meetings held during this time revealed my emerging agenda and unfair stance toward the issues facing the campus and non-working groups.

In the early weeks of 2015, I decided to spend one more academic year at Penn State to complete my dissertation. As writer, researcher, and participant, I was overwhelmed by the stories emerging from my circle, as well as those I discovered daily from my readings authored by a handful of scholars and amateur textile enthusiasts. I felt I needed more time to assimilate and relate the narratives. Uncertainty quickly replaced my initial elation as my funding from the School of Visual Arts ceased the following June. Tammy, the tenure track faculty member, greeted me as I walked into the gallery on a cold day in mid-January. She sat and knit alone at one of the card tables. Shortly

thereafter, Leanne, a graduate student, joined us, taking out her crochet hook and linen yarn. Inevitably, our conversation turned to each other's academic issues. Tammy witnessed her department's abrasive politics during multiple faculty searches; I shared my financial worries over the coming academic year. But Leanne had a much more disturbing story. She described four years of mounting verbal abuse she incurred from her advisor, seriously threatening her research and writing.

In the course of our discussion, which continued well after our usual quitting time of 6 PM, we attempted to help one another. We talked about the insecurity driving the posturing of professors, shrinking visual arts budgets, and how an advisor could so blithely breach the ethics sacred in the teacher–student relationship. Neither Tammy nor Leanne could solve my funding woes anymore then Leanne and I could alleviate the discomfort felt by Tammy as she observed long search committee meetings filled with petty, self-serving arguments. Both Tammy and I advised Leanne to confront her advisor, and begin standing up to her in a calm, constructive yet firm manner. Leanne behaved out of fear that her advisor could prevent her from graduating. I identified with Leanne, as I had experienced more covert abuse from senior women early on in my academic and corporate careers. Until I developed enough self-esteem to stop their behaviors, I continued to attract and feed into those personalities. In that circle of three, Tammy, Leanne, and I empowered one another to actively change our situations rather than passively accept them when possible. Similar to the women's studies and some of the café circle discussions, we shared strategies, including humor, to mitigate our specific concerns within our departments. Although we could not solve each other's problems, we could provide guidance and support within the safe space of the gallery. But in another

gallery circle where different challenges were discussed, I felt far from empathetic. In fact, I felt categorically hostile.

During a crowded meeting later in February, Annabelle, the former school teacher, brought up the proposed block scheduling of her son's classes due to the construction of the new high school. She, Liza, and Lola, a faculty member from the College of Arts and Architecture, all had teenaged students. A heated debate erupted. Most opposed block scheduling, citing a lack of physical movement during the course of the school day. Since the current high school was housed in two buildings situated across from one another, students routinely walked between them, crossing the busy street during the school day. I often witnessed these mass maneuvers either while running or driving, waiting patiently while crossing guards guided the teens from the safety of the two crosswalks. The opposition cited research and studies on the physical and mental evils inherent in the new scheme. Sympathetic to their concerns, I waited to see if any of them felt motivated and empowered enough to act upon these debates, and meet with the school administration. Would they form a group and voice their concerns? Unknown to me was that Liza sat on the school board! In subsequent circles, however, the mothers never discussed the high school's block scheduling again.

I left that meeting annoyed at what I believed to be the mother's pettiness. Earlier in my program, I read Jonathan Kozol's (2005) article about the horrific state of poor urban schools that detailed broken sinks and toilets. In light of those findings, I felt the mother's complaints about block scheduling, which were for the future improvement of the high school and the town's students, were symptomatic of the ignorance surrounding white suburbia in general and specifically its privileged public schools. At the time, I

failed to see how I believed that my funding concerns were of far more import and relevance than their schedule debate. Upon critically reflecting upon our two separate issues, I questioned why neither the mothers nor I began our discussions from a viewpoint of being grateful for the school system or funding we enjoyed. Further, I began to see my hypocrisy in considering my challenges far more important than theirs.

Another issue that irked me concerning some of the non-working women arose immediately in the gallery circle. Despite the arrival of former and new participants in the gallery, I noticed that I lost a few of the café circle's loyal members. After asking around, I was told that Janine, Ella, and Sherrie resented the university regarding their former job experiences. Sherrie described her feelings in an email: "Some of us are allergic to the campus." I reflected upon the gallery circle, and the new social, professional, and aesthetic relationships emerging from our presence. Unfortunately, they failed to set aside their personal feelings toward their departments. They chose to boycott the gallery circle. Instead, they continued to meet weekly and knit with their older peers in the café, forgetting the initial excitement they felt being with women of all ages. Although I sympathized with their feelings, I was disappointed that they could not see past them, and re-pattern their social lives to include people outside of their families and friends.

Perhaps my sewing circle formed too late for them to discuss the shared challenges they faced within their departments. Potentially, such a space could have offered collective support and advice on how to possibly overcome these issues or provided new professional directions for them to take. Instead, they preferred the café and the company of equally disgruntled women who shared their resentment at the university. I believed they channeled their anger against the very group that potentially

provided a space of healing. Despite the challenges we all faced within the university, they forgot that the “unfair” university also allowed me to do my research on sewing circles. Penn State’s support permitted me to form the women’s studies, café, and gallery circles! I related their anger at Penn State to Leanne’s vulnerability as an abused graduate student eager to finish her studies, but afraid to antagonize her advisor. Unlike the non-working women, Leanne did not have a partner whose full-time work she could rely on if her chair threatened her funding. A collective discussion among Leanne, Janine, Ella, and Sherrie concerning their related scenarios of campus discrimination might have been fruitful. Unconsciously, I also interpreted their boycott of gallery circle as a rejection of my professional and scholarly life on campus. Despite my feelings, I denied them.

During a spring meeting, I could no longer ignore the split between my researcher and participant personas. In late May, Naomi walked into the gallery. While helping me arrange the table and chairs, she began telling me how she and a group of the non-working women members went on a road trip to a yarn store an hour south of campus. “We went in Liza’s van. You have to go down there, she has amazing yarns, a mix of local hand-spun and major brands.” My immediate reaction was to stop her and say, “Hey, why didn’t you invite me?” Instead, I listened, disappointed that they excluded me from the rest of the circle’s participants.

I reflected upon the situation, asking: If I went on a trip to a yarn shop outside of town’s limits, would I ask them to join me? My resounding answer was yes. I would have sent out an invitation to my circle’s email list. A year earlier, Annabelle told members of the café circle about a local fiber show and invited me to join her and her sons. This scenario puzzled me as I thought about how Naomi accused Mirabelle and the other grads

of “self-selecting” who they sat with, implying that the older crowd made a more of a conscious effort to mingle. But this exclusion made clear that a few of the non-working group were just as guilty as the grads for their inability to reach out to one another. Regardless, my interaction with Naomi finally raised my consciousness.

Pedagogical and Social Displacement in the Café and Gallery Circles

During that and earlier meetings with the non-working crowd, I felt painfully excluded and invisible. I had to confront my resentment and prejudices that emerged throughout both the gallery and the café circles when the only discussion topics were family-related. As hooks (1994) insists, in order for a teacher to become a healer, she must first heal herself of unexamined debilitating habits of being. Hence in order to become an authentic teacher (Cranton, 2006), I had to self-actualize by critically reflecting upon the general anger I felt toward the non-working women members. How did the cultures of domination and acquiescence act out for me in these exclusively familial and generational circles? I turned to Cranton’s (2006) questions to engage in this painful but ultimately liberating process of self-discovery.

First, I asked: What are the social norms regarding women’s roles? How have these social norms influenced my attitude towards women living within these norms? Crucially, why should I or shouldn’t I revise my perspectives about women living within gender norms? With these questions, I explored why I was so angry with the members living within the traditional bounds of marriage and family. My visceral reaction to Naomi’s and the non-working women’s trip to the yarn store frightened me. Since arriving at Penn State to study, I rarely felt as out of place socially as I did in the past. I replaced the estranged ex-fiancée, his dysfunctional clannish family and working-class

hetero-normative friends with faculty, graduate and undergraduate students from all over the world. For the first time, I felt at home intellectually, engaged with a diverse and dynamic academic community that for the most part, welcomed me with open arms. At times I felt some distance from my fellow graduates due to our age differences, but our mutual scholarly passions far outweighed any generational gaps.

Being with the non-working women's circle reopened a deep wound. While critically reflecting upon the paradoxical gender expectations of my parents and the hybrid working and middle-class worlds I navigated throughout my life, I realized that I had been switching identities in order to fit into whichever crowd I happen to be with. My most uncomfortable and denied self was that of the scholar. Before leaving Massachusetts, I discussed being an intellectual with an Art Education professor; still, I failed to picture myself as one and disliked its aura of elitism. Unwittingly, I absorbed the general social stigma, as well as those of my class and upbringing, that in order to be socially acceptable, women should not act "too smart."

Despite enjoying the fruits of women's liberation, I was raised by parents whose values emerged from the 1940s and 50s. Encouraged and expected to go to college, my parents also expected me to date, have a busy social life, stay thin, and help with housework. Although my brothers had other pressures growing up, they were neither harassed about their lack of dates nor did they have to help with cleaning. My independent feminist assumptions were born out of unfair gender norms manifesting in my family and as witnessed during a year spent as a nanny. I watched the mothers arrive home exhausted, left to take care of her one-year-old daughter and do the brunt of the

cooking and cleaning while the father blithely worked in his home office. These experiences influenced my attitudes toward family norms, and my refusal to accept them.

Passionate about history, art, traveling, and learning in general, I tended to hide my artistic and scholarly aspects of myself with others. Instead of fully owning my academic identity, I periodically returned to school only to finish and not know what to do next. Friendships and partners came and went as I struggled to find a circle of people and a career that suited both my need for connection and intellectual companionship. I grew up and socialized amongst people whose lives solely revolved around striving to attain the middle class suburban norm or who already achieved such status. Meanwhile, I sat silent, angry, and lonely, but psychologically and emotionally unable to fully make the changes necessary to change my life and live among those sharing my values.

This erasure of my academic self caused me to reject wholeheartedly the “family circle” in favor of an independent life. How has this attitude informed my pedagogy? I had more in common with Mirabelle’s unmarried professor than I cared to admit. Four years ago, I would never have verbally stated, but internally agreed with Mirabelle’s professor’s statement that each child a female student had was a book she did not write. Dedicated to defying gender norms, I replaced one rigid prescription for women’s lives with another. In the process, I denied whole parts of myself that longed to be engaged with others who shared my intellectual passions. With my consciousness raised, I felt emancipated enough to embrace all of my selves, the stitcher, teacher, writer, student, and scholar. Only then could I respect the personal and professional choices that both the non-working members and I made. In refusing the traditional role of parent, I embraced the role of teacher and mentor, following the dictum of an Indian sage: “Remember...

that he who rejects the usual worldly duties can justify himself only by assuming some kind of responsibility for a much larger family.” (Yogananda, 2005, p. 288)

The sewing circle allowed me to both fuse my art, pedagogy, and research practices (Sullivan, 2005), but also released my circumscribed identities into a cohesive whole. Finally, I acknowledged and honored the two distinct groups that formed in my sewing circle. As both researcher and participant, I saw my sewing circle’s ability to create new relationships among different groups of women as a strength rather than a weakness. Both the graduate students and non-working women’s groups supported one another through various personal and professional life transitions. Consequently, my intergenerational agenda faded, replaced by what we did share: a passion for collective hand needlework. My epiphany ultimately taught me that in order to teach to transgress, I had to self-actualize to become an authentic teacher and person. By engaging in a personal critical reflexive inquiry, I became more aware of my unconscious agendas before I walked into the public sewing circle and, later, the liberal and visual arts classroom. Further, by discovering my own personal and professional inadequacies with gender and class issues within my sewing circle, I felt compassion for those demonstrating variations of discrimination throughout historical circles. Only by uncovering my own shortcomings did I feel some compassion towards the racist and classed behaviors expressed in most sewing bees meeting from colonial New England through end of the 19th century.

Summary of the Pedagogies of Sewing Circles

I have shown that despite social and political contradictions, American sewing circles cultivated varying degrees of female support networks. Although consistently

divided by family, neighborhood, church affiliation, race, and class, sewing circles provided a space for women to participate in sociopolitical causes throughout the history of United States. In rare instances women transcended boundaries of race and class to form deep friendships among circle members. Sewing circles also proved contradictory. As an approved female form of assembly, some sewing circles taught women their traditional gender roles and tasks within the household; in others, the sewing circle allowed women to transgress the domestic sphere and speak, sew, and sell in public to help transform American society.

Historically, most American women's lives developed from their acculturated household roles within their race and class. Deprived of either a liberal or academic art education, women's ideas of beauty partly emerged within their domestic task assignments, specifically those expressed in their textile production. Depending upon class, women approached their work as a leisurely or practical activity. Driven by necessity and improvisation, poor women raised, processed, and hand made clothing and household items while the wealthy embroidered and embellished cloth to fulfill their social expectations of their class.

One of the few places Yankee and freed women could meet outside of the home was within the neighborhood and church sewing bee. Ironically, many of the faith-based circles became politicized, impelled by their Christian duty to help the poor, the soldier fighting in the Revolution or Civil War, the slave (abolition, the Underground Railroad), emancipated slaves (The Contraband Relief Association), or the wife suffering the effects of an alcoholic husband (temperance). One quilt block, drunkard's path, became a symbol for both Temperance and Underground Railroad quilts. On the plantation,

multiple sewing circles worked within a range of oppressive relationships. In the mansion, house slaves quilted and sewed intricate designs alongside their mistresses. Within this relationship of complete sociopolitical domination, an aesthetic of equality manifested within the collective quilts made by house slave Jane Bond and her mistress, Rebecca Bond. Meanwhile, sewing late into the night, both female house and field slaves found solace while making or mending clothing and blankets for their family's comfort and survival. "Quiltings" gave both house and field slaves a chance to sew, socialize, and exchange information about the world outside their fences, including instructions for their potential escape.

Socially engaged constructivist pedagogies emerged within these circles, but because women lacked sociopolitical rights or critical education to change norms, most Yankee women perpetuated American patriarchal culture of gendered, raced, and classed domination and subordination. Therefore, the majority of domestic, church, and political sewing bees retained strict class and racial boundaries. Only war encouraged inter-class groups. But even among anti-slavery circles, racial exclusion prevailed. Groups that admitted freed black women segregated their seating areas. White women refused to court the social isolation of their peers if they were seen with black women.

The Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, however, was the rare exception that practiced what it sewed and preached. In this circle, white and free black women treated each other with mutual respect, establishing close friendships through their lecturing, writing, and sewing. Crucial to their success was the money they raised by selling their practical, politically charged hand-stitch work in anti-slavery fairs. Led by strong, ethical Quaker women, they merged a committed social activist practice devoted

to sociopolitical equality with the stitch. Born of true friendship, their fellowship outweighed racial distrust. Similar behaviors permeated the Underground Railroad, Contraband Relief Association, and other emancipated slave relief efforts. These racially desegregated activities revealed how crucial coalition was and is to transform sociopolitical inequality. In these groups, both black voices and hand sewing mattered.

Unlike the abolitionist circle, my campus sewing circle was more casual and participant driven. Undergraduate and graduate students, junior and senior faculty, staff, and long-term residents of State College joined either to meet new people or solidify existing relationships. All engaged in some form of hand needlework process, but the majority knit. Although the stitch unified members, it failed to prevent professional and generational divisions from forming when the meetings included those whose lives did not revolve around the campus. When retired mothers and grandmothers communicated, their focus on their family lives tended to alienate the single women, including me. Conversely, the campus members' academic conversations exacerbated the anger experienced by some of the recently retired crowd who felt forced out of their University positions. Differences across life stages and professional status, not technical expertise, tended to divide participants in the café and gallery circles. A more harmonious atmosphere pervaded the women's studies circle because of its strictly academic crowd. Despite participants working in different disciplines, we led similar lives and faced many similar challenges; hence, the women's studies sewing circle allowed for a space to share strategies in which to deal with them. The faculty who joined treated the graduate students as equals, eager and willing to hear their concerns as well as their excitement over their research.

The collective academic atmosphere of the women's studies circle transferred to the café and gallery circles' distinct groups: the nonworking women and the campus graduates and faculty. Within their separate iterations, however, each crowd formed close collectives supporting each other personally and professionally. The older group shared stories of aging parents, adult children, and grandchildren. Meanwhile, the campus crowd continued interacting in ways identical to the women's study circle. Without intervention, two groups remained separated. Nevertheless, I recognized the sewing circle as a viable form of community that cultivated a range of personal and professional networks among women. This discovery caused me to revisit many aspects of my personal and professional decisions, especially how my attitudes may have affected my pedagogy, art, and research practices. I critically reflected upon these and other topics through the collective and solitary hand stitch.

With the exception of the cross-stitchers and the embroiderers, who made framed work, most of the campus knitters and crocheters made wearable items. We rarely deviated from hooks' (1995) and Saito's (2007) ordinary, everyday aesthetics defining the history of women's stitch work. A handful of knitters, however, did engage in charity and forms of activist knitting. But our shared love of the needle failed to prevent divisions across age and lifestyle. Without critical intervention, the café and gallery circle retained strict generational boundaries. As hooks (1995) discovered, aesthetics is not organic, nor, as I have shown, is women's ability to befriend those living lives far different than their own.

Significance of Theory, Method, and Social Practice of the Sewing Circle

I frame my study of American sewing circles in the socially engaged critical pedagogies born from the liberal and visual arts. With their emphasis on consciousness raising and social transformation through critical reflection, Cranton (2006) and hooks (1994) achieve authenticity and self-actualization by writing and discussion. Stewart and Walker (2005) also implement critical approaches similar to those of both Cranton (2006) and hooks (1994), but within studio arts courses. Here, students and teacher construct learning through both the making and analysis of fine art and visual culture. Narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2012) is inherent in these contexts. But none of these scholars draws from the collective social practices of women's traditional stitchery. By situating the sewing circle within the ordinary, everyday aesthetics of hooks (1995) and Saito (2007), I can build a feminist pedagogy integrating socially engaged art practices of hand needlework in both public space and the liberal and visual arts classrooms.

In both the casual and academic circle, however, I discovered that the leader must serve, not dominate or hold hidden agendas. Further, leadership must earn the trust and respect of participants or students. This can only be accomplished if the teacher is reasonably aware of their discriminatory habits of mind while also willing to practice constant critical reflection. If mediated, a collective sewing circle could provide readings and prompts to provoke discussion on gender, race, and class. Individually and together, members could have the opportunity to sew, write, reflect, and discuss their own way toward understanding others different from them. Friendship as manifested amongst the Quaker and freed black women of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society is pivotal to emancipatory classroom.

Critically engaged social pedagogy that nourishes social and intellectual risk emerges from faith and trust among participants and leadership. Political theorist Danielle S. Allen (2004) believes that interracial distrust perpetuates dysfunctional behaviors within the United States. “Friendship is not easy, nor is democracy” (Allen, 2004, p. xxi). We share life experiences, but our interpretations vastly differ. Political friendship, Allen asserts, begins with why people mistrust each other. She believes that a successful democracy acknowledges this distrust, and creates policies to encourage trust amongst the people it governs. Allen (2004) believes that much “interracial distrust [in the United States] now is a product more of retrospection than of immediate personal experience and prevails along fossilized boundaries of difference...Democracy depends on trustful talk among strangers and properly conducted, should dissolve any divisions that block it.” (p. xiii) Allen concludes that relationships are crucial to creating a harmonious society.

The sewing circle potentially fosters pedagogies of relational wholeness generated from the friendships cultivated while collectively stitching. Possibly, mediated sewing circles create bridges of trust and respect between and among individuals, partners, families, neighbors, and neighborhoods. Urban institutions and leaders must begin transcending sociocultural and economic tensions among “strangers” by offering opportunities to cultivate compassionate relationships that transform “strangers” into acquaintances, friends, or mentors. Designing programs and spaces that generate profound relational changes helps foster the recognition of commonalities and differences between and among diverse people. These relational spaces are urgently needed in public and private institutions. I argue that the stitch is one activity that nurtures understanding among disparate people.

Potential of Public Sewing Circles

With facilitation, I believe that differences among women's personal and professional status and lifestyles could be bridged to cultivate friendship in a public sewing circle. Once initial acquaintances are established within the circle, I could draw from a participant-generated list of discussion topics. Then, I could set aside a specific time segment during the sewing circle to facilitate a conversation driven by prompts rooted in Cranton's (2006) reflective questions that are associated with each participant topic. Finally, as teacher-facilitator, I could also search or seek from participants' online sources to share with the circle supporting their questions and themes. Such engaged, constructivist teaching would offer opportunities for participants to share their narratives and viewpoints in efforts toward understanding. Sewing merged with storytelling is one approach to transcending the infinite boundaries separating women from one another. This liminal space could create more meaningful authentic bonds amongst women, helping to shape the elusive sisterhood at least across lifestyle and generations. As a result, expansion rather than contraction of women's experience may result. The story of unequal sociopolitical but equal aesthetic bonds between house slave Jane Bond and her mistress Rebecca Bond provides a metaphor for the potential everyday sewing has to overcome the conflicts between and among gender, race and class.

Discipline-centric tensions between women's work and the visual arts began to unravel within the gallery circle. During that circle, I saw the rigid boundaries between western and everyday aesthetics blur. My definition of aesthetics, situated by Saito (2007) and hooks (1995), and modeled by the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, converged art, activism, pedagogy, research, and critical writing through the social

practice of a sewing circle. Instead of a pedagogy of estrangement, I determined to piece one toward fellowship. The portability of the sewing circle allowed me to envision a range of forms it could take. At Penn State, I explored the voluntary, public sewing circle and met women of different ages and backgrounds who supported one another in a myriad of ways. A related but activist-driven group emerged in Ferguson, Missouri in October 2015. The Yarn Mission formed as a way to engage people in discussions about race relations in the United States.

Begun in a café damaged during the riots occurring after city police officers were found innocent of killing an unarmed black man, African-American founder CheyOnna Sewell “knits for black liberation.” They “use yarn to promote action and change, to eradicate racism, sexism, and other systems of oppression” (Yarn Mission, 2016). Since its inception, The Yarn Mission has become a nonprofit that raises money by selling hand knit and crocheted items and knitting notions, as well as by soliciting donations. Their strategy to engage café patrons is simple. When a stranger asks a participant about their knitting, they reply, “We’re knitting for black liberation.” This encourages conversations on the status of African-Americans in Ferguson and across the country.

Further, they insert the face of black knitters in overwhelmingly white middle class craft, charity, and activist-oriented texts (Christiansen & Shirobayashi, 2011; Greer, 2008, 2011, 2014; Moore & Prain, 2009). The Yarn Mission reveals how talking to strangers and asking them discomfiting but crucial questions about racial inequality can begin to change the conversation about race relations in the United States. Hence, they are a 21st century version of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society’s 19th century interracial model of activism. Their inclusive, activist-driven sewing circle generates new

webs of personal and professional support networks in contemporary public pedagogical practice.

I am developing an approach to teaching and learning motivated by peace and understanding, indebted to the social history of hand stitching practices and their associated female kinship and communal forms. In the future, I plan to explore how the sewing circle could be applied to other public and traditional classroom contexts. Holding the vision of the interracial Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, along with that of the Yarn Mission, I will continue to integrate aspects of the informal campus sewing circle within the critical feminist classroom. Here, I discovered a living aesthetics, nurtured from ordinary and everyday activism, where people could talk, be silent, and create while simply being in the moment. The blending of collective hand needlework and critical pedagogy invites difference and deliberation, but within a community resonant of connection, mutual respect, and fellowship.

The Role of the Authentic, Self-Actualized Leader in the Sewing Circle

Teachers willing to confront and reckon with their own complex personal and professional shortcomings, however, are ideally suited to lead socially engaged constructivist classrooms. To achieve Cranton's (2006) authenticity or hooks' (1994) self-actualization, a teacher, along with their students, must be willing to critically reflect upon their teaching practice. Only by recognizing their unconscious biased habits of mind can teachers liberate themselves in order to form a socially transformative classroom. Through the collective and solitary hand stitch, my consciousness was raised, revealing my deep-seated anger at hetero-normative suburban nonworking members. I critically reflected and my consciousness was raised. This discovery caused me to revisit many

aspects of my personal and professional decisions, especially how my attitudes affected my past and present pedagogy, art, research practices.

By rooting my study in engaged constructivist leadership theory, I discovered models from which to develop my own emancipatory pedagogy through needlework. Further, I pursued its possible manifestations within historical sewing circles and that of my own theory of socially engaged arts practice. Potentially, the sewing bee is an ideal form of assembly that can bridge differences among strangers, transforming them into friends. A sewing circle could meet long-term or be part of an organization's mission. One could form spontaneously or be a one-time event. At times, my sewing circle met in a university conference room, a town café, and a campus gallery. The nature of the circle is that it can be done with minimal materials and meet almost anywhere. But I had yet to discover a pedagogy incorporating the stitch as an aesthetic tool for accessing and altering sociopolitical assumptions of students in the college. I sought to combine the pedagogical scholars framing my research (Cranton, 2006; hooks, 1994;) with Saito (2007) and hook's (1995) mundane aesthetic theories, creating a course where sewing was as central to learning as writing and discussion. Yet, the territory I was about to enter was far more estranged from socially engaged pedagogy and aesthetics than the gallery: the liberal arts classroom.

My opportunity to integrate sewing as part of the Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program arrived in the fall 2015. Informed by my historical research and experiences of my campus circle, I designed a syllabus that included readings on the history of American needlework, aesthetics, and basic feminist theory. Still, I struggled with how to mimic the collective, instructional approach that guided my campus and

town sewing circles. Meanwhile, I assembled enough white cloth, quilt batting, pins, needles, scissors, and thread for 50 students to sew. With blind faith and the humble stitch, I entered this serious space lightheartedly, pushing a rolling cart holding a large plastic box full of the quilt supplies.

Chapter Six: The Activist Sewing Circle in the Liberal Arts Classroom

Figure 6.1: The Quilt Cart



As I composed a syllabus for my upcoming course, WMNST 106-004: Representing Women and Gender in Literature, Art and Popular Cultures, I revisited my research questions and pedagogical and aesthetic methodologies that informed both my study of historical and contemporary sewing circles. How could I apply what I had learned about the pedagogical functions of historical and contemporary American sewing circles to shape a critical, feminist pedagogy rooted in the stitch? With few exceptions, I learned that their pedagogical functions overwhelmingly perpetuated social norms and behaviors. Socio-politically, paradox emerged between sewing circles' classed and raced beliefs and the politically charged object sewn to support political causes, especially for Abolition. The ultimate social and political contradiction manifested within co-created quilts sewn by the hands of house slaves and plantation mistresses. Aesthetically, these quilts represented unity and equality between oppressed black and white privileged hands. Figure 6.1 shows the cart I used to carry materials to and from my classroom.

In the iterations of my campus and town sewing circles, participants shared the practical aesthetics of historical bees but not their activism. Unfortunately, my circles

also tended to mirror socially constructed boundaries that divided women over the lifespan. But perhaps the most vital discovery was that of my own unconscious anger and habits of mind concerning the women leading heteronormative lives that influenced my attitude and ultimately my participation in the café circle. In my curricula and instructional design, I sought to mediate the collective sewing circle through critical reflection and discussion.

Figure 6.2: The Liberal Arts Classroom, Fall 2015



In the middle of August 2015, I found my assigned room in the liberal arts building, shown in Figure 6.2. A workshop took place that day, and some of the chairs sat in a circle. I took this as an auspicious sign for my own class. I was a little nervous, for I had not taught since the spring of 2012. The liberal arts classroom I was about to enter differed from the art education space I left in Massachusetts, one where making is a routine part of students' academic and professional lives. Incorporating sewing within the gender studies curricula could prove challenging; however I was more concerned about how to apply the collectively driven sewing circle to my both my curricula and

instructional design. Throughout my teaching career, I followed a seminar style of teaching, modeling pedagogy I respected. Yet, even within that more democratic format, I felt that the teacher tended to control discourse. While struggling to envision a more collective approach, I reflected upon other barriers facing my student and stitched-driven course.

Institutional and Cultural Challenges of the University

My hope to fully engage students was tempered by the realities faced by them within the culture at Penn State and general campus life. My introductory course was a general education elective, not a requirement. Hence, students would tend to focus more on their required courses. Also, I learned that many of their classes were lecture-based, and had as many as 700 students. They responded to a professor's question by pressing a clicker device. Such a class followed Freire's (1989) banking system of pedagogy, and cultivated silence, boredom, and diversion such as texting, behaviors I wished to resist. In addition to holding jobs, many students take 18 credits per semester - the equivalent of six classes – in order to graduate in four years. I did the same, and by my junior year, I nearly flunked out of school because I was so burnt out with my course load and part-time work; that, along with a father's illness, wreaked havoc on my studies and health. In addition to these concerns, Penn State has its own peculiar challenges. Here, many students felt pressured to join a club, or a sorority or fraternity. Some participate in altruistic causes such as THON, the annual dance marathon to support cancer research; others look to fill their resumes to impress prospective employers.

Nevertheless, by far the most pervasive cultural or event during the fall semester was the Penn State football games. As an adolescent, I remembered watching many of

them alongside my dad who adored former coach Joe Paterno. Beaver Stadium acted as a giant magnet, attracting alumni and fans from all over the world. They joined students celebrating on the grounds surrounding the stadium, in local bars, sororities, fraternities, or in apartments. The game even dominated the first floor of the student union, shown on the massive flat screen televisions. Often, the carousing began well before kick-off. Cognizant of all this, I strove to balance my academic expectations with their lives as Penn State students, and began creating course content.

Curricula Design

Secretly, I renamed my course “Gender, Race, and Class through the Stitch.” Initially drawing upon materials from my research and coursework, I labored over the readings I selected to include in the syllabus. I sought to provide stories that would generate narratives from students that related to the readings, following the method driving my dissertation, narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2012). How would students outside of the visual arts react to the Western and ordinary, everyday aesthetics of hooks (1995) and Saito (2007)? I assumed that most would have no knowledge of the roles women and their needles played in the domestic and sociopolitical causes throughout American history, or, for that matter, the pervasive discrimination against both women and the needle within art history.

Yet before I could introduce stories of sewing in everyday life and in the fine arts, I first had to ground students in basic feminism. To this end, I devoted a couple of weeks to American women’s gendered task assignments, followed by selections from feminist art history, and the sociopolitical history of the stitch, its marginalization, and its gender, race, and classed implications. I also included a couple of artists whose activist projects

did not necessarily involve sewing, but merged identity, photography, and the empowerment of women. Throughout, I would relate their quilting not only to “women’s work,” but also as a method to help students discover their own sense of design and aesthetics. Ironically, the arts-based aspect of the course – quilting – was the only constant in my course design! Once I completed the content, I turned to my pedagogy and assessments.

Instructional Design

Forgoing the seminar discussion structure, I struggled on how to apply my collective sewing circle pedagogy, informed by hooks (1995), Cranton (2006), and Stewart and Walker (2005) to my instruction. While considering how to assess student learning, however, I solved my teaching dilemma. Instead of summative assessments, such as a midterm or final exam, I created several formative assessments to monitor and grade student engagement. Taking full advantage of the automatic online component provided by the college, I uploaded the bulk of course readings to the course website. Then, I required students to post a paragraph or two about each reading before class, choosing a direct quote and relating it to their lives. I encouraged them to use Cranton’s (2006) reflective questions as a guide for their explorations. Although not required to respond to each other’s writings online, the posts assured a degree of student engagement with course materials, hence preparing them to contribute to our class discussions. Far more importantly, I would be forced to follow and support their lead, a task that at times proved more challenging than I care to admit. Warned by my friend who had taught undergraduates for years that “they won’t do it unless they’re graded,” I reluctantly counted their quilt squares as part of their final grade.

However, I did include one summative assessment. For a final project, I gave students two choices. For the first, I asked students to create a self-portrait with their quilt square in a place important to them, and write an essay regarding their choices. For the other option, I asked students to interview and take a portrait of someone they knew who regularly knit, quilted, sewed, or embroidered, and write an essay about their practice. Each student would present and exhibit their work in groups of five. Then, my collective solution appeared: have those same groups of five lead the class discussions! I calculated that each group would present twice during the semester.

Still, I forgot the crucial practice guiding all of my pedagogical theorists: that in order to build a trust in the classroom, students needed time to get to know one another. Since the class met twice a week in the morning from 9:45 to 11, I devoted the first fifteen minutes to sewing and socializing. In so doing, I hoped to establish a socially engaged learning space that nurtured community among students, most of whom were first semester freshman. Also, I allowed groups leading the days' discussion to meet during that time to consider their discussion points if they wished. Relieved and excited, I bought and prepared enough cloth and sewing supplies for 50 students. I packed squares of cloth and batting, along with scissors, spools of thread, and needles in the cart I discovered in the closet adjacent to the women's studies graduate office. Then I made a first day of class decision: I would begin class without any explanation of either the syllabus or why they were required to sew. Plunging students headfirst into the socially engaged sewing circle was a risk I was willing to take. Pushing the packed cart toward my classroom, I breathed, ready for anything.

Narrative Pieces of the Gender Classroom

Upon entering my assigned room in the liberal arts building, I immediately recognized the challenges facing the subversive teacher in the university. Fifty students sitting in a classroom suitable for 25 made for cramped, uncomfortable seating, thus preventing me from rearranging the tables and chairs. Gone were the easily reconfigured café, conference room or gallery. Hence, the institutional aesthetics of Freire's (1989) banking system of education that reinforced the dominating teacher – submissive student relationship asserted itself. Undaunted, I introduced myself. "Hi, my name is Laura Sapelly. Welcome to gender through textiles. Who knows how to sew?" About ten students raised their hands. "OK, please, everyone line up and put together a quilt sandwich. Those of you who know how to sew, please help teach those who don't." "Are all we going to do is sew in this class?" a wary student asked. "No, but it's a requirement," I replied. My critical, feminist pedagogy through everyday aesthetics of a sewing circle was underway!

Initially, students looked baffled; then, they introduced themselves to each other, and got to work. Surprisingly, the students taught each other how to sew. I walked around the room, but nobody needed my instruction! After that first meeting, fifteen students dropped, fifteen students added. During the next class, I reviewed my syllabus, assessments, and expectations. Then, I asked the students to introduce themselves. The majority were freshman and sophomores, but a handful of juniors and seniors registered because the class "fit their schedules." Four young men sat amongst 46 young women. The racial makeup of the roster matched that of my campus circle; most were white

middle class students. Yet, all seemed genuinely curious about my teaching style, and remained for the duration.

As the semester progressed, I found some students already sitting in the darkened classroom as I pushed my cart inside to prepare for the morning's quilting. As the class evolved, students continued to sew during the discussions. I found it kept them focused, away from tempting smart phones. Groups assigned to lead the day's discussion often sat outside of the classroom to plan their speaking points. Figure 6.3 shows students piecing their quilt squares during the beginning of class.

Figure 6.3: Collective Quilting, Fall 2015

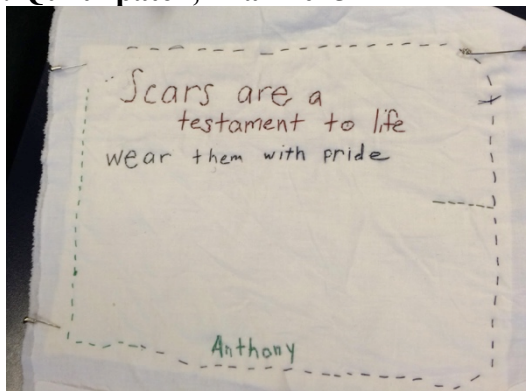


Although a handful of students always shared, I found that over the course of the semester, most students contributed a story or two to our deliberations. They talked about sex, social media, race on campus, sports, and trials facing them and their families. An atmosphere of goodwill pervaded, even as we pondered contentious topics. At times, I had to resist my natural urge to counter a point; increasingly, I found that if I stayed silent, students naturally debated and challenged one another regarding pervading norms

and stereotypes. For many, the collective social and sewing time seemed to make a difference in how comfortable they felt about relating personal stories to the themes chosen by the group discussion leaders.

Not all of my students embraced sewing or the collective classroom, but the majority seemed genuinely engaged. I observed how their sense of aesthetics emerged in their quilt squares. A couple of students felt that they had no “artistic” talent, even after we had finished a heated discussion concerning definitions of “art.” But, as I examined each square before class began, I saw that many created images that related to the university or their friends or family. Others sewed geometric designs that resembled American quilt block patterns, embroidered a phrase, or improvised, scribbling with their needle and thread. An example of a student’s quilt square is shown in Figure 6.4.

Figure 6.4: Quilt “patch,” Fall 2015



During the last couple of weeks of the semester, I listened to each group present their final projects. Presentation format varied. Most projected their images on the screen, but a handful preferred to print and mounted the pictures on cardstock, or carefully placed in handmade frames. Those who chose to interview a hand needle worker featured images of mothers, grandmothers, friends, or extended family, dead or alive, surrounded

by their handwork. Most created self-portraits. They incorporated their dorm rooms, sorority or fraternity houses, or landmarks they loved on the campus. Others took portraits with family members over Thanksgiving break. Some made online visual collages resembling a typical four-patch quilt design. I believed that the modest stitch helped students to create moving representations of themselves, friends, or family, accompanied by poignant narratives.

Although the course was not totally successful in disrupting students' preconceived notions of societal norms, I recognized how many became more sensitive to inequalities surrounding combinations of gender, race, and class. Through the compositional choices they made in their visual projects, I also saw how they explored their sense of beauty and design. Students' attitude toward sewing and art changed; they appreciated learning about discourses surrounding our hierarchical society through aesthetics. Some called quilting "therapeutic," saying it provided a temporary relief from the pressures they faced as young adults living in the 21st century. Through weeks of sewing, discussion, reading, and reflective writing, students created a sympathetic learning community, even if they simply agreed to disagree. The sewing circle encouraged invention in the serious, feminist university classroom.

The Whole Cloth Quilt: Conclusion

The methodologies of Cranton (2006), hooks (1994), and Clandinin (2012) are anchored in the co-responsibility of teacher-researcher and students-participants. The week before our first class meeting, I discovered the perfect reading that would help students understand my pedagogy. Instead of culling excerpts from my theorists, I assigned *African-American women's quilting: A framework for conceptualizing and*

teaching African-American women's history by Elsa Barkley Brown (1989). All of my theorists' collective methodologies related to Brown's (1989) work. As I discussed in Chapter Three, Black quilters eschewed the uniform grid and color schemes of Anglo-American blocks by piecing cloth in strips. Instead, balance is achieved with unpredictable scale and color contrasts. Brown sees her students as representing each unique piece of these quilts; all are necessary yet each retain their individuality. None dominate. In her pedagogy, Brown mimics this variation, seeking to constantly "pivot the center" of her and her students' experiences through the narratives of people of color. In this way, students' lives are not invalidated; rather, they are related to others' stories. Hence, students are empowered to challenge their norms. Brown's teaching mirrors African-American quilting: symmetry is achieved through diversity.

The quilt provides a sublime metaphor for Brown's activist curricula theory, but would liberal arts students embrace or resist quilting? Since my research explores the sewing circle as a form of socially engaged pedagogy, I determined to find out by integrating quilting into my teaching practice. Students lead discussions confronting sociopolitical norms generated from course materials as they piece together small squares. Stories and debates punctuated conversations. I found that group sewing tended to encourage informal relationships and trust. Hence, this historically domestic site offers opportunities to examine and modify unconscious patterns of thought. Throughout her teaching, Brown's nuanced, collegial leadership cultivated honest, difficult conversations. Such feminist pedagogy thoughtfully navigates the perils and promises within the activist-educational space.

Overall, the outcomes of the introduction to gender studies class inspired me to continue exploring how the sewing circle could be applied to other public and traditional classroom contexts. Holding the vision of the interracial Philadelphia Anti-Slavery Society, along with that of the Yarn Mission, I will continue to integrate aspects of the informal campus sewing circle within the critical feminist classroom. Here, I discovered a living aesthetics, one that invited difference and deliberation, but within a community resonant of connection, mutual respect, and fellowship. In both the casual and academic circle, I discovered that the leader or teacher must serve, not dominate or hold hidden agendas; further, they must earn the trust and respect of participants or students. Collective sewing, readings, and prompts provide the base for shared gender, race, and class exploration, but all sew, write, reflect, and discuss their own way toward mutual respect, regard, and understanding. Friendship as manifested amongst the Quaker and freed black women of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society is pivotal to the authentic, emancipatory classroom. Figure 6.5 shows students working outdoors on their quilt squares.

Figure 6.5: The Spring 2016 Sewing Circle



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