
RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT

Soft Politics: The Frictions of Abolitionist Women's Needlework

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Textiles are thought to be soft objects, saturated with care and memory. Present at our most vulnerable moments, they dab at tears, wipe up messes, swaddle fragile bodies, cover nakedness. The weight of a quilt comforts us, its formal familiarity promises continuity. I investigate the persistence of these textile narratives, their alignment with cultural constructions of femininity, the status of the implicit woman behind the cloth, and their discursive deployment. I research women's decorative needlework in the United States and its relationship, in the cultural imaginary, with softness, sentiment, and nostalgia. What has sedimented in embroidery, as a medium, technique, and discursive construction? What frictions are embedded in the relationship between its cultural construction, its use, and its strategic deployment? In "Soft Politics: The Frictions of Abolitionist Women's Needlework," a chapter from my dissertation, " I examine the work of white women in the abolitionist movement in the 1830s-1850s in order to explore these broader questions of the political meanings of work so consistently read as paradigmatically outside of the realm of both "work" and "politics." This essay outlines my initial research into this portion of my dissertation project.

Even by the 1830s, needlework was understood as a nostalgic icon of the home, a representative of naturalized "women's work" (unwaged, but thought of as an outpouring of love), a practice associated with an imagined, pre-industrial past. Needlework practice and discourse in the nineteenth-century aligned women's embroidery with the images of the "Colonial Goodwife" and the "Republican Mother," simultaneously celebrating women's national influence as mothers and moral actors and establishing a discourse of separate spheres. This discourse created a conceptual framework that worked to bound that influence within the home (both as a literal space and a conceptual one, constructed in opposition to the notions of the public as a space of overt politics, fast pace, transactionalism, and masculinity). I argue that women also used this framework to make space for themselves, infusing their "domestic" textiles with political weight, public commentary, and market-savvy aesthetics. They used softness as a tool of puncture.

In "Soft Politics," I work with women's antislavery textiles to understand the complex dynamics of their deployments of femininity, softness, and domesticity in a political movement that, at best, uneasily incorporated women as participants. The American Anti-Slavery Society split in 1840 over the question of women's full participation and the first women's rights convention in 1848 was planned in response to the exclusion of women delegates at the London World Antislavery Convention.¹ Yet women continued to participate in the abolitionist movement as speakers, fundraisers, writers, and even organizers and members of their own antislavery societies, sewing circles, and antislavery fairs. Women's fair and fundraising work

¹ Henry Mayer, *All On Fire: William Lloyd Garrison and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 82.

was a key source of income for the antislavery movement through the 1840s and 1850s, one that enabled their political participation while maintaining associations with domestic femininity.² These fairs were

sophisticated operations, organized by large committees of women and featuring, for sale, “domestic crafts” that otherwise would have been understood as products of the unremunerated labors of a refined, genteel woman, rather than politicized objects or objects sold for compensation. The sale of handkerchiefs, needle books, fancywork embroidery, workbags, and other crafts at antislavery fairs and bazaars gave women the opportunity to see themselves as political actors and earners, while still drawing on the associations with domesticity, morality, sewing circles, and women’s “benevolent work.”³ These fairs confirmed both the economic value of women’s domestic (“ornamental”) pursuits and their political force; many of the objects sold both materially and aesthetically announced their makers’ (and purchasers’) political commitments.⁴ Among these objects is a cradle quilt, sold at the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Fair in 1836. Although the object is not signed, it corresponds to a quilt that Lydia Maria Child described making and selling at this fair, suggesting a lineage in the hands of one of the great abolitionists of the early nineteenth century.⁵

As part of a research trip supported by a grant from the Decorative Arts Trust, I spent portions of the summer of 2018 traveling to the archives at Historic New England, the Peabody Essex Museum, and Colonial Williamsburg to examine abolitionist textiles (figures 1 & 2). At Historic New England, I encountered [this quilt](#), stitched in an unassuming, classic Evening Star motif. The quilt, a cradle quilt meant for a child’s bed, is small (measuring only thirty-six by forty-six inches) and closely worked in fine hand-stitching. Its colors are muted and soft, an accumulation of printed cotton blocks in pink, blue, and brown star patterns; at first glance, this is not a remarkable quilt. However, the maker clearly played upon the quilt’s anticipated home in a cradle, using the implied anticipation of a maternal, sentimental scene as an occasion to insert an overtly political message. Delicately inked in the quilt’s central star is a hand-written stanza from Eliza Lee Cabot Follen’s poem, “Remember the Slave”: “Mother! When around your child/ You clasp your arms in love./ And when with grateful joy you raise/ Your eyes to God above,-/ Think of the negro mother, when/ Her child is torn away,/ Sold for a little slave- oh/ For that poor mother pray!”

² Alice Taylor, “Fashion has extended her influence to the cause of humanity’: The Transatlantic Female Economy of the Boston Antislavery Bazaar” in *The Force of Fashion in Politics and Society: Global Perspectives from Early Modern to Contemporary Times*, ed. Lemire (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010), 118..

³ Of course, this calls us to recognize the class dimensions of these fairs. Many women did already see themselves as workers and were paid for their labors (although they themselves could not legally own property or enter into a contract), but these were typically not the same women who did fancy needlework at home.

⁴ This is particularly important given the fact that the laws of coverture meant that married women could not own property. It enabled women to see the economic value of their domestic pursuits, which otherwise were typically unremunerated. Indeed, advertisements for the Massachusetts Antislavery Fair in 1839 claimed “Never was there a finer display of money’s worth, whether the purchaser be in search of the useful or the beautiful!” framing these women’s works as valuable goods. For more, see “The Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Fair” *The Liberator* 9 (November 1, 1839): 44.

⁵ Lynne Bassett writes that Lydia Maria Child reported, in a letter from January 1837, that her cradle quilt sold for \$5.00 and was purchased by Francis Jackson, for his daughter, a member of the Boston Female Antislavery Society. See Lynne Bassett, *Massachusetts Quilts: Our Common Wealth* (New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 2009), 177.

This poem demonstrates the political stakes threaded through the maternal relationship and the domestic scene, asking women to consider the contrast between their moments of relative domestic serenity and the fundamental cruelties of enslavement.⁶ It harnesses the softness of the quilt and contrasts it with the puncture of political commentary. Although the poem does go on to extend sympathy to “the poor young slave,/ Who never felt your joy,” the stanza that marks this quilt implicitly questioned the scene of white domestic love and pleasure, asking its players to consider whether it was grounded on the exploitation and exclusion of others.⁷ The quilt asks those who encounter it to split their consciousness, countering the notion that quilts, or textiles in general, serve to wrap up, to hold, to comfort.

Angelina Grimké, one of the only white Southern women known to have joined the abolitionist movement, literalized the textural dimension of this form of textile activism in the antislavery movement in her writings.⁸ In her “Appeal to the Christian Woman of the South,” Grimké wrote of the layered work done by women in anti-slavery societies, bringing together notions of moral work and physical labor in her descriptions of the creation of antislavery crafts for sale at fundraiser fairs.⁹ She helps confirm that women’s antislavery crafts often involved the physical representation of the body of an imagined enslaved person, writing that women were “telling the story of the colored man’s wrongs, praying for his deliverance, and representing his kneeling image constantly before the public eye on bags and needle-books, card-racks, pen-wipers, pin-cushions, &c. Even the children of the north are inscribing on their handy work, ‘May the points of our needles prick the slaveholder’s conscience.’” Her writings consistently highlighted the ways in which women might remake political debate by centering their own cultural construction as moral, religious anchors of the home; their domestic position, ironically, became the justification for their emergence into the public sphere. In her discussion of abolitionist women’s craft work, Grimké deftly wove together Christian morality, maternal influence, textile production, public presence, and the textural contrast of the needle through cloth to evoke the force of the political commentary of “innocents.”

My work considers the active construction of the “innocent” subject position, its relationship to the supposed benevolence of textiles, and the limits of its political salience. In the context of the early nineteenth century, “innocent” was a subject position foisted upon both women (“protected” from the exigencies of the political and economic worlds by the system of coverture) and children, a signal of their dependence and, therefore, justification for their exclusion from full civic identity. However, it could function as a strategic claim of women and children (typically, white women and children,

⁶ As I noted previously, this quilt is made from printed cotton blocks. Given the importance of cotton as one of the key products of the slave labor system, it is surprising that Child would have used this material without considering its inherent violence. Many abolitionist women worked to boycott cotton, sugar, and other exports of the plantation south.

⁷ Eliza Lee Follen, “Remember the Slave,” *Hymns, Songs, and Fables, for Young People* (Boston: Wm. Crosby and H.P. Crosby, 118 Washington Street, 1851; Project Gutenberg, 2005) <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/16688/16688-h/16688-h.htm>.

⁸ Angelina Emily Grimké Weld and her sister, Sarah, left the slave-holding plantation they’d grown up on and moved to Philadelphia in the 1820s, where they became members of the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society. The sisters eventually became agents for the American Anti-Slavery Society, giving lectures about the evils of slavery and the moral rectitude of the antislavery cause. They insisted on the relationship between women’s rights activism and antislavery work, insisting on women’s rights to speak publicly on political issues.

⁹ Angelina Grimké’s 1836 letter is cited in Alice S. Rossi, *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to De Beauvoir*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 303.

although abolitionists also worked to extend this category to black women and children). By announcing their sentimental purity, their status as “moral mothers,” women justified their political platforms. But my research questions both the racial dynamics of these claims and whether they helped reify or undermine gendered associations between femininity, domesticity, and depoliticized existence. Though I have found a few interesting examples of ornamental needlework by African American women during this time period and do not wish to whitewash the abolitionist movement, the majority of women participating in these specific antislavery craft practices were white. In these women’s hands, what (or who) did the cradle quilt’s contrast between the white, loving, domestic mother and the black, bereft, laboring mother serve? These makers exploited the friction of juxtaposition, contrasting the sharp puncture of their needle and message with the maternal embrace of the quilt, the femininity of the decorative stitch. This formal contrast undergirded a second juxtaposition, one between their own white status and that of enslaved persons. But this second juxtaposition of status also served as a point of comparison, an occasion for white women to call attention to their own unremunerated labors, their own exploited states.¹⁰ What did this frictive layering generate?

This fundamental question has led me to consider the politics of white sympathy and the commonplace notion that the abolitionist movement was the political staging ground for the women’s suffrage movement. Read through this historical lens, it becomes all the more important to think through the meanings of women’s politicized crafts and their relationship to gendered visions of race and raced visions of gender. At Colonial Williamsburg’s archives, I examined an undated, unsigned sampler features a stitched iteration of the classic Josiah Wedgwood antislavery seal. A woman stitched the image of a kneeling, chained enslaved person in the fashionable, though solidly middle-class “Berlin work” style. This image was a mainstay of abolitionist visual rhetoric, but women also “feminized” the scene, stitching and printing an enslaved woman with the text, “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?” A small needle-case at the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, bears this feminized iconography, an enslaved woman kneels at the feet of an allegorical figure of justice (functionally, a white woman). Though these objects were very real actors in the cultivation of a feminine antislavery movement and enabled women to understand their domestic crafts and decorations as politically relevant, they raise questions about the creation of images of black suffering by white women. As these women stitched their fashionable samplers, pulled needles out of cases printed with classical emblems, and carried workbags signaling their moral, cross-racial sympathies, they developed their own networks, sentiments, and senses of self, revealed in the public sphere.

My work takes these objects and practices seriously, thinking through what it might have meant to labor over the construction of the image of a suffering, black body (as did the maker of the Colonial Williamsburg sampler), what it might have meant to wrap one’s child in a quilt infused with the reminders of the loss, violence, and injustice attending other domestic scenes (as Lydia Maria Child did). But I also hope to question what it meant for white women to construct these images in service of developing their own political subjectivities. How was needlework’s associations with softness, nostalgia, and femininity deployed in each of these contexts? And to what ends? What can histories of women’s decorative needlework production help us understand

¹⁰ Indeed, early articulations of (again, white) women’s right to suffrage and property ownership aligned their status with that of enslaved people. They claimed their right to full citizenship and enfranchisement through comparing (and sometimes collapsing) their own treatment with that of chattel slavery, proclaiming the obvious immorality of this state. See, for example, Harriet Taylor Mill, *Enfranchisement of Women*, (Syracuse, NY: Master’s Print, 1853). This metaphorical language exists earlier and continues even in contemporary conversations, as evidenced in the marketing campaign for the recent film, *Suffragette*, which featured t-shirts with the text, “I’d Rather Be A Rebel Than A Slave.”

about abolitionists' uses of these tools? My research considers these textures of women's political textiles, tracing the histories sedimented within them, their accreted associations, what they smooth over, and what they help puncture.

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Figure 1. Mariah Gruner at Peabody Essex Museum Archives, Salem, MA.



Figure 2: Mariah Gruner at Colonial Williamsburg Archives, Williamsburg, VA.