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## **Fiber Arts and Generative Justice**

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Because the fiber arts are a culturally, ecologically and historically ubiquitous human activity, they make a fascinating lens through which to examine issues of generative justice. They are often a literal intertwining of human and natural agency, and their crafting includes some of the most infamous cases of labor exploitation as well as some of the most profound cases of sustainable fusions between artisans, environments and communities. String made from grasses was one of the earliest human technologies, and textiles and garments made with twisted animal, vegetable, or synthetic fibers (that is, yarn) are with us more than ever, in industrial “fast fashions,” advanced engineered composite materials, and in DIY home knitting, crocheting, quilting, and sewing.

This chapter has three main sections:

The first section is a case study of Navajo rug weaving. Looms first appeared in the Southwest around 700 CE, using cotton, and when the Navajo encountered the churro sheep the Spanish brought to the new world, they switched to wool. Today, traditional Navajo will say “sheep is life,” because sheep still provide a ready source of protein through their meat, a source of wool for clothing and blankets, and a source of cultural pride and identity. The wool was often colored using natural plant dyes, and plant biodiversity in the Navajo environment was supported by many traditional practices. As Kuznar (2001) shows, the presence of Navajo actually increased the biodiversity of their environment. Together with egalitarian social practices, such as ownership of sheep by both genders, the traditional weaving context offered generative forms of justice in its circulation of ecological, cultural and social values.

The masterworks of Navajo weavers now sell for five-figure sums on the international art market, yet most Navajo fiber artists live in poverty. Lack of access to markets means that much of the profit from the sale of contemporary Navajo blankets goes to middlemen, and the most costly Navajo blankets are antiques, often by artists no longer living, who in any case would not benefit directly from the appreciation in value of their work. Yet the generative foundations still offer possibilities for resistance and survival. Economic pressures would dictate that the Navajo should give up raising traditional churro sheep, whose wool is not in demand on the open market, and instead focus on a breed like Merino, whose wool is much softer and is considered more desirable. Yet this decision makes perfect sense from a generative perspective, because raising the heirloom churro and using its wool is an expression of cultural and ecological identity and cohesion.

The second section of this chapter discusses current fiber arts communities in the context of the global economy. Although often associated with grandmothers, fiber arts like knitting, crocheting, and sewing are popular DIY (Do-It-Yourself) activities for many young people as well. The web site Ravelry, devoted to knitting and crochet, has more

than 4.2 million registered users worldwide. In 2012 there were 3.1 million people in the US participating in “needle arts” of various kinds. Spending by the most dedicated fiber arts enthusiasts totaled between \$750 and \$900 million in that year. Fiber enthusiasts come from all social classes, all races and all ages, and although most are female, a significant number of men also engage in fiber arts and are often leaders in their fields.

While the contemporary economics of gift-giving constitutes a multi-billion dollar, aggressively advertised and highly commoditized market, the fiber arts retain many of the characteristics of unalienated exchanges described in Mauss’s (1954) “gift-economy.” Fiber artists may make garments to give as gifts to friends and family, or to give to anonymous recipients through charities that solicit knitting for soldiers, for cancer patients, for sick children, and so forth. Fiber artists may also sell their work at craft fairs, farmers’ markets, or on the online craft marketplace “Etsy.” They may also make their own clothes and accessories. These activities fit well with social movements to “eat local” and “shop local” as well as with the trend toward community maker spaces. For fiber artists, their community maker space is often their local independent yarn or fabric store (about 3,000 across the US), although fiber arts have been incorporated into some community maker spaces. Thus, even detached from much of the ecological and cultural networks that make traditional practices such as Navajo textiles such a clear case, the DIY aspects of fiber arts create a powerful opportunity to see how generative justice can be sustained even in the context of enormous market forces.

The third and final section discusses fiber arts in the context of “critical making.” This dimension in the generative justice of fiber arts comes from the intersection between personal connections—the transparent and community based production, the positive meaning made by both producer and recipient such as heritage connections, the reflective choices in materials and design, etc.—and the cultural critique of new social movements. In addition to the “buy local” and fair trade movements mentioned above, knitters have engaged in protest activities such as “yarn bombing,” most notably knitting a coverlet for a tank and for the bull statue on Wall Street. “Knitters for tolerance” around the world showed their support when bearded drag performer Conchita Wurst won Eurovision’s 2014 song contest. A knitted coral reef was created to raise awareness of ecological disasters in tropical coastlines. Finally, moving from protest to praxis, the integration of fiber arts with science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) education opens up spaces for not only for critiques of the lack of race, class and gender diversity in STEM, but practical means of overcoming the alienation from math caused by our educational system. Thus, while knitting is often portrayed in popular media as the most passive and innocuous of pursuits, its potential for generative transformations is only now beginning to be understood.

#### Citations

Kuznar, Lawrence A. “Ecological Mutualism in Navajo Corrals: Implications for Navajo Environmental Perceptions and Human/plant Coevolution.” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 57, no. 1 (April 1, 2001): 17–39.

Mauss, Marcel. *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*. Cohen & West, 1954.

