



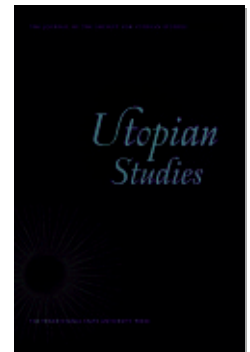
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Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender

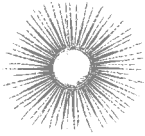
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Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender

Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush

ABSTRACT

This article examines the recent resurgence of interest in what we call “fabriculture.” Three dimensions of fabriculture are explored: the gendered spaces of production around new domesticity and the social home; the blurring of old and new media in digital craft culture; and the politics of popular culture that emerge in the mix of folk and commercial culture. Ultimately, we conceptualize craft as power (the ability or capacity to act), as a way of understanding current activist possibilities.

In this article we analyze the recent popularization of DIY craft culture. We evaluate craft culture, or “fabriculture,” around three major knots: (1) the spaces of production, especially as they are gendered; (2) the relationship between old and new technology or how the digital and the tactile merge; (3) how this popular cultural form, weaving together folk and commercial culture, provides new modes of political activism. Examining Web sites, practitioners’ statements, and other craft-related events, we assess the tendencies within fabriculture. While cyberculture and digital culture seem inherently opposed to the archaic practices of weaving, spinning, and crafting, we

situate fabriculture within this field of new media study. Ultimately, we seek to conceptualize craft as power (the ability or capacity to act), as a way of understanding current political possibilities.

When we speak of “fabriculture” or craft culture, we are referring to a whole range of practices usually defined as the “domestic arts”: knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking, quilting, embroidery, sewing, doll-making. More than the actual handicraft, we are referring to the recent popularization and resurgence of interest in these crafts, especially among young women.¹ We are taking into account the mainstream forms found in Martha Stewart Living as well as the more explicitly activist (or *craftivist*) versions such as Cast Off, Anarchist Knitting Circle, MicroRevolt, Anarchist Knitting Mob, Revolutionary Knitting Circle, and Craftivism. In addition, a whole range of cultural forms fall in between these poles, such as the virtual knitting circles and crafting blogs, as well as the association with (post)feminism in the pages of *Bitch* and *Bust* magazines. When we use the term *craft-work*, we are specifically referring to the laboring practices involved in crafting, while fabriculture speaks to the broader practices (meaning-making, communicative, community-building) intertwined with this (im)material labor.²

This resurgence, we argue, complicates conventional notions of activism, especially regarding gendered politics. Craft-work’s communal quality, reconfiguration of time, and reappropriation of spaces provide a rich tapestry for rethinking contemporary activism (Minahan and Cox 2007). The crafty subject is bound up with trickery and artifice, with tactics that make fabriculture part of what Michel De Certeau calls the “politics of the popular.” Finally, it is tied to a broader DIY culture and an activist community in a way that spatially and analogically links experiments in making futures differently.

I. Spaces and Histories of Craft-Work

The dawn of capitalism emerged in the transmutation of craft. Textiles, we will remember, were one of the first major industries. Craft-work was transformed from guild to factory, from artisan work to industrial labor, from use value to exchange value. But it was not just the “handicraft” that became systematized and eventually automated in the loom.³ The communal craft circle—the ability to produce a community through production and distribution of the object (within the family, as gift, as public sign)—was also

captured by capital. The revival of craft-work and fabriculture is in some ways a revival of this original mutational moment.

And this labor transformation was thoroughly gendered. Mechanization and industrialization smashed the cottage industry of weaving; it changed the speed and space of production and introduced a shift in the gender of weaving. In nineteenth-century England, factory owners recruited male spinners to work the machines. While men were viewed as better equipped to fuse with the machine, in fact laborers often employed their entire families to assist them at the factory machines. Men were paid by the piece, and women and children toiled for the man's income. Gender struggles in craft-work existed in antiquity, and the preconditions of capitalist gender hierarchies could be found in the professional guilds, even while in some places the guilds afforded more room for women's agency (Federici 2004, 31). This transfer to the factories was no simple or smooth process. As Sylvia Federici argues in *Caliban and the Witch*, the rise of capitalism via primitive accumulation was not just an economic reorganization of the bodies of male workers (e.g., the spinners who were absorbed into the factories). Before this violence could take place, another violence was enacted as precondition. This clearing for capitalism was the dispersion, deauthorization, and expropriation of women's skills and knowledges along with the destruction of many women's bodies (the witch burnings). The rest of these knowledges and practices were consigned to the domestic sphere as "mere" reproduction.

In a telling parallel, fabriculture's recent popularity arose alongside of another highly publicized craft-work in the 1990s, namely, the exposure and scrutiny of global sweatshop practices. Anti-sweatshop activism, especially around the garment industry, not only raised awareness of a particular form of labor commodity but was an entry point into counter-globalization activism more generally (Klein 2002). Craft culture can even be regarded as a *direct response* to this pervasive and oppressive form of craft-work (Campbell 2005; MicroRevolt 2006). The emphasis on slow production as opposed to rapid output, on personal expression against repetitive and specialized tasks, and on gift exchange versus mass production all constitute this parallel craft. The collaborative aspects of craft culture reappropriate the collective qualities of sweatshop labor, but without the exploitative discipline and hierarchical forms. Handicrafts in contemporary culture offer a critique of the regime of technology and the culture

of speed. Crafting creates slow space, a speed at odds with the imperative toward hyperproduction. Crafting also ruptures the seamlessness of the technological present—watching someone knit reveals alternatives to mass production, introducing jarring anachronisms akin to the Amish buggy on a highway.

None of this is strictly new: as Glenna Matthews notes in an interview, “From time to time there has been an outcropping of this kind of rebellion against everything being machine made” (Sabella 2006). The “response” to sweatshops is not necessarily explicit and does not therefore simply come after capital expropriation. It is simultaneously an intensification of *precapitalist* practices, invoking the long history of craft-work with this latest incarnation.

Knitting in/as Public

Near the door inside a New York City East Village coffee shop is posted a simple xeroxed sheet. It announces the weekly meeting of Knit Club and lists the rules of Knit Club (first rule: don’t speak about Knit Club outside Knit Club). The humor derived from the hypermasculinization of a knitting circle (via David Fincher’s *Fight Club*) finds a more popular expression as well: the absurdist spectacle of the Style Network’s *Craft Corner Deathmatch*. Juxtaposing the placid traditional domestic arts with the aggressive competitive contests of shows like *Junkyard Wars* and *BattleBots* engenders a humor of incongruity but also provokes broader questions about gender, technology, and the publicness of domestic craft.

In a *Boston Globe* column called Miss Conduct, a concerned reader offered the following conundrum: “I recently attended a professional conference and during a couple of sessions noticed several women in the audience knitting as they listened to the presentations. It seemed a little rude, as it was clear they were not giving their full attention to the discussions. Am I being unreasonable?” Miss Conduct rules that the knitters were indeed being “terribly rude.” The *Globe* coverage appeared on *Etherknitter*, a blog devoted to knitters (“Public Displays of Knitting” 2006). The etiquette column prompted some blogging. Anna writes, “I’ve been dying to knit in law school lectures btw but I know it would NOT be looked on kindly. *sigh*.” Martha warns, “I do think . . . that working women might need to consider how

professional they look knitting at an industry conference. While I think we all agree that knitting helps us pay attention, so much of business success is based on others' perceptions of us, like it or not" ("Public Displays of Knitting" 2006).

What causes such discomfort about knitting in public? One might put it this way: Knitting in public is *out of place*. Freud institutionalized a concept denoting the jarring and disorienting effect of being spatially out of phase: *unheimlich*. The queasiness of the *unheimlich* occurs also when interiors become exteriorized (especially the home, as it also means *unhomely*). Knitting in public turns the interiority of the domestic outward, exposing that which exists within enclosures, through invisibility and through unpaid labor: the production of home life.

Knitting in public also inevitably makes this question of space an explicitly gendered one. One commentator observes that knitting in public today is analogous to the outcry against breast-feeding in public twenty years ago (Higgins 2005). Both acts rip open the enclosure of the domestic space to public consumption. Both acts are also intensely productive and have generally contributed to women's heretofore invisible and unpaid labor.

But could such an innocuous activity as knitting have such social ramifications? How disruptive can fabriculture be when crafting women are more in the public eye than ever before? Many of us may know that Julia Roberts, Gwyneth Paltrow, Madonna, and other celebs knit. We may also know about the resurgence of craft culture from the Style Section stories of major newspapers. But knitting in public leads to questions about publicizing our knitting. To understand the implications of this transfer of the private into public we need to situate crafting into broader issues of space and gender.

The relationships among women, space, and weaving are key to antiquity's myths and practices. Arguably, the most famous spinner can be found in that formative text-as-textile, Homer's *Odyssey*. Domestic and faithful, Penelope weaves. In the *Odyssey*—and by extension, in classical culture— weaving and women were interchangeable. Spinning and weaving were creative and productive acts conducted solely by women (*The Penelopey* n.d.). Telemachos explains the division of labor in classical culture as he addresses his mother, Penelope: "Return to your own hall. Tend your spindle. Tend your loom. Direct your maids at work. The question of the bow is for men to settle, most of all for me. I am master here" (Homer 1998, quoted in *The Penelopey* n.d.).

These sexual divisions of labor began to be codified spatially in antiquity. Weaving as labor took place in a space specifically designated for women and textile production: the *gynaeceum*. A distaff, a tool used for weaving, eventually became a kind of verbal shorthand signifying women, women's work, or the woman's side of a family. In other words, weaving and women were so intertwined that the tool could linguistically, as synecdoche, stand in for women in general.

Women-only spaces have often produced exotic imaginaries in literature, painting, and common parlance, often erasing the labor and production that characterize and produce these spaces. Consider the names: *gynaeceum*, *harem*, *seraglio*, *zenama*, *pardah*. Through Western artists eyes these interiors were opened up for us to see voluptuous bathers and sultry odalisques—no weaving, no loom, no distaff, no politics, and no threat. Tensions between women's productive spaces and those of men are erased in these eroticized representations.⁴

The domestic has been associated with private space since the seventeenth century and has been long linked with the feminine and with the mother (Scott and Keates 2004). We also want to call attention to the traditional sites of women's production: the spaces *within* the domestic space, specifically enclosures within the home that functioned as women-only spaces for work and for confinement. Anthropologists and historians remind us of women's confinement even within the domestic space. Menstrual huts or red tents housed the unclean menstruating body. Similarly, the laboring woman-body was restricted to segregated enclosures.

This transfer of the private into the public has been called part of the "new domesticity," a phrase that may immediately raise the hackles of those who would see this as part of a retrograde postfeminism. We could also call it *reclaiming*, as in the reappropriation of oppressive and violent representations (epithets, stereotypes), but with a significant difference. Whereas reclaiming seeks to give a previously negatively charged meaning a new affirmative one (based on the identity of the group doing the meaning change), the new domesticity does not transform old into new, *it reweaves the old itself*. To put it another way, the old meaning itself might undergo change, whereby the diminution of all things domestic is seen as a patriarchal strategy, one that finds its double in its continuing devaluation even by first- and second-wave feminists. Old domesticity, with its attending negative associations with female subordination, devalued labor, and social role

restrictions, could never fully capture what was actually going on in these spaces. Working with fabriculture can rend this semiotic fabric to reveal layers of activities and meanings covered over.

Neither rejection nor reclamation, this is an affirmation of something that is no longer what we thought it was. We could call it “returning to the home,” but that space is no longer the same. Within contemporary fabriculture, practitioners are not forced to go, nor is it always framed as empowerment due to postfeminist “choice.” A sentiment like “you can’t go home again” evokes the process here: The return is of something that is not the same and *may not have been the same even “back then.”* To put it another way, this is not “returning to the home” but more like “*detourning the home.*”⁵

The domestic as attached to a domicile itself was a historical phenomenon, as we have discussed. The extension into new spaces is just the latest warp in a cycle that also included *intension* into bounded places (home and factory). Craft-work is not unique here, as now various kinds of labor (intellectual and symbolic but also classically manual) take place outside of offices and are becoming mobile and remote. Craft culture’s publicity (in shops, parks, mass transit, the streets, and public events and, as we will discuss later, in cyberspace) and its often communal quality mirror this new exteriorization.⁶

The home, as the other side of this spatial split, was also a stopping point on a trajectory. A long history of critical scholarship, especially feminist research, has sought to make the private sphere visible as site of social relations, arguing even that calling it the “private” sphere is an attempt at obscuring those social relations. What happens now, when feminist analysis is not the only thing bringing domesticity out into the open, when the practices themselves are “going out”?

The home has become social, even global. We could call it the *social home*.⁷ By this we mean two things: (1) the domestic sphere’s practices physically coming out into the public and (2) the recognition that the home was always crisscrossed with social relations. The social home acknowledges these oppressive conditions while also noting, along with Glenna Matthews (1989), that the home was not simply a space of capture (gender domination, exploitative reproduction of labor).

The home is also a site of subject production irreducible to mechanical reproduction. These counterhierarchical interactions, circuits across and between women, have been examined most famously and controversially by Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (1975) and more recently by Franklin (2005), and it

is here that we place the history of fabriculture and space. The interactions and practices outside of the circuits of capitalist capture, and evading the patriarchal gaze, can form new sources of value production. Crafting does not belong to the home any more than it does the factory.

The knitting circle or sewing circle is a worthy example here. Often noted for being women-only spaces where the production of physical objects and communication take place, these “hidden” zones provided a different kind of subject formation. These spaces would function to allow women to swap stories, skills, knowledge, and strategies and generally speak about the more oppressive aspects of the social home.⁸ It is no wonder, then, that these “tightly knit groups” had to be ridiculed as “gossiping circles” and otherwise managed semiotically. Seen as idle work, a waste of time, and unproductive activity from the perspective of capital and masculinized value, these forms of craft-work do not get integrated into profit-making systems but get marginalized as, at best, use-value objects or a cost-cutting measure. Precisely in this diminution as “only” affective and sentimental is where new figures and possibilities arise, which we will see later.

Online Spaces and Collectives

Stella Minahan and Julie Wolfram Cox (2007) argue that Stitch 'n Bitch groups (and as a movement) have been traditionally defined by face-to-face meetings and manual work but are a highly *mediated* phenomenon. Fabriculture is “a new way of connecting that is based on material production using traditional craft skills and yarns as well as the optical fibre and twisted pair cable used for telecommunications” (Minahan and Cox 2007, 6). Knitting in public, as we have already noted, has become an event of publicity and of publication. Third-wave feminist magazines such as *Bust* and *Bitch*, self-published print media (zines), television programs like *Craft Corner Deathmatch*, and documentaries like *Woman's Work* (Grossman 2003) are all inseparable from the emergence of the new craft culture. Most importantly, here is how fabriculture merges with cyberculture to produce what Minahan and Cox call a “new materiality.”

Traditionally, craft circles took place in the context of institutions such as churches, ethnic organizations, and political groups, for example, abolitionist sewing circles such as the Cincinnati Anti-slavery Sewing Circle.⁹ What happens when these spaces are virtual, when they enter the mediated public

sphere of the World Wide Web? Web sites and blogs devoted to fabriculture (e.g., Craftster, *Grumperina*, Knitting Blogs Web Ring, Craftzine) span a wide range of activities. Twitter feeds, Facebook groups, Tumblr (re) posts, and YouTube channels have all become vehicles for the expansion of fabriculture.¹⁰ From commercial sites to virtual knitting circles (or *knit-alongs*), the new domesticity is thoroughly an online affair. Carrioke, Etherknitter, and Extreme Knitter can meet one's needs for debate over the merits of knitting in the round or the ethics of vicuna wool. Just as an embodied knitting circle exceeds the mere execution of knit and purl, so, too, do the knitting blogs share personal anecdotes, show baby pictures, and share political convictions (as the Knitters Against Bush demonstrate).

Like so many other online communities, contemporary knitting culture blurs the boundaries between consumption and companionship.¹¹ With online communities such as iVillage and the WeddingChannel and BabyZone sites, women converge around gendered activities, including knitting. Knitting blogs often open up the domestic space of the user through confessionals, photos, and details on current projects. What could generate more warm and fuzzy feelings than a "community of knitters"? When this kind of traditional domesticity is circulated, the open-ended multiplicity of such technocultural metaphors as the *matrix* is closer to its original meaning (as motherly/matter). We can see that even at the moment of affirming women's online experience, we need to acknowledge how quickly it can be captured in the confining, gated enclosure model of the cult of womanhood.

But other knitting blogs position themselves against this old domesticity, preferring hip and edgy aesthetics, with names like *Extreme Knitter*. It is not surprising that Stitch 'n Bitch nation was launched by Debbie Stoller, editor of the pop feminist magazine *Bust*. Defined chiefly through Stoller's lead, much of the contemporary knitting movement often positions itself as subverting the conventional associations of knitting: domesticity and tender maternalism. The April 2006 issue of *Bust Magazine*, for instance, featured a project by subversive cross-stitcher Julie Jackson entitled "babies suck."

Confessional culture also constitutes much of the blogosphere, another way of exposing the private to the public.¹² Knitting blogs expose the dark side of knitting—addiction and excessive consumption. Etherknitter, a physician and knitter, recounts an exchange that she had with a yarn store owner. She writes, "The staff in the store sees a lot of people at the store who act

out their neediness through yarn. She saw it as uncontrolled buying. Since we were talking about obesity in America at the time she was tying it into alcohol/drug and food addiction.” Etherknitter also observes the use of the word *stash* to refer to a collection of yarns. She reflects on the lifestyle alteration that came into her life after knitting: “I really do have to beat myself to fulfill the more boring paperwork obligations in my life since I started knitting” (“Knitting Addiction” 2005).

Sometimes the bloggers show photos of their in-the-flesh knitting groups in places like New York City. The photos often show several smiling, youngish, mostly white women exuding an upbeat alternative lifestyle arranged around a table drowning in cocktail glasses.¹³ Circulating images of embodied knitting extends that much larger virtual knitting circle. The photos and commentary of the blog reveal the practices of the enclosure to a larger audience. The knit circle becomes media event, but not only online (as a series of individuals on computers); like other sites, these virtual spaces bring people together in space (to have face-to-face knitting circles).

We could say that these sites weave alliances and relationships. Virtual crafting is an exchange of information, skills, and even products. In other words, the knitting circle now meshes with the World Wide Web. More apropos is the phenomenon of online social networking, where interactions are now embedded in virtual spaces (blogs, microblogs, and social media applications). At the same time, these online techniques and spaces become increasingly integrated into everyday life (online dating services, txt mobs, psychogeographic aesthetic experiments, certain reality TV shows, and embedded mobile communications technologies more generally).¹⁴ Continuing with our crafting notions, we can call these social *meshworks*, whose affinities and links are formed not in organizational contexts or in identity-based communities or even via consumer tastes (DeLanda 1998). The units of affinity can be small and local (harkening back to guilds and to contemporary affinity groups) and/or global (especially with virtual communities). Just as the practice of crafting can be seen as open-ended, so, too, these relations and communities can be woven.

Knitting in public forces us to examine more closely the production of both material and virtual spaces. In many ways, knitting in public takes us to the knot of questions regarding the private/public split in today’s spatial arrangement. But the social meshworking aspects of fabriculture are only the first steps toward understanding the relations between old and new technologies. We turn now to this intertwinement more directly.

2. Cyberfeminism: Gender, Materiality, Techne

As a series of binding or connecting technologies (of objects and subjects), craft media are not just representational—they are “tactile” as well. Using one’s hands is obviously not exclusive to handicrafts, as so much of what gets considered high art involved the painter’s and sculptor’s hand. In the 1970s one of the many feminist interventions into the art world, *Threadbare: A Subversive Aesthetic*, worked on this similarity and difference. By pleating crafts into the range of art pieces, the artists foregrounded the hierarchy of senses (visual over tactile) at the foundation of canonical high art.

Historical conflicts over machinic control and techne not only involved class conflict; they significantly revolved around gendered divisions of labor. Weaving and textile production take us to the nexus of these cycles of struggle. Some feminists advocate technological proficiency as a means to personal power. Cyberfeminism was and is a movement that encourages woman-machine relations, especially digital relationships (Fernandez and Wilding 2002; Haraway 1991; Plant 1997; Spender 1995).¹⁵ As the 1990s predictably pronounced that women were “falling behind” in the information revolution, cyberfeminism emerged as a way of having women embrace the machine. In *Nattering on the Net*, Dale Spender writes, “Given our history, it’s not possible to assume that women will automatically share equally in any gains that come from the present information revolution. Women were excluded from the process of knowledge-making when the printing press was invented; and there’s plenty of evidence today to suggest that women are again being kept out of the production of information as we move to the electronic networks” (1995, 161).

During this time, groups mobilized to occupy the Web, and cyberfeminism was born. Cyberfeminism is not limited to issues of technological access or bridging a gendered digital divide. As Radhika Gajjala and Annapurna Mamidipuni (2002) argue, cyberfeminism is a spatial problematic. In addition to being about technological environments, this space is geographical: We “must be wary of drawing the automatic conclusion that ‘gendering’ always occurs to the disadvantage of women in all technological environments across cultures, histories and various locales” (Gajjala and Mamidipuni 2002). Faith Wilding and the Critical Art Ensemble find in craft an important predecessor, if limited to physical space: “The organizing cell for the first phase of feminism was the sewing circle, the quilting group, or the ladies’ charity organization” (2006).

Aside from the specific category of cyberfeminism, it is widely acknowledged that tactical cyberculture is primarily a masculine phenomenon. The typical association is masculinity/digital culture and femininity/fabriculture. The DIY craft culture, however, complicates this gendered binary. Of course, many women are involved in programming and digital culture, and some men are part of fabriculture. But more than this empirical crossover, we can see information technology and handicraft being fastened together in a number of ways.

As Reece Steinberg's Craft/Technology Web site points out, the relationship between technology and craft is deeply intertwined. *Time* reviewed the fabricultural site Craftster and called it "open-source crafting" (Craftster 2006). Some of the key individuals involved in fabriculture have a foot in both worlds. Leah Kramer (founder of Craftster) is a computer programmer. Jenna Adorno (a writer on knitty.com) works in the software industry. Not surprisingly, these crafters maintain an online presence for the handicraft. Another technical example is knitPro, a Web application that translates digital images into knit, crochet, needlepoint, and cross-stitch patterns.

Kirsty Robertson (2006) finds many links between crafting and informatics, following Plant, including information storage and binary data. Robertson, analyzing a number of artists and activists working on this connection, also highlights the embodied activity of both crafting and digital culture and even finds links to biotechnologies. Craftivists have found another overlap, this time in the software model. At a digital poetics workshop, according to one of the participants, they "set out to explore the surprisingly plentiful interconnections between knitting as a form of activism and computer viruses" (Matt Soar, quoted in Buiani 2005). This Viral Knitting Project worked "to create knitting as actual communication," creating both a "text/ile" and a community (Buiani 2005). Other metaphoric interweavings of technology and craft include the parallel use of patches and fiber. Even the *node* of a network etymologically derives from the Latin for *knot*. Furthermore, the "hard" sciences liberally borrow soft terms like *fabric*, *texture*, and *string* to understand the nature of the universe.¹⁶

But there is more to the craft/digital connection than metaphors. The first attempt to automate processes (aka software) was based on the Jacquard loom. Kirsty Robertson (2006) follows up on this historical connection when she argues that information technology is less about hardware than software,

and this code-based programming is akin to knitting.¹⁷ Sadie Plant (1997) has written a “machinic history” of Ada Lovelace, the nineteenth-century aristocrat, mathematician, and collaborator with Charles Babbage on an analog computer. Ada herself was obsessed with tapestries and with the idea of weaving encrypted messages into scarves. The intertwining of digital culture’s origins with fabriculture has led Plant to suggest that the binary code 1/0 that underpins computer programming was derived from knit/purl. A film like *Conceiving Ada* and Plant’s scholarship rely on the long-standing associations between women and traditional handicrafts to warm up women’s perceptions of the digital Web.

Once we take this aspect of craft seriously, we can no longer simply hold onto the notion that craft-work is “old” media. In fact it reconfigures our notions of old and new, even our notions of media itself.¹⁸ Beyond just the use of hands, tools, and skills (the common uses of the term *techne*), craft-work by definition transforms old into new (even at the literal level of refashioning previous material). The resurgence of fabriculture can also be placed into this logic, as a *revision* of the past. Its thoroughly mediated quality (especially with online spaces) blurs the line between old and new technology. To put it simply, cyberculture reconditions fabriculture (especially its origins), while fabriculture reengineers the “newness” of new media and the virtuality of digital culture.

What meanings are immaterially woven into the craft commodity? This is one way of thinking about the virtualization of the object. Hidden maps and codes were embedded in quilts designed to convey escape routes in the Underground Railroad. Family crests, Native American quilt-narratives, espionage messages, and encrypted love notes are other types of informational materialism (Kimokeo-Goes 2007). Beyond the meanings directly integrated into the material design, we also need to take into account the communicative processes infusing the labor process itself. This would mean taking seriously what Tiziana Terranova (2004) notes as the forms of labor not usually associated with value: chatting, life stories, amateur production. Once again, the knitting circle comes to mind, whereby participants swap skillful knowledge (*techne*) but also stories, experiences, songs, and other life strategies.¹⁹ We could consider this *peer-to-peer textiling*, a collaborative “information materialism” (Terranova 2004).

Of course, the fact that products are often circulated within a gift economy (in and out of capitalism) also gives the material a semiotic dimension.

The recent revival of this gift economy (as counter to globalized sweatshop production and mass homogeneity) adds another twist. In this case, handicraft encodes a desire for the *precapitalist* form of production, for the “personal touch.” The commodity now infused with a code that embeds non-capitalist desire is ironically part of a new marketing campaign: global/local authenticity (Gajjala 2006).

Throughout all of this, we can see that craft is not just a material practice separate from semiotic ones. We could put it this way: Craft fastens the concrete and the abstract into a material symbol. Fabriculture is a materialization of a series of relationships and symbols. Therefore, its material is imbued with a mediated quality (as delivery system for messages but, more importantly, as series of subjective processes, systems of meaning-making, technological principles). And once again, this encourages us to think media outside of its representational quality, in its binding capacities, subjectivation processes, and social value. Crafting, as media and as resurgent technology, stitches across common distinctions between old/new, material/immaterial, economic/semiotic, bio/info, and digital/tactile and opens to a new fabric of relations. It is thus profoundly *virtual* (in Levy’s [1998] sense) at the same time as being material.

3. Politics and the Popular

It would be the height of banality to say that the resurgence of craft culture has been commodified. Much of DIY craft culture has been fully integrated into consumer culture in the likes of Martha Stewart, the Style Network, and even the DIY Network. But before examining this popularity more directly, let us turn to the radicalized sectors of craft culture.

Craftivism

Craftivism, as the name suggests, highlights the activist components of craft culture, exemplified by groups like the S/he Collective, Revolutionary Knitting Circle, and Anarchist Knitting Mob. These groups create public events such as knit-ins and Massive Knit NYC. The latter was performed in memoriam of Jane Jacobs, an urbanologist famous for her pioneering work

on the importance of public spaces in cities. The Anarchist Knitting Mob called for people to gather in Washington Square Park in Manhattan. Groups and individuals would then “knit-the-park,” crafting fabrics that surrounded certain grounded objects (fence railings, lampposts, bench legs, etc.). The point of this action, as conveyed by the organizers, was to remind us (as Jacobs did) that public spaces are not static or permanent, they are processes under construction. And this construction does not have to be geared toward redevelopment as capitalist venture.

By softening the hard material of these objects, the radical crafters remind us of the communal and creative essence of the public. Other craftivist projects include the aborted “Wombs on Washington” action, where knitted wombs (collected online) were to be thrown on the steps of the Supreme Court; artist Barb Hunt’s knitted land mines; and the MicroRevolt collective’s knitting of corporate symbols “to showcase the labor involved in the making of textiles and clothing” (Robertson 2006).

On a more everyday level, craftivists develop values and practices like mentorship, community-building, connection with other DIY projects, and gender empowerment. The Viral Knitting Project, for instance, did not just create a textile: “Its performativity, as a collaborative and interactive project . . . also created a community” (Robertson 2006). The Revolutionary Knitting Circle promotes discussion, skill-sharing, and relationships among people with different backgrounds. The S/he Collective works toward building a community that promotes women’s art and social change. The current resurgence of crafting has strong links to the anarchist milieu, especially as a politicized practice of resourcefulness, local knowledge, and nonhierarchical organizational forms. For instance, radical knitters participated in counter globalization demonstrations in Quebec City by sitting on the street knitting objects with protest messages.

Darlene Clover (2005) examines another kind of craftivism, one not tied to typical revolutionary practice. In fact, her “Sewing Stories and Acting Activism” examines one of the more denigrated forms of crafting—quilting.²⁰ The quilt (like much tactile media) is often semiotically limited to its old domesticity, equated with its use-value functions (warmth, comfort, security), and devalued regarding its political potential. But one need only to think again of the Underground Railroad map-quilts to see how a conventional practice can be used for hidden purposes (the quilt as camouflage).

Crying the Blues was an exhibition that used quilting to convey Canadian seniors' "stories, ideas, and concerns" (including health care, education for their grandchildren, wage cuts and job loss [Clover 2005, 635]). More than a series of representations, this material imaginary was then recirculated as a pedagogical tool. The final "product," therefore, was not only an embodiment of a set of symbols but a set of connective material practices that formed a provisional community.²¹ This communal quality comes in many forms in the crafting world, from online blogs to public demonstrations, from small Stitch 'n Bitch sessions in cultural centers to conferences like the above-mentioned "Digital Poetics and Politics." These on- and off-line gatherings do not just bring people and ideas together to make and sell a product, they connect each member's skills, competences, and creativity—in other words, their material labor.

What, then, do we mean when we talk about the politics of crafting? Is it limited to issue-based quilting, radical knitting circles, and public knittins? If knitting offers subversive possibilities, it is hardly restricted to explicit radicalized forms. Instead, it is the very logic, the very mechanism, of crafting that promises a powerful political tool. The community-building, space-making, and ethical relations that constitute fabriculture allow us to rethink the politics of the popular via mundane media. Even the founder of *craftivist.org*, Betsy Greer, recognizes this component: "Craftivism is about more than 'craft' and 'activism'—it's about making your own creativity a force to be reckoned with. The moment you start thinking about your creative production as more than just a hobby or 'women's work,' and instead as something that has cultural, historical and social value, craft becomes something stronger than a fad or trend" (2006).

Greer here indicates that component of craft found in the German *kraft* (power, skill, capacity) as well as the politics of value production. We can add to this another characteristic—the familiar claim about the radical potential of the digital Web—interconnection, weaving, producing and reproducing alliances. As Minahan and Cox (2007, 11–12) note, the resurgence of crafting is a profoundly collective phenomenon, with progressive dimensions (women expressing themselves via "third spaces") as well as more radical, protest-based iterations. The very connectivity of craftivism, according to the authors, is a means of overcoming the alienation in an information society.

Counter to dominant notions of the placid individual crafter, crafting is a social movement and at times a form of direct action. The politics of

crafting here involve a number of layers. Some craft politics are familiar reformist ones—they seek to influence policies (e.g., reproductive rights) as well as raise funds and awareness (such as Craft the Vote or Afghans for Afghans). Others are more like cultural interventions (e.g., street art, stencil art, graffiti), which insert messages into the commercialized spaces of everyday life. Still others accompany street-based direct action politics (counterglobalization protest knit-ins). Others might operate alongside confrontational street tactics (the kind usually associated with aggressive masculine subjects), in order to counter the more macho forms. Besides the content of the messages, the protesters remind others of the *pace* of transformation, that disruptive street tactics need to be met with mundane grassroots direct action, and that confrontational action needs to be paired with a cooperative project. This is a type of “prefigurative politics,” one that creates collaborative relations now as if the world to come has already arrived. In other words, fabriculture spans a variety of political forms, from the familiar reform and revolutionary ones to the cultural politics of everyday life central to cultural studies research.

Return of Time: Old/New

To understand the politics of popular fabriculture we again need to raise the question of history and how fabriculture manages the old/new divide. One immediate retort that could be raised is that fabriculture’s popular resurgence is really just a nostalgic return to preindustrial folk culture (especially in its contemporary marketing). Even aesthetically it has carried this connotation: When incorporated into artistic canons, crafting is often “folk” or “outsider” art. Also, being embedded in domestic traditions (as use value, as gift) provokes this association with folk culture, as do its ancient and mythological roots (elaborated above).

But this is not simply a *return* to the folk, as if an older tradition *belongs* to the past. What would it mean, for instance, to make the case that Tantra (meaning *loom, continuity, tool for expansion or a weaving*), which persists today, belongs to the past? This modernist sense of time as progress and segmented eras has been criticized especially from postcolonial scholars. There is a difference between noting a long-standing tradition and relegating it to “the past” (as premodern, as a previous stage in development, as precapitalist). Modern

linear time is thus a cut that makes an ongoing tradition (one that might vary in its power and visibility) seem like a “return” to the past.

Reconditioning and remediation complicate any easy periodization: Current fabriculture is a resurgence or a reversion of that which went dormant or took on other forms. As with domesticity, the return is not of the same thing. More specifically, the resurgence is not of the past: The emergence of capitalism was a moment when craft was transformed into labor, the proliferating spaces of production were codified into private/public, and process was diminished in favor of product (commoditization). But crafting never disappeared: Its commodified and industrialized forms never eliminated fabriculture, only spatially organized it and ascribed value to certain iterations of it (while devaluing others). Crafting persisted and proliferated, in cracks and interstices. Its resurgence is not new per se, nor is it old—it is a way of rethinking the capitalist industrialized moment itself and the patriarchal division of space/labor. This notion of time, appropriately enough, fits right in with some basic technical characteristics of craft-work: for example, refusing to fetishize newness as such. Instead, innovation itself changes: Now it can mean *recrafting* the material, unraveling a product to start again, or reworking the same material, differently. As it goes with the material (reworking one’s textile) so, too, with material culture; as with fabric, so with fabriculture.

Just as we have argued that space is reconfigured through fabriculture, time undergoes this process as well. Weaving a history can go a number of ways here: Is fabriculture part of an unbroken thread of practice? Or does it entail dropped stitches? In any event, breaking history up into segmented eras and placing craft into one of them would simply cut up fabric into strips. Relegating craft culture to a past folk or to a purely new phenomenon would diminish its critical powers, thus continuing the project of devaluing affective labor and disciplining gendered production. It makes much more sense to evaluate fabriculture in terms of *popular* culture.

De Certeau and the Tactical

Michel De Certeau’s (1984, 1986) work on popular culture, while dealing mostly with scriptural, spatial, and culinary forms, offers a number of helpful insights, specifically around the notions of pop culture as *tactical*. For

De Certeau, dominant powers use visibility, gridding, and institutionalized spaces to limit possible actions. They employ *strategies* to enclose spaces, organize proper usage, and determine the pathways of action. De Certeau locates pop culture on the side of diminished powers, the “weak” who can employ tactics as a counter to the dominant groups. Tactics are small-scale actions (De Certeau draws from guerrilla warfare) found in the interstices of the dominant. They are unformalized practices hidden away from dominant gazes (sometimes right under their noses). These occulted spaces and practices carry with them the tactics for coping with domination but also the types of operations that can combine to produce new effects. In discussing games as a popular art, for instance, De Certeau (1984, 21–24) notes that embedded within them are a whole host of tricks and maneuvers preserved as tradition. Pop culture encodes these tricks and operations into its protocols.

What about crafts? Can they, too, be located as a type of operation, as a series of tricks and tactics? We can begin with some *linguistic* tricks, operations also having traditions embedded in them. To be called “crafty” is synonymous with being cunning, clever, even deceitful. One does not have to go too far back in time to note that *cunningcraft* referred to a whole series of knowledges and skills associated with women (aka folk knowledges or witchcraft). Ornamentation and artifice, associated with the arts of feminine seduction, only increased the association of “craftiness” with legerdemain. The word *knack*, which commonly refers to skill (“to have a knack for”), has its roots in an old German word for deception, trick, or device. Even the English origin of *trick* comes from the French *tricoter* (to tie or knot together [Robertson 2006]). In Greek, one would say to “spin” a plot, rather than to “hatch” a plot as we may say in English. Craftiness and cunning were inseparable for the Greeks: Ariadne’s thread, the labyrinth, weaving contests. Weaving and wiles are woven together in the *Odyssey*: “Here is an instance of her [Penelope’s] trickery: she had her great loom standing in the hall and the fine warp of some vast fabric on it. . . . It is a shroud she weaves for Lord Laertes. . . . So every day she wove on the great loom, but every night she unwove it; so for three years she deceived the Akhaians” (Homer 1998, 38).²² As myth, symbol, and model, the relation between spiders and spinsters winds its way through numerous cultures and their folklore (Weigle 1982).

Craft thus has an intricate relationship with the tactical quality of popular culture. Relegated to interstitial spaces (outsider art, trivial sewing circles, devalued labor) craft culture found shelter for persistence. It is, after all,

innocuous, the unconventional hidden in convention, which links it to viral tactics (Buiani 2005). Finally, the embedded quality of crafting (hidden messages, camouflage, secret circles of exchange) also highlights this *tactical media*. Tactical media are usually associated with the world of high-tech specialists, cyberactivists, digital artists, and the hacker class (Lovink 2003; Wark 2004).

One last remark about De Certeau's contribution to crafting as subject formation. De Certeau (1984) notes that these tactics (such as camouflage) are not limited to human beings. He traces these operations to nonhuman forms, "an ageless art" that "forms strange alliances preceding the human frontier . . . an immemorial link to the simulations, tricks, and disguises that certain plants and fishes execute with extraordinary virtuosity." The clash of these operations belongs to "the domain of the living," surpassing settled institutions as well as consciousness, "from the depths of the seas to the city streets" (De Certeau 1984, 40). If we place fabriculture within this notion of popular culture, we could claim that craft-work is a material practice that weaves in human form something that precedes and exceeds it—arachnids, for sure, but even more: the very practice of *pattern formation*. Just as network studies links ant colonies to software culture (Johnson 2001), so, too, does fabriculture preserve and extend a relation to the nonhuman (Weigle 1982). So whenever we are tempted to say that crafting produces *new* modes of subjectivation, we also ask, How new is this webbing?

The Warp of Activism

Is the popularization of craft-work and fabriculture another case of incorporation, a corporate capture of DIY ethos into a commodity? This would seem to marginalize the craftivist dimension to the more explicit forms. We want to argue that crafting was not incorporated, because it never emerged from an outside position, like a subculture.

To return to the argument in our opening section, craft-work was split, interrupted, and bifurcated at capital's inception; it was the target of a break *by* capital. Capital, in this formulation, can be seen as an intervention, as a *subject* defined by expropriation and exploitation. From the perspective of capitalist value-making, craft was in the shadows, the sewing rooms, the subterranean streams of knowledge, the spaces of the amateur. While

crafting is a paradigm case of capitalist subsumption, as social value it is irreducible to these subsumed forms.

Here we can point to another meaning of craft, the one that ends up in the German language as power (*kraft*) and in Italian as *abilita*. Power here is not equivalent to hierarchy and domination (*potere* in Italian; *pouvoir* in French) but more like capacity or ability (*potenza* and *pouissance*). We can think of English versions like tradecraft, statecraft, spycraft, and witchcraft: the set of skills and practices that have systematic effects in the world.

Interventions of severe and prolonged violence, the massive decomposition of women's knowledges and skills, the expropriation of powers and wisdom, the destruction of bodies, the marginalization and diminution of practices into trifling spheres—all of these were encountered by craft-work. And yet, we see persistence, the preservation of knowledge, the transmission of skills and wisdom across generations of affinity circles, the recomposition and extension of craft into new spheres. Activism can ground itself in and draw strength from this resilient subjective process.

Elsewhere one of us has argued that craft-work complicates contemporary notions of activism based on digital or immaterial labor (Bratich 2010).²³ Fabriculture is not only a type of labor but a type of subjectivity—it has an *ontological* quality. It withstood capitalism's founding violence. Its current popularity is a sign of its strength, not in its incorporation into new modes of value creation but in its endurance despite capitalism and patriarchy. Its resurgence is a moment in a cycle, a warp and woof in the rich tapestry of species history. It thus makes more sense to define activism as the preservation and expansion of craft *against* breaks.

Moreover, craftivism also alters a commitment to conventional notions of organizing. In the tradition of unions and armed uprisings, organizing involved a disciplined subjectivity collectivized through hierarchy and leadership (e.g., the party). It often took place at the hegemonic space of production, be it on the factory floor in industrial capitalism or in the social factory of Post-Fordist immaterial labor. Organizing of this sort depends on a particular type of potential revolutionary subject—either the industrial worker in the factory or the immaterial laborer in the digital sphere. In each case the revolutionary subject is the (typically) male hegemonic fraction of the labor force.²⁴

But if we begin with the social home (discussed above), the space and form of activism change. This meshwork does not require “organizing” as a

separate activity (political) since it emerges from everyday life practices and is tied to the DIY ethos and subcultural practices more generally. And the subject, as mentioned above, is a resilient ontological one, not necessarily shaped solely in the advanced sector (though in the crafter's case, we have seen that the digital sphere is crucial to contemporary crafting).

J. K. Gibson-Graham (2006) gives us another way to think about collective practice.²⁵ They argue that the historical composition of feminism operated through spaces by “link[ing] feminists emotionally and semiotically, not primarily organizationally” (2006, xxiii). Eschewing an external organizational mechanism (as in the traditional leftist party or union), feminist politics and imaginaries took hold via an “ontological substrate: a vast set of disarticulated ‘places’—households, communities, ecosystems, workplaces, civic organizations, bodies, public arenas, urban spaces, diasporas, regions, government agencies, occupations—related analogically rather than organizationally and connected through webs of signification.” Ethos and affect are at the foundation of the economy, and thus transformation is based on “ubiquity rather than unity” (Gibson-Graham 2006, xxiv). Organization means finding affinity circles and social networks, now not just a purely political (*polis* as space of public and city) or economic one (*oikos* as household) but one that is ethical (*ethos* as interpersonal interactions, gift economies, community-making). Fabriculture, inextricably linked to gender, space, and history, thus challenges not only the hegemonic forms of domination but also the hegemonic forms of opposition and antagonism.

Conclusion

The resurgence of craft culture thus pushes us to rethink a number of basic bifurcations: a space divided into private/public, a time divided into past/present, and a technology divided into old/new. Crafting foregrounds and hooks together other binaries, as well (masculine/feminine, technology/craft, folk/popular, production/reproduction, innovation/repetition, amateur/professional, network/web, art/craft, teacher/student, and producer/consumer).

Most importantly, fabriculture brings with it a reconfiguration of political activism. We still find moments of classically defined struggle, but moreover we can locate other rhythms and accumulations. As we have noted,

fabriculture attaches to, and weaves into, a variety of political forms, from street action to policy influence to the cultures of everyday life. Crafting exists as the spectacularly visible (pop culture) as well as hidden and innocuous (sometimes also in popular culture). Fabriculture complicates the fixation on digital media activism (like hacking, modding, social media mobilizing).

While tactical media are usually equated with online and digital action, craft culture shows that digital media are not only a disembodied affair—they are tactile. Conversely, that which is considered unmediated material is embedded with codes and communication (both on the fabric and in the fabrication). Craft-work's communal quality (even when done by an individual), reconfiguration of time (as new, retro, reversionary), and reappropriation of spaces (domestic spheres, the back rooms of craft stores, commercialized and public spaces) also provide a rich tapestry for rethinking media and the activism it promotes.

In the ubiquitous crisis called capitalism, new utopias not only are needed but are being enacted (as prefigurative politics). The persistence of crafting despite the catastrophic decomposition called capitalism reminds us of ontological accumulation whose strength establishes the base for utopian projects. The ongoing crisis opens fissures wherein resurgences and recomposition take place, where experiments in community, economies, and value production begin to take root.²⁶ Some experiments are new, but some are also a type of restoration, a renovation. Amid these ruins, the old cracks begin to widen, the occulted circles reach out beyond the sewing room to weave their fabric again. Fabriculture and craft-work return, having gone through a bifurcation that could never become a full-fledged separation, only a *1/0* or *knit/purl* that opened up to another future. This meshwork tangles in front of us and behind us as challenge and promise.

Notes

1. For some basic introductions to the resurgence, see Craft Yarn Council of America 2004; Higgins 2005; Sabella 2006.

2. There is also a hidden joke about old/new media here, as Kraftwerk was a band from the 1980s famous for its pioneering work in synthesizer-driven sound and overall computer aesthetic. For a discussion of crafting as digital and immaterial labor, see Bratich 2010.

3. Let us remember here that the early antitechnology saboteurs, the Luddites, focused on textile machinery.

4. In traditional cultures wherever spinning is common, there is a “permanent tension, and even conflict, between the groups of young spinning girls and the men’s secret societies. At night the men and their gods attack the spinning girls and destroy not only their work, but also their shuttles and weaving apparatus” (M. Eliade, in Plant 1997, 70).

5. *Detournement* is the Situationist-inspired practice of rewriting and “re-turning” an image or signifier in order to give it a new political charge and empty it of its original power.

6. We note here that “opening up” the private and the domestic are circulating in other media forms, notably reality TV. See Andrejevic 2003; McCarthy 2004; Ouellette and Hay 2007.

7. This follows from the autonomist notion of the “social factory,” in which the procedures and mechanisms of factory discipline begin to permeate everyday life.

8. For an online discussion of feminism and domesticity with regards to crafting, see the forums at <http://www.getcrafty.com/>.

9. For ethnic sewing circles, see Christine Lamb’s chilling 2002 book recounting her travels through Afghanistan, *The Sewing Circles of Heart*.

10. Obviously there are too many sites to mention, but a good starting list can be found at <http://www.blogcatalog.com/directory/crafts/3>.

11. The social networking of digital online media thus has a predecessor in the tactile media of craft-work. The familiar claim about the radical potential of the digital Web—interconnection, collaboration, producing and reproducing relationships—has a long history in other kinds of networking.

12. Indeed, some blogs now function solely as a repository for exposing secrets: Post-Secret, group hug.us, and dailyconfession.com allow anonymous users to disclose their transgressions for all the blogosphere to see (see Boxer 2005).

13. And here we note the particular demographics of the fabriculture resurgence. The most visible versions (in mediated form) are composed largely of white women, and those with the time and resources to make clothing by hand. But before losing the argument in a spiral of shame surrounding privilege, we should also note the longer tradition of craft-work among those with fewer resources (as repair, as gift). And the cost-consciousness permeating much of mainstream crafting also situates this claim about a particular sector of fabriculture.

14. Most prominent in reality TV are scavenger-hunt game shows like *The Amazing Race* and *Treasure Hunters*, but this could also include programs that involve remote commands conveyed via mobile technologies, as in *Real World/Road Rules Challenge* and *ToddTV*. In a further overlay, the very programming format of shows like *Parental Control* and *Next* resembles the interface logic of digital culture.

15. Among the groups and outlets are Cyberfeminists International, VNS Matrix, the zine *geekgirl*, Nerdgrrl!, Homegurrll, and Cybergrrll Webstation.

16. For example, *The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality* (Greene 2004); *The Fabric of Reality* (Deutsch 1997); and various books on string theory.

17. Interestingly enough these looms were also primary targets for Luddite sabotage. New forms of sabotage like viruses (which Gilles Deleuze [1990] calls the new form of

sabotage in control and communication societies) also find their way into fabriculture (Buiani 2005).

18. Craft has an ambivalent status in the history of radical labor analysis (it is both precapitalist production and highly skilled labor).

19. Sometimes these affective communications are also woven into the fabric. As conveyed to one of us by Wiccan seamstresses, the original Harris Tweed was a fisherman's protective fabric in which the wives would sing songs of safeguarding into the weave as they made it.

20. Devalued here from the perspective of youth-oriented commercialized fabriculture, as in the phrase "not your grandmother's craft club" (CBS Radio, cited in Craftster 2006). Also, in *Craft Corner Deathmatch's* opening theme montage, among the signifiers in the urban graffitied landscape, the word *quilts* is displayed with a negating circle with a slash.

21. As important as the final product was, the relationship to the process was key. One hears this often with quilters and other crafters: the phenomenology of the practice—frustration with completion, undoing an almost finished product numerous times, sometimes leaving it unfinished altogether.

22. The weavings of Penelope provide insight into relationships between craft and cunning. However, as queen she had the luxury to engage in nonproductive weaving: She weaves, and she *unweaves*. On the other hand, the many women in her household would have been producing the cloths to support her and to increase the wealth of the house.

23. For a more extended version of the following argument, see Bratich 2010. For some excellent introductions to the contested notions of affective, immaterial, and digital labor from autonomist perspectives, see two special issues of *ephemera* (Dowling, Nunes, and Trott 2007 and Burston, Dyer-Witthford, and Hearn 2010).

24. Leopoldina Fortunati (2007) argues that the immaterialization of waged labor processes is the expansion of traditionally feminized domestic labor into the waged sphere. Once this key insight is taken seriously, there is no need to talk about an "advanced" labor sector, as the processes of immaterialization have come not *from* capital as its innovation in the waged sphere but from (occulted) labor and its history of preservation and struggle.

25. This is a pseudonym that combines the names of two authors.

26. For a contemporary analysis of these emergent forms of organization, see Van Meter, Hughes, and Peace 2010.

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