// International Journal of Education & the Arts

Special Issue: Art for the Sake of Care

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http://www.ijea.org/ **ISSN: 1529-8094**

Volume 25 Special Issue 1.19 **September 27, 2024**

Needling the Public/Private Divide: How to Stitch a Common World to Care For

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Citation: Dronkers, P. (2024). Needling the public/private divide: How to stich a common world to care for. *International Journal of Education & the Arts*, 25(si1.19). http://doi.org/10.26209/ijea25si1.19

Abstract

Taking its starting point in the influential work of care ethicist Joan Tronto, this article critically examines the public/private divide within liberal political theory. This distinction not only conceals gendered power hierarchies in private life but also obscures mutual interdependencies from public view. Utilizing Palestinian embroidery as a companion to unlearn this division, the analysis explores three pivotal aspects of the craft. In the production process, the role of women, the voice of the embroiderers, and the treatment of materials and fabric emerge as vital concerns and active sites for change. Regarding curation, public exhibitions emerge as a means of preserving Palestinian cultural heritage but also contribute to the commodification of embroidered goods, challenging the deeply rooted geographical context of the craft. Concerning solidarity, the article elaborates the distinction between the private purchases of embroidered items and collective public action. A care ethics perspective underscores the interconnectedness of the private and public within a shared world. Embroidery becomes a metaphor for weaving a just and caring society, overcoming divisive boundaries.

Threading the Needle

Political scientist Joan Tronto begins her 2013 book *Caring Democracy* with a critique of conventional liberal viewpoints that unreflectively echo Aristotle's division between the *polis* and the *oikos*: the public domain of that which is of shared interest versus the private realm of the home and family life. Tronto (2013) contends that this public/private division is problematic as it is often gendered, with the public associated with a male-dominated realm of politics and the private as the feminine sphere of the household and care work: "In this separation, nonpolitical concerns, including sentiment and love became attached to the private. 'Home is where the heart is,' pronounce needle-point embroideries" (p. 1). Since her groundbreaking *Moral Boundaries*, Tronto (1993) emphasizes the need to critically assess any line distinguishing between a public and a private domain, while acknowledging the continued importance of privacy (cf. Allen, 2003). Reevaluating this distinction, Tronto argues, is crucial to ensure full participation, particularly of women, in public life.

Scrutinizing the political and social effects of the public/private distinction is a common thread in feminist and care ethical literature (Held, 1990; Ruddick, 1980; Sevenhuijsen, 1998). In fact, as political scientist Carol Pateman (1989) argued, this dichotomy "is central to almost two centuries of feminist writing and political struggle; it is, ultimately, what the feminist movement is about" (p. 118). Thus, feminist scholars take a critical position in a wider scholarly debate on how to understand the public domain and its relation to the private sphere (Squires, 2003). Political philosophers including John Rawls (2005), Seyla Benhabib (2004) and Jürgen Habermas (1969) view the public as the discursive arena where political decisions of common interest are made based on shared notions of reasonableness and rationality (Fraser, 2007). Under the premise that individuals adhere to shared principles governing the political domain, they are free to pursue their individual conceptions of the good in their private lives.

Legal scholar Bonnie Honig (1993) argues that conceiving the public as a discursive space overlooks the ongoing and essential nature of political contest in societies characterized by diverse needs, interests, and power dynamics. When the public is seen solely as a realm for reaching consensus, its primary function becomes the stabilization of society by solving, or at least concealing, difference. Sociologist Craigh Calhoun highlights that such strategic deployment of the public/private dichotomy "imposes a neutralizing logic on differential identity by establishing qualification for publicness as a matter of abstraction from private identities" (1992, p. 35). Echoing this critique, curator and scholar Ariella Aïsha Azoulay questions the application of political concepts, including the public/private dichotomy, that segment and divide citizens in such a way that "there is no longer a common world to care for but only scattered enclaves to protect" (2019, p. 8). Azoulay advocates for 'unlearning' divisive categorizations that leave groups in the margin of society uncared for. Rather than

relegating potentially destabilizing differences to the private sphere, societies should cultivate political relationships that acknowledge pluralism and conflict (Mouffe, 2005; Squires, 2003). Azoulay (2019) proposes seeking fellow-travelers in the endeavor of 'unlearning' divisive taxonomies, asserting: "Unlearning with companions means [...] retrieving other modalities of sharing the world and the many refusals inherent in people's public performances, diverse claims, and repressed aspirations" (p. 16).

Drawing inspiration from Azoulay's call for allies, this article looks to Palestinian embroidery as a companion in challenging the public/private divide. The objective is to identify strategies that disrupt this division and explore avenues to rediscover and reimagine our common world and our shared responsibility to care. This exploration takes place within the emerging paradigm of a 'politics of care,' which links Tronto's concept of a caring democracy with Azoulay's concern for rediscovering our common world. Conceptualizing it as an alternative to liberal thinking, political theorists Deva Woodly and Rachel Brown (2021) define the politics of care as an approach that theorizes and practices "care as an inherently interdependent survival strategy, a foundation for political organizing, and a prefigurative politics for building a world in which all people can live and thrive" (p. 891). This article explores how embroidery can function as a site of prefigurative politics, envisioning this common world and how we should care for it together.

Disrupting the Public and the Private

To unlearn the public/private divide, I return to the 'Home is where the heart is' needlework mentioned by Tronto in the opening paragraph. Even as a mere adornment on the walls of our living rooms, such embroidery immerses us in political ideals, including the capitalist pursuit of home ownership, and the affective emphasis on family life (Tronto, 2013). Tronto's reference to needlework demonstrates how this small craft piece profoundly interconnects the private and the public realm, thus blurring the boundaries between them. It is this connective quality of embroidery that offers a platform for exploring ways to reconsider and resist the separation between the public and the private.

Embroidery becomes an even more fitting companion for unlearning divisive categories and prefiguring a more caring world due to recent scholarly insights into how its relational character is also disruptive. Embroidery is highlighted as a source of embodied knowledge that unsettles fixed categories and modes of thinking (MacGill, 2019). For example, it is argued that this craft offers a glimpse into the interaction between the human and the nonhuman (such as tools and materials), undermining established notions about the distinction between those two (von Kürthy et al., 2022). Philosopher Anna Mudde posits that as a craft, embroidery reveals "the co-emergences—and co-responsibilities, the mutual indebtedness—of worldly things, including human bodies; physical spaces—like workshops; tools—like

needles; and forms of life" (2022, p. 70). Referring to the work of Donna Harraway, Mudde adds: "[c]rafting is the domain of creatures and kin who are 'at table' with one another, becoming together" (2022, p. 70).

Finally, embroidery is also a promising ally in transcending divisive dichotomies and paving ways toward a more caring world, as it itself is a practice of care. Together with Berenice Fisher, Tronto famously characterized care as "a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). Care encompasses the whole range of human activities that serve to sustain human live. Studying caring practices also necessitates an examination of the inherent power dynamics that may prevent this 'living as well as possible' (Urban & Ward, 2020). Within this framework, embroidery emerges as a form of care, involving conscientious attention to the materials and fabrics used in needlework, as well as a steadfast commitment to the craft itself. In embroidery, other caring practices intersect, such as providing oneself and the family with a vital source of income crucial for survival, safeguarding cultural heritage, and creating visual interventions intended to elicit affective responses from its audience.

In this article, I particularly delve into the Palestinian embroidery tradition, which was inscribed on the UNESCO list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2021. I contend that the ways in which embroideries are crafted and utilized express ways of (not) caring, entwining the private and public domains along at least three dimensions.

The first of the three ways in which embroidery blends the public and the private lies in the production process. The craft is typically exercised within one's own home, where it is easily combined with other caring responsibilities (Hunter, 2019). However, this private realm of production must not obscure the fact that, as a source of income, embroidery is embedded in and dependent on a network of companies, traders, and an industry fraught with power inequalities and the risk of exploitation. The longstanding concerns about low wages and substandard working conditions, at home or in sweatshops, underscore the need for a critical examination (cf. Mudie-Smith, 1906). Other production considerations include yarn and supply sourcing, transportation, product recycling, and waste processing. The manner in which these elements are managed, makes the production process more or less caring for the workers and the environment (Adler-Milstein & Kline, 2017).

The second intersection of the private and public realms is evident in embroidery's role as a platform for curating one's cultural heritage. Choices such as selecting or modifying needlepoint patterns and techniques, utilizing specific colors and threads, determining the placement of embroideries on garments, and even shaping the overall design of clothing, all carry cultural significance. Consequently, the work of individual embroiderers can become a

matter of public and potentially political relevance. Moreover, displaying traditional embroideries has become a crucial means of sharing narratives of identity and nationhood. However, when the craft is embedded in a neoliberal logic, it can also result in its commodification. For instance, in 2019, luxury brands incorporating the checkered print of traditional Arab kuffiyeh headdresses drew criticism from Palestinian designers, who viewed it as an exploitation of potent symbols of resistance, effectively normalizing the Israeli occupation (Bramley, 2019).

The third way in which the two domains overlap is through the private consumer's decision to purchase specific embroidered goods, as individuals express their identity through the garments they select to wear in public. Philosopher Maurice Hamington (2015) stated:

> *care is a political embodied performance, every iteration of which has the potential to contribute to our dynamic sense of moral identity, adds to our disruptive knowledge of the other, and supports the notion that ethical understanding is a mind-body activity that is ripe for autopoietic development* (p. 279, emphasis in original).

Indeed, all fashion choices we make express our moral identity in one way or another, but traditional embroidery patterns and texts particularly signify our affiliations and the groups or causes with which we identify. An illustrative example, although the letters were printed rather than embroidered, is the jacket worn by US First Lady Melania Trump during her visit to migrants at the USA-Mexico border in 2018. The back of the coat read: "I really don't care, do u?" (Morgan, 2020, p. 22). The fact that the US First Lady wore a mass-produced jacket by the fast fashion chain Zara underscores that the very act of deciding where we purchase our clothes and when to wear them demonstrate our moral commitments.

In the subsequent sections, I provide a brief introduction to the Palestinian embroidery tradition. The goal is not to offer a comprehensive historical account as others have already done (cf. Dedman, 2016; Dedman, 2018; Kawar, 2011; Munayyer, 2020; Skinner, 2007; Weir, 2006; Weir, 2008), but to lay the foundation for elaborating on the three themes I just identified. In this overview, the focus will be on embroidery as a form of craft. I will only briefly touch upon the work of Palestinian artists, such as Emily Jacir, Mona Hatoum, Majd Abdel-Hamid, Omar Joseph Nasser-Khoury, and Hazar Grably who employ embroidery in more aesthetic ways to reflect on memory, identity, and territory (Dedman, 2016). Following this introduction, I will revisit the public/private divide. As Tronto (1993) argued, this distinction depoliticizes the domestic and intimate realms of people's lives and obscures practices of care and caring that are or can be productive sites for political contestation. By focusing on production, curation, and solidarity the imperative to contest entrenched notions about these boundaries becomes evident, and concrete ways of doing so can be identified.

In examining Palestinian embroidery, I adopt the perspective of feminist scholar Margaret Urban Walker (2007), who argues that ethical theory should combine *reflective analysis* of the moral understandings inherent in concrete practices with *critical normative reflection* on the consequences of this underlying morality for individuals' lives and political philosophy. This article aims to make in particular a contribution to the ongoing discourse surrounding the public/private dichotomy in feminist care ethics (Squires, 2003). While Palestinian embroidery is my companion on this journey, I did not study this craft for its own sake, nor do I, as an ethicist, have the expertise to do so. I approach the Palestinian tradition as an outsider, presenting my provisional understanding of this practice with the humility of someone eager to learn from it (Dalmiya, 2016).

Palestinian Embroidery

Some years ago, while wandering through the streets of Bethlehem during a study visit to Palestine and Israel, I unintentionally found my way into the Baituna Al Talhami Museum. On display was a small exhibition featuring traditional Palestinian costumes from various Palestinian villages.

Figure 1. A malak thobe (king dress) from the Bethlehem area, 1850-1900. Embroidered linen and silk. Collection: The Palestinian Museum, Birzeit. Photo © The Palestinian Museum.

I was captivated by the beautiful dresses, each a result of many days of laborious work at home. The exhibition shed light on how the colors, motifs and design predispositions of the garments served as a public display of the wearer's wealth, status, geographical origins, and personal interests (cf. Dedman, 2016).

As I stood in front of one of the showcases, pictures from my family's photo albums flashed in my mind. My grandmother also used to wear traditional costume.

Figure 2. The author's grandmother and great-grandmother in traditional costume from Walcheren (Zeeland). Photo © Private collection.

The decorations on her garments, her lace cap, and her jewelry similarly indicated the village she hailed from in the Dutch province of Zeeland. It struck me that while producing and wearing costumes in my great-grandmother's birthplace costumes have become a fading folklore, Palestinian embroidery thrives as a vibrant tradition today.[1] Preserving the dresses at Baituna Al Talhami is one of the ways in which this craft enables especially women to safeguard and perform their national belonging in the face of occupation, oppression and forced displacement (Kawar, 2011). Embroidery is a form of artful resistance (Moors, 2000).

[1] See for instance the numerous Instagram accounts focusing on Palestinian embroidery, such as @thetatreezcircle; @tirazain.initiative; @tatreezandtea; @tatreezsisters; @taitaleila.

Though embroidery has always been a dynamically evolving craft, the 1948 Arab-Israeli War profoundly influenced its production and use. The war devasted Palestinian villages and resulted in the forced displacement of over 700.000 Palestinians (Dedman, 2016). In 2001, together with others, Palestinian artist Emily Jacir embroidered the names of the communities that disappeared on a family-seize refugee tent in the project *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948*.

Figure 3. **Emily Jacir**, born Bethlehem 1972. Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948, 2001. A work in progress consisting of a refugee tent, embroidery thread, daily log of names of people who worked on the tent, variable dimensions. Purchased in 2004. Collection: National Museum of Contemporary Art, Athens (ΕΜΣΤ). Photo © Katerina Paraskeva.

Among Palestinians, these events became known as the catastrophe or the Nakba. Suddenly turned into refugees, people had to adapt themselves to a new reality—living harsh and precarious lives in refugee camps, often outside their homeland. In this context, women had to reinvent their embroidery tradition, which had always been interwoven with their daily lives in the houses, lands, and villages that they were forced to leave (Moors, 2000). Cheaper fabrics and production methods were introduced, and a more homogenous 'camp' style of embroidering evolved, which combined motifs and techniques from the various villages the

refugees came from (Dedman, 2016). Most importantly, embroidery became a way for women to generate income.

I learnt at the museum that Baituna Al Talhami was established by the Bethlehem Arab Women's Union. This local charity is one of the many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that, particularly after 1948, established embroidery training centers, workshops, and commercial hubs to provide income to impoverished women and their families.[2] This effort resulted in a growing availability of embroidered goods. While adorned dresses remained costly and fell out of daily fashion, a new range of more affordable items was introduced, including cushions, shawls and handbags, further popularizing this craft (Moors, 2000). The heightened interest led to renewed visibility and prominence of embroidery in the public sphere, as well as in the national consciousness. Thus, its political significance also grew. The traditional dresses with their typical place-bound embroidery motives became material proof of the long-lasting presence of Palestinians on the land (Moors, 2000). Especially since the 1970s, using and wearing embroidery became a way to embody and perform one's Palestinian identity (Kawar, 2011). It evolved into a means of celebrating Palestinian history and safeguarding the national heritage from erasure and Israeli appropriation. This newfound function and popularity in turn altered the character of the craft itself.

With embroidery gaining new symbolic value, the appreciation of the women producing it transformed: their manual labor was now recognized as an essential contribution to the Palestinian economy. Curator Rachel Dedman succinctly summarized this shift: embroidery changed from being "a self-reflexive craft" wherein women wore their own hand-stitched dresses, "to an art produced in a commercial economy" (2016, p. 49). As they dedicated their time and energy to the reproduction of Palestinian heritage, the craftswomen were increasingly pictured as combatants in the fight for the survival of national identity. Their efforts were seen as crucial in the struggle against cultural erasure and the appropriation of Palestinian designs in the Israeli fashion industry (Halaby, 2001).

Simultaneously, this revival of the craft also paved the way for more conservative perspectives and representations regarding the appropriate role, activities, and agency of women. Embroidery aligned well with a political narrative that romanticized an idealized pre-1948 Palestinian pastoral lifestyle, replete with folkloric crafts, strong family structures, and traditional gender roles (Moors, 2000). In the 1970s, in harmony with this conservative narrative, an artistic tradition emerged depicting women in extensively embroidered dresses in

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[2] On the Bethlehem Arab Women's Union see https://bethawu.org/about-us/. For an overview of the NGOs and other institutions active in the field of embroidery see Dedman, 2016, 118-125.

the role of (primal) mothers—supporting, protecting, embracing and birthing Palestine (Dedman, 2016). In short, by the 1980s, embroidery had become an important symbol in both workerist and conservative political imaginaries of the proper place of women in Palestinian society.

In an unexpected turn, the outbreak of the First Intifada (1987-1991/3) brought about a new type of embroidered dress. During this uprising against the protracted Israeli occupation, women began stitching Palestinian colors, motifs and other symbols of national identity and struggle onto what became known as *Intifada Dresses*.

Figure 4. Detail from an Intifada Dress, 1987-1993. Embroidery of the Dome of the Rock. Collection: Tiraz: Widad Kawar Home for Arab Dress, Amman. Photo © The Palestinian Museum.

As Dedman observed: “Intifada dresses’ intersection of private resilience and public resistance […] brings into sharp focus the performative agency of all embroidery, by virtue of

its being worn on the body" (2016, p. 68). The dedication of the embroiderers who spent many hours at home on meticulously stitching the dresses was one of the ways in which women during the Intifada publicly (re)claimed their role as co-combatants, rather than as primal mothers. Thus, the sphere of the household transcended the public/private binary as it functioned as a safe space for resistance and political engagement.

Alongside the introduction of the *Intifada Dress*, the 1980s also witnessed further commodification of embroidery, resulting in the *New Dress*, tailored to consumer preferences. This was the successor of the homogenized camp-style dress. Created using new materials and techniques, such as embroidery machines, the *New Dress* combined traditional symbols with innovative motifs popular on the (inter)national market (Dedman, 2016). This entrepreneurial spirit also led to a further broadening of the range of embroidered goods, introducing items such as phone cases and laptop covers. Despite, or perhaps thanks to, their commodification, embroidered products remain a vital platform today, particularly for wealthier, middle-class Palestinians aiming to express their identity and allegiance at public events (Moors, 2000), as well as for others abroad looking to demonstrate their solidarity with the Palestinian cause.

Despite the process of commodification, embroidery also continues to endure as a traditional craft in its own right. Hand-stitching, in particular, is a time-consuming activity, making mass production impractical. Scholars and newly established social enterprises are working to preserve and revive age-old production methods to ensure the survival of these traditions (Dedman, 2016). Collectives like *Disarming Design from Palestine* combine art, design and embroidery in work primarily meant to convey the story of Palestinian resistance.[3]

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[3] See https://disarmingdesign.com/shop

Figure 5. Tessel Brühl & Disarming Design from Palestine. Awakening goggles. Sleeping mask depicting the eyes of the artisan. Design: Production: Open Studio, Khan Younis, Gaza. Photo © Disarming Design from Palestine.

Dresses dating back to before 1948 are treasured by their owners, collected by private individuals and museums, and often featured in carefully curated exhibitions. Today, embroidery remains a vibrant and crucial platform for preserving and performing Palestinian identity.

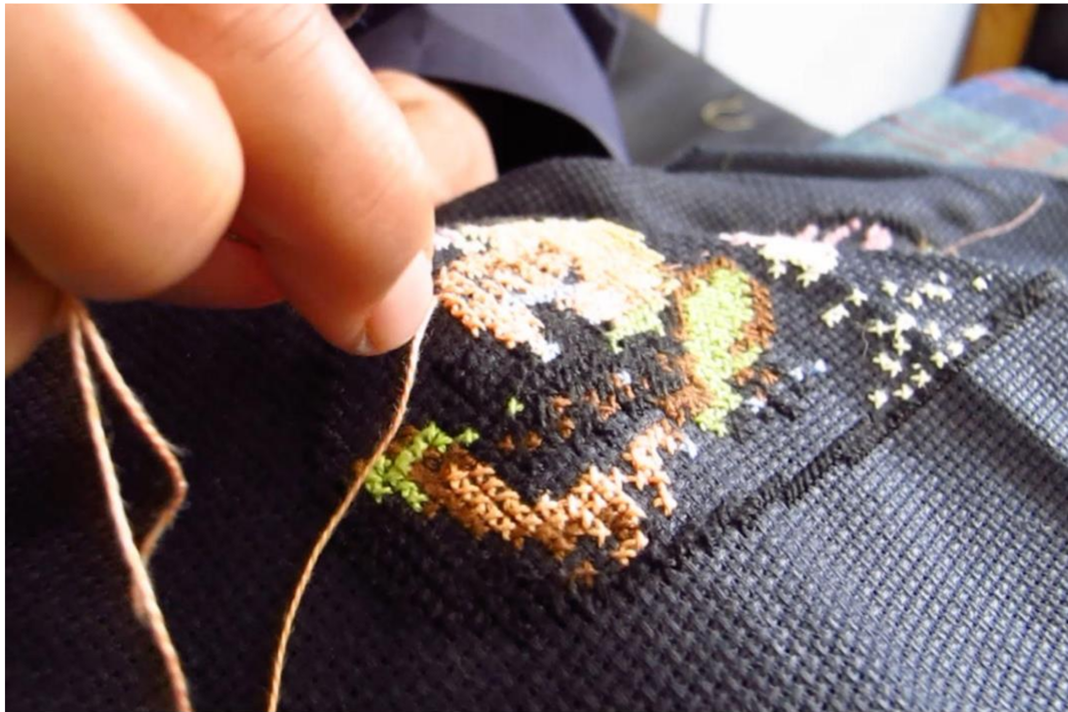

Figure 6. Tessel Brühl & Disarming Design from Palestine. Artisan embroidering the *Awakening goggles*. Production: Open Studio, Khan Younis, Gaza. Photo © Disarming Design from Palestine.

Crafting Care Theory

This brief exploration of Palestinian embroidery, both as a household craft and a public identity performance, offers insights into the complex relationship between the private and the public. Resisting and unlearning this division, particularly in its (neo)liberal form, helps us acknowledge that we inhabit one common world and that we collectively share the responsibility to care for it. In this section, I will discuss embroidery, considering the aspects of production, curation, and solidarity to highlight why separating the public and private realms is problematic. Moreover, I aim to identify the nodes of resistance, or counter-conducts, against this divide inherent in embroidery practices (cf. Morgan, 2020). Thus, I seek to contribute to recent scholarship in care ethics, focused on production, curation and solidarity by showcasing the value of departing from purely conceptual enquiries and engaging with tangible crafts, which can invigorate and enrich theoretical reflections (Leget et al., 2019).

Production

In the realm of embroidery production, the public and the private are intricately intertwined in at least three ways. I will commence by discussing the relationship between embroidery and gender. Prior to 1948, alongside their domestic work, women in rural Palestine played a significant role in agricultural labor and local market trade. In many areas, embroidery was a pivotal means for these women to express their individual identity and belonging when outside their homes. Making their own embroideries provided them with agency and freedom, allowing creative engagement with traditional norms and expectation and intermingling them with their own personal imagination and ideas (cf. Mahmood, 2005). However, post-1948, as Palestinians were cut off from their land and embroidery became an economic pursuit, the status of women shifted. While embroidery as a source of income granted women some independence, it also further confined their daily lives to the private sphere (Moors, 2000, 876; Peteet, 1991). As Dedman argues: "[w]hile working from home is valuable to many women, such a set-up also reinforces prevailing domestic gender structures, which are already inflexible in the conservative environment of the refugee camp" (2016, p. 94).

These shifting and intricate connections between domestic and wage labor, gender roles, and the status of embroidery raise vital feminist concerns about inequality, the relegation of women to the household, and the unfair distribution of care responsibilities. Since the 1980s, care ethicists have argued that structures of patriarchal domination remain unseen when the public/private divide goes unquestioned (Vosman, 2020). The organization of private life and the allocation of care responsibilities should indeed be a matter of public concern. Repressive structures need to be contested and politicized. In 2023, for instance, Palestinian textile designer Hazar Grably created three transparent dresses under the name *Haram* (forbidden) on

which she embroidered Arabic expressions like *eib* (shame), *sharmuta* (slut), and *wati sawtik* (lower your voice).

Figure 7. Hazar Grably, born Jaffa 1990. Garment bearing the inscription 'forbidden,' from the series *Haram* (3 items), 2023. Cotton-thread embroidery and colored flocked screen print on tulle. Collection of the designer. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Lior Horesh.

Through her work, Grably seeks to protest the oppressive patriarchy "reclaiming women's ownership of their own bodies and the right to freedom" (Tareef, 2023, p. 5).

Figure 8. Hazar Grably, born Jaffa 1990. Garment bearing the inscription 'lower your voice,' from the series *Haram* (3 items), 2023. Cotton-thread embroidery and screen print on tulle. Collection of the designer. Photo © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by Lior Horesh.

A second way in which the public and private intersect is in the organization of embroidery production. Many of the craft-based NGOs were initiated as private charitable projects by middle-class women who recognized the potential of needlework to enhance the living conditions of women of lower socioeconomic status (Dedman, 2016). These new NGOs invested in streamlining the production process and in ensuring that the merchandise met the demands and tastes of an increasingly global market. New embroidered products were introduced, designs and colors were modernized, and embroidery patterns were standardized. The resources generated by these NGOs enabled the establishment of workshops where women could gather and work collectively. These centers also offered various other services, including vocational programs, psycho-social support and (pre-)schools (Dedman, 2016). However, with embroidery becoming a commodity answering to market demands, limited

room remained for the individual creativity of the craftswomen. The homogenization of styles led to the loss of the age-old connection between motifs, patterns, designs and stitches at the one hand and the local geography at the other (Dedman, 2016).

While these NGOs supported women in significant ways, their roots in private charitable initiatives also meant that the embroiderers were in a position of dependence to the goodwill of their founders, thus reinforcing existing power hierarchies within Palestinian society. To counter this dependence, some embroidery NGOs began to reorganize into decentralized, non-hierarchical cooperatives from the 1970s onwards, giving employees a more prominent role in decision making (Frank, 1996). Efficiency and creating the highest revenue for the charity were no longer key values. It became more important to work towards an organization in which the status and rights of all concerned were recognized and respected; this was seen as a stepping-stone towards a more equal society. As Dedman states, these cooperatives concerned "themselves less with embroidery as a commodity for the wealthy, and more with its potential role as a catalyst for relationships to Palestine" (2016, p. 102). Not producing goods, but the production of relationship became the core business of these organizations.

A materialist perspective, delving deeper into the production of embroidery, reveals a third way in which the public and private are entangled. Although the actual work often takes place at home and the fabrics and tools used may appear to be private choices, nearly every decision made in the production process touches on how the embroiderers care for our common world. Therefore, a critical analysis of embroidery practices should not be limited to studying relationships of power and dependence between the human individuals involved, it should also include the relation between the human and the nonhuman. The materials and their sustainability, the garments and the possibilities to recycle them, and waste treatment—all these aspects are matters of common concern. The private and the public and the world in which both are embedded are fundamentally interrelated (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). In the field of craft studies, this entanglement of the human/nonhuman has been well explored, especially its potential to disrupt (neo)liberal divisions (MacGill, 2019). Drawing on interviews with experienced embroiderers, occupational scientist Heidi von Kürthy (2022) observes "that embroidering can be interpreted as an important and meaningful liaison where the boundaries between person, body, materials, and tools become blurred" (p. 11). The craft comprises more than an individual embroiderer constituting the fabric, threads, patterns, and her own imagination in a specific way. Von Kürthy (2022) argues that in an inseparable agential companionship, embroidering also 'holds' the embroiderer in the story of its construction. Thus, distinguishing between what is private and what is public is unhelpful, as it conceals this fundamental human/nonhuman entanglement in one common world.

Summarizing, if the public/private divide remains unchallenged, traditional gender roles,

unfair distributions of care responsibilities, and power hierarchies are likely to stay hidden from view. Simultaneously, the cooperative practices through which embroidery can be organized, the intrinsic interaction between the human and the nonhuman in needlework, and the emphasis on sustainable material usage can all serve as reminders of our fundamental interconnectedness and the pressing need to recognize, as Azoulay aptly describes, our common world and our responsibility to care for it.

Curation

The second domain in which to explore the connection of the public and private is curation. As Tronto defines care as that which sustains our lifeworld, it is fundamentally interwoven with practices of curation: of looking after our shared world and ensuring its ongoing existence (Krasny & Perry, 2023). Tronto (2017) herself makes this connection when she highlights that ‘care’ finds its roots in the Latin word *cure*: *homines curans* are caring people.

In the context of Palestinian embroidery, curating can manifest in various forms, such as preserving traditional costumes in museums like Baituma Al Talhami, participating in traditional costume in local folk festivals, safeguarding knowledge about specific patterns and techniques through meticulous research (cf. Skinner, 2007), and revitalizing embroidery by incorporating this craft in artistic practices. Pre-1948 embroidery can be seen as a form of curation, wherein embroiderers made self-reflexive decisions about which traditional patterns, colors, and symbols to retain and use in their decorations, alongside introducing innovative patterns and compositions to enrich the existing canon. Curating is not only about preservation but also involves careful selections and the addition of innovative elements, ensuring that a tradition remains vibrant and meaningful to new generations. When embroidery developed into a commodity in the 1970s, it changed the traditional craft’s character. While women working at the embroidery NGOs still feel they contribute to preserving Palestinian heritage, commodification also resulted in the gradual disappearance of embodied knowledge about techniques and patterns not utilized by these NGOs (Dedman, 2016).

Ironically, the popularity of commodified forms of embroidery originated in and was fueled by another form of curation that explicitly aimed at preserving this craft in its most traditional form. From the 1970s, organizing embroidery exhibitions became a strategy for creating global understanding of and support for the Palestinian cause, as well as to counter the Israeli appropriation and erasure of the Palestinian heritage (cf. Moors, 2000). The curatorial narrative of these expositions often idealized pre-1948 country life with women in lavishly decorated dresses as the progenitors and the protectors of Palestine. While this depiction retained the agency of women as a vital chain in the survival of the Palestinian identity, it also reinforced a conservative worldview associating women’s responsibilities primarily with the

home and family. Key aspects, such as women generating a significant portion of the family income through their craft and their role as combatants in the struggle for the survival of the Palestinian identity, were scarcely represented (Dedman, 2016). Additionally, there was little acknowledgment of how poor living conditions in refugee camps forced women to combine their craft with numerous other care responsibilities. Just as the commodification of embroidery preserved a commercialized version of the craft, the conservative curatorial narratives accentuated the traditional aspects of needlework, while concealing the underlying socio-political injustices from the public eye.

The significant yet complex curatorial activities of NGOs and travelling exhibitions emphasize the importance of curating with care, which involves doing justice to individual stories, aspirations, and struggles, giving them the public attention they deserve. When done carefully, curating can contribute to rediscovering a common world to care for. Exhibitions like *At the Seams* (The Palestinian Museum, Birzeit (PS), 2016), and *Material Power* (Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (UK), 2023) are good examples.

Recognizing this shared world is important both on the broader public level, as well as for individuals. As Von Kürthy argued, embroidering is also a way of taking care of one's own self, or, put differently, curating oneself. The act of designing, stitching, and decorating not only sustains and renews Palestinian heritage but also 'holds' both the embroiderer and the wearer in its narrative. For the refugees practicing this craft, embroidering is more than just a means of earning an income, it is also a way to cope with the loss of one's land, home, and family and to repair one's own relation to it (cf. Peteet, 1991). An embroiderer interviewed by Dedman (2016) stated: "I am of Palestinian origin and so is embroidery. I belong to it, and it belongs to me. We both preserve each other" (p. 90). As demonstrated by the liberation-oriented *Intifada Dresses*, this curating of the self is not only about caring for the memories of the 'no longer,' but also contributing to realization of the hoped-for 'not-yet'—a life of freedom without oppression. The highly public expressions of the most intimate feelings of loss and longing aim to bring about political change.

Solidarity

The third aspect to explore concerning the impact of the public/private divide on care for our common world is solidarity. Tronto (2017) posits that at the heart of care ethics lies "the premise that everything exists in relation to other things; it is thus relational and assumes that people, other beings and the environment are interdependent" (p. 32). The definition provided by Fisher and Tronto (2013) underscores that care as maintaining, continuing, and repairing our 'world' aims at interweaving our bodies, selves and (non)human environment "in a complex, life-sustaining web" (p. 19). In an era of globalization, this 'environment' exceeds our direct life-world (*oikos*) and our society (*polis*); it, in fact, encompasses all those beyond

our walls and borders. Care is a global issue (Robinson, 2011). Given the stark inequalities in power and resources, one of the most pressing issues is how privileged individuals should relate to and care for those people who suffer from injustices that they themselves do not experience (Russo, 2018).

This question is relevant when considering embroidery, as this craft is deliberately integrated in a strategy for garnering international solidarity. Although valued for its own aesthetic qualities at the global market for ethnic fashion (Dedman, 2016), it is also evident that for many buyers, the wish to express sympathy for the Palestinian cause is a motive for purchasing embroidery (Dedman, 2016). As media scholar Lilie Chouliaraki (2013) analyzed, this act of buying and using products out of solidarity aligns with today's neoliberal frame of humanitarian engagement, which stems from the compassion individual citizens feel when they meet directly or indirectly with fellow human beings who find themselves in precarious positions. Driven by this compassion, people alter their consumption patterns or undertake practical actions such as adopting an olive tree or paying solidarity visits (ten Berge, 2016). In this way, people engage in "lifestyle humanitarianism" (Chouliaraki, 2013, p. 177). As crucial as these private actions are, Chouliaraki (2013) emphasizes that it is at the same time crucial not to forsake forms of joint public action. A potential risk of the privatization of solidarity is the depoliticization of the struggle against injustice worldwide. Classical humanitarianism drew its impetus from the perceived moral gravity of the suffering of (distant) others and combined it with grand narratives about a joint responsibility to restore justice. Private consumer choices should not merely remain just that but need to be embedded in and reinforced by public action.

What such joint action towards a common world could or should look like in the context of Palestine and Israel is far beyond the scope of this article. The challenge is undoubtedly complex, especially since the 7th of October 2023. To acknowledge this complexity, Tronto and Fisher's metaphor of care about our common world as weaving a life-sustaining web might sound somewhat too elegant. A few threads could indeed be neatly interwoven, but more often working towards a common web means mending holes, repairing snags, solving loose ends, and we might also want to add new threads, colors, and motifs. In addition to weaving, caring for a common world demands a great deal of stitching.

Tying Off

In 1984, philosopher Michael Walzer wrote 'Liberalism and the Art of Separation,' an article arguing that the liberal interpretation of the public/private divide is a specific "way of drawing the map of the social and the political world" (1984, p. 315). In Walzer's view, distinctions such as those between public and private life are essential to carve out liberties and spaces of freedom from interference by unwanted powers. Tronto (1993), by contrast, asserts that such

divisions conceal actual interferences and depoliticize pressing injustices in the private domain. Separation could lead to an archipelagic society composed of isolated enclaves, as Azoulay cautioned. The reality is that we share one world, necessitating urgent consideration of how to relate to and care for it in a fair and just way. By using Palestinian embroidery as a companion to explore how this craft requires and inspires resistance to such separations, I have aimed to reinforce Tronto's argument that the public and private are fundamentally entangled. Any attempt to divide our lifeworld into two distinct domains conceals crucial questions about production, curation, and solidarity. As an alternative to liberalism and the art of separation, I propose care ethics and the craft of stitching. Adopting a care perspective implies critically assessing and unlearning preconceived notions about how different aspects of our world are separated, and developing new conceptual tools and language to investigate how public and private spheres constantly intermingle (Squires, 2003). Learning the craft of embroidering to first handedly experience both the tediousness and the joy of careful stitching would be a good start.

Acknowledgements

I express my gratitude to Keren Moscovitch, Maaike Hoffer, Marieke Hendriksen, Merel Visse and Zeina Amro for their suggestions and feedback on earlier drafts of this article. I also want to thank Hazar Grably, Frans Dronkers, *Disarming Design from Palestine* (Sint-Pieters-Leeuw), the *Israel Museum* (Jerusalem), the *National Museum of Contemporary Art* (Athens), and the *Palestinian Museum* (Birzeit) for the permission to use images from their collections. Finally, I extend my gratitude to the anonymous reviewer for their valuable feedback, which significantly improved this paper.

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International Journal of Education & the Arts

http://IJEA.org ISSN: 1529-8094

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