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The Auntie Sewing Squad and Asian American Women's Craftivism

Yi-Shen Loo

Abstract

The Auntie Sewing Squad, founded in March 2020 by Kristina Wong, sews cotton masks to help those in need during the time of COVID-19 and follows a legacy of “craftivism,” or craft activism, being used for health justice in the United States. In the age of COVID-19, crafts, particularly the sewing of masks, have served a purpose for not only political health justice work, but for survival. For the Auntie Sewing Squad, their work in seeking to provide proper PPE, or personal protective equipment, to vulnerable communities is necessarily political due to the failure of the United States government to provide basic health equipment for all individuals during this global pandemic. This paper explores the ways in which the Auntie Sewing Squad's work connects to the narrative of Asian American women participating in craftivism during the current health crisis of COVID-19 to not only provide masks to communities in need but also to create a collective network grounded in ideas of care. Analyzing four interviews conducted with members of the Auntie Sewing Squad revealed themes of mutual aid in a time of scarcity, transgenerational implications of care and knowledge, and health justice work. Thus, the Auntie Sewing Squad provides a counternarrative to the idea that Asian Americans are apolitical through its members' health justice craftivism and centers the often marginalized narratives of Asian American women.

Introduction

“We are a national collective of volunteers of all genders who have turned our living rooms into ‘sweatshops’ because of the failure of the Federal Government to provide proper PPE to essential workers and vulnerable communities. Our Aunties, Uncles and non-binary

volunteers give time and labor to make masks to stop the spread of Covid-19, specifically in the most vulnerable of communities with no access to masks. We believe in a system of community care and having a direct connection to our recipients. We share resources on patterns, fabric and elastic. We pride our origins as a mostly WOC and QTNB group that celebrates the ability of all our Aunties to rise up and become the real leaders in this crisis.”¹



Figure 1. The Auntie Sewing Squad logo, from auntiesewingsquad.com²

The mission statement of the Auntie Sewing Squad, founded in March 2020 by Kristina Wong, presents the organization as one that was formed out of necessity during a health crisis, is political by nature of speaking out against the failure of the government to act, and is grounded in community. The Auntie Sewing Squad, which includes members from across the United States, sews cotton masks to help those in need during the time of COVID-19 and follows a legacy of “craftivism,” or craft activism, being used to advance health justice in the United States.

Crafts have historically been used in political movements in the United States. To show support for William McKinley’s presidential campaign in 1896, women sewed quilts decorated with campaign ribbons.³ During World War II, women knit gloves and helmet liners for

soldiers.⁴ Throughout the late 20th and early 21st century, crafts have continued to play a large part in political work and have been extended to health justice work, including the AIDS Quilt of the late 1900s⁵ and the Pussyhat Project of 2017.⁶ In the age of COVID-19, crafts, particularly the sewing of masks, have served a purpose for not only political health justice work, but for survival. For the Auntie Sewing Squad, their work in seeking to provide proper PPE, or personal protective equipment, to vulnerable communities is necessarily political due to the failure of the United States government to provide basic health equipment for all individuals during this global pandemic.

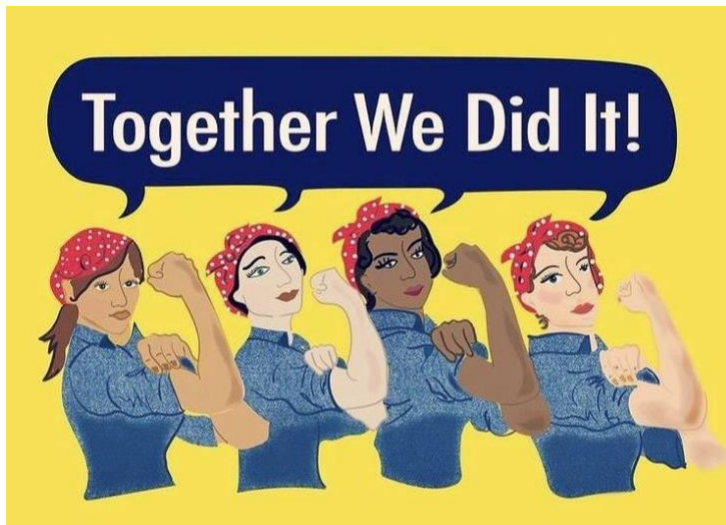


Figure 2. An image from the Auntie Sewing Squad's Instagram, celebrating the completion of 5,000 mask pledges for First Nations.⁷

In this way, the Auntie Sewing Squad contributes to a larger history of women's craftivism work in the United States. However, the organization also plays a role in the history of Asian American participation in community care work. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian American communities have shown support for each other in a multitude of ways. Filipinos Feed the Frontlines⁸ has provided meals to the many Filipino healthcare workers on the frontlines of the pandemic, while Stir-Fry Meals on Wheels⁹ gives meals to elders who are sheltering in place

alone. Furthermore, Asian American communities have worked to document and preserve the memories of these times: Grace Young interviewed restaurant owners in San Francisco Chinatown on their struggles to keep their businesses open,¹⁰ while the Stop AAPI Hate Report Center¹¹ provides a space for documentation of anti-Asian harassment and hate crimes. These organizations are rooted in what Takasaki refers to as the “tradition of Asian American activism that prioritizes community needs and community experiential knowledge”.¹² Thus, the Auntie Sewing Squad is a part of a broader narrative of Asian American community care in the United States in the age of COVID-19.

Despite the number of Asian American organizations that have come together during this pandemic to support their communities, there remains a prevailing notion that the Asian American community is apolitical and has low levels of group consciousness.¹³ This prevalent belief stems from the model minority discourse, which stereotypes Asian Americans as a group that focuses on high academic achievement and remains uninterested in politics.¹⁴ I propose that the Auntie Sewing Squad provides a counternarrative to the idea that Asian Americans are apolitical and is a thread in the long history of Asian American communities of care and solidarity. In this way, the organization comprises a crucial element of Asian American studies and Asian American activism in its focus on collaboration with other groups of color.

In this paper, I will explore the ways in which the Auntie Sewing Squad provides a narrative of Asian American women participating in craftivism during the COVID-19 pandemic to not only provide masks to communities in need but to create a collective network rooted in transgenerational and radical care, countering the idea that Asian Americans are apolitical. This research will be focused through a literature review and analysis of four interviews conducted with members of the Auntie Sewing Squad. I chose to explore this topic of the Auntie Sewing

Squad due to my identity as an Asian American woman and a desire to address the dearth of literature on the topic of Asian American women's participation in craftivism and acts of community care. I hope to frame this work in a way that highlights the significance of the Auntie Sewing Squad's efforts in providing masks to vulnerable communities as well as its empowerment of Asian American women. I aim to explore the following questions: How have women in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st century used crafts during times of health crises to participate in health justice work, and how does the Auntie Sewing Squad serve as a part of that narrative? Further, how does the Auntie Sewing Squad also play a role as a counternarrative to the controlling image that Asian Americans are apolitical? In this research, I hope to move away from the ideas of domesticity that have traditionally been associated with craftwork and instead celebrate the voices of Asian American women who have used crafts to join hands with others in solidarity and practice radical care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Much of the literature centering craftivism or civic engagement through crafts focuses on the experience of white women, and as such, there is a lack of literature surrounding the role of women of color in craftivism. Currently, there are very limited studies on the role of Asian American women in this work; however, examining the experiences of those who participate in craftivism in the fight for health justice can reflect on those of Asian American women. In the present paper, I extrapolate from these studies and use them to inform my research while further grounding my understanding of this topic through considering the intersectionalities that complicate the narrative of craftivism.

Shannon Black's "KNIT + RESIST: placing the Pussyhat Project in the context of craft activism"¹⁵ is one such article that focuses on the role of craftivism in reproductive justice. It

focuses on the Pussyhat Project, a social movement founded by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman as a way to protest against the Trump administration's policies towards women's reproductive health.¹⁶ Suh and Zweiman "wanted to use the hats' name to 'reclaim' the word pussy and use it as a term of 'empowerment' for all women, be they transgender, intersex, or cisgender,"¹⁷ linking the creation of the project to a long history of women historically engaging with crafts to participate in political movements. Thus, Black posits that the Pussyhat Project "encourages activism that is at once accessible and multi-scalar" and weaves people together at the personal, communal, national, and international levels.¹⁸

The Pussyhat Project has received many criticisms, from the term "pussy" not being inclusive to transgender people to the color pink being linked to "flesh tone," and thus, excluding women of color.¹⁹ However, the Pussyhat Project also "galvanized the interest and action of hundreds of thousands of (white and middle-class) American women,"²⁰ showcasing that race and class necessarily play a role in who participates in these demonstrations. Thus, Black argues, "We must demand that craft activism is reflexive, attentive, multidimensional and critical," and that within this work, the craftivist efforts must ensure that they are not privileging certain groups over others.²¹ In this way, the Pussyhat Project and other craftivism projects must be analyzed through the lens of intersectionality, where race, gender and class are contextualized to create a broader discussion of how crafts can be used as a tool for inclusive social change.

The Pussyhat Project was an important movement for the reproductive justice of women and highlighted the role of women in contemporary craftivism. Furthermore, it was during a historical moment in which women's reproductive health was at stake due to the negligence of the government, similar to the ways in which the United States administration's inaction has cost many lives during the COVID-19 crisis. However, because Black's work mentions the exclusion

of women of color in the Pussyhat Project but does not point to the historical role that Asian American women have played in craftivism projects, in my research, I hope to contribute to the literature by centering it around the aforementioned population.

The experiences of women engaging in crafts to aid others during health crises can also be supported by the literature surrounding the AIDS quilt, which was first conceived in 1985 by gay rights activist Cleve Jones.²² Ioana Literat and Anne Balsamo's "Stitching the Future of the AIDS Quilt: The Cultural Work of Digital Memorials" discusses the implications of the AIDS Quilt in its making as well as its enduring legacy. The AIDS Quilt, also referred to as "the Quilt," is a living piece of craftwork made up of panels of 3 ft by 6 ft stitched together, with each panel commemorating a name of an individual who has died due to AIDS.²³ The Quilt was made to promote visibility of the crisis at a time that the political administration was not doing enough to promote awareness of the disease and its deadliness.²⁴ In addition, the size and scale of the Quilt serve to emphasize the number of lives lost to AIDS: "Now covering more than 29 acres, its constant growth is a critical reminder that AIDS persists, despite recent medical advances in treatment options and longevity."²⁵ As such, the AIDS Quilt is contextualized within its historical period and brought to the forefront of the current times through a discussion of the technologization that has taken place to continue its legacy, pushing against the "generational cultural amnesia" that threatens the erasure of its histories.²⁶ Through technologization involving interactive digital exhibits where the quilt panels can be observed and touched on screens, the AIDS Quilt is able to be preserved and sustain its commemoration of those whose lives were lost.

From the work of the AIDS Quilt, many ideas can be extrapolated from the AIDS crisis to the current COVID-19 crisis. Though diseases are not confined within the borders of the

LGBTQ community or the Asian American community, due to political rhetoric, both of these communities have been scapegoated as “disease carriers” during the AIDS²⁷ and COVID-19²⁸ crises, respectively. In addition, the Quilt is a living memorial that continues to bring together the communities of those who have lost loved ones due to AIDS. The last AIDS Quilt panel that has been set aside for the last victim of AIDS to be added to the Quilt reads, “When the last one is named, we will begin to heal”.²⁹ This is not only important in the way that it calls for hope in the future, to be able to end the work, but draws attention to the healing that this will bring.

Similarly, as we are struggling in the current COVID-19 crisis, we ask ourselves, when will the last mask be sewn? Who will be the last communities that receive masks? How will we heal? In this way, the AIDS Quilt demonstrates an act of community care in its metaphorical as well as literal stitching together of individuals from all over the world in memorializing AIDS victims while raising important questions that are relevant to the current pandemic. Literat and Balsamo's work contributes to my research through the linkages of craftivism during a public health crisis and community work in acts of care. However, as their article does not discuss in detail the roles of gender and race within the making of the Quilt, I seek to explore these intersectionalities in relation to the Auntie Sewing Squad, which was originally Asian American women, but expanded to allies and across gender and racial lines.

Methodology

I used an online archival approach in exploring the ways that the Auntie Sewing Squad is connected to craftivism work and acts as a counternarrative to the controlling image that Asian Americans are apolitical. In this approach, I analyzed four interviews that were conducted by students at California State University, Monterey Bay with members of the Auntie Sewing Squad. These interviews are part of the Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Archive that is

housed in the Digital Commons at California State University, Monterey Bay. I selected this method of study because I hoped to find themes throughout the individual stories that might have been skewed had I conducted my own interviews. I also chose to listen to oral history interviews because of the way in which they present personal stories and emotions that cannot be shown through quantitative data. Furthermore, despite the Auntie Sewing Squad being inclusive to all regardless of race or gender, I chose to center Asian American women due to their historical marginalization based on their intersectionalities. In watching these interviews, which were conducted online through Zoom due to the pandemic, I asked the following questions: What are their primary reasons for joining the Auntie Sewing Squad? How is their work important for the field of Asian American studies? Lastly, what does it mean for Asian American women to be coming together during the age of COVID-19 and to be engaging in acts of radical care?

Data Collection

The data collected was from four interviews randomly selected from the 41 Auntie Sewing Squad Oral History Interviews in the Digital Commons at California State University, Monterey Bay.³⁰ The interviews ranged from 35 to 50 minutes in length and were conducted between November 20th and December 9th, 2020. Kristina Wong, the founder of the Auntie Sewing Squad, identifies as a third-generation Chinese American and works as a performance artist and actor.³¹ Linda Lee is a Korean American woman and a single mother who works as an optometrist at her family's optical business.³² Lisa Kawamura grew up in San Gabriel as one of the few Japanese families in the area and works at California State University, San Luis Obispo.³³ Valerie Soe is a fourth-generation Asian American woman who works as a professor and a filmmaker and is one of the original members of the Auntie Sewing Squad.³⁴

In watching the four interviews and exploring the ways in which the interviewees have participated in the Auntie Sewing Squad and engaged in other forms of activism, I found three major themes. First, several of the interviewees noted that their work engages with mutual aid in a time of scarcity. At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, as several members discussed, there were PPE shortages in hospitals as well as elastic shortages as many scrambled to make cotton masks at home. Valerie Soe found a creative way to make masks without elastic by using lanyards from film festival badges (Fig. 3). She also reached out to friends and acquaintances on social media, asking them to send her lanyards until she amassed a large collection.³⁵



Figure. 3 An image from Valerie Soe's Instagram, showcasing the festival lanyards that she used to make masks.³⁶

The shortage of supplies such as masks, hand sanitizer, and gloves at the start of the pandemic attributed to one of her reasons for joining the Auntie Sewing Squad, Kawamura explained. She recalled that several colleagues involved in the organization invited her to “come rage sew.”³⁷ Kristina Wong indicated her frustration about the supply shortages, saying, “It makes me horrified that we live in a situation where -- fabric and elastic -- you can't get those basic things on every human being in this country.”³⁸ Wong also noted that the Auntie Sewing

Squad was not originally intended to be political; however, as the Trump administration's ignorance on the relevancy of masks and inadequacies of the government to handle the crisis became more evident, she realized that this work was critical.³⁹

Transgenerational influence was another major topic that made its way into discussion throughout the interview. Feeling moved by her daughter's reaction to the Black Lives Matter movement in the summer of 2020, Linda Lee attended peaceful protests alongside her daughter (Fig. 4).



Figure. 4 A mask for Black Lives Matter Los Angeles, from the Auntie Sewing Squad website.⁴⁰

Lee felt that she was able to become more involved in political activism in a “proactive way,” stating, “I’m very grateful for her having dragged me in because I feel like I gained out of it.”⁴¹ Furthermore, Kawamura spoke to the value of transgenerational care in remembering her grandmother, who taught her how to sew. When her grandmother was in the hospital, she, her sister, her mother, and her aunt would gather around her grandmother’s hospital bed, where they knitted and crocheted together. She recalled, “I remember one time she was lucid and she woke up. She opened her eyes and she looked at all four of us. She got this really big grin on her face. And it was as if she said to us, look, I did that. You’re doing that because of me.”⁴²

Lastly, the idea of radical care and how the interviewees contribute to health justice was foundational in all of the interviews. When asked why they joined the Auntie Sewing Squad, all of the interviewees noted a desire to care for and help vulnerable communities. In particular, Kawamura disclosed that she wanted to be “in a space where everyone knows how important it is to be protected and wear masks.”⁴³ Wong also noted that the Auntie Sewing Squad is rooted in radical giving and sharing.⁴⁴ Lee attested to this, explaining, “It just seemed like it was something that I really wanted to do, to [help] communities that were really hurting, that were in need, and it just seemed really important.”⁴⁵ Soe also spoke about “Auntie care” in the Squad and how many Aunties who don’t sew are involved in other ways, such as baking cookies, providing yoga classes, or sending hand salves to other members. She added, “It feels like you're connected to the other folks in the group. You know, they're looking out for you.”⁴⁶ In this way, even Aunties who do not have the capacity to sew masks can continue to be in community with and care for other members (Fig. 5).



Figure. 5 An image from the Auntie Sewing Squad's Instagram showcasing a book club that a group of Aunties started together.⁴⁷

Analysis and Discussion

Contrary to popular belief, Asian Americans have played a pivotal role in alleviating the burdens placed upon communities in need during the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrated through interviews, food and supply deliveries, and community support for one another. In particular, the Auntie Sewing Squad was able to become a haven of mutual aid to Asian American women across the country, providing an outlet for a larger community to initiate change from home.

The idea of mutual aid in a time of scarcity is significant in that it reflects on the traditions of Asian American women helping one another in times of crisis. Through Soe's reaching out to others to acquire film festival lanyards to make masks for others, we can see how several communities were brought together, and even those who were not directly involved in making masks were able to have an impact through their donations. Kawamura and Wong's interviews demonstrate the way that the Auntie Sewing Squad was a way for them to alleviate frustrations about the scarcity of supplies and the many vulnerable communities left behind due to the negligence of the government. This also counters the idea that Asian American women are lacking in group consciousness and political activism. Rather, in keeping with the ideas of mutual aid that led to the foundation of organizations such as Filipinos Feeding the Frontlines, the Auntie Sewing Squad works towards assisting each other and extending their hands towards vulnerable communities. As such, they were able to provide much needed masks to many groups and brought together Asian American women in an organization founded on empowerment through collective work.

In addition, the centering of transgenerational care and knowledge connects the members of the Auntie Sewing Squad to their histories and importantly centers Asian American women within those narratives. Kawamura revealed what her grandmother has passed on to her and how crafting brought her family together when her grandmother was in the hospital, while Lee discussed what her daughter has taught her and how attending Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 “re-energized” her sense of political activism. The narratives of Kawamura and Lee speak to healing, as involvement in the Auntie Sewing Squad has been an act of healing for not only the Asian American women in the organization, but the vulnerable communities that they are sewing masks for. Furthermore, the Auntie Sewing Squad’s website states, “We proudly trace the lineage of this sewing to our mothers and grandmothers, immigrant and refugee communities in America, and underpaid women of color garment workers globally.”⁴⁸ In this way, the Squad attributes their foundations to lineages of care and knowledge that do not conform to neoliberal ideas of individualism⁴⁹ and will be passed on through the generations.

Finally, radical care and its connection with health justice during this global pandemic is linked to the Asian American community and these times of rising anti-Asian sentiment in the United States. In “Two Hate Notes: Deportations, COVID-19, and Xenophobia against Hmong Americans in the Midwest,” Pha describes the “forms of radical care that uplifts and ensures the collective survival” of the Asian American community during this health care crisis.⁵⁰ Pha discusses how the Hmong community has made videos in the Hmong language to “educate elders about the COVID pandemic” and how these acts are life-saving.⁵¹ During the current COVID-19 health crisis, we need radical care and collective action to save lives. As Pha notes, “The COVID-19 pandemic is killing us physically, but racism is also killing us spiritually.”⁵² Through the “Auntie care” that Soe discussed, the Auntie Sewing Squad is a space where health

justice takes the form of radical care for not only physical health, but mental and emotional health as well, especially during these times of heightened anti-Asian acts of violence. Thus, the Auntie Sewing Squad engages with radical care and health justice through community activism and being a non-profit organization of volunteers who give their labor and love while “juggling families, careers, and our own losses from COVID-19”.⁵³

Conclusion

The research conducted in this paper examined the significance of the Auntie Sewing Squad, an organization that sews masks for vulnerable communities, and the ways in which it is intimately tied and contributes to the history of craftivism, health justice work, and radical care. First, I analyzed the current literature on craftivism work in health justice in the United States in the late 20th and early 21st century. I then randomly selected four interviews conducted with Asian American women who are members of the Auntie Sewing Squad and deduced three major themes from their narratives: mutual aid in a time of scarcity, transgenerational implications of care and knowledge, and radical care and how it contributes to health justice. I conclude that the Auntie Sewing Squad provides a counternarrative to the idea that Asian Americans are apolitical through its members' health justice craftivism. Furthermore, I found that the organization's work is crucial in the field of Asian American studies in the way that it centers the often marginalized narratives of Asian American women and their engagement with the community.

Further research is needed to explore the ways in which other Asian American community organizations and Asian American women have contributed to craftivism in the United States. If I were to conduct this research again, I would compare the work of other Asian American organizations involved in craftivism to that of the Auntie Sewing Squad. Something that could also be explored is the ways in which age or gender play a role in craftivism work in

the Asian American community. For example, the role of elders within the Asian American communities and their craftivism work could be explored, as they are one of the subgroups most affected by anti-Asian discrimination.⁵⁴ Craftivism could also hold different meanings for immigrants and later generations. In addition, further research could involve other gender identities and their intersectionalities in this work of radical care and giving. It would also be interesting to note how racial or ethnic identity may affect one's involvement in the Auntie Sewing Squad. For example, there are several Aunties who do not identify as Asian American, and it might be interesting to explore the similarities and differences between their activism experience and ideas of radical care in relation to Asian American Aunties. Thus, the intersection between age, generational positionality, gender, and identity in relation to Asian American craftivism requires further examination.

These findings demonstrate that the work of the Auntie Sewing Squad is tied to a critical history of Asian American women's activism and community care. The scarcity of existing research on Asian American women's craftivism and activism highlights the erasure of their stories, and as noted previously, there is a need for further research on this group. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the mask has been representative of political failure, social isolation, and uncertainty. However, the Auntie Sewing Squad has transformed the mask into a symbol of radical care and activism. Their work provides a space to both consider and pose new questions about Asian American women's crafts and community activism.

Notes

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