Crass-Stitches: Reclaiming Dysphemism and Domesticity

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Introduction: The Tip of the Needle

IT IS PERHAPS UNSURPRISING THAT DAME JUDI DENCH, Oscar-winner and national treasure, is a needlework aficionado. The actress is a mainstay in period pieces in which characters spend countless hours maintaining their stiffness of lip whilst embroidering. Dench’s own practice of the craft, however, may be surprising, according to Pride and Prejudice co-star Matthew MacFayden:

She makes these like needlework embroideries on set in the tedium of filming [. . .] but they are all: “You Are a Cunt.” And she gives them as presents. And it’s Dame Judi Dench. And she is doing this beautifully, intricate, ornate [work]. You kind of see the work materializing as the shoot goes on. Like: “You Are a Fucking Shit.” (Rozemeyer 2017)

Dench’s subversive needlework is part of a larger trend in the crafting community: stitching “naughty” words. A quick trawl across the internet will reveal thousands of patterns and finished objects reading “Cunt” and more imaginative terms like “Mewling Quim” and “Twat Waffle”. These “crass-stitches” – cross-stitches that display vulgarity often in a quaint or feminized font with floral, decorative ornamentation – are part of a larger trend towards feminist embroidery. These irreverent works call attention to the dissonance between their physical form and their content, such as Hannah Hills’s piece, which features the “Arthur’s fist” meme, and reads: “When you remember that historically, embroidery hasn’t been taken seriously as a medium because it’s ‘women’s work’” (@hanecdote, October 1, 2016). The piece takes aim at a traditional dismissal of embroidery and women’s work via the very needlepoint that is dismissed (via also, of course, a niche internet meme). The question remains, however, as to why embroidery has been dismissed. Why are crass cross-stitches suddenly so popular? What is the significance of using a historically domestic craft to reframe historically dysphemistic words? How does “women’s work” recontextualize cunt? How do these crafts function in the complex economic matrix of the twenty-first century?

In this paper, I argue that women are drawing on a long history of resistance in embroidery to reinvigorate a domestic art by inserting a traditionally dysphemistic word. I first
trace the history of embroidery to show how it has, historically, been both a site of submission and subversion; this tradition plays into the way women use cross-stitch today in irreverent, ironic, and “unladylike” ways to reclaim this “ladylike” medium. I then turn my focus on cross-stitches for sale on the website Etsy.com that incorporate the word cunt, and how they subtly accomplish this double reclamation. To complicate this simplistic understanding of feminist resistance through craft, I then examine the complex ways this resurgence interacts with the digital forces that shape it, and how these crafts exist in the problematic economic context of commodity feminism. Ultimately, I argue that the cross-stitch is a quiet but powerful form of resistance with historical roots that remains in ambiguous relation to the digital and economic forces that shape it in its current context. Acknowledging this ambiguous and complex history is of specific urgency as feminist activism continues to be increasingly important. Investigating the language surrounding it is both vital and controversial—**informed** “craftivism” is a potentially powerful tool.

**Historical Patterns of Resistance**

To truly understand how dysphemisms work in contemporary embroidery practice, it is important to have a historical understanding of how language functions in embroidery. Though language has been an important aspect of different traditions of embroidery since the medieval period, the specific aspect of embroidery that I am going to focus on is the sampler – the tradition that modern cross-stitches draw upon most obviously. A sampler, defined by John Palsgrave in a 1530 dictionary, is “an example of a woman to work by” (Parker 1996, 85).

Typically, samplers are bits of cloth on which various techniques, borders, and motifs are practiced, and serve as reference pieces for the stitcher. They have been used since at least the sixteenth century – the oldest extant sampler, currently at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, is dated 1598, created by Jane Bostocke. The sampler includes the alphabet, Arabic numerals, dozens of different stitch motifs, and several depictions of various flora and fauna. This subject matter is typical of the period, and language functions in this piece simply as a reference for Jane Bostocke to use later when creating larger, less ephemeral pieces of embroidery.

The seventeenth century saw a growth in the domestic craft, as the mercantile class grew and leisure and domesticity became a mark of status. Embroidery specifically “evoked the femininity of the nobility and yet suggested the service and subservience required of the merchant’s wife . . . Sewing may have suggested a pleasing modesty, but embroidery conferred noble distinction. It was, traditionally, a badge of status” (Parker 1996, 63). Embroidery at its core is ornamental – decoration is not fundamental to function. Though the sampler has some function (as reference for the stitcher), it was not initially for display. Parker explains that, at this time, samplers became “educational exercises in stitchery” – they were used as didactic spaces for women to test their individual skills. Carol Humphrey explains that through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “Most English samplers included a variety of alphabets, numerals, and improving or informative descriptions [. . .] the technique of stitching inscriptions required a limited range of stitches, and the sampler was increasingly a schoolroom exercise. [. . .] the neat alphabets and worthy texts became the chief concern, and the sampler could be displayed for general edification” (Humphrey 1997, 11). By the turn of the twentieth
century, stitch samplers were mostly didactic and religious pieces of ephemera – they certainly did not mention vaginas at any point.

There are two traditions of stitch samplers, however, that I want to highlight here because it complicates a notion of a singular hegemonic tradition of craft. The middle and upper-class contexts, which I have primarily featured thus far, situate needlework as an emblem of femininity and leisure. The only economic implication of this kind of domestic craft was in perhaps procuring a husband. For example, in the iconic moment from Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, as The Bingleys, Mr. Darcy, and Elizabeth Bennett discuss women of marriageable age, Mr. Bingley remarks that it is “amazing” how “young ladies have patience to be so very accomplished” (Austen 1969, 39). “Accomplished” in this context means having a firm grasp of the domestic arts, including needlework, which, in *Pride and Prejudice*, means wife-material. Embroidery and accomplishment in Jane Austen’s nineteenth-century England are a prerequisite to procuring a wealthy husband. By being proficient in domestic arts, producing envy-worthy samplers, women could potentially improve their chances of a financially stable future. Mostly, the middle-/upper-class embroiderer reflects on her family: she “represents a feminine ideal which has acquired explicit class connotations, defined not in terms of economics but by a style of living and mode of behaviour associated with the aristocratic lady, and characterized by an absolute absence of visible work. To be feminine was to be seen to be leisured” (Parker 1996, 113).

The sampler was certainly not used *only* by women of leisure. The other concurrent story of the sampler involves women, mostly in domestic service, who would use samplers to showcase their employable skills. For example, one sampler from 1896, currently in the Fitzwilliam Museum at Cambridge, highlights the different skills needed by a domestic worker – the alphabet here serves only to showcase how she may stitch initials into a shirt cuff or a handkerchief. Women also participated in the brief professionalization of the medium as well. In the nineteenth century, the Arts and Crafts movement, spearheaded by William Morris, also endeavored to include more (specifically rural) women in this sphere as skilled labourers (Krugh 2014). Women continued to be essential labourers in hand embroidery, even as the Industrial Revolution began, as machines could not replicate the fine work that these centuries-old traditions could produce. In fact, the Industrial Revolution provided these women with cheaper and more plentiful materials for their work; however, by the 1880s, hand embroidery was deemed “out of fashion” as machines had finally caught up, and could produce similar products at much lower cost. At the turn of the twentieth century, embroidery became less of a lucrative, relevant or even useful commodity. The sampler became associated with mostly middle- or upper-class femininity that was dependent on a woman’s leisure time and submission to the domestic sphere.

However, I, like many scholars before me, want to complicate that notion through the artifacts themselves and the language of resistance used by these women. Textile historian Rozsika Parker writes that “although the position of the needle-worker – head bowed, shoulders hunched – appears to be one of submission, it also contains within it a hint of autonomy and self-containment at odds with any complete subjugation” (1996, 10). Although embroidery is viewed by some as an instrument of patriarchal values keeping women in the domestic sphere, just the act of creating the sampler necessitates hours of solitary reflection of
communal engagement with the creativity of other women. This resistance is evident in famous early historical examples like Patty Polk’s 1800 stitch sampler that reads: “Patty Polk did this and she hated every stitch she did in it. She loves to read much more” (Bolton and Coe 1973, 210). For Patty, this exercise of stabbing a piece of blank muslin, intended to teach her practical skills or perhaps entrench middle-class values of femininity, was an opportunity for her to resist. Instead, she insists on her autonomy – she professes her love for reading instead of stitching, all while participating in this traditional emblem of submission.

Perhaps a more interesting and rare example is Elizabeth Parker’s 1830 sampler, which begins “As I cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully entrust myself.”¹ The sample is a deeply personal confession about her life as a nursery maid, subjected to “cruelty too horrible to mention” by her employers, and even includes her contemplation of suicide. This artifact is a striking document, given the emotionally sterile space we associate with quaint cross-stitches – it is particularly interesting that, for Parker, the needle is a more effective tool for confession than the pen. The fact that this deeply personal document was created in a format usually reserved for bible verses and pretty embellishments highlights the possibility of resistance. Parker’s confessional cross-stitch exposes the flexibility of the format, as early as the nineteenth century.²

Both Patty Polk and Elizabeth Parker encapsulate the ambiguous resistance at the heart of embroidery – it is a space where women can exercise autonomy and individuality through a patriarchally imposed medium. As Ricia Chansky writes, “The manner in which embroidery signifies both self-containment and submission is the key to understanding women’s relation to the art. Embroidery has provided a source of pleasure and power for women, while being indissolubly linked to their powerlessness” (2010, 11).

Feminist and textile scholars such as Parker, Trent Newmeyer (2008), and Kristy Robertson (2011) have also tracked this resistance through suffragette banners, abolitionists’ quilts, or more recent examples such as the anti-nuclear weapon embroidery at the Peace Camp at Greenham Common in the 1970s. Suffragettes, for example, used embroidery and cross-stitch as a medium for protest signage, and “far from desiring to disentangle embroidery and femininity, they wanted embroidery to evoke femininity – but femininity represented as a source of strength, not as evidence of women’s weakness” (Parker 1996, 197). Resistance for suffragettes, and many protesters who came after them, claimed embroidery as a stage for the language of resistance precisely because it is so strongly associated with traditionally submissive forms of femininity.

Of course, rebellious stitching is not the only, or necessarily dominant, story of alternative embroidery throughout the centuries. There was a large resurgence of the craft in the hippie movement of the 1960s, when embroidery “symbolised love, peace, colour, personal life, and rejection of materialism” (Parker 1996, 204). Parker explains that these women embraced the emotional and individualistic aspects of the craft. Concurrently, however, second-wave

¹ The sample can be viewed in its entirety online in the Victoria and Albert Digital Archives: https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70506/sampler-parker-elizabeth/.
² Parker also notes that earlier, in the medieval period and slightly later, women would embroider scenes from the bible, and there is an interesting number of pieces that feature violence – especially violent women (Parker 1996, 40–59).
Crass-Stitches

The Stitch is Back: Present-Day Feminist Crass-Stitch

Contemporary feminist cross-stitches draw from this history of resistance, but reflect contemporary issues. Parker argues that embroidery has a unique capacity for this type of work, being outside of a masculine realm, which makes it such an attractive avenue for politicization: “It is this categorization of embroidery as the art of personal life outside male-dominated institutions and the world of work, that has given it a special place in counter-cultures and radical movements” (1996, 204). The embroidery practices of the suffragettes, for example, can be seen in one sign hand-crafted for the Women’s March in January 2017, which reads: “I’M SO ANGRY I STITCHED THIS JUST SO I COULD STAB SOMETHING 3000 TIMES.” (@ShannonDowney, January 18, 2017). Here, and in other feminist needlework such as the “Arthur’s fist” meme mentioned earlier, crafters are engaging with the medium in a playful and ironic mode that still has a sharp political message. Like Patty Polk, Elizabeth Parker, and the suffragettes before them, present-day feminist embroiderers employ cross-stitch in their own forms of resistance.

What makes the modern feminist cross-stitches particularly intriguing and shocking is their flippant and playful use of subversive language, specifically the viscerally affective: cunt. On Etsy.com, for example, you can find cunt with a pleasant pink floral border; a pattern for an acrostic poem, “Charisma Uniqueness Nerve Talent”; or even a play on a cross-stitch mainstay: “Cunt Sweet Cunt.” According to the 2000 Millwood-Hargrave report, cunt is the most offensive word on a scale of perceived severity, above racial slurs and abuse of minorities. This aversion to the word is not new: in Francis Grose’s 1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue, he defines cunt as “a nasty name for a nasty thing” (Grose and Clarke 1971). Oxford English Dictionary defines cunt: “1. The female genitals; the vulva or vagina,” “2. A woman as a source of sexual gratification; a promiscuous woman; a slut. Also as a general term of abuse for a woman,” “3. As a term of abuse for a man,” and “4. A despised, unpleasant, or annoying place, thing, or task.”

These definitions, specifically the last three, place cunt safely in the realm of

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4 Important to note here is that cunt has a very different connotation depending on the context – it is very rarely used for example on North American television, but is less stigmatized and used more frequently on television in the UK (Millwood-Hargrave 2000).
dysphemism, “a word or phrase with connotations that are offensive either about the denotatum and/or to people addressed or overhearing the utterance” (Burridge 2006, 457). But this is not how cunt is operating in these cross-stitches. As these examples show, cunt is employed in playful and ironic ways that emphasize the dissonance between a meticulous but gentle craft and a viscerally aggressive word.

By literally framing cunt in floral motifs and other cross-stitch staples, these crafters are reframing the context of the word, and therefore deflating its dysphemistic power. The incongruity of coarse slang and traditionally domestic arts allows cunt to be reclaimed, which, according to Melinda Chen’s definition, occurs when “a derogatory sign or signifier is consciously employed by the ‘original’ target of the derogation, often in a positive or oppositional sense” (Chen 1998, 130). Women are able to accomplish this reclamation through cross-stitch because both their gender and the medium provides them with “natural cover”, which is when those “who because of their group identity are not presumed to have malign motives for expressing themselves in a potentially offensive way” (Burridge 2006, 460). Though it would be difficult (and beyond the scope of this paper) to do an in-depth statistical analysis of the male-to-female ratio of these crass-stitchers, it is, impressionistically speaking, mostly women who participate in these crafts. Therefore, because they were previously the target of the invective, but now use it in a non-aggressive way, they have the “natural cover” to reclaim it. The medium of cross-stitch adds another layer to this reclamation. Even the simplest cross-stitch requires hours of labour-intensive, delicate, intricate needle work – it would be difficult to sustain aggression throughout a cross-stitch session. The careful medium of cross-stitch essentially undercuts the abrupt violence of the dysphemism – it is hard to be offended by cunt when it has been stitched so delicately, surrounded by equally intricate flowers. By using a traditionally domestic yet subtly subversive craft to reframe cunt, women are reclaiming both the word from a dysphemistic tradition and the craft from a perceived tradition of submissive domesticity.

It is important to note, however, that the digital space in which these crass-stitches are bought, sold, and shared may also be an important factor in their crassness. As Réka Benczes and Kate Burridge (2019, 13) explain in their recent article “Taboo as a Driver of Language Change”, the digital realm is often a space where taboo language is welcome: “courts may well be ruling that cunt is no longer obscene, but it seems the word maintains its ‘shock-and-horror capacity’ in the print media [. . .] Electronic media, however, may not show the same prudishness.” Benczes and Burridge show how the potency of language relating to sexual and bodily functions has diminished, and with it the offensive power of the word cunt. As much as these cross-stitches do accomplish a reclamation of a traditionally powerful dysphemism, they

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5 It is worth mentioning, as Benczes and Burridge (2019) point out, that cunt appears regularly in early English texts with little to no shock value. Cunt appears in medical texts, place names (Gropecuntlane), personal names (Clevecunt, Wydecunth, Cruskunt, Cunteles, Fillecunt, Twychecunt, and Sittebid’cunte) and plant names (countewort and counteminte ‘catmint’). For modern readers, however, encountering cunt in a middle English plant name, for example, is similar to the stylistic incongruity of seeing it stitched in an embroidery hoop.

6 In fact, many women associate cross-stitch with the dissipation of unwanted negative emotions. Cross-stitch, and other repetitive crafts, can facilitate mindfulness and introspective reflection (Mellor 2012).
do not do so in a vacuum. *Cunt’s* power as an invective is being softened throughout various channels, and these crass-stitches are part of the general atmosphere of the taboo-rich environment of the internet.

Still, this reclamation of both the word *cunt* and the practice of craft exists alongside and in relation to the “craftivism” that I have already mentioned. Perhaps what is most striking about this form of resistance is the through-line of community that is threaded throughout this long history. Traditionally, samplers were created with the intention of learning and sharing skills amongst women, modifying and embellishing as they went. Alexia Mellor calls it an “open source model” and connects this to today’s culture of cross-stitching, which she links as much to meme-sharing as embroidery. Mellor writes, “Contemporary crafters fuel the Open Source movement by sharing techniques and patterns for processes such as embroidery samplers and meme construction, creating platforms that allow the individual to disrupt the cultural code with the aim of creating their own” (Mellor 2012). She cites the various web applications that allow crafters to create and share their own patterns, particularly those of resistance – such as microRevolt.org, which allows you to create a pattern chart for well-known global brand logos. By highlighting the processes behind clothing production, the participants in this project are attempting to subvert the mindless consumption of fast-fashion. Hand-embroidering these logos in time-intensive cross-stitch calls attention to the unseen global labour force behind the Nike swoosh or the Ralph Lauren polo player. Like the cross-stitches, this project uses irreverence and incongruity to make a political statement.

Complicating Craftivism: The Problematics of Crass-Stitch

Thus far, this reclamation seems like a simple narrative of triumph of craft and language; however, the current context in which crass-stitches reside makes it a more ambiguous project that requires a deeper attention to the forces, both material and virtual, that shape it. Today, access to patterns, finished objects, and the cross-stitching community is predominantly virtual – sites like Etsy, Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr facilitate the making and purchasing of these objects, but the internet is an ambiguous host for the craft. Despite the striking similarity between the pixelated image (the bedrock of the internet) and the cross-stitch, and the open source resonance between sampler tradition and digital space, crafters are working with and against the speed and virtualizing of the digital realm. On the one hand, crass-stitchers are actively working against an ever-hastening virtual world by spending hours on small, charmingly inefficient *objets d’art*; on the other hand, by sharing images and patterns and selling these *objets* online, they are using the speed and global reach of the internet to their advantage. Crass-stitchers often find themselves caught in between several competing forces: between participating in both local and global communities, between engaging with capitalist and anti-capitalist movements, and between embracing both the speed of the digital realm and the deliberate slowness of material craft.

Modern crafters digitize their physical labour – a piece that may have taken 3,000 stabs, for example, and doubtless hours of work, may be shared on the internet to a few likes, views, or shares, 15 seconds of virtual fame, and then fade into the content abyss. Viral or not, there is a certain ephemerality to images posted online; despite the fact that they are forever immortalized, they are lost in a multitude. This is both fitting and contrary to the cross-stitcher’s
purpose – the sampler, historically, was also an ephemeral art, used more for sharing and learning than as a permanent object. However, these objects are now displayed proudly as a symbol of irreverence or rebellion and a marker of the labour-intensive crafting process, which is mostly lost when it is shared via social media. This is one of the ambiguities at the heart of this modern “craftivism”: modern crafters insist on materiality while undercutting that physical engagement by participating in a virtual community that obscures the time-intensive labour involved in their craft. However, these objects are now displayed proudly as a symbol of irreverence or rebellion and a marker of the labour-intensive crafting process, which is mostly lost when it is shared via social media. This is one of the ambiguities at the heart of this modern “craftivism”: modern crafters insist on materiality while undercutting that physical engagement by participating in a virtual community that obscures the time-intensive labour involved in their craft. Indeed, it is worth noting that simply participating on social media platforms is an oft-obscured form of free labour, in which large companies benefit from the volunteered data of their users.

The other problematic element of this reclamation that is difficult to ignore is the complex economic matrix of production in which this resistance is taking place. Like the history I outlined earlier, there are two streams of embroiderers – simplistically, those who use samplers to generate income and revenue, and those who take up stitching as an upper-/middle-class hobby. Though selling patterns and finished objects online is certainly not a lucrative business, there is the potential for exploitation and disingenuousness. Many scholars have written about “commodity feminism”, or how in the contemporary advertising climate, ads are targeted towards women through the guise of “empowerment”. However, although companies use the rhetoric of female empowerment, many of them are part of larger corporations that actively work against these goals. As Nancy Fraser writes in “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History”, feminism originally sought to dismantle the patriarchy and, ergo, capitalism, but the second-wave movement of the 1960s “brought with it an ideology of women’s emancipation tied to capitalistic notions of power” (Fraser 2009, 98). Feminism and capitalism have always existed uneasily with each other, and the recent rash of ad-her-tising shows that now larger corporations are exploiting a feminist zeitgeist. Within this context, it is possible to view the resurgence of feminist cross-stitch patterns and crass-stitches as no more than another hollow example of savvy entrepreneurs cashing in on the cause-du-jour.

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7 This craftivism is certainly not limited to cross-stitch. Most notably, knitters, crocheters, and other fibre artists have participated in yarn-bombings, a form of guerilla street art, which infuses a traditionally male-dominated art (graffiti) with a traditionally feminine craft (knitting). For more on this see: “Crimes of the Senses: Yarn Bombing and Aesthetic Criminology” by Andrew Milllie (2019), “Towards a Politics of Whimsy: Yarn Bombing the City” by Joanna Mann (2015), and “Yarn Bombing and the Aesthetics of Exceptionalism” by Leslie Hahner and Scott Varda (2014).

8 This is, of course, excluding the rare instances on certain platforms (e.g. YouTube) where highly successful users receive a share of advertising revenue.

9 For more in-depth engagement with this fascinating topic see: “Feminism as a Marketing Tool: Calgary’s Urban Curvz” by Shelley Scott (2016) and “Re recuperating Feminism, Reclaiming Femininity: Hybrid Postfeminist I-dentity in Consumer Advertisements” by Michelle Lazar (2014).

10 Perhaps the most notorious example of this inconsistency is one of the first Dove ad campaigns that sought to show women how beautiful they are without makeup, which received massive backlash not only because the commercial was condescending and contradictory, but also because Dove is owned by Unilever, who at the same time, released an ad for Axe body spray, which was predictably sexist. For more on the event see “Is Unilever Hypocritical?” by Nanette Clinch, Asbjorn Osland, and Aline Dorso (2011).
It is also important to consider the economic implications of accessibility and who exactly is able to participate in this community. If one wants to engage in the other stream of contemporary cross-stitching – hobbyists – one must have certain prerequisites. A potential stitcher must have a certain amount of disposable income (to purchase cloth, thread, hoops, patterns, etc.) and a certain amount of uninterrupted leisure time. These requirements alone exclude many from this hobby, again potentially relegating it to a middle-to-upper-class feminist audience. However, these problematic elements of crass-stitch practice do not necessarily wholly detract from its potential power as a medium. Crass-stitches are still part of a larger project of reclamation of a historically powerful dysphemism. Though I will not presume to theorize what it might look like, there is still the opportunity for this reclamation to occur outside of commercial pressures. In its current state, however, understanding the historical and contemporary context, and approaching these sweeping movements with a certain amount of skepticism and informed historical understanding allows us to appreciate these spaces of resistance for what they provide, while acknowledging what they do not yet necessarily accomplish.

Conclusion: A Double-Edged Needle

Ultimately, though crass-stitches are subtly subversive in their reclamation of dysphemism, it is important to recognize that they are also sometimes just funny little gifts to amuse one’s friends. Social swearing, as Allan and Burridge point out, is the most pervasive of the four main functions of swearing. Social swearing demonstrates in-group solidarity with friendly banter or verbal cuddling (Allan and Burridge 2006). To call one’s friend a cunt, without animosity, is indicative of real friendship in certain native varieties of English. Despite all the potential power of diminishing dysphemisms, sometimes you simply stitch a naughty word on a pillow to show someone you love them. Perhaps Judi Dench is simply a friendly cunt.

Still, it is clear that some of these women are certainly reinvigorating a domestic art by inserting a traditionally dysphemistic word and, by doing so, reclaiming that word as well. However, as this paper has endeavoured to show, the sampler has historically been a site of quiet subversion, and women have used embroidery as a space for resistance since its inception. I have also endeavoured to complicate a single history of embroidery by focusing on the two concurrent histories of samplers – as the domestic activity of accomplished women, but also as an avenue for income for women in the working classes. These diverging traditions are alive and well today, and crass-stitches are an ambiguous manifestation of the intersection of embroidery as a domestic hobby and a source of revenue. Women are reclaiming a “ladylike” medium by stitching “unladylike” words, and by using these harsh invectives ironically and playfully, they also reclaim words such as the very pinnacle of dysphemism: cunt. Though crass-stitches are not alone in their diminishing of the violence of the word, as shown by Benczes and Burridge (2019), they are excellent examples of just how much this dysphemism has shifted, especially in the digital realm.

The works by these crass-stitches are a particularly ambiguous case as they are promoted and sold online, where they both reject and embrace the ephemerality of the physical medium of the sampler and digital platforms. This reclamation is further complicated by the economic forces that shape it – women are selling both patterns and finished objects and only
those with a certain amount of disposable income and leisure time can purchase these materials and participate in this form of resistance. Embroidery is a historically powerful but quiet space for resistance and has always existed within a complex matrix of production. It is vital we magnify the powers and problematics that shape modern cross-stitches so we can acknowledge the important work of playful feminist resistance, while remaining informed about the ambiguity at the heart of such work. We can recognize the work of such crass-stitches to reclaim a dysphemism, while acknowledging the broader, complicated nature of these crafts. Informed craftivism is potentially a powerful tool of resistance, which irreverently incorporates language and labour in a digital age where these elements are often either obscured or highly politicized.
References


