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Stitching the Cloths of Serial Migrant Life:

The Quilts of Barbara James

Susan Ossman

University of California, Riverside

In this article, I study the quilting practice of Barbara James to investigate the making of serial migrant subjects. Serial migrants are not from a single place, nor do they travel in the same direction (Ossman 2004). They have moved beyond a first experience of immigration and in so doing, step beyond the home/host dualities of immigration. One might see the project of following their paths as a move from accounts of the creative, imaginative 'third space' produced by immigrants' arrival in their new homes, toward a consideration of the concrete 'third place' of the second or third-time immigrant.ⁱ While the immigrant lives between two cultures, regimes of identification, languages or political systems, the serial migrant 'escapes' this double bind (Ossman 2004; Sayaad 1999). Serial migrants are not diplomats or employees of multi-nationals: their moves are not framed by any international institution.ⁱⁱ Wherever they live they are identified according to static categories by states and their neighbors. They struggle with the difficulty of expressing their subjective continuity across places and the different positions they are assigned. Concepts of hyphenation, hybridisation or assemblage or intersection only add to the sense that the serial migrant not only experiences but 'is' an overflowing collection rather than a coherent, continuous subject (Ong and Collier 2005; Ossman 2013). Exile, economic migrant, love migrant, exchange student, refugee: a serial migrant adds up not just several identities but systems of categorisation over time. This migratory subject often changes 'positions' not only geographically but socially, making us question the static assumptions of social theory with their experiences of diverse approaches to nationality, class, race, ethnicity and gender.

Barbara has experienced dramatic shifts in status, career and perceived class position in the several countries she has called home.

She is a licensed nurse and citizen of the USA and the UK. She has worked as a counselor to foreign students, a massage therapist, and taught English and pilates. As a young woman she lived in the US and Italy and went to college in Delaware. She met her husband Stephen in Virginia. They settled for differing lengths of time in the Philippines, the San Francisco Bay area, Kazakhstan, the UK, Germany, and most recently, Southern California, raising three children along the way. She has always quilted, but does not consider herself an artist. She has never made quilts for sale or public display. One might compare her unstable status as a serial migrant subject to that of quilting and fabric arts; when is a quilt a work of art, an admirable piece of handicraft? Is quilting an art form or a hobby? In her study of American quilters, Marybeth Stalp notices the autobiographical significance of particular quilts for her interlocutors, noting how they make quilts as 'life bookmarks' (Stalp 2007). Barbara's quilts are sometimes markers of noteworthy moments. But in many of her pieces she mingles elements associated with various events and several different homes. This brings the places and people of her past into contact with one another and with her present in an imaginative, impossible, but literally embodied way.ⁱⁱⁱ Taken together, her quilts are less an interrogation of what 'happened' or what 'I saw' or 'what a place was like' than evidence that I felt something and I was *part* of it and made something of it (Taussig 2011).^{iv}

So what was Barbara a part of? How do her quilts speak to the worlds in which she has participated? Serial migrant's relationship to place and other people are especially interesting for the analysis of today's increasingly choreographic politics, which evolves by managing mobility, circulations and modes of interaction of populations. Subjects are shaped by where and how they move across a city or an international border and the way such movements provide or inhibit access to global forms of social interaction, knowledge and values. The three worlds I have found to be especially salient in research both on sites of social interaction and migration are those of proximity, rationality and charisma (Ossman 2003). These 'worlds' are not separate cultures or spheres of activity or fields of practice, or 'scapes' defined by particular activities, or worldviews, (Appadurai 1996; Bourdieu 1977; Ossman 1998, 2013). They are instead defined by the patterns of social interaction they teach and the practices and values these forms of interaction imply and foster. We learn how to be a part of worlds of rationality, proximity and charisma at home, in schools, in informal social gatherings, through interactions with officials and in shops, and on-line. It is not necessarily the *type* of place or institution, but the forms of interactions it fosters in a particular place or moment that is central (Ossman 2003). A neighborhood café might foster proximate relations, while a Starbucks in the city center inculcates 'rational' service and a deluxe coffee house centers on the charismatic performance of its barista making coffee with hand-roasted, prize winning coffee beans. Not everyone has access to all worlds. One might measure inequality with regard to cross-world participation. Politics might be seen as debating and determining the way worlds are associated, promoted or repressed in particular polities or communities

(Ossman 2007). In any case, the three world model is helpful in interpreting the way that serial migrants envision social connection and create continuities across as well as in each home.

For those who can learn the ways of all of these globe-spanning forms of interaction, and especially for serial migrants whose experiences of each new homeland includes sometimes confusing new associations of these familiar global worlds, questions of how to associate worlds becomes especially important. Acting based on proximate criteria in one's workplace may be expected in one country, but tried as corruption in another. Failing to notice how fame and reputation are at work in certain contexts can blind us to important aspects of social and cultural as well as political life, as can interpreting processes of late-modern self-construction without taking into account the importance of circles of proximate relations of the individual, even as they are being extended by communication technology. For serial migrants, being able to act following the forms of interaction and values of one world or another at a given time or in a specific setting is vital to living in a new environment. It is also critical to achieving subjective continuity. Enacting the 'wrong world' can be a social faux pas, but it can also be an intentional political or social act.^v Barbara's quilting practice illustrates this. She joins remnants of old clothing, snippets gifted by friends and pieces cut from whole cloths purchased for her creative work. Attending to the different kinds of cloth and stitches in Barbara's quilts with reference to the interpretive model of the three worlds draws attention not only to the status of the cloths she stitches together, or the interplay of proximity, rationality and charisma in her broader experience, but her active preferences for and even promotion of practices and values associated with proximate relations. To begin to explore these different worlds as she orders them in her life and in her quilts, let us first take a visit to Barbara to see how quilting helps her to instantiate a life-landscape of both site-specific and world-specific elements.

Life Landscapes

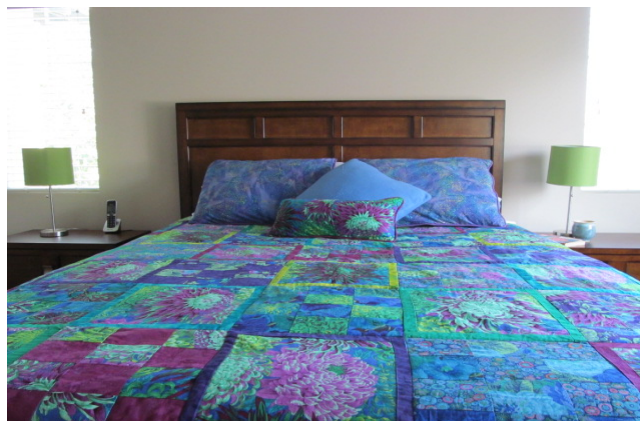


figure 1: Barbara James, *Rain/Water*, 2012^{vi}

Repeated immigration tends to make people wary of becoming collectors. Cherished objects are those that offer possibilities for generating meaningful actions and establishing affective connections across homes. One may go as far as thinking that an ideal object might be one that will eventually disappear. While I was doing research among serial migrants in Dubai, I encountered Nur and asked her a question I posed to many of my interlocutors. 'What do you always bring when you move?' She explained that since she converted to Islam the only things she needs is her Qur'an. But she looks forward to the day when she will have memorised so well that, she will no longer actually need to carry a printed book. For her, it is the sacred text that shapes her 'place' in the world, not any geographic location (Ossman 2013, pp. 27-9). Most serial migrants do try to carry some cherished objects with them when they move, but very, very few of those I've encountered in my research since 2005 have moved with households full of objects from place to place. Most have expressed a marked preference for pared-down, sparse home décor. Thus, when I first visited Barbara and Stephen's home in Riverside, California in 2013 I was taken aback. It overflowed with furnishings, pictures and do-dads; the opposite of the clean style I'd come to expect from serial migrants who, even if they settle in one place for good, live with the possibility of future moves as their imaginative horizon (Ossman 2013, p. 92).

At first, I thought this couple with their burgeoning assortment of voluminous furniture might prove an interesting exception. But as I sank into a capacious sofa with a glass of wine, they made a point of telling me that none of 'this stuff' was theirs. Stephen's new employer had not paid for their move, but had provided them with this furnished house as part of a one year contract. Did they bring nothing at all? Had they brought no possessions they could transport in their suitcases? Had they not acquired new things here in California? They pointed to a drawing by their daughter Megan who'd won a scholarship to study art in California. She was the reason they had sought out work in Riverside. Their older daughter Jen is also an artist; she and their disc-jockey son still lived in London. Quite a creative family; did Barbara have a background in the arts? I wondered. 'I sketch sometimes but I'm not an artist', she claimed. But even as she spoke, I began to notice bright points of color scattered across the drab assortments of the landlord's possessions. I found my gaze shifting to a magenta patch on an ottoman in a corner, then tried to discretely catch a glimpse of a polychrome coverlet draped across a bed in a bedroom down the hall. 'Do these quilts belong to the landlord too?' 'Oh no! These are mine. Would you like to see more?' Barbara proposed, already walking down the hall to fully reveal the pool of turquoise spread over the bed; a mirage in a desert of drab. Thus we began to unfold her life by exploring the fabrics, stitches and patterns of her craft.

I already knew something about Barbara's story. Stephen was among those I interviewed in the 2000's for my research on serial migrants. We met in London in 2006, while I was teaching at Goldsmith's college and he was pursuing graduate studies while working as a consultant. He introduced me to Barbara in 2012. With her athletic build and body-

close biking outfit, my early impressions of Barbara led me to think that I would be more likely to run into her in the gym than at a quilting bee. Nevertheless, once I had expressed interest, she was quick to elaborate on the importance of quilting in her life. It fulfills several functions, she explained. It enables her to get a sense of her surroundings. When she moves to a new place, one of the first things she does is find out where cloth is sold. Having a project to accomplish introduces her to the physical space of her latest home and enables her to understand how she might move through her geographic and social surroundings by giving her a purpose. Bartering for cloth at a market in the rural Philippines, selecting from the very limited selection of materials available in Kazakhstan as the Soviet Union was falling apart, walking through the countless rows of fabric lined up like library shelves in an American fabric store; searching for cloth is a varied experience, and one which facilitates and even requires interaction. One might only have to engage a cashier to purchase a swatch of cloth, but usually, one must seek out a clerk who measures and cuts the cloth. Barbara is a sociable person. She said she never refrains from using these occasions, or those that require haggling over the price as a way to engage people in conversation. Besides helping her to improve her language skills and become attuned to local fashions, in quilting, but also in clothing and interior decoration, they offer opportunities to exchange information and ideas about any number of other topics. In addition to what she learns through these face-to-face exchanges, Barbara reads about the quilting and sewing practices in the countries and regions where she lives. Her practice evolves by experimenting with these techniques and patterns and using them as a point of comparison with the kinds of work with which she is already familiar. She says that her work is 'nothing much' compared to those who are 'master quilters and artists'. But from the perspective of the study of migratory subjectivity, they are a treasure-trove because they offer palpable evidence of the 'accumulation process' of the serial migrant, acting as an evolving metaphor for the production of continuity and meaning.

The origins of cloth can be as difficult to discern as those of people. Patterns like the indigo batik from the Philippines may be easy to place, but what of a Japanese design printed on cloth woven in Cambodia purchased in a German boutique? The vast majority of her pieces mingle materials from different sources even as it references her different homes, loved ones or events. What makes for these associations? What inspires her to develop certain patterns and her choice of fabrics? Most of her quilts are not produced for any specific use or event. Or at least not for uses and occasions that others might readily comprehend. Barbara's quilts are only occasionally representations of a particular home or country. Even when they are, they are likely not made while she was living in that place. Take for instance the blue-green bed cover in figure 1. I was fascinated to learn that for Barbara it is a response to a kind of sensory deprivation she experiences in arid climates. She made it recently in California, where its bright, aqueous hues serve as a reminder of lakes, rivers, flower gardens and rain she came to love while living in the UK and Germany.

In Southern California, in the throes of a major drought, she recalls her other homes and finds relief in its watery expanse. It is no picture of a place or account of an event, but the expression of places joined in her sensory awareness and bodily sensations. Dryness, heat, thirst or abundant sun are similarly the themes of some of the quilts she made while living in Northern Europe. She joins the landscapes of her life when she responds to them with the cool or warm colors of her artistry.

As she enters the beige ranch house from the sun-scorched yard, does she sometimes think she is *in* Almaty? Or does she feel the breeze from the Alps when she stretches out across the bedcover? Listening to her account I could not help but think of my own serial migration and practice of painting. At the time I met Barbara I'd recently written in my diary about 'Line Dry', which I painted in Morocco in 1994:

... viewing the piece in California it not only appeared as relic of my 'Moroccan' life, it extended an invitation to enter a unified space of sensorial continuity and imagination that included the present. Gazing from my office toward the parched, rocky rise of Mt Rubidoux then shifting my eyes to the Naples yellows on the canvas, I could not just 'imagine' a unified space, I could *feel* I was in it. Linear history faded and I might actually think I was in a hotel, perhaps ending a weekend holiday in Ouarzazate, getting ready to pack and return home to Rabat for a Monday meeting. 'Line Dry' could not dissolve space and time for long, but set in motion a kind of flickering between memory and sense impression, the spaces of the map and those of the imagination. (diary, April 2013)

While living in London and a small German town on the border with Switzerland, she enjoyed working with brighter, livelier fabrics. But living in the California heat she recalls the misty mornings and damp afternoons of her former homes with nostalgia. She has developed a palette that evokes cloudy grey or light blue skies. She works with subdued tones and patterns that evoke the deep greens of summer foliage in well-watered climates or brighter blocks of deeper hues that evoke the shape and color of the long lines of brick row houses that lined her daily walks for over a decade.



figure 2: Barbara James: 'My London—I Miss Your Beauty', 2013

Barbara's multi-site collection of cloth is nothing in itself; it is her practice of quilting that brings together the colors and textures she has gathered to give them form. Her skilled hand joins things found in the place she and others purchased or found. Each piece is chosen for the collection then selected again when it joined others in a patterned quilt of specific dimensions. Through her art she can come to recognise and engage continuities of sound, sight, touch or style among her home environments. Her work appears as a manifestation of the kind of 'sustaining relations' Miwon Kwon sees as important in the task of 'relational specificity' site-specific art can engage to address 'the uneven conditions of adjacencies and distances between one thing, one person, one place, one thought, one fragment next to another, rather than invoking equivalences via one thing *after* another' (Kwon 2002, p. 166; also see Oakeshott, 1995, p. 91). The quilts exemplify the 'relational sensibility' Kwon preconises, but they also indicate problems of maintaining a sense of 'site specific art' without reference to the clearly delimited locations of the serial narrative. By quilting, Barbara establishes relationships among her homelands. Yet, what she makes the cloths of her different homes is not simply the trace of her linear story of moving from one place to another. Barbara's stitches and the patterns and colors she designs register and evoke similar conditions or sensations across disparate regions, referencing the way her life path leads her to creatively confuse or conflate life sites and repeatedly make something new of her passage through them. The quilts are not simply 'about' relationships among places but an effort to shape a subjective and social space that includes elements of one's life but which also includes impossible combinations of people and places. Just as the quilts register her desire to create a balance among landscapes to feel 'whole', they also bear witness to Barbara's participation in and active arrangement of global social worlds.

Material Proximities

While Barbara purchases some of her fabrics to conjure the color of a city or the sound of water, others are the remnants of clothes worn by friends and family. The pattern of a toddler's dress recalls the child who has now grown, the place where she lived, the relationship between mother and child at that moment, as well as a host of other circumstances. One of the most poignant moments in our exchanges was when Barbara pointed to a piece of fabric from one of her father's shirts. 'I got it after he passed away. It took some time before I knew which pattern it would go with'. The fabric from the shirt that touched her father's skin is stitched with cloths from places he never visited to develop a design that shows his cloth as part of a broader pattern. This pattern is not the assemblage of all of the fabrics in Barbara's basket but a carefully chosen set that she selects with respect to aesthetic considerations of color, line and pattern. The work of hand stitching is slow and painstaking. Barbara says she finds it relaxing and meditative. Did the repetitive motion of stitching aid her in the process of mourning her father? Perhaps the reiteration of these movements enables her to integrate the loss one feels for those moments that we can never live again, or overcome regrets about leaving behind a cherished friend, or

a child. The products of her careful work provide evidence of those lost or altered people, relationships and homes and not only show but also provide warm, pleasurable experiences of how they continue to be woven into the fabric of the present. Relics of family and friends are associated in the quilts that new circles of friends enjoy. Do they realise that these cloths are the product of a collection amassed in places they will never know? Regardless of opportunities to recount the story of this or that quilt, each offers her an occasion to gather her loved-ones around cloths she too can nestle in or contemplate. The remnants of clothing along with pieces of cloth she associates with making new circles of friends at markets or fabric shops act as metaphors for the proximate worlds she engaged across her several homelands.

One might compare Barbara's way of working with remnants of the clothes and bits of cloth associated with social circles of her life with *Mi Tiempo, Mein Raum, My Map* by the serial migrant artist Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein. This large drawing on a canvas can be viewed as a self-contained work or used as the ground for a performance (Mejia-Krumbein 2016, p. 2017). The design on the tarp is composed of the names of everyone Beatriz has met in her life. Each name is printed in one of four circles, each represents one of the four countries where the artist has resided, Columbia, Germany, Mexico, the United States. During the performance, she walks around the canvas, sometimes drawing a red ribbon across the cloth to trace the path she has taken across these countries of names.

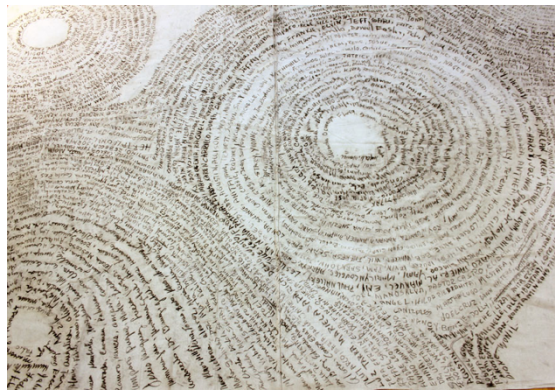


figure 3: Beatriz Mejia-Krumbein, *Canvas Ground for Mi Tiempo, Mein Raum, My Map*^{vii}

Beatriz's accent changes as she moves from 'country to country'. She repeats the name of her husband, 'Peter', at each shift across the name-map. The surface she creates is a 'personalised' alternative to the world map, yet preserves its territorial divisions in its form. Her voice rises and falls to suggest emotions associated with particular names, but the name collection only makes sense when it is ordered by her path. Individuals are represented equally, except when they play a more frequent role in shaping the path. In this sense, Beatriz's work is more 'rational' and less concerned with the association of different

worlds than Barbara's quilts. It tells her story in a linear fashion and charts dyadic relationships to present a personal map.

In contrast, the way that Barbara's work highlights both remnants of clothing and bits of fabric associated with specific interactions in now-distant homes shows a pervasive preference for media that embody or evoke face to face relations and circles of known people. Even fabrics associated with very important relationships between Barbara and one other person are consistently associated with cloths reminiscent of other personal relationships. They are arranged to harmonise in larger patterns, each bit playing a distinct role, much as in society, proximate settings include different ways of associating with and being attentive to a child, grandfather or new acquaintance. As a college-educated medical professional, as someone who has negotiated the educational and health systems of some states and addressed the lack of such systems in others, Barbara is quite adept at practicing the kind of means to end reasoning that has long been seen as characteristic of modern societies. She is not one of those barred from mastering this world because of lack of education or confinement to domestic contexts. She is well versed in the abstract, individualising forms of knowledge and forms of value we associate not only with science and the market and but also with universal human rights. And she knows how to participate actively and effectively in worlds governed by 'rationality'. Might one interpret her embodied, holistic ways of being, an anti-globalisation protest in practice? Choosing quilting as her creative practice may indicate such an activism in action, but rather than a move against an all-encompassing globalisation, I suggest that seeing her activity as a proposal for a re-ordering of several available worlds opens up new possibilities for thinking about her art and action, particularly in the context of her serial migrations. For Barbara, quilting is related to her role as a woman, mother and wife; identities that traverse all of her countries, regardless of the way these roles are diversely interpreted.

Barbara has quilted throughout her life. For her, it is a practice associated with maternity, child rearing and getting to know other women wherever she lives.^{viii} She said she takes pleasure in thinking of her work as connected to a millennial history of women practicing fabric arts. Embroidery or lace making may be as gender specific as quilting; but no other art or craft as readily connotes images of warmth, maternal care and protection. Before quilts were displayed on walls in museums or homes, quilting was used to maintain bodily heat: while home use was prevalent, in cold weather travelers on long journeys also huddled in quilts; some of the earliest-known examples are of military garb used for both warmth and protection in battle. Nonetheless, they are firmly associated with women's work and gendered qualities of care, warmth and mothering. These are crucial elements for artists who use quilts to convey complex, critical messages about gender, work or maternity. Scholarly studies that focus on the craft tend to separate 'private' domestic or 'leisure' quilting out from quilting made with the intention of public exhibition as art or public action one observes in the 'AIDS' quilt or the quilt made to honor the

victims of the 9/11 attacks (Duncan 2005, Stalp 2007). In this schema, Barbara's quilting would be seen as a private matter. But in that case, one might consider any art that is not immediately produced with the public art market in mind as outside the realm of work, even if 'leisure' is recognised as an important arena for shaping identity, even an identity as a 'quilter' (Stalp 2007, pp. 61-71). In fact, Barbara's ideals of proximity have a lot to do with how she conceives women's roles not only as homemakers but also as public care-givers.

Barbara has always worked in 'caring' professions. She is a licensed nurse, massage therapist and pilates teacher. In addition, wherever she lives, she strives to contribute to the collective good through charitable actions, offering shelter, comfort and even warm coverings to others; in Riverside she often leaves social gatherings early during the winter months to distribute food and blankets to the homeless.^{ix} Recently, she co-founded an organisation that helps people make life transitions. These activities are related to expanding the role of 'proximity' in public, a disposition which is fed by her understanding of womanhood, but also, by her Christian faith.

Charismatic Interventions

While Beatriz traces her story in names written across a canvas/map, no single quilt spells out the territory of Barbara's life. Most of her pieces bear no letters or words. One exception is a particularly finely stitched baby quilt she made for her daughter Jen, 'My Sunshine' as the stitches say. The quilt is also embroidered with a quote from the bible, from the book of Luke, which reads: 'If anyone wishes to come after ME let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow ME'. The large block letters of the scripture frame the delicate pattern of tiny segments of cloth whose subtly varied pattern creates a sense of depth and movement. The smaller, bolder cursive script of the dedication to Jen mediates the stylistic disjuncture between the simple border and finely-wrought center. Here, the intimate relationship of mother to daughter is mediated by Jesus, leading to a triangulation that suggests a world that is no longer that of proximate relations or 'rational' accounting or modes of linear recounting but instead, structured according to charismatic principles. This quilt uses fabric cut of whole cloth selected to create a harmonious design; it is only the letters that make it 'personal'. But the way the Biblical verses stitched across the quilted fabric are rendered differently than those addressed to her daughter suggests that there is a special mediating role for 'ME' (Jesus).^x 'ME' (Jesus) is very clearly the bright light that lights the path of Barbara and her daughter, a charismatic figure around which the world evolves in a relationship that is distinctly different than those one enjoys with face-to-face circles of family, friends or acquaintances. And yet the verse selected reminds us of Barbara's ways of 'following' her faith, which she lives primarily through face-to-face interactions with known people. Her art and 'activism' and sense of self develop an interpretation of scripture that gives priority to practices of service in proximate worlds.



figure 5: Barbara James, *Baby Quilt for Jen*

Shana Cohen's writing about how her transnational engagements in social service provides a sense of subjective continuity and a way of enacting her Jewish identity resonates with Barbara's Christian ethic (Cohen 2007). It also helps to clarify the nature of Barbara's commitments to a specific way of living her faith. Cohen makes a pointed distinction between how her conception of service emerges from a Jewish ethic, and any specific ties to specific Jewish communities in the places she has lived. Her service does involve getting to know many people, but as an organiser and a theorist. Barbara contributes to the common good as a Christian in ways that do not necessarily rely on being a part of religious institutions. Yet, she ministers to others' bodily and emotional needs in her work as she does at home, where her quilts create a warm affective environment and bring the familiarity of past homes into the present for her family. One might say her ethic comes out in the way she questions and probes divisions between domestic and public, even as Cohen questions the limits of community-based ways of defining faith-based action. Barbara lives out universal ideas and beliefs equally while fashioning a baby quilt for a friend or providing a warm blanket to a person sleeping on a sidewalk, whose name she invariably gets to know. Just as each fabric, each stitch in every quilt is more than a representation or remembrance of a place or relationship, but a material, palpable part of things, the forms of service Barbara embraces are those that touch others directly, expressing universal ideals and belief in very specific, embodied ways. Her hands-on work crosses all manner of boundaries of public and private in diverse situations by consistently giving priority to relations of proximity. This has implications for how she conceives and expresses universal ideas and beliefs.

I have considered Barbara's promotion of proximate relations by looking at her quilting but the feminine associations of this practice should not lead to the assumption that proximity is dominant only in 'feminine' or domestic contexts. Recently, Barbara has started to display her work publicly in the context of a collective of serial migrant artists I direct. I turn now to a discussion of her work of rendering the proximate in public.

The Proximate in Public

Some authors distinguish between art and craft quilts according to the perceived audience. This divides quilt-making oriented to the public realm and the craft market or art market from quilts made for domestic consumption among family, friends and acquaintances.^{xi} Other writers speak of quilters having 'subjective careers'. There are, of course, well known projects in which even those without such 'quilt careers' develop fabric art as a way to document and share their experiences or those of others. This kind of work is often politically or socially motivated. A good example is the *Desconocidos* (the unknowns) project developed in Mendocino California for migrant quilters to illustrate their dangerous, momentous, traumatic experience of migration, crossing from Mexico to the US across the Sonoran Desert, or the 'No More Deaths' project for which quilters compose quilts of clothing shed in the desert by would-be migrants (Hazard 2016). Barbara makes her quilts alone without prompting. Her move to publicly exhibit her work was, however, spurred by joining a collective of serial migrant artists.

Barbara has been a member of *the Moving Matters Traveling Workshop* since I formed the collective of serial migrant artists in 2013. At the inaugural event of this mobile group who work together on themes related to their common or diverse experiences of migration, she and her husband staged a duet performance. Their 'intimate' public dialogue included notes from their diaries, snatches of Stephen's poetry and improvised exchanges. No mention was made of Barbara's fabric art. It was only the next year, when members of the MMTW living in greater Los Angeles were invited to collaborate with the experimental theater company called the *Son of Semele Ensemble* (SOSE) that she brought her quilts out. This time, Stephen was in the audience and Barbara performed solo. Along with other members of the collective, I helped to hold up and arrange the quilts as a background to Barbara's presentation. We arranged each piece following her instructions, in a process reminiscent of the way she uses the quilts to design each new living room.

We held some quilts behind her as she spoke about them, then folded them up or moved them when she gave us a signal. The audience was enthralled by the colors, stitches and her confident and concrete way of using the quilts to share both her story and her art. As she pointed to a cloth from the Philippines, then mentioned the connection between colors and weather patterns, we were introduced to an intensely personal version of the places she had settled, a story that jumped from accounts of buying fabrics to stories of how being identified as the national of another country landed Stephen in the hospital, to decisions about the children's education. I loved the way that even the most sharply defined geometric patterns were pliable in my hands and the way the stitches that shape them are always somewhat irregular. Barbara explained that though sewing machines can make the piecing work go faster handwork is generally better; she showed me how hand stitches make the fabric buckle and pucker in amazing ways. As it was

for her hands, so it seemed to be for her history. The quilts were more than beautiful backdrop for an absorbing story: they were not simply well-chosen props, but a portable display of a well-defined artistic intent, a mode of generating at once an account of an experience and producing sensory and social continuities today and in the future. They are an example of how one might undertake, render and share something of a life of serial migration in a form that provides continuity for oneself and comfort, beauty and warmth to others.^{xii}

On stage at SOSE, the quilts were organised to follow her life path. But in exhibitions that followed, she presented them as landscapes or themes joined by color schemes, patterns or the techniques she employed to make them. They have created opportunities for thinking about aesthetic and stylistic continuities that encourage one to register and reflect on social and affective connections across time as well as space. While the fabric pieces of the many places she has made her home might jog memories or spur conversation about her story, the quilts register more than her singular story. They are evidence of her style of making connections among people and places and developing not only an artistic signature, but a body of work that forwards a 'soft' activist agenda. One can approach the quilts as illustrations of the global worlds that co-exist without co-mingling, like the fabrics assembled in their patterns. Helping Barbara to unfold the cloths of her life on stage, touching the fabrics she had so carefully collected and noticing how this process was often oriented to future possible projects rather than a search for something to fit into an already set-out pattern, I again became aware of how Barbara's quilting practice indicates her giving priority to proximity in shaping the world at large in ways that also present the serial migrant as a subject, and late modern subjects more generally, as formed by decisions and actions in interaction with others rather than serendipitous collections or assemblages.

Susan Ossman is Professor of Anthropology and Global Studies at the University of California, Riverside and an artist. Her books include *Picturing Casablanca*, *Portraits of Power in a Modern City (California 1994)*, *Three Faces of Beauty: Casablanca, Cairo, Paris (Duke 2002)* and *Moving Matters, Paths of Serial Migration (Stanford 2013)*, which inspired the creation of *The Moving Matters Traveling Workshop*, a mobile collective of serial migrant artists. Susan's work has been supported by a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship and grants from the CNRS (France), The British Academy and the US National Endowment for the Arts.

Notes

ⁱ For a more detailed explanation of the 'third space' see Bhabha 1998; for the logic of seriality see Anderson 1998, Oakshott 1995 and Ossman 2004, 2013.

ⁱⁱ I have been involved in a series of fieldwork projects on serial migration since 2004. See particularly Ossman 2007 and 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ The focus on practice here is similar to Ingold's emphasis on inquiry through making. However, my approach takes issue with his claim that 'by taking the artwork to be indexical of the social milieu and cultural values of its makers, the anthropology of art has merely taken on the mantle of art history' (Ingold 2013, p. 7). Barbara's practice shows the complexity that 'indexing' a milieu can imply and the way practice involves moments of objectification and feeds on a process of collection.

^{iv} I refer to Michael Taussig's important work to evoke the different, sometimes contradictory, sometimes complimentary way in which traces of a pencil, brush or ? might enter into thinking about evidence—in fieldwork or life—and the 'truth' of what actually 'happened'.

^v Such acts may involve discrete use of cultural forms, but according to this approach, what is at issue is not a matter of cultural conflict at the level of specific traits or individually coherent and distinct wholes, but rather, of how subjects or ideologies order (or seek to order) global worlds.

^{vi} All photographs of Barbara James' quilts are by Megan James, with her permission.

^{vii} Photograph by Peter Krumbein. The first version of this performance can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bv_hL3cDkVg

^{viii} In contrast, Stalp explains the recent explosion of quilting in the US where many women take up quilting in middle age as a respite from domestic duties, or a way of 'coping' with more leisure time after children leave home (ibid). For Barbara, quilting actually helped her to 'make self time' in the midst of domestic and professional duties.

^{ix} One might fruitfully contrast this 'flexible professionalism' to Ong's notion of 'flexible citizenship' and the emergence of 'life strategies' Brody studies among Indian nurses in the Gulf countries (Brody 2006; Ong 1999).

^x It could be instructive to compare this stitching of Biblical verses as a message to a particular loved one with other ways of entering into narratives of self developed for (or with) ethnographers, diaries or published texts. See Faubion on the interplay of biblical text and subjectivity and ethical dispositions in 2001 and 2011, pp. 203-267.

^{xi} But many have also charted the moves among these categories. See, for instance, Duncan 2005 and the recent special edition of *Visual Anthropology* edited by Geoffrey Gowlland (Gowlland 2015).

^{xii} I would like to thank Barbara James for her willingness to share her quilts and life with me. I am also grateful for the suggestions of an anonymous reader of an earlier version of this article. All errors are my own.

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