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# Knotty cartographies: Augmenting everyday looking practices of craft and race

## Keywords

everyday racism  
race  
craftivism  
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augmented reality  
macramé  
social justice

## Abstract

*This article examines the disruption of looking and seeing behaviours pertaining to everyday engagements with race and domestic crafts. The notion of the ‘everyday’ derives from Philomena Essed’s approach to analysing racism, a framework that makes visible the veiled manifestations of racial and ethnic inequalities pervasive within societal discourses and practices. Essed’s idea of the ‘everyday’ emphasizes the invisibility of everyday racism. This idea can be extended to domestic crafts: both are perceived as inconsequential, apolitical and ordinary. Despite its innocuous demeanour, everyday racism has material consequences that continue to perpetuate racial inequalities at a systemic level. This article maps out the socio-political impacts of racism vis-à-vis domestic craft. It traces these impacts theoretically. In addition, the author has conceived a visual representation of everyday racism in the form of a macramé wall hanging and augmented reality (AR) technologies in order to offer the viewer a medium for reflection on the socio-political implications of the ‘everydayness’ of racism.*

## Introduction

Once we understand that in a racist society, race and ethnicity can operate through any social relation, when we recognize the racial or ethnic dimensions in particular relationships, it becomes possible to speak of everyday racism as the situational activation of racial or ethnic dimensions in particular relations in a way that reinforces racial or ethnic inequality.

(Essed 2002: 189)

The epigraph at the beginning of this introduction is urgent – calling for both *understanding* and *recognition* of the racial violence that is sustained in the United States on a systemic level. Essed defines everyday micro occurrences of racism as '[involving] systematic, recurrent, familiar practices' (2002: 177). Essed proposes that the knowledge of the everyday (*e.g.* language, norms and customs) is integral for a person's societal mobility and that such knowledge becomes a resource, a survival strategy to 'make living possible' (2002: 188). Essed's interrogation of the everyday is thus more than mere identification of racist behaviours and actions, but makes an argument for the potential dangers with one's complacency with the mundane. Essed emphasizes the importance of disrupting the familiar and the everyday to allow for critical consciousness to emerge and for meaningful change to undo the systems that perpetuate racial injustices: '[individual men and women] remain locked in the forces of the system, unless enough counter-pressure develops to unlock these forces and to transform the machinery of the system that produces racial and ethnic inequality' (2002: 189).

This article examines looking and seeing behaviours pertaining to everyday engagements with race and domestic crafts in the United States, and how disruption can help create recognition and understanding as called for by Essed (2002). For this purpose, this article offers a theoretical discussion of everyday racism in relation to the everyday use of craft, underpinned by a practical project using macramé and augmented reality. The macramé wall hanging, crafted by the author, visualizes the author's perception of everyday racism, its space and tension, through knotted black and white cotton and twine cords as a metaphor of the oppressive, racialized social structures in the United States. The wall hanging was designed to be disruptive. Its ordinariness is complemented by an augmented reality (AR) component to raise the viewers' awareness (in the case, students from the University of Arizona) and modify their way of seeing the textile through the superimposed visualizations of everyday racism.

The examination of the intersection between everyday racism and domestic craft is presented in this article in three sections. First, the analysis reviews critical race theories and critical making/DIY theories as cornerstones informing the rationale behind the creation of the macramé project in relation to everyday racism. Second, the section 'New practices of looking and seeing: disrupting subject

positions', unites theory with praxis through an exploration of the reflective and creative processes involved in the textile's development. Its result is the embodied representation of the interplay of critical race and maker theories as explored through elements such as knotting, tension and types of cording. Finally, the connections between racism and domestic craft are revealed through the re-envisioning of looking and seeing practices through the exploration of AR as a catalyst to spur situational activation. In this article, these three sections are integrated into a broader conceptualization of everyday craft and racism.

### **Generative frames: Critical race and critical making theories**

What is needed, then, is a general theory that explains how something so ordinary, so everyday, and seemingly apolitical as knitting and sewing is transformed into a form of opposition, and why crafts have been chosen to achieve this goal.

(Newmeyer 2008: 444)

The links amongst critical race theories and critical making theories hinge on their inextricableness from the social, economical and political structures of the communities that they are imbricated within. Such structures tend to be hierarchal and are shaped by ideologies controlling, and normalizing certain ways of looking and seeing practices of the everyday that pertain to racism and perceptions of craft artefacts. This section defines two key terms central to this analysis, racism and critical making, and considers the ways in which such theories implicate everyday looking practices.

### ***Critical making as subverting the status quo: Craftivism and DIY citizenship***

Since the inception of *MAKE Magazine* during the mid-2000s, the Maker Movement has continued to grow in popularity, gaining traction on a global scale (The Maker Movement 2005). The Maker Movement, coined by Dale Dougherty of O'Reilly Media, invites tinkerers, craftspeople, hobbyists or anyone with a curiosity to engage in practices of making to join. DIY magazines, make-a-thons, hackathons and cutting-edge technologies such as Arduinos, Raspberry Pis, and 3D printers have emerged from the excitement surrounding the Maker Movement (The Maker Movement 2005). Yet, the 'critical' component of making has received considerably less attention than the technologies themselves.

'Critical' in this context refers to the identification of authoritarian systems and their pervasiveness to marginalize persons and objects throughout social, political and economical dimensions of society (Ratto and Boler 2014: 23). Critical making can thus be understood as pertaining to the often-ignored socio-political dimensions of making that question the status quo of authoritarian systems. In his article 'Knit one, stitch two, protest three! Examining the historical and contemporary

politics of crafting', Newmeyer defines critical making as an extension of the maker. He notes: 'many women have sewn, knitted, and weaved their own lives into the crafts they made – materializing life experience' (Newmeyer 2008: 442). Life experiences, ideologies and values alike are imprinted from the makers' head, heart and hands into the craft material; yarn, thread, cording and other media become conduits for makers to drive political agendas forward. It is then with little surprise that crafting was employed to achieve political purposes during pivotal historical moments such as the women's suffrage movements in the early nineteenth and twentieth century and arguably during the abolitionist movement (Newmeyer 2008: 442). Domestic crafts thus occupy double subjectivities 'as both product and activity used for activist purposes' (Newmeyer 2008: 447).

Two features of critical making are examined more closely here: craftivism and DIY citizenship. These two characteristics disrupt conventional ideas around domestic crafts, and serve as two foundational features of critical making. The term craftivism was coined in 2003 by self-proclaimed craftivist Betsy Greer (Craftivism 2007). Craftivism is a portmanteau of the two words 'craft' and 'activism' and is defined as 'a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper, and your quest for justice more infinite' (Craftivism 2007). Craftivism illuminates the critical dimensions of making through the way it deploys craft and crafting to speak back to dominant hierarchies of power through acts of creation. Creativity is a core fundamental value and driving force of craftivism in that it re-inscribes the political perceptions of the roles of art and domestic crafts. Craftivism connects domestic crafting with activist purposes, that is, crafting is employed in a multitude of spaces and determinations beyond its common relegation to the domestic sphere.

While domestic crafts are framed as having a relative amount of political prowess, it is actually through their movement within public spaces (both physical and digital) that they achieve their radical impact (Ratto and Boler 2014: 23). The second characteristic to define critical making, which emerges from craftivism, is what Matt Ratto and Megan Boler denote as 'DIY citizenship': 'DIY citizenship potentially invites us to consider how and when individuals and communities participate in shaping, changing, and reconstructing selves, worlds, and environments in creative ways that challenge the status quo and normative understandings of how "things must be"' (2014: 1). In other words, an engagement with making to achieve political ends inscribes persons into a DIY-citizenship subjectivity, a subject position that seeks to disrupt the status quo and the everyday through the purposeful act of encouraging the engagement with crafts in public spaces and for various audiences. This challenging of the status quo involves individual awareness: a metacognitive realization of the individual's personal ability to enact social change. DIY citizenship accounts for critical making with an emphasis on the transformative power that it has on an individual and communal basis. A DIY citizen thus directly engages with the definition of critical making in the way that



[...]he contributions address making as a 'critical' activity, an activity that provides both the possibility to intervene substantively in systems of authority and power, and that offers an important site for reflecting on how such power is constituted by infrastructures, institutions, communities, and practices.

(Ratto and Boler 2014: 1)

In summary, the definition of critical making engages the creation of craft to draw awareness to local and global social justice issues and sometimes even suggests possible solutions. This is accomplished through domestic crafts moving into public spheres and through adopting DIY citizenship to challenge oppressive hierarchical infrastructures. Similar to the critical element in critical making, the critical dimension in critical race theory also offers a varied, yet complementary, perspective of the 'combination' and 'articulation' of the state social structures at work, as discussed in the following.

### ***Mapping racial formations through knotting: State violence and social infrastructures***

Critical race theories enrich the conversation of everyday looking behaviours by revealing historical emergences, racialized social infrastructures and the discourses that produce and sustain them. Particularly, the over-simplification and essentialism of race are challenged – race is not monolithic. Race is conceptually complex, and yet it is continually singularized as a byproduct of economic structures (*e.g.* capitalism) (Hall 2002: 39). To contest the reductionism of racism and to emphasize the 'critical' feature of critical race theory, I am drawing on three theorists to provide a theory of race conversantly: Cornell West (2002), and Michael Omi and Howard Winant (2002). Together these theorists bring forth a historical account of race, racial formations and racism, thus undoing the monolithic misrepresentation thereof.

The emergence of race, as conceptualized by West (2002) and by Omi and Winant (2002), is represented in the creation process of an everyday, innocuous craft object: a macramé wall hanging. For this project, macramé was chosen to map out racial social formations due to its ordinary and domesticated character. Macramé is a traditional knotting technique that has existed for many centuries (Harvey 1967: 4). The technique was popular in the 1970s, and is currently experiencing a resurgence of interest in many craft and arts communities. Macramé often combines functionality and aesthetic, with many macramé artists knotting staples such as wall hangings, plant hangers and jewellery. 'Modern Macramé' is a craft aesthetic that is trending in various parts of the United States. This particular style departs from the 1970s macramé appeal with its predominant use of brown cording such as natural jute and twine (Figure 1). Instead it privileges white cotton cording, natural



Figure 1: April Killingsworth. Owl. Creative Commons. 1970s macramé wall hanging.



Figure 2: Marijel Melo (2017), Wall hanging with modern macramé aesthetic. Photograph by the author.

hangers (e.g. driftwood or wooden dowels) and a delicate visual symmetry achieved through the employment of a minimal amount of knotting techniques (Katz 2015) (Figure 2).

West, Omi and Winant's theories inspired colour choices that went into the development of the textile: the wall hanging (often nailed to a wall or hung off from a freestanding metal frame) created for this research project is predominantly white, with a few strands of black twine embedded into it (Figure 3). The inclusion of the black twine signals a significant departure – especially from the Modern Macramé aesthetic: it represents a mapping of the tension, knotting and gaps amid white and black bodies, *i.e.* an articulation of race as it intersects with nodes of ability, class and gender for example as described by Hall:

The unity formed by this combination or articulation is always, necessarily, a 'complex structure': a structure in which things are related, as much through their differences as through their similarities [...] social formation as composed of a number of instances – each with a degree of 'relative autonomy' from one another – articulated into a (contradictory) unity.

(Hall 2002: 45)

The role the white cording enacted in the wall hanging is derived from West's 'A Genealogy of Modern Racism', where he examines the emergence of white supremacy discourse through the 'quest for truth and knowledge in the modern West' (2002: 90). The dominance of white cotton cording and knots prominently covers and binds the black twine. The relates to West's theory, where he leverages the conceptual framing of a genealogy to reveal racism as a construct emerging from discourses crafted from prominent Enlightenment scientists and thinkers (2002: 93). West resists attributing racism to certain groups or individuals, and instead frames western modern discourse as an apparatus to promulgate racist ideologies still prominent today:

I will try to show that the idea of white supremacy emerges partly because of the powers within the structure of modern discourse – powers to produce and prohibit, develop and delimit, forms of rationality, scientificity, and objectivity which set perimeters and boundaries for the intelligibility, availability, and legitimacy of certain ideas.

(2002: 92)

For West (2002), race and racism are derived directly from the works of thinkers such as Carolus Linnaeus, who sought to impose orderly categorization onto humans based on particular physical features. The Scientific Revolution generated scholarship and discourses normalizing subjective benchmarks for beauty and intelligence; such ideals became cloaked in objectivity, and were over time adopted in the everyday 'normative gaze' of peoples (West 2002: 97). Thus, for West, race is a genealogical emergence from scientific discourse at the outset of modernity. He concludes his





*Figure 3: Marijel Melo (2017), White cotton and black twine cords hang from a wooden dowel. Photograph by the author.*



*Figure 4: Marijel Melo (2017), Finished macramé wall hanging. Photograph by the author.*

argument with the use of metaphor: 'The idea of white supremacy is a major bowel unleashed by the structure of modern discourse, a significant secretion generated from the creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian philosophy, and classical aesthetic and cultural norms' (2002: 109). Like West's argument for the historical emergence of race, Omi and Winant (2002), too, address the persuasiveness of racial discourses.

The knots in the wall hanging are analogous to the emergence and undoing of racial formations. According to Omi and Winant, 'Racial Formation' speaks to an awareness of the everyday in terms of recognizing the 'racial dimension' in ordinary, everyday social contexts (2002: 126). Before seeing the internal infrastructures comprising racism, race takes on an air of 'common sense' – a way of comprehending, explaining, and acting in the world' (Omi and Winant 2002: 127). Their article defines race as the signification and representation of certain types of bodies (Omi and Winant 2002: 123). As for West (2002), race is not a recent, but a historical emergence deriving from various 'projects'. A project is defined as an organized representation or explanation of ('non')racist practices and discourses (e.g. projects such as the ones stemming from Cartesian and scientific discourses identified by West) (2002: 124). Race is thus defined as an inherently ideological project sought to communicate or make sense of racial practices. West (2002) and Omi and Winant (2002) challenge the monolithic representation that racism conventionally embodies. Whether that means it is distilled to essentialism, or decontextualized with space or time, race is represented as an emergence of social structures organized to oppress certain bodies.

### **New practices of looking and seeing: Disrupting subject positions**

A significant difference of this macramé wall hanging, in contrast to other textile pieces, is its embedded augmented reality (AR) component in the form of attached QR codes. The AR element compels viewers to engage with a literal altering of their present reality through the disruption of their subject position as a viewer of the macramé piece.

As its name suggests, augmented reality seeks to complement one's perceived reality through the transposition of a digital interface onto one's physical environment. Augmented reality has grown in popularity due to its ease of use and its many applications in the public and private sphere. There are various AR programs available for use. The one used for this wall hanging is the mobile application, *Layar*. To interact with the wall hanging, the viewers had to follow a workflow shared with other QR readers:

- download the *Layar* application to a smart device;
- open *Layar* on a smart device. A window with the prompt 'Tap screen to scan' appears;

- point the smart device towards the QR code, and tap the screen;
- watch the screen as a digital object/image, website or video transpose itself onto the QR code or image (as seen in Figure 4).

In terms of content creation through *Layar*, creators for the app upload a selected image to act as a 'trigger' to prompt a digital interface to populate onto a user's smart device. Each selected image, or visual trigger, is assigned to a webpage. It is possible to choose webpages such as YouTube videos, Twitter feeds or even just conventional webpages. The app overlays digital images on top of physical objects within the viewer's physical environment. For the macramé wall hanging, small terracotta pots were inserted into pockets woven into the textile. These pots followed a typical macramé aesthetic and also provided space to affix the AR visual triggers (Figure 5).

In order to stimulate situational activation, the wall hanging was designed to disrupt normal viewing practices by adding an element of surprise. For example, while it is common to look at the front of an artwork, the wall hanging seeks to encourage viewers to view its rear by affixing the visual triggers to the potted plants there (Figure 6, p. 187). In order to view the augmented portion of the textile, one must move themselves behind the wall hanging, a nod to a type of 'behind-the-scenes' look at how something works, at the operational components governing the piece. In addition, the visual triggers are relatively small (1'x 2'/2.5x5 cm in size). Thus, activation of the interaction requires close proximity between the viewer and the macramé wall hanging, disturbing the space that typically exists between a viewer and artwork.

The AR component of the wall hanging seeks to move the viewer through various subject positions. Subject position is the formation of identity (or identities) that is cultivated through discourse and relations of difference (*e.g.* race, gender, class, etc.) (Althusser 1971). The textile contains six visual triggers that are linked to six webpages. These webpages refer to and reference media sources, including the Black Lives Matter movement and craftivism, that seek to unpack the complexities of everyday racism by making visible the interstices of class, gender and age, which converge in (everyday) racism. Just like people have the ability to hail or interpellate persons into subject positions (Althusser 1971), so does the wall hanging. A viewer not privy to the augmented reality component of the piece would likely view the piece as an everyday macramé wall hanging. This, however, is changed through the AR component, which changes the object from an everyday wall hanging to a piece of craftivism. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai has argued, objects, too, have social lives and subjectivities that adapt to the contexts and perceptions conceiving of them (1988: 15). The macramé wall hanging and the AR component come together to augment viewers' looking practices to be faced (quite literally) with a moment of recognition and understanding of the 'everydayness' of racism.





Figure 5: Marijel Melo (2017), Visual triggers printed on 1 "A~2" pieces of cardstock paper. Photograph by the author.



As the wall hanging shapeshifts its subjectivities from domestic craft to craftivist art piece, viewers achieve a situational activation that can be conceptualized as disidentification. José Esteban Muñoz conceptualizes disidentification in relationship to majoritarian ideologies oppressing queer and queer of colour subjects; disidentification provides a way to both acknowledge and depart from reductive, and often unjust dominant beliefs it is a survival strategy that allows one to (sometimes) self-identify in accordance to their own chosen ideologies (1999: 18). Muñoz denotation of disidentification applies lucidly to the morphic subject position of both the artefact and viewer:

To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to 'connect' with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification.

(1999: 12)

Muñoz carries on further by classifying the types of subject positions that a person can occupy. Muñoz deems a 'good' subject position as one complicit with the dominant ideologies pertaining to the object, a 'bad' subject position works against the presented ideology, while an 'identity-in-difference' subject position allows the space to work with and against said ideologies or, in other words, align and depart from it at the same time, just as the macramé wall hanging is an everyday domestic craft while also a craftivist piece speaking to the oppressive state structures governing people.

### **Joining theories of race and critical making in the everyday**

This section explains how the above theories of race, everyday racism and critical making come together in the embodiment of praxis to form the rationale driving the creation of the macramé wall hanging as a reflection on theories of the everyday. The work of key theorists sustained the development of the macramé wall hanging – they are integrated throughout the piece into 'contradictory unity' (Hall 2008: 45). One particular theorist, Stuart Hall, provides substantive insight into the way in which race is socially articulated, and has deeply inspired the development of the macramé piece. His engagement with race vis-à-vis articulation theory has been a useful starting point for making everyday racism structurally visible through craft and vice versa. Hall's 'Articulation, race, and societies structured in dominance' engages race through economical and sociological conceptions. Both notions condense race into a singular mode of production, decreasing the complexities of race to a mere social category (Hall 2002: 40). According to western discourses, categories purport everyday racism through normative ways of looking (West 2002: 102). Race, as noted by West, is thus continuously accounted for in relationship to the dominance of whiteness in spaces so that bodies of colours are made hyper-visible in contrast to the dominance of white (2002: 153). Such subjectivities align and depart from dominant

ideologies pertaining to racism and craft, an oscillation of movement that creates space for, as Essed calls it, situational activation to occur (2002: 189). Accordingly, Hall expands reductionist accounts of race by engaging multiple social structures (or in his words, formations).

The macramé textile was designed as a metaphor for Hall's employment of articulation theory to make visible a 'complex unity, structured in dominance' (Hall 2002: 44). The adopted Modern Macramé aesthetic is representative of the dominance of state whiteness and of the state's government (inherently white) dominance over black people – an explicit corollary to the state formation of contention that impacts both on the individual and on the collective level. The interrelationships between the black and white cords reveal dominance inbuilt into the relationship: pulled into each other, closed through the application of pressure and wrung tightly to form closure (but never completely). In the same way a larger width cotton cord envelopes the smaller-width black strand through tension, so too is the state structured to oppress certain bodies, an oppressive dynamic that Adam Geary describes when grappling with AIDS as a systemically racist epidemic in the black community: 'The state has structured the ways in which black Americans have been made vulnerable to HIV exposure and infection far beyond the capacity of any individual or community mitigation or control' (2014: 2).

The macramé wall hanging piece has dangling cords – reduced to singular configurations barely interacting with neighbouring structures. The complexity of the piece forms through the knotting of cords making discernable the nodes of emergence – knots of both visibility and invisibility. What do these knots then show? Although connected, Hall reminds us that despite being pulled together black and white (cords and persons) remain separate entities (2002: 44). The latter idea challenges the privileging of visibility. For example, Adela C. Licona and Marta M. Maldonado (2014) explore the repercussions of state structures governing both immigrant and Latin@s people during the 1990s in rural Perry Iowa. Licona and Maldonado (2014) highlight discursive ramifications of being visible, consequences that promulgate discourses on policeability, deportability and even acceptance within the community. Reverting to the textile as an extended metaphor of race and perception, the arrangement of cord visibility has control over how the piece is seen and received, how the piece is talked about, and dictates the types of conversations arising from the piece itself.

Augmenting reality can be powerful; it has the potential to make one estranged to oneself and one's familiar ideologies. It can mobilize possibilities and plant seeds to achieve future imaginaries. Imaginaries, in this context, can offer the space for future craft pieces to fill the silences regarding bodies not quite black or white. Each art piece resonates with an air of invisibility of representations. While the wall piece enacts a social formation, it also makes visible the invisible – a knotted map that showcases moments of 'structured dominance' and points of unravelling (Hall 2002: 40). Beyond the obvious knots are the spaces between, the absence and the nothingness of the piece that is very much a discerning, and yet often dismissed part of the whole. These absences are made tangible through the questioning of visibility regarding other bodies of colours – brown bodies and

not-so-brown bodies alike. This leaves space to think about other representations of racialized structures or even how the existing structure can be broken down or 're-knotted' to include visibility to others. Through absence, there are presences still to be seen.

## Conclusion

This article examined looking and seeing behaviours pertaining to everyday engagements with race and domestic crafts in the United States, and how the disruption of such behaviours can facilitate the recognition of racial inequalities sustained through social discourses and behaviours. This theoretical undertaking resided on an interdisciplinary intersection: Critical Making and Critical Race theories. Critical Making Theory conveyed the historically disruptive, political and activist-rooted features of domestic crafts, while Critical Race Theory placed into conversation the always already racialized social infrastructures that sustain racism. The development of a macramé wall hanging with an augmented reality component served as an extended metaphor to depict the tension amid knotted black and white cords, and as an embodied site for situational activation to occur.

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