The word “dissent” took on new meanings as US Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg’s role as a counterbalance to the court’s conservative members grew increasingly vital during Donald Trump’s presidency, ultimately becoming intrinsically tied to her legacy upon her passing in September 2020. In an outpouring of collective grief within left-leaning circles, the phrase “I Dissent” took on new resonance, and DIY versions of the late judge’s iconic lace collars adorned innumerable bodies as “dissent collars.” Patterns for variations on this design continue to circulate on digital fiber communities, such as Ravelry, creations that would be right at home in Hinda Mandell’s 2019 edited volume Crafting Dissent: Handicraft as Protest from the American Revolution to the Pussyhats. Unlike other books in its genre, such as Rachelle Hope Saltzman’s edited collection Pussy Hats, Politics, and Public Protest (2020), this book sets out to take both a historic and contemporary view toward making practices for the purposes of enacting change. Crafting Dissent brings together historians, art historians, communication scholars, curators, practicing craft activists, and many more, to engage with the central theme of craft and civic engagement.

With twenty-four chapters including a graphic essay, bracketed by a foreword and an afterword, the book is an accessible compilation of approaches to political craft in the so-called Trump era. It is clear that the genesis of this book began with such scholars as Mandell reacting to the craft culture that erupted in the wake of Trump’s election as the forty-fifth president of the United States. Indeed, this book feels extremely of its moment, especially as readers reflect on all that has changed since the first Women’s March in 2017. This book therefore reads as a kind of primary source for future historians to use in their efforts to better understand Trump’s legacy and citizens’ (in this case, particularly makers) understanding of their dissenting actions in a broader geographical and temporal context. Notably, curators Mary Worrall and Shirley Wajda address the topic of future scholarship in their chapter “Curating Craftivism and Rethinking Collections,” as they describe
the planning and collecting model that they implemented to preserve and interpret items from the Women’s March at their institution, the Michigan State University Museum.

The book’s stated goal is to historicize the practice of craft activism, which is accomplished in the first, and strongest, section, “Crafting Histories.” While some chapters within this section connect the past to the present, four are firmly rooted in the past. Art historian Elizabeth Hawley unpacks the significance of the loom in John Singleton Copley’s 1773 portrait Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Mifflin (Sarah Morris) while also placing this work within the context of Copley’s own politics during the American Revolution. Art educator Laura Elizabeth Sapelly remains in the Revolutionary era to examine histories of sewing circles and the way this political textile work intersected with concepts of femininity. Social and cultural historian Katie Knowles importantly takes on the topic of enslaved African Americans’ resistance through conspicuous consumption as a form of anti-craft. And Kent State University faculty collaborators Rekha Sharma and Gargi Bhaduri move outside of an American context to show how “homespun” was a key tactic in Mahatma Gandhi’s Indian liberation movement against British rule. This historical context provides the thrust for the remainder of the book, as many proceeding chapter authors base their arguments about contemporary projects on the historical roots of crafted protest. More work that addresses this history on its own terms would have strengthened this foundation.

Of the chapters that do move between the past and present, folklorist Felicity Lufkin’s “The Underground Railroad Quilt Code Myth and the Culture of Crafted Experience” and Mandell’s “Finding Frederick and Anna Douglass’s Parking Lot: Public Art’s Role in Combating Historical Erasure and Urban Renewal” shine brightly. Lufkin’s chapter, which interrogates the pervasive myth that abolitionists used quilt symbols to guide enslaved persons to freedom, is a master class in how to trace ideas back to sources and in turn how to evaluate those sources. What Lufkin accomplishes is to examine how myths about craft activism are perpetuated and why they are so enticing. Mandell engages with the past in another way: by locating, researching, and marking the site of Frederick and Anna Douglass’s home in Rochester, New York. Upon finding that the city razed the house to build a parking lot, Mandell focused her research on Anna’s life and created yarn installations to commemorate the invisible work that Anna undertook in that home. This effort resulted in the erection of an official plaque, a durable marker that Mandell sees as in dialogue with her more ephemeral textile pieces.

Mandell’s rumination on the outcomes of her craft activism introduces a theme that other authors address in section 2, “Politics of Craft”: the efficacy of this practice and whether or not it is forceful enough in the fight for political change. Communications scholar Hannah Bush’s contribution, for instance, focuses on contemporary embroiderers’ principle thread provider, Dollfus-Mieg et Compagnie (DMC), including DMC’s business practices and the way they co-opt craft activists’ work and messages without supporting the makers’ causes. Artist and community development worker Tal Fitzpatrick speaks directly to this question of efficacy and the tension between individual gestures and collective action in “Craftivism as DIY Citizenship.” Fitzpatrick usefully denounces this dualism as unhelpful, instead arguing for an approach to craft as engaged citizenship with the capacity to strengthen democracy. The book’s third section, “Crafting Culture Conversations,” offers a different model in its initial chapter by activist Sarah Corbett: political craft as a form of gentle protest. By staging public “stitch-ins” and creating unique handkerchiefs for board members of a large retail company in the United Kingdom, Corbett and her collaborators were suc-
cessfully able to encourage the company to become a Living Wage Employer.

Another criticism of crafted dissent that this book tackles is its perceived whiteness. Fashion design educator Sandra Markus first introduces the topic of intersectional feminism and craft in “Craftivism from Philomena to the Pussyhat” in the first section, but it is really in section 3 that authors explore this topic in depth. Art therapist Lauren Leone and craft scholar Suzanne Schmidt both discuss the collaborative potential of quilts that center marginalized voices. Schmidt focuses her writing on the intergenerational work that the Social Justice Sewing Academy facilitates by pairing young persons with experienced quilters who together realize young persons’ visions. Schmidt focuses her writing on the intergenerational work that the Social Justice Sewing Academy facilitates by pairing young persons with experienced quilters who together realize young persons’ visions. Freelance researcher Elaine Fishwick and criminologist Alyce McGovern examine the relationship between craftivism and the law, including the inequitable policing of public works as well as its rehabilitative properties in prison reform. In the final chapter, Diane Ivey critically engages with how craft communities erase the contributions of people of color, in particular Black persons in the United States, despite their obvious and significant presence in its historical and present movements.

It is notable that Fishwick and McGovern’s work discusses indigenous craft work and notes that the act of creating traditional work in the face of colonialism is a form of resistance, which is also known as “survivance.”[1] Future work may consider further centering indigenous voices in this manner and could perhaps explore the growing role of digital communities, such as the Facebook group Breathe, which has connected indigenous mask makers around the world during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With its wide temporal and geographical scope, this book succeeds in placing craft activism within the broader concept of crafting dissent. It does so by shifting language away from activism toward the more inclusive notion of civic engagement. This shift comes across in the overall pacing of the book, as some chapters are noticeably short or long. Betsy Greer’s contribution, for example, is comparatively short despite her important work that coined the term “craftivism” (reaching a high point in her 2014 book Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism), referenced many times in this volume. However, this functions to make room in the volume for other contributors to give their own definitions of craft and protest. Indeed, one of the strengths of this book is that it can be mined for these definitions that point the reader to a multitude of frameworks and approaches that build on one another.

While cultural and art historians may wish for more time spent in the past, contemporary craft scholars, makers, and the general public alike will find this to be a useful book with which to begin seeing dissent as a through line across different temporalities. In particular, communications scholars will find this volume to be a rich resource as this perspective permeates the book both through the editor and many of the authors. Nevertheless, authors from a variety of backgrounds each bring their expertise to bear without using discipline-specific language, which sets an accessible tone. The relatively short chapters and the use of full-color images adds to this approachability. Whether experts or novices in fiber arts, readers of this volume will no doubt be inspired to create textile work in response to the politics of today with the knowledge that many forebears did the same.

Note
[1]. This term emphasizes “an active sense of presence over historical absence” and has been used in relation to Native peoples of North America and their cultural expressions. Gerald Vizenor, ed., introduction to Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 1.
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