

*Embroidered Stories: Interpreting Women's Domestic Needlework from the Italian Diaspora.*

Edited by Edvige Giunta and Joseph Sciorra.

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304 pages.

Inspired by a 2002 interdisciplinary symposium on Italian American needlework, *Embroidered Stories* is a far-reaching conglomeration of artwork, memoir, poetry, and scholarly essays that together give much-needed attention to an understudied population in conventional histories of the Italian immigrant experience—women. The compilation includes both the contemporary experience of writers and artists of Italian descent alongside the work of scholars who utilize embroidery, lace, crochet, and knitting as jumping-off points to grapple with questions of family, tradition, heritage, and community. As Edvige Giunta and Joseph Sciorra explain, “For Italian immigrants and their descendants, needlework represents a marker of identity, a cultural touchstone as powerful as pasta and Neapolitan music” (4). The editors’ decision to marry academic writing with varied artistic responses centered on needlework offers an expansive approach to the many ways that objects such as *biancheria* (white-on-white embroidery) or the items of a *corredo* (the wedding trousseau) can do important cultural work for those attempting to understand Italian immigration and diasporic communities across the globe.

Thanks to the proliferation of material culture studies in the fields of history, anthropology, and art history, this object-centric approach to accessing the histories of often overlooked populations is well-trod territory. This volume represents an important addition to this realm of inquiry by successfully arguing that needlework can carry memory as it moves through generations, act as signifier of place and home, and serve as a way to initiate connections between people who have never known one another. While the editors explain that their aim is to record “the literary, visual, performative, ethnographic, or critical reimagining” (7) of needlework and not to fetishize the object, the most compelling works in this volume are those such as Maria Terrone’s “The Tatted Handkerchief” or Maria and Lucia Grillo’s “Hand Towel,” which employ a rich array of sensual experience to describe a singular work and then weave the encounters into larger stories of family and legacy. *Embroidered Stories* also adds to existing scholarship by providing an international lens on mass migration from Italy in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The works in the volume concern not only Italians in the United States but also examine diasporic communities in Canada, Latin America, and Australia.

Giunta and Sciorra divide their volume into five sections: “Threads of Women,” “Skills and Artistry,” “Factory Girls,” “Environmental Sites,” and

“Lost, Discarded, Reclaimed.” “Threads of Women” focuses on intergenerational connections, and many of the writings in this section, such as Maria Mazziotti Gillan’s “Donna Laura,” examine the imagined experiences of lost ancestors brought to life through the discovery of family heirlooms. A notable exception is Rosette Capotorto’s “No ‘So,” a poem that interprets one mother’s refusal to sew as an act of rebellion within a family of needleworkers.

“Skills and Artistry” centers on the specific techniques and tools required to produce needlework. Mary Jo Bona’s “A Needle Better Fits?: The Role of Defensive Sewing in Italian American Literature” argues that narratives of handmade textile production in early twentieth-century literature represented a way for women to achieve a measure of independence. Ilaria Vanni’s “From Domestic Craft to Contemporary Arts: Needlework and Belonging in Two Generations of Italian Australian Artists” focuses on the movement of objects between cultures. Vanni borrows Ernesto De Martino’s idea of the *crisi della presenza*, a critical moment when unmoored objects either lose meaning or acquire outsized associations in new contexts, as a key to understanding how textiles from Italy took on new valences across the Italian diaspora. She reads these objects as intertwined with two connected processes of immigration: uprooting and regrounding. As she notes, “[Textiles] enable the narrative and performance of uprooting from one place and the re-grounding in another” (127). Vanni’s work pays close attention to the multiple ways that meanings shift and alter when items travel with immigrants from one environment to another.

While this volume deals with handwork rather than mass-produced textiles, the section “Factory Girls” considers the economic realities of how Italian immigrant women produced needlework in industrialized settings in both the factory and the home. Bettina Favero explores knitting workshops in post-World War II Argentina, while Paola Corso imagines conversations between immigrant women workers at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory a century ago and sweatshop workers in China, Vietnam, and Thailand today.

The section “Environmental Sites” shifts the focus to the connection between needlework and place. This group of writings highlights the specific geographies that such textiles can evoke, a particularly important feature for immigrants remembering landscapes left behind. Joseph J. Inguanti’s “Siate Felici: Garden Imagery in a Messinese Biancheria da Letto, c. 1900” offers the most intellectually creative essay in the volume by taking a focused look at the iconography of a single embroidered pillow sham from Messina, Sicily, produced in the early twentieth century. Analyzing the types of flora and fauna the embroiderer pictured, Inguanti ties together histories of idealized landscapes, religion, sexuality, women’s work, cross-cultural influence, and migration. He combines close looking with a deep knowledge of the cultural

mores of the early twentieth-century Messinese to present an engaging and provocative rumination on a singular work of embroidery.

The final section, “Lost, Discarded, Reclaimed,” functions as a bit of a catch-all for remaining contributions, with writings that range from ethnographic accounts of peasant dress in Calabria from Joan Saverino to personal essays about the intergenerational passing on of skills and objects, such as Jo Ann Cavallo’s story of her daughter’s interest in learning Italian embroidery while the author wrestles with her own mixed emotions upon discovering a long-lost family trousseau.

*Embroidered Stories* is a rich volume, at points almost overly so. Giunta and Sciorra could have been more judicious in their inclusion of poetry, in particular, as many ruminations on beloved relatives seemingly brought to life through the touch or the smell of needlework tend to bleed together and dampen the potency of the more successful writings. In addition, though the effort to include visual works of art related to needlework and immigration is laudable, the small black-and-white illustrations provided in the text do little to transport audiences into what are, in many cases, complex installations fashioned from a plethora of materials. Even when accompanied by artist statements, these images fail to make the majority of these projects legible for the reader.

*Embroidered Stories* was published in 2014. Rereading the book in 2017, when the rights of numerous immigrant populations appear increasingly at risk in the United States and Europe, one feels that many of the essays and memoirs seem newly relevant. At its most basic, this volume argues for the importance of women’s voices in narratives of immigration and transplantation while highlighting the role that objects can play in helping communities explain their cultures to themselves, future generations, and the world at large. At a moment when many in the West appear to be veering away from celebrating cultural difference as a primary asset to their nations’ cultural life, the writings in this collection provide a much-needed antidote.

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