

Passing on love and care: The glory box tradition of Coptic women in Australia

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Abstract

Migrants bring stories, customs, rituals and material objects to their new homelands. These traditions contribute to the culture they join, with both the local culture and the traditions themselves undergoing gradual transformation over time. This article focuses on the glory box tradition of Coptic women in Australia. The authors undertook research in 2011 alongside a community arts project that was initiated by a group of Coptic migrant women who came to Australia from Egypt, Lebanon and Syria over the past 60 years. The women worked with a contemporary artist and collaboratively with each other to create works that explored and celebrated their glory box tradition, and whether the tradition could be transformed into something that the younger generation of Coptic women could embrace.

The researchers used observation, individual interviews, and focus groups to document the women's activities, reflections, narratives and their responses to the key questions that emerged: What is the meaning of the glory box in contemporary society? Does it have any meaning? Should it? How can it be remade or recreated for a contemporary world?

As the participants interacted with the project and with the research, it emerged that it was not the glory box as material object and tradition that the women wanted to reclaim but the glory box as symbol of the love and care, instruction and encouragement that mothers bestow on their daughters.

Keywords

Glory box, cultural continuity, community arts, narrative, craft, Coptic women

Introduction

The glory box, also referred to as a trousseau or a hope chest, has a long tradition in many cultures across the world. While the majority of single women in contemporary Australia no longer spend hours crafting bed sheets, towels and nightgowns for future use, the tradition lives on in some parts of the world and certainly in the memories of older women in many cultural contexts (McFadzean, 2009). For the authors as feminists, the custom is problematic, and yet enticing. On one hand, having grown up in the 1960s and 1970s in the midst of second wave feminism, we associate the glory box with a range of patriarchal

customs, and traditions designed to restrict women to the domestic sphere. On the other hand, the glory boxes, filled with women's craft work, represent women's creative output, and the tradition of working together across generations to make beautiful and functional objects that are often the only remaining legacy of female ancestors.

The women who initiated the project, all migrants, were passionate about their traditions and customs; they did not want them lost. We were empathetic to their desire for cultural continuity, fascinated by their passion for the glory box and its tradition, and curious to explore how this tradition, and the associated