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Knitting as a feminist project?

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SYNOPSIS

As a site of feminist politics, knitting potentially represents a redefinition of a devalued and traditionally domestic feminine craft as empowering and creative. Further, it potentially contributes to the construction of alternative masculinities and femininities and promotes the creation of new feminist communities. However, questions remain about the specific contexts in which knitting represents an intentional political activity. In this article, I examine the possibilities of knitting as a feminist project, drawing on ethnographic research in stitch 'n bitch knitting groups and online knitting communities as well as interviews with knitters. I conclude that the meaning of knitting is context-specific and that the engagement with feminist politics by individual knitters and knitting communities in everyday life is limited.

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Introduction

Writers and scholars identify knitting as part of contemporary feminist culture and argue that knitting is part of a larger feminist project (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Groeneveld, 2010; Minahan & Wolfram Cox, 2007; Myzelev, 2009; Pentney, 2008; Robertson, 2011; Stoller, 2003; Wills, 2007). Beth Ann Pentney (2008) offers a continuum of feminist knitting practices that range from appreciation of knitting as a domestic art and community building to outreach and fundraising activities to the use of knitting in art and activism. Pentney describes feminist knitting practices as “active and purposeful knitting projects used in the spirit of feminist goals of empowerment, social justice, and women's community building” (2008:1). In taking this broad definition, Pentney provides the opportunity to consider a variety of knitting practices as feminist. However, Pentney suggests the caveat: “Clearly not all acts of knitting can or should be considered feminist in intent, and this too must be explored more carefully to identify the limitations of an overly optimistic conception of feminist knitting practices” (2008:13).

Scholars such as Pentney (2008) have argued that knitting provides an opportunity to reclaim a devalued feminine craft. Further, knitting practices can trouble gender norms and contribute to the construction of alternative masculinities

and femininities. Local knitting groups (often called “stitch 'n bitch” groups) as well as online knitting communities can challenge the public/private divide and create locations for feminist communities. However, there are still important questions about the conditions under which knitting represents intentional engagement with feminist activism or participation in a larger feminist project without articulated intentionality. In this article, I first examine the ways in which feminist writers and scholars have conceptualized knitting as a feminist project. I then engage in an exploration of the experience of “everyday knitters,” drawing on ethnographic research in stitch 'n bitch knitting groups and online knitting communities as well as interviews with knitters. I assess the ways in which knitting may represent an intentional engagement with feminist activism and the ways in which knitting may contribute to a larger feminist project without explicit intentionality. I build on previous discussions of knitting and feminism that have been primarily theoretical and/or drawn on public examples of knitting as art or activism. This paper empirically examines the meaning of knitting practices through a case study of local and online knitting groups and interviews with knitters. I engage with the broader literature on social movements' tactical repertoires in order to situate knitting as a potential strategy for creating change in the context of feminist activism.

Literature Review

Knitting as a feminist practice

Previous scholarly work on knitting as a feminist practice has largely focused on the ways in which artists and activists have used knitting (as well as other fiber arts) as a medium for artistic and political expression. One example of feminist knitted art is an exhibition titled *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting* held at the Museum of Arts & Design in New York City held in 2007 (Pentney, 2008; Robertson, 2011). Pentney (2008) suggests that feminist art and activism occupy one end of the continuum of feminist knitting practices. Betsy Greer (2011) describes the practice of “craftivism,” which occurs at the intersection of craft and activism. One example of a “craftivist” project is a knit breast prosthesis for use after a mastectomy, such as the “tit bits” created by Canadian feminist, educator, and knitter Beryl Tsang and published in *Knitty*, the free online knitting magazine (Pentney, 2008). Pentney (2008) suggests “tit bits” pose a challenge to the options available to mastectomy patients and enable women to engage in creative self-healing. However, it is not clear whether (or under what conditions) women knitting this pattern for themselves view it as feminist. A visible example of a group “craftivist” project is a Canadian group called “The Revolutionary Knitting Circle,” which uses knitting groups to promote an anti-corporate anti-globalist agenda (Black & Burisch, 2011; Pentney, 2008; Robertson, 2011). As Anthea Black and Nicole Burisch describe: “The group also participates in marches, rallies, and protests by conducting group ‘knit-ins’ or by carrying the large, cooperatively knitted Peace Knits banner. The public knit-ins and the banner serve as peaceful and accessible rallying points for action, discussion, and awareness” (Black & Burisch, 2011:206). Another example of public knitting projects that may be conducted by individuals or groups is “yarn bombing” or “knit graffiti.” Yarn bombing involves stealthily covering objects with yarn in public places, such as stop signs and benches. The book *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti* by Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain (2009) offers examples as well as instructions on how to create knit graffiti. The actual purpose is open to interpretation by those participating. For some, it may be a comment on the contemporary cultural and political climate but for others it may be just about esthetics. As the “Knit Graffiti” Ravelry group notes on its page “Whether you’re out there bringing a welcome warmth of whimsy to the urban jungle or you’re angrily stitching it to the hegemony, we want to hear about your adventures in knitted and crocheted graffiti.” The example of yarn bombing suggests that the meaning of knitting is dependent on the intention of the knitter and is context-specific. Although not all knitted art is explicitly “political” and not all political knitted art is explicitly “feminist,” the use of knitting as a medium often results in messages about gender reflected in the projects (for further discussion of knitting and other fiber crafts as art and activism, see Black & Burisch, 2011; Greer, 2011; Parker, 1984; Pentney, 2008; Robertson, 2011).

Pentney (2008) notes that fundraising and outreach represent a middle area on the continuum of feminist knitting practices. Knitting as a fundraising strategy or “charity knitting” may or may not be political, depending on whether or not it seeks to challenge existing social structures or practices. Charity knitting is an important part of many knitting communities

(Groeneveld, 2010; Minahan & Wolfram Cox, 2007; Pentney, 2008; Wills, 2007). At the far end of Pentney’s (2008) continuum is an appreciation of knitting as a domestic art and community building. She includes online knitting communities, which others have referred to as examples of “cyberfeminism” (Minahan & Wolfram Cox, 2007).

While some scholars emphasize knitting as “craftivism,” others are more cautious. After reviewing various ways in which knitting practices are taken up, Elizabeth Groeneveld argues “what these diverse samples from across the political spectrum suggest is that knitting itself is not necessarily inherently political but rather can be mobilized for a variety of different ends and that the politics of knitting are context-specific (2010:266).” Overall, these examples, particularly those of artists and activists, suggest compelling evidence for possibilities of knitting as a feminist practice in certain contexts. However, these discussions open new questions about what knitting means to the many individuals who knit as a hobby and do not necessarily identify as artists or activists. I take up these questions in the analysis. But first, I assess how knitting might be understood as a feminist practice in the context of the literature on social movements’ tactical repertoires.

Social movements’ tactical repertoires

Scholars have outlined various criteria for evaluating communities and practices as political. Some focus on opposition to the state (e.g. Tilly, 2004). Others also include identity and culture as political goals for social movements (e.g. Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008; Bobel, 2010; Reger, 2012; Staggenborg, 1995; Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004). Verta Taylor and Nella Van Dyke (2004) suggested three criteria for social movement tactics: contestation, intentionality, and collective identity.

First, Taylor and Van Dyke (2004) argue that in order for a practice to be a part of a social movement’s tactical repertoire, it must be a site of *contestation* “in which bodies, symbols, identities, practices, and discourses are used to pursue or prevent change in institutionalized power relations” (2004:268). Writers and scholars have examined knitting and knitting communities as a site of contestation in which gender norms are challenged as part of a larger feminist project of agitating for gender equality (Baumgardner & Richards, 2000; Groeneveld, 2010; Minahan & Wolfram Cox, 2007, 2011; Myzelev, 2009; Pentney, 2008; Robertson, 2011; Stoller, 2003; Wills, 2007). There are several possibilities for the ways in which the everyday practice knitting may be subversive. First, knitting offers opportunities for the creation of alternative femininities and masculinities. Second, knitting groups can be locations for developing feminist communities and challenging the public/private divide.

One way of understanding knitting as a site of contestation involves subverting ideas about femininity by defining knitting as something that women do for pleasure rather than because it is expected or required. For some, the redefinition of knitting includes a politicized rejection of commodification and consumerism, locating knitting within a larger do-it-yourself (DIY) community (Wills, 2007). However, critiques of the feminist crafting have also addressed the consumerism inherent in these often expensive hobbies and the relationship to the global economy (Groeneveld, 2010; Robertson, 2011). In reviewing the coverage of knitting in *BUST* magazine, Groeneveld (2010) notes the lack of attention to the classed dimensions of crafting.

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