

TAKING BACK THE KNIT:
CREATING COMMUNITIES
VIA NEEDLECRAFT

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PARTIAL REQUIREMENT FOR THE
DEGREE OF M.A. IN CULTURE,
GLOBALISATION AND THE CITY,
GOLDSMITHS COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY
OF LONDON, 2004.

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introduction

“I’m doing my dissertation on knitting.”

“Knitting?”

“Yes, knitting. It’s punk rock, you know.”

In brief, that is what the majority of my conversations have been like these days. The open astonishment by others that I could be exhibiting a year’s worth of knowledge in a Master’s level course via an extended essay on knitting was at first a bit disheartening. For awhile, I thought that maybe I should be writing about something more erudite about Weber or Marx or at least something with more syllables. But through research, I began to unearth a wealth of information about not only the history of knitting, but about communities, personal revolutions, activism, ethnography, creativity and feminism. All of a sudden it didn’t seem so funny.

It has been said that public interest in knitting is cyclical; that the craft goes in and out of fashion, and has done since the invention of yarn. I do not argue with this observation, however, as although knitting has been a craft that has returned to the forefront every so often, there was always an underlying reason as to why, mainly resurgences were caused surrounding times of war. Now, in the days of sweatshops and shopping malls, we do not have to rely on making our own clothes, blankets and accessories as people did in the past in order to

stay properly attired, warm and/or individual. I wanted to find the reason why, now that we don't have to knit, why the hell are we?

Throughout this project, I have held the following words written by artist Faith Gillespie as a near constant guide,

There is clearly another imperative at work now in our exercise of the old crafts. It has to do with reclamation, with reparation. The world seems not to need us any more to make 'the things of life.' Machines make more and cheap. The system needs us to do the maintenance jobs and to run the machines that produce the so-called 'goods,' to *be* machines in the consumer societies which consume and consume and are empty. Our turning to craftwork is a refusal. We may not all see ourselves this way, but we are working from a position of dissent. And that is a political position. (178)

In conversation many different theories are bandied about in regards to the onset of the current interest in craft, reasons like: a response to 9/11, a return to simpler times, a quest for the communal, a backlash against technology, the self-satisfaction inherent in creation, spiritual/meditative qualities, reclaiming crafts as a feminist act, an anti-materialist response to consumer culture and craft as a revolutionary act. In the following pages, I am going to try to explore a variety of these options more in depth, not only because I am just plain curious, but because there is a wider implication at hand that reaches beyond knitting and crafts.

In his book, Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam wrote how as society, we are in the midst of civic decline. We are doing less with and for others. It is my argument that through harnessing your own creativity, you can reconnect not only with yourself but with others, therefore strengthening communities via a renewal in conversation. It is not only that we are not participating, we're just not communicating with one another, an irony in this day and age of mobiles and computers. Craft allows us, in this world of quick fixes, to actually be a part of

the creation of something from start to finish. Something that, apart from giving birth, we don't see too often as everything comes either pre-packaged or with accompanying directions in Swedish. It allows us time to talk and learn and share with one another.

We say that we don't have time anymore and therefore a quick email typed in a rush takes the place of a paper and pen letter sent through the post, a quick two-minute call while we are waiting in the post office queue takes the place of a face-to-face conversation over a cup of tea. We are using this newfangled technology to distance ourselves, all the while fooling ourselves that it is really bringing us closer together. Instead of using the Internet as a tool that can help our social lives grow, too often it is used as a device to create a wedge between us and the real world. The trick of the Internet lies in the past, "both the history of the telephone and the early evidence of Internet usage strongly suggest that computer-mediated communication will turn out to *complement*, not *replace*, face-to-face communities." (Putnam, 179) With this Putnam hits the nail on the head; by 'complementing' rather than 'replacing' social interaction, the Internet allows us to ensure a stronger social community.

By creating social groups of our own devising, rather than relying on more pre-arranged groups like the ones suggested in Bowling Alone (church, school, civic-minded organizations), we are reconnecting with others in a way that precedes technological inventions. Every time I meet other women in a knitting circle, I am recreating the quilting bees of over a century ago. I am facilitating growth in my community. I am re-establishing a connection via my own channels, reclaiming something that was lost in the postmodern quest for more more more. We are no longer knitting together out of a necessity for basic clothing needs, we are creating together out of necessity for closeness. Closeness to our inner selves as well as closeness to others. In an age where we wear tend to so many different hats, it's good to find something that satisfies when while we're donning all of them. Knitting can be done alone or

with other people, in scraps of time accumulated throughout the day or in front the television. It's versatility allows for its success.

With all the sweatshops all over the world, people are getting angry. Not to mention sick of wearing things that everyone else has. The creation of something with your own two hands is one way of resisting a consumerist and materialist based culture that is built upon the backs of less fortunate individuals. Even though in order to make your own garments you have to purchase yarn and needles), it is possible to shop locally and purchase goods that are produced in an ethical manner. Manos del Uruguay, a cooperative comprised of women in rural Uruguay, began around 1850. Their kettle-dyed yarn is vibrant and full of colour in a way that the mass-produced acrylic crap could never be. There is something magical about a product that is not only beautiful to look at as well as touch, but also beautifully made. As the "cooperative provides much needed income to approximately 350 women working in 17 locations," objects created with this yarn not only are gorgeous, but ethical as well. (kaleidoscopeyarns.com) Every time I enter a yarn store, I find myself gravitating towards 'Manos,' as even though there are hundreds of different fibres on the shelves, its sheer brilliance never fails to grab my attention.

I am sick and tired of being a billboard for some designer's sick dream of world domination. By using the advice of Elizabeth Zimmermann or creating things from patterns designed by my peers (magknits.com, knittinggarden.com, knitty.com), I am rejecting that bastion of enterprise known as 'the mall.' And once I am finished and wearing it around town, I can tell people when they compliment it, "thanks, I made it." In finding an alternative to the mass-produced, I am fighting against the darker sides of our culture. If you don't have the means to buy new yarn and needles, there is a plethora of knitting supplies in most charity shops. I have seen a lot of beautiful yarns and needles at World War II prices. The problem with knitting is that it does take *time*, not

necessarily money. One drawback of studying such a craft is that knitting tends not to attract individuals who for whatever reason, have little time to spare.

I chose to focus on knitting because it is what has consumed me for the better part of three years. It's not only a labour of love, it's a labour of life's joy. Sometimes the knitting world seems forking huge. But when you step back it is so very infinitesimally small. Just another patch of the greater quilt, so to speak. But like anything else, knitting has something to teach us. At the beginning of her book, No Idle Hands: The Social History of Knitting, author Anne Macdonald writes, "on only one knitting subject is there universal agreement: knitters relish working with their hands, hands that are *Never Idle*." (xxvi) After years of talking with knitters as well as months of accumulating research, I am inclined to agree with Macdonald. There are as many different reasons for knitting as there are knitters.

It is my belief that the current resurgence of knitting is community based. As it has been through personal participation in such craft circles, rather than theory-driven observation, that led me to this conclusion, there is no escaping that while this essay is about the tenacity, strength and power of communities, it is also a story about me. Sometimes the best stories are ones that you find yourselves compelled to tell.

reasons to knit

It wasn't my intent to come to England and become a 'knitting nerd.' Honest. But somehow over the past year and a half, it just happened. It was as if I was swept up along in a current without even realizing my feet had left the ground. A fair amount of interest has been shown in the past few years surrounding this simple craft consisting of only two stitches, knit and purl, and even simpler equipment, two sticks and a piece of string. Looking through history, it is easy to see why knitting was such a common activity: it's cold outside. Someone had to make the clothing and blankets. At someone point during this past year, I became slightly (although my flatmates might disagree with that adjective) obsessed with finding out why this current resurgence was occurring. Given knitting's history, which I will expound on later, there seemed to be no pattern between this craze and the last, which occurred in the middle part of the last century. In order to get to something resembling an answer, I had to not only question others, but question myself as well.

I did not grow up knitting, although I did spend six years as a Girl Scout, and dabbled in such exciting activities like macramé and pot-holder making to attain my 'arts and crafts' badge at some point in the mid-80s. If only I had stuck with it, perhaps I could be ruling the craft world right now. Instead, I am plodding along trying to catch up thanks to 15 years of not exercising my creativity. I learned to knit at the age of 25, in a New York City knitting circle in the spring of 2001. My interest waxed and waned for the better part of a year, and it wasn't until a fit of winter boredom during an ice storm in North Carolina that I dug out my knitting, still safely stowed in boxes I had yet to unpack from my move south.

During the past three years since, I have knitted up and down the Eastern seaboard of the United States, all over England, and bizarrely, for an event in a contemporary art museum, Palais de Tokyo, in Paris. I have knitted with punks

and Goths and aging yuppies and people who spoke no English and my really old Aunt Gene and children and friends and strangers and the more I do it the more I am reminded that it is about community. About connecting with some part of ourselves that has been lost along the fray of computers and fear and anxiety and 24/7 shopping. It's not about clothing people out of necessity, it's about clothing people out of love. About stitching each stitch like a little prayer or using textiles as a way of connecting with individuals that at first glance you would think would be boring or weird or without a story to tell. Keep it quiet, but I think knitting is a way of reminding ourselves just that, that *everyone* has a story to tell. It has been written that "whatever the historical and epochal changes, art and craft just are universal, human, essentially timeless." (Rowley, 27-8) It is just this human element to craft that lies in its appeal.

When Robert Putnam wrote Bowling Alone, he was on to something. People are hiding away more and more these days while civic halls and churches get emptier and emptier, or at least the clientele older and greyer and dying off failing to get younger people to fill their forever vacant seats. However, in reading this book I kept help wanting to email Putnam and say, 'but people ARE meeting. Just not in the community-oriented and sanctioned meeting spots of the 1950s. Instead of going to a town meeting, individuals are creating their own community in their living rooms and local coffeehouses. People are finding like-minded individuals to learn and share and grow from. And you know what? It's exciting.'

Maybe he would listen, but maybe he's just thrown his computer out in frustration and is the President of his local Elks Lodge offering a 'two for the price of one' membership drive. Or sponsoring a chilli cook-off in the Ozarks. Or just chilling on a beach on Tahiti on a island that he owns from the success of his book. Or maybe he's started a bowling league.

In the interest of figuring out whether or not my thoughts had any validation and if Putnam was right, I decided to do a little research. Instead of handing out flyers to random people on the street, I decided to do a more self-selecting type of research. Yes, it has its failings, because we all know that most people don't knit. But I wanted to hear what knitters had to say, so instead of having little boxes to check I asked questions. I posted the questions on lots of websites, and sent out emails to my crafty friends in the U.S. and U.K. I was amazed at the response. Knitting people do go on. About knitting. I was curious to see if given a more open format, the people responding would have the same sort of answers, I didn't want to put any ideas in their heads. So I left them a blank canvas to fill up with type.

And they filled it up.

With the exception of certain individuals, for example, hermits, community is a viable part of most individual's lives. It is multi-faceted, as it allows for things such as: growth, sharing, learning, reflecting, leadership, unity, production of knowledge, dissemination of information, connectivity. As technology improves, so does our definition of community. Before Alexander Graham Bell devised the telephone, there was a lot less random popping over for tea. You were pretty much stuck with the people who lived near you whether you liked them or not. They were your instant community, and everywhere you looked: the local shop, church, fishing hole, school.

Time passed, and according to some people, things improved.

Now thanks to early efforts of the military to keep in contact with one another (although I'm thinking that something to do with spying might have been more likely), we have the Internet. I never would have guessed that the same equipment that made me abhor green type forever, the same machine that

brought us the fast-paced world of Pong®, allows for contact with individuals all over the world with a telephone line. (although *that's* steadily changing, too.)

I didn't mean to discover my creativity via the web. I was looking for places to send writing submissions in when I came across a rather engrossing personal site about a part-time writer who rescued domestic rabbits from unfulfilling housing situations. Since I had just given my pet rabbit, Bunny, to an after-school programme for children because he needed more love than I was able to provide, I was curious. There was a link to a website called Getcrafty. I clicked.

There before me was page after page of crafty ideas written by women around my own age (then 26) and mostly from the United States. There was a subversion inherent in this return to domesticity that seemed somewhat forbidden during my teen years of rebelling against the patriarchy. For years, I raved about how I wasn't going to iron or cook or darn for anyone. I was a feminist. Of course, in harbouring such vitriol, I had overlooked the fact that I might find these activities pleasurable. But here was a connection between two trains of thought that I believed to be opposites: these women claimed to be crafty and feminist. AT THE SAME TIME. I had to know more.

For the first time I was using the Internet as more than just a convenient way to send and receive email, I was using it for inspiration. "The most important question is not what the Internet will do to us, but what we will do with it." (Putnam, 180) By using the web as a tool to enhance our "real lives," we can get out of the vicious cycle that is so often led by boredom and actually *live* our lives instead of trying to escape them. Given the relative newness of this type of technology, we are lucky to find ourselves in a position where there is still plenty of room for growth and exploration.

This newfound notion that I could embroider tea cloths with phrases like ‘ain’t no one’s little lady’ or ‘make your own damn dinner’ enticed me, and seemed like a much more intelligent way of expressing my resistance. The added bonus was that it was also useful. I could dry my dishes and remind myself of my convictions or send them off to someone else who seemed to need a little bit of recharging. Once I realized how craft is a “resistance to capitalist modernity,” (Rowley, 24), I stopped feeling at war with my reactionary side and the part of me that wanted to make cool stuff that I hadn’t made since I was a Girl Scout obtaining the aforementioned arts and crafts badge that could be affixed to my sash for all the world to see, allowing my mother to feel a vague sense of accomplishment that I wasn’t just another American kid sitting on my ass in front of the television. Despite the fact that I had resisted the domestic for years because “girls, of course, were expected to knit because they had *a/ways* knit,” I had found my own path of dissent. (Macdonald, 329)

a stitch in time: a brief history of knitting

One of the knitters who responded to my questionnaire wrote, “there will always be knitting as long as there are two sticks and string.” Bearing this in mind, it is not hard to see why the actual date of when knitting began is debatable. As sticks and string have been available as long as there have been trees and sheep, its exact date of origin is a bit difficult to pinpoint. According to Richard Rutt, “the oldest datable pieces of what is claimed as knitted fabric were found by L.J.A.M. Van der Hurk in the late second-century grave of a woman at Esch in southern Holland.” (28)

For the purpose of concision, I am going to zoom past the next millennia and a bit to concentrate more on knitting in the past 200 years. As the equipment that knitting calls for has not gone through any spectacular development during that time, I hope that that decision will be seen as a smart move. Knitting is a craft practiced worldwide, but I have only seen it demonstrated and participated in knitting circles in Great Britain and the United States. Although I did knit in Paris with Cast Off, the knitters were the usual suspects and mostly English, seeing that we brought our own. Due to this fact, it has been precisely these two countries that I have chosen to research a bit historically. As my own observation is a part of the research, I am limited to my somewhat tiny world of travel since I began to knit.

One important point not to overlook while skipping over centuries of knitters is that while there haven't been many developments in the tools of knitting, there have been a great number of inventions that aid the production of wool. Since the beginning of knitting, things have become easier. We have the option of buying pre-spun, pre-dyed yarn made out of a variety of textiles, not just wool straight from the sheep. “It takes hours of spinning with a hand-spindle to produce enough thread for a handweaver to use in an hour. Add on hours to prepare the fiber to be spun, hours to prepare the loom to weave, hours to convert the cloth into a garment.” (Myers, 20) Part of knitting's survival

definitely rests on the fact that thanks to technology, we can knit whether or not we have our own sheep.

Thanks to things like the high street, here in 2004, it all seems a bit ridiculous to knit, especially when looking back at the history of knitting. Although the actual tools (needles, yarn) might be cheaper in a rush of excitement to reproduce something seen at Selfridges, once you factor in the labour, the store-bought option suddenly seems rather reasonably priced. We no longer need to manufacture our own clothes as a necessity, like previous generations before us had to. This materialist culture has its downfalls, which I will get to later, but passing a credit card over a counter to a sales clerk is something we have the option to do. Much to my ancestor's chagrin, this was not always the case.

Throughout American history, the number of women who knitted soared during wartime, as the troops needed clothing, bandages and other such supplies that knitters could provide using their craft skills. During the first World War, Judith Brockenbrough McGuire wrote in her journal, "there is so much to do, and we must do it." (Macdonald, 117). In times of war in America's history, the above quote could have applied to the thousands of women who knitted for individuals fighting for their country when it was pitted against others (Revolutionary War, World War I, World War II, Korea) as well as when it was fighting against itself, as in the case of the Civil War. Such action gave women a sense of participation, "I can't fight, and I can't make munitions, but I *can* knit!" (Macdonald, 208) Even after the invention of the knitting machine during the Industrial Revolution, hand knitters continued to purl away, "what mattered was providing women on the home front a means for sustaining their men. Knitting answered that need and nothing would deter them." (Macdonald, 216)

Such frequency of wars during this era in history allowed for knitting to be revived again and again,

the revival of knitting seems to be the one and only benefit derived from the war... [and] provides just enough movement for those who are too nervous to sit quite still and rest [since] there are many war-wrecked constitutions, in these days! (Macdonald, 241)

Not only did knitting serve as a way of furthering the war effort, but it also allowed an outlet for the anxiety that built out of issues like concern, grief and loss. The same sort of cyclical approach to knitting was occurring in Britain, using the strength of oral tradition to allow the craft to continue, as written about in a book on Cornish knitting history, “knitters of 150 or 100 years ago had no patterns in written form. They were passed on by word of mouth, and by practical demonstration, from mother to daughter, within families and village communities and sometimes by travellers.” (Wright, 55) However, as in America, during times of war, personal knitting projects were kept at a minimum:

[K]nitting is no longer a pleasant hobby. No one makes jokes about knitters now, for knitting is no joke. It is a great war industry, run by an unnumbered host of workers who ask for no pay, and expect no profits...The woman who knits, like her sisters in the munitions factories, and in the hospitals, is doing important war work. (Macdonald, 290)

This quote from the British Voluntary Organizations pamphlet *Knitting for the Army*, expressing how women should express their patriotism and get involved in the World War II effort, echoes similar sentiments heard in America. Women were using the skills they had been taught as children out of necessity for a greater patriotic cause.

But what about after the war? “With the resurgent women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s, knitting came to be seen, once again, as a symbol of women’s entrapment in the home.” (Stoller, 13) Today there are many efforts that call on a similar sense of duty, allowing for knitters to make and donate supplies for less fortunate individuals. For example, the Bloomington, Illinois, based Project Linus “delivers security blankets to children around the world.”

(projectlinus.org) By agreeing to make a blanket within certain specifications, knitters can become 'blanketeers' who supply children with something of comfort. There is also knitting to be done for the current war started by the United States through projects like San Francisco's Afghans for Afghans which on its website acknowledges previous knitter's contributions to war efforts:

Afghans for Afghans is a humanitarian and educational people-to-people project that sends hand-knit and crocheted blankets and garments to the beleaguered people of Afghanistan. This grassroots effort is inspired by Red Cross volunteers who made afghans, socks, slippers, and other items for soldiers and refugees during World Wars I and II and at other times of crisis and need. (afghansforafghans.org)

Although such work is commendable, it still does not account for the current resurgence in knitting. Why has, according to the Craft Yarn Council of America, "the percentage of women under the age of 45 who know how to knit and crochet has doubled in the past six years, climbing from 9% to 18%?" (craftyarncouncil.com). This 50 per cent increase is just in regards to American knitters, unfortunately. Worthy estimates in Great Britain seem to have gone uncalculated as through my work with a knitting club here in London, was somewhat disheartened to receive an email from a staff member of the British Hand Knitting Council asking me if I knew of such a number. Somewhere along the line my work with Cast Off has gotten me confused with someone who actually should know these things. It's frightening.

With no *need* to knit bandages and socks for soldiers at war and certainly no *need* to toil over knitting patterns so our loved ones will be adequately clothed in the colder months, this upswing is questioning. This brings me back to community. We are starved for it in our personal lives even though one of the facets of modernity is that we are around people all the time: on the subway on the way to work, stuck in traffic on the M25, in the queue at the supermarket. But such activities do not allow us to *connect* and establish relationships, such

relationships that we can only fully enjoy in a community, which seems to be somewhat debated as of late.

where has our community gone?

In his much publicized book, Bowling Alone, Robert Putnam notes that there has been a marked decline in social participation and therefore social capital during the latter part of last century. He writes of empty Elks Lodges, City Halls and churches, extolling how in earlier days they were fuller and allowed the congregation of individuals and therefore facilitation of thought as well as action. I'm sure my grandfather would agree with this point, seeing that he has been complaining about the lack of worshippers in his church for twenty years, but does Putnam really think that it is because "kids today just aren't joiners" (16) that social capital is in decline? And just what does he mean when he writes of 'social capital?' In his own words

...social capital refers to connections among individuals- social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called "civic virtue." The difference is that "social capital" calls attention to the fact that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessary rich in social capital. (19)

It seems to me that Putnam is noting that as human beings, we work better and therefore, enjoy life, when we are around others. Although that seems like a playgroundesque oversimplification, this linchpin in Putnam's book seems to be something that most of us learned at an early age. Over one hundred pages later, he reinforces this point by reminding the reader, "social capital refers to networks of social connection- doing *with*. Doing good for other people, however laudable, is not part of the *definition* of social capital." (116) The building of a relationship/community comes in doing things together, in the camaraderie of shared experiences.

In his article, *Social capital and Political Fantasy*, Carl Boggs argues that Putnam missed the mark in Bowling Alone, and that social capital is not what

has had a decline, instead he notes that what has suffered a noticeable loss is an interest in politics. Boggs writes that Putnam has a “misplaced emphasis on generalized “civic disengagement” rather than a more definitive (and accurate) focus on *political* decline.” (290) He asserts that while Putnam was on the right track, he was pinning the tail on the wrong object. On the next page, he continues “social capital has resurfaced in new (though often anti-political) forms over the past few decades.” (291) To Boggs, such an oversight fails to mention that social capital “is still here, visible for anyone to detect...it frequently leads away from generalized citizen activity within the public sphere.” (295)

Harping on the fact that my grandfather noticed, that former important communal areas of congregation (churches, legion halls, community centres) are experiencing a drop in attendance, Putnam does not pay enough attention to other places where community is thriving, while he does acknowledge that community is created within them, he dismisses research as “ambiguous.” (180) As Boggs echoes, places that may not be as public or as obvious. There has been a strengthening in smaller, more local groups. In lieu of turning to community institutions for our places of discussion, we are forming more and more groups ourselves. “These newer forms seem overwhelmingly preoccupied with recovering a sense of group identity and solidarity in a post-Fordist capitalist society that reproduces individualism, materialism, privatism, and passivity as part of its economic-political logic.” (Boggs, 286) It is in my opinion that such groups are flourishing because they are self-created as opposed to culturally instituted, Putnam seems to put emphasis on the wrong area, only to dismiss research undertaken by others.

Quoting Putnam’s idea that in order to sustain social capital and community we need to “connect with people unlike ourselves,” Boggs adds that this notion “further illustrates just how impoverished and class-biased Putnam’s concept of SC [social capital] turns out to be.” (295) Our tendency to associate with

individuals most like ourselves allows for us to be a willing participant in the smallest of communities. We should be rejecting this need to only socialize with 'people like us' because it is ultimately damaging to our overview of the world and how it work. That is one of the benefits of crafts such as knitting as even though they involve individuals who all knit, unlike Elks Lodges or punk rock shows- it brings together people of varying ages, nationalities and political beliefs.

Where does the Internet fit into this equation? Perhaps the best answer to this question is the following quote, cited by Putnam and written by Internet theorist Michael Strangelove in the article *The Internet, Electric Gaia and the Rise of the Uncensored Self*

The Internet is not about technology, it is not about information, it is about communication- people talking with each other, people exchanging e-mail...The Internet is mass participation in fully bi-directional, uncensored mass communication. Communication is the basis, the foundation, the radical ground and root upon which all community stands, grows and thrives. The Internet is a community of chronic communicators. (171)

The communities that the Internet, "the network to end all networks," create are establishing new connections formerly impossible due to disparate geographic locations. (Putnam, 148) Now with the click of the mouse, we can chat with someone an individual in remote Mongolia without leaving our settee. In order for communities to continue to grow, it is important that things not get stagnant (which I am sure occurred in more than one rural American Legion Hall)- the wide-reaching component of the Internet allows for just this. Its existence enables us to break out of the human tendency to choose people for our social circles that are very much like ourselves, the larger platform of the web allows for "the sharing of knowledge between women across various boundaries of diversity." (Youngs, 58)

Such a connection is especially important if you belong to a subculture that is outside of the mainstream. At times, the online knitting community astounds me with its size and energy. Often after I have been knitting in public, I feel drained. It never fails to pique people's interest, this publicizing of what has in the past been a "private unseen activity." (Cameron, 48) "What are you doing? Is that knitting? Can you knit me a jumper? (most frequently asked by a strange male) My mom used to knit....You don't look like anyone's grandmother. **You** knit? Weird. I never would have pictured **you** knitting. Anything but..." It's endless, and I am constantly reminded that stereotypes die hard. Such is the case for knitters, no longer solely pensioners rocking slowly away in a chair before the fire, knitting away with a cat curled up at her feet. Even given the fact that it technically is not that hard, at times it gets a bit disheartening to constantly encounter people who don't know how to knit, don't intend on learning, but still insist on a constant barrage of queries all the way up the Northern line. Whenever I'm feeling like the only knitter on the block, I go online. I feel both empowered and inspired reading other voices like mine. Empowered, inspired and not alone.

Through their virtual voices then can confront and challenge the ideas as well as the conditions and practices that separate and connect them in their real lives. Cyberfeminism may be the new collective knowledges which result, utilizing the radical potential of virtual space to work towards real change. (Youngs, 68)

It is not even just the ladies who are knitting, either, currently or historically. Knitting creates community via its very process- uniting individuals who at first may appear to have nothing in common but a similar interest in textiles. Thus is a similarity to the Internet. As it is something that most anyone can learn to do, both online literacy and knitting can be achieved at practically any age. For crafts, the internet provides a wealth of patterns and stitches and various techniques unique to particular geographic communities and facilitates conversation, teaching and sharing. For the Internet, passions that people have count for its continued success.

While I am more inline with Boggs on the fact that Putnam misses the mark a bit by insisting that we should look to old bastions of community, I do agree that “a major commitment to television viewing- such as most of us have come to have- is incompatible with a major commitment to community life.” (229) Putnam estimates that there is a “10 per cent reduction in most forms of civic activism” with every hour of television consumed per day. (228) Such pacification by the television is dangerous, as it allows individuals to fall into a void with the remote control as the only means of escape.

I think that part of the reason why we ‘aren’t joiners today’ because we have forgotten how good it feels to interact with our peers in a non-birthday/pub/spectator environment. Knitting circles (and like activities) invoke grade school slumber parties- where there is no other purpose for the gathering other than to enjoy one another’s company. Perhaps we laze in front of the television because it allows for a bit of time where we aren’t “doing” anything except for just being.

research: the pitfalls and the joys of self-selection

In order to better understand why the knitting resurgence is occurring now, I decided to undertake some research of my own. Considering the wealth of online craft-related communities, I chose to post a survey of eleven questions (Appendix A) on several different websites: bust.com, getcrafty.com, craftster.org as well as forums for various publications. In a matter of days, I had 152 responses. I chose to post open-ended questions in order to get the full response from knitters, so as to not to steer the answers in any direction. The downfall of such a method is that the individuals responding were self-selecting, rather than obtaining answers from people of my own choice, I let people decide whether or not they wanted to be included.

When I first started to think about this essay, I wondered if there was some truth to the rumour that this crafty resurgence was based on Americans wanting to tuck away and hide as a result of the events of 9/11. While this made sense to me in an academic context, it personally did not make sense as I began to knit in New York City, before 9/11. And there many women knitting alongside me. In an article in The Charlotte Observer last year, a columnist caused a slight online furore when she wrote

Too many sisters fought to free women from aprons and mops for me to voluntarily become Aunt Bee [a homemaker character of a 1960s American sitcom] and pretend it's by choice. It is not a choice. It's peer pressure. In the last two years, an undercurrent of conservatism has permeated American culture from the White House to Hollywood...Instead of reconnecting with traditions, it seems like we're knitting, cooking and hiding in our homes because we're scared. Creating something with our hands gives us a false sense of control at a time when we have little. (Jameson)

Jameson's response continued to add that we should be shooting basketballs instead of making scarves. A few days later, there was a widely cheered response from a fellow Charlotte Observer, Vanessa Willis, "When women put

such limits on one another we fail to accomplish the very goal she credits our foremothers with fighting for- the freedom to make choices about our lives.”
(Willis)

This argument illuminated the fact that despite any hype otherwise, there was still a faction of women that believed identifying as a ‘feminist’ and a ‘knitter’ was impossible. I wanted to hear how other knitters felt about these issues. As always, hindsight is 20/20, and I wish I hadn’t asked questions in such an informal tone (which I did in order to shy away from academic rhetoric as I was worried it might scare some respondents away, I asked the questions as I would have if I had been conducting this project solely for my own purposes). In compiling the results I realized that some of my questions were completely pointless in regards to what I was actually researching. Despite my best intentions, not everyone answered every question, so not every question as a result adding up to 152.

For the past year, I have been teaching beginner knitting lessons on and off at various locations. As I do a fair amount of showing people the ropes (no pun intended), I couldn’t help but wonder how other people learned. The results showed that of the 32 individuals who did not learn how to knit via books or websites, 66 knitters learned from family members compared to 30 who learned from friends. Eight respondents learned to knit in school and 14 were unknown. Knitting has traditionally been something that has passed down through the female side of the family and has been called “that least exciting, most old-fashioned, most feminine of occupations.” (Macdonald, 229) Further breakdown of the results showed that 45 of the women who learned to knit before the age 10, 25 by their mother and 20 by their grandmother. Of the 30 that were taught by friends, 17 of them ranged from 21-30, 9 from the ages 11-20, suggesting that the tradition is still passed along via the family, although not exclusively by any means. There seemed to be a more enthusiastic jump into knitting for those who learned at older age, “I learned to knit in November

'03, after years of pestering people to teach me. I was 23.” Although it would be safe to say that those that learned to knit at a young age did not always welcome the tutelage, as one knitter noted, “I learned in structured group lessons when I was 7. WORST POSSIBLE TORTURE available at the time for a hyper child.”

Interestingly, the data showed that a near equal number of knitters learned either before the age of 10 [53] and 21-30 [50]. Thirty-two learned the craft between 11-20. If given the chance to undertake this again, I would have asked why the individuals chose to learn knitting, in the hopes that it would explain the drop in the 11-20 age range. Half of the respondents are currently between the ages of 21-30, with a similar number of knitters responding on either side, 23 at 11-20, 34 at 31-40. As at 29, I fall into the biggest age range, perhaps I failed to post my questions in places where I would reach other age brackets, as it was a bit disheartening to note that the majority of knitters who responded were a part of my generation.

One of most solidly answered questions of all was the question I posed asking if they saw knitting as a way of nesting or returning to simpler times. Although there were a few people who chose to avoid this question, 82 people answered with a resounding no, compared to 23 who believed that knitting evoked this. In fact, I never knew there were so many varying ways of saying no.

Most of the women [87!] could not pinpoint an exact date of when the current knitting resurgence began, when asked why they thought it started, 36 weren't sure, but 29 knitters noted that they saw a rise in knitting given the sheer amount of press on the subject of celebrities joining in, while 27 remarked that the upswing was due to a notion that the domestic arts are being returned to based on issues surrounding postfeminism. Suddenly it was no longer seen as anti-feminist to be more domestic. Suddenly it was cool and subversive. Quoted in a *salon.com* article, Debbie Stoller said, “the very fact that skills of

the happy homemaker have been considered too girly to be done in public is proof that these crafts need to be reclaimed by the same feminist movement that initially rejected them.” (Brown) The responses to this question were extremely lively, while most knitters preferred to stick to one answer, some individuals thought that there was more than just one reason behind the comeback,

I think the resurgence in knitting, which has been going on for a while, was in response to the "bigger, better, faster, harder" 80s era of excess. Everything was about status and the "Me" Generation. Eventually, subsequent generations reject the ideals of the past, and I think knitting was one of the ways to say, "No, it's not Gucci. I made it myself." Also, I think with this disposable, prefab society that we live in, we don't have anything of heirloom value to us anymore. People who want to "stand out" look for ways to make things that are unique, and more importantly, created by themselves.

Along with this resurgence has been a rise in knitting circles, of the 60 knitters who answered that they knit with a group, 57 of them mentioned that they enjoyed their knitting circle because of the social/communal aspect. Back home in North Carolina, I started a group last year that meets every Tuesday night. It is the one night that stands in stone in my diary. It has not only become an evening for sharing craft skills, but as also expanded my social circle much wider than it was previously. Of those that remarked that were not part of a craft group, explanations were given as to why, 'there's no one in my area' was the most frequent reason. Here is one example as to how the Internet might be put to use, finding others in your community who share your interests.

My own personal experience has suggested that there is a subversive/punk/DIY aspect to knitting, 113 of the responding knitters also agreed. Of the ones who answered yes, 28 said it was because of its anti-consumerist possibilities, 18 because sub groups exist in all facets of society and 14 because of issues surrounding a new sense of pride in domesticity. One knitter's response was very much in disagreement with this question,

answering, “Knitting? Subversive? You’re getting, right?” My personal favourite agreed with the smugness surrounding handmade crafts and noted, “I like making a piece of string into something I can wear.”

From the answers obtained, 97 individuals answered that they knitted because it was creative, relaxing, gave them satisfaction or a combination of the three. In all of the 152 answers, the word ‘terrorism’ was missing. There was no evidence to prove this theory anywhere near close to something resembling a reason for the resurgence. Perhaps it is because of these reasons that more than half of the respondents, 85, answered that they had no preference on whether or not they were knitting alone or with others, as long as they were knitting. The responses showed that at the end of the day, knitting is a part of life for knitters, not just something to do idly, “it’s like living, sometimes it’s better with people and sometimes I just need to be alone.” Of those that said it didn’t matter, 30 knitters added that they liked to knit alone when they had difficult patterns to undertake, while 48 enjoyed the community aspect that evolved when knitting with others. Knitting’s portability allows for it to be carried easily in a handbag and pulled out whenever deemed appropriate, which seems to be just about anywhere, from classrooms to hospitals to the bus.

During the past few years that I have been knitting, I have often heard people extol the virtues of knitting from the proverbial rooftop claiming that it is almost a panacea for everything. My last question was worded, “can craft save us all?” Although it isn’t the most scholarly query, the answers here showed that while there are a lot of knitters with either no sense of humour or imagination, there are more of them (exactly half of all the responders, in fact) who answered ‘yes,’ with an additional 18 adding, ‘it makes me sane.’ While the responses varied widely, there was some wisdom to be gleaned, “I think that if more people were doing crafty things then they would have less time to kill each other, but then again, they’d just figure out a way to make a glue gun a weapon.” As well as some food for thought, “it makes me aware of

consumption patterns and the danger of mindless purchasing. It helps you value objects for what they're really worth and to include labor and other human's efforts in the total cost."

But what does all this tell us? There are millions of women (and men!) throughout the world who knit, what is the significance of 152 of them answering a survey? It gives an insight into a particular type of knitter, which taking my research into account, is a left-leaning and literate 20 to 30-something creative woman. It turns the stereotype of knitting as something done by an older generation on its head, allowing voices of a younger age to be heard and discussed. Although I would have loved to have seen the results of the data had the numbers been 1,520 instead of 152, but that is one of the limits of a self-selecting survey.

It shows that community is a viable part of knitting. The fact that so many individuals mentioned that the reason why they enjoyed knitting with others was for the social aspect, was inspiring. While knitting alone has its place, like in trying to concentrate on a difficult pattern, it has been my thought that the actual knitting was only part of the whole resurgence. The opportunity to sit and talk with friends and like-minded (or even not-so-like-minded!) individuals in a non-threatening and welcoming environment is so rare these days that people were craving such an interaction.

it's about connection

Some aspects that emerged from the results of my data coincided with what I have already observed and surmised in my work with Cast Off, the aforementioned London knitting club, that states in its manifesto, "its aims are to promote the art of knitting as a healthy, contemporary and creative pastime, through the establishment of a club dedicated to the craft." (castoff.info) Cast Off began in 2000, started by the London artists, Rachael Matthews and Amy Plant. Through a complete coincidence, Rachael owns the house where I am currently a lodger. When I arrived in London I called a few ads, but her house was the only one I actually saw, the connection to Cast Off something I realized after I arrived to see the room. While we are both avid knitters and what one might call preachers for the church of craft, Rachael is a textile artist, whereas I am more focused on the pure process of knitting and its connection to feminism, community and the DIY punk ethos. Truth be told, her knitted creations are light years ahead of mine. The knitted lampshades, pieces of clothing knitted from old curtains and handbags all provide the house an extra vibrancy that I would never have even thought of. I am constantly inspired by her imagination! She has knitted for most of her life, learning from her grandmother, while I was a much later convert. While our passions are the same, our reasons for following and having them are different. We also agree that one of the benefits to knitting is community.

That moment of recognition that occurs when you pull out your knitting needles and are spotted by another crafter (closeted or otherwise). All of a sudden, mouths open and stories start to flow. Yes, there is a lot of talking about yarn, but sometimes the conversation strays to wholly unrelated things like politics or sports. Going back to the 'smaller group movement' mentioned earlier by Carl Boggs, I would argue that community is built once the needles are taken out of the handbag. Like my research, the community of knitters in itself is a self-selecting community, but one that crosses a plethora of boundaries. As knitting

is an ancient craft with ancient beginnings, once you pick up the needles you are not just connecting with knitters of the present, but also with knitters of the past. There is a sense of strength in connecting not only with a long line that extends forward, but with one that stretches behind you as well. Faith Gillespie says it best in her essay *The Masterless Way: Weaving an Active Resistance*:

In making, we work in direct relationship to the power to *transform*-clay to bowl, molten glass to goblet, fibre to thread to cloth to cloak. Within the power to change raw materials by our hand into things both pleasing and useful lies an intimation of the possibility of transforming our lives. In this, we are sustained by a feeling of connectedness and a sense of continuity, an awareness of our foremothers worldwide in a line that stretches back and back like a long warp into pre-history, to before our true powers were stolen, when women were the makers, making what was necessary tools and spells, pots and baskets and blankets against the cold. (178)

Unlike other pursuits I have, the long line of knitting's history gives it a special place. It isn't a punk show or a left-wing lecture or a record shop, it's a craft which is done by women completely unlike me of every age, nationality, sexuality, political party and social class. It is a leveller that allows me to actually connect with people who aren't just like me. In this discovery, I have found that missing piece of community in my life, and given the answers to my survey, the same can be said for others. This wave of craft is about reunifying ourselves to the past in order to connect with and to preserve the future. It has allowed us to realize that maybe slowing down and taking time to make something from scratch is a viable part of the way forward. It is just this levelling and slowing down that has allowed me to get to know people like my Aunt Gene.

My Aunt Gene is 84 and a knitting fiend. Her passions also include the Catholic Church and bridge. A few weeks ago we found ourselves in mutual attendance of a cousin's wedding. During the bridesmaid luncheon, my cousin introduced everyone around the table, and when she got to me, mentioned that my essay on knitting. For the rest of the weekend, Aunt Gene would appear out of

nowhere to talk to me about knitting. She tried in vain to explain to me the pattern she used when knitting for “our boys” in World War II, the one where they used to knit in a special way so they could better aim their guns. She told me about teaching nuns in her diocese to knit and about how she knits 21 sweaters a year, one for each of her great grandchildren. Before this trip I have never really talked to Aunt Gene. We talk more in 72 hours than we have in 29 years.

Experiences such as this aren’t unusual in the least to me, as people have approached me countless number of times to tell me about knitting. How they knit, how their mother knit, how they wished they would knit. While it isn’t occurring in an Elks Lodge or a Town Hall, community is happening. But truth be told, out of all the individuals I have met via knitting, Aunt Gene is my favourite. After almost 30 years of having nothing to talk about, knitting has allowed us to communicate.

This experience of community is not only evident in real life, but throughout online communities as well. “In the Internet, we look through screens, darkly, sensing others, finding the contours of their selves, as we pick words here, images there, for this prodigious piecing together of a new reality.” (Arizpe, xii) Although we may choose our words more carefully as we tap them out on a keyboard and send them into the ether, we are still expressing our thoughts to others, and creating conversations.

The strength of this resurgence, as opposed to a wartime necessity is “the fact that much of it is done for pleasure, for love and *not* for competition, exhibition or sale.” (Dalton, 36) According the Craft Yarn Council’s website, there are 38 million individuals who either knit or crochet. (craftyarncouncil.com) It is my intention to unearth just a few of the reasons why there is such a great number of such a craft that is no longer necessary in our daily lives.

Craft is common. It is common in having low status. It is common as something in which so many of us participate. Our crafts are common in being unsanctioned, they have not been much raked for the production of 'genius,' they remain our property and embody our domestic values. Our common feminine traditions are expressed in our craftwork, and as a community of women we can find self-determination in the commonality of our crafts by creatively making and consuming. (Gillespie, 184-5)

Craft is something we own. By allowing ourselves to re-embrace the world of the domestic while at the same time proudly calling ourselves feminists, my generation is realizing that there is power in making our own choices and that without the past efforts of women, we might never have been able to be in a position to choose.

During times of war women knitted because it was their only way to get involved in the war effort, this current surge in reclaiming domestic crafts nods in that direction each time someone makes a sweater because they disapprove of the materialist culture that we live in. No, the struggle we find ourselves in in latter days is not a war, so to speak, but it is something to no less fight against. Given the myriad readymade things piling up on shelves in retail outlets everywhere, it's not surprising that "the celebration of late capitalism's super-fast product cycles resurrects in a backhanded way an anti-materialist stance." (Colloredo-Mansfeld, 247)

craft as a subversive/feminist act?

In an article on salon.com, Debbie Stoller said about knitting,

We're supposed to be embarrassed by it, so my immediate reaction is to be proud of it. People would see me knitting on the bus, and I might as well have been churning butter, it was so strange to them. All these things women had been doing for centuries were suddenly under the threat of extinction. (salon.com)

While a vital part of my personal experience with craft has been community related, I arrived at that point via radical feminism. I spent many angry years at the patriarchy before ultimately realizing that it was getting me nowhere. And was no fun. All this anger was unproductive and stifling my creativity. As Debbie Stoller wrote in Stitch 'N Bitch, "Betty Freidan had forgotten that knitting served the knitter as well." (9) Somewhere along the line, I had forgotten me, too. Discovering the domestic was completely eye-opening for me as, with a feminist pedigree that extended back to the early 1990s with Riot Grrrl, I had consistently and purposely shunned anything that had to do with the domestic arts. I only picked up a needle to sew on a button or cooked a meal out of absolute necessity, as anything else resembled treason.

Then all of a sudden, it just seemed ridiculous. "Why couldn't we all- women and men alike- take the same kind of pride in the work our mothers had always done as we did in the work of our fathers?" (Stoller, 7) This abhorrence to everything domestic seemed ludicrous because while I thought I was rebelling against the patriarchy and thereby reinstating my independence as a woman, all I was doing was following feminist dogma like a puppy on a leash. I had forgotten to take note of what I had an interest in, I was busy looking for answers steeped in radicalism, overlooking the fact that I secretly enjoyed sewing on those errant buttons and patching up holes in jeans. There is a feminist attitude inherent in this current upswing of craft.

In 1991, I identified with Riot Grrrl because I no longer wanted to be silent. I wanted to go to punk shows and see just as many girls in attendance as guys, I wanted to be able to walk down the street without being harassed, I wanted to be allowed to express my anger. North Carolina is a southern state on the eastern seaboard of the United States, this did not always go over so well. Thirteen years on, I still hold on to that same fire that was ignited by injustice and pain and cruelty, although I no longer identify with the term 'grrrl.' One of the reasons that craft appealed to me outside of the revival of community is that through it, I was able to tap into the same DIY spirit that I had not fully harnessed since my late teens. As I hear about women (and a handful of men) opening up their own craft shops, starting their own zine distributions, creating things with crochet that they did not read about in a magazine, I am inspired again.

They are actively invested in a punk and feminist cultural repertoire of music production, technology, performance, instruments, and underground distribution networks. They adopt punk DIY (Do It Yourself) philosophy to encourage women and girls to take the initiative to create art and knowledge, to change their cultural and political landscapes, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for them. (Garrison, 154)

Even though Garrison is writing about Riot Grrrl, some of the same forces are at work now in the world of craft. Riot Grrrl's failing was that stressed musical invention, instead of something more encompassing. I would argue that this newfound return to the domestic arts owes much to postfeminism. "The prefix 'post' is used here not as a signifier of a complete break in previous social relations or as the overcoming of oppressive relations, but rather as implying a *process of ongoing transformation*." (Budgeon, 14) Much like how I see bits of Riot Grrrl flowing into the work I am doing now, there is a 'transformation' at work, which collects and then reassembles the pieces in a similar, but different order.

I've learned that feminism is best used when it is self-defined.

When we understand that feminism is not about fitting into a mould but about expanding our ability to be revolutionary from within the worlds and communities and scenes we move around and through, then collective action becomes possible across the differences that affect people differently. (Garrison, 160)

Although there has been concern that postfeminism means 'anti-feminism,' with the above definition in mind it is also possible to see how, postfeminism "becomes a way to talk about the changes in feminist thinking over the last 40 years rather than a rupture with it." (Braithwaite, 341) After my involvement with Riot Grrrl, I opted out of feminist discourse. At the end of the day I began to care less and less about what wave we were in, while there is valuable literature to be gleaned from such discussions and perhaps even more to be learned from feminist history, I just wanted to talk less about these issues and instead channel my energies to creating objects that exhibited my feminist beliefs.

DIY ethics are very important to me, as they not only remind me to be aware of how things are produced and consumed, they also challenge and stretch my creativity. If there is something that can be made by either me or my friends instead of being purchased, I would prefer to construct it.

Knitting is a part of the same do-it-yourself ethos that spawned zines and mixed tapes. By loudly reclaiming old-fashioned skills, women are rebelling against a culture that seems to reward only the sleek, the mass-produced, the male. (Stoller, 16)

It is out of a similar belief that allowed me to embrace crafts such as knitting even at the beginning I had numerous discussions with friends about my feminist and punk beliefs. Amusingly, there were some people in my acquaintance who thought that by learning to knit, I was losing my edge. Every time I craft, I am being subversive. By not allowing mass media to dictate what I should or should not wear and instead making these decisions for myself, I

am fighting against our overly material culture. Instead of using anger and my voice as a weapon, I am using crafts as a way to express my dissatisfaction.

The wisdom to hold two seemingly antithetical ideas simultaneously- knitting and feminism, for example- comes from the great well of sagacity to be discovered in this practice...People seem to associate their knitting experiences with the lessons they've learned in life. (Murphy, 151)

There is only wisdom to be gained in joining disparate parts.

conclusion

We all have our channels/waves of resistance. It's just that some of us are more aware of them than others.

Unlike previous handicraft revivalism movements- when things were made because they *couldn't* be bought, or, as in the '60s and '70s, things were made to demonstrate one's connection to the earth- today's handcrafting is a self-conscious exploration of something younger generations haven't really known firsthand. It may be a bit political, but it's also intensely personal. (Brown)

Through expanding the boundaries of political conversation and modes of resistance, "many grassroots movements press for an alternative discourse and practice that might enlarge the whole field of politics." (Boggs, 286) Instead of following Putnam's advice that we need to refill our communities civic centres, perhaps what is needed is a continued focus on smaller groups that in allowing for conversations to take place, aid political knowledge and therefore, participation.

For the past few years I have been involved with various arts of the repopularisation of the aforethought ancient craft. I have talked about knitting online, in various small printed works and not-so-small publications and in person. For me, it was never so much about trying to be an expert in the knitted tradition or being a cheerleader espousing the benefits of craft to anyone within arm's reach. It was about trying to understand **why** the resurgence was happening, most fervently in my circle of radical feminist friends. There was something quite incredible about the way that I could talk to my grandmother about knitting hats for premature babies to eventually donate to the hospital one day and then about knitting vibrator cosies with my friends the next. It wasn't necessarily all about the knitting. There was something else afoot.

My experience with the rebirth of craft has taken me from a women's knitting circle in New York City to knitting by myself at home getting pattern ideas from individuals online to creating a weekly knit night with punk rock friends in North Carolina to working with a knitting club in London where I've done events everywhere from the Circle Line to the Victoria & Albert Museum. As I'm about to move back to North Carolina to combine elements of all of the above, I've done a hell of a lot of thinking about knitting. And it's not just about two sticks and string, it's about what happens when people see them peeking out of your purse.

I haven't seen it with my two eyes, but there is in existence Sky News footage of me saying, "Knitting is like a dog..." and this point I became fully cognizant of the microphone in front of my face and lost my train of thought. The reporter egged me on. I continued with something like, "it allows for people to come and talk to you without feeling awkward." I am not exactly sure as it was a bit of a nightmare. But, it's true. It's much easier to go up and talk to someone who is holding a baby or playing with a puppy because everyone agrees that they're both cute. You don't look like you're hitting on them or anything. It's safe. The similar reaction happens when you have your knitting. A space for conversation opens up somehow, with this simple act. Most of the time I get men telling me about watching their mothers or aunts or grandmothers knit as children. It's nice until they ask you to knit them a jumper. Um, no.

My favourite people who invariably sit next to you when you're knitting are elderly women. I love it when I'm sitting there knitting at a café or a park or something and they sit down next to me. Usually quiet for a few moments, and then saying, "I used to knit. I think it's great that younger people are picking it up these days." Sometimes they say a little bit more, but usually they just sit and watch and smile. Watching my hands as they are looping around the yarn and moving the needles rhythmically back and forth, intently. I know you can't

see what people are thinking, but it's the closest I've ever come to ever being able to visibly see nostalgia.

In the United States, they are known as the "Greatest Generation," the individuals who grew up during the World Wars I and II. Many of the women of this era knitted as a way to support 'their boys,' churning out various wardrobe items and sending them overseas. Before I started knitting, I had a hard time talking to women from this era as I was never sure what to say. Knitting allowed me to into their world. Allowed conversation to flow as fast as my fingers, and not about the weather or the price of a pint of milk. And it was this levelling that was so amazing. I was asked by strangers to make them jumpers (some of them in earnest for money, others as a way of being chat up), informed of backwoods knitting stores in supermarkets, communicated via sign language with a Hispanic woman at home who knew no English. It was amazing.

This year has opened so many doors for me, it has been nothing short of amazing. For awhile, I had plans with Rachael to open up a shop here in London that not only sold handmade crafts by artists we knew, but would teach lessons as well. A few months after we devised this plan, my grandfather was put in the hospital. As the surgery was pushed back due to complications, I began to feel farther and farther apart from my family. I began to get homesick.

After talking with various craftspersons, I decided that it was best to return to North Carolina. While my work with Cast Off has been always surprising and inspiring, I have decided to use what I have learned, in this past year of widening my craft skills and craft circles, back home. Still stuck on the craft shop idea, I entertained the thought of doing the same thing at home. After more thought realized that what we need (at home) is a community centre. Because there's only so much beer you can drink and sharing my (not-so-

good) skills makes me happy. And there are so many people at home can do so many incredible things.

But this year has been about so much more than just knitting, it as allowed me to fully understand the importance of your community. Not only do I have craft communities in New York City, North Carolina and London, but I also have an online community as well- between the four of them I am constantly inspired and recharged. I do think that it is a similar feeling to what Robert Putnam is trying to bring back with his work in Bowling Alone. By reaching out to others, giving and taking, arguing and then making up, learning via discussion, we are given a chance to more fully participate in this world. No I don't think that craft can save us all, as the last question on my questionnaire implied, but I do think that it is a question worth asking. Because while craft is something that I am passionate about, there is something everyone is equally passionate about. It might change over time, but chances are we'll all be more fulfilled when we find that thing which allows us to better understand both ourselves as well as others.

So for now, instead of going on Take Back the Night walks, I'm planning on staying in and taking back the knit. All of this IS revolution. Communicating, sharing, learning, growing, talking, loving, caring, creating. Revolution is about more than just fighting against, it's about change and passion, too. Truth be told, I was getting a bit bored with explaining why craft is revolutionary. You might say I was 'beyond it' or even that I was a malcontent, but I just think that I have become hyperaware of the fact that revolution is what you make of it. That without community we all begin to wilt and wither, even though we may not realize it. Community, in its myriad forms, keeps us whole. This wholeness keeps us driven, which allows us to see that in the simplest terms, revolution is within.

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appendix a: a knitting questionnaire

1. How did you learn to knit? How old were you then and how old are you now?
2. Knitting=nesting? Is your knitting a way of getting back to simpler times?
3. In regards to the current resurgence in knitting, when do you think it started and why?
4. Do you have a crafty group that you meet with? How often? Why do you dig it?
5. Where do you go online to discuss/learn/share your craftiness? How do these sites inspire you in ways that real life conversations don't?
6. Is there a subversive element to knitting? A punk rock element? Or simply a DIY smugness?
7. Why do you knit?
8. What other crafty things do you do besides knitting?
9. The future of knitting - is there one or are we just kidding ourselves?
10. Do you prefer to knit alone or with other people? Why?
11. True or false: can craft save us all?

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