CHANGING THE WORLD ONE STITCH AT A TIME:
KNITTING AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ACTIVISM

A Thesis
Presented to
The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

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August, 2007
CHANGING THE WORLD ONE STITCH AT A TIME:
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Thesis

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ABSTRACT

The latest revival of knitting, which began around the year 2000, is part of a history of hand-crafts revivals occurring over the last 150 years. What sets the current revival apart from its predecessors is the use of knitting in the larger context of Progressive social and political activism. The revival has its roots in the social movements that began in the 1960s (feminism, ecology, civil rights, and anti-war) that became permanent though often unrecognized fixtures of Western culture and thought. As part of the larger Post-Modern world, activist knitters in the twenty-first century have continued their advocacy of human rights and the peace movement and have further championed a broad spectrum of social justice and ecological causes. The communication revolution afforded by the World-Wide Web has allowed like-minded individuals to connect and participate in a grassroots movement largely unrecognized and unreported by corporate media, leading knitting to become a personal and collective symbol of both empowerment and dissent as well as a tactic of protest.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my gratitude to my mentor and advisor Dr. Virginia Gunn who, for years, has inspired me with her knowledge, dedication, and good humor and who has been a source of unflagging support and encouragement. I am also indebted to the Family and Consumer Sciences Department for affording me a welcoming intellectual home. I especially wish to thank Dr. Richard S. Glotzer and Dr. Teena Jennings-Rentenaar who shared their knowledge and love of their subjects with me and other students without reservation and whose acceptance and encouragement have sustained me during my years of study and writing. And last, my deepest gratitude to my husband Robert L. Zangrando who supported my undertaking this degree from the first and for his constant and unreserved support and love.
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I came to an interest in knitting by a rather circuitous route. As a teenager during the turbulent late 1960s and early 1970s, I had little exposure to sewing, let alone knitting or crocheting. My mother could sew a seam, hem a dress, and mend minor tears, but other than that had little interest in sewing. In my second-generation, immigrant, working-class family, “homemade” clothes were something that people too poor to buy from a store had to make do with; something we, thankfully, had been spared. When I made a friend who was becoming a skilled seamstress, I begged my mother to let me have sewing lessons with a well-meaning but, as I was to find out, uninspiring teacher. I became adept at ripping out seams but little else. In seventh-grade Home Economics class, I alone of all the other girls could not finish my skirt before the end of the term, and it languished in its un-zippered state, never to be used. No one in my family, so far as I knew, knitted or crocheted. The only person I knew who did anything of the sort crocheted stiff, harsh polyester yarn in lime green, bright yellow, orange, and brown to make small oval rugs, couch cushions, and square hot pads. It was the age of throw-it-in-the-wash polyester, but my family still valued 100 percent cotton and fine wools and silks, even if we could not always afford them.

It was a time of change, when old assumptions were being challenged. Though the want ads still read “Help Wanted Male” and “Help Wanted Female,” and most
women could not get a credit card in their own names, and girls were still being steered almost exclusively by guidance counselors into school-teaching and nursing; some of us were becoming aware of feminism. I made the conscious decision never to get drawn in to “feminine” pursuits like sewing, knitting, or crocheting. To my mind, only women still mired in their own subjugation would waste their time on such artsy-craftsy pursuits. So it was with a chequered past that I came to a graduate program in which I would study clothing, textiles, and interiors. I represent a part of the population who grew up thinking that only “little old ladies” knitted or crocheted.

But times change and people change. Feminist artist Judy Chicago represented the untold story of women’s contribution to history by using the traditional feminine crafts of china painting, embroidery, and hand-made lace in the 1979 exhibition of The Dinner Party.¹ Over the decades, I matured in my feminism and began to free myself from the idea that those pursuits, gifts, or interests that the culture deemed “feminine” were “worth less” than traditionally masculine ones. And I am not alone. Other women have reclaimed knitting and other fiber crafts and arts. They are knitting in droves. Millions knit in North America. They knit alone and in groups. They knit in their homes, in doctor’s offices, and at their car mechanic’s. They knit on airplanes (so long as they are allowed to carry knitting needles aboard) and at soccer games. They knit at “knitting cafes” in Boston, Chicago, New York, and Seattle. They knit at libraries and coffee houses and in schools and universities and hospitals. Corporate executives knit and teachers knit; surgeons and lawyers and graduate students knit. People of all sorts either knit or want to learn.
I was drawn to those who began using knitting as a spiritual practice. Many spoke of knitting as “the new yoga,” a new form of meditation. In a post-modern, post-mechanical world of cell phones and text messaging, of pagers, computers, email, Palm Pilots and Blackberrys and video iPods, time to be “out-of-touch” with the world and in touch with the self is often hard to come by. Knitting offers many the meditative practice of slowing down yet being active simultaneously. Knitting can happen anywhere and any time at the knitter’s discretion. Like yoga or walking a labyrinth, knitting coordinates the physical and the intellectual. The rhythmic click of the needles, the texture of the yarn as it slips and moves through the fingers, the gentle weight of the accumulated fabric in the lap all help center the knitter’s attention and allow for thoughtful contemplation. At least, it has become so for a significant number of knitters. In Susan Gordon Lydon’s *The Knitting Sutra* and its sequel *Knitting Heaven and Earth*, knitting becomes the means of spiritual discovery much the same as it does in Bernadette Murphy’s *Zen and the Art of Knitting*. Some knitters have sought to heal grief by knitting for themselves and some by knitting for others. The Shawl Ministry, an inter-denominational group, knits shawls for others who are hurt, grieving losses, ill, or dying. Other groups knit for babies who have died and might otherwise not have new and lovingly prepared burial clothes. Less concerned with dogma, ritual, and institutions, these knitters find a personal spiritual satisfaction in knitting for themselves and others.

My personal spiritual quest led me to the Internet for more information, and what I found there proved fascinating. Not only were people rediscovering knitting, they were infusing it with activist purpose. The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, a small group in Calgary, Canada, dedicated to positive social change used knitting as a tactic in their
protests for fair trade and self-sufficiency. Were there other knitters like them? Opening the door to knitting activism revealed a host of other social “uses” for knitting: protesting against economic globalization, sweated labor, rigid sexual stereotypes, mysogony and homophobia, and corporate domination of politics and the economy. That discovery segued into another segment of the knitting population – DIY (Do-It-yourself) knitters. Who were these young, “feminist” knitters who called themselves “girls” and who often expressed themselves through pre-feminist imagery from the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s? Why did many of their knitting or craft projects appear regressive or sexist? Something was happening, but it was not clear exactly what. I was hooked. I had to find out. And I think I have made some enlightening discoveries.

Despite parallels to the past, Post-Modern knitting presents a slightly different face. First, most no longer knit to be thrifty. Creativity rather than necessity provides the impetus for most contemporary knitters. Second, knitting had long been promoted as relaxing and anxiety reducing, a pursuit suitable to the mentally fragile (women). Knitting was gendered by culture as a pursuit appropriate to women in a biological sense, almost like motherhood. Today, knitters, male and female, speak of knitting as a meditative and spiritual process appropriate to the human (rather than female) condition. Third, knitting and associated fiber crafts intersect with political activism differently from the past. Unlike patriotic wartime knitters in previous generations, many of today’s “craftivists” support causes outside the mainstream, something perhaps not seen since the Revolutionary War when women couched their political support of the Revolution in terms socially acceptable to radical men (Betsy Ross comes easily to mind).
And finally, contemporary knitters seem to have broken the fetters of the past that tied knitting to the subjugation of women. Women knit today because they want to, not because they have to.\(^7\)

As this thesis seeks to demonstrate, knitting, with the help of the Internet, has become a means of social and political activism and exists in three major forms: charity/spiritual knitters, Do-It-Yourself knitters, and Political knitters. Charity/Spiritual knitters emphasize improving the lives of individuals through gifts of hand-knitted baby-clothes and blankets or healing shawls and scarves. The second group, comprised mainly of knitters in their twenties to mid-thirties, lives and knits out of their belief in the DIY (Do-It-Yourself) lifestyle. Most are Third-Wave feminists who adopted the DIY ethic from the world of punk rock. The final group—the most overtly activist of the three—is the Political knitters. They craft as a means of making abstract political positions clear, concrete, and meaningful to the larger population. Knitting is their public forum.

The Internet Hub

Post-Modern knitting cannot be examined outside the context of the Internet. In the last decade, the Internet has given this new activist community a voice and a venue while at the same time revolutionizing the ease with which individuals can initiate social action. Knitters use the Internet as their hub of activity, information, and outreach. Indeed, knitters form one of the most vital blogging communities on the Internet. Thousands enliven it with monologues and conversations about their lives, knitting projects, social and political commentaries, and observations. In the case of the Dulaan project, an individual’s mission to assist the people of Mongolia turned into a national cause merely by being publicized on a knitting blog. Internet web logs (blogs), available
free or at a nominal charge, afford individuals of modest means the opportunity of engaging a worldwide audience.

In the knitting community, many now well-known or even infamous knitters have become published authors based on the popularity of their blogs—Stephanie Pearl McPhee (yarnharlot.com), Jennifer Stafford (domaknitrix.com), Ann Meador Shayne and Kay Gardener (masondixonknitting.com), and Nikol Lohr (naughtyneddlesknitting.com) come to mind. Blogs, of course, vary widely in quality and content. Some blogs are little more than on-line diaries detailing the minutiae of a person’s life—where she has gone, whom she has seen, books she has read—with varying degrees of analysis and commentary. Some few have a broader purpose: to contribute to the betterment or wellbeing of others.

The New Face of Activism: Knitters as Cultural Creatives

Conventional wisdom has it that today’s youth are far too self-interested to be concerned about the state of the world and that their elders have grown complacent and self-satisfied at worst, or at best distracted by their mortgages, car payments, ever-rising health insurance premiums, and anxieties over national security. Is that the truth of the matter, and must all forms of activism necessarily be as dramatic and public as observers tend to assume? According to sociologist Paul H. Ray and psychologist Sherry Ruth Anderson, activism, in its many and varied forms, is alive and well. In their book, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People are Changing the World*, they argue that far from disappearing, social activism has instead become more subtle, varied, and mainstream. The public does not perceive the same level of action for four critical reasons. First, activism has gone local. Those who were once involved in mass
movements on the national stage are now acting in their cities and towns. Second, with
the consolidation of conservatively-inclined corporate-owned media and the infotainment
focus of news broadcasts, citizens are not exposed to the social and political actions
undertaken by progressives and radicals. Third, what the pair calls the “cultural arms” of
social movements (those ancillary and non-political aims and interests of a movement’s
participants) were and remain less visible, though nonetheless culturally significant.9 The
women’s movement, for instance, is most identified with its goals of social, political, and
economic equity for women, yet it also spawned such cultural aims as feminist
spirituality. Since spiritual goals are often nurtured at private, inter-personal, and local
levels rather than as a mass experience, they often fly under the radar of mass awareness.
Finally, though social movements did not perfectly achieve all their goals, much of their
agenda has become part of the cultural mainstream, almost taken for granted on a daily
basis.10

In fact, activism, particularly of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, has been so
successful that beliefs once considered “natural” or “correct,” like racism and sexism,
have been unmasked and identified as unacceptable in that cultural mainstream. Thanks
to the initiatives of previous decades, the majority of Americans no longer accepts the
mass extinction of species, unrestrained ruination of the environment, the unquestioned
safety of nuclear power and the absolute necessity of nuclear weapons, the moral
legitimacy of white supremacy, or the legally and socially sanctioned discrimination of
women and minorities.11 Ray, now vice-president of America LIVES, Inc., a market
research polling firm investigating the lifestyles and values of Americans, has the figures
to back up the pair’s thesis. The number of Americans concerned about the health of the
environment has jumped from 20 percent in the early 1960s to 80 percent today, with a corresponding percentage worried about the proliferation of nuclear weapons. By 1994, 63 percent of Americans believed that women had as much right to work outside the home as men. This cultural shift in attitude is due, the authors argue, to the impact of mass activism over four decades that changed the way Americans perceived their world. Even when traditionally-minded persons here and abroad have exerted the force of political and economic power to roll back some of the gains already achieved, most continue to endure. There can be back-sliding, but there is no going back. In such a setting, activist knitters are often cultural creatives themselves, acting out their political and social ideals in non-traditional forms.

Anti-materialism is still a minority movement, but the numbers of those beginning to embrace the philosophy is growing. Many twenty- and thirty-something youths eschew shopping malls’ cookie-cutter fashion in favor of thrift and second-hand stores where they can create their own fashions by remaking, remodeling, and revising what they find instead of relying on sweated labor employed by brand-name producers. Influenced by the Voluntary Simplicity movement (“living a life that is outwardly simple and inwardly rich”) that began in the late 1960s with Duane Elgin’s book *Voluntary Simplicity*, many are turning away from the work-longer-to-buy-more-“stuff” mentality that has driven contemporary America. Fair-trade and self-sufficiency rather than free-trade are strong values for many activist knitters.

An individual may not exert sufficient influence to effect over-all cultural change, but millions of individuals, acting singly yet united for a clear purpose, may. Activism is not dead. It flourishes in thousands of small ways inherited from the idealism and
hopefulness of the reformers of the 1960s and 1970s, combined with the vitality of
today’s youth, and with the aid of the communications revolution of the Internet. It is
with this awareness and in this context that a student of contemporary knitting can
discern and seek to examine the varieties of knitting activism.

Notes


4 Ibid., 360.

5 Ibid., 142, 181, and 229.

6 Ibid., 26.

7 Ibid., 360.


9 Ibid., 133-35.

10 Ibid., 110 and 135.

11 Ibid., 111.

12 Ibid., 112.

CHAPTER II

THE GENTLEST ACTIVISM: CHARITY AND SPIRITUAL KNITTING

Charity knitters pour their hearts and souls into this gentle sort of activism as a means of affecting positive change. The foci of knitting charities vary, but all center on the marginalized, on people in need, often suffering and in pain, the socially invisible, here and overseas. Cause-oriented knitting serves multiple functions for contributors and recipients. Some knitters are so engrossed with knitting that, at first, they may be looking for ways to justify collecting more yarn and finding more time to knit. But that initial reaction is often supplanted by the satisfaction of making a real difference in the lives of others. Knitting for someone in need empowers those who feel otherwise powerless in the face of massive social and economic problems. Contributors realize that they can effect change.

Charity Knitting

Today’s knitters are not unique in their charitable work. Knitting has a long history of usefulness during times of war and economic hardship, activism in service of popular causes and those in need. In No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting, Anne L. Macdonald described the Union knitting campaign during the Civil War where women made socks, mittens, and shawls for the troops as well as fancy knitted goods for charity bazaars and fairs in support of the Sanitary Commission (which coordinated the manufacture and distribution of hand knitted goods to the troops).¹ Not
to be outdone, Confederate plantation owners contributed to the war effort by converting their homes into makeshift “manufacturing centers, setting up . . . spinning wheels, yarn distribution centers, knitting instruction alcoves and refreshment tables for visiting workers.”² In England during the Crimean War (1854-1856), knitters made what would later be called the “balaclava helmet: a knitted helmet, covering the head, ears, and neck, and with an opening for the face.”³ In World Wars I and II women and men in the United States and Britain knitted mufflers, socks, and mittens again. Knitters also rose to the occasion during times of economic emergency. Richard Rutt notes that British knitters worked in aid of the poor when hard times afflicted Lancashire (a cotton mill town) in 1862. They were called to action again during the National Knitting Appeal (November 1934) to provide clothing for the poor during the Great Depression in Britain.⁴

What is significant about knitting charities today may be their willingness to support less popular causes. There is a greater acceptance of the “other” in knitting charities; topics like miscarriage, formerly spoken of in whispers, if at all, are no longer overlooked. Foreigners, regardless of religion, race, or politics, are a bit more likely to elicit sympathy. Society’s dirty little secrets—rape and domestic violence—have been brought out into the open, their victims no longer shrouded in shame. These cares motivate the socially and politically minded charitable knitter in the twenty-first century. Of the myriad outlets for charitable endeavor, this study focuses on five sub-catagories of charitable knitting: knitting for preemies and infants, knitting as a means of fostering recipients’ independence, humanitarian knitting to aid a particular country or people, knitting as spiritual outreach, and knitting to raise public awareness and promote social change.
Caring for Society’s Smallest: Preemies, Infants, and the Still-Born

Scan any list of knitting charities, and those for infants and children seem to dominate. No one is more physically at risk and in need of the comfort and warmth that knitting provides than a premature infant, no one more grief stricken than the parents of a stillborn child. For the families of premature infants, the empathy of others can be especially meaningful. It can be almost impossible for new parents of a preemie to find clothing small enough to fit their babies. So, knitters craft tiny hats, mittens, gowns, hooded wraps, and booties so small they measure little over two inches in length.³ Cuddles, an organization based in the United Kingdom, reports that hospitals are always short of blankets and hooded wraps for preemies. It is not just what crafters make for babies and their parents that matters, it is the care and love put into each item that gives it meaning (see figure 2.1). Internet sites emphasize that garments and blankets for preemies be made not only to size but also in lightweight yarn to suit the delicate bodies they are meant to clothe (see figure 2.2).⁶ The need for preemie-sized clothing is so great that, according to Victoria Swain, founder of Warm Hearts—Warm Babies, “many times babies are sent home in only a hospital T-shirt and disposable diaper.”⁷ Because the difficulty of dressing a preemie is often compounded by poverty, many organizations pay particular attention to, though do not focus exclusively on, the needs of low-income babies and families. Victoria Swain further recounts that “In Denver many babies are discharged to live with their family in their car.”⁸

Even something as seemingly ordinary as a baby blanket takes on deeper significance when it is made for a premature infant. Preemie blankets measure fifteen to
Figure 2.1. Baby Jesse Wearing Knitted Cap and Sweater. Available from http://www.warmheartswarmbabies.org.

Figure 2.2. Premature Baby Wearing Knitted Cap. Available from http://www.warmheartswarmbabies.
twenty inches and are knitted in baby weight yarn to insure the soft texture and lightweight necessary for small and vulnerable bodies. But the blankets serve an emotional function as well. Not all outcomes are positive. Some infants fail to thrive and despite all best efforts, die. Blankets can give parents happy memories of their baby:

Mums and Dads can nurse their little angel in their blanket in the precious little time they have together. The mums and dads are given their baby’s blanket as a memento of their little one to provide a little comfort in their painful months and years that lay [sic] ahead for them.9

This sad undercurrent of potential loss runs just below the requests for garments and blankets: some babies are either stillborn or die soon after birth. According to a Cuddles staff member, “Sadly we still lose babies. From the tiniest prematures [sic] to full term size. We would like to have a blanket for each of these babies.”10 Burial garments are donated in knitted, crocheted, and sewn versions in varying styles and sizes, depending on the needs of the recipients. Garments that should connote the joy of a new life seem that much sadder when paired with death--Burial Buntings, Burial Rompers, and Burial Gowns come in sizes to fit the still-born to the smallest preemie to the full-term infant in soft, lightweight yarn. Knitters are also advised to use yarns in pastel hues because “strong colours can be attractive for healthy babies but not really appropriate in the circumstances where Cuddles blankets are needed. ‘Pale and Pretty [sic] is Perfect.’”11

Warm Hearts – Warm Babies, which devotes its energies to needy families, provides complete layettes:

for the babies who die and need only one last outfit and blanket to be snuggled in. These burial layettes include a gown or romper for boys, a hat, a blanket, a keepsake envelope for the mementos, and a small keepsake. Most hospitals dress the baby in the outfit and take a picture with the keepsake, and that way the mothers can keep something that was touched by the baby.12
In the recent past, parents’ abiding memory of their fetuses and babies was their being spirited away, still in soiled hospital coverings. For grieving parents, a Fetal Demise/Burial Pouch becomes a special gift indeed. This combination of sympathy and empathy permeates knitting charities, infant charities most especially. The goal is that no baby, no matter how small, is overlooked.

The Heifer Project: Fostering Independence

The Heifer Project, an international organization with a long and venerable history, also works to foster independence and self-sufficiency among its clients. The organization was founded by Dan West, a Church of the Brethren Relief worker, who had an epiphany while giving milk to hungry children during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). The revelation that “these children don’t need a cup, they need a cow” became the basis for the Heifer Project’s philosophy. The goal has been permanently to end hunger by providing the poor with the domestic livestock and agricultural education to sustain themselves and their families so that “they could be spared the indignity of depending on others to feed their children.”

Heifers (young female cows that have not given birth) eventually provide not only milk, but also female calves, which recipients then share with others in an ever-widening circle of sustainable economy. Though the program began with heifers, contributors can now donate chickens, pigs, rabbits, sheep, and other livestock to create positive change. More directly related to knitting is the Heifer Project’s “Knitting Basket” option:

Dad’s been wearing the same sweater for the past 15 years, and no matter how many new ones you give him, he just can’t part with his old favorite. This year, instead of another sweater that will end up in the closet unworn, why not give Dad a Knitting Basket—four wool-producing animals that will give new hope to families in need? Your gift in his honor will warm his heart and yield countless
bundles of wool for families to make clothes, blankets, ponchos and more . . .
handcrafted pieces earn income for food and basic necessities. This is a gift that
will truly warm the heart!¹⁴

Contributors can donate, in part or in whole, the cost of a “Knitting Basket (two llamas
and two sheep) to provide a families the means of economic independence (see figure
2.3). For five hundred dollars (the entire cost) or fifty dollars (a share of the gift), anyone
can help families; “an expanding network of hope, dignity, and self-reliance is created
that reaches around the globe.” In its sixty years, the Heifer Project has helped to change
the lives of “millions of families” in 128 countries.¹⁵

Figure 2.3. Recipients of Heifer International’s “Knitting Basket” Livestock. Available

Humanitarian Knitting

With the aid of the Internet, knitters today are better able to help those who find it
difficult to help themselves. A computer-based community of knitting activists is easily
able to disseminate project information and thereby elicit knitting donations. Better
communications and fast, reliable travel have also made the world a smaller place for
more people than in the past. Individuals are also better traveled than they were forty or fifty years ago. Western culture has absorbed foods, spiritual beliefs, and cultural practices at an every increasing rate, making people a world away a bit less foreign and exotic. As a result, Western knitters seem better able to identify with the difficulties facing non-westerners more willing to offer aid through their knitting advocacy than ever before. Two of the most prominent and successful relief ventures are Afghans for Afghans and the Dulaan Project.

Afghans for Afghans

Among the better-known charities focusing on war-ravaged regions and peoples is Afghans for Afghans. The group defines itself as “a humanitarian and educational people-to-people project that sends hand-knit and crocheted blankets and sweaters, vests, hats, mittens, and socks to the beleaguered people of Afghanistan.” Founder Ann Rubin, like many humanitarian organizers and volunteers, is a professional. Her business degree from the University of California-Berkley led to a career in business and marketing. Rubin first encountered Afghans and their textiles in 1999 on a visit to Peshawar and was inspired to help. Describing herself as a “laid-off Internet sector worker,” she and six friends began the group in the spring of 2001. Rubin and the others were inspired, they say, by the venerable history of humanitarian knitting by the Red Cross during and following World War II.

Though Afghans for Afghans’ method of outreach is personal rather than political, the leaders work in concert with a variety of national and international groups, agencies, and businesses. Funding is provided by the Agape Foundation, which supports “non-violent social change” by providing loans, grants, and start-up money to qualifying
groups. The Agape Foundation, founded in 1969 by pacifists and anti-war activists in Palo Alto, California, in addition to outreach and aid, seeks to “confront the root causes of social problems by challenging the responsible systems and institutions.” So, indirectly, charities affiliated with them may have a political impact. Afghans for Afghans distributes its donations through the Quaker-based American Friends Service Committee. The group also relies on a broad base of “resources, advice, leadership, and encouragement” from agencies like the Afghan Relief Organization, International Orphan Care, International Midwives Assistance, yarn companies (Abbey Yarns, Black Water, Crystal Palace Yarns, elann.com, Ferncrest Farm Yarns, Greenwich Yarn, YarnMarket.com, La Lana Wools and others), as well as from knit and crochet designers, spinners, lawyers, graphic designers, and photographers.

Afghans for Afghans tries to bridge cultural and economic gaps by putting a human face on donors (see figure 2.4). Rubin counsels crafters to send photographs of themselves along with their blankets, sweaters, or vests to personalize the gift and connect with recipients. Some include personal letters. One anonymous woman included a note explaining that her mother (who had died) had knitted the afghan while pregnant with her: “My mother would have wanted me to send her afghan.” As Rubin puts it, “the friendship aspect of this is really important. So people know we’re thinking of them.”

It is the personal touch, the human connection that seems to appeal to donors. One, Christie Smith of Austin, Texas, wanted women to know that other women care: “This is my way of trying to show Afghans, especially the women, who are suffering so much, that not all of us are blind to that.” Others describe a need for relief from anxiety and
Figure 2.4. Little Kabul Girl Wearing Hand-Knitted Hat by Missy McIver, Columbia, South Carolina. Available from http://www.afghansforafghans.org.
sadness following the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C. What the donors share is connection to others a world away, a sense that all human beings are and should feel themselves to be inter-connected on a deep level. The afflictions of one should be the concern of all. This is the Cultural Creative consciousness that Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson illustrate so clearly in Cultural Creatives.

The Dulaan Project

Afghanistan is not the only country to which knitters have turned their attentions. Mongolia’s bitter winter weather, uncertain political situation, and extreme poverty have proven fertile ground for the Dulaan Project’s contributions of warm, knitted and crocheted sweaters, scarves, gloves, mittens, and vests. The Dulaan Project is the coming together of three dedicated parties—Mossy Cottage Knits (an Internet web log), Kunzang Palyul Choling (a Buddhist community in Sedona, California), and the Flagstaff International Relief Effort (F.I.R.E) in Arizona.

Dulaan, which means “warmth” in Mongolian, was conceived by a Buddhist monk Konchog Norbu and publicized by his cousin Ryan Morrissey on her web log Mossy Cottage Knits. Morrissey mobilized knitters nationwide, and coordinated the donation of over 4,517 items to Mongolia in 2005. The project was originally intended to last one year, but its initial success spurred on a second year. In 2006, the “Dulaan Brigade,” a group of knitters who pledged to make at least five items for the project, surpassed its goal of 4,518 more than twofold to donate 12,085 warm pieces of clothing. The rallying cry for 2007 is “Dulaan—10,000 or Bust!” and the goal is to donate at least one item more than the previous year’s total. It is not clear how long the group will
endure, but its continued success speaks of the interest and dedication of hundreds of knitters worldwide, brought to a common humanitarian purpose by the Internet.

Dulaan requires more than dedicated knitters to achieve its goals. Dulaan delivers its donations with the help of F.I.R.E. whose mission is to assist the often overlooked rural populations in the developing world, particularly in Mongolia. The group flies above the nets of politics and religion by remaining grassroots, non-political, non-religious, and non-profit. Since 1997, F.I.R.E has sent medical and educational supplies as well as 70,000 pounds of warm clothing to Mongolia. It has hand-distributed the thousands of donations sent by knitters through the Dulaan Project.

Dulaan has been a rousing success, much talked of on the Internet, and featured in two articles in Vogue Knitting International. Co-founder Morrissey admits that she began the project out of her love of knitting but has since found even deeper meaning in the work:

Who’m I kidding; I started this frickin’ [sic] charity just to give myself an excuse to knit more. But now, because of Meredith’s and Tom’s pictures [of Mongolia], Dulaan has stopped being merely an entertaining lark; we really are making a difference [Morrissey’s emphasis]. Please keep knitting, Dulaaners! Let’s help F.I.R.E. keep up the good work.

What makes faraway Mongolia so compelling? For many knitters the answer may be simple human need for basic necessities. According to F.I.R.E’s website, when occupying Russian forces withdrew in 1990 after a presence of over sixty years, they took 40 percent of the Mongolian economy with them, thrusting millions into poverty.

“Today,” the web site notes, “one third of Mongolia’s 2.5 million people live on less than $1 a day.” Drought and extreme weather have further worsened the situation. In the capital, Ulanbator, the winter temperature, on average, dips to ten degrees below zero
Fahrenheit. In 2004, 367 persons froze to death in the capital alone.\textsuperscript{28} Photographs graphically illustrate the dire circumstances of the Mongolian people. A late October 2006 posting on Kochong Norbu’s blog (affiliated with Dulaan sister site Kunzang Palyul Scholing) showed prison inmates with hatless, shaven heads clad only in lightweight cotton clothing squatting in a barren hallway. One inmate had no shoes, only plastic sandals to cover his feet (see figure 2.5). The families of Mongolian prisoners, too poor to feed and clothe themselves, are expected to provide food and clothes for incarcerated family members. Another picture showed the same men dressed in warm woolen Dulaan hats, mittens, and socks (see figure 2.6).\textsuperscript{29} On the Mossy Cottage Knits blog, a photograph featured a little girl inappropriately dressed only in shorts and a thin tee shirt (it had already snowed) unable to attend school. In a second photo, she wore a warm hat, mittens, and a sweater over her thin cotton clothing (see figures 2.7 and 2.8). Though still not ideally dressed for such a cold climate, she would then be able to attend class.\textsuperscript{30}

Clearly, much of the project’s success rests on Morrissey’s passion and commitment to knitting and to making a difference in the lives of ordinary people a world away. Her energy and verve drive the Dulaan Project and its knitters. She is straightforward and direct in her appeals for knitters’ help and speaks in an easy, honest, and informal tone to which the Internet community clearly relates. In a September 20, 2006, announcement to launch the 2007 campaign (“And They’rrrrrrrrre Off!”), Morrissey whips up support:

The launching of Dulaan on Monday felt remarkably like the Kentucky Derby. I swear I felt the ground rumble as knitters came pounding out of the starting gates, sweatin’ and snortin’ and wild-eyed! A hosing off, hot mash, oats, hay, carrots, a roll in the dirt, and neck pat for everyone when the race is over.\textsuperscript{31}

Figure 2.6. The Same Mongolian Prisoners Wearing Dulaan-Donated Hats and Shoes. Available from http://www.danzanravajaa.typepad.com/myweblog/2006/10/dope_about_dope.html.
Knitters responded with enthusiasm and even excitement to her encouragement: “Yay for 2007! My first box is already 2/3rds full.” In another posting, Nancy O. wrote her support:

You can count on Texas! I’m in! My goal for 2007 (if we go for one more than last year) will be 41 items. I already have a batch of caps done (6 are in the box, I think) and a wool scarf on the needles about half way done. I am so excited to be involved in another year—a heartfelt thanks to Ryan for all of her hard work, and to all you ladies for your time and talents.32

Responses come from everywhere, from New York City to British Columbia, and range from mothers to daughters to Girl Scout troop leaders.

Despite its disarming informality, the web site itself is highly organized. Laid out clearly in its pages are an overview, information for returning “Dulaaners” as well as newcomers, and a precise goal for 2007. Participants are encouraged to tell their friends, to inform social and religious groups about the project, and to further spread the word with a pdf version of Dulaan’s flyer. Like other charities, the web site of the F.I.R.E component of the Dulaan Project provides multiple links to Internet sites for patterns for mittens, hats, sweaters, socks, scarves, gaiters, blankets, and afghans. It is a one-stop activist inspiration with information made possible by the communications revolution.33

In the case of the Dulaan Project, warm clothing changes lives by making it possible for children to attend school and for adults to find work to support their families. “Think of it not just being physically warm, but also the warm heart of human love, and the warm feeling that grows from knowing that you have touched a life, even on the other side of the world.”34
Knitting for Those at Sea

One of the older charities that uses knitting as part of its outreach is the Seaman’s Church Institute of New York and New Jersey. Through its Center for Maritime Education, Center for Seafarers’ Right, and Center for Seafarers’ Services, the Church “promotes safety, dignity, and improved working and living conditions for more than one million men and women serving in the maritime workplace.” The Church is allied with the Episcopal denomination and has existed since 1834. The Church’s Christmas-at-Sea program was first launched during the Spanish American War in 1898, but did not become a yearly tradition until the First World War. In 2005, three thousand knitters from all fifty states were supplied with patterns and yarn with which to make sweaters, watch caps, and scarves, and they responded by contributing 14,000 garments (see figure 2.9). Seafaring may seem a romantic life, but sailors suffer loneliness and isolation from months at sea. According to Captain Roger Haskell of the motor vessel Sea-Land Comet:

Crossing oceans, especially stormy ones at Christmas can be depressing. There is loneliness in 40-knot winds and 35-foot seas that is difficult to express to those who have never experienced it. We received our packages of presents from Seamen’s Church Institute in Elizabeth on November 13 and here we are more than half way across the Pacific in route [sic] from Yokohama to Long Beach on Christmas. That’s twelve ports and 19 time zones. The fact that there are people who will sit down and make gifts like these for merchant mariners they’ve never met is truly moving. You have brightened our Christmas away from home. May God bless all of you.

The success of the Christmas-At-Sea Program depends on its many volunteers. Program Director Barbara Clauson observes that the knitters who donate to the Program come from every walk of life and situation: “The knitters are male and female, young and old, some in penal institutions, schools, scout troops, [and] senior residences. Quite a few of our knitters are even blind.” Whether their actions constitute activism, according
Figure 2.9. Mariners’ Scarf, Christmas At Sea Program. Available from http://www.seamenschurch.org//cmstest/486.asp.

Figure 2.10. Seamans’ Watch Scarf, Christmas At Sea. Available from http://www.seamenschurch.org//cmstest/487.
to Clauson, would depend on the intentions of each knitter.\textsuperscript{37} What is certain is that deep feeling motivates their actions: “Many do it because they appreciate the loneliness endured by mariners who bring the commodities we enjoy to our markets. Many do this as an expression of God’s love for each one of us. Some find it an outlet for their knitting passion, when they have no one else to knit for. Some do it because they are giving something positive back to a troubled world.”\textsuperscript{38} Whatever their reasons, mariners deeply appreciate their efforts (see figure 2.10).

Knitting for Change: Caps to the Capital

On first impression, charitable knitting does not readily appear political. Kindness and concern are not necessarily political. Instead, the political impact of knitting charities varies depending on each group’s objectives and methods. Those who emphasize the comfort and connection offered by one knitter to one recipient, with shawls or baby caps, may seem apolitical. A charity whose intent is not only to help those in need but to galvanize volunteers and the public to act for change constitutes a special category. Caps to the Capital ably unites charity and activism.

Unlike charities that devote their efforts solely to knitting warming caps for babies, Caps to the Captial goes one crucial step further. Before sending the much-needed baby caps to infants in developing nations, they first sent them \textit{en masse} to Washington, D.C. as a political statement. “Caps to the Capital,” a joint action of Warm Up America! and Save the Children, takes knitting or crocheting for newborns in developing nations into the realm of politics. In a well-crafted “action kit,” available on both groups’ web sites, makers are asked to craft caps according to specific patterns, send
them to Washington, D.C., with a personal letter to the President. Included in the action kit is a letterhead with the photograph of a Bolivian newborn and an opening greeting:

Dear Mr. President,

In recognition of the 2 million babies who die each year in the first 24 hours of life in developing countries, I made this cap. I am sending it to you today to demonstrate the need for our country to do more to help newborns survive. 39

Though the letters may be unsigned, contributors are gently encouraged to include their signatures “to show our leaders that the cap was made by a volunteer knitter or crocheter.” 40

This well-organized campaign has taken a three-pronged approach: first, knitting or crocheting caps; second, writing to the President; third, participating in a nation-wide telephone call-in campaign to the White House on October 10, 2006. As a tactic, knitting the caps serves not only the practical purpose of sending at-risk infants something that might help them survive (the newly-born are especially in danger because they cannot regulate their body temperature). Sending these small, warm objects in large numbers to the White House makes the abstraction of the deaths of four million infants in the first month of life tangibly real. It is also sends a strong message about the commitment to and interest in the issue for a large block of voters:

American leaders could save millions of newborn lives by putting a little more of the U.S. budget towards health programs for mothers, babies, and children in developing countries. When President Bush puts his budget together this fall, it’s important that he knows you want him and our country to do more to help these babies survive. 41

Collective action transforms the personal but seemingly disconnected work of thousands of participants, most of whom never meet one another, into a critical mass with legitimate
political impact. Thousands of letters, each attached to a cap, flooding into Washington reinforce the strength of numbers.

Politicians listen to voter opinion, even if they do not radically alter funding proposals. As a strategic alert to the administration, the “Unite for Newborns” call-in campaign took place three months before the caps reached Washington. An administration that makes “family values” and “life” part of its political platform will be hard pressed to ignore the voices raised in protest for the welfare of third-world infants and mothers. “Your cap can help us save a life. Your voice can help us save millions,” the rallying cry of the caps initiative, rings true when quiet individual voices combine in unison.42

The Internet makes communicating such an action viable and efficient. With the click of a mouse, a few sheets of paper and a printer, a clear and focused explanation of the problem and an activist “solution” is readily available. The “action kit” contains everything that makes this an organized, effective action: patterns, questions and answers, a sample letter, tags for caps, and a printable color flyer for distribution (see figure 2.11).

Caps to the Capital was inspired by a far-reaching Save the Children’s 2006 State of the World’s Mothers report (downloadable from the web site). The Caps to the Capital campaign is one portion of a larger effort to allocate funding for medical supplies and personnel for Africa:

But a package of simple health measures provided to mothers and babies worldwide, including antibiotics to fight infections, training for skilled birth attendants, immunizations against tetanus, education on breastfeeding and basic care such as drying a newborn baby and keeping it warm (this is where the caps come in!) could prevent 70 percent of these deaths.43
Figure 2.11. Caps to the Capital Action Kit (cover) [pdf.]. Available from http://www.savethechildren.org/campaigns/caps-to-the-capital/knitters-for-newborn-story.html.
Rallying knitters gets thousands of people involved at a grass-roots level in the cause of infants and mothers world-wide. From there, they may participate in other politically focused charities.

The project does not accept money or donated caps but encourages everyone to knit or crochet a cap: “The more knitters and crocheters from all 50 states who participate personally, the louder our voice will be. Let the government know that you care about newborns overseas.” In an Associated Press story on the Caps to the Capital initiative, a former teacher from California was reported to have made thirteen caps with help from her grandchildren. “What a huge deal to save a life,” Seelye said. “The world politics is so huge – to change the causes of poverty and death, I can’t do that.” But perhaps she can. At a time when many believe the individual is powerless in the face of massive social problems, this action demonstrates the power of one combined into a voice of many.

Knitting the Spirit: Spiritual Knitting

Knitting is a multi-dimensional pursuit. It is creative. It allows the imagination free rein to compose, combine, and create. It is tactile. The variety of textures, weights, and “hands” of fibers running through fingers is a sensuous pleasure. It is visual. The myriad shades, hues, intensities, and color combinations are a visual delight. It is rhythmic. The repeated movement of the needles and fingers form a dance of their own. Because knitting actively involves both the body and the mind, it allows knitters to go inside themselves, to center themselves, to think. Today, because it is done from choice rather than necessity and because contemporary knitters are more open to alternative forms of spirituality, Post-Modern knitting segues neatly into spirituality. Post-Modern
knitters may not have invented knitting spirituality, but they have been the first to write about and organize around it. Healing shawl and knitting outreach programs enliven and deepen the spiritual lives of knitters and recipients.

The Shawl Ministry

The foremothers of organized intentional shawl knitting [as a means of reaching out to those in emotional and spiritual need] are Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo. Their Ministry grew out of their experiences taking a course in applied Feminist Spirituality taught by Miriam Therese Winter, MMS. After graduating in 1997 from the Women’s Leadership Institute at the Hartford Seminary, Bristow and Galo launched their project in Connecticut. Their Shawl Ministry is a prime example of Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson’s thesis that Cultural Creatives are changing the world in a myriad of small but powerful ways. After many of the political goals of the Women’s Rights Movement (laws against discrimination in credit and lending, domestic violence, assault, and in the workplace) had been largely achieved, cultural objectives, in this case, the inclusion of the feminine in religion’s conceptualization of the Divine, have continued to run a parallel though quieter course in Western culture. Feminism provided an awareness of the absence of a female face of God in traditional, patriarchal religions and the resultant isolation and emptiness that that often creates for women of faith. This has led to a social activism that is more personal and less overtly political than the more publicized initiatives of the Feminist Movement in the late 1960s into the 1970s.

The spiritual goals of the Shawl Ministry incorporate personal connection and nurturance as a manifestation of the feminine Divine, so that the intentional and prayerful act of knitting creates a positive energy that in itself has a constructive impact on the
larger world: “Thus the blessing ripples from person-to-person, with both the giver and receiver feeling the unconditional embrace of a sheltering, mothering God!” (see figure 2.12).47 There is no clerical hierarchy to be negotiated or placated; instead, participants are free to carry out their work as best fits their personal spirituality. “There are no specific criteria,” observes Sister Peggy Gorman, whose Buffalo, New York group, Mercy Knitters, has donated 231 shawls.48 Anyone, men or women, young or old, of any faith or any skill level may belong to the group. And anyone with a need for comfort or a cause for joy is a fitting recipient for a prayer shawl. The Shawl Ministry has spawned numerous offshoot groups, most of which remain true to the original group’s light-handed organizational style. Some, however, become a bit more formalized within a specific church. For instance, in addition to the prayers of the group members, a clergy member, female or male, might bless the shawls as well (see figure 2.13).49

The Feminist Spirit

A feminist consciousness of the rites and rituals long ignored or denied, and the inclusion of others often forgotten or overlooked, permeates the occasions for which a shawl might be knitted and gifted. Spiritually meaningful rituals marking events particular to women’s lives, such as the onset of menstruation, childbearing, and menopause, are here resurrected and celebrated. As an antidote to a culture where menstruation has often been shrouded in shame, secrecy, or ridicule, a girl might receive a shawl to honor not only the onset of menses but also her approach to womanly sexuality. A shawl might also commemorate a woman’s giving birth or nursing a baby.50 Likewise, a mature woman approaching menopause, a rite of passage often the butt of

jokes and derision in contemporary mainstream culture, becomes a ceremony of croning, casting her instead as Wise Woman to be honored for her experience and wisdom.  

Every significant passage in a woman’s life may be commemorated. Part of Feminist Spirituality is for women to reclaim, for themselves, all aspects of womanhood: their bodies, their sexuality, their creative capacity, their spirit, and their intellect. All are good, and all are celebrated.

Feminist Spirituality seeks to restore women to full personhood as part of the Divine and as an equal participant in all aspects of human culture. Patriarchal religions, though they have regularly relied on the labor and contributions of women, have systematically denied them positions of spiritual authority. To paraphrase the fifth-century B.C.E. Greek philosopher Protagoras, throughout much of history “man [has indeed been] the measure of all things;” and man has generally measured woman as “less than” himself.  

Millennia later, feminist Simone de Beauvoir argued that men had always judged women not truly human but as “other.” Humanity and maleness have, consciously or unconsciously, been deemed the same.

Feminist spirituality acknowledges that women, too, may be called to a spiritual life. Borrowing the Jewish tallit (a fringed prayer shawl traditionally allowed only for men), a shawl may be specifically knitted for use while praying or meditating, symbolizing and illustrating women’s belonging in and rightful admittance to the spiritual realm. Thus, shawls are also gifted for ordinations and for use by women in the ministry. Gays and lesbians, another marginalized and often demonized group, are acknowledged by giving shawls for commitment ceremonies.
Given its feminist foundation, the Shawl Ministry members are sensitive to the plight of women around the world as well as around the corner. Vermont members of the Shawl Ministry heard from a minister’s wife in Baghdad of the pain Iraqis have suffered from years of recent (1991) and imminent (2003) war:

\[\text{. . . the children . . . are very much affected by this upcoming war. They are not doing well in school; they are fed up with the war and the fear of the war for the past 12 years. They want peace. Some say why should we study; we will die anyway. This war is breaking up the family structure; the children are looking for strength and answers, but their parents feel helpless. They keep praying and hope others will join them in prayers for peace in the world.}^{55}\]

Dr. Olivia Masih White and members of an international team of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches (WARC) visited Baghdad, Iraq, in February 2003 (just before the start of the current war) to show their solidarity with and concern for the Iraqi people. Members of the Prayer-Shawl Ministry from the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Vermont, anticipating the WARC’s upcoming trip, had decided to knit peace shawls to send to women in Iraq. Dr. Masih White recalled:

\[\text{They, as mothers and sisters, understood the pain and struggle of our sisters in Iraq. They wanted to reach out and touch some of these sisters . . . in Baghdad. Their hope was that eventually, they would invite more knitters to create ‘Prayer Shawls for Peace’ and send them to whatever destination their prayers led them.}\]

Dr. Masih White took one of the shawls to Baghdad, read a prayer sent by the knitters to a gathering of Iraqi women, and explained that each stitch was imbued with love, concern, and hope for peace (see figure 2.14). The shawl was displayed each week when the Iraqi women have been able to meet as a reminder of the connection between women of the United States and Iraq. The Ministry sponsored a Jerusalem Peace Shawl initiative as well.\[^{56}\]
Women are not the exclusive focus of the Shawl Ministry. Shawls are also given to men; no one and no occasion is overlooked. Marriages, anniversaries, deaths, illnesses, coming-of-age celebrations, graduations, and birthdays are all shawl-worthy occasions according to Janet Bristow who believes “shawls . . . made for centuries universal and embracing, [are] symbolic of an inclusive, unconditionally loving God. They wrap, enfold, comfort, cover, give solace, mother, hug, shelter, and beautify. Those who have received these shawls have been uplifted and affirmed, as if given wings to fly above their troubles . . .” 57
The Power of Intention

What gives the Shawl Ministry its spiritual depth is the power of intention or spiritual consciousness with which the shawls are made and given. Variously named “Comfort Shawls, Prayer Shawls, Peace Shawls, or Mantles,” the maker mindfully prays for the person for whom the shawl is intended and concentrates on that person and her or his situation while making the shawl. Consistent with many spiritual traditions (Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Buddhist), some makers use their stitches like rosaries or prayer beads to meditate on their hopes for the person who will wear the shawl. Shelia Banks, founder of Heart Warmers in Buffalo, New York, calls this “body prayer: The repetitive action of doing this simple stitch lets me be present in the moment and aware of what I’m doing. . . . You can practice different forms of prayer, by repeating the person’s name, or contemplating . . . .” Typically, knitters offer prayers meaningful to themselves (there are no proscribed prayers) at casting-on, on beginning, and on completing a shawl. Many knitters even compose their own entreaties and meditations that they send to the Prayer-Shawl Ministry web site. Susan Bourne (founder of an Internet-based group called Healing Shawls) chants while knitting, according to Rebecca Ortinau. She “repeats certain phrases or mantras that correlate with whatever pattern she’s working on. For example, while working a knit-knit-knit-purl sequence, she may repeat the words ‘Peace-be-with-you,’ through an entire shawl."

The Symbolism of Threes

Some knitters choose to knit in a symbolic pattern as well. Trios of stitches give additional meaning to the pattern. The symbolism is as ecumenical as the group’s members. Taoist, Hindu, Buddhist, and Kabalistic traditions of threes are represented:
the Taoist tradition of “the Great Triad (Heaven, Human, and Earth), Hindu Creation, Destruction, and Preservation, Buddhism’s Three Jewels—the Buddha (the enlightened one), the Dhamma (the teachings), and the Sangha (the community of followers).” In Christian tradition, three symbolizes the Trinity: “Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer” (from a feminist perspective) as well as the three attributes of God, “omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence.” The diverse meaning of threes is not limited to religion but extends to the phases of life such as “child, adult, senior” or “past, present, and future.” Numerological meanings to the Maya, the Chinese, the Egyptians, and the Japanese are also included. These varied and meaningful traditions offer knitters of any background, religion, and spirituality a safe haven and a connection to each other within the group.

**Spiritual Community**

Though the contemplative nature of the ministry is often interior, it is not entirely individual. Community is another integral element of the shawl-knitting ministry. Ideally, each group comes together to knit on a regular basis and the group as a whole contributes to the making of each shawl. By custom, each gathering begins with a prayer or meditation as a transition from the cares and harried business of the world to a calmer spiritual center. The mind is calmed before the spiritual action of the group begins. Members pray in a way meaningful to themselves over their needles and yarns, at the commencement of a shawl, during knitting, and upon completion of the shawl. Often, the shawl is passed to each person to contribute her or his few rows of mindful knitting, and finally the group blesses the finished shawl. Gifting the shawl is also a community act. Ideally, a pair of knitters hand-delivers each shawl and offers a brief prayer while placing it on the shoulders of the recipient. A face-to-face gathering, though ideal, is not always
possible for knitters. Those who are infirm or elderly participate by knitting at home and
donating their finished products to the group; for others, the Internet provides
community. In addition to the Shawl Ministry web site, another Internet knitting
ministry, Healing Shawls, founded and moderated by Susan Bourne, provides a place for
knitters to talk and share ideas and experiences on-line.64

Ecumenical Outreach

The Shawl Ministry has struck such a sensitive chord with spiritually-minded
persons that it has served as a model for many domestic and international groups: “there
are now shawl-knitting ministries in Episcopal, Methodism, Presbyterian,
Congregational, Catholic, and evangelical churches across the U.S.”65 As Kimberly
Winston points out in “Hands-on Spirituality,” the ministry of knitting is not limited to
Christian churches. Conservative Jew Marci Greenberg of Seattle, Washington, has
developed a course called “Knitting by Torah.” In the course, high-school-age students
might discuss why traditional Jewish prayer shawls (tallit) are blue and white. Later,
students use knitting to contemplate the Jewish “principle of tzedakah, ” or charity.66

Janet Bristow, co-founder of the first Prayer-Shawl Ministry, was herself surprised at the
speed with which the idea grew and spread:

As the shawls were passed person-to-person, hand-to-hand, and heart-to-heart, a
grassroots movement began. Others saw that this was something they could
do . . . . We had no idea that our little ministry would go any further.67

It is precisely the lack of rigidity, the inclusiveness and informality that have made the
group so appealing, especially to women looking for a women-friendly and women-
supportive spirituality. When Bristow and Galo hold workshops for those interested in
forming their own ministries, their advice is to be open to possibilities: “We encourage
groups to make it an ecumenical event by inviting others in their community. This is a
great way for people from different faith traditions to gather together and connect across
the barriers of various religious beliefs.”

A Gift of the Spirit

One of the better known offshoot groups, also in Connecticut, was founded by
Susan Jorgensen and Susan Izard and featured in their book *Knitting Into the Mystery.*
Jorgensen writes of her emotions while knitting her first shawl in 2001 for a friend whose
husband had died in an automobile accident: “I prayed to enter her grief; I prayed light
into every stitch; I prayed that she be comforted: I prayed that she be healed.”
Jorgensen stresses the mystery, *mysterion* in the original Greek, which she defines as
meaning, “to shut our eyes.” She continues:

This shawl-knitting ministry invites us to ‘shut our eyes’ in order that we can be
open to seeing what happens in ourselves and within the context of an encounter
with ‘other.’ The mystery that unfolds silently in the rhythm of K3, P3 (knit three,
purl three) asks us to risk seeing new things, to experience the divine in ways that
may feel unconventional and unfamiliar.”

Such selfless contemplation is a gift of compassion and love for the shawl maker as well
as to the shawl recipient.

The Activist Spirit

Skeptics may wonder how such personal, seemingly apolitical action can be
construed as activism. Conventional wisdom would have it that activism has to involve a
critical mass of persons acting visibly, either by writing thousands of letters or marching
in the streets or boycotting corporate products to be viable. The Civil Rights Movement
serves as a ready example. Churches and college campuses provided many of the
movement’s most eloquent speakers and served as staging points for mass marches and
public actions. In knitting charities and ministries, organization is often spiritual, and therefore non-denominational or multi-denominational, symbolic political action rather than “practical” political action. Symbols are, after all, a vital means of social and political mobilization. Otherwise, the public would not react so violently to the idea, let alone the actual gesture, of setting the American flag alight, or burning draft cards, or tossing away Vietnam War medals. Elections have been jeopardized by such gestures. In fact, looking back at the heyday of mass political action in the 1960s and 1970s, it is often the iconic images of such symbolic actions that still inflame or inspire the imagination. Charity or spiritual knitters rarely try to incite such explosive feelings; since their purpose is usually to promote tranquility, their actions are meant to inspire peace and calm.

Perhaps contemporary culture is deluded into thinking that peace is, by nature, less powerful than violence and so must be less powerful as a means of activist expression and action. Yet the non-violent philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi freed India from British rule and proved to be the means through which Martin Luther King Jr. helped to liberate African-Americans from the heavy burdens of Jim Crow and segregation. Some spiritual persons believe that as more people intentionally focus their spiritual and physical energies on the love and compassion they send out into the world, those energies will positively affect collective world energies for the better. This seemingly new spiritual view is not inconsistent with ancient, spiritual practices.71

Threads of Compassion

Threads of Compassion’s knitted (or crocheted) scarves are meant to be a tangible acknowledgement of the life-altering effects of sexual or physical assault.
nell-p-lucy [on-line name in lower case], the founder of Threads of Compassion, a Chicago-based, on-line charity and blog page, is herself a survivor of sexual assault. At age seventeen, she writes on her blog, she and three friends were raped. She felt she had nowhere to turn and no one in whom to confide. To cope, she rejected everyone around her: “I had no idea of the support I truly needed. I guess part of my hope is to offer to others some of the support I wish my friends and I had received.” She observes that typically family and friends are at a loss to know how to comfort rape survivors: “Their fear of adding more pain by saying or doing the wrong thing results in silence . . . a silence that offers no validation to the pain they are going through and that adds to their feeling of isolation.”

Like other knitters, nell-p-lucy believes in the calm and empathy that knitting can communicate to the recipient: “Each scarf is made by someone who wishes to provide a small amount of comfort against the pain being faced, and by doing so, lets the victim know they are not alone.” And, like other scarf or shawl outreach charities, the benefits go both ways. The knitter, especially if she or he has been a victim of abuse, begins to heal through helping others: “The added beauty of the scarves is that the gift is actually two-fold. Through making the scarves, survivors are provided an opportunity to help other victims (in a very non-threatening way).” The group differs from other charities in the immediacy of its response. Scarves are donated to two rape crisis centers in Chicago to be given to assault victims immediately following their attacks, while they are still in hospital emergency rooms receiving care. Though donors and victims never meet, each scarf comes with an attached tag explaining the mission behind Threads of Compassion,
the intentions behind the scarf, and information about where victims may seek additional support.76

Growing Via the World Wide Web

Threads of Compassion became a viable activist outlet as a result of Internet exposure, and it matured quickly. In 2005, the blog was well organized but basic. There were no links and no visuals. Lucy also appeared on another blog (crochetville) discussing and promoting her work. She replied to one woman that shawls (even though they take longer to make) make fine donations and admitted that she needed more scarves: “. . . that’s why I’m placing the info [sic] out to anyone I can.”77 Threads of Compassion scarves were initially intended for victims of sexual assault only, and the scarves were to be made only by survivors. But, as a result of bloggers’ insights, Lucy broadened the applicability of scarves to a larger-world context. Her response to a comment from a blogger (who said she has posted information about Threads of Compassion on her own blog called One Small Thing) illustrates the sensitivities and flexibilities one finds among spiritual knitters who utilize the Internet:

Thanks for posting the info [sic] for my site on your blog. I’m considering changing the requirement for making a scarf from actually being a survivor, to anyone whose lives have been affected by sexual abuse or assault. (Scarves could be done in honor of friends who were raped, family members who suffered abuse, or simply as a symbol of fighting back against sexual violence done to the woman [sic] of Dufar [sic] in the Sudan, etc.). I spoke with two other people today who wanted to make the scarves who were not survivors. And I really did not want to tell them they couldn’t. Anyone who wants to help should be welcome. Figuring out all the kinks in hosting the group is just beginning, and I’m sure I’ll be fixing more as I go.78

Due to efforts of women like Eve Ensler, author of the play and book _Vagina Monologues_, and the resultant V-Day campaign to end violence against women and girls
worldwide, awareness of the scope of violence against women has deepened. The mission of Threads of Compassion broadened and deepened because of free and rapid exchange of ideas among many and varied but like-minded persons within the Internet community.

**Threads of Compassion Blossoms**

By 2006 Threads of Compassion had a logo (two knitting needles stuck through a ball of yarn) and color photographs of finished donations. The page was further brightened with a Frieda Kahlo painting of a white-haired woman pensively knitting (see figure 2.15) and an 1890s studio photograph of one seated woman flanked by two other women each holding their knitting (see figure 2.16). The updated page also contains several helpful links. For immediate victim assistance, readers are directed to The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN). Other useful additions include easy-to-understand knitting instructions, free patterns, and scarf as well as shawl patterns. Because of its Internet visibility, Rape Crisis centers in other states have contacted Threads of Compassion hoping to locate chapters in their own area. What began as individual action quickly grew, matured, and expanded.

**Knitting as Prison Outreach**

Like Threads of Compassion, other groups use knitting as a means of outreach and connection. Twelve female inmates at the Albion Correctional Facility (in western New York state) meet weekly to knit—sometimes for themselves but more often for others. Separated from their families and living in unpleasant and often dangerous
Figure 2.15. Frieda Kahlo, Woman Knitting. Available from http://threadsofcompassion.bravehost.com.

Figure 2.16. Women Knitting, ca. 1890s. Available from http://threadsofcompassion.bravehost.com.
circumstances, these prisoners find that knitting provides an outlet for creativity and nurtures self-discipline, empathy, and camaraderie. In “Knitting For a Change” Buffalo News [New York] reporter Paula Voell described the contributions of volunteers Adrienne Daniels and Helen Morton, who began holding knitting classes in 1992 for the inmates in the medium-security facility.81

Knitting behind prison walls is not without its difficulties, however. Inmates’ sentences usually run from one to eight years, and security is a concern. No inmate may knit in orange, blue, black, or grey, the colors worn by security guards. Also, for security reasons, knitting needles must be signed out and their use strictly monitored. Despite these restrictions, the women find genuine rewards in knitting. One inmate, Martyse Esposito of Wallington, New Jersey, was proud to donate her first project: “Beaming, she recalls how her teachers gave a red, mohair scarf—her first project—to a nun friend of theirs as a Christmas gift. ‘That was a warm sense of accomplishment,’ said Esposito.”82 The women are drawn outside themselves and their situation to think about others. Though everything they make is donated to charity— their blankets for AIDS babies, sweaters sent to Afghanistan, baby clothes for single mothers, and mittens and hats for children—they are permitted to buy yarn to make items for family and friends.

Along with the satisfaction that comes from reaching out to others in need, the women also use knitting to ease the pain of isolation and confinement. One inmate admits to knitting at night in the dark: “It’s so relaxing. It’s all you hear—just the needles and me breathing.” Sherisse Hall tunes her Walkman to Gospel music to drown out the surrounding chaos and escape into her knitting: ‘I knit away and it takes me from inside these walls.”83 And when they leave prison, some women are glad to have
acquired a new skill. One looks forward to knitting for her own children, and Esposito admits, “It makes the light at the end of the tunnel even brighter. And now I know I can take something positive out of here.”

Silent Witness

Other groups merge the charitable impulse with education, and consciousness-raising. One such group is Silent Witness. In 1990, twenty-six women had been murdered in Minnesota by relatives, acquaintances, spouses, or partners. In response, women writers and artists, in concert with women’s organizations in Minnesota, formed the Arts Action Against Domestic Violence. They gave voice to the murdered women by making twenty-six “free-standing, life-sized red wooden figures, each one bearing the name of a woman who lived once, worked, had neighbors, friends, family, children—whose life ended violently at the hands of a husband, ex-husband, partner, or acquaintance.” A twenty-seventh figure was added to represent those uncounted women whose murders went unsolved or were erroneously ruled accidental.

This powerful exhibit, named “Silent Witness,” was so effective that in 1994 Janet Hagberg and Jane Zeller formed a national program that expanded the exhibit from Minnesota to forty-six states by 1997. The group’s goal is to reduce the number of women’s deaths from domestic violence to zero by 2010. The Silent Witness Initiative has a clear, specific, and well-organized, five-point plan: Awareness; Involvement; Commitment; Violence Reduction; and Results. Washington D.C. marches, vigils, conferences, summits, and legislative visits have publicized domestic violence and offered viable solutions to all fifty states and thirty countries.
The symbolic personalization of violence against women that made the Silent Witness exhibit so poignant and compelling has been applied to a knitting program to honor Shelia and her husband U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone (Democrat of Minnesota). Before their tragic deaths in a plane crash in 2002 cut short their good work, the Wellstones were tireless advocates for women’s issues in the State Legislature. To commemorate them and their work on behalf of women, Silent Witness instituted knitting programs called Paul’s Scarves and Shelia’s Shawls whereby contributors knit comfort scarves and shawls for survivors of women and men murdered by domestic violence. The scarves and shawls (which may be knitted, crocheted, woven, or sewn) not only provide solace and comfort to the families of victims but, when worn in public, serve as symbols of the terrible legacy of domestic violence. Silent Witness provides a pattern for Seaman’s Scarf but knitters are also directed to web sites where they might find other, more challenging styles to try. Knitting these scarves and shawls is comforting to the maker as well as to the wearer. Knitters are asked consciously to consider their feelings and emotions as they knit: “... please knit comfort, healing, hope, and love into the scarf so that the person receiving it will feel those feelings when he wears it.” A separate Yahoo blog explains:

Whatever your tradition or heart suggests, let this be a peaceful experience and process for you, as it will be for those who receive the shawl or scarf you have created. These two projects [shawls and scarves] make their ways out into the world, under the auspices of Silent Witness, embracing and enriching the hearts of many in touching and unexpected ways.

Responses indicate that recipients are indeed touched by the gift of a hand-knitted scarf or shawl. Debbie Wheeler wrote to thank knitter Hilda Pizzuti for a shawl she received following the 1998 murder of her youngest sister Dannette: “I feel the love she
put in this while she sat and worked.” Australian Louise McOrmond-Plummer, herself a domestic abuse survivor, called her shawl “. . . the loveliest, most nurturing thing anybody has done for me in a long time.”

Fran B. wrote about the comfort of having her hand-knitted shawl: “Sometimes, sitting here at home alone, I reach for my shawl and just wrap myself in it—feeling the love was made into it, the warmth that we all need when the bad memories hit hard, and remembering the good memories that I have of my little Kendall and Cordae.”

Another woman wrote that her two children like her shawl so much that she allows them to cuddle in it as they go to bed, then she takes it up again when they are asleep. She asked Silent Witness to send her children blankets or shawls of their own “’cuz [sic] I feel bad when I take it from them.” A woman in Hawaii who still grieves for her murdered sister wrote, “. . . it looks beautiful and [is] a reminder that someone cares about Patty. I am still healing even after 26 years. It really matters.”

Knitters ply their craft in the service of infants and children, of teens, adults, and the elderly, of the abused and neglected, the homeless, the indigent, and the disabled. Work of this kind, though it seems restricted to a one-on-one impact on the world, has a more wide-reaching effect. It allows the giver to share some of her or his heart with another and offer hope and encouragement to those who are suffering. Some knitters become involved because their passion for knitting demands an outlet. Others participate because they too have suffered loss, injury, illness, abandonment, loneliness, or grief. Their creations might soften the pain and isolation of a patient undergoing chemotherapy, the fears of a child entering foster care, the loneliness of a sailor weeks at sea and far from home, or the abandonment of a person living on the street. Activism is “vigorous action in pursuing a social end,” so being aware of others’ suffering and taking personal
and/or collective action to alleviate it is activism.\textsuperscript{94} If “the personal is political and the political is personal” then charity knitting is the gentlest form of social activism.\textsuperscript{95}

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Notes
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\textsuperscript{2} Ibid., 121.


\textsuperscript{4} Ibid., 146.

\textsuperscript{5} Available from http://www.tlcforangels.com/home.html; 1 of 4; Internet; accessed 19 August 2006.

\textsuperscript{6} “Welcome to Cuddles; available from http://cuddles-uk.org/; Internet, 1 of 2; accessed 19 August 2006.

\textsuperscript{7} “Our History;” available from http://warmheartswarmbabies.org/; Internet; 1 of 2; accessed 19 August 2006.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 1 of 2.

\textsuperscript{9} “Welcome to Cuddles,” 1 of 2.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 2 of 2.

\textsuperscript{12} “Our History;” available from http://warmheartswarmbabies.org/; Internet; 1-2 of 2; accessed 19 August 2006.

\textsuperscript{13} “Our History;” available from http://www.heifer.org/site/c.edJRKQNig/b.2901520/; Internet; 1 of 2; accessed 2 September 2006.

\textsuperscript{14} “A Gift to Warm the Heart;” available from http://www.heifer.org/site/apps/ka/ec/product.asp?=edJRKQNigFiG&b…; 1 of 2; Internet; accessed 2 September 2006.

53


17 Ibid.


20 Available from http://www.afghansforafghans.org/about.htm; 2-3 of 3; Internet; accessed 8 September 2006.

21 Sefton, 3 and 1.

22 Ibid., 2 of 3.

23 Despite a careful search of the Mossy Cottage Knits blog, the Dulaan site, and all related links, the last names of Tom and Ryan were never revealed. The names were finally revealed by Lee Ann Baluzuc in “Dulaan to Others,” Vogue Knitting, Spring/Summer 2006, 16.


27 “Helping Mongolia’s Orphans and Street Children,” 1 of 1.
28 Ibid. According to the Mongolian government’s official tourism website, the correct spelling of the capital is Ulaan Bataar; available from www.mongoliatourism.gov.mn/; Internet, accessed 8 February 2007.


31 Ibid., 1 of 12.


34 “Knitting to Warm Mongolia;” available from http://www.fireprojects.org/dulaan.htm; 1 of 2; Internet; accessed 29 October 2006.


36 “Knitters in Every State Keep Busy Year-Round Creating Gifts for Mariners;” 2 of 3; Internet; accessed 2 September 2006.

37 Barbara Clauss; e-mail to author; Internet; 5 September 2006.

38 Ibid.


40 Ibid., 3 of 10.

41 Ibid., 4 of 10.

42 Ibid., 3 of 10.
43 Ibid., 2 of 10.

44 Ibid., 4 of 10.


47 Ibid., 2 of 5.


49 “Prayer Shawl Ministry Home Page: About the Shawls;” 2-3 of 5.

50 Ibid., 3 of 5.

51 In some feminist spirituality circles, the stages of women’s lives—maiden, matron, and crone (wise elder woman)—are commemorated and celebrated. “Croning” is a rite of passage into the wisdom, power, and influence of age. Such observances are meant to counteract the youth obsession of popular culture that dismisses and diminishes women as they age.


56 Ibid., 1-2 of 2.

58 Paula Voell, 1 of 3.


60 Rebecca Ortinau; “Healing Power of Prayer Shawls;” CraftHealthy Living; available from http://www.shawlministry.com/Articles/CraftHealthyLiving.htm.; 1 of 2; accessed 8 September 2006.


62 Ibid., 1 of 2.


68 Ibid., 1 of 2.

At Princeton University, a group of scientists, artists, and others is studying collective energy and its possible impact on the world-at-large as part of the global consciousness project. Detailed information is available from http://nooshpere.princeton.edu/index.html.

The founder of Threads of Compassion refers to herself exclusively by her online name in various forms: nellplucy or NELL-P-LUCY, and nell-p-lucy. She will hereafter be cited as nell-p-lucy.

Available from http://threadsofcompassion.blogspot.com; 1 of 2; Internet; accessed 8 September 2006.


Ibid.


Ibid., 3 of 4.

For the history and goals of the V-Day Campaign see http://www.vday.org.contents/vday.


Ibid., 1-2 of 3

Ibid., 2 of 3.

Ibid.

CHAPTER III

KNITTING THE DO-IT-YOURSELF LIFESTYLE

For some knitters, doing for themselves is a social statement of creativity and empowerment. Their DIY (do-it-yourself) mindset is not entirely original, however. Doing-it-yourself was the norm until the Industrial Revolution and to a lesser degree until after the Second World War. Where before doing-it-yourself was an economic necessity, today it is often a reaction against the cookie-cutter sameness of corporate-driven materialism that often robs persons of feelings of connection, community, personal mastery, and independence of action.

DIY knitters share some common affiliations: many are in their twenties and thirties, have an interest in punk rock/independently produced (indie) music and its surrounding culture, and read or write zines (Internet or self-published magazines). They are often highly educated and technologically savvy, possessing a comfort and familiarity with computers and easy access to the Internet and online communities of bloggers and web sites. They share (to varying degrees) social and political viewpoints such as feminism, fair-trade, anti-corporate/anti-global sentiments, and ecological and economic sustainability, attitudes that characterize Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson’s Cultural Creatives.

Despite these commonalities, their interests and emphases vary. Some are more political than others; some cast their nets widely while others may be single-issue
focused. Many take pleasure in participating in an on-line community—whether it be one-on-one contact, “lurking” (reading but not participating directly) on blogs, writing their own blogs, or starting “crafty” DIY web sites of their own.

**DIY and Third Wave Feminism**

Though in some ways they are the most visible of the “new,” Post-Modern knitters, their motives and history can be perplexing. The DIY movement has its roots in Third-Wave feminism. Second-Wave feminism (as it was defined by popular media in the late 1960s and 1970s) is what most people think of as feminism—demands for social and political reforms that gave women access to careers, economic reforms in lending and credit, Title IX and access to sports, and so on. Third-Wave feminism builds on these social, legal, and political achievements but has its own interpretation of those successes and of what remains to be achieved. Many older feminists question many young women’s dedication to “true” feminist ideals and many younger feminists think older feminists have remained too rule-bound, too mired in past methods, attitudes, and goals. Young women believe issues of equality have moved beyond the 1970s, that times have changed and Second-Wave feminists have not changed with them. As Post-Modern theory questions authority, so young women question the rules and methods of the past and argue that no one should impose rules or limits on their thoughts and behaviors.¹

**The Intersection of Riot Grrrl and DIY**

The majority of DIY knitters and crafters cite Punk Rock and the Riot Grrrl movement as the progenitors of contemporary DIY philosophy. Understanding this makes Stitch ‘N Bitch founder Debbie Stoller’s declaration “Crafting is the new rock and roll, baby” more meaningful.² Riot Grrrl emerged in the early 1990s as “a feminist
musical movement” that grew out of the larger, male-defined and -driven Punk Rock culture.³ A significant component of Riot Grrrl philosophy is self-definition:

Riot Grrrl was a grassroots, third wave feminist movement. . . riot grrrl was neither an organization or a specific thought, but instead thrived on non hierarchal ‘chapters’ set up across America and parts of Europe connecting mostly young women with music, a thriving zine scene [self-published magazines], and direct political action.⁴

As its growled spelling of girl (grrrl) suggests, young women founded Riot Grrrl out of anger to develop their own “voice” within Punk Rock by forming all-women bands and writing independent fanzines. This inspiring example of grass-roots DIY influenced many of the women now at the forefront of the DIY craft movement.

Riot Grrrl intersects with the DIY movement at several points. Riot Grrrls, like DIYers, define themselves as ‘Third-Wave” feminists, and their musical themes often feature issues such as violence against women, childhood sexual molestation, and social inequity that influence the DIY activism. Riot Grrrl also fits Post-Modern sensibilities of not obeying rules and of questioning “authority,” whatever its source: “Riot grrrl is being a non-conformist and not meeting society’s standards. . . .”⁵ Freedom of choice links Riot Grrrl and knitting/crafting philosophy. Young women knit if they like, when and how they like, and in ways that satisfy themselves rather than the culture-at-large. They pursue craft for personal pleasure and satisfaction rather than by cultural fiat. Riot Grrrl continues to inform the DIY outlook in knitting and other crafts.

To an outsider, DIY’s claims to social activism may seem overstated. It is true that not all Do-It-Yourself knitters pursue activist causes. Some simply craft to express their self-defined style and to thrive creatively outside corporately defined fashion. A sizeable number believe that knitting, crocheting, or sewing their own clothes, gifts, and
housewares, or reusing and repurposing materials symbolically liberates them from societal constraints and labels. One of the labels these young women challenge most is that whatever is traditionally defined as “women’s work” is somehow less imaginative, less worthy, or less artful than traditionally male pursuits. The resurgence in knitting among young, urban, professional women is best exemplified by Stitch ‘N Bitch and two influential web sites, Jean Railla’s GetCrafty and Leah Kramer’s Craftster.

**Debbie Stoller and Stitch ‘N Bitch**

Among the first to publicize DIY knitting and bring it to the forefront of public awareness was Debbie Stoller and her Stitch ‘N Bitch knitting groups. Stoller did not invent DIY knitting but tapped into burgeoning DIY sentiments. Riot Grrrl had laid the groundwork for DIY, so Do-It-Yourself knitting is likely a phenomenon separate from the retreat to home and family elicited by the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center. Insiders at *Publishers Weekly* had already noticed an upsurge in the publication of knitting books a year earlier. Stoller recognized that what was making knitting “cool” again was young women self-consciously differentiating themselves and their craft from the stereotype. Post Modern knitting emphasizes kink and quirk in attitude and projects. Debbie Stoller understood and presented this “new,” hip, urban crafter.

Stoller herself is not quite as young as the twenty- and early thirty-year olds who have joined her Stitch ‘N Bitch knitting groups in droves across the country. Her casual, slang-infused speech belies her background. After writing her dissertation on the media’s influence on women’s self-perceptions and earning her Ph. D. in women’s psychology from Yale in 1993, Stoller founded *BUST* magazine as the voice of young, Third-Wave
feminists. *BUST* and its web site, as well as Stoller’s books, serve as a clearinghouse for information and a contact source for young knitters. In a February 2006 interview with *Spun Magazine*, Stoller described *BUST* as a women’s magazine that is fun and real and true to young women’s experiences today, unlike conventional women’s publications:

> It’s a pretty straight-forward idea but it [is] hard for people to grasp sometimes. They really have a hard time acknowledging that there is this population that are [sic] kind of alternative chicks, who are sort of feminist and crafty and into the indie rock scene, I guess. People don’t even realize that those people exist.  

In *BUST* as well as in knitting, Stoller tapped into that often disregarded population of young women unrecognized by the mainstream.

The Third-Wave feminism that drives Stoller’s views and defines *BUST*’s tone and content is one with which many of Stitch ‘N Bitch’s knitters relate. In the introduction to *The BUST Guide to the Girl Order*, a book she co-edited with Marcelle Karp in 1999, their vision extends beyond Generation X (those aged late twenties to early thirties) to what they define as:

> Generation XX, we women slackers, the girls having a difficult time becoming women, and the adult fears that are particular to being female: having children, fear of becoming “spinsters,” dealing with men who can’t “commit,” being way more than two boys away from being virgins, aging and our body image, to name a few.  

*BUST*’s followers have serious issues with Second-Wave feminism. They often feel led astray by promises that they could have could have it all, given the limitations they still face. Despite believing their lives would turn out just as they wanted, today’s young feminists remained unsatisfied. Karp and Stoller sounded the clarion call for all younger women:

> . . . there are a whole heap of us late twenties and early thirties groovy girl-women. And we need to hear each other. We need to help each other. We need
to laugh at each other. We need to speak to each other. So speak. We wanna [sic] read you. We wanna recognize ourselves and laugh. We wanna have fun. We wanna get mad. We wanna BUST!\textsuperscript{10}

Stoller’s point of view in \textit{BUST} (which informs her connection to young knitters) is by equal parts serious, ironic, and irreverent. In this context, Stitch ‘N Bitch was born.\textsuperscript{11}

Stoller, like many women of her generation, struggled with what she perceived as the conflict between a yearning to handcraft and being a feminist. Though she first learned to knit as a child, it was not until 1999 that knitting became an obsession.\textsuperscript{12} As Stoller shared news of her new passion with others, some asked her to teach them to knit, while others, barely masking their disdain, wondered why any feminist would ever want to knit. What began as a personal obsession turned into a mission to, in Stoller’s words, “take back the knit,” to reclaim the dignity and worth of handcrafts of every sort and the women who make them.

Knitting and other handcrafts, as Stoller sees it, have gotten a bad reputation because they are traditionally defined in the culture as women’s work and therefore “worth less” than men’s work, an interpretation that is neither original to Stoller nor one that would be denied by older feminists. She argues that she, like other young feminists, had mistakenly believed that the only route to true equality was to eschew those things culturally gendered female as traps and snares that held women back from social, political, and economic equality (as indeed many once did). Like other feminists of the late 1970s, she saw the lives of the women in her family as stifled: “I saw the limitations of their lives as a great tragedy, one that would never befall women in the future, least of all me.” And so, except for a few guilty indulgences in handcrafts while visiting family in Holland, she put aside needlework.\textsuperscript{13}
It was only after disdainful rebuffs of her knitting that Stoller began to reevaluate where she, as a feminist, stood on the issue of handcrafts. The feminist revolution of thought that had begun thirty years ago, she argued, had killed the Betty Friedan-style desperate housewife: “so why, dammit, wasn’t knitting receiving as much respect as any other hobby? Why was it still so looked down on?” She concluded that handcrafts of every sort, despite feminism, were still discredited as merely the province of women and their achievements discounted. She asked, “Why couldn’t we all—women and men alike—take the same pride in the work our mothers had always done as did in the work of our fathers?”

Her point resonated with young women. She expounded on these and other observations in her 2003 book *Stitch ‘N Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook*. The knitting, embroidery, and tatting executed by her mother’s Dutch family, all fine needlewomen, imbued in her a respect and admiration for such skills. In a February 2006 interview she shared her family’s history of handcrafting: “I come from a long line of needleworkers. . . . I grew up with a much deeper appreciation and understanding for that stuff.” Stoller herself has an intimate familiarity with handcrafts. In *Stitch ‘N Bitch* she movingly describes both her grandmother’s youth when she was responsible for knitting socks for a family of fifteen and her old age when, as she lay dying, she fretted over having one sock of a pair still to knit and could not be easy in her mind until Stoller offered to knit the other.

Stoller’s perspective also includes the history of knitting in particular and the work of women in general. She gives an overview of knitting beginning with Medieval knitting guilds, continues through the Victorian period, and includes women’s knitting
for the national effort in both World Wars. Stoller admits that knitting’s comeback is nothing new but part of a cycle of favor and disfavor that handcrafts have experienced for hundreds of years.

With implied criticism of Second-Wave Feminism, Stoller calls herself a “crafty feminist.” Born after many of the initial aims of Second-Wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s had been achieved (access to birth control, reproductive choice, laws governing sexual discrimination and harassment, entry into the professions, a liberalizing of laws and attitudes regarding rape, marriage, and divorce), some young feminists (though not Stoller herself) may be unaware of how hard fought were the battles, how hard won the victories, and how tenuous remain the gains. There is some truth to Stoller’s claim that Second-Wave feminists saw handcrafts, gendered as they were and still are, as holding women down, trapping them in the home, and so, sought to escape them. These feminists for a time identified with the predominantly male-defined idea of success and abandoned female-gendered work as being inferior to men’s work since the culture in which they had come of age viewed it as such. Second-Wave feminists realized that unless and until women had the freedom to pursue any work and receive equal pay for that decision, they would never achieve equality. Pink-collar ghetto jobs (bookkeepers, secretaries, waitresses) and care-giving careers such as child- and elder care still paid less than men’s jobs in other fields requiring comparable training. Unequal wages kept women dependent, and their work, although essential to the economy, remained cheap.

Because working outside the home no longer casts women in the role of social radicals, and because many young women currently earn high salaries, buy their own
homes, and take control of their own finances, they sometimes tend to dismiss earlier feminists for their perspectives and emphases. In her article “Do It Yourself” Janelle Brown, of salon.com speaks for many young women when she reflects on Stoller’s position:

The very fact that knitting, sewing, crocheting and other 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. Where early feminists denounced the burdens of homemaking as enslaving and menial, third-wavers are celebrating the ultrafeminine [sic] in the spirit of independence and, to a certain extent, rebellion.¹⁹

Such a “rebellion” against earlier feminist positions in combination with Riot Grrrl philosophy has, in part, led to the DIY movement, where Stoller squarely places the revival of knitting and other handcrafts:

Knitting is part of the same do-it-yourself ethos 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. But every generation puts its own spin on the craft, and for today’s knitters the emphasis has been on using chunky yarn and fat needles for quickly completed projects; experimenting with exotic fibers sheared from alpaca, silk recycled from Indian saris, and yarn spun from hemp plants; and creating funky, colorful sweaters, bags, and scarves.²⁰

As much a part of Stitch ‘N Bitch’s philosophy as doing-it-yourself may be, the degree of activism with which members imbue their knitting varies. Some DIY’ers simply like to knit “cool” projects. Others may see taking up knitting as a conscious and deliberate assertion that work, because women carry it out, is not frivolous or unimportant. They see women’s work (knitting) being reclaimed in a gutsy good-humored manner. There is a self-conscious edginess running through Stitch ‘N Bitch from it’s hip vulgarity (“You Ain’t Shit if You don’t Knit”) to its decidedly retro cowgirl mascot (a slight variation on a late-1930s Enoch Bolles pin-up of a curvaceous, white-
mini-skirted young woman.) In the latter case, she packs knitting needles instead of a six-gun and twirls around her small-waisted, big-busted body a lasso of red yarn instead of rope with the legend “Revolutionizing the Knitting Circle” printed beneath (see figure 3.1). Knitting is a craft for the young, the sophisticated, the free-thinking and free-acting “girl.”

It is just this sort of pre-feminist imagery that is unappealing to some. Not every feminist agrees with Stoller and others in DIY. Ariel Levy, who by virtue of her age (early thirties) would be expected to identify with Third-Wave interpretations of sexuality, is one who does not. Levy, the author of *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, wondered why contemporary young women who identified themselves as feminists were wearing the Playboy bunny logo, or the classic trucker mud-flap design, or Tee shirts that said “Eye Candy.” In search of answers, Levy looked back to the 1970s when feminists split over the concept of whether sexual pursuits such as pornography were a woman’s right of personal expression or the culture’s misogynist abuse of women. Those who championed women’s participation in or enjoyment of unfettered sexual expression called themselves Sex Positive feminists. It is with these women that many Third-Wave feminist DIY knitters appear to identify, as seen in their heroines and their knitting designs.

Many Third-Wave knitters champion seemingly pre-feminist representations of sexuality. In her second book *Stitch ‘N Bitch Nation* (2004), Stoller included a knitting pattern created by Jenna Adorno, “Mud Flap Girl Tank Top,” a knitted version of the long-distance truck drivers’ icon of a sexy, naked woman (see figure 3.2). Adorno
morphs the emblem that feminists originally interpreted as an objectification of themselves into a flag of freedom around which young women should rally. She cited the 2004 television character Samantha from *Sex in the City* (who wears the same image as a necklace—see figure 3.3) as a shining example of an empowered woman who remained unattached and free. Adorno exclaims:

Now, *that’s* [Adorno’s emphasis] worth commemorating on a mud flap. This tank [the knitting pattern] was designed for all the strong, sassy, female-positive women everywhere. What’s better than a sexy girl sporting a sexy girl image and taking it as her own?²⁵

Figure 3.2. Mud-Flap Trucker Girl. This is the long-distance truckers’ iconic image of women. Available from http://www.mondotees.com.
Taking her cues from an industry dominated by men, Adorno identifies with the popular television show *Sex in the City*, a story about twenty-five-to-thirty-five-year-olds (roughly the same age as her knitting audience). Samantha’s wearing of the mud flap necklace becomes, for Adorno and like-minded young women, a symbol of female freedom of living life on her own terms. Samantha’s alleged “power” resides in her sexual attractiveness, a quality, ironically, that will soon fade in a culture that idolizes young, “hot” women. Adorno and other Third-Wave feminists interpret Samantha’s co-opting of the truckers’ fantasized caricature of a woman as a symbol of power because she has supposedly diffused it by embracing and fulfilling it. Samantha lives her life, as Ariel Levy would counter, “like a man” with the same mythically voracious appetite for and matter-of-fact attitude toward sex.

Paradoxically, these knitters may be treating sexuality the same way they accuse Second-Wave feminists of treating craft and femininity, that is, by capitulating to male
cultural definitions. Adorno’s endorsement of Samantha as “female positive” equates sex with power. Young knitters interpret sexy knitting as a means of protest and a reclamation of feminine power. They may underestimate the degree to which the culture invests the symbol with justified male power and domination, and therefore, the less likely women’s appropriation of the symbol will necessarily diffuse and transform it.

Stoller praises the patterns in *Stitch ‘N Bitch Nation* for their cutting edge creativity and for:

> the energy, inspiration—and, of course, frustration—that went into designing these projects and writing up these patterns just about explode off the pages, and I hope you dig them as much as I do. I am truly awestruck at the talent, creativity, and balls-out bravery of our nation of knitters.²⁶

Stoller’s laudable enthusiasm and passion for the pattern designers’ creativity aside, describing knitting with a male-generated and referenced comment like “balls-out bravery” would seem to contradict the woman-focused attitudes of Stitch ‘N Bitch knitting.

As exemplified by Stoller’s choice of words, another Third-Wave component of the *Bust* and *Stitch ‘N Bitch* ethos is the use of sexual slang. On the *BUST* web site and in the magazine itself, products are promoted via the “Boobtique” (an intentional play on the *BUST* name and boutique). In the same vein, when Stefanie Japel designs a multi-functional, interchangeable mini skirt/tube top combo dubbed “Totally Tubular,” (a takeoff on 1980’s slang), she calls her tube top a “boob tube.” Breast imagery and slang for breasts is part of the self-defined “sex positive” attitude of *BUST* readers and *Stitch ‘N Bitch* knitters. Young knitters argue that when they appropriate male sexual slang they diffuse the negative power of the word as well as the intent of those who originated it.
The same argument has been made by some African Americans regarding the word “nigger,” a word so emotionally, politically, and socially charged with meaning that it is usually referred to in whispered asides as “the N word.” While it is true that those inside this historically marginalized group have greater social sanction to use the word than those outside the group, the power of the word, its historic connotations with discrimination, enslavement, and dehumanization remain undiminished outside the group. Despite or perhaps because of the inherent power of words, so long as any group (in this case, women) lacks political, economic, and social parity with the dominant power group (in this case men) words retain the force and intent of the group that first coined them.

Nevertheless, some DIY knitters seem content to flaunt references once deemed sexist. In another pattern, young, tea-drinking knitter Amy Barker finds that tea-cozies have their uses, but adapts the traditional flowery designs to suit her personal tastes. “I wanted something with a sense of humor to fit in with my retro kitchen (emphasis on kitsch), and this is the result.” One of her “Two for Tea” designs, knitted in orange letters on a blue ground, reads “Coffee, Tea, or Me?” It is unclear whether Barker is familiar with the original tell-all memoir of two flight attendants that played on the fantasies of male business travelers that every attractive stewardess was part of the service provided for their refreshment and enjoyment. This is a mild example of what Ariel Levy terms “raunch culture.” Nonetheless, Stitch ‘N Bitchers argue that their knitting empowers women to reclaim women’s sexuality as their own, as valuable, and important.
Other knitting patterns in *Stitch ‘N Bitch Nation* seem innocuous enough, though they suggest appeasement of cultural dictates by emphasizing the cuteness, softness, and youth of the women who knit and wear them. Patterns range from the pink “Warm Fuzzies” scarf and the Bear Hat (complete with ears) to “Later ‘Gator Mitts” (green alligator mittens), “Felted Furry Foot Warmers,” and “Mobile Monsters,” (a knitted piggy or bunny cell phone holder). Other knitting patterns draw upon a perceived popular cultural past such as “That Seventies Poncho” (based upon the current television series, *That Seventies Show*), “Flower Power” (a 1960s-inspired sweater), “London Calling,” (a Mary Quant-inspired sweater complete with the Union Jack), the “Cabled Newsboy Cap,” 1980s-inspired “Roller Girl Legwarmers,” and “Knit My Ride” 1950s-style fuzzy dice and wheel cover. Still others look to popular music (some with Punk overtones) and television for inspiration: “Joey Ramone, Henry Rollins, and Joan Jett dolls” (music), “Jesse’s Flames” (sweater inspired by the television show *Monster Garage*), and the retro Sonny and Cher overlaid with Punk “The Bead Goes On” beaded wrist cuffs (with skull or broken heart). They are a fascinating mélange of cultural images, often perceived through the veil of television re-runs and re-makes, and they echo the feisty self-determination underlying DIY.

The same dissonances and conflicts that continue to fracture larger culture are evident in the feminist concepts in *Stitch ‘N Bitch* and *BUST*. A Third-Wave view of entitlement might have lulled young knitters into complacency. Some young feminist knitters risk doing what they accuse earlier feminists of doing—internalizing the culture’s view of their femininity and sexuality. What seems a brave and outrageous reclamation of femininity may still be mired in definitions women themselves have not consciously
made. Levy describes it as “conforming to someone else’s—some more powerful’s—distorted notion of what you represent. In doing so, you may be getting ahead in some way. . . but you are simultaneously reifying the system that traps you.”

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the Stitch ‘N Bitch “platform,” Stoller and her fellow Stitch ‘N Bitches argue convincingly that “being crafty” does not preclude being a feminist. Today’s knitters claim their right to craft in ways that speak to them as young women of the twenty-first century, but perhaps at a price.

Women Get Crafty: Jean Railla and getcrafty.com

Jean Railla, a contemporary of Debbie Stoller has become another strong influence in the DIY movement. She, too, has played a role in giving voice to contemporary young women’s attitudes toward handcrafts. The newest wave of crafting may have begun with knitting, but quickly blossomed to include most of what would have once been called “the Domestic Arts” as well some non-traditional domestic arts. Railla lays out the “manifesto” of what she terms “the New Domesticity” in her 2004 book Get Crafty: Hip Home Ec., and on the web site she founded, GetCrafty.com:

Getcrafty, as the hub of the new domesticity, is about combining career and cooking and crafts, and family and going out and staying in and fashion and home decoration and, of course, politics, books and philosophy. It’s about not having to choose between being a feminist or a domestic goddess or an intellectual or an artist. It’s about using powertools [sic], [it’s about] people. It’s about messing things up. Not playing by the rules. Making home ec. hip. Am I making sense?

The same Riot Grrrl-inspired rebellion and verve that motivates Stoller’s knitters drives knitters (and others) who identify with GetCrafty’s combination of community, craft, and (primarily) individual activist initiatives.
Like Stoller, Railla remembers her youth being filled with craft, Punk Rock, and political ideals. She recalls, “I promised myself I’d become a feminist warrior; I would never marry, never be tied down to keeping a home, and never find myself changing dirty diapers.” And like fellow DIYers, she felt and continues to feel alienated from older feminists who, she says, taught her that:

housework and domestic arts were drudgery—work done by women who didn’t know better. Smart, enlightened women became writers, thinkers; they became important, like men.34

It was only later, in her thirties, that she realized that, despite her career and personal successes, her pleasure in life was diminished by not cooking, decorating, crafting and otherwise taking care of her needs as an adult woman.35 She shares Stoller’s conviction that women should and must reclaim their traditional work, which she argues is women’s heritage, “and dismissing it only doubles the injustice already done to women who didn’t have any choice but to be domestic in the first place.” 36

GetCrafty.com is an on-line community of (mostly) women who find meaning in creating with their imaginations and making with their hands. Craft, including knitting, is their way of being in the world, a way to connect. The site becomes a recipe for free-form creativity that reflects the interests of many DIY knitters.

The site also emphasizes interaction among members through discussion forums, blogs, and pictures. Even more than the other site forums, “community announcements & suggestions [sic]” and the “GetCrafty Community Book” encourage direct participation of the site members. This is where viewers and members turn for news about anything new and opportunities in the crafting world. They are also allowed free rein to suggest, criticize, nudge, and prod for ways of making the GetCrafty community
“even better.” An extension of this goal is the “GetCrafty Community Book” to be filled with community suggestions on cooking and crafts. Other forums include “domestic bliss” (housekeeping, family, children, babies, “creating a wonderful home”), “consuming passions” (food, wine, and recipes), “book worms” (favorite books and “literary gossip” on books of all topics), “freestyle” (anything goes discussions), as well as the requisite crafts forums and how-tos on crafts ranging from knitting to sewing to stained glass, to beads, candles, vintage jewelry and clothing, to Christmas and household projects. Never one-dimensional, participants are as apt to discuss feminism as knitting and other crafts.

GetCrafty’s popularity extends far beyond the borders of the United States. A number of members hail from countries as diverse as Belarus, Germany, Canada, Indonesia, Japan, Israel, French Polynesia, Spain, the United Kingdom, and South Africa (see figures 3.4 and 3.5). The idea of free choice, of not being limited by cultural expectations, encapsulates the platform of Third-Wave-inspired DIY knitters and other crafters. In her letter to site visitors and members entitled “It’s All Good,” Railla explains the purpose of GetCrafty:

. . . getcrafty is not about a bunch of shoulds. It’s not about perfection. . . . At getcrafty, we try not to feel bad about the things we don’t do. . . . Instead, we celebrate the things we do do. . . . See. It’s all good. No one really cares that your aren’t doing it all, darling. Just have fun. Discover some things you like. Get a hobby. Make a nice house. Eat good food. Figure out how you want to live. . . . If you like to craft, to make things by hand, to be in touch with the magic of creating, then do it. If not, who cares?

In “Low-Tech Crafts,” Jackie Guerra, (host of Jewelry Making on the DIY Network), explained “my mother’s generation was crafty because they had to be. For the post-feminist generation, it’s a choice.” There are few rules to restrict what the community
may craft or say, but that does not seem to result in chaos or inconsideration. There are a few “Codes of Honor,” the foremost being not using blogs to advertise business: “Even if your company is super-bitchen crafty-tastic, the blogs are meant to build community, not businesses.” Doing-it-yourself, for many, is a lifestyle choice not merely a commercial activity.

Another major DIY web site is craftster.org. Computer programmer Leah Kramer founded it in August 2003 as a way of meeting other “crafty” sorts whose interests coincided with her own: “Somewhere along the lines she thinks she [Kramer] inhaled too much glue because she is attracted to crafts that are irreverent, ironic, kitschy, or cleverly eco-friendly.” The site’s audience is primarily the twenty-to-thirty-plus, urban crafter, though one of its volunteer web managers is retired.

Part of the DIY philosophy is “making do” by creatively using/reusing what is readily available, so the site is a place where everyone can find up-to-date craft projects as well as other crafters who will guide them through the process and inspire them with trendy and interesting ideas. Crafters find traditional projects like tea cozies reinterpreted for the young and hip. (The site’s slogan “no tea cozies without irony” defines the tone of the projects.) So, the “Behind-the-8-Ball” or “Coffee, Tea, Or Me” Tea cozies in *Stitch ’N Bitch Nation* would resonate with these crafters as well. So do punk-rock-inspired baby clothes or scarves with skulls. One Craftster-featured tee shirt designed for

knitters sports the slogan “Knit Fast—Die Warm.” Puns, irony, and playfulness feature prominently in Craftster projects:

Craftster is a forum for people who love to make things but who are not inspired by cross-stitched home sweet home plaques and wooden boxes with ducks in bonnets painted on . . . . If you’ve been known to run with scissors, you can break the rules of crafting with your fellow rebel DIY’ers here!

They show off their current craft projects, ask for advice on future projects, and get inspiration for future endeavors. Just about anything goes for craft projects—in this case, a mask to wear to a movie (see figure 3.6).


Kramer has a mission. She defines Craftster as a “repository” of crafts knowledge and techniques that, if not actually in the process of being lost, were felt to be slipping away by the (mostly) young persons who frequent the site. Unlike usual patterns and
instructions that feature only a photograph of the finished project, Craftster stresses the process as well as the final product. Site members are encouraged to send in photographs of their projects at every stage as well as the finished item.

The goal of the site is to offer crafters “a user-driven forum that focuses on archiving actual projects with pictures and step-by-step instructions.” As Kramer has observed, finding such detailed information in an organized fashion is difficult or impossible on most sites and makes Craftster stand out from the other DIY sites.\(^4^6\) With a membership of 55,000 and over 300,000 visitors, her goals have mass appeal.\(^4^7\) In its brief on-line life, Craftster’s influence has been noted by such prominent newspapers as *The Boston Globe, LA Times Magazine, The Chicago Tribune, The Seattle Times,* and *USA Today* as well as the magazines *Jane, Macworld, Time, Budget Living, Venus Magazine,* and *Staple.*\(^4^8\) The pleasure of creation in community with others defines this group’s activism and has proven a compelling draw to thousands seeking individuality in an increasingly mass-merchandised society.

Given its DIY mindset, Craftster’s culture is necessarily populist, grass-roots, and non-hierarchical. The Internet allowed an individual woman (Leah Kramer with the requisite computer skills) to start a web site with limited resources but mass appeal, and, with the help of volunteers, to challenge corporate domination over individual creativity.

This lies at the heart of all DIY endeavors; creativity cannot be taken away unless individuals surrender it. Over forty volunteers moderate crafts departments ranging from knitting, crochet, and embroidery to glass to paper and book making to recycling and repurposing projects. Annie Tomlin, in her article for *Venus Magazine,* “Have Modern, Will Craft: Craftster.org Knits Together Online D.I.Y. Community,” highlights projects
that are as inventive as the on-line names of their creators: “strangelittlemamma” creates a knitted Ice-Cream Pint Cozy, “adamkempa” honors his late brother Chris by rendering his likeness in a bottle cap mosaic, and “sallysparks” designs a sundress made from Smurfs sheets that she bought at a thrift store.49

Craftster’s volunteers mirror the patchwork of ages, interests, backgrounds, and experiences of the larger web audience. Many are college students of varying majors (Criminal Justice, Geology, Engineering, or Graphic Arts), but at least one is retired. One works in a restaurant, one is a musician in a band, many have their own blogs and on-line businesses, and all are passionate crafters.

Knitting and other crafts are or evolve into more than mere hobbies to become an expression of personal, even spiritual, identity. One volunteer known by the member name “vanillaxlight” used crafting to negotiate adolescence. Member “kategirl” “likes coming to Craftster to see how the communication of ideas progresses as people build off each other’s projects and inspiration.”50 This support, sharing, helpfulness, and interest in others may be driven by a need for connection so often missing in contemporary culture. Though not all Craftster members are women (the majority, however, are), the tone of accommodation and consensus fits a time-honored female pattern of interaction and conversation style. The easy informality of the interchange among members is also an outgrowth of on-line writing style. Members use text-messaging shorthand, so there are breathless exclamations of OMG! (Oh My God!). Words like “cute,” “kick ass,” and “too cool” are sprinkled liberally throughout.

Craftster exists for the pleasure and enjoyment of its members who see themselves as kindred spirits, part of a group with common goals—to explore creativity,
using knitting and other crafts, outside the mainstream. The site is non-profit, and its classified section offers members a means to post notices about trade supplies or products. Craftster also provides low-cost advertising to its small-business owner-membership. Although anyone may use the site free of charge, viewers are encouraged to become supporters at a cost ranging from twelve to thirty-six dollars a year and to choose “the subscription level that you feel best suits your budget or whichever one best represents what you get out of Craftster.”

Like their Stitch ‘N Bitch sisters, many site members see the reclamation of traditional women’s crafts, the repurposing of supplies, independent production, and community participation as activist acts in themselves. Other more freeform examples of activism are raised on an as-needed basis. In the “Crafting For Good Not Evil” section of the forum, member “mazzy” writes asking for craft suggestions to help her and a group of friends raise money to pay medical bills and expenses for a friend, a single mother without medical insurance, who has been diagnosed with breast cancer; “Help me find boob related [sic] crafts that are naughty, risqué, silly, and/or surprising,” she asks. As with other requests of this kind, members respond with sympathy, encouragement, and suggestions including, but not exclusively limited to knitting. (Many members have interests in a wide variety of crafts.) Ideas range from a knitted “boobie scarf” to breast-shaped cookies and cupcakes to pink ribbon pins to embellished bras. Another call for craft suggestions by site member “weeping_cloud [sic]” is aimed at girls ages nine to twelve. Dismayed by popular culture where so many little girls are Brittany Spears wannabes “and pissed off by the lack of good female role models . . . ,” she and a friend planned meetings for girls to discuss “a different strong woman from history or today,
what positive traits she has, what she did, and a craft that has something to do with the woman we learn about that day. Knitting as well as quilting and hand sewing are all suggested as ways of showing the degree to which women were responsible for clothing their families in the past. Other creative crafts like jewelry, jean pocket purses, and handkerchief dolls add to site members’ advice. Respondents recall their memories of learning to knit and craft as girls; mothers write about crafting with their children; adults are inspired by new ideas about what to do with children they know. Anyone who believes that contemporary, technology-driven society must necessarily lead to isolation and loneliness has not visited sites like Craftster.

Post-Modern knitting is largely a middle-class, urban pursuit. No longer an economic necessity, hand-knitting is far more expensive than purchasing mass-produced knit goods. It is middle-class knitters who can afford to buy novelty, fashion, and luxury yarns that have driven knitting’s soaring popularity. At the same time, there remains a segment of knitters dedicated to using knitting as a means of acting out their social, political, and ecological consciousness; they either produce yarn or patronize private independent producers of supplies. Regardless, the younger knitters to whom Stoller, Railla, and Kramer most appeal do not see handcrafts as a cultural dictate. They knit because they choose to, not because society deems that, as women, they must or should knit.

Post-Modern knitting serves as the bridge between charity/spiritual knitting and more explicitly political knitting. It is a training ground where knitters, through active contact with other kindred spirits, explore using craft as activism. For some, knitting becomes a declaration of independence from what they see as outmoded attitudes toward
handcrafts. For others, knitting is a statement that women’s work matters or that personal creativity liberates them from corporate domination. Participants are free to pursue activism as personal statements, as collective undertakings, or not at all.

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Notes


5 Ibid., 3 of 5.


9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 The name Stitch ‘N Bitch is not entirely original to Debbie Stoller. Anne L. Macdonald, in No Idle Hands, interviewed women who, as young wives of World War II servicemen, formed a knitting group they called “Stitch and Bitch Club” in Akron, Ohio.


13 Ibid., 6.

14 Ibid., 7.


16 Stoller, *Stitch 'N Bitch*, 3 and 11.

17 Ibid., 12-13.


22 Stoller and other Third-Wave contributors to BUST, *Stitch 'N Bitch, Stitch ‘N Bitch Nation, and BUST: The Guide to the New Girl Order* often use terms originally coined by men to objectify and/or render women powerless (“girl,” “girlie,” and “chick”) that earlier feminists fought to change.


26 Stoller, *Stitch 'N Bitch Nation*, 32.


28 Amy Barker quoted in *Stitch ‘N Bitch Nation*, 251.


31 Ibid.

32 Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, 106.

33 “Editor’s Letter;” available from http://www.getcrafty.com/home_letter051204.php; 2 of 2; Internet; accessed 3 January 2007. Since there is no standardized spelling for GetCrafty, except when referring to the web site (www.getcrafty.com), the name will be GetCrafty.


35 Ibid., 3.

36 Ibid., 6.


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43 Available from http://www.craftster.org; Internet; accessed 29 December 2006.


45 “Craftster.org Mission;” available from http://www.craftster.org/about.html; 1 of 2; Internet; accessed 29 December 2006.

46 Ibid., 1 of 2.


Ibid., 2-4 of 6.
CHAPTER IV
KNITTING FOR CHANGE: PROGRESSIVE POLITICAL KNITTING

The caring that prompts charitable/spiritual knitting and the self-reliance of Do-It-Yourself knitting combine and find a further outlet in political knitting. Political knitters care deeply about the welfare of society-at-large and dedicate themselves to effecting positive change. They differ in having an overtly political outlook, though the degree of organized political action varies by group.

Multi-Issue Political Knitting Groups

Among multi-issue political knitters, three groups, each with diverse political agendas, serve as models for other political knitters. These three—craftivism.com, the Revolutionary Knitting Circle (RKC), and castoff.com—pursue all manner of public causes from social to economic to environmental. “Craftivism” (combining craft and activism) is a term coined by Betsy Greer, founder of craftivism.com. This site serves as the conceptual bridge between Do-It-Yourself craft and political knitting. Within crafting circles, the Revolutionary Knitting Circle in Calgary, Canada, though it may have a small number of active members, has significant influence. Staging marches (knitting needles in hand) at various locations in Canada, and inspiring knitters worldwide via the Internet, the RKC serves as a template for political organizing. London’s answer to the Revolutionary Knitting Circle is Cast Off; a clearinghouse for post-modern knitting
activism in the United Kingdom. All these groups use knitting, both metaphorically and practically as the means through which to challenge the status quo.

Craft + Activism = Craftivism

The combination of DIY and activist crafting is clear in Betsy Greer’s web site. Greer, now roughly thirty years old, began crafting in earnest in 2000 and founded the site in 2003. She believed that what constituted activism had widened from earlier perceptions:

My whole idea for this site is based on the idea that activism + craft = craftivism [Greer’s emphasis]. That each time you participate in crafting you are making a difference, whether it’s fighting against useless materialism or making items for charity or something betwixt and between.¹

In an interview Greer admitted that “for years I was a really frustrated activist . . . . I had a hard time getting my head around the fact that there were more possibilities to activism than banner waving and chanting slogans at marches.”²

Greer’s style of activism is largely electronic, relying on the Internet to gather and disseminate information about using knitting and other crafts to promote social change. In addition to her blog, craftivism.com, she writes for Internet site knitchicks and has co-founded an online zine called CROQ (Craft Review on Quarter). CROQ emphasizes Greer’s message:

By combining the power of the internet with the power of the personal creativity, we are proving that things do not have to be mass-produced, that we can be our own stylists. . . . We’re about not only recognizing the past legacy and the future possibilities of craft, but also about reminding you, the reader, that you are not alone.³

Greer has set out to develop a still-photo documentary that she hopes will eventually become a film about crafting. The current craft renaissance, which Greer places before
the September 11 attacks, differs from those of the past by occurring during peacetime rather than time of war. The project is meant to quantify the demographics of the crafting community and to connect crafters in a more personal way.\textsuperscript{4}

Betsy Greer embodies many of the views of her generation. Having come of age during the computer/Internet revolution, she, like Debbie Stoller, Leah Kramer, Jean Railla, and others are readily at home on the Internet and have benefited from its development. While studying in London, Greer adopted the role of “craftivism correspondent,” by posting comments, observations, knitting quotes, and web links for British DIY sites of interest to her readers.\textsuperscript{5} In 2004 Greer earned her Master of Arts in Culture, Globalization, and the City at Goldsmiths College, The University of London, with a thesis entitled “Taking Back the Knit: Creating Communities Via Needlecraft.”\textsuperscript{6} While a graduate student in London, she connected with fellow political knitters in the knitting group “Cast Off.” She served as a volunteer at the Craft Rocks! Exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum and became something of a spokesperson for knitters of her generation in a television segment at the Museum of Natural History as well as being interviewed live on BBC radio in Shropshire and Berkshire.\textsuperscript{7} As she wrote in 2004, craft, for her, is not limited to mere trendiness but signifies something deeper:

The other part of my crafty dream is that everyone becomes conscious of all of their actions by asking things like: do I need this? do I want this? do I want to support this company? how can I help? where does my passion lie?[lower cases in original]\textsuperscript{8}

Greer eventually traveled to Paris, where she taught knitting and later ventured to the Scottish highlands to gather more data for her research project. Like her contemporaries,
Greer has had the opportunity of being mobile—physically, technologically, and intellectually—to a degree unknown to earlier generations.⁹

Music serves as a *lingua franca* of crafters worldwide, and like other crafters in their thirties, Greer readily admits that Riot Grrrl was a force in her life:

> my background is firmly entrenched in punk rock. i was always cutting and pasting my own little zines. . . . It was only when i started learning to knit, crochet, embroider, screenprint [*sic*], make books, felt, etc etc that i regained my own sense of self and that fire that punk rock put in my belly when i was 16 [no capitalization throughout].”¹⁰

Though Riot Grrrl gave her an identity and set her on the road to expressing her “anger safely and honestly about being assaulted and abused” it did not heal her disquiet. It “wasn’t until I picked up knitting needles and yarn and saw something positive coming from the work of my two hands that I began to rechannel [emphasis Greer’s] all that energy into something good and restorative.”¹¹ For Greer, and others, Riot Grrrl and punk rock provided a springboard to DIY, to community, and to activism.

Despite her passion and dedication, Greer is not unaware of the imperfections within and without the craftivist community. In “When Cultural Production Becomes Counter-Production,” she lamented an increasing cliquishness and snobbery evident in the crafting world, and wondered if craftivism’s noble beginning was coming to an early end:

> What started out as a way to nurture creativity and circumvent materialist culture has lately inverted itself. A few years ago as hipsters everywhere were beginning to knit and craft it seemed like heaven, as all of a sudden people were embracing skills that many of us had never been allowed to fully enjoy.

What offended and disillusioned her most, however, were those who pirated the ideas of fellow crafters:
And as I hear more and more stories of companies and individuals blatantly stealing the ideas of my friends and peers, I can’t help but think of how we’ve come full circle. From the outset where we were trying to escape the mainstream and delve into uniqueness [sic] and cheering each other on, to 2005 where individuals are stealing others [sic] ideas in hopes of a quick and easy profit. Instead of co-opting ideas from the megamarts [sic] and making them our own, we’re robbing from our own microculture [sic] and microeconomy [sic].

Greer and those who believe in crafting for positive change share common perspectives. They seek individual empowerment through handcrafting and feel disillusioned and dissatisfied with post-industrial, materialist culture, the encroachment of multi-national corporations on individual decision-making and privacy, and the destruction of local economies and local cultures worldwide.

Scholars have taken notice of how handicraft, knitting in particular, is being used to address these issues. In November 2005, Chicago Columbia College’s Institute for the Study of Women and Gender in the Arts and Media held a panel discussion to explore “the political implications and possibilities of “craftivism.” As a preview of the event, craft was placed in its historical and contemporary context:

Crafting can be examined as a new phase in the DIY phenomenon, with its ideals of empowerment, accessibility and community, which began with the self-publishing of the Beats and Situationists, mail art, pirate radio in the ‘60s, the anti-consumerist politics of punk rock, the rise of independent record labels, zine culture, and the ‘90s Riot Grrrl movement. Yet crafty culture may present a reverse rebellion: instead of the sharp critique of domesticity offered by second-wave feminists, contemporary crafters are embracing and celebrating the domestic arts as relevant, viable and creative work.

The panel sought to uncover the level of participation by various age groups, minorities, and classes as well as to determine the cultural and economic value placed upon handcrafts in “an aesthetic environment obsessed with high design.” They also planned to examine how fellow crafters might “channel our creative passions into activism.”
Earlier that year Canadian graduate students of the Joint Programme in Communication and Culture, York University and Ryerson University, organized a conference that included two papers on knitting and activism. Kirsty Robertson, Department of Art at Queens University, presented a piece entitled “Needling the System: Knitting and Global Justice Protest.” Global justice is an elastic term that often encompasses related concepts such as a living wage, sustainable economies and environment, feminism and the protection of indigenous cultures, and anti-corporate/anti-materialist activism. Robertson summarized her interpretation of knitting’s place in activism:

Focusing on the network of Revolutionary Knitting Circles, this paper examines how knitting, an activity traditionally thought of as domestic, feminine, and lacking use value has been appropriated by the global justice movement as a sophisticated technological metaphor for networks . . . against the globalization of capital. Transforming the language of primary computer code into the stitches of knitting, Revolutionary Knitting Circles stretch metaphors of linkage through virtual and real projects . . . [for] connections throughout the world to other craft-workers and anti-sweatshop activists. . . .

The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, founded in Calgary, Canada, with satellite groups in Canada and the United States, is among the most interesting of those groups advocating knitting as a means of social and political activism.

Calgary’s Revolutionary Knitting Circle

Of all progressive groups that use fiber crafts to transmit their message, the Revolutionary Knitting Circle (hereafter referred to as the RKC) best exemplifies “core cultural creatives” described by Paul H. Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson in their book, Cultural Creatives. Indeed, the RKC has become one of the most politically sophisticated knitting groups on the Internet due in large part to Calgary-raised and -
based Grant Neufeld. He founded the Internet-based “Calgary Activist Network” in 1999, and subsequently established the Revolutionary Knitting Circle. In 2001, he and other Calgary activists developed “Project Sudan,” which helped to compel the Canadian oil company, Talisman Energy, Inc., to withdraw from Sudan. In the lead-up to the war in Iraq, Neufeld and others formed a “loose coalition” of peace activists called “Peace Calgary,” of which he remains coordinator. In 2004, Neufeld became the co-chair and coordinator of the “Alberta Social Forum” held in Calgary in February 2005. Beginning in 2004, he also served for two years as President of the Green Party of Alberta.17

The RKC’s motto “Building community, and speeding forward the revolution, through knitting” appears, at first, paradoxical. Community and knitting are a cozy pair, but revolution often connotes violence, destruction, and upheaval before achieving desired ends. For these knitters, the revolution is not defined by what would be lost so much as by what would be gained: “The knitting circle is a constructive revolution [emphasis in original]—we are creating community and local independence which, in this corporate society, is a truly revolutionary act.”18 The community they speak of includes male and female, adults and children. Though best known for knitting, the group does not limit participants to any medium but welcomes quilters and crocheters too.

The RKC actively seeks out senior members in order to include those overlooked in a youth-obsessed culture, arguing: “They [senior members] typically have a tremendous amount of experience to draw on both in skills and ideas.”19 A desire to construct a strong sense of community and connectedness defines the RKC. One stated goal is to “foster community and provide opportunities for dialogue across class, gender, ethnicity, age and other social boundaries.”20 Knitting circles offer a means and purpose
for gathering in a supportive atmosphere where participants can share insight into and experience with knitting but with life as well. Intimate multi-generational gatherings—family, political-precinct parties, or labor-union celebrations, holidays, festivals and rites of passage—have largely disappeared from the social landscape. Where shopping malls pass for culture, where viable neighborhoods have gone the way of the passenger pigeon, and where hundreds or thousands of miles often separate families, the RKC seeks to provide an emotional and social support system so often lacking. According to its website, participants at RKC gatherings can expect “discussion including (but not limited to) social, environmental, political, and economic issues.” Given knitting’s venerable history, the cohesiveness of its traditions, its role in the preservation of human life, and the means of connection it affords, knitting serves the group’s goals of increasing self-sufficiency and community. For these reasons, the RKC hopes not only to preserve but also to “expand the social traditions around textiles and other hand-craft work.” So sure are they that textiles and fibers are a “revolutionary” force that the group’s logo is a ball of yarn shaped like a bomb complete with a lit fuse (see figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Revolutionary Knitting Circle Logo: Starting the Cultural Revolution Through Knitting. Available from http://Knittingactivist.ca.
The Knitting Circle’s banner is suitably “revolutionary” as well, featuring a pirates’ skull and crossbones flying overhead as traditionally dressed Dutch women knit curiously dark, unidentifiable pieces (see figure 4.2).

![Revolutionary Knitting Circle Banner](http://Knittingactivist.ca)

Figure 4.2. Revolutionary Knitting Circle (RKC) Banner. Available from http://Knittingactivist.ca

The RKC’s “Manifesto” rings with idealism and recalls the American *Declaration of Independence* in its wording, with hints of Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* and of late-nineteenth century communitarian references sprinkled throughout. Advocating local self-sufficiency it opens, “We hold that all communities should have the means necessary to meet every essential need of their own people.” The manifesto further asks that everyone “take up the struggle through the tools of local production.” While arguing that local communities should “liberate [themselves] from the shackles of global corporatism,” the group nonetheless champions “global justice” for all communities, a restatement of the 1980s activist call to “think globally, act locally.” These revolutionary knitters hold conglomerate, capitalist, multi-national corporations at least partially responsible for the destruction and disintegration of local communities.
neighborhoods, and businesses. Post-Modern knitters advocate that citizens claim their power to loosen the stranglehold of corporations on the public’s wallets and well being. By knitting their own sweaters, hats, gloves, and so on, these “revolutionary” knitters believe they help themselves and each other as well as exploited workers around the world. They argue that:

By sharing in the skills and resources of our communities, we shall become free to cast off dependencies on global trade for our subsistence. In so doing, we shall all be able to enter fairly into meaningful and equitable trade of not only our goods, but also those cultural intangibles that are necessary if we are able to bring about understanding, justice and peace to truly enrich our individual lives and our communities.”

RKC members want the same benefits for every community that they want for their own—a resurgence of human connection and individual empowerment through growing food, producing textiles and clothing, building homes, or engaging in the healing arts. Their balancing of group and individual needs and their emphasis on a subsistence lifestyle rather than mere economic enrichment will lead many to call them naïve. They are certainly idealistic. Their revolutionary principles are unlikely to be embraced by the masses. Yet voicing these principles is noble and thought provoking, and shares many of the ethical qualities of Western religion, the spiritual precepts of Gandhi, and the secular idealism of the early twentieth-century Progressives.

Members of the Revolutionary Knitters Circle want to live life on their own terms rather than on terms they see as dictated by unrestrained capitalism:

We will remind ourselves—and those who would have us believe there is no alternative to the corporate doctrine—that we can have the ability to produce what we need without the destructive hand of the investment banker and his ilk at our throats."
Despite the provocative language, the message is a peaceful but empowering one. People need not turn to corporations and their advertising agencies to define “the good life,” to give them happiness, or to buy their identities. But just how do they intend to carry out such a revolution in lifestyle? First they make their views visibly known by knitting in public: “We shall put this struggle in the faces of the elites by engaging in knit-ins at their places of power throughout the world.”\textsuperscript{27} And the RKC has done exactly that by taking its cause to the streets of Canada.

In Spring 2002 while protesting unregulated globalization during a meeting of the World Petroleum Congress, Neufeld and fellow RKC activists were inspired by rumors that a group of European knitters had stopped a military convoy’s progress on a public thoroughfare by fashioning a knitted net across the road.\textsuperscript{28} Later that year, the RKC put out a call to rally its members for a protest at the G8 Summit in Kananaskis, Alberta, Canada. True to its stated goals, it promised “lawful, peaceful, tactics to make a safe space for all ages and backgrounds.” The RKC engaged in a “mass knitting action” and planned to “join with other activist protest, marches, conferences etc.—but always with our knitting needles in hand!”\textsuperscript{29} An on-going tactic of the group’s members is to communicate their viewpoints to the public in a non-threatening manner. Since everything about knitting—hillsides dotted with sheep, carding, combing, and spinning raw fiber into yarn then looping the yarns on sticks—connotes peaceful contemplation, knitting is ideally suited to convey their various messages. These include practical self-sufficiency in the context of community involvement, a challenge to the limits of traditional gender norms (through men knitting in public), and a rejection of the
inevitability of corporate domination. These are not empty assertions but a lifestyle choice (see figure 4.3). For them:

the real work of challenging corporatism must go on every day of the year. We encourage you to take the lessons that will be learned through these actions and expand on them in the months and years to follow.30

As Neufeld told a reporter, “knitting opens the door to talk to people.”31

Another intentional tactic of the RKC is knitting symbolic projects. During the 2002 G8 Summit protests, the group staged a mass knit-in on a main street to construct squares that would be joined to make a blanket for the homeless. As one senior woman told a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation reporter, “What we’re doing is symbolic. Another thing about blankets is that they represent warmth and security because we feel we are losing our security.” At the same protest, members made “tree cozies,” knitted sleeves placed around trees to connote “symbolic protection for the trees from security

Figure 4.3. Peace Knits Banner, 20 March 2004. RKC members protest against the war in Iraq. Available from http://gallery.wayground.ca/peaceknits.
forces in the Kananaskis area.” Such tactics are innocuous enough—non-violent—but the RKC’s visible presence needled the Canadian government and its security officers, both of whom represented social conventions and established authority. Like intellectuals and reformers of all eras, activists threaten the status quo while attempting to goad and prod the public out of its apathy, ignorance, or compliance. Most people find change unsettling and do not give up self-protective complacency easily; they mistrust and even despise activists for threatening established power. Activist ideals are often ridiculed as silly, quixotic, or naïve. Yet activism demands idealism, hope, and the imagination to foresee a better world. The anger and ridicule that often assail activists usually indicate that their arguments have hit a cultural nerve.33

Cast-Off: Revolutionary Knitting in the UK

The closest counterpart to the Revolutionary Knitting Circle is Cast Off in the United Kingdom. This knitting group originated in 2000 under Rachael Matthews and “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.”34 Like the RKC, its goal (stated in its Constitution) is to broaden the appeal of knitting to embrace a wide audience. No one is excluded: “Cast Off has an anti-discrimination policy which means that anyone regardless of age, cultural background, gender, disability, or health status is welcome. Cast Off believes that knitting can be good for all.”35 Such inclusiveness demonstrates sensitivity to the needs of those whom Western culture often overlooks or denigrates.

Cast Off members, like crafters worldwide, believe that knitting and other handcrafts are valuable on several levels—emotional, spiritual, and political. Also like
other contemporary knitting groups (Stitch ‘N Bitch et. al.), Cast Off has “cast off” knitting’s traditionally stodgy stereotype and invited new practitioners into the knitting fold by “arranging fun and adventurous knitting meetings in a range of unusual public settings.”

Some of Cast Off’s members have co-opted war imagery to become “Guerrilla Knitters” who take their knitting to the streets to KIP (knit in public), visibly to challenge gender roles (many active members of Cast Off are men), and to be seen creating their own “products.” Knitting in public is a “radical act” if one considers the exigencies and pressures of contemporary life. In Western culture where the primary role has become consumer rather than citizen, most people have become totally removed from producing anything—clothing, food, etc.—for themselves. Instead, they passively and compulsively acquire commercial, cheaply made products on a whim created by advertising. By contrast, production and creation require patience and skill and result in a satisfaction and achievement that shopping at Wal-Mart cannot supply.

In “Guerrilla Knitters Unite,” Times (United Kingdom) newspaper reporter Hugo Rifkind embedded himself in a group of “male warrior knitters” to get a first-hand look at what motivates Cast Off members. Three men and Cast Off founder Rachael Matthews met at the Dove pub in London to knit and discuss their work (see figure 4.4). The four, ranging in age from twenty-five to thirty-five and hailing from Europe and Canada, identified themselves as “earthy, London, and street,” as opposed to Hollywood screen stars like Scarlet Johansson and Kate Moss who had trendily taken up knitting. Rather than jumping on the bandwagon of knitting’s popularity, they wanted, instead, to challenge societal norms. Twenty-five year old “shaven-headed, nose-ringed Arthur”
says, “It’s all about doing usual things in unusual places. It makes public what is
normally private, and challenges people’s preconceptions about what they ought to be
doing where.” To that end, Cast Off members have been seen publicly knitting at “pubs,
clubs, Tube trains, an exhibition at the Tate Modern, and the American Bar at the
Savoy.”\textsuperscript{40} Knitting at the Savoy was surprisingly fraught with tension (see figure 4.5).
The manager threw out the knitters telling the women that home was the proper place for
knitting and the men that they “should be sent off to war.”\textsuperscript{41} Like so many other knitters,
Cast Off members hope to remind people that taking production of clothing into their
own hands develops a level of independence. Despite this, none of the group is a
Luddite; they acknowledge that it is not feasible for anyone to make all his or her own
clothing.

Still, Rachel Matthews observes, “if you knit something instead of paying 20 quid for it, you value it in a whole different way.”

Knitting as a metaphor for reform and activism has moved beyond Cast Off to the wider London scene. The Victoria and Albert Museum and the Crafts Council Gallery of London have taken notice of the knitting renaissance among young adults. “Craft Rocks,” a March 2004 exhibit at the Victoria and Albert, spotlighted the connection between music and knitting with a Disc Jockey, a “knitting bar” (complete with free knitting needles and yarn), and Cast Off members ready to lend a helping hand teaching anyone who wanted to learn how to knit. Even edgier was the London Crafts Council’s “Knit 2 Together: Concepts in Knitting,” an installation of fiber art designed to challenge ideas about knitting and gender. Fiber artist Shane Waltener sees men’s knitting as a challenge to society’s diktat that only women should knit. He (like Stoller and others) interpreted knitting as having been devalued exclusively because it was the work of women. Artist Kelly Jenkins relied on computer-generated images to fashion giant machine-knit wall hangings based on prostitutes’ calling cards, using “industrial knitting techniques” to remind viewers of the essential role industrial knitted goods play in everyday lives. Katie Bevan, a curator of the exhibit noted that Cast Off’s public knitting so challenged public views that “it seemed almost as transgressive as breastfeeding in public 20 years ago.”

Another theme common to knitting activists is freeing the individual from materialism. Waltener believes that “By knitting you are resisting capitalism and consumerism. You are not responding to the fashion industry; you are making your own
decisions.”¹⁷ Then, too, there is the assessment of art versus craft. Post-Modernism challenges the cultural assumption that art (traditionally the province of men) has higher status relative to craft (practiced primarily by women), a stance implicit in the exhibit as well as in the philosophies of many knitters.

The Internet has made the communication and exchange of ideas and news so efficient that knitters and their groups regularly speak in blogs and web pages across continents. Most knitting group members and artists are as aware of what is or will be happening in London as they are in Adelaide, Cincinnati, Edmonton, or New York City and can easily chat with knitters in any or all of those cities. Even small, loosely organized activist groups can be part of a larger web of connection, and so are rarely limited to one idea in one geographic location.

**Single-Issue Political Knitting Groups**

Unlike some of the largest political knitting groups, other groups and individuals develop a more concentrated political focus. Given knitting’s historic intersection with the working lives of women in particular and workers in general, some groups gravitate to addressing the labor abuses in a global marketplace. More than any other group, microRevolt seeks redress for workers in developing nations by engaging knitters in developed nations in its on-line generated activism. Others, such as Randy Sklaver and textile artist Barb Hunt, are joined by feminists and Quakers to devote their knitting energies to working for peace. Sometimes, projects like the Peace Blanket surface on the Internet to be taken up by individuals the world over. Other sites more pointedly protest the current war in Iraq. Redsweaters.org and stealthissweater.com symbolically interpret the suffering and waste of the Iraq war through miniature and full-sized knitted garments.
It may be party politics or the environment that drives other groups or projects like Knitters vs. Bush or earthworm aficionado and compost promoter Naomi Dagen Bloom. No matter their emphasis, all dedicate themselves to making the public think, perhaps in ways they have not done before, about the betterment of the world.

**microRevolt: Anti-Sweatshop Activism**

In addition to feminism, gender roles, art, and self-sufficiency, fiber activists are dedicated to bringing to light the abuse of sweatshop labor (a part of fiber/textile production since the earliest days of the Industrial Revolution) in developed and developing nations. To that end, microRevolt.org uses knitting as a tangible reminder of labor abuse.

Of all the young, female, fiber activists, Cat Mazza, the twenty-eight-year-old founder of microRevolt, is among the most articulate and knowledgeable. She earned her undergraduate degree in Art from Carnegie Mellon University and her Master of Fine Arts degree in New Media Art at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI). She exemplifies the young, urban crafter at the intellectual intersection of art and craft. She began microRevolt in 2005 while a student at RPI, but her activism actually began while still an undergraduate when she became the only female founding member of a collective called Carbon Defense League (CDL—now HACTIVIST.com). Mazza traces her early interest in anti-sweatshop activism to PICA—Peace Through Inter-American Community Action, of which she was a member while living in Maine. New England, the site of the earliest textile factories (and the first employer of women in factories in the United States), also stirred her imagination. She speaks with authority on the background of textile production in the United States and its historic utilization of cheap female labor,
a problem that endures in non-union shops to this day. Mazza also cites a lengthy list of other art collectives that served as inspiration for the founding of microRevolt—The Institute for Applied Autonomy, the Critical Art Ensemble, subRosa, and Eyebeam, an online forum for discussion of art and technology. Mazza defines microRevolt as a combination of related components: knitting, women’s labor history, and computer technology. Mazza, based the name microRevolt (loosely, she says) on the ideas of French philosopher Felix Guattari, who believed that “social change happens through small acts of resistance; not necessarily by people soldiering behind some dogmatism or governing policy. Small, disorganized actions can overlap to create change.”

Mazza describes herself as a novice knitter, one who still cannot read a pattern and has yet to graduate to knitting anything more complicated than scarves and leg warmers, projects she also favors because they are quick to knit. And while she often uses a knitting machine, Mazza confesses to preferring hand-knitting because of the indefinable “something” it gives the knitter. She describes it as:

a kind of tacit knowledge: a silent knowledge that cannot be articulated or qualified, [sic] it can only be understood through experience. So with knitting, I don’t know if that’s consciousness raising or not, but there is this level of learning how to make [create] that I find indescribable and meaningful.

Mazza is no fuzzy-minded idealist; instead, she has a clear understanding of how the apparel industry works. She admits that it would be virtually impossible to buy all sweatshop-free apparel. She argues instead for knowing which companies to avoid and which to patronize. She also understands that apparel designers like Nike or Gap do not themselves manufacture the garments they sell:

They’re in designing and fashion, and they’re hiring models and making commercials to make the garment look great. I think there is a real need to break
down these media representations as much as there needs to be organizing in the factories. But actual manufacturing is subcontracted. So Nike itself might not even know [or care to know?]—where or in what conditions their garments are being produced.54

In an interview, Mazza commented on the World Trade Organization’s repeal in 2005 of the Multi-Fiber Agreement that had previously placed caps on the number of garments each country could lawfully export. She worried that as a result, apparel manufacturers would have added incentive to undercut labor costs in developing nations.55 Companies are more likely to reduce costs by lowering workers’ salaries than by economizing on fibers and materials. Mazza hopes to educate consumers to the human cost of the garments they buy with such abandon. She freely admits that she is neither an expert on knitting nor on the attendant economic and political issues involved with sweat labor. She reasons: “So for me, it’s important to go to people who are working in legislative policy change or are working in new business models for paying workers a living wage.”56

To raise public awareness of the feminization of labor in the global economy and the ills of sweatshop labor in particular, Mazza devised what she calls “logoknitting,” hand-knitting a typically well-known logo of an offending corporation like Nike, the Gap, or Disney on a scarf, blanket, sweater, or leggings (see figure 4.6).57 Mazza reasons: “Logoknitting, hopefully makes people consider issues of authenticity, advertising, trademark, representation, making a connection between the logo, the labor process and the sweatshop.”58 Her best-known project is the Nike Petition Blanket (see figure 4.7). Mazza acknowledges that Nike is not the worst corporate offender, but its “swoosh” is among the most recognized logos in the world, making it a prime target for
Knitters and crocheters world-wide each send in 4 x 4 inch squares to be stitched together “as a petition for fair labor policies for Nike garment workers.” From January to May 2006 the resulting fourteen-foot wide blanket was displayed in Dundee, Scotland. A list of virtual signatures (legally binding signatures collected electronically) was then sent, along with the blanket, to the Chairman of the Board of the Nike Corporation (see figure 4.7).
What makes logo knitting possible is a computer program *knitpro*, available free of charge from microRevolt’s web site. According to Mazza:

knitPro translates a digital image—jpg, a gif or a png—into a knit, crochet, needlepoint, or cross stitch pattern. *knitPro* is really bringing people to the Nike project and the other projects of microRevolt.\(^6\)

There is also a video version of knitPro: “Instead of taking in a digital still file, it’ll take a digital video file, lower the resolution, put a stitch over it, so it looks like this animated stitch video.” Mazza plans to use knitPro to “develop animated narratives about labor.”\(^6\)

Mazza believes that hobby knitters are better able than most to appreciate the labor involved in knitting and producing garments. They understand how many hours of work might go into that hand-knitted sweater from the Gap. They understand the intricacies of cable and other stitches. Another important characteristic of today’s knitters, she asserts, is that they are largely well educated and often professionals, even if some do struggle economically. It is essential to make this demographic element aware of the plight of workers who knit and sew the clothes Americans wear. Mazza noted: “If we keep in mind the economic subjugation of developing world laborers on first world consumption, I think it’s a meaningful group to mobilize.”\(^6\)

Mazza’s hopes for grass-roots activism are modest. She does not believe that microRevolt or its various projects will, of themselves, save workers from the abuses of free-trade globalism. Admitting that microRevolt projects “are not solutions,” she says they are “all kind of absurd or ironic on some level, [sic] I guess they are cultural activism not political activism, encouraging knitting as a symbolic gesture of intolerance of consumer goods made in these horrible conditions.”\(^6\) Still, Mazza argues that knitting is “radical” in a culture that places so much value on buying and possessing things. She
also thinks that the act of logoKnitting reinforces awareness of the connection between the sweatshop offenders and the clothes they market. The goal is to educate the public to its potential to boycott or patronize companies and thereby influence company practices. While microRevolt focuses on sweatshop abuses, it also incorporates feminism and wider-reaching labor issues. Other activist knitting groups apply a similar scope to their programs.

Knitting for Peace

Whether those who promote peace are drawn to knitting or knitting promotes a desire for peace, many have begun to connect the two. After all, hand-knitting is, by definition, a peaceful pursuit. Dedicated practitioners often cite the meditative calm, the time to slow down the pace of everyday life and look within, that knitting allows. Not surprisingly, therefore, Randy Sklaver, an American knitter living in Sweden, used the Internet to propose an international Knit for Peace Day (March 21, 2006). As she pointed out, “You’re going to knit anyway on March 21, so why not dedicate your work on that day to peace?” Sklaver, in the “Knit for Peace Manifesto” eloquently evokes the peace inherent in knitting—sheep grazing on hillsides, wool running through the knitter’s hands. Beyond that, Sklaver muses on the world that knitting brings to her door:

My knitted things have no borders. I use a Swedish wool to knit mittens using a twisted Eastern stitch. The mittens turn out not to be warm enough [sic] so I knit mitten liners out of Chilean alpaca. . . . I become a part of a world bigger than that enclosed by the ends of the sofa where I sit knitting. My mind wanders through the world that has led to the knitting in my hands [sic] and because I am knitting engaged in this quiet, peaceful activity that starts with the placid sheep, my mind wanders through a peaceful world.

Sklaver asks knitters to write to knitforpeace@yahoo.com, “a transpolitical, transreligious [sic] grassroots effort” with “the common goal of peace, and the idea that
we all work toward peace within our own frames of reference.” Knitters may forward details of what they plan to knit for peace to be posted on the blog. Sklaver offers several suggestions for peace-inspired knitting, among them, knitting in a church or cathedral, knitting pink squares to cover a military tank, knitting in LaFayette Park across from the White House, or festooning the Royal Mile outside the Scottish Parliament with white scarves or other knitted objects. Sklaver might “teach my son to knit” or, with a friend’s help “teach eight six-year-olds to knit.” Sklaver also fits Paul H. Anderson and Sherry Ruth Ray’s definition of a Cultural Creative, one who takes a holistic view of the interconnectedness of human lives and actions. What may appear to others to be hopelessly quixotic or naïve to a Cultural Creative has the potential to shift world attitudes through the sum of energies exerted by individuals. Sklaver hopes that focusing the energies of thousands of like-minded knitters worldwide will make some small difference:

> Will it stop people from hurting and threatening and frightening each other, the antithesis of peace? Who knows [sic]. When I knit on March 21 [sic] I will be saying with each stitch that peace is possible, that human intelligence and compassion can triumph over fear and greed, that terror and war can give way to discussion and peace.”

The Internet discussion of knitting and peace did not end with Sklaver. On the fifth anniversary of the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center, a knitter posted to fullthreadahead.com that instead of a “knitting in public” day proposed elsewhere on the web, there should be a “knit in peace” day:

> A show that knitters from every demographic could join together for peace. Put down the differences and take up the knitting. Sit side by side [sic] making the magic that turns a ball [of yarn] into something. No political statement on whether the war [in Iraq] is just or not; no which side is right and which is wrong;
no politics; just the collective desire to send a message for a more peaceful world.\textsuperscript{70}

In typical Internet fashion, this knitter asked for suggestions for a time, date, and year. The next morning, another knitter, who usually read but did not post on the Knitter’s Review forums site, “decided it was worth coming out of lurkdom to post about [the knit in peace day].”\textsuperscript{71}

Knitters have fashioned for themselves a vital on-line community for the exchange and debate of ideas and information. The Internet, if used in a constructive manner and in a democratic spirit, has the capacity to bring people together for creative and constructive change in attitude and awareness. Anchorage Daily News correspondent Catherine Hollingsworth mused that knitting might heal the world: “Why can’t we knit the world together? . . . . The universal craft or the traditional art of knitting can be our peace offering to the world.”\textsuperscript{72} A San Francisco group called Crafty Bitches (knitters and crocheters) “knit for peace” in front of local businesses “because they didn’t feel comfortable stopping traffic (see figure 4.8).”\textsuperscript{73} The Quaker group, American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) in Chicago chose another route to peace. In November 2003 they held a Knit-A-Thon for Peace to knit blankets to be included in Infant Kits sent to Iraq as part of the AFSC’s Infant Care Kit Drive for Iraq. The blankets were “distributed to clinics, maternity wards, and other places so Iraqi families have the basics to begin life with their new children.”\textsuperscript{74}

Blankets are often adopted by knitting charities and political groups as tangible expressions of concern, interest, and connectedness. A peace blanket pattern circulated on the Internet as well. The free pattern, posted on www.knitting-and.com, included a
line drawing of the center of the Peace blanket and an explanation of its content (see figure 4.9). Its ideas are rendered in Blissymbols, “an international written language designed by Charles Bliss, an Austrian Jew imprisoned in Dachau and Buchenwald concentration camps before escaping and fleeing to the Hongkew sector of Shanghai.”

Katharyn Gunn explains how the message of peace is crafted into a blanket using Bliss’ symbols: “It is made up of the symbol for ‘opposite’ (half arrows pointed in opposite directions) and the symbol for ‘war’ (crossed swords) i.e. meaning ‘peace’- the opposite of war.’ Peace is written in “28 different languages or language groups,” some familiar (English, French, German, and Russian) and some less well known (Esperanto,
the breadth of the languages and peoples represented in this “blanket expression of peace” allows knitting to do what it does best—make the abstract concrete.  

Another political knitting blog, yarnarchy [lower case in original], in the United Kingdom, is based in Edinburgh, Scotland. Like the American group knitta [lower case in original], it “tags” public spaces with knitted graffiti, though unlike knitta, which tags spaces because it is fun, yarnarchy seems to combine consciously art/craft and protest. 

In its March 22, 2006 posting, yarnarchy placed “peaceful [knitted] flowers and scarves” in Edinburgh, York, and Leeds as “an act of solidarity with all those who campaign for peace worldwide.” In its March 17 posting, yarnarchy alerted readers to Randy
Sklaver’s Peace Manifesto and the proposal to make March 21 the International Knit for Peace Day. yarncraft [sic] called on knitters to unite to participate by knitting white objects “and displaying them publicly with your own peaceful messages on March 21st.” Readers were given a contact address for local actions in Edinburgh as well as an address that directed them to Randy Sklaver’s Peace Manifesto. Clearly, the online knitting community is in touch with one another.

In Barb Hunt: antipersonnel – A Fiber Installation, Canadian fiber artist Barb Hunt decided to highlight the dangers of buried land mines by researching and then knitting 50 replicas in pink wool.80 The Art Gallery of Ontario’s Exhibition Archive described the knitted mines as “innocent and even seductive, contemptuously mimicking an ominously lethal weapon capable of maiming and, often, killing.”81 After taking part in the sixth annual international conference The Social Context of Death, Dying, and Disposal, Hunt chose death as the subject of another exhibit, this time at the Art Gallery of Newfoundland and Labrador. Her objective was “to reflect on loss, grief, healing and continuance.”82

Anti-War Knitting

Those who work for peace do so at all times, whether or not the United States is then involved in a war or police action. They support peaceful solutions to international disputes at all times, not merely some times. Anti-war protests, however, tend to arise when the United States is currently involved in a military action. Protesters may or may not otherwise be pacifists. Instead, they may disapprove of the government’s policy or execution of a war rather than war in general. The two most prominent on-line anti-war
knitting projects are those mounted by textile artist and activist Lisa Anne Auerbach at stealthissweater and Nina Rosenberg’s collective project redsweater.org.

StealThisSweater

Knitting advocacy in the campaign against war or for peace, like other issues, is political, and given the contentiousness involved in the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections, it is not surprising that the Internet knitting community responded. A number of sites dedicated to supporting or opposing candidates cropped up, and some few, following the elections, morphed into other sites of related purpose. Sites supporting Howard Dean and Al Gore’s bid for the presidency have largely disappeared, but one has evolved into something even stronger. Lisa Anne Auerbach’s first political web site, KnittersForKerry, began with a simple hat pattern. After John Kerry lost the 2004 election, Auerbach, a Los Angeles artist, renamed her site StealThisSweater in homage to Abbie Hoffman’s Steal This Book, which she calls “a survival guide and manifesto for those who fantasize about (or pursue) anarchy.” Like Abbie Hoffman, Auerbach says, “At StealThisSweater, we’re not fond of The Man either.”

She chose sweaters as the medium for her statements because sweaters are not generally viewed as disposable in the way that other clothing might be and because she found an historic connection between sweaters and both the liberalization of women’s fashion and the campaign for women’s suffrage.

Auerbach has a gift for transforming knitwear into protest. Like walking message boards, her mittens, scarves, and sweaters transmit powerful and thought-provoking anti-war imagery. Among her most provocative projects is her Body Count Mittens (see
Each mitten bears the number of American soldiers killed in Iraq on the day the mitten was knitted, along with the date. The difference in numbers depends on

how fast each person knits, with the difference highlighting the on-going deaths. As long as the number of deaths remained in four digits, Auerbach said, the numbers would fit on mittens, but “the number of American soldiers wounded is already 5 digits, which is too big for mittens, but perfect for hats.” She advises knitters not to stop with mittens but to consider using scarves, hats, any form that will point out the carnage. Auerbach, earlier than many, acknowledged the tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians killed and directed knitters to IraquiBodyCount.net for the latest figures. Despite trying, she was unable to find documentation regarding the numbers of Iraqi soldiers or insurgents killed. It is evident that Auerbach gave careful thought to designing the mittens for maximum impact. They are, she admits, a wonderful project for knitting in public. Like other knitting activists, she knows that people (whether they knit or not) will often approach to inquire about the project, “... and the intricate looking mittens attract attention and encourage conversation both about the knitting and the occupation/war.”

The photographs included with the pattern feature mittens in black, red, and cream wool, intricately patterned, with tassels on the fingers. The pattern was intentional. The mittens provide commentary that is at once respectful yet provocative.

Following her own advice, Auerbach did not stop at mittens. The Body Count sweater was meant to be “history as soon as it was made,” said Auerbach (see figure 4.11). At a casual glance, the over-all effect of the sweater is innocuous enough. It is a black, cream, red, green patterned sweater. It is only on closer examination that its purpose and message become graphically clear. Designed and completed in 2005, she prominently placed the (then correct) body count of 1516 American soldiers dead on the
front of the sweater. Just beneath it, she added the number wounded (11,220) and the legend “as of March 14, 2005” in plain text. For impact, along the bottom of the sweater, in what Auerbach called “a more traditional knit alphabet font” she inscribed war-related catch-phrases “It’s been nearly two years.” As a component of the pattern, “the top stripe uses the words ‘SHOCK’ and ‘AWE.’” To further heighten the ironic tone of accusation, the back of the sweater features an estimate of the number of Iraqi civilians killed, the people the war was supposed to liberate: “16381-18662 Iraqi Civilians Killed as of March 14, 2005” and the legend “FREEDOM IS MESSY.” As a final indictment, Auerbach applied President Bush’s rashly premature statement of victory, “MISSION ACCOMPLISHED,” on the left sleeve and signed and dated the sweater on the right sleeve.

Auerbach devotes the same attention to detail and impact in all her creations—an anti-war blanket reading “QUAGMIRE,” the red and white Vive la revolution d’amour” (“Long live the Revolution of Love”) stole, the red and white tasseled scarf “Shoot to
Kill/Freedom is Messy,” and the “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition” sweater in red, black, and army green.\footnote{91} What Auerbach says of her mittens applies no less to her other creations: “Wear history sadly and thoughtfully. Let the memories and unfathomable statistics keep you warm.”\footnote{92}

Redsweaters.org

One of the better known sites directly tied to the war in Iraq is RedSweaters.org, founded by Nina Rosenberg in February 2005. Since then, the project has taken on a life of its own. Rosenberg has never defined the project as anti-war but instead said her purpose was to raise awareness:

I felt a need to make other people more aware of what is going on so far away; to compel people to listen to the news, ask questions, form opinions, or to simply take a moment to stop and consider the realities of war and how it is affecting their life [sic], even if they are not directly involved. I wanted to come up with a way to use knitting as a vehicle to raise public awareness.\footnote{93}

She pondered death as she knitted stitch after stitch and found a connection between the repetition of knitting and the lengthening list of deaths in Iraq. Recalling Mme. Defarge knitting the names of aristocrats about to be guillotined during the French Revolution in Charles Dickens’ A Tale of Two Cities, Rosenberg decided to use knitting to symbolize the deaths of troops in the Iraq war.\footnote{94} Eventually she determined to use one knitted G.I. Joe-size sweater for each serviceperson killed in Iraq. The red sweaters, sent in by knitters and crocheters, were strung on a garland and hung on a tree in the tree lawn outside her home (see figure 4.12).

The sweaters remained there until July 8, 2006 when the city asked her to remove them because of a complaint. City officials argued that the sign and garland could not legally be hung on a city tree. In spite of having telephoned city officials to ask
permission before hanging the sweaters, Rosenberg removed the installation the same day (and posted the development on the RedSweaters site). Readers learned the entire story, and Rosenberg asked anyone who had space for the sweaters to contact her. 95 By August 28, the installation had a new home. Renamed “The Red Sweaters Deployment Project,” it would be displayed at The Hardware Store Gallery in San Francisco from September 15- October 28, 2006. RedSweaters.org prompted knitters to ponder the war while they knitted and donated thousands of sweaters. The site is so well organized (providing information on where to buy the brand, type, and color of red yarn and how to knit the

Figure 4.12. Minature Sweaters on Nina Rosenberg’s Tree. Available from http://www.redsweaters.org.
sweaters) and the project so poignantly thought provoking that it is unlikely it will falter so long as Americans serve and die in Iraq.96

Party Political Knitting

In addition to pro-Democratic sites, a few anti-Bush knitting sites also exist. One is Knitters vs [sic] Bush. With the slogan “Knitters Against Bush: Don’t Unravel Our Rights,” founder Maureen McClaron began the group in 2004 because of concerns that the Bush administration was undermining women’s freedom to choose. In an article for the on-line magazine Knitty, she explained that the group would become the first knitter’s PAC (Political Action Committee), but this PAC set its sights higher than merely agitating to be allowed to carry knitting needles aboard airplanes.97 Inspired by news about the 2004 March for Women’s Lives in Washington D.C., (a major pro-choice march), she came up with the group’s slogan (“Don’t Unravel Our Rights”), registered its Internet domain name, and set up an account with CafePress (an on-line, low-volume manufacturer of activist t-shirts, bumperstickers, and buttons). All the profits of the sale of her slogan t-shirts and bumper stickers would go to MoveOn.org and NARAL (National Abortion Rights Action League). She described meeting fellow bloggers on the steps of the Natural History Museum in Washington as “like meeting old friends.”98 The march lasted about an hour, and McClaron described, with some emotion, the sight of thousands of people pouring on to the Mall.

McClaron is outspoken in her belief that knitting is not inherently political but must be transformed by actual political action:

Forget about all this “knitting is a political statement” crap—I’m not buying it. I knit because I like it, and do so unapologetically. Wanna [sic] question my feminist cred [credentials]? Watch out for the flying needles. What I’m talking
about is this: knit and make a political statement. Sure, women knit [sic] for the soldiers during the World Wars, and now we do all sorts of charity knit-alongs, but if people are really interested in taking knitting out of the private and into the public realm [and I don’t mean coffeehouses], we need to take the opportunity to be overtly political. Many of the knit blogs address political issues, so Knitters Against Bush seemed like the logical next step.99

McClarnon advocates using knitting in conjunction with targeted, collective political action, just as the Revolutionary Knitter’s Circle or other groups might. Knitting that is individually rather than visibly and publicly symbolic will have less immediate impact. Throughout 2004, Knitters Against Bush was still earning contributions via its t-shirts and bumper stickers, and McClarnon was still forwarding those profits to MoveOn.org and others. Bloggers were still writing to her asking for information. The most often asked question, McClarnon said, was “what exactly does “Don’t Unravel Our Rights’ mean?” Her response, “Pick your favorite—so many are endangered at the moment.”

If Knitters Against Bush demonstrates anything, it is the power of one person to act on political conviction, to inspire and to galvanize others into action. McClarnon’s group is not as well organized as some activist groups, nor as broad in its appeal, but it remains a significant example of the power of the Internet to mobilize knitters and give average citizens a voice.

Pro-Environment Knitting

Through their knitting practice, some knitters develop a deep appreciation of and respect for the environment. As with other knitting activism, it is not clear whether an appreciation of the animals who provide wool for yarn precedes or develops from the practice of knitting, but a love of the natural world often informs knitter’s political activism. Environmental activism can range from the critically important, as with I
Knit’s campaign for clean drinking water, to the fanciful picture of Australian Fairy penguins sporting hand-knitted mini-sweaters and New Yorker Naomi Dagen Bloom’s knitted red wriggler worms. Each campaign, however, is a serious attempt to raise consciousness to the dire state of the world’s environment and its direct impact on the health and well-being of its creatures and people.

**Knit A River—Campaigning for Clean Drinking Water**

Knitting has utility to environmental campaigns, as savvy knitting activists have managed to make clever use of its metaphors there as elsewhere. One of the most stirring projects is “Knit A River.” In true “Cultural Creative” fashion, knitters have risen to the task of publicizing people’s need for clean drinking water half way around the world. In America and Europe, water has long been regarded as a plentiful and readily renewable resource. But water may soon become as scarce, expensive, and as much a corporately controlled commodity as oil. After all, who would have thought thirty years ago that vending machines would supply water at over a dollar for a sixteen-ounce bottle? The problem is grave for those in countries where water of any kind, let alone clean, safe water, has always been scarce.

I Knit (in the United Kingdom), in conjunction with the international advocacy group Water Aid, launched the “Knit A River” project to publicize the need for clean drinking water, toilets, and sanitation for everyone (see figure 4.13). Water Aid advocates not only that “clean water and sanitation are human rights” but that they are essential to reduce disease and poverty. Knitters knit blue, water-colored fifteen-by-fifteen centimeter squares to be stitched together to form a knitted river.
I Knit announced:

Instead of a more traditional petition [sic] I Knit is proud to be making a spectacle! Our knitted river will force world leaders to sit up and listen. The river will travel to all future WaterAid campaigning events and carry the message. Our demands are simple—let the water flow!

I Knit’s web site provides sobering statistics about the need for clean water:

More than 1 billion people do not have access to safe water, [sic] more than 2 billion people do not have access to sanitation. The resulting ill health is often a death sentence, [sic] in fact [sic] a child dies every 15 seconds due to water [sic] related diseases. Help us in our call for UK Government Policy change.
According to a 2006 posting on Treehugger.com, I Knit (London) “took over a train on the tube [a la CastOff] and knitted their way, as they traveled from one end of the line to the other. In a few weeks, they will be taking all the squares to the Thames River and having a mass sew-in to put together that blue river. It’s enough to make you want to pick up those needles . . .”\textsuperscript{104} Countless supporters knitting small “streams” of fabric to be combined into of a large “river” powerfully illustrates the issue and demonstrates the impact of individuals acting together to raise awareness and concern.

**Aid for Australian Fairy Penguins**

Politics is rarely playful, but two environmental knitting actions, though based on legitimate concerns, evoke fanciful images. The first is from Englishwoman Sarah Bradberry, now living in Australia. On-line since 1996, the thirty-six year-old Bradberry publicized in 2001 an Australian environmental emergency. Penguins exposed to oil spills needed small, knitted sweaters to keep them from preening, ingesting the toxic oil, and dying as a result (see figure 4.14). Once the penguins were properly cleaned, the oil-soaked sweaters were discarded. Some penguins, though, required sweaters after cleaning while their natural oils replenished.\textsuperscript{105} Even after the emergency, the need for sweaters continued. Donated sweaters were sold by the Philip Island Penguin Parade to raise funds for “research and conservation projects.”\textsuperscript{106} Images of scores of “fairly penguins” wearing miniature sweaters, while charmingly amusing, does not diminish the importance of the ecological disaster that prompted it.
Healing the Environment One Compost Heap at a Time

New York City retiree Naomi Dagen Bloom has her own ecological passion—for worms. She determined to make the next phase of her life creative. But why worms? Dagen Bloom became involved/obsessed/inspired with composting as a simple, sustainable, and ecologically sound way of disposing of garbage. As she says on her website Cityworm.com, “compost took over my life.” She went on to invent WormWare, a copyrighted kitchen composter convenient even for those living in miniscule New York City apartments. To share her solution and inspire others, she developed a ten-minute...
performance called “Composting in Manhattan.” She recalls, “Who knew that bringing tiny, red wiggler worms into my apartment would become an art form?” At Queens Botanical Garden her exhibit “This Dirt Museum: the Ladies’ Room,” attracted over eight hundred visitors. There she showed them “how to solve the world’s garbage problem through a simple daily practice.”

As part of her educational outreach, she began a project called “Knitting One Red Worm” (see figure 4.15). For children, it is a great way to learn to knit, for adults it makes learning about composting whimsical and fun. She advises crafters not to


worry about making the worms too realistic, though she insists the knit worms not have eyes: “And please no eyes! These worms must charm on their own (real ones have no
eyes) rather than be cute.” She imagines knitted-worm quilts and knitted worms as picture frame decorations. Her cat even sports a knitted worm collar (see figure 4.16).

![Image of Lulu Cat Wearing One Red Worm Collar](http://www.cityworm.com/oneredworm.htm)

**Figure 4.16.** Lulu Cat Wearing One Red Worm Collar, Naomi Dagen Bloom. Available from http://www.cityworm.com/oneredworm.htm.

Dagen Bloom certainly lived up to her own injunction that her retirement be creative: “It is the way many of us in the 3rd age (a French notion about active retirement) find new and different ways to walk in the world.” Who knew worms could help to save the world from itself?

Saving the world from itself is exactly what political knitters are trying to do. Clearly, a love of knitting often engenders an awareness of and connection to the natural world—a connection that readily translates into concern for the health of the environment and the body politic. Knitting is also a peaceful pursuit, so campaigning for peace or against war is a logical extension/byproduct of knitting. What is more difficult to
determine is what came first—a dedication to social improvement or a love of knitting. Does social consciousness draw people to knitting, or does knitting’s capacity for contemplation and community foster social consciousness? Once intersecting, the two become inseparable. Political knitters, with the aid of the Internet, are actively working toward a cleaner and more healthful environment and social and economic justice for all.

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6 Betsy Greer, “Taking Back the Knit: Creating Communities Via Needlecraft;” available from http://craftivism.com/archives/taking%20%the%20knit.pdf; Internet; accessed 9 June 2006. The title of the thesis is based on Debbie Stoller’s admonition that women “take back the knit,” proudly reclaiming the traditional work of women.


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CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Activism is alive and well and living on the Internet. And for many, knitting is the fabric of its standard. Given the centrality fiber has had to the fabric of human history, it should not come as a surprise that knitting could prove a viable means of communicating, promoting, and reflecting change. It was textile factories that first hired women during the Industrial Revolution, textile factories that became the incubator for one of the first workers’ unions. Women’s lives were intimately connected to fiber and craft. Knitting was regarded as a kind of insurance against poverty, age, and disability, being something productive a woman could do even if elderly and nearly or totally blind. This historic craft is now a basic component of action for some women in the twenty-first century. It has become a banner of change, a declaration of independence from the old lie that work traditionally done by women is worth less than the work of men. Post-Modern fiber artists (the majority of them women) are also unraveling the distinctions between art and craft, and knitting is often their means of doing so. For other women, knitting is the focal point of their spiritual and political lives. For some, it is their way of connecting in the world. Like a common language or background, the “culture” of knitting is universal. All knitters welcome and value the sensuous nature of knitting, the texture, feel, “hand” of fiber, the creativity of composing or modifying their own pattern for a sweater, shawl, or scarf.
To the extent that they can be classified, knitting activists fall into three categories: Charity/Spiritual, Do-it-Yourself (DIY), and Political. One can knit love and concern for others, knit as an assertion of creative independence and empowerment, and knit to create a better, more benevolent world. Some might argue that knitting does not constitute activism because it manifests itself differently from earlier activist movements. Nonetheless, contemporary activism can be more individual and less collective than models in the past. Activism’s newer forms continue to unite individuals into associations, even if they are loosely knit. Socially conscious knitters rely upon symbols and metaphors to clarify abstract principles, just as activists have in the past. Some knitters make use of marches and protests; others do not. Most believe that hundreds of small actions, outwardly inconsequential in themselves, accumulate and produce changes in attitude and outlook. Robert F. Kennedy agreed in 1966 when he said:

> It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

In that sense, Charity/Spiritual, DIY, and Political knitting lead to change from the bottom up, from the individual to the group, from the local to the national, and even to the international. Not bad for two sticks and a ball of yarn.

Knitters share a language of stitches, techniques, and troubles. By its nature, knitting encourages relationship. One knitter teaches another who then passes on the skill. Knitters reach out to others when faced with a problem or difficulty. They put their heads together to decipher patterns, choose colors, or discuss changes.
encourages connection. Knitting done alone can be a mindful, even meditative, experience, but knitting offers additional benefits when done with others. It is a reason for gathering, an immediate engagement with others, an exposure to others’ ideas and a validation of their contributions. Since knitting is not competitive but collaborative, it encourages personal growth, change, risk, and eventual mastery. Creation can be individual as well as collective, leaving each knitter free to create, in large ways or small, in a way that suits her or him. Knitting provides a bridge between the past and the future. Its traditions and connections to previous generations prove comforting and supportive, yet it can also embrace new styles and methods to confront new concerns. Knitting encourages reflection, and perhaps that is why knitters so readily seem to think of others with a charitable concern for their wellbeing. This way of “being” together is particularly suited to women who value conversation and consensus; they can forge ahead together while remaining individually intact. And therein lies its value to activism.

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http://www.knkwkriterati.commovabletype/MossyCottage [blog]

http://www.seamanschurch.org

http://www.shawlministry.com

http://www.tlcfortinyangels.com

**Do-It-Yourself Knitting Sites**

http://www.bust.com

http://www.craftster.com

http://www.getcrafty.com

**Political Knitting Sites**

http://castoff.uk

http://craftivism.com

http://Knitting.activist.ca

http://wateraid.org
http://www.cityworm.com
http://www.iknit.org/uk
http://www.microRevolt.org
http://www.redsweaters.org
http://www.stealthissweater.com
http://www.yarnarchy.blogspot.com

General Knitting Sites
http://knittersreview.com
http://knitty.com
http://wolfandturtle.net
http://www.fullthreadahead.com [blog]
http://www.knitting-and.com

Related Information Web Sites
http://marionboyars.co.uk
http://studentaffairs.depaul.edu
http://www.ago.net
http://www.cbc.ca
http://www.brum.com
http://www.msnbc.com
http://www.supernaturale.com
http://www.treehugger.com
http://www.vday.org
http://www.wateraid.org
On-Line Magazines

http://spunmag.com

http://venusmagazine.com

http://www.eyebeam.org

http://www.knitty.com

Secondary Sources

Books


