I KNIT THEREFORE I AM:
AN ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL STUDY OF KNITTING AS CONSTITUTIVE OF GENDERED IDENTITY

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This study examines the ways in which gender is constituted through everyday performances, with a specific focus on knitting. Because knitting has a feminine connotation in the United States, female and male knitters have much different experiences when engaging in this activity and as such, knitting influences the ways that they negotiate their performance of gender in varying ways. Through the theoretical lenses of ethnomethodology and critical gender and communication research, I use autoethnography to investigate my own experience with knitting as a gendering activity; I also use in-depth interviewing to gain insight from five male knitters about how they understand knitting in ways that reify and resist cultural norms. The study suggests that gender performance is a constant negotiation to establish believability or proficiency as masculine/feminine, rather than a static performance that either meets or does not meet the cultural norm of masculine/feminine. The study also offers insight into the often overlooked ways that we transgress gendered norms in our everyday lives.
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“Most people see what is, and never see what can be.” Albert Einstein

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CHAPTER I. CASTING ON

I recently added socks to my knitting repertoire. The idea of hand knitting socks when manufactured ones are widely and inexpensively available is ridiculous to some, and I can understand why. Sock yarn is as expensive (if not more so) than most pairs of manufactured socks, not to mention the time it takes to do the actual knitting on tiny size two needles. Yet, despite all of this, I embarked on knitting socks to mark a certain milestone in my knitting: I felt that my skills and my patience were finally up for the challenge.

There is a lot of time for contemplation when making a sock. Progress is slow on tiny needles, so I really get to know the ribbing at the top of the sock, the leg, the heel flap, the gusset, the foot, and the toe. Each of these elements, which have always seemed invisible in the socks I put on everyday, become novel, even fascinating. When I “turn the heel,” as it is known, and start to see the resulting cup in the fabric, I am practically giddy. And so it is with knitting: garments that once seemed interesting only to the degree that they meshed with what’s “in” this season, I now understand as complicated constructions requiring much planning and skill.

Was that knit from the bottom-up or top-down? Different construction methods yield slightly different looking garments, at least to the trained eye. For instance, a sweater can be made seamlessly in one piece, or in three or four pieces and seamed together. Knitting patterns offer scripts by which knitters create and customize their garments. Some knitters feel bound by the pattern, following it stitch by stitch and row by row, while others see patterns as a “jumping off point,” modifying to accommodate their taste and style. Through I would say I am a “pattern follower,” in reality I usually find myself somewhere in between the rigid and the creative. I may add side shaping to a straight sweater or modify the construction of a garment to reduce the number of pieces to seam together.
In a similar manner, we rely on culturally-based scripts to enact our gendered identities “daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure” (Butler, 1990, p. 282). When I choose to wear high-heels despite the pain they will soon cause, the way I eagerly paint my face everyday, my instinct to cross my legs when seated, the rule in my head that “he” has to call me first... With each re-enactment, I create and perpetuate feminine gendered scripts and my female gendered identity. However, as a single and independent 27-year-old woman pursuing a Ph.D., I also resist traditional feminine scripts. My feminine gendered identity is enacted through a combination of traditional and non-traditional acts that I engage in my everyday life, and it is the precise “everydayness” of my activities that makes these various acts (e.g., applying lip gloss, paying bills) seem far from a study in internal gender-based conflict. Though the often conflicting ways in which we negotiate our everyday lives may initially appear as apolitical and disinteresting as a sock, these activities are intriguing to the extent that they are constitutive of our complex gendered identities.

It is in the doing of everyday activities that we create our gendered identities, yet too often we contend that everyday activities are outside the scope of the critical eye. Though I know knitting as both a hobby and a passion, I also know it as a specifically gendering activity that has consequences. For me, knitting is not indicative of my inherent feminine identity but it is constitutive of my feminine identity. I know myself, at least in part, as a crafty, domestic, nurturing woman; knitting is one way that I know and enact this aspect of my identity. The knitted items I have made for myself and others, and the “Look at you, Martha Stewart” remarks that are spoken with sarcasm and affection by my friends and family; these acts perpetuate and affirm my sense of self as feminine. I have felt hope in my hands thicker than wool when I have knitted for male partners to show them my affection, while subconsciously trying to impress
them with my domesticity. Knitting increases my connection with traditional feminine scripts, but women are not the only people who knit.

Because knitting has a feminine connotation in our culture, knitting enhances my ability to negotiate the cultural pressure I feel to be feminine. In contrast, knitting poses a challenge for men as they negotiate the cultural pressure to be masculine while engaging in a feminine activity. Men who knit are often perceived as an affront to the “natural” system where men do masculine activities and women do feminine activities. I am forced to recognize this usually invisible system each time I catch myself noticing male customers in a yarn shop, while female customers seem to blend into the background. While I am familiar with own experience with the gendered consequences and implications associated with knitting, I did not know how men make sense of their desire to knit and their experience with knitting in the midst of a culture that dictates they should strive to be masculine (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004; Connell, 1995). How do other knitters make sense of their desire to “take up sticks” and the implications and consequences therein when “those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler, 1990, p. 273)? How do other knitters experience and communicate the gendering aspects of this activity? How do they make sense of and express their desire to knit amidst these gendered norms? The gendered consequences of knitting merit attention in a critical communication study because they have an impact on the lives of the knitters themselves and influence how they communicate with others.

For some knitters, mostly women, the gendered consequences of knitting may be easy to overlook. Some people have indicated that it seems “peculiar” to find a younger woman knitting, given its association for many as something their grandmother might have done, but “peculiar” is not bad. Usually the responses I get are overwhelmingly positive. If a stranger
exclaims “Isn’t that neat!” or asks me about my project when I am knitting in an airport or waiting room, I do not feel threatened or self-conscious; these inquiries have always been friendly. If I lose my place in a pattern due to the interruption, it is a small inconvenience. However, for those knitters who are regularly asked to justify—not just discuss—their knitting in “What are you doing that for?” moments, the consequences are not as easy to ignore because these inquiries are not friendly, or at least not perceived as such. In these moments, the knitter’s performance of his/her gender is called into question, not just the activity of knitting.

The idea that knitting has the power to invoke a gender identity crisis is not easy for many to grasp. I have found that when I mention my dissertation “about knitting” to people outside of the academy I receive a small range of responses. Fellow knitters are generally enthusiastic, seeming to assume that I am writing about the relative merits of wool yarn or circular knitting, while non-knitters are less enthused, saying things like “Hmmm…interesting…” in a tone that conveys they are anything but interested. Others ask if I am studying the therapeutic or meditative aspects of knitting given its recent description as “the new yoga.” No one suspects that I am investigating—let alone questioning—the feminine connotation of knitting and its impact on male and female knitters. It is easy to overlook the ways that seemingly mundane activities, like knitting, provide the opportunity to explore the ways in which we come to know ourselves as gendered beings. But when we take pause to explore these opportunities, it doesn’t take long to find reason to look closer at the fiber of this well-constructed system.

One particular reason compelled me throughout this project. My mind kept going back to an incident that happened one frigid afternoon during my first winter at Bowling Green State University. Calvin, a colleague I did not know very well at the time, had stopped to say hello
while I was having coffee at the student union. Noticing his apparently hand-knit scarf, I remarked, “I like your scarf—did someone make that for you?”

“I made it…I knit,” he responded, and then looked at me expectantly.

“Oh…” I began, but paused. I couldn’t think of what to say next.

In the moment of my pause he added, “I’m straight,” with a bit of a nervous laugh.

“Oh…no…I mean, that’s not what I was thinking….” I stammered, trying unsuccessfully to find the words that would make the whole situation less awkward.

_But is that what I was thinking?_ I claimed otherwise, but I have to wonder if that’s exactly the reason I paused. If I had been talking to a woman, and she had responded “I made it,” I’m sure I would have eagerly asked about her current projects or how long she had been a knitter, but I wasn’t talking to a woman. I interpreted his remark as a private admission rather than a conversation starter, and instead of trying to connect with him, I paused. In that pause I questioned his masculinity—his sexuality—and my usual efforts to act as a progressive, open-minded woman were derailed.

I compare that memory to a recent experience I had at my friend’s rehearsal dinner on the night before her wedding. I was seated with a group of people I did not know well, so our conversation turned to the basic “get to know you” information about work and outside interests. After I mentioned that I was working on a dissertation “about knitting,” the man seated next to me asked if I had made the sweater I was wearing. When I replied that I had, his already flirtatious nature went into overdrive. He remarked that he was very impressed and then leaned in toward me and coyly asked, “Will you make me a sweater?” In light of my experience with Calvin, this situation gives me pause. Why did my admission of being a knitter seem to enhance my desirability as a heterosexual partner even though I had not identified my sexual preference,
but Calvin felt alienated and compelled to express his heterosexual preference after making the very same admission? I recognize that my quiet response to Calvin’s revelation was, at least in part, the impetus for his “I’m straight” response. Realizing how I was/am complicit in perpetuating a gendered system that privileges some at the cost of others is not a good feeling, but it serves to remind me that the politics of gender are not abstract, they are concrete and personal. My surprised response to Calvin wasn’t intentional, it was automatic, but why was that?

The cultural logic that framed the situation—and the way in which I reified this logic with my shocked response—deserve attention because communicative situations like these occur everyday. If we fail to acknowledge that gender is created, and thus normalized, in the small, seemingly apolitical activities of our everyday lives, we leave a stone unturned or—more appropriately—a slipped stitch in the fabric of gender communication studies. By investigating how the cultural logic of gender is constituted, reified, and resisted in everyday activities like knitting, we are better able to understand the transformative potential for traditionally gendered practices to transcend narrow definitions of the past. For individuals who are regularly made to feel that they are not masculine or feminine “enough,” the consequences of our strictly bifurcated system of masculine/feminine can be devastating. However, with better understanding, we can envision the possibility for gender to be enacted differently, and in ways that are more affirming to everyone.

I pick up the stitches of this project with several complementary yarns: my experience as a knitter, a brief overview of the cultural history of knitting in the United States, and the theoretical lenses of ethnomethodology and critical gender communication research. These fibers combine in Chapter Two to dictate the pattern of my investigation of how knitters reify
and/or resist the cultural logic of knitting. In order to gain a better understanding of the strategies that knitters use to negotiate the cultural logic of gender/knitting, I first critically investigate my own experience in Chapter Three. Then, I pan the lens outward in Chapter Four to interview male knitters about their experiences. Finally, in Chapter Five, I bring the pieces of my research together to “finish” this project. While my research here is but one small stitch in a tent-sized project in terms of understanding and challenging the everyday ways of constituting gender, each stitch is important.
CHAPTER II. KRIS KNITS

I learned to knit five years ago at a small specialty yarn shop in Florida. I can’t recall exactly why I wanted to learn, but I think it had something to do with a combination of boredom and stumbling upon a yarn shop one mile away from my house. Originally, I planned to get some yarn for a crochet project. I learned crochet from my grandma in the third grade, and I had done it on and off since then. As I perused the store, I saw samples of fabulous knitted garments everywhere and started to believe that knitting offered a lot more diversity, project-wise, than crochet. I also got the distinct impression that knitting (at least according to the knitters) was a much more elite activity than crochet. When I asked how many balls of a specific yarn I would need to crochet a scarf, their faces seemed to say, Don’t use our yarn for that.

Fueled by a desire to be part of the elite knitting community, I made an appointment for a knitting lesson with the shop owner, Susan, for the next Saturday morning. I arrived with no idea about what I wanted to make, so she suggested a scarf and directed me to select yarn from a shelf filled with several colors of Filatura di Crosa worsted weight wool. In a store full of compelling yarns of various textures and compositions, I dutifully walked to the specific shelf she pointed to and selected five balls of a pink/peach shade that was not very winter-ish (but I would not think of that until I was in too far to turn back). She selected the size seven needles I needed for the yarn, and we sat down at the table in the center of the shop for our lesson. Over the next couple hours, Susan showed me how to cast on stitches and to knit and purl—the two basic stitches used in knitting—all the while balancing the needs of her many other customers.

After approximately one hour of knitting, I had no idea how anyone made it past one lesson. I struggled, yet the women buzzing around me buying arm-loads of yarn seemed to be quite passionate—obviously, they were not still struggling, if they ever had in the first place.
While crochet had been easy to learn and felt natural in my hands, knitting was a nightmare; I struggled just to keep my stitches on the slippery *Addi Turbo* silver needles without dropping them, executing each stitch with exaggerated awkwardness. Each stitch in the row looked different to me even though they were all the same and required the same repetitive action to complete; I could not get into a rhythm. By the time I left the shop around lunchtime, the one inch start of a scarf looked horrible; I did not see how I would ever complete the full 60 or so inches to finish the project.

However, about one year later, fighting myself the whole way, I did complete the scarf—pausing to crochet several scarves along the way. But even after this accomplishment, I did not love knitting. I wanted to love it; I had seen the passion in some knitter’s eyes, but I just didn’t get it. With one scarf under my belt I put down my needles for six months, which was long enough for me to 1) forget the basics and 2) re-ignite my desire to learn the basics. Trying to get myself on a new course, I purchased a cache of needles at an estate sale, found a new yarn shop and teacher, and scheduled a refresher course.

“So, what do you want to make? A hat? A sweater?” Marion asked, indicating that either option was do-able. Though I thought even a modest hat was well beyond my grasp, she assured me that I could handle it. I asked her which yarn I should select and she lead me around her cramped store and gestured toward several options. “That would work…or that…any of those would do…” I stopped to consider several options, romanced by the texture and feel of the yarns, before settling on plain black chunky-weight wool. As my new teacher walked me through the basics, I found that the stitches felt much more natural to me the second time around. She helped me to understand the big picture—or the *logic*—behind the stitches so that I was better equipped to actually *see* what I was doing, and recognize when and how I made errors. I
walked out into the warm south Florida air with a three inch hat brim hanging off my needles and a renewed outlook on knitting. One week later I had a hat, a very large hat that did not fit even the largest-headed person I know, but a hat nonetheless. Other hats followed…and scarves, and sweaters, and mittens, and now even a sock…. Thus, after a tempestuous and protracted start, I became a knitter who *loves* knitting.

In graduate school, knitting has offered me a great deal of stress-reduction and personal satisfaction. At the end of a long day of contemplating critical communication concepts, it’s refreshing to follow a simple pattern repeat instead of a complex theoretical argument. My coursework has caused my mind to stretch and contract like elastic-infused sock yarn as I learned new ways of thinking about gender and communication. Digging into theories by gender scholars like Bornstein (1998) who presents a strong case for multiple, dynamic gendered lifestyles, and Butler (1990, 1993) who asserts that gender is perpetually enacted and reified, make me crave the mindless repetition of a 1 x 1 rib scarf or a simple stockinette stitch hat.

While advancing in my studies has caused me to pay closer attention to the world around me, advancing in my knitting has meant just the opposite. When I watch experienced knitters, I notice that they rarely have to look down at their work; it seems as though they just picked up a ball of yarn one day and knew how to knit intrinsically. Thus, in an effort to test my skills, I have tried to emulate their technique by trusting myself to knit by feel rather than looking at each stitch I make. At first I could only force myself to do a couple stitches at a time without looking, but slowly I have progressed to about five. I know when a stitch is right or wrong, I can feel the break in tension that occurs when a stitch has been dropped accidentally, but going on feel *alone* is a test of confidence.
Critical Stitches

As my knitting confidence and skill increase, I am reminded of how difficult it was for me initially. It was taxing on my mind and my hands because I could not focus on anything else; now that my mind is taxed by the pursuits of higher education, knitting as a less mindful activity seemed like a welcome reprieve…at least initially. It was easy to neglect the important role it plays in my life because it’s just knitting, after all. Knitting seemed too mundane, too everyday to think about critically. It was easy to overlook the time I invest in knitting and knitting-related activities, but these activities are clearly part of who I am in the world. It is the seemingly mundane aspects of living (working, doing laundry, cooking, knitting, etc.) that occupy much more of our lives than what we regularly perceive as milestone events, such as graduations or much cherished dissertation-oriented epiphanies. Our lives—our gendered lives—are constituted by our everyday activities.

To illustrate the importance and magnitude of our everyday activities, specifically those marginalized activities attributed primarily to women, performance artist Germaine Koh has devoted the last 12 years to Knitwork, a “lifelong project, generated by unraveling cast-off garments…and reknitting the yarn into a wide blanket” (Barnett, 2002, p. 356). Koh travels with Knitwork, which must be transported by crate, turning it from a private activity to a performative one in order to “make visible” the everyday activities and labor “that tends to be invisible” (p. 360). Knitwork is intended to show “the massiveness of everyday activity, the massive presence that mundane concerns come to have in one’s life,” which Koh hopes will encourage observers to recognize “grace in the everyday” (p. 360, p. 358). She explains, “I think it’s important to emphasize that it is a means of showing us how remarkable we all are, how remarkable are the things we all engage in” (p. 360).
Though everyday activities like knitting are regularly dismissed as being outside the scope of critical investigation, Koh illustrates with *Knitwork* that the fabric of our lives is composed of everyday activities. When we acknowledge this, we are able to see the benefit of investigating everyday activities with a critical lens. Knowing that gendered politics contextualize and shape our everyday activities, I know that knitting is no exception; one does not have to look far to see that “knitter” is often synonymous with feminine pronouns in pattern books and other knitting texts. When I view knitting through a critical lens, I am caused to wonder why and how this activity with seemingly no direct connection to physicality came to be considered feminine, and how this connotation continues.

Like Koh, sociologist Harold Garfinkel (1967) believed in studying the everyday by treating the ordinary as extraordinary, and developed a theoretical perspective and approach to research known as ethnomethodology. “[Ethnomethodological] studies seek to treat practical activities, practical circumstances, and practical sociological reasoning as topics of empirical study, and by paying to the most commonplace activities of daily life the attention usually accorded extraordinary events, seek to learn about them as phenomena in their own right” (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 1). The specific interest of ethnomethodological studies is to determine the “process through which the perceivedly stable features of socially organized environments are continually created and sustained” (Pollner, 1974, p. 27 as cited in Coulon, 1995, p. 16). Thus, by investigating the ways in which *actors* create social reality though their everyday decision-making processes, we are able to understand the underlying logics that are actualized in those decisions (Coulon, 1995, emphasis added). In other words, if we know the reasoning different knitters use to understand and make decisions about knitting, it is possible to explore how social, gendered norms are enacted and/or resisted in this process.
Garfinkel asserts that social reality is not static, but perpetually recreated. Judith Butler (1990) extends this position in her theory of gender performativity, claiming that “what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction” (p. 271). Social reality is created through our performances of gender, which is enacted and realized in our everyday activities, such as knitting. While some gender scholars have suggested that “sex” is biological while “gender” is cultural, Butler (1993) counters that “‘sex’ is a regulatory ideal whose materialization is compelled, and this materialization takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulated practices” (p. 1). Thus, both sex and gender are enacted or performed; however, “performativity is…not a singular ‘act,’ for it is always a reiteration of a norm or set of norms” (p. 12). Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman (1987/2002) explain, “When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on international and, ultimately, institutional arenas” (p. 4). In other words, we can examine the connection between the individual and the social, and explore how each one illuminates the other.

One of the most prominent features of Butler’s theory of gender performativity is the concept of heteronormativity, which is the idea that heterosexuality is the compulsive, normative paradigm that frames our gendered performances and, thus, our social reality. Performing fe/male to the normative standard is equivalent to performing heterosexual fe/male. “[T]he cultivation of bodies into discrete sexes with ‘natural’ appearances and ‘natural’ heterosexual dispositions” perpetuates heteronormativity because the seemingly natural, constant bifurcation of gender conceals that it is perpetually reproduced (Butler, 1990, p. 275). It just seems like “the way things are” or should be, which obscures the constant cycle of reproduction.
The “constituting acts” of gender determine one’s identity as a “compelling illusion, an object of belief” (Butler, 1990, p. 271). This illusion of gendered identity appears to be permanent and fixed even though it is perpetually being recreated through the “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 270). When a person performs his/her gendered role to the regulatory ideal—when one’s gendered identity is readily believed to be that which is culturally appropriate—s/he is accorded the status of the subject. Those who do not perform their gender to the heteronormative regulatory ideal—those whose identities are not believed—are not given the status of the subject. Instead, they are given the status of the abject, which was originally defined by Julia Kristeva (1982) in a psycho-analytic context as: the unrecognizable, that which “lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game” (p. 2). Butler (1993) utilizes this term in a social context; “The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of subject, but whose living under the sign of ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject” (p. 3).

However, Butler’s theory does allow for the potential to transgress this system of oppression. If we are able to recognize that gender is performed and not an expression of an a priori gendered status, “then there is no preexisting identity by which an act or attribute might be measured…there would be no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender” (Butler, 1990, p. 279). We would be able to embrace the notion of performing gender differently because if it were no longer possible to get one’s gender “right,” there could be no such thing as doing it “wrong.” If there were no such thing as the subject, there would be no abject; the two exist only in relationship to each other.
Doing Gender in Context

Butler’s theory allows us to analyze how gender is enacted in specific contexts that encourage specific behavioral norms. Linda Marie Bye (2003) used Butler’s theory as a lens through which to view the practice of hunting as it invokes the performance of rural masculinity in rural Norway. Specifically, Bye observed how this performance is enacted when other groups of people (women, urban hunters) attempt entrance into the hunting domain. The extent to which female partners of male hunters may take part in hunting trips—the most common way that women enter into hunting culture—is moderated and limited by the regulatory ideal of rural masculinity. If several women are part of an extended hunting trip, conversational topics and social behaviors which threaten rural masculinity abound. If one male hunter becomes too involved in such feminine conversational topics, his masculinity, and thus his subject status, may be questioned. One male interviewee explained:

[The girls] are interested in curtains, and that is not something that we boys can have any opinions about….Well, of course we may have opinions about such things also, but then all the guys must take part of the discussion. Otherwise it becomes a bit stupid…We men most often discuss hunting, machines, and work. (p. 148)

Because men have been taught to seek out support from other men to affirm and support their masculine identity, if only one man were to discuss curtains, his masculinity would not be affirmed in that situation. Because of the pressure to maintain one’s masculinity, and thus abiding heterosexuality in the presence of a mixed gender hunting group, many men prefer to hunt with their female partners apart from larger hunting parties where they are away from the stress that comes from integrating the two groups.
Just as hunting has been constructed as a masculine activity through repeated, cultural performance, knitting has been constructed as feminine. Unlike hunting, however, knitting has not always been a female-dominated activity. Like other methods of textile production, knitting was probably originally practiced by men; however, there is no documented history about knitting prior to the establishment of male-only knitting guilds during the Renaissance in Europe (“History,” 2002). Due to the lack of documented information, it is difficult to pinpoint the exact inception of knitting, but there is “no evidence to support the existence of knitting until around the 13th century AD” (“History,” 2002, p. 2). Historians believe that knitting was originally centered in the Mediterranean and then spread throughout the world by sailors and traders.

Early information about knitting must be deduced from surviving knitted items. These scarce items offer clues about methods of construction and design, but they offer nothing about the social history of knitting, such as who knitted (gender, class) or how popular it was during any given time period. Not surprisingly, few texts exist about the history of knitting. Yet despite the lack of information, historical explanations have emerged. “In the absence of facts, knitters have used their imaginations to create colorful histories for their craft” (“History,” 2002, p. 2).

The tradition of knitting in the United States is indebted to the English legacy. In England, both boys and girls were taught to knit in as a part of their childhood education, and this tradition was carried on by the earliest American settlers. However, in both places, it was rare for men to continue knitting after their early education in the craft (Rutt, 1987; “History,” 2002). It is significant that one of the few texts about the history of knitting in the United States, Anne Macdonald’s No idle hands: The social history of American knitting, focuses primarily on the connection between knitting and women’s roles in society.
The journey of knitting from labor to leisure activity was aided by the invention of knitting machines, which reduced the amount of knitting that had to be done for practical purposes. In the early days of American settlement, pioneer women relied on machine knitted items because they did not have the privilege of time for hand knitting; however, women living in more established communities often knitted at social events known as knitting bees (Rutt, 1987, p. 205). Though knitting had begun the transition to a leisure activity, it was used as a political tool as well. During the Civil War, knitting transcended the family and social circles for the first time and became a patriotic activity. Both Northern and Southern knitters formed organizations to produce much needed garments for their soldiers (“History,” 2002). Patriotic knitting was also enacted during both World Wars, evidenced by American Red Cross posters stating slogans such as, “Our Boys Need Sox, Knit Your Bit” (“Stitch-one-purl-two”).

Though knitting had gained the connotation of a women’s activity, boys and men continued to knit. One famous example is former NFL football player Rosey Grier, who gained great publicity from his interest in knitting and needlepoint, even publishing Rosey Grier’s Needlepoint for Men in 1973. Clinton Trowbridge (1997) notes that current assumptions about knitting and knitting history—those that exclude men’s participation—do not reflect his knitting experience. As a teenager, he and his boarding school classmates began knitting for the troops in World War II as well as for a leisure activity. “[C]ertainly no one ever suggested that it was inappropriate for us to be doing ‘women’s work.’ That question, in those supposedly unliberated times, never even came up” (Trowbridge, 1997, par. 2). Similarly, my grandfather, who just turned 90, recently told me about the vest his uncle knitted for him when he was a young man. There was no trace of “can you believe he knitted me a vest?” in his voice when he told me about it, only pride because his favorite uncle had made him something. Current assumptions about
knitting betray men’s participation in its long and varied history. Though knitting need not be linked to one gender because both men and women can and have knitted throughout history, it has gained the connotation of *women’s work*, which is not a neutral observation. When something is deemed women’s work, there is an assumption that while it may be a necessary task, it is menial, and thus too insignificant a task for a man to do.

Michel Foucault (1978) offers insight into how a seemingly neutral activity gains a positive or negative connotation by way of describing the dominant discourse and subdued knowledges. The dominant discourse defines what we come to know as “normal” and/or desirable, and in doing so also defines what is undesirable. The dominant discourse of our culture defines knitting as a normal activity for women, and by deduction, an abnormal activity for men, even though there are, and have always been, men who knit. Because knitting is perceived as a feminine activity, it is considered a subdued knowledge or a low knowledge, meaning it requires knowledge attributed to women or other marginalized groups. Feminists have struggled against the negative attribution given to women’s knowledges. In fact, Koh considers Knitwork to be, in part, “a feminist comment on the devaluation of craft, particularly the textile work traditionally associated with women” (Barnett, 2002, p. 358). However, subdued knowledges do offer a space for resistance because, as Foucault (1978) posits, power operates from the bottom up: those who are allowed more power are reliant on others with less power to maintain their status. Therefore, it becomes possible to see the power for transgression in women’s work.

In a review of women’s hand work as it figures into the plots of *The Color Purple* and *A Women’s Story*, Catherine Lewis (2001) explains, “[w]omen’s common experiences that have too long been undervalued, such as domestic and manual labor, can be used to overturn the
systems that have imposed and labeled the tasks” (p. 243). For example, in World War II, what would the service men do if they did not have enough of the hats and scarves they desperately needed to keep warm? The resistance to the dominant discourse can occur through more overtly economic means as well. Though only a small percentage of knitters use their craft as a sole source of income in the United States, there are several small businesses as well as individuals who create hand-dyed and/or hand-spun yarns. When I attended “A Wool Gathering,” an annual wool and yarn festival in Yellow Springs, Ohio, I purchased hanks of yarn that were crafted by women who had raised and sheared the sheep, and then washed, dyed, and spun the wool into a variety of one-of-a-kind yarns. Most vendors could provide buyers the name of the individual sheep that provided wool for specific hanks of yarn.

Several yarn companies are involved in activism on a more global level. For example, Peace Fleece was founded in 1985 by husband and wife team Peter Hagerty and Marty Tracy, who “started buying wool from the Soviet Union…in hopes that through trade they could help diffuse the threat of nuclear war” (Peace Fleece, n.d., The Peace Fleece Story). Peace Fleece yarn is spun from U.S. and Eastern European and/or Middle Eastern wools in an effort to promote peaceful international cooperation. Hagerty and Tracy recently developed “Baghdad Blue”:

When the United States invaded Iraq, we looked for a way to respond to such a blow against diplomacy. All the proceeds from the sale of Baghdad blue, the color of the late afternoon sky shortly after the snow clouds have broken, will be donated to the Palesatinian/Israeli village of Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salaam. (Peace Fleece, n.d., New Peace Fleece Yarns)
In addition to yarn, Peace Fleece also offers a variety of knitting supplies that are crafted by people living in the midst of political strife in various parts of the world.

Mango Moon is another yarn company with an activist agenda. Proceeds from the sale of the yarn, which is spun by Nepali women from remnants of silk saris, go toward the Nepal Women’s Empowerment Group, devoted to “provide a safe shelter, health care, education and the dignity of financial independence” to women who have been rescued from abusive situations (Mango Moon Yarns, n.d., Nepal Women’s Empowerment Group). In the course of using knitting as an independence-seeking endeavor, “[women] are able to shed the chains imposed upon them by the men and male institutions in their lives” (Lewis, 2001, p. 242).

Knitting has also been utilized for more emotionally-based forms of activism. In 1998, Janet Bristow and Victoria Galo began the Shawl Ministry, which combines “care and the love of knitting…into a prayerful ministry that reaches out to those in need of comfort and solace” (Shawl Ministry, n.d., About the Shawls). Before casting on, the knitter says a prayer of dedication for the recipient of the shawl. Then, the knitter thinks mindfully of the recipient as s/he knits the shawl, before concluding by saying a final prayer and giving the shawl to the intended recipient. Though the benefits of prayer might seem intangible, Bristow notes otherwise in her 1998 prose introduction, “Those who have received these shawls have been uplifted and affirmed, as if given wings to fly above their troubles.”

*Chicks with Sticks*

Knitting as a practical necessity has largely faded in the United States. While it is still considered a feminine activity, it is no longer considered to be *women’s work*; as a result of this shift in purpose, knitting is in a period of transition. According to a 2004 survey commissioned by the Craft Yarn Council of America, the yarn industry’s trade association, participation in
knitting in crochet has increased 150 percent since 2002 among women ages 25 to 34, jumping from 13 percent to 33 percent; large increases were evident in other age groups of women as well (“CYCA Study,” n.d.). In the introduction to her pattern book *Hip to Knit*, Judith Swartz (2002) notes, “A whole new generation of young adults is falling in love with knitting….Now, in many cases, instead of a vertical passage of knowledge from generation to generation, knowledge is passing laterally within one generation as friend teaches friend…. It is a time like no other; where it is ‘hip to knit’” (p. 1). As if to prove this point, her female models are young and trendy-looking, one wearing a nose-ring and another wearing her hair in braids; a male model wearing the “Rollover Pullover” is shown jamming on his guitar.

Knitting has been imbued with a different kind of significance now that functionality is no longer viewed as the primary motivating factor. Lewis (2001) notes, “Handicraft has been reclaimed and accentuated, apparently in recognition of its ability to bond or its use as a medium to pass along information of former generations” (p. 236). Often, knitters find it appropriate—necessary even—to openly pay respect to knitters of previous generations. For example, one dedication prayer Bristow created for Prayer Shawl knitters includes a passage where knitters ask for blessings “from all who have come before me; whose hands have been instruments of creation and beauty; who have used humble tools and hand-spun wool in order to provide cover and warmth for themselves and those they loved…” (Shawl Ministry, n.d., *Prayers*).

Elizabeth Zimmerman (1974/1981), one of the most influential knitters of the twentieth century, foregrounds her community-based understanding of knitting when she explains her rationale for using the term “unvent” instead of invent when explaining new techniques she has developed:
Invented sounds to me rather pompous and conceited…One un-vents something; one unearths it; one digs it up, one runs it down in whatever recesses of the eternal consciousness it has gone to ground. I very much doubt if anything is really new when one works in the prehistoric medium of wool with needles…In knitting there are ancient possibilities; the earth is enriched with the dust of the millions of knitters who have held wool and needles since the beginning of sheep. (pp. 74-5)

While some knitters believe that the sense of community they feel with other knitters—past and present—creates a feminist context for their craft, others have a difficult time with this connection.

Feminist scholar and author Debbie Stoller (2003) was initially hesitant about the relationship of knitting and feminism. Regarding her process of working through her ambivalent feelings, she writes:

It seemed to me that the main difference between knitting and, say, fishing or woodworking or basketball, was that knitting had traditionally been done by women. As far as I could tell, that was the only reason it had gotten such a bad rap. And that’s when it dawned on me: All those people who looked down on knitting—and housework, and housewives—were not being feminist at all. In fact, that were being anti-feminist, since they seemed to think that only those things that men did, or had done, were worthwhile…Why couldn’t we all—women and men alike—take the same kind of pride in the work our mothers had always done as we did in the work of our fathers? (p. 7)

With her newfound understanding, Stoller attempted to put a new face on knitting. Toward this end, she includes some rather risqué patterns (for example, a knitted bikini with thunderbolts) in her revolutionary book *Stitch 'N Bitch*. In a review of Stoller’s book as well as the phenomena
of Stitch ‘N Bitch knitting groups that have emerged worldwide, Julie Scelfo (2004 January 26) declared, “They may have blue hair, but they’re not grannies,” in reference to the “punk” appearance of some new wave of knitters (p. 54).

Brenda Phillips (1995) also recognized the feminist implications of knitting. When her university made the introductory course in Women’s Studies part of the core curriculum, she used knitting as a nonthreatening way to introduce students to feminist theory. To investigate women’s hiddenstream art, students are asked to explore and analyze knitting and other women’s textiles through the lens of feminist theory in order to understand their political, social, and historical implications. The rebirth of knitting across college campuses is apparent outside the classroom as well. One dorm at Ohio State University is known as the “knitting dorm” because a great number of the mixed-gender population has learned to knit, and at Brown University students created a “Knits of the Round Table” group (“Students say,” 2004).

Phillips (1995) notes, “Women’s textiles represent women’s links to the larger society economically, politically, and socially,” and this is evident in the different endeavors that knitters are a part of today (par. 19). Many knitters are involved with making newborn hats or “chemo caps” for local hospitals. Psychologist Diane Britt of Oberlin College started The Knitting Train in 2000, which is a group of employees, students, and local residents who knit hats and mittens for Columbus, Ohio-area children whose families cannot afford these necessary winter items (Farber, 2002). On a larger scale, the Craft Yarn Council of America developed Warm Up America!, an initiative that encourages people to knit or crochet squares which are then formed into afghans and donated to people in need (“Warm up America!”).

Other knitters have used, and continue to use, their knitting for activism on a global level (Phillips, 1995; Stowe, 2004). In colonial times, knitting was used as a means of reducing
reliance on British goods; one female knitter even sent secret messages through yarn balls (Phillips, 1995). Currently, groups like Code Pink: Women for Peace, a “full-fledged movement of women peacemakers,” have incorporated knitting into their activism by starting public “pink” knitting circles (CodePink, n.d., par. 1). Another activist group, The Revolutionary Knitting Circle, started by Grant Neufeld in 2000, uses the slogan “Building community, and speeding forward the revolution, through knitting” to encourage communities to rely on their own resources and modes of production (Stowe, 2004; Revolutionary Knitting Circle, n.d.).

The resurgence of knitting is welcome by many who enjoy the craft, but some feminists, like those that Stoller (2003) alludes to, believe that it constitutes a step back for the feminist movement. When Jane Stapleton, women’s studies instructor at the University of New Hampshire, organized a “knit-in” to commemorate the passage of the 19th Amendment, she heard from many of her feminist colleagues who believed that knitting was a sign of oppression. “I got the most unbelievable hate mail and voice mail…They were appalled that we were doing these women-oriented things” (as quoted in Petrovski, 2004, p. 29). Though the potential for resistance is not difficult to see, especially in the aforementioned activist movements, these venues are often obscured by the “common sense” logic of the dominant discourse, which continues to define it as “a sedate, feminine-appropriate activity” (Phillips, 1995, par. 5). Susan Bordo (1989), a critical gender scholar, urges us to remember how our beliefs are materialized on our bodies. In an article refuting the attribution of feminist rationale to primarily female illnesses like anorexia, she declares that it is difficult to see the feminist implications when “women, feminists included, are starving themselves to death in our culture” (p. 28).

Bordo’s reminder about the materiality of feminism is relevant in the context of knitting because though I may be thinking feminist thoughts about the feminist implications of knitting,
such as being self-reliant instead of dependant on a capitalistic system that determines my size and style, I cannot deny that when I am knitting in an airport or waiting room, my petite, blonde, made-up self is not likely read by others as a rebellious feminist. Though I may feel like Gloria Steinem, I may remind people of June Cleaver, and it is imperative to recognize that with each stitch I make, I reify as much as I transgress gender boundaries because my knitting is not contradictory to, but rather affirms my performance of female. Male knitters do not have this privilege.

Knitting by Male

Newer pattern books like Hip to Knit, The Yarn Girls’ Guide to Simple Knits, or Stitch N’Bitch often indicate a feminist sensibility that is open to knitters of all genders, but the feminine history and cultural connotation of knitting is still easy to recognize. In Swartz’s (2002) description of the pattern for the “Boyfriend Sweater,” she writes, “Of course you’ll knit a sweater for him…So go ahead and make it, then borrow it—it’ll probably become yours anyway. Better yet, teach him to knit!” (p. 72, emphasis added). Similarly, in The Yarn Girls’ Guide to Simple Knits, Julie Carles and Jordana Jacobs (2002) describe the rationale for “The Compromise,” a men’s sweater pattern:

Old wives’ tale or not, we’ve heard countless stories from women (and sometimes men) who knitted a sweater for their beloved and were dumped soon after. Despite our repeated warnings to prospective knitters (and brides), many choose not to heed our wisdom. We came up with this sweater as a compromise; it’s such a quick and easy sweater to make, we figure that even if things don’t work out, no blood, sweat, or tears were wasted. Kathleen made this sweater in two weeks, gave it to her boyfriend for his birthday, and a month later they broke up. She simply shrugged and laughed, saying at
least the relationship had lasted a little longer than it took to make the sweater. (p. 121, emphasis added)

The next men’s sweater pattern in the book is titled “The Exception to the Rule,” appropriately named because one of the authors, Julie Carles, disobeyed the advice, “Don’t knit a sweater for your boyfriend until you have a big fat diamond” (p. 124). She made the sweater for her then-boyfriend and rather than breaking up with her, he proposed; thus, “the exception.”

Though it seems that the authors of newer knitting pattern books, like Swartz and Carles and Jacobs, acknowledge the changing nature of knitting (e.g., encouraging women to teach men to knit, noting that male knitters have had relationships cursed), they still indicate that their primary readership is heterosexual women (e.g., the aforementioned “big fat diamond” reference). Perhaps most surprising, however, is the how obvious the assumption of a heterosexual female readership was in the special 2002 collector’s issue of Vogue Knitting that was devoted to men who knit. The following caption appears at the beginning of the “Knit2gether” section that showcases coordinating men’s and women’s sweater patterns:

How compatible are you? Try a little togetherness in his-and-her variations on some of our favorite new styles. You’ll find you have lots in common when it comes to knits that look as good on him as they feel on you. (“Men,” p. 52, emphasis added)

However, maybe this should not be so surprising. One male knitter lamented in an online narrative that knitting magazines often fall under “Women’s Interest” at bookstores (Men Who Knit, n.d., John Sutton). And, as if to provide further confirmation, the Craft Yarn Council of America survey about the dramatic increase in knitting in crochet was limited to female participants.
For men who knit, the lack of inclusion can lead to questions about their masculine identity. Masculinity is defined negatively as that which is not feminine, and “it feels imperative to most men that they make it clear—eternally, compulsively, decidedly—that they are unlike women” (Kimmel & Aronson, 2004, The Social Construction of Masculinities). Thus, men who engage in knitting must negotiate their knitting in the midst of patriarchal pressure which dictates that they should want to be a part of the dominant, masculine group, not a numerically female-dominated group and the subjugated knowledge of knitting. Activities that are normal for females are, by deduction, abnormal for males. And, because there is a larger realm of possible feminine behaviors than there are masculine behaviors (e.g., a “tomboy” is generally more accepted than a “sissy”), males’ options for projecting an appropriately masculine identity are limited.

Men make choices about how to “do” their gender, but these choices “are always made in concrete social circumstances, which limit what can be attempted; and the outcomes are not easily controlled” (Connell, 1995, p. 86). As Butler (1993) notes, the performance of gender is not freely chosen, but rather it is a reiteration of regulatory norms that bring forth what we recognize as “male” and “female.” Failing to do these performances in accordance with the regulatory ideal can be dangerous because “gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences,…[T]hose who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished” (Butler, 1990, p. 273). The consequences may be both emotional and physical, ranging from name calling to hate crimes.

Joan Evans and Blye Frank (2003) note that men who go into the female dominated nursing profession must negotiate this pressure as well because they must also attempt to project a masculine image while at the same time willingly engaging in an activity that undermines their
effort. It should be noted that the degree to which the differing status of knitting and nursing (leisure activity vs. profession) impacts perceptions of men engaging in these activities requires more research. However, there are meaningful similarities in their common historically gendered nature that offers heuristic insight to the current research. Because nursing is a regulated profession, we are able to see how laws have protected (and thus perpetuated) the feminization of nursing throughout history. This record, as well as current gender-related research in the field of nursing, causes the disparity between genders in the nursing context to become more concrete than the gender-based differences in knitting, where there is no “legal” record and very limited historical research.

A variety of narratives posted on the “Men Who Knit” section of a popular knitting website offers insight into how some male knitters maintain/protect their masculinity, and negotiate the potential and realized consequences of their actions. There is striking similarity to the ways that men negotiate their masculine performances in nursing and in knitting: they may avoid public discussions/displays, highlight their physical masculinity, and/or highlight the masculine qualities of their activity/profession. Men both enact and diminish their masculinity in nursing and in knitting. These everyday negotiations are dynamic and multilayered, often evolving and changing as the nurse/knitter evolves and changes.

*Let’s Hear it from the Boys*

The potential for public shaming and/or questioning is a powerful deterrent to “going public” with one’s nontraditional activity. One nurse stated, “I was too embarrassed to go back to my high school reunion as a nurse, so I stayed away;” another said, “I’ve had guys laugh in my face when I told them what I did” (Evans & Frank, 2003, p. 279). Likewise, some male knitters chose to knit only in “safe” spaces, which for many includes their “LYS” (local yarn
shop), in order to avoid negative responses. Dave Burrows, a longtime knitter, hid his knitting
from non-LYS affiliated people for many years. He notes that his experience with knitting has
been positive, especially since he is more open now about his knitting, yet he is still reluctant to
knit in public; “I have taken my knitting with me, occasionally hoping for a reason to knit in
public but have not yet done that. I think I still fear it a bit, too. I don’t really like to draw the
attention of strangers” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Dave Burrows). Chris Smith echoes Burrows’
reluctance, “I really haven’t had any bad experiences so far…unless I count my lingering
reluctance to knit in public for fear of disapproval” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Chris Smith).

Those who do “go public” with their knitting have met with mixed reactions. Witt Pratt
states, “I knit in public every day of my life, and mostly, people just want whatever it is I’m
knitting, or else they want to learn how” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Witt Pratt). Rick Mondragon,
editor of Knitter’s Magazine, also knits regularly in public, but he has not had such a positive
experience; “I have been called a sissy, fag, and much else” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Rick
Mondragon). Clifford Williams has also met with some hostility, although not as overt. He
laments that he has not been able to find a welcoming LYS, which is a guaranteed safe space for
many other male knitters. “I invariably get one of two reactions. Either the store owner is right
in my face from the moment I enter until I leave…or everyone runs away” (Men Who Knit, n.d.,
Clifford Williams). He theorizes that his size, 6’3” and 230 pounds, is intimidating to LYS staff;
“I realize that…I am a bit bigger than most of their customers but I just want to look at the yarn.
They don’t need to stare me down or flee in terror.” The physical representation of masculinity,
in part marked by a larger frame, can be an important part of negotiating masculine identity in a
female-dominated context, even though, as in Williams experience, it is not always met with the
desired response. For male knitters, emphasizing one’s larger size and physical expression of
masculine qualities is one way of maintaining one’s masculinity. Pratt notes the benefit of his large stature with some humor, “I’m 6’8” and about 230 pounds so for the most part people leave me alone” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Witt Pratt).

In addition to emphasizing the knitter’s own masculine physique, male knitters as well as female knitters seem prone to emphasize the masculine qualities of knitting when referring to men who knit, a phenomenon also observed in nursing. While most nurses, males and females, go into nursing for the same reason—to help others—male nurses are more likely to be coached, by peers and superiors, to pursue administrative roles and/or elite specializations, which are perceived to be more masculine; ironically, these positions often involve less patient-interaction, which contradicts their original desire to go into nursing (Evans & Frank, 2003). Similarly, female knitters are prone to note the unique skills/abilities of male knitters in an effort to make their abilities seem to be inherent in their gender, rather than to assume that all knitters have the same kind of love for the craft and capacity for skill development.

In the seemingly mundane narrative that contextualizes her circular shawl pattern in Knitter’s Almanac, Zimmerman (1974/81) makes a clear distinction between male and female knitters:

Have you begun to see the well-known geometric theory behind what you have been doing? If you are a man, you will have spotted it right away. If you are a woman (sorry, lib), you probably expunged such theories from your memory the minute you finished high school, or even college, to make room for more useful stuff. (p. 73)

Chris Smith recounts being told by a friend that his gender would be an asset to him, “Men always make the most beautiful sweaters!” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Chris Smith, emphasis added).

Moreover, Lawrence Boyko highlights masculine/heteronormative qualities of knitting: “While
relaxing under my awning I quite often knit and this attracts quite a few ladies who find it odd that a man is knitting. A buddy of mine says knitting is a ‘babe catcher’” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Lawrence Boyko).

_Abject Knitter_

Despite these behavioral negotiations by both men and women to protect masculinity, males in nursing and knitting must consistently battle negative stereotypes and disapproval. When a man engages in an activity deemed “normal” only for women, his performance of masculinity is incongruent with the normative masculine ideal. Male nurses and male knitters are not doing their gender “right” because _manly_ men would not do _women’s work_. Though their status as males may not be in question, their masculinity—or their _subject_ status—is in question. If identity is understood as an “object of belief,” male nurses and knitters may find it difficult to be _believed_ as masculine by others (Butler, 1990, p. 271). Michael S. Kimmel (1994) posits that “[m]anhood is demonstrated for other men’s approval. It is other men who evaluate the performance (p. 128).” Those who are unable to negotiate a strong masculine identity—those whose identity is not believed or approved—fall into the realm of what Butler (1993) defines as the abject position.

Several of the male nurses that Evans and Frank (2003) interviewed mentioned that they had internalized their abjection. One stated:

I don’t doubt my sexuality, I know who I am and what I am, but after a while people make you feel—is there something wrong with me? The suspicion almost makes you feel at times like—maybe I am. You question yourself. Is it because I’m in nursing that I’m supposed to be gay? (p. 280)
Another noted simply, “It’s made me less manly” (p. 281). Though none of the men who posted narratives about knitting mentioned that they internalized the abjection attributed to them, Mondragon, who has been victim of verbal slurs about his knitting, illustrates the power that Kristeva (1982) notes can be found within the abject position. The abject is not a powerless position because “from this place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (p. 2). Mondragon asserts his power by explaining why he no longer engages those who disparage his knitting. “To qualify is to defend…I have no mission to enlighten the ignorant any longer. My skin is getting thicker as my knitting becomes finer” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Rick Mondragon).

*NakedKnitter and the Conservatives*

A late-adopter of interactive websites, I only recently discovered online discussion boards and blogs. And, it is not surprising that knitting was the motivating factor: many knitters post helpful hints, techniques, and patterns online. Recently I was reading through the archives of a knitting message board and noticed several posts by “NakedKnitter,” who had spurred a playful conversation on the topic of his/her screen name. I felt a kindred spirit to NakedKnitter, assuming that we would have a similar outlook on knitting because anyone would who would adopt that screen name has to be fun. However, I was also caused to think about the many knitters who would gasp at the mere association between gratuitous nudity and their beloved knitting. For example, I once read a post on a knitting blog in response to the blossoming notion that knitting is “sexy.” The woman (identified as such in her post) was adamant that knitting was not sexy, and clearly felt that the association of sexiness to knitting was a step in the wrong direction. She noted with great disdain that a website was selling tee-shirts and other items—including thong underwear—emblazoned with the slogan “Knitting is sexy.” At that point, I
immediately went to the online store and ordered a tee-shirt, never to finish reading her argument about why knitting was *not* sexy.

It is obvious that knitting is not the same for every knitter. I doubt NakedKnitter and Ms. Knitting-is-not-sexy think about knitting in the same way. Similarly, I probably do not have the same outlook on knitting as Rick Mondragon, given that the only fear I have when knitting in public is that someone will talk to me about my knitting and I will get caught up in conversation and make an error in my pattern. I do not have to fear being called disparaging names and having to account for my harmless activity. Yet, despite this evidence to the contrary, there is a tendency to assume that “we” all have the same experience of an activity or phenomena. We know that there are different vantage points, different positionalities, yet we still maintain the assumption of commonality. However, “[p]eople do not, in any way, have identical experiences, but they suppose that their experiences are identical; they act as if they were, for all practical purposes, equivalent” (Coulon, 1995, p. 5).

It is clear that the gender of the knitter plays a role in how he or she relates to the activity. Gender scholars offer an excellent framework from which to understand the complex ways that gender is constructed in everyday activities; through their work we are able to see how large power structures are written on individual bodies, both from a distance as well as in our own lives. What we must understand, however, is that the large power structures do not write the same story on all bodies; as such I believe that investigating how knitting, as a gendered/ing activity, is explained and experienced by actual knitters is an important endeavor.

Given the current status of knitting in our culture—an activity enjoyed by longtime knitters and beginners, females and males—it is apparent that there is not one way to experience knitting and the gendered politics therein. Knitters negotiate their desire to knit, or their
ambivalent feelings about knitting, using cultural logic which they then reify and/or resist in the process of sense making. For instance, feminist female knitters must make sense of their desire to knit in the midst of critiques that a feminine activity cannot be feminist (e.g., Petrovski, 2004, Stoller, 2003), and male knitters must make sense of their desire to knit amidst a culture that dictates that they should not want to engage in such an activity, and that engaging in such an activity threatens their performance of masculinity. Though knitting may not seem complicated or critically important at the outset, when we consider how gender is compelled and thus normalized through everyday activities (i.e. through the making of the blue and pink newborn caps) and that this process of gendering our bodies produces material consequences, the need to study this phenomenon becomes apparent.

Though knitting is an activity with a long and gendered history, no one has done a full investigation of knitting as an activity with specific, gendered implications from a critical communication perspective. Some scholarly-minded knitters may be too entranced and romanced by the clicking of the needles, the warmth of the wool, and the fellowship of knitting to turn a critical eye. Others may be too busy doing the politics of knitting by holding up knitted peace sign banners at rallies, organizing knit-ins on their campuses, or making blankets or hats for people in need. For me, the current context of knitting—an ancient activity in transition to a 21\textsuperscript{st} century culture—begs two main questions. How is knitting constitutive of a knitter’s gender in the context of a cultural logic that positions knitting as a traditional, feminine activity? And, how does a knitter resist and/or reify the cultural logic in his/her sense-making process about knitting? Both the romance and the politics of knitting compel me to pursue a deeper understanding of my favorite activity, and it is in this space that I begin my journey to deconstruct the construction of gendered identities that occurs through knitting.
The definition of knitting is fairly basic; “[it] is the process of forming a fabric by making interlocking loops from a continuous strand of yarn using two or more needles” (“Basic,” 2002, p. 22). However, there are several different methods by which one can make the “interlocking loops,” or stitches. Most methods consist of moving all stitches from the left needle to the right needle; then, once all stitches are knitted on to the right needle, the knitter switches the “empty” needle to his/her right hand and repeats the process. The variance of knitting methods involves which hand the knitter uses to hold the yarn and how the knitter maneuvers his/her hands to make the stitch. The method by which a knitter learns to knit is usually the method that s/he will continue to use throughout his/her knitting career. However, knitting neophytes do not usually know that they are being taught to use a particular method; they think they are learning to knit, period.

I was taught to use the Continental method, which is popular with German knitters. This method involves holding the yarn with the left hand, and uses hands equally a part of the knitting process. Though I have a strong German heritage, this had nothing to do with my knitting education; I just happened to learn to knit from Continental knitters. In fact, it was at least three years before I even heard the word “Continental” or its tradition with German knitters. At a knitting social, I sat in the midst of a group of knitters who were all doing a funny-looking-wrapping-action with their right hand. At first, it appeared that they were trying to knit but didn’t know what they were supposed to be doing. However, someone explained that they were using the English (also called American) method, which is more of a one-handed method where the yarn is held and worked with the right hand. I was surprised to learn that this method is much more prevalent than the Continental method among knitters in the United States. I felt
Sheepish as I remembered my snobbish—albeit unvoiced—initial reaction, and grateful that I had not offered to help any of the English knitters “learn” to knit.

Though these two methods are the most widely used in the United States, there are several other slightly different methods used by knitters worldwide. For instance, Italian knitters use very long needles that they wedge under their armpits as they work, and traditional South American knitters wrap the yarn behind their necks to maintain their tension. Though all of these methods work, meaning they will all yield a knitted fabric, there is some debate among knitters about which method is the best. While there is no conclusive evidence that one method is better than another, this does not preclude some knitters from voicing their opinions. For instance, even as Stoller (2003) advises readers/new knitters to try out both methods, she declares, “Me, I’m a stodgy diehard, and I’ll never switch my stitch, even if they do claim that the Continental method is faster” (p. 33).

Though many knitters remain faithful to their original method, some are able to make a switch. Zimmerman (1971) changed methods early in her life, although this change did not occur without incident. She was originally taught in the English method, but taught herself the Continental method when she was still a child. Noticing this change, her English governess “forbade the practice of anything as despicable as the German way of knitting,” so she had to practice secretly (p. 16-17). It is possibly Zimmerman’s experience with both methods that allowed her to develop a philosophical, culturally-based explanation for the divide among English and Continental knitters:

For some reason the right-handers scorn the left-handers, causing the poor left-handers to labor, with great humility, under a quite unsubstantiated feeling of inferiority. It is my belief—and please feel free to disagree with me—that because right-handed knitting is
prevalent in the British Isles, it is considered more elegant. Those with Anglo-Saxon names, such as mine originally was, tend rather regretfully to look down on others.

Why? (p. 15)

Other explanations include arguments that one method yields a more consistent gauge, a faster pace, or a more natural feel for right-handers vs. left-handers, but whatever the rationale, the divide and the debate persist.

*Kris Knits Continental*

I have tested my own faithfulness to Continental knitting several times by attempting the English method. I know in my head how to do it, but when I try to maneuver my hands, I am twice as awkward in my effort as I ever was when I first learned to knit. My hands know Continental. It makes sense in my mind and in my hands, so it is difficult not to be partial, especially when it comes to teaching someone how to knit. Even if I try to point out that there is another method one could use, my awkward demonstration of the English method certainly does not make it seem appealing, especially in contrast to my apparent command of the Continental method. “Oh yes, that way looks much easier…” I cannot help but agree.

I began my investigation of knitting from this partial—both as it is defined as *biased* and *limited*—position. As a female knitter investigating knitting as a gendering activity, it is important to acknowledge my positionality as both knitter and researcher, as well as to recognize that my lived experience is an abundant resource for systematic investigation; however, I do not want to merely acknowledge my position and experience because that would diminish its value as well as its bearing on this research. My performance of gender—of self—includes knitting, and as such it is a way of knowing for me. Ronald J. Pelias (1999) posits that “such
knowledge…is perhaps best expressed in the poetic,” and explains the distinction between poetic writing and traditional scholarly writing (p. ix):

The poetic essay finds kindred spirits in the diary, the journal, the personal narrative, the confession, the autobiography, not in the objective research report, the factual history, or the statistical proof…In short, the poetic essay offers a more nuanced account in keeping with the spirit of the performative event itself. (p. xi).

What Pelias (1999) refers to as “poetic” writing is part of a method of inquiry known as autoethnography, which can be defined broadly as “research that displays multiples layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739).

Autoethnography has been used as a method of inquiry across disciplines for several decades and during this time it has evolved a great deal (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Although many variations of autoethnography have emerged, one way it can be understood is “complete-member research” because the researcher is writing about his/her own experiences within a cultural framework and s/he is already “fully committed to and immersed in the groups [s/he] stud[ies]” (Adler & Adler, 1987 as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739, 741). Therefore, as a female knitter writing and researching knitting within a culture where knitting is predominately a feminine activity, this methodology seemed like an obvious choice. I utilized my insight as an avid knitter and critical scholar in order to explore and reflect the gendering aspects of knitting and provide “a more nuanced account” of my experience (Pelias, 1999, p. xi). I did not attempt to detach myself from knitting, to put down my needles in order to gain objectivity, nor did I view my connection to knitting as a limitation to my study. Instead, I used my experiences to uncover the ways that I both reify and resist the cultural logic that positions knitting as a traditional, feminine activity.
In Chapter Three, I have focused my investigation primarily within the context of a particular romantic relationship to illustrate the ways that I made sense of knitting for a partner and how I understand knitting to be an active part of my understanding of self. In this effort, I hint at “the diary, the journal, the personal narrative, the confession, the autobiography” in an attempt to capture my experience, my reflections, and my journey as a knitter, and the implications I have felt through that process (Pelias, 1999, p. xi). Additionally, I have used autoethnography to contextualize other elements of this document to communicate my experience and understanding of knitting as a gendered performance as it relates to this research.

Learning English

While autoethnography allows me to investigate my own experience of knitting, like all methods, it reflects only one way of knowing and doing. To investigate knitting, which encompasses a variety of methods, using only one method would be to diminish its complexity, and I knew that there was much to be learned from knitters whose experience is different than mine. Though I went along thinking that my experience of knitting was just like everyone else’s for several years, I know better now and I wanted to learn from “English” knitters—from those whose experience is far different than mine. Though both male and female knitters may have ambivalent feelings about, and experiences with, knitting, I particularly wanted to learn about the experiences of male knitters. What would it feel like to have someone call my gender, my sexuality, my being into question just because I happen to be knitting?

Garfinkel (1967) states, “Familiar scenes of everyday activities, treated by members as the ‘natural facts of life,’ are massive facts of the members’ daily existence both as a real world and as the product of activities in a real world” (p. 35). The naturalness of everyday life occurs because of a moral order; activities that are thought of as the “natural facts of life” are so because
they are morally right. However, the massiveness of these so-called natural facts is often obscured because constant moral judgment is a part of “commonsense” logic; it does not seem to require much critical thought. I wanted to learn the reasoning behind the commonsense knowledge about knitting for male knitters.

So, to investigate how other knitters, specifically males, understand their knitting as a gendering activity, I interviewed a convenience sample of five male knitters. “Through [interviews] the communication researcher tries to gain a critical vantage point on the sense making in communicative performances and practices” (Lindlof, 1995, p. 165). This type of interview has the feel of conversation, but differs in purpose and structure (Lindlof, 1995). In these interviews, my purpose was to elicit information from each knitter about his experience with, and feelings about, knitting. I wanted to understand how each knitter makes sense of his desire to knit and how he negotiates maintaining his masculinity while engaging in an activity considered feminine. The structure of the interviews followed an open-ended question and answer format and ranged in length from 30 minutes to one hour. At the conclusion of the interview, I allowed each participant to select a pseudonym; if they did not have a preference, I chose one for them.

In each interview, I encouraged the participants to uncover the commonsense ways that they approach their knitting, and how they determine what is right/natural and what is not. To do this I developed a list of questions that focused on the how, why, and when aspects of each participant’s knitting behavior. I allowed the information each participant provided dictate the flow of the interview, so the topics covered and the time spent discussing each topic varied among the participants. I began by asking each participant how long he had been knitting, which typically led him to discuss how he had learned and who had taught him; in some cases I asked
several follow-up questions to gather this information. I then asked each participant some basic questions about his knitting projects (past/current) and his knitting habits (frequency/location).

These initial questions helped to foster trust because they were designed to solicit “facts” instead of “opinions” and they were not overtly personal in nature. Later in the interview, I returned to their often brief responses to these initial questions in order to probe for insight on the why/how aspects. Also, when I perceived that more trust had been established, I began to ask each knitter about more personal topics, including the extent to which he talks about knitting or knits among others (and if/how/when he makes these decisions) and if he has connections to other men who knit.

During each interview and in my subsequent analysis, I tried to determine how each knitter makes his decisions about knitting accountable, a key feature in ethnomethodological research that refers to the ways that a person/group goes about making their activities appear to be organized and intelligible (Garfinkel, 1967, p. 33). I tried to uncover how each participant understood his relationship with knitting, and how this understanding was negotiated with and against the “grain” of normative cultural logic. For instance, when one knitter (Calvin) noted that he would not knit in a public place such as the Student Union, I asked “Why wouldn’t you want to knit in the Student Union?” in order to encourage him to elaborate on the reasoning process that went into his decision.

*Sorting the Stash*

The process of collecting and sorting information from the five knitters was much like collecting yarn. When I first started knitting, I was satisfied to have only the amount of yarn I needed to complete my current project, but over the years my yarn philosophy changed from “buy as needed” to “I love it, I need it, and I’m sure I’ll use it someday.” Instead of relying
primarily on big name craft stores, I perused wool festivals, and sought out yarn shops locally, online, and when traveling. Given the conversations I have overheard (and participated in) at yarn shops, the yarn-obsessed lamentations of knitting bloggers, and Debbie Stoller’s (2003) cheeky “SEX” acronym for “stash enrichment expedition,” I believe I am in good company as a yarn fanatic. However, when my overgrown yarn stash threatened to take over my apartment, it became glaringly obvious that I needed to find a better storage solution.

After considering several options, I bought three soft-sided containers that would fit under my bed. I knew that most, if not all, of my yarn would fit in the containers—but how to organize? Because the containers were opaque and I would be storing them under my bed, I knew that being able to quickly access [a] particular yarn/s I was looking was the most important factor. First, I sorted by color, which seemed like the most obvious strategy, but I realized that eighteen balls of chunky-weight, dark green wool share little in common with two balls of a delicate, lime green silk blend. So I began to experiment by making other distinctions—such as weight of yarn and number of balls—but I knew that none of these organizational strategies would meet the criteria I set about ease of access.

Finally, when I reflected on the whole pile of yarn spread out on my bedroom floor, I began to see that the natural distinction between the different lots of yarn was related to the yarn’s purpose (or lack thereof), rather than any sort of aesthetic value. I had purchased some yarns with a particular project in mind, while others I got because they were on sale or because I just couldn’t leave the store without them. The yarns that did not fit into the two previous categories were odd-balls left over from previous projects. I made labels reading “reserved for a project,” “enough for a project,” and “oddballs and leftovers,” and put each yarn into its proper
container; the system seemed so obvious and organic, and I knew that it would allow me the
easiest access to my yarn.

In a similar manner, I excitedly collected and analyzed information from my interviewees
and began the sorting process. I collected in my office at school, in a coffee shop, a hotel lobby,
and, naturally, a yarn shop, and then poured over the transcripts and my notes, drawn to each
knitter’s experiences in the same way I am drawn to the naturally occurring variances of recycled
silk yarn. The more time I spent with the material, the more nuanced I found each knitter’s
experience to be. With each read, I highlighted and scribbled notes and symbols in the margins,
adding even more variance in texture. As my material grew, the question of how to organize was
ever-present. By individual in case studies? By length of knitting experience? The
organizational strategy I should use was not initially apparent, but as with my yarn stash, the
material itself revealed the solution that would provide the easiest access to the information.

I began to recognize that the different highlighter colors I had attributed to each interviewee
did not disguise the thematic similarities apparent in their responses. A thematic organizational
strategy emerged that would provide the reader easy access to the ways in which the male
knitters I interviewed negotiate their knitting; I grouped the information across interviewees by
similar strategies used by knitters to negotiate their knitting/masculinity, and then I grouped the
different strategies into two major categories. I have documented this information in Chapter
Four.

Though both organizational systems—for my yarn stash and my research—provide
increased access to the respective materials, neither one is perfect. In the case of my yarn, for
instance, some of the yarn in the “oddballs and leftovers” container could also be in the “enough
for a project” container. Of a greater concern, however, is the inherent imperfection in the
thematic organizational strategy for my research: the possibility of over-generalizing and/or diminishing each knitter’s individual experience. Though I believe that the “tidiness” of this thematic system provides the benefit of accessibility which outweighs the risks, I do not want to imply that the knitters I interviewed, or the ways that these knitters understand themselves and their knitting, fit into tidy categories. Gender performance, and the ways in which we understand our performance and ourselves, is a highly complicated process that defies simple explanations. The participants’ acts and responses that defy a theme point to the complexity of gendered performance, which has sincere consequences in our culture.
CHAPTER III. KNITTING FOR BOYS

“Krissy, do you want this afghan?” Grandma asked plainly over the phone.

“The pink one you were working on? Yes! I’d love it!” I responded in one breath.

A couple months later, she sent me the afghan with little pomp or circumstance, which is typical; Grandma is not a “warm and fuzzy” kind of person. Instead, given our common interest in fiber arts, she described the “Mile a Minute” pattern and the yarns she used, part of a large stash she inherited from her sister-in-law. She didn’t tell me about how she thought of me as she was making it, or about how much she loved me. She didn’t mention that she wanted me to have things that she made to remember her by someday. She didn’t tell me these things, but that’s what it meant to me.

I could feel her soft hands working quickly and precisely, with agile fingertips toughened by millions of pin-point scars accumulated from a life of sewing and quilting. Her skill is apparent, and while such perfection could easily appear store-bought, I can see the work behind it. Each stitch was created by the hands that made my mother’s wedding dress over thirty years ago, and the hands that held mine during summer camping trips and Friday night sleepovers. In the afghan, I feel the time and love she invested in the blanket and in me, with her hands and her heart. The afghan will certainly keep me warm and look nice at the foot of my bed, but her gift wasn’t just the afghan…

* * *

Three weeks before Valentine’s Day I began knitting his scarf, giving only passing consideration to the old adage that knitting for a partner inevitably curses the relationship. I had a good feeling about this one, something that I hadn’t felt for someone in a long time. In fact, I had a great feeling about this one—I couldn’t stop thinking about this one, which was a good
feeling in itself. Any challenges to our relationship were invisible, forgotten, hoped away in the haze of infatuation. “I feel like I’m thirteen years old—I’m stupid over this boy!” I lamented to a friend over dinner, almost embarrassed, yet hardly able to contain my excitement.

What if this is just the beginning,

We’re already wet and we’re gonna go swimming…

Why can’t I breathe whenever I think about you

Why can’t I speak whenever I talk about you

Liz Phair, Why Can’t I

Liz Phair’s pop anthem of drippy infatuation spoke to my inspired sense of optimism about what was to come for us. Ever since my sixth grade crush who I swore was the “meaning in my life…[he’s] the inspiration” (Chicago) and my first real boyfriend in eighth grade who was my “Love of a Lifetime” (Firehouse), I have usually been able to find myself in song lyrics or the occasional movie quote. In college, when my friends and I were ABBA-crazy, we were amazed at how we could describe our feelings during nearly any phase of a relationship using songs from ABBA Gold. They were so prophetic! Old songs, new songs, happy songs, breakup songs… Regardless of my romantic circumstance, it’s comforting to know that someone out there seems to know what I am going through. And, at that moment, I was grateful to be sharing Liz Phair’s sense of blissful infatuation rather than one of Air Supply’s morose tales of love gone wrong.

We had discovered our mutual attraction almost by accident. He was leaving my apartment after a friendly visit, and after giving me a hug he leaned in to give me a little kiss, an innocent little kiss…or was it? He’s just affectionate, I thought, just a touchy-feely kind of guy…I really wouldn’t mind if he…but… There was a pause as we looked at each other
expectantly, and then he turned toward the door. With more confidence than I felt, I asked, “So…do you kiss all your girlfriends?” Even as the words came out of my mouth, I was not sure if I was making a pass or asking for clarification. He turned back toward me and a smile crept across his face, telling me he felt caught making a pass of his own. “You said that ‘on again, off again’ thing is ‘off again,’ right?” I asked as I moved closer. “Yes!” he responded, and, without another word, gave me a kiss that was anything but innocent.

We stared at each other in a state of happy yet awkward confusion. We were just getting to know each other as friends and now...this. You mean you…? I knew I did…but you? And there was that one time when I thought maybe…but… The particulars of what we were getting into were unclear, but since we had already made the leap from friendship into the territory of “something more,” where we landed didn’t seem immediately important. Not really knowing how to proceed from this unconventional beginning, we resolved to “just have fun with it, see what happens.”

Now, I am not a laid back, “just have fun with it” kind of person, but the contemplating I usually did when I started dating someone was irrelevant. We had gone from nothing to something without even a first date; there was no time for the traditional getting-to-know-you-as-a-partner phase, no time for me to think about him between dates, no time to debate long-term compatibility. Though I had given little thought to the possibility of a relationship with him before that night, after that night I could think of little else. It was more than a fling; we were more than “having fun with it, see[ing] what happens,” and we both knew that. When something feels this right, it’s right—right?
And then you sense a change, nothin’ feels the same
All your dreams are strange, love comes walkin’ in

Van Halen, Love Walks In

Robert Hopper (1998) notes “two things must happen to begin a love story: something unusual, and the identification of the unusual event as flirting” (p. 38). Check. Check. And so our love story began, and though it was a new story, it was an old tale. I knew it from “hair band” power ballads and easy listening classics, from tear-jerking-chick-flicks and my daily appointment with The Young and the Restless. Our story had all the elements of the Great Love Story: it came out of nowhere, quickly became intense, passionate, physically intoxicating, and there was the plot twist of a third party (the “off again”). I knew how the story unfolds: the guy summons the strength to jump off the viscous “on again, off again” cycle for good, having found what he was looking for in the proverbial “place he least expected,” and the girl realizes that the reason she didn’t feel the twitterpation before was because it wasn’t right before. I knew the script and I was ready to play my role.

*   *   *

I felt my mobile phone vibrating under my leg as I was driving. Please let it be him, I thought as I reached to answer. He had called earlier to let me know he was at the airport, so I figured it wouldn’t be, but I was filled with hope as I peered at the caller ID window.

He began slowly, almost apologetically. “So I’m on my lay over…and…and thought I’d call…I know I called before…but,” he paused, “I just can’t stop calling you!”

I could hear the smile in his voice.

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” I lamented with exaggerated sincerity, as if it were some sort of romantic affliction.
I knitted our story, our tale of romantic affliction, into his scarf using a pattern that looks complex but is really quite simple. Like Prayer Shawl knitters involved with the Shawl Ministry (n.d.) who knit prayerful concern for the recipients of their shawls, I imbued each stitch of his scarf with my desires for us, anxious for the day when he would feel the warmth of that hope surrounding him. After dating too many boys that I had no desire to knit for—no desire to invest—I was quite taken by the romance of it all, feeling the thick, soft wool slipping quickly and systematically between my fingers as I pictured him wearing the scarf. It was as if I had been transported back to the 1950s, hearing advertisers encouraging me to knit for that special guy:

I hope you’ll not just sit and think about how nice he is. Do something! Go out and get that wool today, and cast on, you’ll know knitting for him can be, and is, fun. It…reaps heaps of results—gifts that stand up and say, “Knitted with Love.” And what could be better? (Macdonald, 1988, p. 330)

And really, what *could* be better? He was charmed by my knitting, not finding it “granny-ish” or peculiar, and he was charmed by me. I couldn’t wait for Valentine’s Day.

I knew little about the “on again, off again,” didn’t want to know really; I just saw the fallout. The emotional bruises he bore were apparent in the way he drank in my attention, my affection. I wanted to save him, to wrap him up in my affection and save him. I knew that only time would tell if the “off again” was “off” forever, but I am not patient. I craved the security I would feel when I was confident that I was not going to end up just a tangent in another woman’s love story. My hands worked quickly and with each stitch, I created the security I did not have. This fabric felt strong, while the fiber of their longtime relationship was unraveled to the point of breakage; the loose ends were already splaying out into new directions. The way he
looked at me, the way he kissed me, the way he seemed to feel the same way I did… *You can’t fake that stuff.*

* * *

I was an impossible case, no one ever could reach me,

But I think I can see in your face, there’s a lot you can teach me,

So I wanna know, what’s the name of the game?

Does it mean anything to you?

ABBA, *What’s the Name of the Game*

The first night I stayed over, he held his alarm clock and asked, “What time you want up?” I paused briefly, contemplating my response. “Mmm, early…seven?” My daily routine did not call for such an early start, but I thought it sounded good; *I’ve got important things to do, I’m a busy person.* BEEP—BEEP—BEEP—BEEP… I cringed at the halting sound of a strange alarm clock, and then it quickly went silent with a practiced swipe of his hand. I stretched my neck forward, working out the kinks caused by an unfamiliar pillow, and I pushed into him, curling my back into his side. He pressed against me, acknowledging my silent “good morning,” but from his deep breathing pattern I knew that despite the alarm he was almost asleep again.

I peeled off the blankets and quickly changed back into my clothes from the night before, trying to calm the chill bumps that covered my body. Through the frosted window I saw that several inches of snow had fallen overnight, and I dreaded going out into the icy air and scraping the snow off my car, knowing that I would be almost home before I would be as warm as I was before I got out of bed. After a moment of hesitation, I lay back down—feeling the warmth of the spot I just vacated through the chill of my clothes. I rested my eyes, giving in to tiredness, but more so to my craving for one more moment of intimacy. Feeling me next to him again, he
offered a sleepy smirk, attributing my return to bed as a sign of sluggishness rather than what it was: an invitation to pull me back in, wrap his flannel-clad legs around my body, and keep me from leaving. “I’m going, I’m going.” I muttered to myself as much as to him and pulled myself out of bed again.

At the bathroom sink, I briefly tried to tame my outrageous cowlicks, which sleep had set free from the discipline of products and hair drying. My eyes dark and puffy, my blemishes uncovered, my gerbil-like hair…. Maybe it’s a good thing he isn’t awake to see this… I padded in my socks to the front door where my pile of winter gear was strewn on the floor. Coat…scarf…hat… As I pulled on my boots, I heard him stirring and realized he was coming to kiss me goodbye. I slowed my bundling process, taking out my mittens and keys carefully, and smiled as I heard his footsteps in the hallway; this is good—he’s not just letting me go.

“Good morning, Sleepyhead!” I chimed obnoxiously and he groaned. With eyes only half-open, he leaned to give me a quick kiss, and then another, before moving to open the door. “Goodbye,” he said quietly, as if he was trying not to wake himself completely. “I’ll talk to you later…Now get back to bed!” I responded, trying to imply that he did not really need to see me out. He smiled, and I kissed him again before leaving. On my drive home, though tired and impossibly cold, I affirmed that it was a good idea for me to go; I don’t want to seem clingy. I still wanted to be lying next to him, but if I stayed that would be too obvious.

* * *

He called on Wednesday night as I neared completion of the scarf, a week and a half before Valentine’s Day. I had just returned from the hair salon, and decided to knit through the transition from the hustle and bustle of the day into my nightly reading. Though I did not usually schedule evening appointments, it was fun to wrap up my day talking to Doreen, who had cut my
hair through several dating relationships. “So…what’s happening with you?” she had asked excitedly, holding a comb to my wet head, waiting to begin cutting until we had established our conversation. I knew exactly which part of my life she was asking about. “Things are really goooooood….” I responded with a grin, knowing that I would be asked to provide more details, and that I would happily oblige. Two cuts ago, he was a friend that I was spending some time with, last cut I was still shocked at the friends-to-more change in status, and now things were “really goooooood.”

I was a few rows in when he called. Grateful for the excuse to delay my reading bit longer, I cradled the phone on my shoulder and kept working as we said our hellos and began what I thought to be a routine call. I couldn’t help but feel mischievous, knitting his scarf as I was talking to him, knowing how excited he would be if he knew the project I was working on. I used to work with a woman who made a quilt for her partner in the early stages of their bi-coastal relationship; she talked of how, with each phone call that went late into the night, she finished a little more of the quilt and they fell a little more in love. I reveled in the way that my story paralleled hers, but I was quickly snapped out of this reverie.

“I don’t want you to be upset…” he began slowly, obviously preparing me for upsetting news. “She’s coming this weekend?” I repeated, turning his statement into a question in hopes of putting the event into question. “Don’t worry about this—I’m not worried about this,” he tried to assure me earnestly, but my stomach sank anyway. “She just said she needs to talk,” he said plainly, offering no clue as to how he felt about the visit. Why was she really coming, I wondered but said nothing. Can’t they talk on the phone? The knitting that was alive with activity fell to my lap. Things had been going too well. I should have known.
I finished the scarf Thursday morning, just needing to be done with it. I worked quickly. My usual morning routine interrupted, preempted. Desperation and fear produced a noticeable change in the fabric. Tight. Narrow. The final inches of fabric wrought from anxiety contrasted the lazy gauge of infatuation. I stretched the tight, narrow rows, trying to relieve them of their natural inclination so they would match the rest of the scarf, but to no avail. Fear is far different than confidence, and no amount of work would make that distinction seamless. I carefully rolled the scarf and tied it with a bow, tying and retying several times before I was satisfied. With the narrow end folded in, it looked perfect. *He said not to worry,* I thought, the perfect package offering me a moment of hope. But I knew. The pit of my stomach knew. The clipped narrow ending of my scarf knew, no matter how well hidden it was.

> If I could turn the page in time then I'd rearrange just a day or two
> (Close my, close my, close my eyes)
> But I couldn't find a way, so I'll settle for one day to believe in you
> (Tell me, tell me, tell me lies)
> Fleetwood Mac, *Little Lies*

In an attempt to hold on to a thread of optimism, I called to see if he could meet for a drink the night before she was due to arrive. *We wouldn’t be seeing each other for several days,* I reasoned before picking up the phone, *we could have just a casual drink because I have nothing to worry about, right?* “Oh tonight I just can’t—I’m totally swamped right now.” *To free all of your time for the weekend,* I figured but said nothing. “No biggie, just thought if you had time…You’re busy—I’ll let you go…” I hung up the phone and affirmed that this was all a very bad sign; *he could have made time.* However, I was also a bit relieved. If he were available, I would have to decide whether or not to give him the newly completed scarf before *the* weekend,
instead of for Valentine’s Day as I had intended. *It might appear too desperate,* I thought. *Am I ready to put my cards on the table like that? To show him how much I care?* But not giving it to him left open the possibility of never giving it to him, and considering that possibility meant letting go of the *hope* for a happy ending, and even though I saw the signs everywhere, I wasn’t ready for that. I couldn’t bear thinking that this was the denouement of our romantic tale.

I turned my thoughts to imagining how our meeting would go, how over a glass of wine I would tell him everything. *I was making this for you for Valentine’s Day, but now things are different….* He would take the scarf and realize that beneath my convincing attempt at being the easy-going, “who-needs-security-in-a-relationship?” girl, I was carefully constructing the security that he did not provide. He would grab my hand, realizing that our meeting wasn’t really about the scarf. *Now that this has come up—that she has come up—I don’t know what this means for us… and I just can’t look at this and think about what might happen, so for what it’s worth…* He would untie the scarf and contemplate it for a moment, digging his fingers into the thick, complicated emotions caught up in the wool. He would run his fingers across the tight, panicked stitches at the end, and he would feel guilty for the fear and anxiety he caused. Then, he would bring it and me into his embrace, and he would realize that I could care for him better that she could. He would reward my vulnerability—my grand gesture—and he would assure me with more conviction, *You have nothing to worry about…* And I would believe him. *That’s how things would have gone,* I told myself, but there was no meeting. I did not feel convinced.

*Congratulations, for breaking my heart, congratulations, for tearing it all apart…*

*Congratulations, you got a good deal, congratulations, how good you must feel.*

Traveling Wilburys, *Congratulations*
The painfully matter-of-fact call came early Monday evening. In one fell swoop, the barriers to their happy life together had apparently disappeared from the equation, and so had I. They were “on again.” In a daze, I was unable to offer much by way of a response, falsely sounding unaffected. His seemingly sincere assurance not to worry echoed in my head. *Had he really not known what was going to happen, or was it just too awkward to tell me the truth? Was he caught up in “us” too?* Two days later, my emotions overflowing, I cried on the phone, “How could you give up…give me up so quickly?” He was quiet, apparently taken off-guard by my emotionality. He began slowly, “I am so sorry for hurting you—I never meant to hurt you…I’m so sorry….” He seemed sincere, but I did not want an apology. I wanted things to be the way they were, the way I thought they could be. I wanted the romantic ending made all the more romantic by a *near* breakup. I wanted the romantic ending I had seen play out in the teen romance novels I used to read by the dozen, the ending I had seen on movie screens a million times; I knew how to play the role of the woman who *almost* lost her guy. Instead, reality ruptured my fantasy and left me to contend with the gaping emotional wound caused by *actually* losing the guy. No one would pay eight bucks to see this.

As we talked through the end of *us* and the re-beginning of *them* I stared at the scarf still sitting pertly on my coffee table: 60 inches of vulnerability, raw and exposed, with no opportunity for reward or reciprocation. My heart a tangled web of wool all tied up with nowhere to go. I am not Julia Roberts standing before Hugh Grant in *Notting Hill* in this moment, I am not “just a girl, standing before a boy and asking him to love me”; I am alone in my apartment. The vulnerability I spent hours to share with him is still mine, but it is out *there*; all of my hopefulness, my neediness, is on display and it mocks me, mocks my naked desire to
be loved never more obvious than in my attempt to cover him, surround him, clothe him with my affection.

I am not just lonely with my vulnerability, I am alone, and it feels awful. Though outwardly, maybe it was just a scarf; it wasn’t just a scarf. It was the scarf and it was the relationship, and it was what they meant together. I had felt this before; an afghan is not always just an afghan, a hat is not always just a hat…

* * *

Sitting in my car in the parking lot, I called my mom. Upon hearing her voice and not her voicemail, the tears that were welled up in my eyes began to spill.

Sensing tears in my breath, she quickly began, “Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

I was aware of the fact that my car was not a private space—parked in a grocery store parking lot during the five o’clock rush hour—but I felt safe. I made no motion to start my car and leave, and instead I began rambling through my tears.

“I’m just…I’m just really mad…but it’s stupid…you’re going to think I’m stupid…”

“Why? WHAT happened??”

“They threw away my hat…you know my new hat? The navy with green stripes that matches my scarf?”

“Yes, I know it—who threw it away? Why?”

I had lost my hat in Kroger two days earlier, when it must have fallen out of one of the overstuffed pockets of my puffy ski coat. It was my newest and most favorite hat. After all of the ill-fitting, unflattering hats I had made, this one was perfect. I used a pattern I found online from a man in London who developed it to imitate the style of hats popular with English urban hipsters like David Beckham. Yes indeed, this hat was quite stylish. More than that, it marked a
milestone in my knitting. I had learned how to knit in the round and then transfer to double-pointed needles, thereby eliminating the need to seam up the hat. Hats knitted in the round have cleaner lines, and a smoother, more sophisticated fit. No matter how much care I put into sewing up my previous hats, the seams always had a rudimentary look and feel.

I called the store immediately after I noticed it was gone, bags of groceries still on the kitchen floor. “No, it’s not here, but maybe if you check back later it will have turned up.” Just before midnight I called again.

“Yeah it’s here. Just pick it up at Lost and Found.”

“Oh good!” I exclaimed, relieved. “Would you mind pulling it out and putting my name on it?”

“It’s really not necessary—it will be here,” the teenage female voice on the other end assured me with seeming impatience.

“I know, it seems kind of silly, but I made it…and it took a long time so I just want to make sure it’s there…if you could put my name on it I’d really appreciate it,” I pushed on.

“It will be here, it’s not necessary,” she countered, her impatience with me growing.

“Okay, then…,” I relented, agreeing to trust her. “I’ll pick it up when I’m back in town on Wednesday.” I thought about driving down the next day, but I reasoned that if she said it would be there, it would be there. One day wasn’t going to matter. When I arrived at customer service two days later, I noticed that the young female I had spoken with was on duty, recognizable by her name tag.

“Hi! We spoke on Monday night? I’m here to pick up the hat I lost,” I began cheerfully, hoping she wouldn’t remember her apparent annoyance about my devotion to the hat.
Without a word she bent down to what I took to be the Lost and Found box, and I noted the confused look on her face.

“Did something happen to…?” she mumbled to her colleague at the booth, who said nothing. With growing concern I watched as she picked up the phone and dialed what I assumed to be a supervisor.

“Hi…yeah, did something happen to the Lost and Found stuff? It was all here earlier…Oh…They threw it out this afternoon?...Okay…thanks.”

“They threw it all out this afternoon,” she repeated to me without a trace of apology.

“They WHAT?” I asked slowly, disbelieving. “They threw it OUT?”

“Yes.”

I paused a moment, staring at her. “Do you remember telling me that you didn’t need to put my name on it because it would be here?” She said she was unaware that the Lost and Found was going to be cleared out. I wanted to shout “That’s why I asked you to set it aside in the first place!” but she was clearly done with our conversation.

“They don’t even take them to a shelter or something?” I asked. The local Goodwill practically shared a parking lot with the store. At least if they had taken it there, I could think of my hat warming the head of someone else, if not my own.

“No, they just throw them out,” she confirmed as if my question was truly about the store’s Lost and Found policy.

I wanted to stay there and argue, hoping that logic would make the hat come back—or that the supervisor would call remembering that one hat had been held back from the trash—but I was taken off guard by the tears starting to burn in my eyes. I did not want to cry in the store;
she wouldn’t understand my reaction, and I did not want to be the funny story about the crazy knitter she told to her family over dinner.

Outside in the parking lot my mother affirmed my openly emotional reaction.

“It’s not stupid,” she began softly. “You work so hard on those things…You should call the store manager and report that girl—she should have put that hat aside for you when you asked…That’s just ridiculous,” she declared.

I had heard that tone before; it was the protective tone that came out when someone hurt me. She was trying to give me an action, a step to get some sort of vindication, and while I appreciated that, I figured that the store manager would have as much sympathy for my lost knitted hat as the teenage employee. I had other hats—that wasn’t the issue. It was more than just a hat to me, it was a symbol of my accomplishment, and now it was sitting in a dumpster full of damaged cereal boxes, bruised fruit, and rotten meat.

* * *

Though his scarf wasn’t sitting at the bottom of a dumpster, frozen to a brown banana and waiting to be taken to a landfill, it was ruined nonetheless. My hope was carelessly trashed. Just as I trusted the grocery store employee who assured me that my hat would be there, I had trusted him. “Don’t worry about this,” he had said.

“Let him have it,” my mom declared in her protective voice when I told her about the cavalier call that abruptly ended our romance. “He’s just going to think that he can get away with treating people like that. You need to tell him that that’s not okay. He needs to know that he hurt you…you can’t just treat people like that.” It really isn’t okay, I thought. I didn’t do anything wrong. I don’t deserve this. But I knew that there were no guarantees in relationships, especially this one.
With the romantic vision of *us* gone, I must contend with reality. We had not begun our relationship with the right material; it was thin, flimsy. You can compensate for some things while knitting, like length or width, but the raw material you use dictates the entire nature of the project; a bulky turtleneck pattern knitted with thin silk yarn will never be warm enough. However, I had envisioned how incredible our relationship *could* be if the material *was* right. With each stitch I tried to strengthen the material of our relationship to make it work. I knew that the “off again” was more than a design element, or a mark of the uniqueness of our relationship, yet I knitted on pretending not to notice, thinking I could somehow compensate for this flaw with my skill, with myself. I knitted on because I was unwilling—because I was unable—to stop. All of the good love stories have that moment of concern, that moment where you think that the two star-crossed lovers might not find their way back to each other, but they always do. We would find our way to each other; I wanted my turn at the “chick flick” ending.

The adage that knitting for a partner *curses* the relationship is salient, even though I tried to deny it. Former *Saturday Night Live* cast member and knitter, Julia Sweeny, spent six months making a sweater for her boyfriend, only to have him break up with her two days later. So much for the old yarn manufacturer slogan, “He’ll love you more if you knit for him” (Macdonald, 1988, p. 322). Sweeny speculates, “I think the sweater just becomes this big heap of neediness to some guys, and it is too scary that you would do that much for them—especially when they know deep down that they would never take 1000 hours to do something for you” (Cousins, 2003, p.13). *At least she doesn’t still have to look at it—at least she gave him the sweater. I can’t even blame the curse because I never let him see how much time I put into us—that’s not what made him leave.* He wouldn’t have worked so hard for me, though, that part is true.

* * *
With the time for reflection that a breakup offers—requires—I contemplate how our pivotal scene would have played out, the scene when I gave him the scarf had the weekend never happened. I am reminded of John Cusak’s pathetic lamentation in the movie Say Anything: “I gave her my heart and she gave me a pen.” Less bound by optimism, I reason that even if I would have gotten the “pen,” at least I would have gotten some closure. Without this our story seems all the more tragic and imperfect, all the more heartbreaking; I’m not supposed to still have this, I think holding the scarf carefully, tracing each stitch of my failure. He calls again to apologize, explaining his conflicted state. I still have feelings for you…I haven’t forgotten about “us”... I think about the “what if”… I drink in these admissions because they offer me some validation, a touch of affirmation; but they offer me little catharsis because he doesn’t change his mind, he doesn’t rush back to me—he just thinks about it. He cares for me, but he cares for her more.

With only a minimal base of friendship to fall back on, there is little more than awkward distance between us, which only enhances my sense of sadness as I remember how that distance once disappeared in my doorway. In 1971, Elizabeth Zimmerman wrote Knitting Without Tears to help knitters avoid common mistakes and thereby reduce knitting frustration (or tears). My cheeks wet, my body physically weak from the emotional work that comes with getting dumped, I can’t help but find the dark humor, ‘Knitting without tears’ my ass. The scarf is a lasting reminder of getting my heart stomped on, cast aside, passed over. In each stitch my hope is unfulfilled, my prayers unanswered.

Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.

Garth Brooks, Unanswered Prayers
Garth was big in my high school, and though I claimed not to like country music, I sang my heart out in my Volvo 240 with the windows up. While my traditional Lutheran upbringing told me that no prayer went unanswered, I understood what he meant. The gift was being able to look back on what you used to think you wanted and being grateful that you didn’t get it; it was about looking back and rethinking, reframing. It was about being thankful that I didn’t grow up to marry my first boyfriend, my two-month steady “love of a lifetime.”

In the spirit of reframing, one female knitter reflected on her blog about a recent finished project. Questioning her selection of yarn and her adherence to the pattern, she attempts optimism:

But I’ll try to keep myself warm with the secure feeling of knowing that even if I totally messed up and dropped the wrong stitch nothing much would happen. And knowing that all that fragile-looking framework of ladders is actually as firmly attached as steel cable, and unlikely to ever shift in the least. Sigh. *One must wrest satisfaction out of the wrong choice, somehow.* (Knitting (mostly) blog, 10 December 2004, emphasis added)

In that same spirit, I must wrest satisfaction from our relationship, to wrest meaning from my scarf, and my choice of partners. I contemplate the steely strength I felt in the fragile material of our relationship. I trusted that strength, and yet I wonder if I ever had cause to trust in him, or in us. I was creating a false security, and maybe I knew that all along but I just couldn’t stop. The depth of self-doubt is complicated and disheartening. *Why would he want me anyway?*

This doubt makes me want to get rid of the scarf, to rip it out. I hold it in my hands and imagine the catharsis I would feel when the seemingly tangled thick fabric easily gave way as I pulled, and pulled, and pulled…hours of stitching coming out in a matter of minutes, leaving only a pile of wool at my feet. The only trace of the scarf would be the systematic kinks in the
wool from the stitches. *I could roll it back up and those would eventually disappear*…. I contemplate pulling out the loose end I carefully wove into the last row of stitches and freeing the end knot that would start the unraveling process…*it would be so easy.* But I stop myself. I can’t do it. I am as unable to undo my stitches as I am unable to undo *us.*

The rapid end of our relationship and the furious stitching I did to finish the scarf “in time,” though both finalizing acts, do not translate to a feeling of closure, and thus I am forced to cope with my own raw vulnerability. Germaine Koh’s words echo in my head:

> I think of vulnerability as a strength: the strength that it takes to let things slip away, or to open oneself to things. I believe that situations of potential loss can be valuable, in that they may prompt us to pay particular attention to the present. (as quoted in Barnett, 2002, p. 367).

And so I begin the process of rethinking, reframing and trying to find a way to be grateful. I miss the relationship—both the idea of it and the feeling of arms around me—but more than that I miss having hope. Through the lens of self-doubt I remember the joy I felt imbuing each stitch that passed from my left needle to my right, and how organic the process was for me. It is only by beginning again that I am able to initiate closure.

Borrowing from Julia Kristeva’s work, Koh again enlightens me:

>[I]t isn’t the artist who makes the work, but the work that makes the artist. In the sense that when the work is finished, the artist is at a loss, or experiences loss to such an extent that he or she is compelled, or driven by compulsion if you like, to make another work. Without making art, they experience a sense of emptiness, because the work makes them feel alive.” (as quoted in Barnett, 2002, p. 367)
I am empty without the work, without the feeling. My gaze shifts from his scarf in the middle of my coffee table to the corner where a small basket of unfinished projects sits at the ready. On the top of the pile lies a hat, or at least two inches of the ribbing of a hat, that was begun as a Valentine’s Day present for my dad to match the scarf I had made him for Christmas.

I had cast Dad’s hat aside easily when I began the scarf intended for my former partner, but finishing the hat took on a new sense of urgency. Knitting a hat for my dad is not about the vulnerability of wanting to be loved, but the vulnerability we share with those whom we love, and who love us unconditionally. It’s about drawing support from family as I begin to cast myself off from the hurt of a romantic relationship. Dad may not wear it, but that doesn’t really matter; it’s not just a hat, it’s a part of the process.

* * *

Six months after the breakup, long after the “I’m sorry” calls had ceased, I ran into him. No one was around. We had to talk.

“So…how are you?” he asked.


“So what are you up to?” He continued, working at conversation much harder than I wanted.

“Not much,” I responded vaguely.

I continued the conversation for several minutes, feeling obligated to pretend that I wasn’t suddenly angry, confused, and miserably uncomfortable. Then, I reached my limit.
“This is hard for me…,” I began and read the confusion on his face. “The small talk is hard…I can’t do this,” I gestured to the space between us, trying to touch the awkwardness with my hands; trying to point it out as if it weren’t obvious.

“What do you mean?...Do you want to talk about bigger things?” he asked. “Maybe we could get lunch?”

“Why?” I paused, but did not allow time for a response. “So we can talk about ‘us’? There is no…us.”

He chimed in on the “us,” and stood quietly for a moment.

“Yeah…I guess it’s kind of a mute point now…” he relented, apparently comprehending the bleak outlook for resolution. Resolution, at least in the conventional sense, seemed unlikely.

* * *

About twice each year, I get an undeniable urge to finish all of my works-in-progress. Given that I usually have at least five projects going at a time, there are always plenty of projects to be finished. Within the span of a week or so, scarves, wraps, sweaters, and other items fly off my needles and I look at my empty basket with a sense of relief before I immediately jump in to a new project or two. My conscience is clear. I am absolved of the guilt I sometimes feel for starting so many projects when others are still waiting to be completed. During these finishing furies, I finish all the projects I have going, or…at least I always have. I finished them even if my initial enthusiasm for the project has waned. Don’t like the color anymore? Don’t plan to use it? Don’t know why I ever started it to begin with? No matter. Projects are begun to be finished even if they fall short of my expectation, even if they leave me unsatisfied with my time and investment; at least they are done.
However, during my last finishing fury, something changed. After I diligently finished several projects at the top of my pile, I came to a 14 inch start of a two-strand, furry, yellow, skinny scarf. I had purchased the furry novelty yarn, called “Fizz,” at a local yarn shop in my hometown. I did not know what I would make with it, and I knew it was too thin to be knit alone so I would have to find a coordinating yarn—not to mention that I don’t wear much yellow. But when I saw this little ball of yarn I just had to have it. I purchased two different plain yellow yarns before I found the pale yellow cotton that would provide stability and compliment—but not overpower—the novelty yarn. Given the yardage of both yarns, I decided that I would have just enough to make a fun scarf, and it was the perfect project to begin on a trip to Florida for Easter because it would not take up much room in my bags before or after it was finished.

I began working on the scarf on the night before my flight so that I could memorize the “mistake rib” pattern I planned to use, and I diligently continued working on it as soon as I got to the waiting area at the airport. “Oh what fun! Where did you get that yarn?!” I got a lot of attention from other knitters. The novelty yarn I was using was unique, much “furrier” than the novelty yarns that have become commonplace. I worked on it during every spare moment on my trip and returned home with 14 inches of a scarf that would need to grow to at least 40 inches to be functional. Yet, despite my initial enthusiasm, the 14 inch start of a scarf soon became intermingled with the other projects in my knitting basket, abandoned and temporarily forgotten.

As I finished the projects on top of the scarf, I saw the furry material peek out. It was cute; the yellow color was so bright and cheerful that my mom had affectionately dubbed it “the chicken scarf.” The trip to Florida had come during a very stressful time in my life and the laid-back weekend with my family was exactly what I needed to restore my well-being. I thought about the night when I was knitting and chatting with my mom and my sister, all three of us
sitting on my sister’s bed. I remember how the yellow of the scarf matched the bright yellow of her comforter; it was a happy time. Yet, when I held the start of the scarf up to my face, all I could think was, *I really don’t wear yellow.* It was just not me.

I did not wind the materials back up. I simply bound off and put the yarns back in my stash. I did not want to save it for later, no “Maybe I’ll want to finish it some other time,” no “I’ll make it as a gift.” I just started to bind off the stitches, effectively wasting the yarn and my investment, but rather than feeling guilt I felt relief; *I don’t have to finish that.* I did not calculate the cost I incurred to throw it away versus take the time to unravel and re-roll the yarns. I did not contemplate the uselessness of a 14 inch piece of fabric. I just *had* to have that fun yarn, and I just *had* to start that scarf, but not matter how cute it was or how much I liked it at the beginning, I didn’t have to finish it. Things change. Though I know quite well that knitted items can be imbued with significance that far outweighs their apparent value, I realized that sometimes the meaning is in the imperfect, the unfinished. Sometimes the meaning is being able to accept the imperfect project—or the relationship—that *was,* instead of wanting that which *could have been.*
CHAPTER IV. KNITTING AND FROGGING

In the previous chapter, I explored the ways in which I reify and resist the cultural norms of knitting; how—with my needles in hand—I am at once tied to the traditions of the past and liberated to find new ways of knowing and understanding. Metaphorically at least, and sometimes literally, I knit and I “frog.” Frogging refers to the process of “ripping out” a project—either partially or entirely. Where knitting is generally precise and methodical, frogging can be ruthless; a partially completed, complex cabled sweater can be reduced to tidy balls of yarn within minutes if the knitter spots a glaring mistake in the third row, or determines that the 10 inch size disparity will end up producing a sweater that is more that just slightly “oversized.” Frogging can be traumatic because all of the knitter’s time and effort seems lost, but, as knitting technique expert Theresa Vinson Stenersen (2003) notes, there is also another perspective. “[I]t can be incredibly liberating to admit that, well, this here just ain't working, while possessing the sure knowledge that you have the skill and talent to make something beautiful out of a monstrosity” (par. 2). Frogging offers the knitter freedom to imagine, and then create, something new using the same material.

* * *

My goal in interviewing men who knit was to explore the ways in which the participants create and sustain their masculine identity/performance when they choose to knit in a culture that discourages men from knitting. More specifically, I wanted to investigate how each male knitter made his knitting “visibly-rational-and-reportable-for all-practical-purposes” amidst this strong cultural opposition (Garfinkel, 1967, p. vii). In this effort, I chose to focus specifically on the five participants’ male gender and their involvement in knitting. I did not focus on socioeconomic factors such as ethnicity, education, or class because my data did not suggest any
significant connections; further research with a greater number of participants might indicate otherwise.

Given my own at times ambivalent experience with knitting, I was not surprised to find that the male knitters I interviewed also used specific, often contradictory, reasoning strategies to negotiate their involvement with knitting and to make that process accountable (p. 33). By way of their responses to my questions—both the explicit and implicit meaning of their words and expressions—each knitter communicated his understanding of knitting and gender, and identified how he positions himself in regard to each. Though each knitter’s experience and history with knitting was unique, they often echoed each other in the way that they spoke about knitting and the underlying reasoning processes that seemed to guide their responses, and as such, themes were evident. So, although their experiences and reflections—like mine—were layered and complex, for the sake of clarity I have separated the themes into two major sections. First, I explore the reasoning strategies that reify cultural norms about knitting and then I explore reasoning strategies that resist cultural norms. While the opposing forces may contribute to a false perception of equilibrium, a closer investigation sheds light on the perpetual negotiation that occurs as these knitters’ gendered identities are constituted through many seemingly small, yet significant, communicative moments that reflect their understanding of self as masculine/knitter.

**Knitting**

The five thematic reasoning strategies presented in this section demonstrate how the knitters’ logics reify cultural norms about knitting by supporting the logic of the dominant discourse, which defines knitting as “a sedate, feminine-appropriate activity” (Phillips, 1995, par. 5). From their abject position, they seem focused on desiring subject status, rather than
challenging the structure that keeps them from having it. When employing one (or more) of these strategies, the men make their knitting accountable by implying or claiming wrong-doing, in effect, “I know I shouldn’t be doing this, but…” These strategies suggest the potential for someone to engage in a resistant performance while still reasoning from the dominant logic. At times, even when an individual would indicate that he questioned his own self-consciousness about knitting—in essence, “Why should women be the only ones who can knit?”—it did not always translate to a change in behavior. This speaks to the powerful social sanctions that compel our gendered performances; the dominant logic continues to be regarded as the “natural” order of things, even when its inherent unnaturalness is apparent (Butler, 1990).

The reification themes I have identified cover a range of topics. I have organized them here starting with those that deal with the perception of self-as-knitter and moving outward to those that deal with self and others in regard to knitting.

But I can explain!

When you go against the “natural order of things” you better have a good reason for doing so, or at least this seems to be a guiding principle for a couple of the knitters I interviewed. Though all the men I interviewed could easily explain how/why they started knitting, Darrian and Calvin seemed to provide more by way of justification than explanation, thereby implying “It’s not like I just wanted to learn to knit…” They both offered “good” reasons for learning how to knit, which seems to excuse, eclipse, or replace desire as the motivating factor.

Darrian explained that his journey into knitting was two-fold: impetus and opportunity. The impetus was a trip to visit his grandparents, where he was reminded of all of the knitted gifts that his grandmother had sent him over the years. The opportunity was an ethnography assignment for a research methods course. He related how the idea came to him:
Sitting in class…[I was thinking] okay, what do you want to learn more about?…and you know what, it would be a great idea to learn how to knit and to knit my grandmother a present just to let her know that I appreciate all of those presents that she had given me. So I chose that [knitting shop for the ethnography].

He then explained how he contextualized the project to his female partner, moving the focus from knitting to his relationship with his grandmother. “She had questioned ‘Why do you want to knit?’…Once I told her the story about wanting to knit my grandmother something…she was like, ‘Oh, okay, cool.’” He added that learning to enjoy knitting was not a part of his original plan, “It’s something that I learned along the way…I had no intention of knitting beyond the class when I started,” which increases the sense that he felt he was learning to knit primarily out of obligation rather than desire.

Although it would seem that Darrian felt that he had adequate justification for learning to knit, he indicated that he continued to question his choice of the yarn shop for his ethnography. His description of how he handled this doubt prompted him to provide even more rationale:

Why did I choose a yarn shop of all places? [That] was a big question that I kept asking myself while I was doing this….Why didn’t I choose like a bowling alley or a bar or something? And the answer that keeps surfacing…is that I think it has a lot to do with group acceptance, group identity because [this class] was predominately women [14 women, 2 men]. I wanted to feel like I was part of the group…[The women] loved hearing the stories of me knitting, you know, what am I knitting, who am I knitting for…”

His explanation of the classroom context illustrates yet another reason for why he selected the yarn shop for his ethnography: he would gain attention and affirmation from his female
colleagues—a normative desire—if he chose a feminine venue (versus a masculine venue such as a bar). The classroom situation was unique in its male to female ratio, and thus, he reasoned, it required that he develop a unique strategy to gain acceptance from his colleagues. So, he accounts for his choice of venues by explaining that he was responding to the logics of the nontraditional classroom environment rather than personal desire; in doing this, he creates “distance” between himself and his decision to study the yarn shop.

While Darrian had several “good reasons” for learning how to knit, Calvin expressed only one: he wanted to be shocking. He explained that several years ago, as an undergraduate, he was intrigued by a documentary-style show on television about men knitting in South America. Though the men in the documentary were shown knitting as a “normal” part of their culture, Calvin believed that if he learned to knit, it would shock, or at least surprise, his contemporaries at school. “I kind of wanted to be weird…I was actively [seeking a reaction].” He did not wish to challenge the cultural logic that knitting is a feminine activity, instead he wanted to use this logic to be “weird.” However, he noted, he was unsuccessful at garnering a response; “[A]s far as reactions go, my friends didn’t care at all….It didn’t really work.” For it to work, ostensibly, his friends would need to openly recognize that he was acting rebellious or “weird.” When they did not recognize this (or at least not openly), his reason for knitting could be construed as a simple desire to knit, which was not his intention. Therefore, he accounts for his initial experience with knitting by explaining that it was merely an unsuccessful attempt to gain attention, and not a sign of a deeper desire or affinity toward knitting.

I’m mostly masculine.

Butler (1990) posits that “gender identity is a performative accomplishment” (p. 271). Two of the men I interviewed seemed to reason that their gender identity is overwhelmingly
masculine despite the fact that they knit, because their performance of masculinity overshadows their feminine performance of knitting. Just as former football player Rosey Grier was believed as masculine even as he publicly expressed his interest in knitting and needlepoint, they seem to reason that they have enough masculine “credit” to compensate for their feminine performance. Darrian and Mike do not question that knitting is a feminine activity, but rather they try to frame their knitting in the context of their other daily activities, which are masculine. If gender is a “compelling illusion, an object of belief,” Darrian and Mike seem to reason that they should still be believed as masculine (Butler, 1990, p. 271).

When discussing the benefits of knitting, Darrian noted that he enjoyed the creative aspect. When I asked if he had any other creative hobbies, he responded, “[N]o…The hobbies that I had, I guess they would be masculine hobbies…like snowboarding, mountain biking…I did bowling for awhile, a couple years back. But nothing, no, nothing creative, nothing…I would say nothing similar to knitting.” Darrian seemed to conflate “creative” with “feminine,” and given that “creative” is not an overtly gendered adjective, it seems to reflect a strategy to euphemize the word “feminine.” Darrian clearly wanted to establish that knitting is his only creative/feminine activity—the exception rather than the rule in the context of his daily life.

Mike contextualized his knitting in a similar way. He mentioned that he mostly knits during the winter, “I’ve become a shut-in in the winter…I read books and I knit and watch TV.” Later in the interview, I asked about his seasonal approach to knitting and he explained:

I have my reasons for that if you really want to know…[In the summer] my main thing is, I wouldn’t call it extreme sports, but outdoor [sports]. I have a white water kayak. I do a lot of white water kayaking trips and rock climbing. And I have my own gear and do my own climbs…I have some really hard core friends…I like being able to see how far you
can exert your body before downfall. When I’m climbing, I end up sitting around a
campfire drinking beer [instead of knitting].

In contrast to the male nurses who are often called upon to perform the more physically
demanding aspects of nursing, Mike emphasized the physical strength he exhibits in his non-
knitting-related activities. Even though he shies away from defining his activities as “extreme,”
the connotation is there when he references his affiliation with “hard core” friends and his desire
to push his body to exertion; his language choice connects him not just with the normative
masculine ideal, but with an “extreme” masculine ideal. He noted that his female friend Lara,
who taught him how to knit, is also a climbing partner and she often knits during the evening
campfire. He explained, “I used to get on her…I was like, ‘My hands hurt so bad I couldn’t even
make a fist, so how are you knitting?!’” He seemed to indicate that knitting is something he uses
to pass the time until he can engage his true (and extremely masculine) passion for outdoor
sports. Ostensibly, Mike knits because of climate-constraints; if the weather allowed for year-
round sporting, knitting would lose its appeal entirely.

Craft stores are just different that way.

The act of knitting can only be engaged if one has the necessary materials. Darrian,
Calvin, and Rob described their experiences of buying yarn and other knitting supplies at large-
scale craft retailers (e.g., Michael’s, JoAnn). None of the three reported having any negative
experiences in craft stores, which they promptly attributed to the specific nature of the stores
and/or employees. As Calvin explained, “I just take stuff up there and they run it through their
scanner, and I don’t know if they even know what I’m buying.”

Rob, who works in a high-end yarn shop, usually shops at large-scale craft stores for his
supplies because they are more budget-friendly. Like Calvin, he reasoned that the lack of
reaction he has received in craft stores is due to the nature of the employees, “It’s [their] job, so
no one ever notices that I’m a boy…buying craft supplies that are feminine…. [T]hey are just
doing their job, so they will sell whatever to whoever, you know.” The rather flippant way that
he made this comment suggests that Rob believes that if the employees cared more about their
jobs, they would recognize that he is violating a cultural norm (“boys” shouldn’t do “feminine”
things), and therefore the employees are to “blame” for his unremarkable experience at craft
stores. Rob’s explanation regarding the craft store employees is especially interesting in light of
the sincere attention and effort that he extends to customers at the yarn shop where he works
(detailed in a later section); although he pays careful attention to his customers, he does not
assume the same of the craft store employees. Calvin and Rob both make the craft store
employees’ lack of obvious, negative reactions accountable by suggesting that the employees
were inattentive; the assumption of discrimination colors their experiences, even when it is not
realized.

Darrian offered a slightly more philosophical explanation about his experience in craft
stores, although he seemed to come to a similar “it’s just craft stores” conclusion:

I was self-conscious, you know, the first couple of times [I shopped in a craft store]. I
guess I was looking around to see people’s reactions, but nobody cared…But it seems
like that’s the nature of these arts and crafts stores, where you know, it’s okay for, it’s not
the question of your sexuality or your gender, going in there. It didn’t seem like that.

But that might be the nature of arts and crafts stores.

Though initially he speculates that craft stores might have a more progressive nature than other
places, he seems to fall back on the possibility that craft stores are exempt from the stereotypical
prejudices—seeming to indicate “they’re not progressive, just different.” Like Calvin and Rob,
Darrian’s assumption that discrimination *should* exist in this space compelled him to provide rationale for why he had a non-discriminatory experience.

*There is a time and place for everything.*

Once they have the supplies, the process that each knitter uses to determine where and when they will knit is quite telling of the way that they perceive their actions in the greater cultural context. A policy to knit or not to knit in a certain location or among certain people, reflects a knitter’s understanding of the logic that governs that space/those relationships as well as their desire to support/resist that logic. Both Calvin and Darrian have outgrown their aforementioned original reasons for knitting, and in the absence of their “justified” reasons to knit, their sheer desire is laid bare. To compensate for this vulnerability, they have each developed strict policies about where and among whom they are willing to knit. Further, both expressed that they “test the waters,” specifically with other men, in order to gauge their reactions, a logic that conjures Kimmel’s (1994) description of men’s experiences: “We are under the constant careful scrutiny of other men. Other men watch us, rank us, grant our acceptance into the realm of manhood (p. 128).”

As previously mentioned, when Calvin started knitting, he said he knitted publicly because he wanted to get a reaction from his friends, even though he was not successful in this effort. However, his lived experience of audience indifference does not seem to alter the reaction he expects that he will receive if he knits in public now that he does not want the reaction. “I wouldn’t go knit at the [Student] Union or something like that, put it in people’s faces you know.” When asked to elaborate, he explained, “Maybe I worry that there might…be a negative reaction…Maybe I have a subconscious negative reaction to it or something.”
Although he usually knits at home, Calvin described one recent instance when he took knitting to his men’s Bible study meeting. He said that he got the idea because a woman who attends the women’s Bible study complained that everyone in her group knitted. Because she was not allowed to join the men’s Bible study, Calvin told her that he would start knitting during the men’s group so that it wouldn’t be as desirable (ie. it wouldn’t be any “better” than the women’s group). Although he initially made his decision to knit at the men’s group accountable by saying it was strictly to “make a point” to his friend in the women’s Bible study, his later reflection on the event underlies how it was a way of testing the waters among his close friends:

Maybe I did [have hesitation], at least partly, because I was curious as to how they would react…But…I trust those guys quite a bit. *They know all my flaws. If they considered knitting a flaw, that would be another one that they’d know…the truth about me.*

(emphasis added)

He seemed to feel confident that his knitting would not permanently alter his friendships with other men in the group, but his choice of the word “flaw” to describe how he assumed that his knitting might be perceived certainly underscores the “subconscious negative reaction” he has about knitting. Calvin indicated that the only direct response he received about his knitting from anyone in the group came from one man who remarked that “he had never seen anyone knit at a men’s study before.” Though Calvin did not believe that this comment was made with negative intent, he did not bring his knitting to any future meetings because he felt that it was “distracting” to the group. Ostensibly, he did not perceive the groups’ response, though mostly nonverbal, as “acceptance into the realm of manhood.” Instead, he believed that his knitting was a burden to the group.
In contrast, Darrian has had an overtly negative experience due to his knitting. While knitting in the passenger seat of a car during a road trip, a male driver in the car next to him flipped him off and called a “faggot.” Upon reflection of this incident, he commented on the initial insecurities he experienced when going into the yarn shop for his ethnography project. “It just made me…realize that there’s a lot of insecurities out there…based on gender in society…[but] this is the first time that I felt like I was the center of the gaze, the ‘masculine gaze’…. And I guess I never felt that kind of oppression, you know, based on sexuality and gender….And it…made me question my own sexuality and the norms that we have.” Darrian accounts for his experience by pointing to a larger system of gender-based injustice; in doing so, he moves the focus from his personal experience to cultural norms, which allows him to create distance from his experience.

Although Darrian wonders, “Why is it natural or normal for women to knit, but not men?” and challenges the basic, gendered ideology that fosters such assumptions, he does not want to repeat his negative experience, so he keeps his knitting to “family and close friends…only the friends that I think would not, you know, trip out,” and he makes a clear distinction between talking about knitting and actually knitting. “I can talk with people about knitting, and [their reaction] seems to always be like, ‘Oh, I wouldn’t know by looking at you.’” Ostensibly, others may not be able to make the distinction between whether or not it “looks” like him if he were actually knitting; he has more control in a discussion about knitting versus a display. He explained the process he uses/d to determine which friends would be accepting:

I tested the water by throwing it out to these friends that I think would [be okay with it], and said, ‘Hey I just learned how to knit…[or] I’m picking up knitting.’ They reacted in
different ways. If they react positively, then okay, I think I would consider knitting in front of them. But negatively, nah, I’m going to avoid it.

When asked what would be “at stake” if he proceeded to knit in front of these friends, he explained, “Comfort, a clear notion of my sexuality and my gender, you know, and them not questioning it.” When asked if he would ever knit in place such as a hotel lobby (where our interview took place), he responded, “Off the bat…no, because I am conscious of…all the drama that could happen, you know, people coming up and looking at me differently…I would try to avoid that.”

He has good reason to assume that knitting in a hotel lobby might cause him unwanted attention. Not long ago, in a hotel lobby at a conference, a man had sat down next to him to wait for a friend. Through some basic small talk they found that they had a lot in common, which made Darrian feel comfortable enough to test the waters about knitting:

We were talking for about 10 or 15 minutes or so, [and I] felt comfortable and he asked, ‘What do you like to do in your spare time?’ I said, ‘Well, actually, thanks for asking. I just picked up knitting.’ And his reaction was…it was in a joking manner…but he said, ‘Oh, man, I knew that something was wrong. This was too good to be true, you know, that we were getting along.’ So I felt…like [he was implying] ‘You’re gay, you’re feminine.’…We sat there, the tension was out there, and…we had a silence…He jumped in and he said, ‘Oh, but there’s nothing wrong with that…’ but we didn’t talk about it after that. We went back to talking about music.

Though Calvin and Darrian had different experiences with testing the water in what they perceived to be “safe spaces,” both men retreated when the waters did not seem hospitable rather than challenging the response.
Honor thy father.

Kimmel (1994) notes, “Even if we do not subscribe to Freudian psychoanalytic ideas, we can still observe how, in less sexualized terms, the father is the first man who evaluates the boy’s masculine performance...Those eyes will follow him for the rest of his life.” (p. 130). Calvin, Rob, and Mike each described a marked difference between their mothers’ reactions, which were neutral or positive, and their fathers’ reactions to their knitting. All three believed that their fathers viewed knitting as a sign that they were gay (which they are not), and thus not masculine “enough,” even if these assumptions were not verbalized. In light of Butler’s (1990) notion of heteronormativity and Kimmel’s (1994) conclusion that “[h]omophobia is a central organizing principle of our cultural definition of manhood,” this is not surprising (p. 131). Rob explains, “I can see the look on his face when I finally brought a girl around....He was definitely overjoyed.”

However, having their sons’ heterosexuality “confirmed” did not diminish their continuing disapproval of knitting. As Butler (1990) notes, the performance of heterosexuality to the normative standard is conflated with the performance of masculinity, so trying to project one without the other is not very convincing for some. Rob explained, “My father pretends that it doesn’t exist. He never asks me questions about it.” Mike’s dad is more overtly “suspicious” of Mike’s true sexual preference, a situation he described with humor, “It’s been an ongoing thing [with my dad], like ‘Mike, it’s okay, you can tell me [that you’re gay].’ I’m sorry Dad, sorry to let you down!” Though Rob, Mike, and Calvin’s fathers had similar reactions to their knitting, the ways in which they respond to their fathers varies. Rob and Mike disregard and/or challenge their fathers’ objections (which will be discussed more in a later section), but Calvin, the only one whose father explicitly questioned his sexuality, does not. He described how his dad overheard a conversation that he was having with his mother about marriage, which was
brought on by his lack of interest in a woman that his parents wanted him to date. “And my dad heard me say that—that I’m okay with never getting married—which [to him] was further proof that I’m gay, and so he said [to my mother], ‘You shouldn’t have taught him [to knit].’”

He believes that for his father the issue is much larger than knitting:

He has concerns about other things in my life and thinks that maybe knitting is symptomatic. He also doesn’t like the tongue ring or the earring or the tattoos. So, I take out my earring when I am home and wear clothes that cover the tattoos. He has never told me to do these things. I just do them. I also don’t knit when I am home. It is respect.

However, he also noted, “Once in a while something will bring it to the fore, and he’ll mention it. For instance, when I didn’t find a particular woman particularly attractive, it was because I knit.” Knitting, like tattoos or earrings, is always there, visible or not; it is part of each knitter’s identity, and—when shared with another person—it also becomes part of that person’s perception of the knitter.  

Frogging

In stark contrast from the strategies presented in the previous section, the four thematic reasoning strategies presented in this section reflect how the knitters’ logics resist the dominant cultural logic about knitting. When using these reasoning strategies, the knitters illustrate the power that Kristeva (1982) notes can be found within the abject position because they clearly challenge their “master:” the dominant discourse (p. 2). These reasoning strategies show how the male knitters make their knitting accountable by defining themselves in opposition to the dominant cultural logic and by pointing to a re/definition of knitting as something other than “a
sedate, feminine-appropriate activity” (Phillips, 1995, par. 5). When using these strategies, the knitters do not ignore the cultural norm, but rather carve out an alternative ideological position.

There are a few instances where it may seem that an individual negates himself by employing contradictory reification and resistance reasoning strategies (i.e. he seems to reify as much as resist). However, this inconsistency is consistent with the research presented (for example, the knitting-as-feminist vs. knitting-as-anti-feminist debate) as well as my own experience. I would also submit that it is consistent with the nature of hand knitting in general—work done by human hands rarely has the consistent texture of machine knitted fabrics. As with the previous section, I have organized these strategies starting with the self and moving outward.

*I've never really been masculine.*

As Kimmel and Aronson (2004) posit, “[i]t feels imperative to most men that they make it clear—eternally, compulsively, decidedly—that they are unlike women (*The Social Construction of Masculinities*). In the previous section, I identified strategies that some of the men I interviewed used to distance themselves from knitting in order to preserve and protect their masculinity. In stark contrast, Mike and Rob tried to distance themselves from masculinity—not knitting—as a part of an effort to carve out a non-masculine/heterosexual identity. In essence, if being masculine means that you can’t or shouldn’t knit, then the problem is easily solved by relinquishing masculinity, not knitting.

Rob stated, “I never really saw myself as a masculine guy…I just do what…feels right for me.” Given the pressure to prove one’s masculinity, this is no small performance of resistance. Although, as previously discussed, Mike highlighted his very masculine endeavors (rock climbing, kayaking), he identifies himself outside the realm of masculinity. He explained how he viewed his masculinity with humor, “There was a study that came out that said the size
of your hands related to the amount of testosterone you got…and I got really tiny hands. I think I got shorted in that aspect.”

Butler (1990) explains the automatic connection we make between the performance of masculinity/femininity and heterosexuality, and notes that those who do not perform their gender to the regulatory ideal are relegated to the realm of the abject. Mike and Rob project a non-masculine, heterosexual identity, but they are not always “believed” as heterosexual. Though he used humor when talking about his lack of masculinity, Mike indicated that he did not always find the topic so amusing:

I used to get really offended…[by people wondering] ‘Are you gay?’ because I would buy fresh cut flowers a lot, and I would cook really nice food, and I have a very clean, orderly apartment. I have good taste in art…and I knit. I used to get really uptight about it, and then I started figuring, well, it doesn’t really matter because I was…as far as attracting the opposite sex, it was just as effective [to do these things] and it’s more me. I think it’s an age thing. I got to an age where it didn’t matter anymore.

Mike stated, “I’ve become very callous to what other people think,” which echoes Rick Mondragon’s previously noted proclamation, “My skin is getting thicker as my knitting becomes finer” (Men Who Knit, n.d., Rick Mondragon).

Mike does not believe that his knitting (or his other non-masculine endeavors) has had a negative impact on his ability to attract and develop relationships with women, which is apparent in his description of how he learned to knit:

“My friend Lara…taught me how to knit on a road trip…” We were sitting in the back bored, and I was like ‘I need something to do…’ and she had extra [knitting supplies]…”

Had you been interested in her knitting before the road trip?
“Honestly, I think I was more interested in her before the road trip!”

A romantic relationship with Lara did not ensue, although a strong friendship and his love for knitting remain strong.

Like Mike, Rob has also used knitting as a way to connect—or flirt—with potential romantic partners. He explained, with humor:

A lot of girls…my friends included, will ask me to make them things all the time…And I would say that I make stuff for people for two reasons. One is that they pay me and that I have enough time in my life to do that, or [two] every year at Christmas I make something for someone that I’m sleeping with. And then, I’ll go on and turn that into a pickup. It’ll be like, “So, if you’re lonely at Christmas, you know where to find me!”

However, he also noted that his non-masculine identity has caused some confusion among potential partners about his sexual preference:

A lot of times when I’ve gotten romantically involved with a girl who’s seen me or knows of me before…we started dating…they would always say, almost nine times out of 10…that they thought I was gay because they saw me knitting…they just assumed that I was, you know, that I was a gay boy…

Regarding his thoughts about their incorrect assumptions, and in stark contrast to the concerns that Darrian expressed, Rob explained, “I just laugh…I mean, I’m not at all concerned about being perceived that way….People can think what they want.” Further, he reasoned, a potential partner’s ambiguity about his sexual preference might not be the reason why a relationship does not ensue; “I think everybody’s really bad at knowing when somebody is interested in them romantically. So if nothing came of it, I guess I would just assume that nothing was going to come of it.”
Though Mike and Rob have had differing experiences, they each negotiate the realm of the abject—the space outside the heteronormative masculine ideal—by not openly seeking affirmation for their performance, a key aspect of traditional masculinity. They seem to echo the sentiments of one man involved in a conscious-raising effort against traditional masculinity, “Masculinity…is power-seeking, it is being closed-up, competitive, drab, insensitive…We can join encounter groups with women and gays, we can go on demonstrations, pickets, etc., but the most important thing we can do about it is change ourselves” (as quoted in Segal, 1990, p.282). By defining themselves—unapologetically and firmly—outside the regulatory ideal of masculinity instead of being passively “placed” there by others, they claim a powerful understanding of abject status.

*Knitting is practical, functional, technical (ie. masculine).*

While knitting as a necessity in the United States has largely faded, Calvin, Rob, and Brian emphasized its practicality vs. its ornamental value; their reasoning points toward a masculine, functional understanding of the usefulness of knitting, which is often juxtaposed against a traditional, feminine understanding. For instance, Rob explained how he decided to make an afghan for his first project, “I didn’t want to make a…doily or [another] feminine thing….It was just going to be something functional.” His language choice—setting up “functional v. feminine”—reflects the way that he defines his involvement with knitting in opposition to a traditional (feminine) knitter’s involvement with knitting.

Calvin also emphasized the functional nature of knitting. When asked how frequently he knits, he responded by explaining the problem-solving rationale behind his last knitting project; “The last time it was *really* practical. I needed something to set the little fake Christmas tree I had on, and so I just [made a tree skirt], so it wasn’t like [I just wanted to do it].” Though a tree
skirt might seem like an optional item, Calvin did not view it that way, so knitting a tree skirt was a means to an end, rather than a decorative addition. Later, he described how his father, who is clearly opposed to his knitting, could also appreciate the useful aspect of knitting: “Dad has always appreciated practical abilities so he would like a scarf [that I made him] ok, and maybe even be glad that I could make it.”

Brian, who co-owns a yarn shop with his partner, explained that his non-traditional understanding of knitting began very early in his life, although he did not actually learn to knit until college when he enrolled in a fiber arts class. He explained that his primary motivation for taking the class was that it fit his schedule; however, he noted:

I don’t want to say desire [to take the class] wasn’t there. I grew up in a household that we learned, I’m going to use the term, life skills [eg. sewing, outdoor work]…So I mean, it wasn’t when I took the class…‘Gosh I’m taking a woman’s class.’…There was no gender stereotype to it.

Brian’s perspective of knitting as a skill rather than a feminine, leisure activity was clear when he described how he “took” to knitting:

I don’t find it to be a difficult skill. In breaking it down, you’re pulling a loop through a loop…so, technically it’s not hard…Now maneuvering the tools can be a little difficult, but I think it just takes practice, and...when you increase your skill in anything you do, you increase proficiency.

By accounting for his experience using masculine vocabulary and imagery (e.g., the notion of working with tools to increase proficiency), Brian showcases how his understanding of knitting exists parallel to, rather than opposite, a more traditional, feminine understanding of knitting.
Perhaps a more telling example of his masculine-oriented understanding was when Brian brought up the issue of meta-talk about knitting in the context of describing his experiences with helping other male knitters who come into the shop:

“It is nice] when you can speak to somebody on equal grounds…So when we assist somebody—assist a guy—and we’re talking about, you know, what yarn are you thinking of using [and other knitting issues], to a certain extent it’s kind of funny because it’s almost talking—[to put it] in ‘male terms’—sports, you know? Because it’s like there’s a…common bond. (emphasis added)

The issue of bonding, and male bonding in particular was also salient when he discussed knitting culture and the culture of his yarn shop specifically. While Darrian contrasted the idea of doing his ethnography research in a bar with his choice of a yarn shop, Brian described the culture of the yarn shop in terms of a bar.

“What was it, in the 80s, people were on the television show, the bar one?”

Cheers?

“Yeah—Cheers. People would just go there, have a drink, talk to friends, and that was their relaxation. Knitting…the repetitive nature of knitting can be very relaxing…”

Though the shop’s customers are overwhelmingly female, Brian’s comparison of the shop with Cheers rather than a female-oriented show solidifies his alternative interpretation and definition of knitting and knitting culture.

**Knitting is art, not craft.**

As previously noted, performance artist Germaine Koh explained that her ongoing knitting project, Knitwork, is intended to show “the massiveness of everyday activity, the massive presence that mundane concerns come to have in one’s life” (Barnett, 2002, p. 360).
Koh’s *art* is designed to celebrate the “everyday” aspect of knitting, not to elevate it, but to recognize and celebrate it exactly as it is. She views her work as a counter to the “devaluation of craft” that is associated with women; Koh sees art *in* the craft, or the normative connotation associated with women’s knitting (p. 358).

In sharp contrast, Mike, Rob, and Brian define their knitting as an artistic alternative to craft; in other words, some knitters make crafts, but we create art. This redefinition of knitting as art is not surprising given that Mike, Rob, and Brian are all involved in the arts as a hobby and/or profession. While crafting does not have an elitist edge, fine art conjures a more limited access, and it was clear that each of the three men believed that their understanding of knitting was not open to every knitter.

Mike made a clear differentiation between art and craft when describing his philosophy of art, with reference to one of his professors:

His big thing is that artists have this intuitive ability to see beyond daily activities, and I think a lot of that is true. I think that part of making art is the technical ability. You have to have the craft and you have to know color theories…to make what the ‘establishment’ would call good art…so part of it is craft and practice. But then there’s that other side of things, that intuitive side of you that says, you know, I’m choosing this image because this means something greater…[Artists have] that internal ability to turn something from your mind into a communicative medium…People that have the need and ability to do that, we find connections among [each other] and that’s why artists form communities. And it’s the same with knitting, it’s that community…stitchers come together [at this coffee shop] and they sort of feed off each other.”
Mike’s explanation points toward intentionality as being a determining factor in the production of art versus the mechanical use of craft. Ostensibly, crafters do not think of their knitting—the colors, the meaning, the intended effect for the audience—in the same way that artists do, which makes the support of fellow artists particularly important because they would understand.

Rob provided a similar explanation of the importance of intentionality, and his need for community support:

I have a lot of friends who are musicians and artists in the classical sense…and I’m the only person I know who works predominately in this medium [fibers]…but their ideas definitely influence mine, and…it’s really inspiring to be around other artists and be around other people who are making things, and thinking…conceptually about how to make something intangible into something tangible, or express something intangible with something tangible.

His description of knitting as making “something intangible into something tangible” is much different than the notion of knitting a sweater/hat/scarf. In this description, knitting becomes an expression rather than a hobby or leisurely activity.

The definition of knitting as art was particularly pronounced for both Brian and Rob in discussions of the current knitting fad or “craze.” When I asked Brian if the current knitting fad had caused an upswing in interest about his knitting, he said that he had not noticed any increased attention; “I guess the community of people that [my partner and I] know are very much artists as well, and it’s just a shared appreciation for what everyone does.” In essence, his artist friends are not connected to the increase in popular knitting because their appreciation is not tied at all to craft.
Rob reflected on his job at the yarn shop and the leadership role he sees himself playing among fad knitters:

It’s been about making the community more knowledgeable with knitting and getting ‘scarf knitters’ to move on so that they can start making things and see the beauty of what they’re doing—that it’s more than just fashion accessories. It’s an artistic expression and it’s Zen and it’s all of these other things.”

Since scarves are a popular first project, his use of the term “scarf knitters” evokes a somewhat disparaging connotation signaling unskilled or non-creative. In his quest to increase awareness and appreciation among craft/fad knitters, Rob explained how he negotiates between meeting customers’ needs and achieving his own goals:

I think that the majority of the people that we have in [the yarn shop] are just doing it to use as fashion accessories and I think that’s the nature of that business, especially at this point in time….there’s a knitter craze going on and we’ve got to feed that and hopefully steer some people towards doing something a little more creative with it…Even insomuch as people coming in for scarf material, we try to make them think about it as much as possible…[After offering some advice to a customer,] I try to walk away and make them make this decision [about material] for themselves…I definitely try to foster creativity as much as possible. (emphasis added)

Rob’s assumption that knitters with a less artistic understanding are not thinking about what materials they are selecting points again toward intentionality as the key distinguishing characteristic between art and craft; apparently, fashion-oriented intentions are not artistic.
Knitting for new world order.

As previously indicated, knitting has been used as a tool for activist purposes at various times in history (CodePink, n.d.; Phillips, 1995; Stowe, 2004). Though the activism with/through knitting has not exclusively been engaged by women (see Revolutionary Knitting Circle, n.d.), it is most often associated with activism by women because it is considered a feminine activity. However, Mike and Rob both identified the power that Kristeva (1982) notes can be found within the abject position when they discussed the activist element to their knitting.

Similar to the way he identified motivation as the determining factor between art and craft, Mike explained that an activist motivation differentiated his knitting from his grandmother’s knitting:

[F]or her it was gifts and…it wasn’t about her. You know for me it’s about me and my relaxation thing…I have other motives than just relaxation as far as fair labor and environmentalists and all of those other things we do. It’s a bunch of radical liberals, you know. My grandma wasn’t. That wasn’t her thing.

Mike understands his knitting as more “radical” than his grandmother’s knitting, and thus he aligns her with the normative connotation of knitting. Then, he uses this description to define himself by contrast and connect, at least in part, with an activist purpose.

While Mike aligns his activist motives toward specific issues of labor and the environment, Rob explained that his knitting-related activism is designed “to draw attention to gender stereotypes. I think that a lot of times they are really ridiculous and so I guess…if I had any sort of direct motive, that would be it.” He knits in very public places because, as he explained, “…I guess…ultimately all artists want to change society…I think performance art is a very pure way of doing that…It's definitely a mark of honesty as far as I’m concerned.”
Rob described how he finds power in his abject status by causing others to focus their attention, often unwittingly, on gender stereotypes. “I don’t expect anyone to realize when I’m working on the blanket [outside the coffee shop] that that’s an art project. You know, that’s kind of the point. You don’t know that I’m paying attention to you.” Rob noted that the reactions he receives outside the coffee shop are mostly positive, but he has experienced more hostile reactions as well:

[T]here were times…I would go out at two or three in the morning and sit outside the bar on their park bench and the drunks come out of the bar and then I would get shouted at and called a “fag” and called whatever else…I shake my head. It doesn’t bother me…I mean, I don’t shout back at them or anything…

While most of his performance art is public, Rob notes that he also engages in activism directly with his father; “I definitely go out of my way to show him the things that I’m making and talk about what I’m doing with him.” Instead of seeking affirmation for his masculinity, Rob exemplifies his non-normative understanding of knitting and gender stereotypes by shrugging off both the disapproving reactions and the normative pressure to seek approval in the first place.

Though the idea of a man knitting may seem entirely resistant to the dominant discourse of knitting, the actual experience of male knitters is not so clear cut. Calvin and Darrian cope with the femininity of knitting, while Brian creates masculinity with the same needles and yarn; Mike “used to get really uptight” when others would ask if he was gay, but now, like Rob, he questions those who were asking him instead of questioning himself or his desires. They knit along and they frog back, embracing the potential to re/imagine gendered performances using the same available material.
By employing a variety of reasoning strategies to describe and engage their knitting, the men I interviewed indicate that their performance of masculinity and their desire to perform masculinity to the regulatory ideal are not consistent. As a result, they make their knitting accountable in ways that resist and reify the dominant discourse that surrounds knitting, which reflects a more complex, nuanced understanding of the range of possible masculine performances. Where there was “masculine,” we see masculinities.
CHAPTER V. FINISHING

In the knitting vernacular, “finishing” refers to the process of putting together all of the pieces of a project once the main knitting has been done. For example, if you have made a cardigan sweater in five pieces (back, two fronts, two sleeves), the finishing process would likely include seaming the sleeves, shoulders, and sides; sewing on the buttons in line with the button holes; and knitting the collar once the rest of the steps are completed. Then, you must also weave in all of the yarn ends with a darning needle or crochet hook, and then wash and block (or shape) the final product. Finishing is the final, rather tedious phase in what is often a long process. Given all of the work involved, many knitters consider “finishing” a dirty word, so perhaps it is not surprising that most yarn shops carry business cards of local knitters who “finish” other knitters’ work for a fee.

For me, the challenge of finishing lies in my ability to conjure the patience required to stay with the project; while I am quite motivated to knit, I am less interested in sewing, weaving, and blocking. What keeps me on task is past experience that shows me it’s worth the effort to finish a project properly. For instance, there is a vast difference between my first sweater projects, where I naively used a rudimentary whip-stitch for the seams, and my more recent projects where I have followed the correct seaming procedure; when I put in the time, the seams are virtually seamless. The same magic of finishing was apparent with my first lace shawl. When I finished knitting, it looked like a rumpled mess; then, I soaked the shawl and began the slow, careful process of pinning it out on a beach towel to dry. With each pin the delicate pattern emerged, seeming much more elegant than my simple stitching could possibly produce. The stitching, though it is the fundamental aspect of a project, does not make sense without the finishing. The finishing process of this project is similar because I must bring each component
of my research together into an overall document that will offer insight into the area of critical gender and communication research. What does this research mean? Why is it important in the greater context?

As I reflect on each of the pieces in this project that lie in front of me, my mind wanders to my personal notes and memories that are not included. I fight through the haze of retrospect to remember the process—the many drafts of my autoethnographic chapter that got me to my final version, the many scheduling issues that were resolved so that I could get my interviews. The interviews. I remember thinking when I started this project that it might be difficult to secure participants, but everyone I asked responded with enthusiasm; however, I soon learned that the actual interview process was much more complicated.

* * *

“I got stood up…AGAIN. I can’t believe this!...” I began to vent into my advisor’s voice mail. I had assumed that getting the participants to agree to be interviewed would be the hard part, not getting them to show up for the interview, but in my attempt to get five interviews, I was stood up three times. Since I had scheduled each of the appointments only days in advance, it did not seem as though remembering the date/time could be the problem. Maybe it was simply an issue of a forgotten entry on a day planner or a last minute conflict—the reasons offered were not all clear—but I can’t help feeling that maybe the reason was a bit more complicated.

When I reflect on the notes and observations that I wrote up after each interview—rather than the actual transcripts—I am struck most by the anxious moments that I detailed. For instance, in my reflections about my interview with Brian, my third overall, I noted that I was feeling much more comfortable with the interview process, but that I sensed nervousness on his part. Brian is an acquaintance who happily agreed to be interviewed, but I had noted some
hesitation in his voice when I called to confirm our interview the afternoon before the morning we were scheduled to meet. The next day, amidst a surprise snow storm, he met me outside the yarn shop before it opened and ushered me inside. I remember that the snow falling outside contributed to the cozy feeling I had when I walked into the shop carrying a coffee cake and a tote bag holding my notebook, consent forms, and two audio recorders (just in case). Brian put on coffee and we sat down at the table in the middle of the shop that is usually populated by yarn shop regulars or those who come in to ask for assistance. As I pulled out my notebook, laid out the recorders, and began to ready the consent forms, the nervousness I had sensed over the phone became more palpable.

“I’m going to be taped?” he asked in mock horror.

“Well, yes… Is that okay?” I responded, even as he signed the consent form agreeing to have our interview recorded.

I had hoped that the coffee cake would somehow compensate for the recorders, but to no avail. As we began the interview, he spoke very quietly—much more so than usual—and given that we were in the store by ourselves, there was no obvious reason for him to lower his voice. I remember how I had considered pushing the recorders closer to him but didn’t because I feared that would make them even more of a concern for him.

Reflecting on his hesitation—on his voice trying to escape recording—among other moments in my research process, I am reminded that these were not just simple conversations about knitting I was having with my participants. While the presence of audio recording equipment cannot be minimized in an interview, neither can the cultural context in which the interview takes place. Though I was initially compelled to account for my own comfort and ease during my interview with Brian by pointing to the immediate environment I was in—the warmth
of the store on a cold morning, the backdrop of beautiful yarns, my friendship with Brian—upon further reflection, I realize how the fact that few question my justification to knit, or to research knitting, underlies all of the creature comforts I experienced in the store that morning. For Brian and for the other participants in this study, the context is different because the fundamental issue of “justification” to participate in knitting is not a given for them. There is something at stake when men talk about knitting, and through this process, I was able to glean insight about how that “something” functions.

**Knitting as R & R**

Though knitting is often positioned as old-fashioned or progressive, traditional or radical, it is all of these things. The false dichotomy that is evoked reminds me of the divide that is invoked when knitters indicate that they create their own patterns (ie. some follow patterns, some create them). While the creative process is integral to the enjoyment of knitting for many, innovation is always grounded in tradition. For instance, I could make a sweater without a pattern, but my totally “new” sweater would be influenced by the sweaters that I have previously knit from patterns, and it would include a body, two sleeves, and a neck opening. Furthermore, a sweater that I would “create” after having knitted only one previous sweater would likely be much different than one I would “create” after having knitted ten sweaters. Thus, what initially appears as a simple assertion of pattern-follower/non-pattern-follower, is actually a dynamic process of leading and following.

In the previous chapter, for the sake of clarity, I separated the reasoning strategies that the male knitters I interviewed used to make their experiences accountable, or how they describe their commonsense ways of understanding their experiences, into two major categories; however, it is obvious that they, like me, understand and engage their knitting in ways that both
reify and resist traditional cultural norms. The often contradictory reasoning we each use to understand and describe our experiences may contribute to an overall sense that knitting is a static activity, but knitting—from a cultural perspective—is a fluid process of understanding the limits of gender and our gendered performances. Some reasoning strategies were focused specifically on establishing gender believability (for example, see “I’m mostly masculine” in Chapter Four), but if we reflect on the strategies in a more general sense, we can see a more complex understanding of gendered performance emerge by recognizing the everyday transgression of cultural norms.

Butler (1990) posits that gender comes into being through a “stylized repetition of acts” (p. 270). The literature, as well as my own experience and the experiences related by the male knitters in this study, indicate that knitting has the ability to increase or decrease our ability to perform our gender to the regulatory ideal as determined by self and/or others. Knitting helps me to perform feminine to the regulatory ideal because knitting is deemed a feminine activity in our culture, but for men who are expected to perform masculine to the regulatory ideal, knitting presents many challenges. In our performative efforts, we engage in contradictory communicative acts; this suggests that gender is compelled by the repeated performance of highly stylized, complex, often paradoxical, acts that convey an overall degree of proficiency about one’s performance of gender to the regulatory ideal. Additionally, this research suggests that the accomplishment of gender—specifically masculinity—is fluid and connected to audience (e.g., Mike knitting at home alone during the winter months rather than during summer rock climbing trips with his friends).

Butler (1993) notes that performativity “is always a reiteration of a norm or set or norms” rather than a single act, and as such, knitting becomes part of a greater gendered performance.
Given its strong feminine connotation in our culture, our desire to knit becomes part of how we understand our gendered identity and communicate that understanding to others. Why we knit, where we knit, among whom we knit, and whom we knit for are all part of how we accomplish the everyday performance of ourselves as gendered beings. This process, in turn, is indicative of the ways that we perform and/or fail to perform, or choose not to perform our gender to the regulatory ideal.

The often paradoxical acts that knitters discuss in this study points to a slightly more nuanced understanding of Butler’s (1990) concept that the performance of gender is “an object of belief” (p. 271). Though it may seem as though one’s performance of heterosexual masculine/feminine is either believed or not believed, the division between belief/non-belief that emerges from this study is more comparable to varying levels of gender proficiency. To understand gender “believability” as fluid is more consistent with the notion that we are perpetually re/enacting our gendered performances as we negotiate our everyday lives. For instance, my experience, in part detailed in Chapter Three, reflects how the normative connotation of knitting helps me to balance my less traditionally feminine performances and still perceive myself as feminine: “He would take the scarf and realize that beneath my convincing attempt at being the easy-going, ‘who-needs-security-in-a-relationship?’ girl, I was carefully constructing the security that he did not provide.”

Calvin also pointed toward the notion of believability as being a careful balance when he described his father’s resistance to his knitting:

I think if I had a 9-5 job, a wife, a dog, a house and all the other accouterments that need to be acquired before one reaches 30, the knitting wouldn’t bother him at all….I suppose that I would have more idiosyncrasy credit if I could just conform in a few key areas.
I would posit that, in his description, “masculine” could be easily substituted for “idiosyncrasy,” which again points to the way that we negotiate our gendered performances in an effort to maintain a level of gender proficiency. Though we cannot “escape” the normative tradition of knitting in our culture, this research suggests that knitters, specifically male knitters, are not always defined by it. For male knitters who only knit alone or among a small group of intimates, knitting is not always a visible element of that greater performance, which suggests that transgressive gender performances are and can be enacted within, not outside the normative system of gender roles.

Perhaps the most enlightening issue is that knitting, unlike one’s choice of career or appearance, is engaged at will, so the knitter has more control over how much impact it may have on her/his gender believability, especially as it is determined by others. While it would be difficult to distance oneself from a career or appearance, although these are changeable features, it would be easy to create distance from knitting, or to abandon it entirely. One can talk about knitting (or not) and/or knit in front of others (or not), so the degree to which knitting impacts one’s gender proficiency is variable. This research points to the ways that male knitters attempt to reason their knitting in ways that maintain masculine proficiency, which indicates the variety of masculinities that are possible and exist in our culture, even though we tend to think of masculinity in terms of a masculine/not-masculine dichotomy. However, as Connell (1995) states, “To recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination. These relationships are constructed through practices that exclude and include, that intimidate, exploit, and so on” (p. 37).
Knitting in Phoenix

The Phoenix rising from the ashes is a hopeful sign. I would submit that, in a very basic sense, the fact that I had no trouble finding men to interview for my research is also a hopeful sign because, though many people are unaware of the fact that men knit, men are knitting. The clear gap between perception and reality, although problematic, illustrates that narrow, gender-based performance norms are suggestive but not always restrictive. The men I interviewed continue to knit—some publicly, some privately—but the pressure that they have experienced has not caused them to put down their needles.

Although knitting book authors often conflate “knitter” with feminine pronouns, this research suggests that male knitters may have more freedom in their lived experience than the dominant discourse would indicate. Having more freedom is not the same as there being “no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender,” but opening up the categories is certainly a step (Butler, 1990, p. 279). The concept that some of the men I interviewed find it okay to talk about knitting with others, even if they do not actually knit in front of others, suggests that the boundaries about knitting as a gendered performance are permeable and perpetually in transition.

What is considered masculine and/or feminine is variable, and the history of knitting provides some indication that the current feminine connotation of knitting in the United States may not be permanent. As I previously noted, knitting began as a masculine activity, and men have knitted in different cultures and times periods since its inception (“History,” 2002). The connotation of knitting in the United States has primarily been feminine, but, using history as a guide, there is no reason to assume that this cannot or will not change. Men did not stop knitting overnight in some cultures, nor did women take it up it overnight, but change can feel slow when it is happening one knitter at a time.
Though I believe that the changing gendered connotation of knitting throughout history is enlightening, my hope is that we can begin to distance ourselves from the idea that gendered connotations attached to certain performances are necessarily instructive regarding who can/should engage in those performances. Just as an ill-fitting sweater can be frogged and remade into a perfectly customized garment with the same material, I hope that we can reinterpret and re/vision the limited ways in which we have traditionally perceived gendered performances; I hope that knitting, even though it is considered feminine, can be perceived as an activity for all people, rather than an activity which, for some, requires explanation or compensation. Jesse Loesberg, a knitter who chronicles his knitting experiences on his website www.yarnboy.com, reflected this hope on a recent blog posting. In regard to the attention his knitting and website attract, he notes, “Don't get me wrong. I love the attention…[but at] the same time, wouldn't it be nice if, one day, the reaction to Yarn Boy was, ‘So what?’” (14 December 2005).

**Qualifying Resistance**

Although some resistance to the dominant discourse of knitting can be viewed as progress toward Loesberg’s (14 December 2005) pithy “So what?” aspiration for knitting/gender, all resistance does not equal progress. In some cases, resistance of the dominant discourse signals a shift in understanding, but not toward one that is more inclusive of others. For instance, part of Brian’s resistance to the normative connotation of knitting as a feminine activity included an effort to seemingly impose masculine dominance. He conjured the image of master and apprentice when he recalled how he had showed a new knitter how to “spit-felt” two ends of wool yarn to form a continuous strand. When the new knitter, a woman, noted that she would love to learn “all of these little tips,” Brian pointed out she didn’t need to learn knitting
techniques all at the same time, implying that he would be the one who knew when she needed to learn more. The gatekeeper image was also present to in Rob’s disparaging commentary about new knitters/“scarf knitters.” He insinuated that all knitters should desire a complex, art-inspired understanding of knitting, and that they need his leadership to gain access to such an understanding.

Even though I believe that the complex understanding of gender performance that emerges from this research sheds light on the space for transgression that is shadowed by the dominant discourse, we should be mindful that not all steps away from the dominant discourse are moving toward the holistic goal of a cultural environment of acceptance and appreciation for diverse gender performances. In all cases, however, resistance does suggest that there are more ways to negotiate the cultural logic that surrounds knitting than one might initially assume. Our narrow perception regarding what performances constitute our gendered identities often obscures the myriad diverse performances that actually constitute our gendered identities.

Pattern Swap

I am shamelessly addicted to knitting patterns. Each time I go into a bookstore, I have to check the knitting shelf, and, when I log on to the internet, I fight the urge to search through the thousands of free patterns that are available. I plan to just check my email, but somehow I end up on Google typing in “[hat/sweater/shawl, etc.] knit pattern.” The allure of pattern hunting lies in the seemingly endless number that are available; a Google search for “hat knit pattern” will turn up hundreds of options. I click on one link, which often takes me to a page of links, which leads me to more patterns than I could possibly knit in a lifetime, each one interesting and alluring in its own way. Though many patterns are similar in their overall look and/or construction, there are small variances that alter the fit or style. From traditional beanie hats to
those with I-cord dreadlocks or cat ears, there are seemingly limitless ways to go about making a hat.

My urge for patterns—but perpetual inability to be satisfied that I have found the definitive sweater/hat/sock/mitten/scarf/etc. pattern—reminds me that patterns, though they seem complete and all-encompassing, represent only one version, one method, one story. Patterns appear timeless and objective, but they are always subject to the particular knitter, always a product of their context and maker. One pattern can yield a variety of slightly different garments. For instance, I used the same sleeveless cowl neck sweater pattern twice using two different yarns. I made the first one as I was preparing for my preliminary exams and I was feeling very stressed, and the second a few months later, after successfully defending my exams and taking a vacation. The difference in the two garments, though they have the same measurements, is evident.

In a similar manner, patterns for writing and doing social scientific and/or experimental research abound. Like intricate intarsia charts, these patterns offer little to no room for modification without risking the overall integrity of the completed project. However, patterns for humanistic research are not as rigid though the elements (theoretical grounding, data collection and analysis, and implications of research) are similar; humanistic research patterns offer more room for tailoring and personalization. Thus, I offer the pattern for this project, which is informed by patterns of other critical autoethnographic and ethnomethodological research studies, to scholars who might be interested in investigating gendered activities.
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