

**Men Knitting:  
A Queer Pedagogy**

Ph.D. Education  
(Society, Cultures and Literacies)

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## **Dedication**

For my family.

## Abstract

This study investigates '*how men knitting functions as a queer pedagogy*'. In the doing it recognizes that a man knitting elbows his way into long-held contrived conventions of (domestic) femininity, queering space and generally causing embarrassment and a sense of cultural unease through his performance.

As a work of educational research (situated within a Society, Culture, and Literacies profile) it is intent on troubling lingering gender-based notions of in/appropriate educational research and what remains academically out-of-bounds: knitting as domestic diversion has largely been neglected by scholars with the few academic sources focusing almost exclusively (and unapologetically) on female knitters. As such, the pedagogical meaning(s) of men knitting are essentially absent from the educational literature. This research project seeks to address that gap.

Taking the form of three journal articles, this work reads the everyday performance of men knitting as queer pedagogy, learning which 'minces' and troubles not only masculinity but traditional constructions of educational discourse limiting pedagogy to classrooms and accredited educators. Using personal narrative and a methodology which brings together document analysis and queer theory, this study interrogates photographic and other artifacts through a queer lens, destabilizing meaning(s) and problematizing gender. It recognizes that leisure activities like knitting, as with other human activities, are by-products of the culture where they're re/produced and a reflection of broader societal boundaries. 'Men knitting as a queer pedagogy,' is about gendered desires, anxieties, and places where critical dissatisfactions with culture gets performed in other/ed ways.

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**Make Do and Mend:**

**An Introduction**

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## **Introduction:**

“Get Met, it pays.” So says the insurance company’s slogan, and walking toward the Metropolitan Insurance Building, I’m reminded of the jingle. My bus stop is positioned just out front, and despite my hurried steps, I wax nostalgic for Charles Shultzs’ Peanuts characters, who once populated the indemnification giant’s television commercials. Decades on, I still sentimentalize Linus and Lucy and a wholesome, mid-century rendition of childhood, never my own. I smile as my bus passes. I’m late again.

For a Sunday afternoon, the transit stop is crowded. In a government town with the reputation for streets which roll-up come Friday afternoon, it’s a chance event. Standing there I wonder if I’m the only one to have missed my ride; curious if any else is reminiscing about Snoopy. Gazing at the multitude, I notice many inspecting the bus shelter, looking within its environs rather than impatiently down the street for weekend schedule public transit. Not wanting to miss out, I go in for a gawk.

Seated within the glass enclosure is an elderly man, his furrowed brow and hunched demeanor invoking both determination of purpose and annoyance with presence circumstance. Surveying his audience I discern many are regarding not his face, but what he holds in his hands. They quickly look away when he returns their gaze. I move in for a closer look.

At once I comprehend the spectacle: in his grasp, knitting needles featuring a bright pink hand-knit, tethered to a jumbo ball of the same synthetic yarn peering from a plastic bag. I feel awkward. Not for witnessing his performance and my troublesome ogling, but to be in the presence of one so brave. He isn’t merely knitting in public, but

does so with a bright-pink, shiny-synthetic yarn. As I've overheard many times from adolescence males on city buses: 'dude, that's really gay'.

Embarrassed by my response, I endeavour to transcend my looky-loo status, parading into the enclosure. Time slows, and I try to think of an appropriate urban salutation to cut the tension of the moment. My mind goes blank. I turn and face the crowd; they look away. Unsure if he senses my hesitation, or if he seeks to speak-back to the stares and judging glances, he clears his throat, looks over his shoulder towards me, and in a clear voice for the assembly to hear announces: "make-do and mend". The comment hits with a velocity belying the slowness of my comprehension and my clumsy intrusion. Time quickens, city-buses appear, and in an instant, crowd and knitter disperse. I'm left alone, missing my bus again.

Years later, I still recall the event with clarity. Yet, analysed through the lens of time (and maturity), I'm still uncertain of the mystery man's exact intent. Did his comment contain a childhood biography shaped by war time rationing and reuse, his phrase containing "the catchwords of the day" (Edwards, 2001, p. vi). Perhaps his meaning was a satirical rebuke, informing his audience of fibre repurposed, invoking "instances of reuse which make little sense to us in a disposable society" (Jervis & Kyle, 2012, p. 3). I will never know. Even today, when I walk to that bus stop, I am haunted not merely by the spectre of his performance, but by his invocation. I'm rarely sentimental for the Peanuts at that locale, rather, I remember his unexpected performance. I think of him, the brave-one, we his audience, the brightness of his yarn and handiwork, and his salutation: make-do and mend.

My doctoral work is informed by that provocative moment. The event sparked within me an attentiveness to the rebellious quality of a man knitting, and “how men commit a subversive act by knitting in public” (Wills, 2007, p. 62). As Macdonald (1988) suggests, “where knitting has been assigned to woman’s domain, adult knitting males are stared at, fussed over, almost petted as daring, even darling, adventurers or avoided for being too ‘feminine’” (p. xvi). The articles which follow bear subtle witness to that elderly man quietly knitting with pink synthetic yarn in a bus enclosure in a small, sleepy, capital city. As provocateur, that illusive stranger occupies an incendiary space in my psyche. In hindsight, his performance and few words ignited my interest in me(n) knitting, an enthusiasm unfulfilled until years later and only in response to malady.

As a bystander, a critical reflection began when I witnessed his conduct and my analytical ‘third eye’ popped open. Witnessing and wondering not merely on that occasion, but how to this day, “I catch myself noticing male customers in a yarn shop, while female customers seem to blend into the background” (Medford, 2006, p.3). In the intervening years between the coruscating event and my ensuing PhD, I learned to knit as a response to illness. In the doing I developed a deep, first-hand captious contemplation of men knitting, but at the beginning there was a bus shelter, a startling appearance, and disconcerting words.

**Research Question:**

That event, coupled with my later gay-guy knitting experiences, shepherded a doctoral investigation preoccupied by one major research question: ***how men knitting functions as a queer pedagogy?*** My research and the three essays which ensue, seek to respond to that dominant query. In the doing, and as a mechanism to answer

that primary question, secondary questions were raised. Namely, ***‘why men knitting is considered odd or inappropriate’*** and ***‘why knitting remains a site of such entrenched gender identity’***.

In addressing these questions, we must acquiesce that a man knitting betrays “how craft activity [has] contributed to identity formation” (Dusselier, 2005, p. 172). His performance garners stares, awkward passes, snickers, and intermittent clumsy observations: ‘is he knitting?’ As Turney (2014) proposes, “knitting is both familiar and familial, the stuff of everyday life, epitomized by the enduring image of a granny knitting in her rocking chair” (p. 22). Somewhere in the recesses of our collective cerebrum, the likeness of some romanticized maternal icon incarnates when we conceptualize knitting, and “she remains a potent signifier of knitting as a female and family centric occupation” (Turney, 2014, p. 22).

Regardless of our individual experiences or exposures to knitting, it’s essentially culturally construed as feminine and allied with domesticity. It’s a ‘gentle art’, a phrase suggesting “the continuity with, and links to, earlier needlewomen” (Brocket, 2012, p. 7). Knitting is heeded as a homely pursuit, something largely undertaken within the household. Historically, “knitting was one of many, repetitive chores, things that needed to be done to maintain the household” (Turney, 2009, p. 10). As such, it fell under the purview of women’s work. In Canada, this is perhaps an echo of an early settler ethos, which saw knitting as an essential skill and one to be included within the colonial curriculum for girls (Department of Education, 1851). Catharine Parr Traill (1854), writing of her settler experiences in the wilds of pre-Confederation Upper Canada, notes the importance of knitting to the household:

Every young women is prized in this country according to her usefulness; and a thriving young settler will rather marry a clever, industrious girl, who has the reputation for being a good spinner and knitter, than one who has nothing but a pretty face to recommend her. (p. 178)

Our contemporary depiction of knitting and its association with the feminine and domestic, still reverberates with this earlier sensibility. A homely, long-established rendition, posits knitting within a “sentimental framework, which is simultaneously past and present, and therefore symptomatic of a permanent state of nostalgic longing” (Turney, 2014, p. 21). Knitting invokes an idealized recollection, an imagined ideal of home and the maternal. It is a conjectured reality of the feminine, and it remains a highly gendered pursuit to this day (Groeneveld, 2010; Murphy, 2002; Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007; Turney, 2009; Turney, 2014; Wills, 2007).

My research queries were fashioned, not simply to recognize knitting as normally and nominally female, but specifically to tease out the performance of the men in the group. My questions are designed to avow the oddity of men knitting and its affiliated tensions, and engage the performance’s dissident meanings. A man knitting, acutely breaches deep-rooted stereotypes of appropriate and legitimate (gendered) activities. His performance troubles masculinity and boundaries of what’s acceptable and what remains largely out of bounds: “the only person I know who knits in public is a man; and though he seems oblivious to criticism, his friends tend to make excuses for what is generally perceived as odd or inappropriate behaviour” (Trowbridge, 1997, p. 16).

The question of ‘how men knitting functions as a queer pedagogy’, opens up renditions of men as other, where “practices like knitting represent an alternate temporality” (Parkins, 2004, p. 432). His performance becomes a reflexive contrivance, and a creative opportunity to opt-out, containing within it a “critique of our habitat”

(Marras, 1999, p. 4). As a 'critique of habitat', his performance registers a critical dissatisfaction with the limitations of gender(ing) which prescribes knitting as 'female'. A man knitting embodies gender gone awry, and how gender can falter and fail to be inclusive because of its own rigid exclusivity. Knitting in the hands of the male 'other', draws attention to long-held assumptions of perimeters, and allows us to communicate gender failures without speaking a word:

I had no way to talk about gender. I wasn't allowed to express how uncomfortable it was for me. To resist would have put me in danger, so I kept subversive thoughts covert. As a person who couldn't conform to what was expected of me, I thought I was a failure and kept it to myself. (Spoon, 2014, p. 17)

Throughout my research project, and in the articles contained within this document, knitting is understood as hand-knitting exclusively. Hand-knitting is defined as "a specific technique consisting of the forming of a row of stitches out of a long thread, and only fabrics made with the use of two, three, four or five knitting needles" (Turnau, 1986, p. 167). Pedagogy is defined as "the process of education in its widest sense – materials, methods, theories and their applications" (Reynolds & Trehan, 2001, p. 358). An open translation of pedagogy is imperative, as "a knitter doesn't need a higher education to learn the technique," and they're frequently educated into the craft by mothers, grandmothers, or other female family members (Sundbro, 2007, p. 118).

Knitting has almost exclusively been a pedagogy of the feminine; education undertaken by and for women (Margolin, 2014; Parker, 1984; Turney, 2009; Turney, 2014). A man knitting intervenes in an activity of "intergenerational instruction, of behaving 'like a girl'" (Turney, 2014, p. 23). His performance is a queer undertaking, not simply because of its oddity, but because it points to other/ed knowledge previously

unavailable. A man knitting operates as a queer pedagogy because his performance furnishes queer perspectives, and “queer perspectives continue to offer essential counter-points to the dominant heteronormative (and patriarchal) paradigm” (Aperture, 2015, p. 13). His performance is emblematic of didactic divergence, of pedagogy queered. Throughout this work I invoke Morris’ (2003) definition of queer pedagogies to demonstrate dissimilarity: “queer pedagogies perform the difference... [they] trop up the difference through different forms of symbolic representation” (p.189).

### **Research Purpose:**

The purpose of this research project is to present the spectacle of a man knitting, as elucidation of the “constraints and possibilities of the existing gender order” (Connell, 2002, p. 82). His performance isn’t simply odd or strange, but down-right queer. There is an underline tension in his endeavour, not simply of difference or discord, but of an unspoken taboo ruptured. If knitting has been socially contrived as female, and a man engages in its performance, what does it say about the man? My research endeavours to engage the implied, a scrutiny of the not-quite-man-enough which invites speculations of queer. Through his performance, his demeanour appears diminished and he tacitly becomes less male because of his ‘feminine’ comportment. The spectacle of self, the manner and means we parade before onlookers, is digested and fed back to us. If we transgress, the message we are likely to receive can be disparate from the norm.

As Simpson (1994) proposes, “failure to conquer the feminine implies homosexuality, which implies ‘penetration’ by the feminine” (p. 195). A man knitting has not conquered but embraced a female undertaking, and thus opens himself up to

conjecture. Thinking back to that transit stop all those years ago, I remember deliberating on the aged male knitter's sexual orientation. I caught myself giving him 'the once over', interrogating visible signifiers of his sexuality during our brief encounter. His wardrobe, his mannerisms, the hint of a lisp during his declaration. And I did so as a 'loud and proud' gay male. What then must the straight onlookers on that day thought? Ultimately, "queer is in the eye of the beholder" (Aletti, 2015, p. 27).

Despite liberation movements which have endeavoured to unbridle normative processes around sexual practices, or perhaps in response to them, "our society is obsessed with other people's sexuality" (Tenn-Yuk, 2014, p. A13). It is something we notice, speculate on, and gossip about. The purpose of this research project is to bring this speculation to light in regards to the knitting man. To conjecture out-loud about a man knitting as a queer, and as a disquieting queer pedagogy. A performance which challenges assumptions where "the need to confront the feminine becomes also the need to master 'the feminine'" (Simpson, 1994, p.195).

According to Mansfield (2006), "manliness likes to show off and wants to be appreciated" (p.45). So what happens when his performance is, well, not altogether manly? What does that show, and what gets appreciated? Ruminating on the elderly man's words, 'make do and mend' can afford us opportunities to engage renderings of self in creative ways. It empowers us to "explore occurrence[s] of compromise (or making do) and repair (mending)...in a theoretically informed manner" (Jervis & Kyle, 2012, p. 3). We don't have to read renditions of men knitting straight on, but suspiciously and with an untrustworthy eye. There is an opportunity to retire cultural

compromise which has put masculinity in jeopardy of being too narrowly construed, and (a)mend it by stitching together a broader expanse or what maleness could be.

As a theoretical undertaking, my primary research question of ‘how men knitting functions as a queer pedagogy’, is intended to get at the edginess of his performance. Yet this edginess, like the theoretical itself, can manifest in sublime and subtle ways. In the peering of baffled spectators, their desultory comments, or in the haphazard chortles, giggles, or out-right guffaws of a male passerby. Whatever their response, it is formulated in the cultural terrain where we live. A habitat which too often camouflages the “multiple discourses around sexuality that exist simultaneously, contesting and sometimes intersecting each other” (Johnson, 2002, p. 317). The ambition and aim of my investigation and corresponding articles, is to peek into these discourses, exploring normative gender(s) and more disparate notions of masculinities in regards to men knitting.

### **Research Context:**

My doctoral work is situated in a Faculty of Education, within the *Society, Cultural, and Literacies* profile. This research concentration focuses on “the social and cultural issues in education as well as diverse literacies” (University of Ottawa, 2013). My decision to study within this concentration profile, steamed from background as a teaching and research librarian and my desire to avoid a strictly schooled analysis of education. From the start, this profile felt open to divergent discernments of pedagogy. Its emphasis on the social and cultural aspects of educational discourse, mingled with differing literacies, was very attractive in its receptiveness to the non-traditional. As a Science and Engineering Librarian working in a post-secondary environment, I desired

to step out of my hard-science world, making a conscience decision to investigate an arts-based educational topic. I desired a challenge different from those furnished in my science and applied engineering routine, and was deeply passionate about a research topic which dovetailed nicely into the broad amplitude of the *Society, Cultures, and Literacies* module. I genuinely cared for my subject matter and, having a career I loved and without the pressure of finding a (post-graduate) teaching position requiring a ‘marketable’ research topic, I was open to the possibilities of a creative, even avant-garde dissertation. Early on I encountered the work of educational philosopher Maxine Greene (photo



courtesy of Inside the Academy, 2014), who opened me to innovative pedagogical iterations:

We are interested in education here, not in schooling. We are interested in openings, in unexplored possibilities, not in the predictable or the quantifiable, not in what is thought of as social control. For us, education signifies an initiation into new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, moving. It signifies the nurture of a special kind of reflectiveness and expressiveness, a reaching out for meanings, a learning to learn. (Greene, 2001, p. 7)

The passion for my research topic was a quest for other/ed ways of ‘seeing, hearing, moving, and feeling’. Greene’s words garnered in me a resolve to pursue doctoral work which was quirky, odd, and perhaps downright queer: “queer discourses question the way in which...objects are conceptualized and articulated” (Dasgupta & Rosello, 2014, p. 4). I wanted to expand the range of research possibilities, so resolved that the object of my investigation wouldn’t just be a project pedagogically palatable to a Faculty of Education, but one containing elements which might evoke “dude, that’s

really gay” responses. As a gay man, I wanted to include my own gay-life narratives, and desired a topic “concerned with making spaces for queer...to become, and to belong in education and the larger culture and society” (Grace & Benson, 2000, p. 90).

Me(n) knitting immediately came to mind as a study worthy of examination. A few years prior to beginning my PhD, I had been diagnosed with cancer and gone through surgery and treatment. Leaving a job I loved and a city I had come to call home, I went off on sick-leave, moving to my mother’s home in smaller town Ontario. I knew I was unprepared to endure cancer on my own, so decided to pursue treatment with the help of my mom and in the town where I had been reared. My mother, like her mother before, had taught me to knit and I incorporated knitting into my convalescence. I used the craft to abate the effects of illness and aid recovery, and knitting became an integral part of my cancer narrative; part of the routine of my cancer day and its corresponding treatments and recovery.

My knitting practice was informed by illness, a catastrophic ailment which, like the domestic, felt altogether invisible and unseen. I was largely alone, isolated apart from my mom, occasional family visits, and phone calls from my best friend. The geography of knitting provided a space where deep, worried breathing could be replaced by a creative undertaking. A site of renewal and, fingers-crossed, transformation: “knitting to ease heartbreak, knitting as a tool for battling anxiety, knitting to cope with serious illness, and knitting to access higher consciousness” (Murphy, 2002, p. 17). Knitting became my superpower, because “doing something resourceful and productive feels like magic” (Myzelev, 2009, p. 151).

Knitting seemed a challenging and thoroughly unexpected doctoral research topic. Its appeal wasn't only in its recuperative quality, which I had experienced first-hand during my convalescence, but the undervalued nature of the activity: "knitting within the domestic sphere is a relatively mute activity; it is invisible labour, unseen and unrewarded, and as a consequence is socially and culturally deemed without value" (Turney, 2009, p. 9). The allure of a knitting doctoral research project was taking a low-status activity and politicizing its meaning by examining it as something other than what was expected. According to Groeneveld (2010), "the politicization of knitting occurs when then this activity traditionally associated with the domestic, 'private' sphere moves into the public realm" (p. 266). Investigating the male knitter, the overlooked other within a devalued arena of domestic craft, seemed to epitomize giving public voice to the private. It exposes the banal activity of knitting not only as "thoroughly domestic, [but] only grudgingly domesticated" (Brocket, 2008, p. 8).

When contemplating this research topic, my first step, as a professional librarian, was to get a sense of the available literature and what resources documented and discussed men knitting. I surveyed indexes of graduate and doctoral level theses done in North America and Europe, peer-reviewed journal databases, and academic and national library and archival collections. Very quickly I realized little research had been done on hand knitting. As Blackman (1998) suggests, "more importance has been attached to the history of machine knitting – handknitting did not attract serious academic research to the same degree" (p. 177).

Indeed, much of the research I uncovered was related to machine knitting, and was produced largely by sociologists, labour historians, and feminist researchers

focusing on the period from the early industrial revolution to late nineteenth century. Of this material, most concentrated on the United Kingdom. The hand knitting literature uncovered was almost entirely focused on women. There were some interesting exceptions, notably academic journal literature, government documents, and archival photographs produced from the first to second world war period. These few but rich resources, focused on the emergence of craft-based therapies like knitting, used in hospital environments to rehabilitate wounded soldiers. Keough (1918), nicely sums up the sentiment of much of this literature for the care of war wounded: “in caring for disabled soldiers, no source of possible benefit to their condition should be left unexhausted” (p. 85). This attitude would lead to the implementation of hospital-based knitting therapies in Britain, Canada, and the United States, from about 1915 to the mid 1940’s.

Apart from academic and primary government document resources produced during this era, very little exists detailing men knitting apart from some generalist and popular culture materials. With this in mind, I decided, rather than producing a traditional thesis, I would undertake the ‘three journal’ option and produce three academic publications which could contribute to the establishment of research on men knitting. I felt producing three contemporary scholarly articles on the phenomenon, which could be published in open access journals, might in some small way create interest in pursuing the topic of men knitting.

Having worked as a research librarian in academic institutions for twenty years, I know first-hand, how graduate students tend to go to internet-based open access resources first when investigating research topics. ‘The Google search’ is usually the

first step. Next, they will investigate commercially indexed peer-reviewed databases (e.g. Proquest), but usually after they have settled on their research topic. They may never investigate these indexes to see what doctoral dissertations have been produced, or only do so as a final step. My thinking therefore, was to complete a 'three journal article' thesis, submitting the articles to open access journals after final defence, so these peer-reviewed articles could be located easily in an internet search. Anyone intrigued by the topic could build upon my preliminary research, including borrowing my literature review and expanding upon it.

### **Methodology:**

According to Highmore (2002), methodology has the power to transform the insignificant into its opposite. Hand knitting hasn't attracted serious academic research, because it's altogether undervalued and remains largely unnoticed (Blackman, 1998). Filtered through a dynamic research methodology, 'men knitting' has the potential to take on inadvertent, unforeseen, and influential meanings. A research project which populates knitting with men, rather than the culturally expected, seems ripe with potential for discovering the unexpected. But what is required, is a methodology which teases out the unanticipated, a theoretical approach which facilitates full disclosure. From the start, queer theory seemed the spirited research methodology powerfully suited for this inquiry.

As a gay man active in the gay rights movement in the 1980's and early 90's, I was acquainted with the 'queer' movement and theories of queer conversational discourse. Queer, that one-time pejorative term used to label those perceived as deviant, became a parasol concept reclaimed by sexual minorities to situate themselves

outside prescribed heteronormative practices. At the time, we were living through the beginnings of the AIDS epidemic, a disease which “willy-nilly outed gays of all social classes and colors,” including “poor gays and rich gays and old gays and ghetto gays...and they were suffering from a terrible and fatal disease” (White, 2014, p. 26). AIDS at that time was largely “constructed through a bio-medical discourse of infection, incubation and transmission, as well as through a cultural vocabulary of innocence and guilt, dominance and deviance, threat and threatened, self and other” (Lord & Meyer, 2013, p.169).

To be gay in that era was to be implicated in a presumed decadence of the homosexual lifestyle, while governments dithered, ignored, or moralized the growing epidemic (King, 1989; Lord & Meyer, 2013; Morris, 2003; Shilts, 1987; White, 2014; Wojcik, 2009). Queer became an act-up and act-out word, invoked by marginalized peoples frustrated by the times. We invoked queer, not simply to take back its sting, but as a rallying cry to mark difference and display power through protest and resistance. During the 1990’s however, queer morphed from a term used exclusively within the lesbian and gay communities, to a broader group of followers. Queer began to modify not merely sexuality but gender; it transformed into theoretical discourse “which resists boundaries and refuses to be narrowly defined” (Aletti, 2015, p. 27).

Halperin (2003) credits Teresa de Lauretis as bringing together the terms ‘queer’ and ‘theory’ as an organizing chair for a 1990 conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick helped mainstream queer theory within academic discourse, with Butler’s (1990) *Gender Trouble* clearly expressing queer theories desire to destabilize cultural narratives around gender: “I would argue, a

constitutive failure of all gender enactments for the very reason that these ontological locales are fundamentally uninhabitable” (p. 186). Gender is a learned enterprise, not an inborn quality, and therefore has the potential to be unlearned and overturned. Queer theory aims to liberate, not merely to emancipate identity from gendered shackles, but to articulate a space perpetually open to re/interpretation (Thomas, 2000).

Queer theory is difficult to define but like queer pedagogies, “resists stable definition” (Shlasko, 2005, p.123). For this research project, I invoke Pummer’s (2005) working definition of this methodology: “a radical stance around sexuality and gender that denies any fixed categories and seeks to subvert any tendencies toward normality within its study” (p. 365). Queer theory is perpetually in the process of undoing and unmasking and pushing boundaries and limitations. Knitting, as a feminized and domesticated craft, contains within it gendered “byproducts and generators of narrative” (Prain, 2014, p. 10). Deploying a queer theory methodology, could help unpack these fictive accounts, through “subvert[ing] its hegemony by refusing to conform to its practice” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 129).

Queer theory was a significant component of my methodology strategy, but it wasn’t the only part. Having collected an assemblage of primary sources including photographs and government documents, all depicting and examining soldiers knitting during the two world wars, it was important to incorporate another methodology - document analysis, commonly employed in the study of reports, documents, and visual resources (Johnson & Reynolds, 2012). Document analysis can cull meanings from texts fashioned by other generations, providing glimpses into their authors’ perceptions of the world. As Rapley (2007) asserts, when I speak of texts I am using the concept in

its “broadest sense to refer to the whole range of written and visual documents” (p. 88). It is important to recognize that these texts, unlike journal literature for example, were customarily “produced without any intention or knowledge that they will be used as data” (Hewson, 2008, p. 544). An important aspect of document analysis therefore, is its ability to extract meaning and give voice to materials which were only intended to document a particular moment or process.

The photographs in particular, seem largely designed to attest to the knitting activities undertaken by war wounded men in hospital wards. Perhaps originally destined for hospital administration, military brass, or to demonstrate vigor, these images provide a glimpse into the curative benefits of knitting. But these pictorial representations also reflect values and attitudes of an era, “how they wanted to be seen rather than how things actually were” (Sholis, 2015, p. 23). Document analysis, through its who, what, where, when, why and how analysis, forms an aggregate “to move beyond the surface content of a document and into its function” (Prior, 2003, p. 21). But given the nature of this men knitting doctoral project, queer theory provides a complement to document analysis as it can read back meaning, bringing other/ed unintended voices forward. According to Davie and Wyatt (2011), even though these texts were created in a specific context and with a particular purpose, we can study them as something more than products of their time. Reading them in our own contemporary voice, we might discover dynamic meanings beyond the (limited) goals intended by their authors. Queer theory draws on “poststructuralist and postmodern understandings of identity and being,” and so can provide a model to undo a strictly fixed analysis of historic texts (Whitehead, 2002, p. 194).

## **The Articles:**

Meagre scholarly literature has been produced on knitting men. My work is therefore largely exploratory, and essentially at the inauguration of contemporary inquiry on the meanings of men knitting. It felt appropriate therefore, rather than undertaking a qualitative research project which identified and interviewed a cohort of male knitters, that a more preliminary step was needed, one which would survey available literature and provide an original contribution to scholarship by addressing arenas lurking within the materials uncovered. The literature itself would be a determining factor in the direction the articles took, but ultimately I looked to my doctoral advisor and Ph.D. committee for feedback on the orientation of my essays. At the conclusion of my comprehensive examinations, as part of the excellent advice and feedback provided by my advisor and committee, we discussed major themes identified within my preliminary research and settled on three areas of focus for my articles: methodology, military men knitting during the war, and contemporary examinations of men knitting.

As requested by advisor, committee, and the PhD handbook, my first article focuses on methodology. This paper provides an overview of how queer theory and document analysis are brought together as a messy methodology to investigate 'men knitting as queer pedagogies'. As document analysis was used to help interrogate the photographic and other primary documents addressed largely in the second article, this first article delves more deeply with queer theory which is the dominant methodology used extensively in all three articles. According to Slagle (2003), "the tenets of queer theory provide scholars with a model to interrogate how sexuality and other differences play a fundamental role in rhetorical practice" (p. 129). This practice is a technique used

by researchers to convince a reader to re/consider a subject or text from a desperate viewpoint. In the case of queer theory, the desperate emboldens “resistance to ‘normative,’ and dominant cultural values” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 36).

However, like Dasgupta and Rosello (2014), I feel “queer movements have very quickly become the victim of the relative success that queer theory has enjoyed in academic circles” (p. 4). Queer theory is hot, but also highly theoretical and situated deeply within academia. As someone who cut his teeth on gay street-resistance, I rapidly became frustrated and later resentful of queer theories utopian claims. Accordingly, this first paper contains scads of my own queer life narrative, and my frustration that queerness, as articulated in academic queer theory, “can never define identity; it can only ever disturb one” (Edelman, 2004, p. 17).

This work demonstrates that while queer theory can be useful within academic discourse, it has troubling elements for gays such as myself, as “it may be working against productive means by which self-actualization and organizational resistance is built” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 33). Queer theory challenges the value of maintaining distinctive gay communities because homosexuality, like heterosexuality, is merely a category which needs to be erased in favour of some abstruse and perpetually evolving state (Jagoes, 1996; Kirsch, 2000; Warner, 1992). Even Theresa de Lauretis, the academic credited with bringing together ‘queer’ and ‘theory’, abandoned the phrase as she felt it had been co-opted by mainstream institutions (Jagose, 1996; de Lauretis, 1997). This piece of writing, illustrates my understanding and how and why I used the methodologies I did, but it also conveys my irritation with queer theory.

Article two, details the use of knitting in hospitals during the two world wars as an act of convalescence for wounded soldiers. Invoking the myth of Freya's Hall, a place of reprieve for battle-hardened Vikings, this paper uses the metaphor of Freya to examine the queerness of military men knitting. Freya, a Norse fertility goddess linked to crop production and domesticity, was associated with matters of the heart including compassion for men (Graslund, 2000; Lindow, 2002; Page, 2003). The compassion she provided fighters, through respite in her hall, was considered effeminizing by Viking contemporaries as it was thoroughly domesticating (Branston, 1955; Heide, 2006; Price, 2002). Using Freya as allegory, this article shows how Freya-like female ward aids, in their compassion to rejuvenate injured soldiers through craft-based activities, invoked a culturally construed effeminate undertaking: they taught men to knit.

Employing period primary resource materials including photographs, government documents, and coeval journal articles, this work deploys a multi-phase document analysis approach using coarse grain (big picture) and fine grain (fine point) inquiry of texts to scrutinize meanings (Butler-Kisber, 2010). As Gampat (2013) describes, "grain was the original name for the little circles that one would see in an image," coming in "various sizes, roughness, amounts, and looks depending on various factors". Reading grain, is used as a technique to investigate text at the macro and micro level. Queer theory is used alongside document analysis' big and small analysis, to inconvenience and problematize identity claims made in these primary resources, particularly in regards to gender. Also contained is my own illness narrative, and corresponding convalescence using knitting.

In the third article, I explore ‘man enough to knit’ narratives, situated within popular culture representations of men knitting. Focusing on the everyday, because it’s “part of most people’s daily experience,” I intersect my own mundane queer life knitter narrative with present-day representations of men knitting (Duncum, 1999, p. 295). Knitting, as an everyday activity remains “a gendered occupation”, but one which increasingly features the odd appearance of a man (Prigoda & McKenzie, 2007, p.93). Using knitting-how-to resources directed at men, including video, monograph, advertising, and an artist’s film, this article articulates representations of divergence: “did I feel manly? Well, not very” (Churchill, 2013).

As Macdonald (1998) states, “the increasing number of male knitters can be traced to the gradual blurring of gender roles as men tend babies, cook, clean and perform duties once deemed exclusively feminine” (p. 351). But even though some men knit, this shouldn’t presume much has changed in terms of broader cultural inference: “every time Chuck Wilmesher pulls out his needles, someone notices, stares for a moment and asks, in so many words: what do you think *you’re* doing?” (Brodeur, 2014) To demonstrate ‘what I’m doing’ I offer the reader a knitting pattern of my creation, featuring my own hand-spun/hand-dyed wool, in this essay as a final queer act and craftivist performance:

We’re sick of homogenized culture, and these realizations have left holes in our hearts. We create to fill those holes, to be able to sleep at night knowing we’ve done something, even a small something, to confront culture that is currently being churned out. (Rigdon, 2007, p. 6)

## **Conclusion:**

One of my first knitting research project discoveries, was a hardbound collection of reproductions of World War II instructional leaflets, produced by the British

government to encourage home-front rationing and reuse. *Make Do and Mend: Keeping Family and Home afloat on War Rations* (2007), contains pamphlets produced by Britain's Board of Trade during the war years. The free handouts were an essential part of "the government's anti-waste and 'Make-do and Mend' campaigns," encouraging resourcefulness through recycling and salvaging (Norman, 2007, p. 12).

*A Guide to Woollies*, a handbill contained within the collection, features how-to advice for the hand knitter on making durable knitted garments. Included is "make-do's for woollen garments," a section on salvaging wool by unravelling old knit apparel and repurposing it by reknitting into useful attire (Board of Trade, 2007, p. 61). Reflecting back on my encounter with the aged male knitter all those years ago, it feels like his words were not merely about that moment, but directing me an/other undertaking. Maybe his intent was for me to go forth and discover this document and a time and a craft which held great meaning for him. Transformational and perhaps even healing qualities.

In an analogous way, I hope the essays which follow inspire you dear reader, to discover something of immense meaning to me: knitting. My ambition for the articles which follow is to demonstrate that knitting carries "the stories of those whom society overlooks," particularly the knitting man (Prain, 2014, p. 10). I'm optimistic an interest might be tweaked, and others will work forward on men knitting research, building on what I have re/presented. This research project and corresponding articles, endeavour to demonstrate that a man knitting represents the spectre of the other, and as such proclaims a queer pedagogy. His performance haunts unexpected locations, and in the doing builds "knowledge and understanding to inform a pedagogy of 'resist-stances'...to

build queer integrity by creating inclusive and transformational learning environments” (Grace & Benson, 2000, p.90). There is much work to be done, and the essays which follow are but a modest starting point.

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**I Don't want to be Queer Anymore:  
Reading Theory, Straight**

Ph.D. Education  
(Society, Cultures and Literacies)

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**Abstract:** This article is a critical reflection on academic appropriations of queer theory. Once a space of activist resistance situated within homosexual identity politics, queer theory has become academically fashionable and doesn't feel very queer anymore. Queer, that loathsome word invoked to ostracize and punish those perceived as being gay, was gradually (re)appropriated by homosexuals, reversing its gaze and usurping its pejorative meanings. Written in a fag/got's voice, this paper remembers what queer was, questioning queer theory's mainstreaming within academic parlance. Detached from its political 'street' roots, academic queer theory appears to be chasing a theorem grand enough to embrace anyone self-identifying as queer, but excludes homosexuals committed to the politics of identity. This paper finds its origins in my doctoral work on *Men Knitting as Queer Pedagogy*, which employed queer theory and document analysis research methodologies. As such, I invoke knitting as exemplar throughout this work.

### **Introduction:**

Written in a fag/got's voice, this paper is a meditation on academic appropriations of 'queer' and a critique of queer theory as methodology. Having been excised from its gay political roots, contemporary queer theory has sacrificed the queer for overtly idealistic notions of theory and, "despite its laudable ambition and broad academic appeal,...tends to lapse into a discursively burdened, textual idealism that glosses over the institutional character of sexual identity" (Green, 2010, p. 522). Rather than operating "to rethink sexual (and gender) nonconformity in ways that do not reproduce marginality," I suggest queer theory, in chasing a theorem grand enough to encompass all, actually marginalizes (Stein and Plummer, 1994, p. 176). What we've witnessed is the displacement of queer political identity theory by big-tent academic queer theory, permitting the stage to be occupied by non-queer performers. Sure fag/gots can play a role but only if performing the script as written; penned by obscure academic authors far removed from the street discourse where it began.

While respectful of non-queer, queer theory advocates who, motivated by a progressive stance, embraced 'queer' and produced theories of difference, it is critical to

remember that while theory can be a space of creative nonconformity it can also be a place of erasure; a hiding-hole where differences get minimalized or made to disappear. Readings of queer which theorize “flexible identity...constantly in motion, constantly becoming, constantly transgressing,” can put fag/gots at risk (Gunther, 2005, p. 23). The practical gets lost and individual gay identities disappear in a flurry of theoretical sleight-of-hand.

As Green (2002) suggests, “in the wake of queer theory, the study of sexuality has undergone what some would call a paradigm shift” where queer theory “exerts a formidable influence in the study of sexuality” (p. 521). However, queer theory frequently feels little more than ‘queer chic’, a fashionable accessory used increasingly by non-queers to make their research appear hip, interesting, and edgy. They play at being queer, having never lived queer lives and without experiencing the life-long burden of homophobia. What follows is a refusal to let (fag/got) self-identity go, a defiant track against the appropriation of radical queer ‘otherness’, and a belief queer theory has been read ‘straight’. In the end, I’m unsure I want to be queer anymore.

### **Research Project:**

Based on my *Me(n) Knitting* doctoral research, which explored me(n) knitting as re/crafting liminal spaces of meaning, this work is haunted by the spectre of the fag/got packing balls of wool, knitting needles, and a gender-fuck attitude intent on speaking back to what queer theory has become; lamenting who got left behind. As a work of educational research situated within a Faculty of Education, my project sought to address a gap in the literature encompassing the pedagogical meaning(s) of men knitting and challenging lingering gender-based notions of in/appropriate academic

research. As domestic diversion, knitting remains largely unobserved by academics; male knitters don't register on scholarly sonar.

The significance of studying men knitting lies in undoing social constructions of knowing, troubling normative narratives and truisms of masculinity: men don't nor have ever knitted. A man knitting looks queer and its strangeness defies a presumed stability: "since the Victorian era and the sociocultural division of the sexes, masculinity had been cited as the norm, whilst everything non-masculine had been considered 'the other'" (Turney, 2009, p. 33). As pedagogical performance, men knitting reveals gendered desires, anxieties, and how critical dissatisfactions with cultural can put space to 'other' uses and for queer purposes. Pedagogy is understood as "the process of education in its widest sense – materials, methods, theories and their applications," and was unbound by confines of either building or professional class (Reynolds & Trehan, 2001, p. 358).

To investigate men knitting as queer pedagogy I employed a methodology which brought together document analysis and queer theory. Document analysis, "the detailed examination of documents produced across a wide range of social practices," was essential given the large number of primary documents uncovered during the course of my study (Warton, 2006, p. 80). These included government documents and photographic resources discovered in libraries and archives in Canada, the United States, and Scandinavia, as well as historic and contemporary popular culture representations of men knitting.

Queer theory seemed a logical research methodology, giving the presumed oddness of men knitting, and an interesting complement to document analysis. Early on

however, I became distrustful of queer theory's utopian claims, highly academic post-structuralist approach, and rejection of identity politics. Having participated in 1980's queer activism, witnessing first hand roadway-resistance and resilience in gay street militancy during the AIDS crisis, I found appropriation aplenty of queer identities within academic queer theory literature.

### **Fag/got:**

I've never liked the word 'queer'. Not because I have "difficulty separating the political and prideful uses of the term from its history" but because it's a relic of a different era (Sadowski, 2013, p. 12). 'Queer' belongs to earlier generations, invoked to label awkward otherness without explicitly naming it. Like other earlier pejoratives such as 'nancy', 'nellie, and 'puff', 'queer' is a by-gone term which identified, framed, and threatened. It drew attention to difference while sparing the user from explicitly implicating self in knowledge of an/other/s way of being. It allowed the speaker to identify an odd otherness while remaining safely within the bounds of institutionalized (heterosexual) objectivity.

'Fag' is my word. I was reared on this term, hearing it daily in classroom whispers, school hallways, playgrounds, and most notoriously, in the dangerous domain of the boys' locker room. The word enveloped my identity, as it did for many boys of my generation. It was a boundary word which, as Pascoe suggests, didn't necessary mark gayness, but undermined masculinity: "when a boy calls another boy a fag, it means he is not a man but not necessarily that he is a homosexual" (2007, p. 82). Gym class and the would-be jocks of my youth frequently hurled the term at each other, mostly to

re/assert masculine boundaries of identity when one of their tribe transgressed prescribed maleness.

Moving into secondary school and the hormone laden world of adolescent life, 'fag' implied weakness of character and identity, marking those labelled as fair game to be culled from the (heterosexual) herd. This was punctuated by 'faggot', meaning the lowest of the low, indicating you had not only exited (high school) norms of 'guy/ness', but you personified 'gay/ness'. 'Fag/got' fixed its stare on me the first day of grade nine (I was labelled before lunch), stalking me for the entirety of high school.

I don't recall ever being called 'queer'; epithets of 'fag/got' were used exclusively. Even today as I ride public transit to and from work, never once have I heard 'queer' invoked as pejorative referencing either sexuality or gender. 'Fag/got' is floated freely, typically by rowdy adolescent males as they climb onboard the city bus after school. 'Don't be such a fag' or 'he's a faggot' is not uncommon discourse and while I recognize its "used as a weapon...to temporarily assert one's masculinity by denying it to others," for those who are indeed homosexual, it's an explicit indictment of a forever secondary status (Pascoe, 2007, p. 82).

Although many may be called 'fag', the term bears an unequal burden depending on where it lands and cannot be read only in a theoretical register, simply as space where 'masculinities get troubled'. For 'gay-boys' on the receiving end, the word not only ghettoizes but identifies a masculinity which can never really be attained. Gays don't walk away from 'fag/got' in ways non-homosexuals do; we are forced to own it and frequently crushed by it. 'Fag/got' foreshadows the overt and subtle world of adult homophobia to come, a place of isolation marked by the real risk of violence. Someone

who isn't gay and called 'fag/got' will inevitably void its meaning by occupying (adult) heterosexual space. It's different for gays because there is an element of truth; you are indeed a homosexual, a 'fag/got':

Heterosexuals' use of 'fag' and other similar derogatory terms for one another is different from other forms of gay harassment in that it is not directed at the gay person. Nonetheless, it is probably experienced as harassment by the gay person that witnesses it. It reminds gay people that they are members of a low-status social group and probably further reduces the chances of their 'coming out'. (Burn, 2008, p. 3)

'Fag/got' discourses remain a critical means of maintaining identity, for those involved and for 'passive' viewers. Such was the case when, after exiting my local knitting shop and climbing onto the city bus laden with discount wool, a skein of Icelandic Lopi bungeed from my bag, bouncing by a group of adolescent males. Awkward pause, followed by snickers, culminating with "hey fag, you dropped your yarn." There is something critically honest about a group of adolescent males on city buses. Largely performing the identity expectations of their peers in a raucous tone, using banter designed to display prowess and power, attempting to keep participants (and any would-be viewers) in line.

### **Queer:**

I first encountered 'queer' in gay street culture during excursions to Toronto to escape the oppression of small(er) town South Western Ontario. I would take the train (sometimes skipping school), departing Ontario's 'bible belt' to the open spaces of Toronto's Church Street and the 'gay ghetto'. It was during one of these high school 'outings' I first bumped up against 'queer' in the 'fuck you' narratives of fellow fag/gots intent on troubling the times. 'Queer' was an activist word invoked as resistance to broad-based homophobia and zeitgeist. It was the 1980's, the era of Thatcher-Reagan-

Mulroney, where 'silence = death' and "AIDS was seen as a disease of outsiders, whose moral practices put the general public at risk" (Wojcik, 2009, p. 63). AIDS and gay culture were viewed as synonymous particularly by the U.S. government which "perceived the disease to be one of gay men and thus not of concern" (King, 1989, p. 138).

Randy Shilts' (1987) *And the Band Played On*, provides a detailed description of the unfolding AIDS crisis from 1976 to 1987 and the inaction of the Reagan government to acknowledge the crisis: "people died while Reagan administration officials ignored pleas from government scientists and did not allocate funding for AIDS research until the epidemic had already spread throughout the country" (p. xxii). Queer emerged as a banner term, a response by homosexual communities to the times:

A movement frustrated with the do-nothing attitudes of politicians while the AIDS crisis raged and still rages. Tired of peaceful demonstrations during the 1970's, activists tired new tactics...angry, in your face queers act up and act out. (Morris, 2003, p. 193)

Queer was a means of inserting gay narrative(s) into master(ful) heteronormative narrations, undoing dominant culture storylines. It made homosexual bodies known, giving visibility through pop-culture phrases like 'we're here, we're queer, get use to it'. Voluntarily taking on the label 'queer' co-opted its meanings and power. For those politicized combatants intent on undoing the political order, 'queer' was the struggle; a phrase of clarity, "for some simply a matter of display, for others the effect of discourses or of complex social conditions" (Hennessy, 1995, p. 142).

As 'fag/got' I soaked up the resistance language of 'queer', useful in that it bound me to communities intent on overturning the era, using an oppressive word to overcome oppression. Having always been called fag/got I accepted 'queer' because it was

articulated from an activist position and by the 'other/ed' community which I belonged. At the time I thought 'queer' nostalgic in its subtleness, while 'fag/got' more vitriol in its contemptuousness; the power 'fag/got' held in schools, playgrounds, and the street was undeniable. But to connect myself to the broader homosexual community, I translated the fag/got I was into the queer I needed to become.

Reflecting on my conversion, I remember a cold November day, a train-ride to Toronto, with Glad Day Bookshop (the one-time hub of Toronto's gay community) waiting at journey's end. On the train, a few seats ahead, was a thirty-something male donning a hand-knit blue mohair sweater accented with a pink-triangle pin, a popular resistance emblem of 1980's queer culture. Debarking at Union Station, intrigued by sweater and pin, I followed the wearer through the concourse, up the ramp and onto Front Street. Outside, sweater, wearer, and pin, were greeted by a passer-by, a stranger, complimenting his hand-knit. As they walked abreast just ahead, I overheard "thank you, I always wanted a blue mohair sweater, so knit one for myself". An invitation for coffee followed and the two disappeared into the noon-time city-scape. Later that day I discovered the leaflet *Queers Read This* (produced for the 1990 New York Pride March) stapled to a telephone pole and my transition to queer was complete:

Let's make every space a Lesbian and Gay space. Every street a part of our sexual geography. A city of yearning and then total satisfaction. A city and a country where we can be safe and free and more. We must look at our lives and see what's best in them, see what is queer and what is straight and let that straight chaff fall away! Remember there is so, so little time. (Published anonymously by queers, 1990)

Today this sentiment is popularized in the Pride Day t-shirt "not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck-you". Both texts are by products of a homosexual culture intent on raising voices and resisting marginalization through visibility.

## Queer Theory:

Even in Canadian cities, at the fringe of American empire, 'queer' activists formed small cell groups like Queer Nation, ACT UP, and other (American-style) direct action advocacy groups informed by identity politics. Queers did theory, but it was bound up in notions of 'us and them' making ('diseased') bodies visible in pandemic times. Moving into the 1990's there was a migration away from community politics as 'queer' became, "among other things, an aggressive impulse of generalization" and a rejection of "minoritizing logic of toleration or simple political interest-representation in favour of more thorough resistance of regimes of normal"(Warner, 1993, p. xxvi). It was during this time a formalized queer theory made its presence known when Teresa de Lauretis, organizing a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1990, introduced the phrase as a joke:

She had heard the word 'queer' being tossed about in a gay-affirmative sense by activists, street kids, and members of the art world in New York during the late 1980s. She had the courage, and the conviction, to pair that scurrilous term with the academic holy word, 'theory'. (Halperin, 2003, pp. 339-340)

Teresa de Lauretis, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Judith Butler are the researchers most identified with queer theory with Butler's (1990) *Gender Trouble* aptly articulating this methodologies concerns around identity: "identity categories tend to be instruments of regulatory regimes, whether as the normalizing categories of oppressive structures, or as the rallying points for a liberatory contestation of that very oppression (pp. 13-14). Queer theory abhors identity politics and "often seeks to refute the entire concept of an identity politics as falsely constructing a unitary entity or person" (Edwards, 1998, p. 472). Identities aren't fixed but rather learned/repeated through social/cultural performance. Notions of fixed identity remain controlled through the

artificial constructs of heteronormativity which bounds both sexuality and gender, defining what is normal. Heteronormativity can best be described as:

The cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships of a sexual nature, and against same-sex relationships of a sexual nature. Because the former are viewed as normal and the latter are not, lesbian and gay relationships are subject to a heteronormative bias. (American Civil Liberties Union, 2013)

Queer theory, “as a deconstructive strategy, aims to denaturalise heteronormative understandings of sex, gender, sexuality, sociality, and the relations between them” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 81). In the doing this methodology functions as “a radical remix of social construction theory” and, “since identities are not fixed...we can perform ‘gender’ in whatever way we like” (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 163). Yet it isn’t simply a critique of ‘straight culture’, ‘heterosexual vs. homosexual’ identity, and/or gender(ed) performance, “it is not a theory of homosexuality...it is an approach to sexuality and, more generally, identity” (Gauntlett, 2008, p. 145). Queer theory is not only concerned with deconstructing heterosexual identity, but deconstructing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning identities (LGBTQ): “despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness, thereby abstracting ‘queer’ and turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness” (Halperin, 2003, p. 341).

Honeychurch (1996), reflecting on academic engagements with ‘dissident subjectivities’, states that research methodologies:

Presuppose a particular worldview and also determine the ways in which individuals experience, and subsequently privilege, particular knowledges and approaches over others. Hence, the subject(s), processes, and claims of research inquiry are considered, explained, and legitimated through selectively authorized epistemologies, methodologies, and texts that have embedded within them not only the intellectual ideals and assumptions, but also values, or the culture in which they are produced. (pp. 339-340)

Traditional research methodologies can be bound by rigid epistemologies of 'normalcy' which reduce knowledge claims and knowledge production to a simplistic binary: male-female; heterosexual-homosexual. These orthodox methodologies maintain a socially constructed 'binary divide' and demand 'queering' to "challenge the traditional views of masculinity and femininity, and sexuality" (Gauntlett, 2008, pp. 146-147). As an expression of 'destabilized binary', knowledge claims might better be expressed as continuum making room for other/ness.

Queering, the process of identifying the 'odd' or 'strange' or 'counterfeit', is at the very heart of queer theory and its challenge of the traditional and orthodox. Queer(ing) theory, was initially situated within "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, [and] Transgender (GLBT) studies," operating as a critique of the "hegemony of heteronormativity" (Elia, Lovass & Yep, 2003, p. 336). It very quickly moved beyond its birth place, ultimately critiquing lesbian and gay studies itself and the binary relationships found within its discourses, now occupying a privileged position as 'radical methodology of choice' in many universities (Halperin, 2003, p. 340).

Defining queer theory is difficult. Apart from "poststructuralist concern[s] with issues of language and signification," there is much debate amongst practitioners as to its definition (Hicks, 2006, p. 561). The term itself "is very hard to pin down" but "must be seen as a radical stance around sexuality and gender that denies any fixed categories and seeks to subvert any tendencies toward normality within its study" (Plummer, 2005, p.365).

Whereas early community-based notions of queer were practical in that they 'theorized' in-your-face actions/events intent on resisting assimilation in the broader

'straight' culture, academic queer theory is about aloof flexible identities seeking to constantly transgress: "with time, the use of 'queer' has moved beyond simple anti-assimilationism toward a more destabilizing rebellion against the formation of identities around fixed poles of gender or sexuality" (Gunther, 2005, p. 23). Smith (2003) makes clear this distinction, and the transition from a homosexual-communities reading of queer to a community-of-scholars reading:

I am *not* concerned with 'queer as fashionable shorthand for the infelicitous expression 'gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender.' Nor am I interested here in queer politics as a congregation of now defunct movements that briefly defended identities marginalized by mainstream gay politics. (p. 345)

### **What Lies Beneath:**

During the course of my doctoral research I had a regular routine of knitting. Never a fan of complex stitches, my favourite technique was stranded knitting which employs two or more colours "worked across each row, and when a color is not in use, it is carried loosely across the wrong side of the fabric in horizontal floats or 'strands'" (Leapman, 2010, p. 22). The visual effect on the right-side is a main colour contrasted by secondary colour(s); a pleasant unified pattern maintained not simply by the dominant colour, but with contrasting minor colours surfacing and quickly disappearing below, hidden from view.

The critical word in stranded knitting is 'tension'; to produce smooth, beautiful, well fitted garments "you need to become adept at controlling the tension of the strands that run across the back of the fabric" (Gibson-Roberts & Robson, 2004, p. 131). What lies beneath the surface is a multitude of strands informing the design above. However, if the tension isn't balanced rogue strands poke through the finished right-side distorting the design and binding the wearer. One also needs to be mindful of strands beneath,

“so...fingers and toes [don't] get caught in them when you try to put the garment on”  
(Radcliffe, 2012, p. 207).

Metaphorically, stranded knitting is an apt comparison with academic queer theory: a knitted garment where the stranding has gone awry, where the dominate colour completely overwhelms what lies beneath, the tension is off, and suppressed wayward strands are likely to snag the wearer when tried on. Turning the work inside-out, one can eyeball the incongruity of the knowledge claims underneath, knowing it's not going to be a pleasant fit.

For me, the knitting project went awry with the demise of some of the more radical elements in the lesbian and gay movement, when a hetero/normalizing influence took hold of 'queer' (theory). Queerness began to be normalized with fag/gots rendered invisible under a dominate discourse: identity politics have been subsumed in favour of a 'straight' and binding rendering of queerness. This replicates the power dynamics of 'passing' within mainstream society, where everyone is assumed heterosexual until they claim otherwise. 'Queerness' has become a synonym for 'uniqueness' in academic queer theory instead of marking 'distinctiveness' as it had done in earlier community discourses. Alexander (2003) nicely sums up my concerns:

What happens when the term queer is used as a general reference to gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders, twin-spirits (et al.), and liberal straights of varying hues? What happens when my clearly heterosexual practicing, married, female, Japanese-Polish-American friend claims a queer identity because of her politicized feminist stance and her affinity with and support of gay folk? While I appreciate this presumed solidarity, we are the same and not the same. (p. 350)

What happens when a non-homosexual person gets to theorize what queerness means without having battled and reclaimed the (pejorative) label of queer? If you've never experienced the struggle associated with 'being queer', how can you 'perform

queer'? For example, the opposite-sex married (straight) professor referencing queer theory in a 'methodologies of difference' lecture, all the while wearing one earring announcing/performing to all who pass-by his heterosexuality: "left is right, and right is wrong" (Kokkino, 2009). It takes the bend out of queer, twisting and turning it until it can be read straight-on.

The open-ended inclusivity of 'queer' in academic queer theory troubles me. I am not entirely comfortable with non-queer researchers attaching the label 'queer' to their work when, in non-academic everyday spaces, it's unlikely they describe their domestic life as queer. More often than not, queer theory has come to privilege the work of non-queer researchers who claim 'queer' insight(s) without actually living queer. Too many times I have sat in classrooms listening to non-queer professors talk 'queer' theory or read their journal articles wondering what, if anything this has to do with a fag/got's life. Their queer performances appear limited to classrooms and academic journals, and at the end of day they go home to their opposite-sex partner:

With the institutionalization of queer theory, and its acceptance by the academy (and by straight academics), have come new problems and new challenges. There is something odd, suspiciously odd, about the rapidity with which queer theory – whose claim to radical politics derived from its anti-assimilationist posture, from its shocking embrace of abnormal and the marginal – has been embraced by, canonized by, and absorbed into our (largely heterosexual) institutions of knowledge, as lesbian and gay studies never were. (Halperin, 2003, p. 341)

Queer theory has become problematic; its separation "from wider politics or connections with grass roots activism" leaves some lesbian and gay researchers feeling isolated from their political roots (Edwards, 1998, p. 473). Institutionalised queer theory, the queer theory which largely gets performed in academic institutions, has lost its activism and grounded connection to the real life of homosexual peoples. As Gauntlett

(2008) states, “queer theory cheats, by focusing on fancy theories and cultural texts rather than real life” (p. 159). Frequently, the ‘theory’ in queer theory appears to have prevailed over the ‘queer’, with ‘queer’ becoming a safe and harmless qualifier of ‘theory’ (Halperin, 2003).

Queer theory has entered the canon becoming an article of faith in academia. Everyone seems to have to adhere, citing Butler like gospel and reading highly theoretical texts like liturgy and falling in line with those disciples renouncing ‘identity politics’ as heresy. Groeneveld (2009), provides a critical reflection on hierarchy and perceiving named leaders as “a problem in and of itself, given that this strategy inscribes a hierarchical structure through which the opinions of certain figures are imbued with more authority than those belonging to others” (p. 186).

### **Unified Theory:**

As someone who has laboured in the hard sciences their entire career, queer theory echoes the push in theoretical sciences towards grand theorems, those unified theories attempting to pull disparate parts together. Within theoretical physics, a unified theory fundamental describes nature, “put[ting] us in a position to answer the deepest questions of cosmology” (Weinberg, 2003, p. 11). At its core, “a unified theory...ties together branches formerly seem as separate and unconnected” (McGill, 2010, p. 627). Queer theory labours under a similar dream, to create a unified theory of sexualities relevant to all people, in all places, at all times. The trouble is, big-tent theories can be so grand they miss the mark completely, over-generalizing to bring everyone under one canopy. What queer theory misses is the recognition that some homosexuals have a deep need for community to support basic needs like ‘coming out’. The response rather

than rethinking prohibitions on identity politics, is to push more theory on the 'queers' rather than letting 'queer' lives moderate the theory.

While I agree queer theory can help disrupt culturally based heteronormative constructions of gender, sexuality, and identity assigned to the body, I can't help thinking about fag/got struggles with identity:

For us, visibility often breeds contempt. Yet silence can truly equal death, especially for gay teens. Death by invisibility – the Catch 22 of our tribe. (O'Connor, 1994, p. 8)

How exactly is queer theory's post-structuralist methodology going to rescue the gay kid from being labelled 'fag/got' and thus victimized for the entirety of their schooling years? Queer theorist would argue it's not just the gay kid who gets labelled, but anyone with "less normative gender identification and self-presentation" (Pascoe, 2007, p.65). They would also invoke a theory of binary divide and suggest we need to move the entire enterprise beyond gay-straight discourse. But how, in the here-and-now and in the daily lives of a homosexual child, does this help? While opening critically important spaces for many to explore boundaries beyond identity, queer theory does have a role to play; but does that mean all should abandon identity:

For academics, being interested in queer theory is a way to mess up the desexualized spaces of the academy, exude some rut, reimagine the public from and for which academic intellectuals write, dress, and perform. Nervous over the prospect of a well-sanctioned and compartmentalized academic version of 'lesbian and gay studies' people want to make theory queer, and not just have a theory about queers. (Warner, 1993, p. xxvi)

In knitting terms, it's like walking into a craft shop and picking up various yarns based solely on how they look, and heading home to construct a project without first investigating what each is made of. Some may be wool, others silk, and some synthetic fibres. The finished garment may look great, feel wonderful, and inspire pride, but it's

not until it's worn on the street and hits the wash that we discover that differences matter. Appearances fade quickly as the garment distorts because we have failed to acknowledge the unique qualities, properties, and identity of each fibre.

### **Genderfuck as Moderator:**

Reich (1999) defines genderfuck as producing “meaning in a symbol-performance matrix that crosses through sex and gender and destabilizes the boundaries of our recognition of sex, gender, and sexual practice” (p. 255). Genderfuck is bound by political sensibilities of 1960's North American gay 'counterculture' where identity was always political (Glick, 2000, pp. 20-21). For me, it provides much needed political agency and activism missing in (academic) queer theory, providing an interesting moderating influence.

In my *Men Knitting* doctoral research, genderfuck was deployed as a conceptual framework endeavouring to 'fuck' or mock “the relationship between the supposed identity and its outward manifestations (or essence and appearance)” and does so in real and practical ways (Tseelon, 2001, p. 3). The act of a man knitting functions as a kind of cultural drag, where the male operates in a space typically occupied by a female. Genderfuck is much less preoccupied with theory than queer theory opting instead for everyday and practical considerations such as a man knitting. The performance of drag, literally dressing/acting as an/other, is quintessential genderfuck as it seeks to cross over and become. Drag shows where men cross-dress as women are essentially genderfucking socially contrived gender roles, using camp (and little academic theory) as parody. A man knitting in public can operate in much the same way, especially if his

performance is unexpected. The viewer suddenly discovering the performer, struck by the awkwardness of the undertaking: 'is that man knitting?'

A Ph.D. project focusing on men knitting needs genderfuck as a conceptual framework to hone queer theories (academic) edge, sharpening its resolve for resistance-based research. In reflecting on the impact of genderfuck to my research project, I remembered a stance in a poem by Mary Oliver (1994): "to pay attention, this is our endless and proper work" (p. 8). To 'pay attention' implies a critical honesty, an ability not simply to reflect on the world around us but on our individual lives.

As a man, or rather, as a man who was raised to be a straight male, I am preoccupied with masculinity. I pay attention to masculinity because I'm aware of the potent potential for failure, of a (straight) masculinity which never took hold. Popular culture representations (both gay and straight) which continually reinforce these abstract notions of failure: the deviant pretender who doesn't pass.

Genderfuck seems to soften the purely abstract theory found within institutional queer theory, fucking with its aloofness and grounding it within daily lived experience. 'Fucking' can also mean a coming together or melding of two (or more) identities or experiences. The 'trans' community frequently employs elements of 'fucking' or melding to represent "a practical critique, at the most profound level of the naturalising discourses through which commonplace conceptual and practical binaries and generalisations are constructed about the human or ethical subject" (Carver, 2007, p. 117). Whittle (2006) details the kinds of experiences which can be 'fucked' through trans-identity:

It can encompass discomfort with role expectations, being queer, occasional or more frequent cross-dressing, permanent cross-dressing and cross-gender

living, through to accessing major health interventions such as hormonal therapy and surgical reassignment procedures. It can take as little of your life as five minutes a week or as much as a life-long commitment to reconfiguring the body to match the inner self. (p. xi)

Essentially genderfuck and ‘fucking’ is about remaking meaning. Within the canon of educational theory it fits within transformational learning with its aim of “evoking a new consciousness and self-understanding” (Bennetts, 2003, p. 473). According to Mezirow (1991), transformational learning involves empowering a sense of self through a critique of how social relationships have in/formed belief systems and taking action to make change. Deploying queer theory as research methodology and genderfuck as its moderator (or as conceptual framework in the case of my men knitting research project), creates a transformational learning space ripe with fugitive knowledges:

Fugitive knowledges transgress heteronormative cultural life; they emphasize what queer life really feels like. From a postmodern perspective, they are contextual, relational, and dispositional knowledges that acknowledge their own partiality as they context the anti-queer bias in concepts, ideas, and perspectives embodied and embedded in partial and privileged heteronormative knowledges. (Grace & Hill, 2001, p. 3)

A man who knits, particularly if he possesses an expertise of the craft, articulates a fugitive knowledge which transgresses heteronormative cultural life. His knowledge and performance of knitting is a practical demonstration of the queer, of an/other way of being. It points and is informed by other/ed options which transgress and destabilize the normative because he is demonstrating a knowledge (knitting) and a way of being which he should not possess.

## **Conclusion:**

Recently, while going through a purge of possessions, I came across a box in a cupboard containing a sweater I knit years ago. The colours could best be described as 'bright' and knit in a funky pattern which long ago (and thankfully) went out of style; what was I thinking? With great relief and without a shred of nostalgia I tucked it into a bag, sending it off to the 'Sally Ann' where it hopefully would find some purpose.

During the course of my doctoral research I went through a similar purge, discovering metaphorical boxes in cupboards filled with discarded artifacts and memories which had long gone out of fashion. My participation in 1980's and early 1990's street queer activism and consciousness raising is one, as is the memory of my mother saying: "please don't get arrested". I'm long past waxing nostalgic for a time and a youth which best can be described as difficult. My protest days are over, and I feel fortunate to live in a country where gay rights are on the ascent and enshrined in law, and where homosexuals can marry (and divorce) and adopt and have privileges not possible only a few years ago. I am hopeful others living elsewhere will experience similar change.

I also reflect differently on politics and long ago discarded the 'left good, right bad' political absolutes of my youth, maturing into different sensibilities; I'm generally suspicious of all politicians. During the 1980's I held as moral certainty that right-of-centre politics were the enemy, and while the ignorance and avoidance of the AIDS epidemic by right wing politicians of the time is well documented, my political views have softened. Today, openly gay politicians appear (or are rumoured) on all sides of the political spectrum. Time marches on. And while there will probably always be

organizations like Fox News there will also be MSNBC, with each jockeying for new audience when both are likely addressing the already converted.

What I find new and interesting and worthy of mentioning in a summation of my critique of queer theory, is the role of liberals in the co-opting of queer discourse. As an example, Colorado College recently added five options to its voluntary gender information section of their job application forms: female, male, not disclosed, transgender, and queer (Monteith, 2013). The intent, of course, is to create a culture of inclusion and thus provide an open and receptive space so all may feel comfortable to apply. Worthy and noble goals, and college administrators are to be commended; I think? My question is, which box should I tick?

By depoliticizing queer and denying its validity within identity politics, all the while permitting the term to be used over-and-over again by everyone/anyone, the word has been reduced to a kind of fashionable nonsense. In the beginning a site of resistance, queer (theory) now appears to be about power and theoretical drift away from queer-lives to queer-light: a featherweight version of its former self. Perhaps the fault is our own, we fag/gots who fought and pushed to maintain visibility? In reclaiming the word we have created a cultural conundrum of sexy-chic, inviting the non-queer in only to be pushed out. But what do we do when (well meaning) advocates have taken over the talk; when the rhetoric becomes just about advocacy and the fag/got disappears? Perhaps queer has been read neutral, and it's time to reclaim fag/got, although I think it unlikely non-homosexuals would ever qualify their life/research as fag/got (theory); too controversial, and not very sexy.

My own personal level of discomfort with well-meaning liberal advocates who, in their self-appointed role as defender/proponent/spokesperson, substitute theoretical models for life-experience, is revealed in the claim: “there is strong need to translate central ideas of queer theory into language which can be understood by intelligent and experienced people outside the academy who have not enjoyed years of leisure to study Lacan and Foucault” (Smith, 2003, p. 345). You know egotism has won the day and elites are far removed from the lived-lives of many when that goes to press.

In the beginning, queer theory as a methodology was important to my doctoral research as it would usher in a general sense of ‘undoing’, creating fluidity of identity and performing an open reading of non-sexual texts (men knitting). Now I’m unsure if I even want to be Queer anymore; what’s a fag/got to do?

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**Convalescing at Freya's:**

**Military Men Knitting**

Ph.D. Education  
(Society, Cultures and Literacies)

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PhD. Article #2

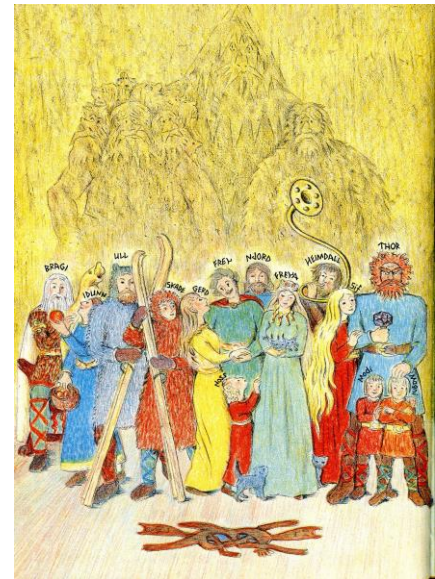
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**Abstract:** Based on my doctoral research on *Men Knitting as Queer Pedagogy*, this article is a discussion of injured military-men knitting as an act of convalescence. During the First and Second World Wars, knitting was presented as a means of diversion and an aid to recovery for wounded soldiers recovering in hospital wards. While culturally feminized, knitting was encouraged in recuperating service men as a means of regaining well-being and as a positive pursuit to occupy idle minds/bodies. Yet knitting was only ever intended as temporary occupation and merely a means of moving invalids into retraining and occupational pursuits once health was recovered. Invoking the Norse myth of Freya's Hall, a place of respite for war-weary Vikings, this paper presents knitting not simply as temporary stopover for military war wounded, but as a space which permitted soldiers to occupy territory socially constructed as other.

### Introduction:

As a young boy, my favorite book was D'Aulaires' *Norse Gods and Giants*. A children's version of the Sagas, it contained brightly colored drawings of gods, goddesses, giants, dwarfs, and the entirety of the Norse pantheon (D'Aulaire & D'Aulaire, 1995, p. ii). Every outing to my local public library would inevitably lead to the mythology section and re/discovery of this work. Like visiting a fond friend, I anticipated the meeting wondering, in its absence, what fellow Viking carried-it-away. Had it fortified them for their journey as it had me, outfitting them for struggles to come?



The pleasure of its reading inspired a personal mantra which heartens to this day: "I am a Viking, and I am brave". Since childhood this phrase emerged when I was frightened or worried, transporting me from troubled circumstance to the camp-fire world of 'Sagas' with all their power, absurdity, and possibility.

‘Sagas’, a word “related to the verb ‘to say’ ...[meaning] both ‘history’ and ‘narrative’,” were epic tales of Viking voyages, feuds, family, heroes and heroism (Lindow, 2002, p. 26). For a boy never enamored with school, *Norse Gods and Giants*, and later the Sagas themselves, were welcome refuge from the tedium of prescribed classroom texts possessing insufficient enticement for a youth questing adventure.

Years later, I discovered the reissued/renamed *D’Aulaires’ Book of Norse Myths* in a sale bin at a big-box-bookstore. Leafing through its pages I immediately recognized the earlier work. As if happening upon a long, lost childhood friend, elated reminiscences culminating in rediscovery of a favorite passage (for a boy raised with four older sisters): “if any hero preferred gentle conversation and the company of women to feasting and fighting, he could go to Freya’s Hall, for Odin had given Freya permission to invite as many as half of the host to stay with her” (D’Aulaire & D’Aulaire, 1995, p. 80).

In Norse mythology, Freya was a powerful fertility goddess resolutely linked to productivity including crop protection and assistance in childbirth (Graslund, 2000; Page, 2003). She was also associated with love and matters of the heart, having great compassion for men (Lindow, 2002), which likely explains her benevolence toward battle-weary Vikings within the Freya’s Hall myth.



The D’Aulaires’, emulating this allegory in their illustration (D’Aulaires, 1995, p. 81), depicted Freya’s Hall as archetypically domestic imparting refuge, cozy comforts, conversation, and creativity.

Yet, despite the feigned security of Freya's Hall, the goddess also brought to her visitors "the magic of seid, a form of sorcery and divination" (Lindow, 2002, p. 24). During the Viking era the practice of seid by males bore negative connotations of effeminacy including the social stigma of "ergi", meaning unmanliness (Hall, 2007, pp. 148-149). Page (2003), employing translations of the medieval Icelandic chronicler Snorri Sturlson, concurs that "this sorcery, when it was performed...[carried] such effeminacy that it was thought shameful for men to have anything to do with it" (p. 182).

Based on my doctoral research on *Men Knitting as Queer Pedagogy*, this paper ruminates on the phenomena of military-men knitting as convalescence during the First and Second World Wars. Using Freya's Hall as metaphor, this article regards the hospital wards where recuperating servicemen knit as territory where comrade in arms morphed into comrades with knitting needles, invoking craft-based therapies to "be cured or at least improved in physical or mental health" (Dunlop, 1933, p. 7). But like the allegorical Freya's Hall, the gift imbued to recuperating military men wasn't simply respite, repose, and recovery from the battle, but othering-insight which put the male-learner at risk; the curative 'magic' of knitting offered up in ward occupations was culturally perceived as 'effeminizing'. The craft of knitting and its performance, provided participants with "skills for coping with otherwise difficult situations and events" (Riley, Corkhill & Morris, 2013, p. 56). There was however, an awareness and tenacious sensitivity, that these recovering conscripts inhabited activities which were feminine, domestic, and could put their (military) masculinities at risk (Fitzsimmons, 1938; Neuschutz, 1944; Segsworth, 1920).

## Research Project:

On August 25<sup>th</sup> 2004, I was diagnosed with papillary carcinoma, a form of thyroid cancer. Despite assurances from the diagnosing endocrinologist that, “if you were to pick a cancer, this was the cancer to pick,” I was devastated. As a former medical librarian in epidemiology and infectious diseases, I spent the days after diagnosis sifting through peer-reviewed health-sciences literature endeavoring to bolster spirit and confirm a positive long-term prognosis. Fears remained however and my journal entry from that time belies my anxieties: “whatever happens, life will be different.”

My research project on *Men Knitting as Queer Pedagogy*, is largely located in my use of knitting as a means of engaging cancer and battling, at the time, what I considered catastrophic illness. At its core it contains elements of an illness narrative, reflecting “the truth of personal experience in the patient’s own voice in distinction from the medical account of the experience” (Sakalys, 2000, p. 1469). As illness narrative detailing knitting process, it became for me an academic embodiment of ‘different’, producing research on a no-prestige topic (offering little likelihood of exploration grants) undertaken as a cathartic activity to cope with cancer diagnosis, thyroidectomy, loss of para-thyroid glands, radiation, drug-therapy, near loss of vocal cords, and cancer metastasis fears. As therapeutic activity, knitting provided a quieting intervention where I could sit and produce as my body diminished, hindered by surgery, treatment, medication, and ongoing chronic illness. What manifested from my cancer knitting narrative, besides the self-conscious awareness of being a male knitter, was a desire to explore the topic of men knitting as doctoral research.

Within a Faculty of Education, I became intent on troubling lingering gendered constructs of acceptable educational research and what remained academically out-of-bounds. Knitting as domestic diversion has been neglected by scholars with the few academic sources focusing almost exclusively (and unapologetically) on female knitters; the pedagogical meaning(s) of men knitting are absent from the educational literature. To fill the scholarly void, my inquiry investigated men knitting as queer pedagogy, learning which ‘minces’ and troubles not only masculinity but traditional constructions of educational discourse limiting pedagogy to school-rooms and traditional teachers.

From the outset it recognized that leisure activities like knitting, as with other human activities, are by-products of the culture/times where they are re/produced and a reflection of broader societal values, patterns, and boundaries. Men knitting as queer pedagogy is about gendered desires, anxieties, and places where critical dissatisfaction with cultural can get performed through mundane activities. Throughout the research project, the pedagogy of men knitting was read as queering space, putting space to queer uses. To facilitate my research goals, I invoked a messy research methodology which brought together queer theory and document analysis, largely to interrogate photographic and other texts through a queer lens, questioning nuances and problematizing gender. The intention was to create a dynamic territory, envisioning something more than static-injured-bodies, frozen in time, giving voice to people who the camera/text rendered speechless:

We need to recognize that all pictures – and particularly all photographs – are illusions and are thus always somewhat symbolic. Because this is true we must also realize that some of the strength and validity of information obtainable stems from feelings put in when the picture is made and usually meant to come out when the picture is viewed. (Rudisill, 1982, p.1)

## **Freya's Hall:**

This text focuses specifically on the historic representations of convalescing military men instructed in knitting during the course of recuperation in both world wars. Convalescing military males were encouraged to knit during hospital confinement, with the curative benefits viewed as outweighing the negative social aspects of soldiers knitting: it was perceived as women's work. The performance of soldiers knitting, apart from its therapeutic function, permitted men to elbow their way into long-held contrived conventions of (domestic) femininity, queering space and generally causing a sense of cultural instability through their performance.

Freya, meaning 'lady' in old-Norse, was the preeminent and most attainable goddess in the Norse pantheon, accessible to anyone invoking her name (Lindow, 2002). She traveled the sky in a chariot pulled by two cats, appearing as a peripatetic sorceress in towns and villages, performing/teaching *seid* in exchange for compensation or acting out of a sense of compassion (Branston, 1955; Price, 2002). *Seid*, a kind of shamanic magic, delivered an insight or discerning destiny to the learner which could radically reorient or rework the receivers sense of being and purpose (Heide, 2006). The metaphorical Freya's Hall was space where the 'magic' happened, the space where second-sight and self-reflexive insight got performed.

The character of 'Freya' was typically performed by young women possessing:

The best that was in motherhood and the best that was in the affianced towards her own man without the inspiring causes. Theirs seemed to be the purest form of altruism, dealing with unpleasant men who in a short time they would never see again and from whom they received sometimes not even thanks; dealing with them with patience and kindness and an insistence that we see nowhere else except with the mother and the child. (Dunlop, 1933, p. 8)

Whether labelled as ward-aids or later occupational therapists, Freya-in-disguise, played a ubiquitous role in “an experimental gesture at keeping idle hands from causing emotional mischief,” facilitating a “type of therapeutics carried out by trained workers, whose academic qualifications were reinforced by an over-plus of understanding, patience and persistence” (Faulkner, 1934, p. 36). Invoking the Freya’s Hall allegory, a culturally feminized place of respite for battle hardened Vikings, this work reflects on spaces of slippage where soldiers were encouraged to knit in an era where the craft was essentially considered ‘womanly’. Friedland (2003), in her historical review of occupational therapy, identifies how women were viewed as morally superior to men and their incursion into public spheres were permitted based on this assumption: “they will bring to society what they bring to their own homes” (p. 205). The antidote for soldiers injured at the war-front, was invoking the home-front and instructing homely activities like knitting, with ‘Freya’ as instructor instilling (culturally) forbidden knowledge. This article reads the work performed in the knitting workshops of recovering conscripts, which endeavored to provide remedy for war wounded, as offering up a kind of magic which, while providing relief, carried with it the cultural stigma of effeminacy.

My connection to the images of knitting war-wounded men and the documents detailing their performance, were constituted in my own illness narrative; the connection I made between knitting and malady abeyance, recognizing in knitting soldiers a similar consummation. However, unlike the soldier’s performance duly done in hospital wards under the caring gaze of Freya-like ward-aids, my illness narrative of knitting was populated exclusively by my (Freya) mother who taught me to knit. Freya’s Hall was not

the hospital where I received medical treatment but my mother's home where knitting was instructed and performed.

My mother's inaugural knitting project for me was a pair of Mary Maxim pixie slippers, a sock-type moccasin featuring large, conspicuous pom-poms. In the printed instructions for the men's version of the slippers, pom-poms were distinctly absent, presumably to preserve a whiff of masculinity. In my mother's tutored version however, pom-poms (happily) figured preeminently and un-ashamedly. The queerness of our pixie-slipper-project didn't camouflage their critical importance of course: keeping a recuperating cancer patient's feet warm during treatment. But it nevertheless provided a critical space where, as part of my cancer-illness-narrative, I could perform a culturally re/presented women's craft (knitting), opting-out of a prescribed pattern of masculinity (read: the man's version of pixie-slippers), and instead queer the project by constructing a feminized rendition.

This document is informed by an illness narrative which sought to unravel "how illness is represented and communicated through different narrative forms," specifically in the narrative form of knitting (Mazanderani, Locock & Powell, 2013, p. 892). From the outset I felt great empathy for the soldiers pictured in hospital wards, knitting to cope with circumstance, injury, and illness, which had been forced upon them. Having experienced catastrophic illness and with an insider-knowledge of knitting rehabilitation, I was keenly aware of the affinity I could bring to the reading of photographic texts. At the same time I was mindful that "photography is a medium that tends to flatter to deceive; we can be easily seduced by the appearance of things" (Salkeld, 2014, p. 61).

It was imperative therefore, to develop a research methodology capable of ferreting out meanings beyond mere empathy.

### **Document Analysis:**

During the course of my research, I uncovered a number of historic and primary-source documents which discussed or illustrated knitting as a means of recuperation for injured military men in hospital during the two world wars. These included period photos of soldiers knitting during periods of infirmity, government publications which documented knitting-convalescence in military hospitals, and journal publications of the era which chronicled knitting as a retraining process for military men. From the start I sought to adopt “an approach for reflection in the research process,” opting to incorporate document analysis into my research methodologies (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 126).

Document analysis is frequently employed in interpretation of historic texts and as a research method is designed to prompt the researcher to analyze documents by asking key questions. These include considering what type of document it is, when it was produced, why it was written and its purpose, it's author (and their position), the intended audience, and any unique characteristics. Wharton (2006) describes document analysis as:

The detailed examination of documents produced across a wide range of social practices, taking a variety of forms from the written word to the visual image. The significance of the documents may be located in the historical circumstances of production, in their circulation and reception of the item and also the social functions, interpretations, effects and uses that may be associated with them. (p. 80)

And yet, as a research skill-set, it shouldn't simply ask and answer a series of prescribed questions, but aspire to unravel the intent and motivation of the text within a

particular milieu. As Bowen (2009) suggests, “consider[ing] the original purpose to the document – the reason it was produced – and the target audience” are critical to document analysis (p. 33). Yet, in deploying document analysis it’s worth mentioning that, “traditionally, social scientific research has focused on the collection and analysis of document content more than on documents as agents or actors” (Leavy & Hesse-Biber, 2008, p. 19). As agents or actors, documents perform for the viewer, engaging the observer in unintended ways and “may exceed, or even contradict, what the maker intended” (Salkeld, 2014, p. 62). Minimally, the text provides researchers with the opportunity to scrutinize “phenomena they are geographically, physically, and temporally distant from” (Johnson & Reynolds, 2012, p. 303).

To disrupt contrived, linear, or false depictions of an otherwise complex performance, Butler-Kisber (2010) encourages a two stage approach to document analysis research practice: reading field texts into coarse-grain and fine grain phases. ‘Field texts’ in my research project, took the form of war-time photos, government documents, and period journal literature, filtered through this multi-phase approach:

The coarse-grained phase is when the researcher really gets to know her field texts. It involves close readings and rereadings or listening and viewing, dialoguing with herself about what is being revealed, writing reflective and analytic memos and/or keeping a journal or log, and playing with some broad categories. (Butler-Kisber, 2010, pp. 30-31)

The fine-grain phase strives to narrow the lens even further, taking what might appear as disparate texts and rearranging into a coherent “plausible and persuasive explanation of what is transpiring” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 31). The process endeavors to take a macro/micro view, beginning with a broad macro ‘big-picture’ reading of collected texts, gradually moving to the micro and a ‘fine-point’ rendering of documents.

As a life-long journal writer, the entire process for me was chronicled in a hardbound (lab) book, which on reflection, provided a critical opportunity to reflect on the amassed aggregate of materials. Contemplating the meaning and significance of photographic and other documents was dominated by a discourse of making sense of ‘text’, reading it as a character or advocate of the times where it was produced. Further, photographs can act on the viewer as “important medium by which modernity indoctrinates its subjects...[instructing] us to play our roles” (Liu, 2002, p. 519).

In that frozen moment when the camera shutter clicks there’s an impression that the medium somehow has captured the truth (Wehbi & Taylor, 2013). Truth however, is not necessarily ‘frozen’, but open to

the sense-making of the ‘reader’.

According to Johnny and Mitchell (2006), narrative, is a “story told through the succession of pictures or the frozen scenario that allows the viewer to imagine what has happened to the characters” (p. 760).

To facilitate my own sense-making, imagining what happened to the men populating the photographs and fully engaging the documents discovered, I initially adopted a *Photo*

Photo Analysis Worksheet

**Step 1. Observation**

A. Study the photograph for 2 minutes. Form an overall impression of the photograph and then examine individual items. Next, divide the photo into quadrants and study each section to see what new details become visible.

B. Use the chart below to list people, objects, and activities in the photograph.

People	Objects	Activities

**Step 2. Inference**

Based on what you have observed above, list three things you might infer from this photograph.

**Step 3. Questions**

A. What questions does this photograph raise in your mind?

B. Where could you find answers to them?

Designed and developed by the  
Education Staff, National Archives and Records Administration,  
Washington, DC 20408

*Analysis Worksheet* developed by NARA: National Archives and Records Administration

in Washington (National Archives and Records Administration, 2010b). This resource was one of a number of document analysis worksheets, “designed and developed by the Education Staff of the National Archives and Records Administration...[to] introduce students to various documents” (National Archives and Records Administration, 2010a). My intent, as part of the coarse-grain phase, was to begin with the photo worksheet and move on to other NARA worksheets, but early on I grappled with the meaning of documents as ‘agent and actor’, realizing that “exploring a text often depends as much on *focusing what is said*...as well as *focusing on what is not said* – the silences, gaps or omissions” (Rapely, 2007, p. 111). Gaps, silences, and omissions can take the form of cultural assumptions positioned deep within the document, revealing stereotypes of the time.

In the case of government documents produced during that era, it’s worth noting that military vocational boards’ felt awkward about craft-based therapies like knitting. They acknowledge the benefit of knitting as a regenerative therapy, but viewed it as suspect. Fitzsimmons (1938), reflecting on the practice and process of craft-therapies indicates that “the male patient is apt to feel that it is effeminate and in this very psychological conception much of its therapeutic value is lost” (p. 151). However, as early as 1920 military hospitals recognized that “the educational value of these crafts has not been sufficiently recognized” (Waugh, 1920, p. 446). A tension appears to be in play around the net benefit of craft-based therapies, verses their stereotypically gendered meanings.

As agent or actor, documents can’t simply be read as texts waiting for meaning to be discovered; as works that contain singular truths and meanings which are two

dimensional, buried deep within. In the case of photographic 'evidence', and moving into fine-grain analysis of text, "a photograph might be said to show faithfully what a scene 'looked' like at a given moment...what the photograph 'means' is another matter entirely" (Salkeld, 2014, p. 47). These texts have their own narrative backdrops, which includes the character and culture and times they were created, but we the 'reader' bring something to their performance. As objects of study, we give them meaning "by how we use them... [and] in part, we give things meaning by how we represent them" (Hall, 1997, p. 3). Documents are performers within society, they "enter into systems of action in their own right...[and] their very existence, in that sense, can influence the actions of human beings" (Prior, 2003, p. 20).

At the beginning of the research process I understood document analysis to mean bringing together a range of primary-source resources including government documents and photographs, and including period journal literature which provided insight into the meaning(s) of military men knitting as ailment abatement. In the case of government publications, I conducted a literature search which identified documents published during both world wars, chronicling the work undertaken in military hospital wards including the inclination and sentiment of political authorities or elites detailing soldiers knitting. This was supplemented by the published journal literature of their research contemporaries, commenting on the convalescent activities undertaken including knitting. Pictorial representations of soldiers knitting were also incorporated, uncovered in archival collections in Canada and the United States.

The finite number of documents in the field meant it was relatively straightforward to generate a manageable sample; it was possible to 'read' everything published in the

area of 'war-time soldiers knitting during hospital recovery' as there was a limited amount of material available. In the case of government documents reviewed, the macro or coarse-grain analysis began with who, what, where, when, why, and how questions invoked when a researcher uses primary documents "as commentary...[marking] their descriptive orientation, their concern with organizational and institutional structure and process" (Miller & Alvarado, 2005, p. 351). Analysis of the journal literature was undertaken to provide supplementary information, notably, "insight into social practices that are not observable...because they happened in the past" (Miller & Alvarado, 2005, p. 351). Photographic documents were the third piece, analyzed by developing "an overall impression of the photograph," scrutinizing the activities, objects, and people inhabiting the photos (National Archives and Records Administration, 2010a).

Early on however, I became keenly aware of the palatable absence of any diary or personal-journal primary source written by recuperating soldiers, documenting their knitting performances. The only narratives available, besides government and academic-journal publications of the time, were the photographic representations of soldiers knitting; no diary entries written by recuperating military men knitting seems to have survived.

### **Queer Theory/Pedagogy:**

Not wanting to simply read these documents in situ, but practice a reflexivity which helped unsettle document analysis, I ushered in micro or fine-grained analysis by incorporating an additional methodology into the research process. Indeed, Bowen (2009) states that "document analysis is often used in combination with other qualitative

research methods” (p. 28). Given “the tension between the ideas and the actual practice...evident in discussion of art and craft activities,” specifically the difficulty surrounding the highly gendered nature of knitting as a convalescent therapy for soldiers, I opted for a methodology which would red-circle the oddness or queerness of the event and interrogate its meanings (Sedgwick, Cockburn & Trentham, 2007, p. 413). I also wanted to invoke a methodology which would queer the latent sense of authority in document analysis, particularly when contrasting the goings-on in the photographic documents with the ‘official’ tone of the government documents, and ‘authority’ of the academic journal literature. This was particularly important in that the pictures featured a photographic likeness of an illness narrative gone silent, where the injured and recovering soldiers lay hushed, forever frozen in a gendered performance of knitting.

Queer theory immediately came to mind, as it ushered in a general sense of undoing, putting “everything out of joint, out of order...[bringing] with it a radical deconstruction of all conventional categories of sexuality and gender” (Plummer, 2005, p. 359). Queer theory “problematizes gender and sexual identities,” even the notion of identity itself (Shlasko, 2005, p. 125). Also, since injured male bodies lie at the core of restorative knitting therapy in hospital wards, it seemed critical to employ a methodology which could engage these bodies. For Ruffolo (2006):

The body is the primary site that queer theorists use to queer – disturbing, decentering, and destabilizing – dominant practices and assumptions that further minoritize the minoritized through binary conceptualizations of identity. (p. 3)

Queer theory complemented document analysis in my research project because it challenged identity claims as presented in the primary sources. For example,

Neuschutz's (1944) division of gendered activities in *Other Occupations for the Visually Handicapped*, which makes specific knowledge claims of appropriate (and inappropriate) activities for men and women (p. 51). Implicit in this is not only a strict division of labor, but a cultural normalcy of this division. At the core of queer theory, is the belief "all sexualities, indeed all attempts at normativity, are bound to fail because achieving normal is an impossible task" (Mayo, 2007, p. 183).

OTHER OCCUPATIONS FOR THE VISUALLY HANDICAPPED

<i>For Men</i>	<i>For Women</i>
Salesmanship	Typewriting from dicta- phone
Selling insurance	Switchboard operating
Newstand selling	Magazine subscriptions
Conducting small business	Proofreading from braille
Typing and dictaphone work	Public reading
Music store	Musician
Auto mechanics	Hand weaving
Cabinet work	Rug weaving
Poultry raising	Machine sewing
Gardening, truck farming	Crocheting, knitting
Animal husbandry	Clay modeling
Horticulture	Horticulture
Medicine	Massage
Massage	Library work
Osteopathy	Teaching in schools for the blind
Law	Teaching music
Music performance	Social service
Piano tuning	Child care

Queer pedagogy is intimately connected to queer theory (Shlasko, 2005). Like queer theory, queer pedagogy is intent on destabilizing rigid boundaries of stability; it seeks to trouble traditionally held notions of in/appropriate instruction, knowledge development, and learning. As Sykes (2011) attests, "pedagogies appear in different guises" (p. 419). In reading documents and photographs intent on maintaining strict boundaries around gender identity and sexuality, "queer pedagogy calls for queer

readings” (Shlasko, 2005, p. 129). These readings can take the form of exaggerated difference where “queer pedagogies camp up difference” (Morris, 2003, p. 189).

Reading photographs of presumably straight-masculine-men knitting, where we are provided no real narrative of their activity, invites queer and unexpected examinations. It is unlikely we will ever know soldiers stories or how they felt engaging in knitting, but we do know the establishment’s ‘effeminacy’ stance as documented in government documents and contemporary academic journal literature. Part of the consumption of these images invites a queering of the picture beyond the shutter frame, beyond the boundary of what documents can provide. Queer theory assists in fine-grain analysis as it recognizes that “all explanations are partial by nature, and there are always multiple ways that experiences and/or phenomena can be explained” (Butler-Kisber, 2010, p. 31). Reading after all, including the reading of visual texts, is a dynamic undertaking and reciprocal event where the reader plays a dynamic role bringing their “cultural, social, and personal history” (Rosenblatt, 1994, p. 1064). Reading the photos of recuperating military men knitting through a queer lens then, could render their conduct as drag. They queer and trouble their own likeness as (masculine) soldiers through their performance.

The performance of drag, where men perform or dress stereotypical representations of women, is an example of a queer pedagogy. Through his performance the exaggerated pretender instructs the viewer in the ridiculously artificial constructs of ‘gender’. As a performance, the performer is typically made to look foolish, but his performance is “typically directed at others, usually cultural, economic, and political elites” (Dunn, 2011, p. 448). In a similar way, a soldier knitting as an act of

convalescence in a hospital ward, queers recuperation given the highly gendered nature of the recuperating activity. He is encouraged to operate outside a rigid cultural masculinity in the hospital, engaging in knitting to restore well-being, and in the doing regaining health but troping difference through his performance.

### **Knitting as Convalescence:**

The entire enterprise of 'knitting as convalescence' was intimately connected to the emerging profession of occupational therapy: "occupational therapy is a new therapeutic science developed on an age-old law, that occupation is necessary for health" (Howland, 1934, p. 1). The term 'occupational therapy' was coined in 1912 by Chicago's George Barton, who was "attempting to treat an arthritic condition by use of occupational methods...when he inadvertently stumbled on the combination of words" (Dunlop, 1933, p. 6). The development of the profession was closely allied with the military, and a response to the large number of military wounded returning home for treatment during the First World War (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, 2010; Sedgwick, Cockburn & Trenthan, 2007). Faulkner (1934), reflecting on the growth of occupational therapy, stated that "the modern conception of the treatment of the physically disabled and emotionally unstable is an outgrowth of the Great War" (p. 36).

Young women were recruited and trained during both world wars to function as ward-aides and later occupational therapists, to assist in the rehabilitation of soldiers through the use of crafts (Dunlop, 1933; Kidner, 1918). Women performed this role which could be described as patriotic work, "a simple extension of women's traditional roles...closely aligned with the female spheres of household and child care" (Scates,

2001, p. 45). As Freya-like characters, interested in the wellbeing and recuperation of soldiers, women instructed injured military men returning from Europe, and:

From the time these men landed...an effort has been made to keep their minds and hands occupied. Curative education has been practiced with satisfactory results...[and] the men have shown interest in the 'ward occupations', which consist of wood carving, knitting, weaving, block printing, bead-work, knotted work, embroidery, educational work and typewriting. (Office of the Surgeon-General, 1918, p. 186)

Knitting activity for service men was qualified as a 'ward occupation', something to be done to rehabilitate and only within hospital wards. As ward occupation, knitting was a way of occupying the ward's inhabitants with a positive and productive outlet rather than allowing them to "lie on their beds brooding over their troubles and thinking how black and hopeless the future was" (Segsworth, 1920, p. 36). Ward occupations functioned as in-between space and temporary activity, transitioning idle men to more demanding curative workshops where, "the diversional side of the work decreases, the mental stimulus increases," and mental and physical activity hasten to provide a cure (Segsworth, 1920, p.35).

Curative workshops, unlike ward occupations, were geared to economic endeavors which the patient could pursue after leaving the hospital. As earlier illustrated in Neuschutz's (1944) table, occupations were highly gendered reflecting a binary framework dividing appropriate male occupations from those prescribed to females. This sentiment seems so common place that Segsworth (1920), writing his guide to Retraining Canada's Disabled Soldiers, states:

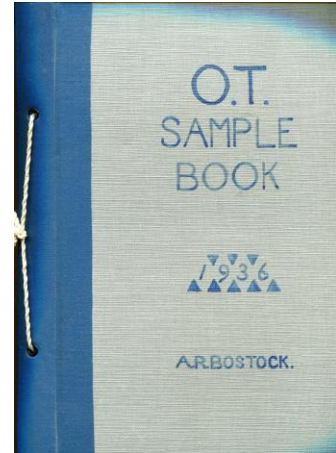
Some say that basketry, weaving, etc., should not be taught to men, that they are effeminate occupations; others say that women should not be used as the training should aim at some practical vocation in life. Those who argue in this manner are probably not conversant with the whole policy. (p.36)

## Therapy:

Knitting and other crafts, “were understood to be a key component of the therapists intervention, and instructors were expected to be able to teach a wide variety of handwork such as knitting” (Sedgwick, Cockburn,

Trentham, 2007, p. 414). An illustration of this is A. R.

Bostock’s *O.T. Sample Book* (1936), which is filled with all manner of training exercises including knitting, embroidery, and weaving, produced during her therapy training. One



project featured is infant booties

(Bostock, 1936), knit in wool. Similar booties are featured

in *Old Man Knitting* (Pringle & Booth Photographers, 1938)

at the Christie Street Hospital which was associated with

the Military Hospitals Commissions of Veterans Affairs,

housing First World War veterans. The old man pictured, a

resident of the hospital, is a highly skilled knitter displaying

his knitting on his ward bed. The queerness of the photo lies in the materials produced:

clothing for new-born and infants. Not artifacts one would associate with a former

military man, but delicate items traditionally

associated with the maternal. In the photo the

man sits knitting, working on a lace-like project

which belies a masculinity and toughness

associated with the military.



Judith Butler observes that gender gets

constructed and repeated in the stylized and repetitive movements in one's performance (1997). In the old man's performance we see a creative output instilled by 'Freya' therapists, performed long after initial convalescence. In the imagined sounds of his clicking knitting needles, one senses a gendered performance undone, a binary event defeated; the elderly man sits and continues to knit, performing his craft for the photographer, presenting his wares to the viewer.

Through this queer lens we are the invited guest; he sits formally dressed, expecting visitors, ready with his knitted wares displayed. I very much want to ask, not just who he is and where he is from, but of his knitting exercises and experience, his craft output and pride of production, and about the (hospital) space he occupies. The queerness of the performance doesn't simply lie in the man knitting and his production, but in the place where it is performed. It is completed in a hospital, not at home, queering the location of domestic space. We are unsure if the elderly has resided in the hospital ward (Freya's Hall) long term, or perhaps returned, nevertheless, the prescribed masculine (military) identity is absent; imprinted by the feminizing influence of an absent Freya.

### **Why Shouldn't Men Knit?**

The pamphlet *Why Shouldn't Men Knit* (Wm. Briggs & Co. Ltd.), is an eight page booklet featuring, what appears to be models in a staged studio portrait. The document, produced by a commercial knitting-wool manufacturer, makes the case for teaching men to knit, inviting female readers to participate by purchasing the publishing companies yarn and volunteering for the cause. The photograph appears



to be “a literal transcript of what was before the camera” but its pitch can be queered if we opt to read a more complex rendering of the composition (Rudisill, 1982, p. 1). In this document, the Freya-character is portrayed as a beautiful young women holding an equally attractive young man’s skein, as he winds wool into a ball. The queerness of the photo is the role-reversal; men are typically represented, in homely domestic spaces, as holding their wives skein as they are wound in preparation for a knitting project. The man, in winding the wool, has appropriated the female role, but his performance is normalized in his coy smile towards his nurse, hinting at an attraction.

In sexualizing the photo, invoking a subliminal heteronormative rendering of male-female attraction, the role reversals appear to be rendered ‘safe’. A man knitting isn’t threatening as his performance provides the opportunity to cavort with an attractive women. Equally, one can imagine that the female readers of the document could read themselves into the Freya role, and perhaps meet an attractive convalescing soldier in need of (knitting) instruction.



In the photo *Soldiers at Walter Reed* (Harris & Ewing, 1918), the ward-aids loom in the background as three young soldiers engage in knitting including rake knitting. Walter Reed General Hospital, founded in 1909, was the United States preeminent military hospital and at the time the photo was taken, grew rapidly to accommodate first world war wounded (Walter Reed Society, 2010). The photo is populated by three

service men and two female attendants. A fine-grain reading invites the viewer to ask the question: “what is really going on here?”

A queer rendering cultivates a homoerotic quality to the composition: attractive, young men, whose corn-fed wholesomeness and vigor belies a fragility of body. Their bodies lying abreast, engaged in knitting or occupied by we spectators. Two soldiers scrutinize us the viewer, with an erotic robustness which repudiates their current circumstance. The third soldier, situated in the center of the photo, is bespeckled and intently focused on his handiwork. Freya appears as two maternal ward-aids, one slightly older and looming large, her gaze focused on her young charge. The other more ethereal and far in the background; both frame the composition. Their instruction subverts the masculinity of the place, but at the same time their motherly composure renders the performance harmless: two protective motherly-figures who appear poised at any moment to intervene and regulate the young men’s performance.

The photo *Resting but Busy* (Anonymous Photographer, 1918-1925), features a group of First World War soldiers

engaged in knitting and other ward occupations, out-of-doors.

Apart from its title nothing is known of the photos location or the patients featured. What we do know is the snapshot was



originally a glass lantern slide, from Canada’s Department of Veterans Affairs; the photograph was produced by the Program for Soldiers’ Rehabilitation instituted during

the First World War, which included the Military Hospitals Commission and the Invalid Solders Commission (Burant, 2008).

As inscribed on the original photo, the image's title aptly describes the scene: a group of recovering soldiers engaged in knitting and other handicrafts as convalescence. Freya has vanished; she is not to be found. The queerness of the photo lies in its title: *Resting but Busy*. The group of soldiers are in repose, resting on lounges in the outdoors but are busily engaged in handicrafts. The oddness of the photo presents itself in the activity the soldiers are engaged in, which contrasts their masculinities as represented in their uniforms.

'Busy' can be read more broadly, queering the combatant wardrobe and underlying that these soldiers no longer function as traditional soldiers but appear as other. I find this the most 'dangerous' photo as Freya-in-the-background has instilled a sense of *seid*, an effeminizing enterprise which undoes the military virility of the composition. But her absence, and the unmoderated influence of any female-figure which might establish opposite-sex tension or maternal responsibility, queers the entire composition. The soldiers simply recline, unmitigated and engage in knitting and embroider; women's work. 'Ergi', that sorcery taught by Freya which provides second-sight, permits performer and viewer to read a femininity which undermines military-manliness and masculinity at large. The photo underpins a convalescence which is not simply reparative to the body but also a space of cultural respite from binary construction of maleness.

## **Conclusion:**

As a site of (cultural) convalescence in an era of cripples, military men knitting provided their practitioners with respite not just to repair bodies and minds, but operated as a cultural site of slippage enabling soldiers to occupy domestic repose situated in the gentle arts; a world historically populated by females. As a pedagogical performance, soldiers knitting demonstrates a route of rehabilitation which demands queer readings and can't simply be read 'straight-on'. Simply stating that war-wounded-men picked up knitting needles, wool, and engaged in the craft, set them apart from the times where their activity was performed. Men knitting was an articulation of queer, whatever the intent, providing openings to explore other ways of being and transverse cultural taboos of 'appropriateness'.

The photographic and primary resources presented are important because they provide evidence of queer happenings; spaces where men could opt out, not simply of their war-time role as military-man, but an imposed binary masculinity/femininity through a discourse of convalescent occupation. Convalescent activities like knitting were intended not simply to occupy the patient's time, but recognized as 'busy' activity essential to enriching the patient's life and aid recovery. Susan Tracy (1907), a Superintendent of Nursing at the Adams Nervine Asylum in Massachusetts, emphasizes the importance of occupation over amusement:

Amusements serve to pass time away, occupations treasure and redeem the time. However esteemed, I shall not include anything in the nature of games, and may we not raise the questions as to whether a long convalescence may not be more profitably spent? We not infrequently find patients who play solitaire the greater part of their time. May we not help them do something which shall mean a little more to the world in general and, as a sure result, mean eventually much more to the patient himself? (p. 172)

Women played an integral part in the process of occupation, with “educated young women, teachers of crafts and occupations...recruited for bedside occupations offered during hospitalization” (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists, 2010). However, this was always codified within a sensibility which fixed the roles of women:

The quiet wisdom of the ages, the eternal womanhood, responded under organization and in the artificial environment of the hospitals, to do that which woman had been doing in the caves in the dim red dawn of man. They helped the man to find his own soul. (Dunlop, 1933, p. 8)

The metaphor of Freya’s Hall seems apt, as within the wards where women instructed, they invoked a kind of magic to rescue men from the battle field and provide respite and recuperation. Both the female instructor in the ward and Freya in her hall are filled with compassion for those men in attendance. Both created a space which not only permitted war-wounded to opt out of what came before, but provided a self-reflexive opportunity to learn a skill and craft which would assist their recovery and physical and mental well-being.

Freya as an allegorical undertaking, was practically performed by female ward aids and therapists, optimistic about the curative effects of craft-based treatment therapies like knitting. These Freya-in-disguise health care workers assisted “male soldiers to find a will to live through occupational engagement,” but one can’t deny that the entire enterprise “as a whole was deeply entrenched in late nineteenth and early twentieth century gender ideology” (Sedgwick, Cockburn & Trentham, 2007, p. 414). The curative ‘magic’ administered was controversial, as knitting was woman’s work, and however beneficial remained culturally constructed as such. However well intended the ‘magic’, it was frowned upon and could put the male practitioner at risk of becoming other. Looking back through a queer lens, it’s interesting to imagine the reactions the

war-wounded encountered and any would-be personal censorship invoked once the soldier returned home.

From a Viking world-view, entering Freya's hall and accepting her gift could be a tough compromise for any would-be Norse hero, as it might hinder a warrior's death and compromise a war-wounded hero's Valhalla (Graslund, 2000; Lindow, 2003; Page, 2003). Definitely a harsh and romanticized rendering, this reading can be replaced with a Freya's whose presence moderates the hospital space, providing maternal security, but also the stability of the opposite-sex which normalizes the performance of knitting which she instructs. As a ward occupation, knitting provided "a way for sufferers to explain and contextualize their interrupted lives...changing relationships with the social world" (Kohler Riessman, 2003, p. 7).

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**Man Enough to Knit:**

**Pattern Included**

Ph.D. Education  
(Society, Cultures and Literacies)

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PhD. Article #3

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**Abstract:** What does it mean to be ‘man enough to knit’? Read as encouragement for gender-conscious men to invoke machismo and knit, it feels little more than reiteration of the hypermasculine. Finding its origin in my PhD research on *Men Knitting as Queer Pedagogy*, this article beguiles the hyper/masculine interrogating its representations as antidote to a ‘craft with a history’. Questioning its denotation, one detects anxieties of the feminine and queer fears in its utterances. Masquerading as a form of imposter phenomenon, the ‘manly art of knitting’ rhetoric does little to ameliorate western cultural uneasiness around knitting performances. This work endeavors to give the mundane its due, ruminating on contemporary representations of men knitting. Mimicking the how-to-knit literature geared toward male knitters, a knitting-pattern for traditional Scandinavian mittens is included. As craftivism, it queers man-enough DIY, and troubles ‘appropriate’ boundaries of academic discourse.

### **Introduction:**

It’s 12:30 p.m., and I’m standing in the knitting section of the Chapters bookstore on Wellington Road in London, Canada. I’m home for Christmas Break and commencing the holiday by searching for the ideal knitting book to help decompress after a particularly stressful autumn term. While the store is abuzz with harried voices of last-minute holiday shoppers, restless children, and a barista’s hissing espresso machine, the knitting section is quiet. Standing in craft-inspired equanimity I hover over how-to-titles, exploring each text. Calm descends and I cut myself adrift from anxiety of another all-too-busy fall term. In that quieting interlude, I’m reminded once again why I love the craft.

Knitting provides a calming intervention, an opportunity to slip away from circumstance, departing however briefly, to some safer more forgiving place. For Durant (2006), the impulse to knit is essentially about creative output as “all knitters have the same instincts: you want to make warm and comfy things for those you love” (p. 11). For myself however, that’s merely a happy bi-product. The big-payoff living a knitter’s life is not merely material output, but the interior work getting done:

Knitters knit to meditate, to quiet themselves, to reach transcendence, to create art, to play with color, to appreciate texture, to strengthen their immune systems. Mostly, knitters knit to be still. (Murphy, 2002, p. 56)

Anticipating my mother is waiting at the end of some near-infinite, bookstore-holiday-check-out-queue, and certain it will be 'years' before she comes and 'collects me', I drift further. Crouching down, I investigate the lower shelves. Typically an excellent source for missed or missed-placed 'gems', it's always worth the extra effort. I kneel to have a better look.

"What does she knit?"

I look over my shoulder and a middle-aged woman, children in tow, repeats her question: "what does she knit?"

"No, it's for me. I knit."

She stares. The children stare. And as the noise-plume of Christmas-time commerce lifts revealing an awkward pause (like the entire world has gone silent), I slink away to the relative safety of discount science books. In that mundane moment, I'm critically aware of myself as outsider, interloper, and oddity. As a man who knits I am (once again) read as an imposter, not a maker, merely a 'thoughtful guy in search of a gift'. A fraud, self-confident enough only to transverse the knitting section for a present for some assumed mother, sister, or girlfriend. At that moment I am reminded how easily shame and secrecy are thrust upon an/other's life. How the everyday is (en)gendered with a meaning not our own, and how the intrusion of the uninvited gaze, however well-meaning, is fraught with danger.

This paper is haunted by the everyday, by the mundane specter of a male knitting. It hazards the unexpected discovery of his performance, rendering it

dangerous. Troubling because it challenges certainties of what things should look like; who is included, or more to the point, who gets left out. This work is written by a gay-guy-knitter, who is keenly aware that knitting is “a material domain that can be used to explain human interaction and interaction” (Storey, 2014, p. 75). Bringing together elements of queer theory, document analysis, genderfuck, the imposter phenomenon, and a free knitting pattern, this work challenges hypermasculinity as portrayed in ‘man enough to knit’ literature. It embraces the performance of the knitting man, seeking to interrogate its meanings.

### **Research Project:**

This composition finds its origins in my doctoral work on *Men Knitting as Queer Pedagogy*. That research was inspired by my cancer narrative and by a body becoming what it never expected to be. Knitting became for me a means of engaging illness, displacing grief, and developing a creative self-reflexivity. In a very practical way, it provided a “comforting metaphor in a world of perplexity” (Raunio, 2007, p.63). A symbol of home, happiness, and the familial. Knitting, like many homely crafts, is valuable for its sense-making and insight-formulation:

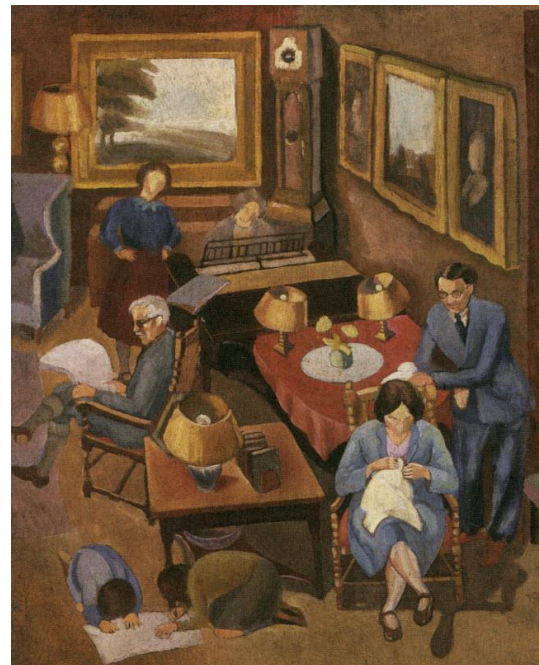
Material culture artifacts...are very important resources in establishing contexts for communication, orienting communicative action, creating emblems or expressions or ideas, distinguishing symbolic sites of value and power, and forging linkages to the past and the future. (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 239)

As a creative undertaking, “knitting is a process craft” (Murphy, 2002, p. viii). It is essentially, “a method of changing a one-dimensional object, a line, into a two-dimensional object, a surface” (Zilboorp, 2002, p. 9). When you knit you take a thin strand of fiber and transform it into something your own, something with texture, depth, and meaning. Yarn is the material used for this metamorphous, it is “the medium with

which we knitters perform” (Leapman, 2010, p. 6). Simply or sophisticatedly executed, the process is essentially the same, regardless of whose hands holds the needles. Paradoxically, it matters greatly who holds the needles as “crafting, like other politicized practices, is ambiguous” functioning hegemonically and subversively (Groeneveld, 2010, p. 267).

My PhD research, inspired by my own narrative as a male knitter, sought to interrogate the seemingly banal performance of a man knitting as exceptional, a spectacle creating dilate disturbances. This is because the feminine, and by extension the domestic, are so deeply engrained in the knitting edifice. As del Vecchio (2006) suggests, “today many people feel that men don’t knit, never have, and ultimately shouldn’t because knitting is part of ‘the woman’s domain’” (p. 7). Peggy Angus’ (1930)

painting *Ramsay MacDonalds with Members of his Family* aptly illustrates the point; an idealized domesticity where all play their role. My own imagined sensibility of knitting, with its fond recollections of the securely domestic, was similarly informed. Such musings were so compelling they helped me simultaneously remember and imagine a life (real or fanciful) beyond catastrophic illness.



Angus’ work delineates the “ideas and ideals surrounding the cosy, homely, familial, traditional, thrift, feminine and hand-made” (Turney, 2014, p. 21). It is representative of her time, with echoes in our own. Populated by family members, all

are gathered in the parlor or lounge, occupied by activities expected in a fetishized domestic space. Idealized children on the floor engrossed in drawing, with a grandmother figure safely-situated at the piano. At her side, a younger woman at the ready to turn sheet music or insert another selection from the presumed music heap in front of her. A grandfather figure sits reading a newspaper, while on a chair in the foreground is seated a woman. She faces us the viewers, with legs crossed, engrossed in her knitting. Over her shoulder leans a bespeckled man, also facing us the audience, observing her work. Both appear resolute in their performances.

Situated within a Faculty of Education, my doctoral research sought to unpack the meanings of men knitting, reading its depictions as queer pedagogy. As a queer pedagogy, the male knitter challenges and inconveniences “traditional understandings of sexual identity” by performing a learning different than what is expected (Meyer, 2007, p. 25). Knitting, because it is still largely perceived as women’s work, replicates an emasculating demeanor: “not only are homosexual sub-texts alluded to, but men appear uncomfortable and embarrassed, and can be seen as vulnerable and without power” (Turney, 2009, p. 32). Playing with the oddness of men knitting, Matt Lytle (2013) invokes the male-knitter as caricature in *Knitting in November 2013*. The photo, part of a fundraising *Movember* calendar designed to raise awareness of men’s health issues, features men functioning in domestic spheres stereotypically portrayed as female. Comedian Amy Sedaris (2010)



punctuates the queerness of men engaging in crafts like knitting, satirizing domestic craft-space and its performers:

More than 8 out of 10 households have at least 4 out of 5 family members engaging in 2 out of 3 crafts 78% of the time. A staggering 98% of this group are homosexual men. (p. 19)

As a queer undertaking, it was critically important to connect 'queer' and 'pedagogy' as a means of talking-back to rigid and disconcerting renderings of knitting. Throughout my research project, as with this document, queer pedagogies were situated within landscapes of 'radical pedagogies'. Those educational theories "rooted in an aversion to all forms of domination" seeking to "develop modes of critique fashioned in a theoretical discourse that mediates the possibility for social action and emancipatory transformation" (Giroux, 1983, p. 2).

### **Methodology:**

My doctoral research, and creative output such as this work, brought together a hybrid methodology combining document analysis and queer theory. During the course of my analysis I uncovered many historic primary documents detailing men knitting. These included government publications and emerging 'occupational therapy' literature produced during the First and Second World Wars. Extolling the virtues of recuperating service men knitting, these resources acknowledged that handicrafts "served many purposes in occupational therapy...providing a creative vehicle to assist with psychological recovery and growth" (Sedgwick, Cockburn & Trentham, 2007, p. 414). Also uncovered were many archival photographs of ameliorating military men knitting in hospital wards during the world wars, in Canada, the United States, and Great Britain.

Given the large number of photographic and textual materials uncovered during my investigation, document analysis seemed a logical methodological choice. It opens documents to readings which engage their functionality and societal interplay. Bowen (2009) characterizes document analysis as the evaluation and review of material in a systematic way, requiring materials to be “examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (p. 27). Never purporting neutrality in my readings, nor pretending a disinterested voice in my translations, I sought to pair document analysis with a reflexive methodology. My aim was to be receptive to:

Transformations in the research process...questioning the role, authority, and responsibility of the researcher. Rather than finding ways to neutralize the influence of the researcher, as was attempted in more traditional survey designs, postmodern methodologies have embraced the notion that the researcher is a variable in the endeavor. (Staller, Block & Horner, 2008, p. 38)

According to Taket and White (1993), “a postmodern position distrusts,” and positing myself within a postmodern worldview, I admit to being distrustful of methodologies which claim neutrality and an objectivity to the object of their study (p. 869). It is a poststructuralist sensibility I am pursuing, and one open to the possibility of unstable and troubling meanings. As a young gay man, I was active in the AIDS Collation to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in the 1980’s, a militant action movement intent on improving the lives of people with AIDS (PWAs). A direct action faction, ACT UP groups sought to raise awareness, pressure for better health care, advocate for swifter and cheaper drug therapies, and effect legislative change. My role was small: a willing participant who simply showed-up and acted-up. Later, like many ACT UP participants, I became involved in Queer Nation, an anti-assimilationist group committed to raising the

visibility of LGBTQ peoples. As someone with agitated queer activist declarations, it was instinctive to pair document analysis with queer theory; they became methodological collaborators.

Queer theory, drawing on post-structuralist concepts of identity formation, describes “the conceptual and speculative work involved in discourse production...and the necessary critical work of deconstructing our own discourses and their constructed silences” (de Lauretis, 1991, p. iv). Within my groundwork, this became my working definition of queer theory, informing my investigative strategies. But I was ever mindful that queer theory operates as “a segment of academic thought that focuses on the constructedness of gendered and sexual identities and categorizations” (Callis, 2009, p. 215). The underlining of the quote above is my own, as I remain cognizant that queer theory has largely abandoned the street-presence of my youth, operating almost exclusively within scholarly confines.

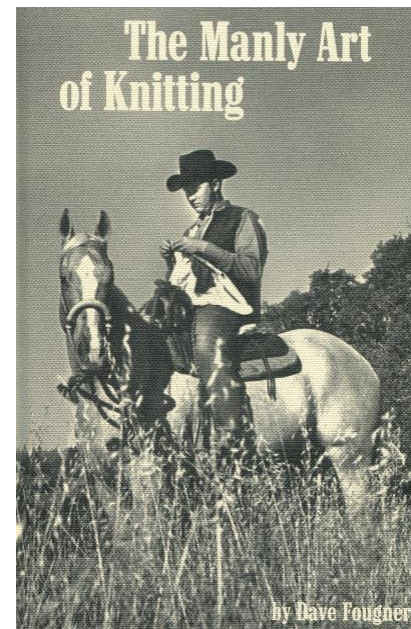
Invoking document analysis, was a means to reflect more deeply on my research as a researcher, bestowing “new texture” to my written work (Staller, Block & Horner, 2008, p. 48). Queer theory expedited this process, particularly given the representations of convalescing soldiers knitting, shockingly contrary to historic pop-culture renderings of First and Second World War military men. Partnered with a queer (theory) research stance, both were congruent as “‘queer’ is both a method of inquiry and a political stance” providing “political, professional, and personal strategies and effects” (Filax, 2006, p. 139). Document analysis and queer theory are symbiotic, in that both inform and propel inquiry forward. Enforced throughout this work, this twosome methodology

disrupts discourse, “opening up to further learning, not closure and satisfaction” (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 43).

### **Men Knitting:**

Ironically, when compared to earlier output on (military) men knitting as rehabilitation during the war years, scant scholarly material has been authored in the intervening years about the knitting male. Probably the three most academic works to date are *A History of Handknitting* by Richard Rutt (1987), Anne Macdonald’s (1988) *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting*, and *The Culture of Knitting* by Joanne Turney (2009). Excellent resources and required reading for anyone embarking on knitting research, but all meager on details of male knitters apart from a few references to their earlier involvement or their noticeable absence: “in twentieth-century Britain it became unusual for men to knit” (Rutt, 1987, p. 157). Compared with the avalanche of knitting resources assuming a female audience, works which anticipate a male reader are diminutive.

The few sources which do exist, are essentially internet blogs and chat spaces, YouTube videos, the occasional magazine article, and quirky niche documents, some of which I describe as ‘man enough to knit’ texts. A classic representation of ‘man enough’ is Dave Fougner’s (1972) *The Manly Art of Knitting*.



Recently reissued by Gingko Press (2014), the book is considered a cult classic with the author claiming a two-fold purpose in its writing:

The first is to introduce knitting to those men who have an interest but are reluctant to try. Then too, it is hoped that the many men who now knit will become less reluctant to admit it. (Fougner, 1972, p. 5)

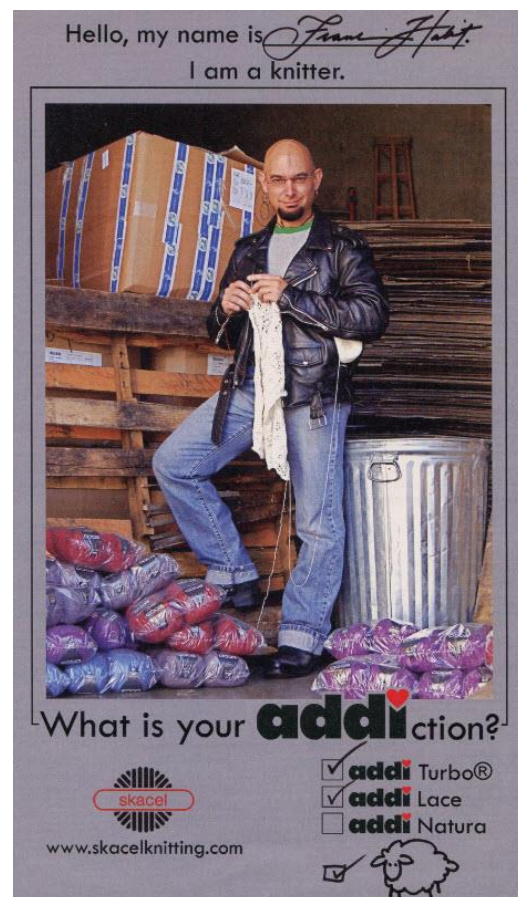
To segue his ambitions, the author features an attractive, masculine cowboy astride his horse, standing in a grassy field. Lacking colour, the cover photograph is reminiscent of early sepia-tone depictions of early Americana, and appears to be referencing an idealized American West. The rider, mounted on his steed, travels the range as some antecedent cow-poke might have done. He pauses, in an idealized landscape, not to withdraw his rifle nor admire the scenery, but to retrieve his knitting. It's queer stuff. Fortifying the oddness, the book includes projects like knitting a small floor blanket for your 'pooch': "man's best friend" (p. 48). As well as using an old piece of garden hose to knit a horse blanket and knitting a back-yard rope hammock "using shovel handles, or pool cues for [knitting] needles" (Fougner, 1972, p. 55). Masculine allegories, all. Filled with analogously cagey projects, the book is well written with excellent photographs illustrating technical techniques. It's an accomplished introduction to knitting (for anyone) and eminently accessible, justifying its classic-text status. But there is something deeper going on here.

The not so subliminal message: if someone as manly as this cowboy can knit, why can't you? The manner of his pose however, his aloof attitude (only the horse faces we the observer), and imposed acute-masculinity, reinforces rather than destabilizes his gendered activity. For Butler (1999), "the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (p. 179). The intended result of the composition is not to inspire

me to knit, but to question the need to invoke manliness: “today the very word manliness seems quaint and obsolete” (Mansfield, 2006, p. 1). It conjures “a problematic proposition” where the Fougner’s ‘cowboy text’ replicates a masculinity norm seeking to “discourage the display of vulnerability...adopt[ing] a presentation of self that many seem confident and stable” (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani & Seaton, 2004, p. 234). It feels otherwise.

### Man Enough to Knit:

Another representation of the ‘man enough’ phenomenon, is an advertisement for the German knitting company Skacel presented in *Interweave Knits* (Spring 2010, p. 7). Titled “What is your addiction”, the ad features a man donning a leather jacket, a goatee, and a lace knitting project. He announces to the reader that “I am a knitter”, returning the viewer’s gaze. His stance is cocky, with a street-style in defiance of his lacework. He is posed in an assemblage of urban refuse: discarded boxes, shipping pallet, and trash can. Juxtaposed are the skeins of yarn neatly piled (all freshly wrapped) at his feet. The advertisement represents a street-wise, urban man, who is tough enough to negotiate not only his metropolitan locale, but his ‘addiction’ to knitting. His masculinity ample enough to (over) compensate for both.



There is something distinctively creepy about this pictorial. The slightly sinister smile of the 'poser', the relentless stare, his knitting appears little more than fashionable accessory. His contrived grooming intonates metrosexual predilections: "a contemporary male that revels in fashion, grooming and his appearance, often to the detriment of his other features and skills" (Burrill, 2014, p.151). There is more of 'rough-trade', than rough in this depiction. As Salkeld (2014) advocate's, "the semiotic approach proposes that we treat photographs as texts; that is, as a collection of signifiers to be read and interpreted" (p. 56). Despite my aversions, it seems clear the advertiser intended to conjure narratives of strength, self-confidence, and manliness. Again, over compensating for the feminized activity being undertaken. Sure, they're making a sales pitch to any would-be (closeted) male knitters, but it's also an invocation of the masculine to somehow bring legitimacy and vibrancy to their highly gendered product.

To aid in my gendered-analysis of 'text' within my doctoral research, I employed a conceptual framework of genderfuck. As a mode of guerilla theatre intended to "be effective in changing the stereotypes that cling to social mores," it demonstrates "the fragile and hypocritical nature of sex-role stereotypes" (Humphreys, 1972, p. 164). The classic representation of genderfuck is the drag show, with its self-conscious 'fucking' of gender roles as performed by male entertainers transitioned to an idealized female other. To the uninitiated eye, drag and genderfuck appear like a repetition of commodity culture, an exaggerated material representation of the binary. A repetitive portrayal of femininity by a male in make-up and heels, performing feel-good kitsch intent on lulling performer and observer into a soothing sedateness of 'optimal femininity'. But its effect

is something other than to tranquilize, it's a defiant rebuking of what is mundanely perceived to be a quiet and tranquil naiveté. Its consequence something other than placid, for its performance can invigorate and challenge, denoting stagnant cultural assumptions just below the surface.

Knitting can function in a similar fashion. It is typically perceived as a quiet, tranquil, and banal occupation, but points to similar dormant societal assumptions. McFadden (2007) asks, "How does something as innocent and harmless as knitting become subversive?" (p. 8). Clearly part of the response would include knitting's association with the everyday, and our tendency to discount and disdain everything mundane as not special nor unique enough to warrant serious attention. For Duncum (1999), the everyday are those "objects, events, places and experiences that for most of us, children and adults alike, form part of ordinary, daily life" (p. 295). The everyday is read as frivolous and trivial because its meaning is imbued by endless tedium, a worthless activity which doesn't matter much. But there's the possibility of the "delicious about something that is worthless" (Mizrahi, 2012). The meaningless takes on agency which can trump the worthwhile. A man knitting can storm the prosaic, assailing the predictable and rendering the mundane transcendent. His performance potentially subverting the ordinary, and similarly conferring its substance.

Another part of the answer must include knitting's alignment with the feminine and thus, for many men, a harbinger of the sissy. According to Epstein & Friedman (1995), the duty of the sissy is to make everyone feel more manly or womanly by occupying the space in between, and therefore be perceived as a homosexual subliminally. 'Man enough to knit' assumptions conjure the sissy with queer fears on the

'down-low': a homosexuality unspoken, but lurking. Ultimately, men knitting performances can breach the 'bro' or 'guy code', "an unwritten series of rules and regulations that men use to police each other, turning...gay men into untrustworthy sexual predators (of straight men)" (Burrill, 2014, p. 12). Many men would find such a framework ridiculous, but fears of effeminacy (even for gays like myself) prowl close to the surface. We cannot discount that "peer group networks are a key site for the construction and (re)production of masculinity and, therefore an important arena within which gendered social approval and acceptance is both sought and gained" (Richardson, 2010, p. 737). Whether we claim to be part of such networks or allege to have exited their meanings, we are enveloped by their entanglements.

### **Real Men Knit:**

As a reflection of queer fears, the hypermasculine can be detected as antidote to its affliction. It ramps up masculinity "emphasizing the importance of manhood as an ideal" (Peterson, 2011, p. 75). In its exaggerated tone, we find "a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of risk and resilience" (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani & Seaton, 2004, p. 229). Fougner's book and Skacel's advertisement are representations of the hypermasculine invoked as a response to a perceived (queer) threat. They are representations and enactments of men knitting, but anxious of their own performance they contain derisive disregard of their own meanings. Sure, just because a man knits doesn't imply he's gay, but it doesn't mean he's straight either. Rather than situating the reading somewhere in the unknown, knitting is still spooked by the moniker of 'the gentle arts': "used in the nineteenth century to describe stitching and other creative decorative 'work' such as crochet, lacemaking and knitting done by ladies and young

girls” (Brocket, 2012, p. 7). Resorting to hypermasculinity isn’t simply “a way of symbolizing gender identity achievement,” it can function “as an individual response to perceived threats or challenges” (Spencer, Fegley, Harpalani & Seaton, 2004, p. 240).

The instructional video *Real Men Knit* (Unconfined Mind, 2006), is another hypermasculine facsimile. Opening with traditional representations of masculinity like weightlifting, football, cars, and construction, the film rightly points to women pursuing hobbies traditionally inhabited by men. But what follows are representations of ‘overtly’ masculine men talking about their interest in knitting, while keeping traditional manly representations close at hand. In gay culture it might be construed as ‘trying too hard’, being preoccupied by the specter of a lisp, or dropping your voice an octave so as not to be found out. Photographic representations such as these “give credence to those narrative ways of knowing that routinely lead to complex understandings of human phenomena” (Otto, 2007, p. 73).

For example, the football player seated on the sidelines, appearing ready to ‘jump into the game’, occupied in his downtime by his knitting. Around him are layered overstated representations of masculinity from his uniform to the training equipment. His gear



approximates a suit of armor, shielding him from any inference of the feminine: ‘no way that guy’s queer, unless he’s outing himself as a queer ballplayer’. Hulking over his knitting, his extreme performance replicating the guy code which requires its adherents

to appear “emotionally stoic, a rugged individualist, and physically tough” (Way, Cressen, Dodian, Preston, Nelson & Hughes, 2014, p. 241). Hovering over the narrative, it appears we are quick to deny the queer, hoping for other options. Sure, gay athletes are rumored with the odd queer athlete outed, but isn’t it just easier (and safer) if we maintain the tone of the game and not disrupt the match? Hypermasculinity is a badge which brands the wearer with a presumed straightness, a ‘no homo’ or ‘no gay’ idiom, “a phrase...to indicate his previous statement [or performance] was not meant as a ‘gay’ statement, and that he is straight” (Burrill, 2014, p. 151).

A queer reading informs an “arrested development masquerading as insight” (Peterson, 2011, p. 85). The insight a hypermasculinity rejecting a “healthy resistance to debilitating norms of masculinity” (Way, Cressen, Bodian, Prestne, Nelson & Huges, 2014, p. 242). Its rendition manifests like an ‘imposter phenomenon’, with adherents believing “they somehow deceived others and must not allow their lack of competence to be discovered” (Hellman & Caselman, 2004, p. 161). The overtly masculine self-handicaps, and denies the male knitter the possibility to knit for the sheer enjoyment of it. They must not only maintain a façade of maleness, but an extreme version to compensate for their ‘feminine’ pursuits. A very real “fear of failure motive underlines the imposter phenomenon,” rendering the sufferer in a heightened state of anxiousness (Kumar & Jagacinski, 2006, p. 149).

### **Road Trip:**

In contrast to the hypermasculine and notions of the imposter phenomenon, is artist Jane Morton’s (2012) video *Road Trip*. The flick features a young man walking the streets of a small Canadian city, donning a hand-knit outfit of off-white yarn. A

videographer follows his sixty minute journey as he transverses city scape to country side. As he wanders, he unravels his wardrobe, converting it (back) into an enormous ball of yarn. The video contains no soundtrack, no written text, with the camera silently capturing the walker, his surroundings, and his repetitive unwinding. Fascinating to watch, there's lots going on.

Firstly, there is the outfit itself, an exaggerated rendition of a knitted garment constructed for a loved one (Morton, 2014). The artist has constructed the suit, delivering the hand-knit attire to an idealized love-interest personified by the wearer. Historically, knitting has been allied with “familial and romantic love: of time spent thinking of someone whilst making, with the made object an expression of the sacrifice of time, of thoughtfulness, and the embodiment of feminine ‘virtues’ of caring and nurturing” (Turney, 2009, p. 303). The performance symbolizes both hand-knit garment ‘love’ metaphors and their undoing; an allegory unraveled. It represents a reversal from the pleasure of the making to delight of its unmaking. The walker’s conduct can be read as a work of craftivism, a space “whereby crafts – as both product and activity – are used for activist purposes” (Newmeyer, 2008, p. 447). He sheds not only romantic inferences of knitting but also its meanings and the ‘skin’ cocooning him. An/other queer rendering is a homely likeness of opposite-sex attention, rejected; why do we assume a straight effigy, a heteronormalized likeness?



The pre-jettisoned wardrobe at first glance, appears retro, a kind of leisure suit, or stylized track-suit, invoking a vintage sensibility but also a certain hipness. As

reversal, the wandering man replicates Fougner's cowboy. He doesn't however knit while traversing the range, but unravels what has been knit for him. In the doing he seems grounded in his landscape, a man coolly connected to his environment despite the awkwardness of his task. As an extreme embodiment of hand-knit for a loved one, the artist's suit drew attention to:

The conscious act of knitting such a garment for the man in one's life can be seen as a deliberate attempt to update home knit as well as updating the potential wearer. The transformation of yarn into garment can be seen as a process of transformation from man to idea or 'new' man. (Turney, 2009, p. 39)

Invoking a queer reading, we the viewer can linger over a narration rejected. The wearer announces his rejection of the gift through its unraveling, not simply spurning the suit but the allied meanings of (hetero)sexual love and attachments. His unsnarling manifesting anxieties of rejection, but morphing and imbuing his performance with an erotic quality. There is a homoerotic element to his performance, not simply in that he undresses before the burly men observing his conduct as he passes, but he counters pop-culture discourse where heterosexuality can be bound up in a pair of home-made socks or a hand-knit sweater. The suit which dominates him is abandoned, and along with it, how-to-book advice on 'knitting for your man':

You want to find the right knitting project for a man in your life – be your husband, your dad, or your best friend. But men are difficult to buy clothes for, not to mention to knit for. They don't want anything fussy, or too trendy. The color palette needs to be classic and the yarn should be soft. They want something comfortable they can wear for years. (Knight, 2009, cover flap)

**Pattern Included:**

There isn't a lot of space in Knight's wording to insert the queer in the crowd: the guy knitter. On the surface the first sentence appears to be open ended, but we know the 'you' the authors/editors reference is female. Otherwise, why warn the reader of the

pitfalls of fussy and trendy? Wouldn't the knitting-man, being a male, know 'masculine' likes and dislikes, and adjust his work according to the tastes of the man he's knitting for? The subtlety of exclusion in Knight's text is common place; many knitting books featuring patterns for men, when they address their audience, assume a female readership and exclude the guy in the crowd.

As the gay-guy knitter in this crowd, how should I respond to 'man enough to knit'? As my own 'Road Trip', and as response and a reaction against 'man enough' narratives within knitting culture, I offer the reader my own knitting pattern.

Nothing sophisticated, certainly not a grand narrative offering awe-inspiring insights into, well, anything. No, simply an understated knitting pattern designed to queer the pitch of what came before. As a home-spun antidote, it employs knitting as a means to let the anger out; letting loose my frustration with heteronormativity which creeps everywhere, especially into knitting. According to Austen (2006), "knitting is legitimate fidgeting, something you can take with you and do almost anywhere" (p. 39). If that's true I want to bring my knitting into this research project and fidget with academic boundaries. In the doing, exiting normal academic discourse and voicing the mundane as "a means to puncture some of the posturing that haunts academic work, a contextualizing measure that can enhance the modest" (Gregg, 2004, p. 364).



In an unassuming way, like the humble hobby of knitting itself, it seeks to have a quieter conversation with the audience, with you the reader; you the viewer. In questioning the 'man enough' narrative, it opens spaces to slip into other conversations. To talk metaphorically of threads running through our stories and how the whole gets knit together, while simultaneously unravelling its meanings. At the core of this conversation (for a gay-guy-knitter like myself), is scrutiny and queer analysis worthy of the dialogue:

Queer analysis deals centrally with the gulf between the normative alignments of sex, gender, and sexuality, and the lived experience of individuals. It also pays special attention to one particular binary that has served as the trope of difference structuring social knowledge throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries: the homosexual/heterosexual binary. (Valocchi, 2005, p. 753)

The phrase 'pattern included' is used queerly in this paper's title. Typically patterns were provided in knitting publications to instruct the user how to replicate exactly the project pictured. Included were detailed descriptions of specific yarns used, including weight and gauge and vendor product information, with sizing changes so the exact garment could be reproduced. Essentially, the maker could take the list to their local knitting shop, purchasing all the require materials and follow the pattern, no questions asked. DIY literature intended for male-knitters functions in a similar way: photo of the accoutrement is presented with the exact materials and steps needed to complete the project. With online purchasing the male knitter need not 'out' himself, replicating the work of another from the safety of his home.

Metaphorically, 'pattern included' also references identity constructions and patterns of 'individuality' replicated in any number of social 'texts' we encounter. Social constructions are patterned for us, and very much the fibre and fabric of everyday life.

As Johnson (2002) suggests, “issues of assimilation and incorporation demonstrate...the construction of *mainstream* categories” (p. 331). Yet from a postmodernist vantage point, we can disturb and challenge these categories in self-reflexive ways. For postmodernism is a “temporal vehicle by which a new order can develop,” providing “an opportunity for social relationships to adjust to, and accommodate, the collapse of old ontological understandings” (Dennard, 1997, p. 158).

The pattern which follows frivolously functions as a kind of postmodern autobiographical queer life narrative: “telling and theorizing personal narrative to build a knowledge base where description, interpretation and analysis lead to critical dialogue and ‘resist-stances’” (Grace & Benson, 2000, p. 89). It is a stance which resists overarching and assumed ontological understandings but with an “unsettling concern...that the importance of objects may be found not in their use but in their uselessness” (Silva, 2014, p. 185). Indeed, on the surface a barmy knitting pattern seems “at odds with the intellectual labor that has fed [the] conceptual and politically motivated” (Smith, 2008, p. 81). But as a work of craftivism, that critical juncture where activism meets craft, my trivial knitting pattern takes on meaning warranting attention (Kelly, 2014, p. 134).

As a craftivist performance, this paper includes a knitting pattern developed with the expectation the male knitter will seek out advice from other knitters. While not intended for the novice knitter, it is accessible for the relatively new male knitter. But as it’s not intended as a pattern to be blindly followed, it is hoped that in seeking assistance to execute the work he will develop a loud and proud countenance, and not rely on football uniforms, leather jackets, or horses to feel comfortable with his craft. It’s also

hoped, that those long-time closeted male-knitters will 'shed' their gendered attire, walk away from normalizing influences ('man enough' narratives and otherwise) and publically embrace the craft. Hopefully he will work on his creation on the bus, in the cafeteria, or anywhere in public which encourages the gaze (and comments) of others.

Cohen (1985) suggests that "symbols do not so much express meaning as give us the capacity to make meaning" (p. 15). The importance and meaning of this knitting project, was inspired by a pair of traditional Scandinavian mittens given to me many years ago by my sister. As with many crafts, knitting is "an opportunity for designing and modifying, for having an impact on our material environments" (Raunio, 2007, p. 63). So stimulated by the beauty of the hand-knit and the memory of the gift, I was inspired to create mittens which approximated the original. With no instructions to follow, I created my own pattern, changing wool-type, colour, and adapting to my taste, but observing the spirit of the inspiration piece. This is my re-interpretation of an/other's interpretation of traditional Scandinavian mittens. It's a re-reading many times removed. Throughout the 'pattern process' I was mindful that:

An object made from a pattern is not only the copy of the copy of a copy that substitutes reality because no one remembers or recognizes the original any longer, but it is also the product of our creative powers that becomes the manifestation of nostalgia for something that has been lost. (Myzelev, 2009, p. 152)

During the knitting process and pattern evolution, I was keenly aware that you fellow knitter, would take my pattern and adapt it to your own needs, (re)interpreting it as you require. This is as it should be for "an object can resonate for one person differently than for somebody else" (Carding, 2014, p. 9). As a child, the colour, texture, and construction of the gifted-mittens resonated with me. Fashioned of tightly spun,

single-ply, Lopi-like 'home spun' wool, the unbleached body of off-white roving was contrasted by a traditional decoration on the cuff. The primary 'red, yellow, and blue' colour band provided not only a decorative feature, but practical in that it functioned as contrast against the snow in case any mitt might go awry. It could be easily located in the snow. The mitten is completed with a tail topped with the same tri-colour banding. A homage to earlier days, the tail is a hint of a 'string' which would have joined the mated left and right gloves in earlier days.

Hefty, single ply wool-roving, has the advantage of being less bulking than plied yarns and provides enough 'loft' for a warm garment. Unfortunately, as merely a 'single' it has the distinctive disadvantage of not being very durable. The fibre's spin lacks sufficient twist and absent is the added security of plying two or more singles producing a hard-wearing garment. The wear on the original gloves, found at the stress points where fingers, friction, and repetitive tasks meet, is testament to the durability of the materials used.

Low twist, single-ply wool remains popular in Scandinavian knitting, as witnessed by the prolific patterns produced for Icelandic Lopi. Instruction books abound, and the ready availability of this material in North American craft shops testifies to its popularity. It's an excellent choice for those seeking a traditional rendering. All that is needed is for the knitter to purchase Lopi or similar single-ply wools. Taking this route, one will quickly discover a world beyond unbleached and primary-colour choices, and the temptation to step outside the conventional using a seemingly limitless variety of colour combinations.

For Morton (2012), "so much of knitting is about process, not just the hand-knitting, but the spinning and dyeing" of fibre. Like Morton, I pay attention to these

processes, looking beyond ‘the wool shop’ and gazing further to material production itself. In my rendition therefore, I opted to keep traditional styling but dismissed the ‘singles’. I also embraced locally produced wool, choosing to spin and produced a durable two-ply wool from sheep within my region. As a teenager, my mother registered me (at my pleading) in spinning classes held at a local museum. There I learned to spin on a (Dutch) Louet S10 single-treadle spinning wheel. The wheel, a modern interpretation of a castle-style spinning wheel, is still produced in a single treadle model (at a time when many have embraced double treadles); it has a cult-like following in the spinning community. It’s simple, modern, ‘no oil required’ design, and near indestructability ensures its popularity with long-time spinners. Its ease of use, and simple operating mechanisms makes it a popular choice for new spinners; it is the ‘Mac’ of spinning equipment.

My spinning days came to an end when I started University as an undergraduate. At the time I was busy trying to ‘fit’ into the strangeness of post-secondary school, and was ever mindful of being labelled ‘spinning guy’. Ironically, when I was becoming active in queer conscious raising groups like Queer Nation, I opted out of spinning. Reflecting back on my spinning exit-strategy, being a spinner seemed, well, too stereotypical (gay-guy spinner) and frivolous. It seemed silly compared with the times and the protests. Reflecting back on my (all too naïve) politics, it was as Garcia (2010) suggests: “liberal politics often obscures the complexity of power relations” (p. 182). I was too troubled with AIDS activist discourses to bother with something, which at the time, felt as powerless and silly as spinning. Years later I returned to spinning to deal with the stress of completing a second graduate degree and preparing to begin my doctorate. Long

gone were concerns of labelling, replaced with an enthusiastic sense of “the activist potential of amateur, domestic crafts and the quiet activism of everyday making” (Hackney, 2013, p. 169). Once again I purchased a Louet spinning wheel, but this time with a greater awareness of locally produced materials, I sought out local suppliers of wool.

For this project I purchased a kilogram of unbleached wool roving, a washed and carded material with fibres combed in the same direction. Sheared from local Romney sheep, the material was processed at a woolen mill at Upper Canada Village outside Morrisburg, Canada. The mill is a reconstructed, pre-1860, water powered facility situated in a ‘living museum’ on the banks of the St. Lawrence Seaway. As with all other buildings on site, the mill was transferred from communities scheduled for flooding during the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway in the 1950’s. The village is an idealized representation of Upper Canada (Eastern Ontario) immediately prior to Canada’s confederation in 1867.

For someone who has worked in science their entire career, and who must pay too much attention to technology, Upper Canada Village provides respite from the flash of the new. It is a sentimentalized rendering to be sure, but provides a quieting intervention to my science and urban life. Knitting likewise feels a sentimental and romantic counter to urban and post-industrial life; it is a strange survivor in a post-modern age. Participating in its pleasures provides “advantages of living with hand made objects, in reaction to our technology based lives” (Johnson & Egan, 2002, p. 10). Yet, the appeal of using Upper Canada Village wool was something more than nostalgic. The wool refined at its mill comes from flocks raised in the village or those

produced locally by Ottawa Valley farmers, all situated within a few kilometres of the village. Their production techniques are also 'light on the environment', being produced in a water powered mill. Given the inexpensive means of production, the wool can be purchased cheaply at around \$9.00 per kilogram (with Village membership discount), less than half the cost of more prestigious varieties of Australian or New Zealand wool. Great for a student preoccupied by thrift.

As homage to the inspiration, I adopted a similar split-complementary colour scheme of 'red-blue-yellow' banding found on the original's cuff. Deciding on my colour scheme, and indeed envisioning my reworked derivative, I was attentive to the tensions inherent in replicas. I did not want to reproduce a facsimile, being aware that "craftwork certainly does not banish invidious comparison to the work of others; it does refocus a person's energies, however, to getting an act right in itself, for oneself" (Harrod, 2004, p. 96). To get it right for myself, I opted to stay with an analogous colour format, but instead of caustic chemical dye-baths or complicated, unpredictable, and expensive natural dyes, I opted for Kool-Aid. Easy and 'food safe' when combined with household vinegar, Kool-Aid is cheap, harmless, and a colour-fast alternative to dangerous or expensive dye stuffs. Using a variation of Melanie Falick's "Kool-Aid yarn" (1998, pp. 14-15), I purchased readily available unsweetened Kool-Aid and household white vinegar, and used Falick's stove-top method to produce fool-proof dyed yarns in the colours required.

For those interested in the dyeing process used, instructions for *Dyeing with Kool-Aid* follows. For the indifferent and unconcerned, feel free to skip down to the mitten pattern below. Likewise, if my knitting project embarks an unenthusiastic

response, please disregard and migrate to the ‘conclusion’ portion of this work. As segue to the craft portion which follows, and a reminder of a queer self-awareness at the core of this enterprise, it is important to note that writers typically:

Consider questions of audience (Who does this work address? Who does it leave out? What are the effects?) and [this] reveals the decisions behind sites chosen for study. With the mundane as the origin and subject of analysis, we can recognize when writers neglect bits of culture that seem less interesting, less radical or ill-fitting their preferred interpretive models. (Gregg, 2004, p. 364)

This work is intent on giving the mundane its due. It values the everyday event of men knitting not merely as ordinary, but as a creative opportunity to beget the extraordinary; at the very least unnerve the observer. The craft work which follows has largely been extradited from academic discourse, and a man engaging in its practice essentially ignored or marginalized within mainstream knitting practice. With those few exceptions, men knitting is rarely read as neutral and as with the ‘man enough’ exemplar, provides an opportunity to re-inscribe a hypermasculine narrative. The craft process of dyeing and knitting included in this paper, is incorporated because it helps unravel a system of practice and belief imposed on the everyday, both in academic discourse and pop culture rhetoric. As resist-stance, “knitting is not just a metaphor...knitting is life” (Edwards, 2011, p. 7). It is indicative of a larger social order, and as such it warrants research, and the inclusion of alternative patterns, and admittance of self-discovery through Kool-Aid dyeing.

### **Dyeing with Kool-Aid**

#### **Dyeing Supplies Needed:**

- Three 40 gram hanks unbleached yarn
- Four 6 gram packages of unsweetened Kool-Aid in the following flavours:
  - Ice Blue Raspberry Lemonade (blue)
  - Cherry (red)
  - Lemonade (yellow)

- 150ml household white vinegar
- Bowl – minimum 2 litre capacity
- Pot – minimum 2 litre capacity

**Directions:**

- Take one 40 gram hank of unbleached yarn and place in a bowl of 2 litres of cold water. Let soak for 30 minutes.
- In a pot with 2 litres of cold water, add 150 ml of household white vinegar, and four 6 gram packages of unsweetened Ice Blue Raspberry Lemonade. Mix ingredients.
- After thirty minutes of soaking, remove the yarn from the bowl, gently squeeze out excess water and add to the pot of mixed ingredients. Be sure the pot is large enough so the yarn isn't crowded and moves freely.
- Slowly bring to the bowl, and turn down to a low simmer for 30 minutes or until the water becomes clear.
- Turn off the heat and let the mixture sit and cool until it reaches room temperature.
- Empty the bowl used for soaking the yarn, and fill with 2 litres of room temperature water.
- Rinse the yarn from the pot, placing in the bowl of room temperature water. Replace with fresh room temperature water until the water is clear.
- Remove the wool from the rinse water, squeeze gently to remove excess water and hang to dry.
- Repeat process with two remaining Kool-Aid flavours.

**Mitten Pattern**

**Supplies Needed:**

- 225 grams of unbleached two-ply wool
- 25 grams of dyed two-ply wool in the following colours: blue, red, and yellow.
- One pair of 4 mm single point (straight) needles
- One set of four 4 mm double pointed needles
- One set of four 5 mm double pointed needles
- Stitch holder
- Stitch markers (size to fit needles)
- Darning needle

**Gauge:**

- Knit on 5 mm needles, 21 stitches over 10 cm = 2.1 stitches/cm
- 30.5 rows over 10 cm = 3.05 rows/cm

**Measurements:**

- Finished measurement is approximately 23 cm.

- 23 cm (finished size) X 2.1 stitches/cm = 48.3 stitches
- Cast on 48 stitches or enough stitches to reach desired measurement

## Instructions:

### Left Hand Mitten

- Cast on 48 stitches on 4 mm (straight) single point needles
- Transfer to four 4 mm double point needles (do not twist stitches)
- Add a stitch marker at join, and purl 19 rows (20 rows including cast-on)
- On 21<sup>st</sup> row switch to knit stitch using 5 mm double point needles
- Knit 35 rows and on the 36<sup>th</sup> work the following (to begin shaping the thumb):
  - Knit 16 stitches, slip 9 stitches to stitch holder
  - Cast on 9 stitches on your needle (to replace the transferred stitches) and knit until the end of the row
- Continue knitting for 30 rows, adding a second stitch marker after the 24<sup>th</sup> stitch
- On the 31<sup>st</sup> row begin decreasing as follows:
  - Knit 1, knit 2 stitches together, knit to 3 stitches of the stitch marker
  - Slip stitch, slip stitch, knit both slipped stitches together, knit 1, slide stitch marker
  - Knit 1, knit 2 together; knit to within 3 stitches of middle stitch marker and slip, slip, knit; knit 1; slide stitch marker; knit 1;
  - Knit 2 together; knit to with 3 stitches of first stitch marker (end of row) and slip, slip, knit.
- On the 32<sup>nd</sup> row knit without decreasing.
- Continue decreasing on the odd number rows (as you did in step 7) and knitting without decreasing on the even number rows (as you did in step 8)
- When there are 20 stitches remaining (and after a non-decrease even row) work the following:
  - Knit 1; knit 2 together; knit 2 together; slip, slip, knit; slip, slip, knit;
  - Knit 1; slide stitch marker; knit 1; knit 2 together; knit 2 together;
  - Slip, slip, knit; slip, slip, knit; knit 1 (12 stitches remaining).
- Next row knit the following:
  - Knit 1; knit 2 together; slip, slip, knit; knit 1; slide stitch marker;
  - Knit 1; knit 2 together; slip, slip, knit; knit 1 (8 stitches remaining).
- Break the wool (keeping a long strand) and insert the end in the darning needle. Remove the remaining stitches with the darning needle pulling tight and inserting down through the top of the mitten. Bind off thread inside your work.
- Thumb – Divide the 18 stitches on two needles. With third needle pick up and knit 4 stitches around opening of thumb and complete knitting (22 stitches). Work for 4cm and decrease as follows:
  - Row 1: Knit 3; knit 2 together; repeat to end of row.
  - Row 2, 4, and 6: Work without decreases.

- Row 3: Knit 2; knit 2 together.
- Row 5: Knit 1; knit 2 together.
- Row 7: Knit 2 together; break wool and insert into darning needle; remove the remaining stitches with a darning needle pulling tight and inserting down through the top of the thumb. Bind off thread inside of your work.

### **Right Hand Mitten**

- Work as Left Mitten to the beginning of thumb opening row.
- Knit 26 stitches, place next 9 stitches on stitch holder and cast on 9 stitches and work till to the end of the row. Work stitches as you did for left hand mitten.

### **Finishing:**

- Knit or crochet a cord, adding tassel with three complementary colours.
- Work diamond 'X' pattern to the cuff of the mitten using a darning needle and the three complementary colours.

### **Conclusion:**

Jane Dussleir (2005), in her article on gendered resistance in Japanese-American internment camps, explores the use of craft in the re/creation of space: “crafts created in Japanese American concentration camps allowed internees to re-territorialize the camps and become anchored in hostile and unfamiliar settings” (p. 172). Life in the camps attempted to mimic the communities from which internees had been displaced. This included everyday events such as waking, eating, sleeping rituals, always articulated in the confines of detention and regulated through a prison/inmate narrative. Other everyday events located within camp confines were the familiar practices of craft, repeated in traditional activities like knitting.

Yet, the strangeness of the camp and the inmates' resistance to their internment, articulated craft in critical ways. Crafts culturally prescribed according to sexual difference, became places of push-back where “both men and women crossed gender lines to engage in crafts deemed appropriate for the opposite sex” (Dusselier, 2015, p.

172). Both sexes blurred the lines between the in/appropriate, with performances undertaken without regard to past gender boundaries. Men for example, both old and young, queered convention and permitted themselves to knit sweaters, socks, mittens, and caps, both for themselves and their families (Dusselier, 2005, p. 172).

Dusselier's article is important because she provides a glimpse into how craft can be used to create critical space in a difficult landscape. Internees invoked craft in the camps to talk back to the system and take back space by troubling the everyday at the most mundane level: in its gendered performances. Dusselier (2005) hints at camp authority's acquiescence, granting men space not only to work with traditional craft materials like wood, but a whole range of materials "not so clearly defined in terms of sexual difference" (p. 176).

The banality of men knitting, can disorder deeply gender constructs of binary male verses female space, opening a dynamic opportunity to challenge and "create the conditions...where our multiple identities can be decoupled from overarching norms" (Tierney, 1997, p. 171). This paper invoked a queer reading of the craft-practice, intending to disturb not only its performance, but how it gets replicated in hypermasculine discourse. It is an attempt to exit fraudulent identities of 'imposter', and create a multilayered craftivist work which is both unsettling and enjoyable. As Gregg (2004) suggests, "mundane dispositions might...introduce some curiosity about what we think we know" (p. 364). The banality of the everyday performance of men knitting, contains the power to humble not merely social constructions but perhaps even academic discussions.

Knitting in many ways “is like belonging to a tribe complete with initiation rituals, customs, rites of passage, and language” (Edwards, 2011, p.7). But knitting, as with many culturally constructed enterprises, is still largely haunted by the spectre of the sissy and fear of his queer performances. This is largely because “the way our society is structured – everything from gendered roles to job categories to standards of dress – reflects and extends the assumption that men and women will pair off, reproduce, and grow old together” (Oesterreich, 2002, p. 289). Men knitting anxieties and ‘man enough’ articulations, are palatable portrayals of these assumptions. This paper, bringing together queer theory, document analysis, autobiographical queer narrative, and a postmodern self-awareness in the form of DIY (do it yourself) projects, attempts to trouble heteronormative and hypermasculine inferences. It does so by invoking a queer rendering of men knitting to build “knowledge and understanding to inform a pedagogy of ‘resist-stances’ as one that aims to build queer integrity by creating inclusive and transformative learning environments” (Grace & Benson, 2000, p. 90).

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**Reflections of a  
'Cocksucking Fag':  
A Conclusion**

Ph.D. Education  
(Society, Cultures and Literacies)

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## Exordium:

On November 14<sup>th</sup> 2013, American actor and progressive political pundit Alec Baldwin, irate at a paparazzi swarm outside his New York apartment, turned on the throng and, according to TMZ (2013), chased photographers calling one a “cocksucking fag”. The incident is one of many homophobic slurs attributed to Baldwin, dating back several years. In 1992, the actor called the driver of a horse-drawn carriage a ‘faggot’, later apologizing for the comment (McCook Dailey Gazette, 1992). Baldwin also used the gay pejorative ‘queen’ in his Twitter feeds, maligning *Daily News* editor Colin Myler (Malone, 2012a), journalist George Stark (Martin, 2013), and a male Starbucks employee (Malone, 2012b). In the case of Stark, Baldwin went on to say: “[I’d] put my foot up your fucking ass, George Stark, but I’m sure you’d dig it too much” (Cartwright & Beekman, 2013). Later apologizing for his verbal attack, Baldwin stated “my ill-advised attack on George Stark of the *Daily Mail* had absolutely nothing to do with issues of anyone’s sexual orientation” (Rivera, 2013). Baldwin insisted he didn’t hate gays, just ‘queens’, and in an interview with the *Gothamist* (2013) claimed:

The idea of me calling this guy a ‘queen’ and that being something that people thought is homophobic...a queen to me has a different meaning. It’s somebody who’s just above. It doesn’t have any necessarily sexual connotations. To me a queen...I know women that act queeny, I know men that are straight that act queeny, and I know gay men that act queeny. It doesn’t have to be a definite sexual connotation, or a homophobic connotation. To me those are people who think the rules don’t apply to them.

Following Baldwin’s tirade, left-leaning television network MSNBC announced it was cancelling *Up Late with Alec Baldwin*, “because of the actor’s foul-mouthed, homophobic rant at a *New York Post* photographer” (Johnson, 2013). Baldwin would go on to blame “the fundamentalist wing of gay advocacy” for his woes, including the

cancelling of his television show (Johnson, 2013). In a statement to GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation), Baldwin reminded the gay community of his long support for gay issues and that his words did not contain the meanings ascribed to them:

As someone who fights against homophobia, I apologize. I have worked, periodically, with numerous marriage equality organizations, especially over the past couple of years, to achieve the very rights that gay couples are earning by recent court decisions. I would not advocate violence against someone for being gay and I hope that my friends at GLADD and the gay community understand that my attack on Mr. Stark in no way was the result of homophobia. (Baldwin, 2013)

It's important for me to begin the conclusion of my doctoral project on 'men knitting as queer pedagogy' with Alec Baldwin's words. Not because I find them shocking (I regularly hear much worse), nor because I have any interest in the actor or his career, but because they're the unexpected utterances of a self-described liberal and provide an interesting lens to view the performance of men knitting as queer undertaking. As a gay-guy knitter, my chief concern from the start of this research project were readers who would simply reject the notion that a man knitting could be construed as queer: "just because a man knits, doesn't mean he's gay; and even if he is, so what?"

Growing up in a benevolent family, or rather, growing up as the only gay child in a largely benevolent extended heterosexual family, I was fortunate to have a loving clan eager to protect me from a world which largely disapproved of homosexuality. Given that "an openly gay person risks and often suffers rejection by the people he loves most and hostility from the general public," I long ago recognized my good luck (Wills, 2007, p. 96) Occasionally however, my families desire to protect me slipped into a kind of

denial: “they weren’t being homophobic, it was just a misunderstanding”. Rather than acknowledging something as problematic, they could neutralize it’s meaning by rendering it a misunderstanding. A misunderstanding, sometimes, but always, I’m not so sure.

As an adult, I’ve tried hard to hold tight to the generosity of ‘it was just a misunderstanding’. Recognizing within myself a near boundless capacity for foolishness, and wanting to grant others equal space to say dumb things without judgement, I’ve typically favoured ‘misunderstanding’ over ‘vilifying’. That said, I think Baldwin’s words are important for a man knitting project, because they’re a reality check. For knitting fags like myself, perhaps even our ‘lefty’ progressive kinfolk, the actor’s words remind us of our own internalized queer fear demons, those malignant spirits we had hoped to excise. Internalized homophobia, the fear of the gay other and “the ability to train ourselves to deny homosexuality either in ourselves, another, or the broader society,” is still very much alive (We’re all ‘Out’ Channel, 2013). As Whitehead (2002) suggests, a heightened awareness and politicization of gay sexuality “does not, however, automatically refigure a greater openness or accommodation around sexual difference” (p. 74). Just because rights have been won and laid down in legislation, doesn’t mean the world will immediately become a more accepting place. We may have fewer queers in the closet, but that closet still has plenty of skeletons piled high, including the remains of heteronormativity which continues to inform identity. According to Nanda (2000):

Since both males and females are brought up by women, children have a high degree of identification with female gender roles. The development of a mature masculine identity therefore requires separation from the female. (p. 105)

A man knitting, doesn't perform separation from the feminine, but its embrace. Whether or not we perceive a man knitting as queer, "knitting opens the door for that," because in a man's hands, knitting is still a social signifier of the feminine and gayness (Wills, 2007, p. 62). For Kelly (2014), even when a male knitter has successfully integrated his identity as both 'man' and 'knitter', "resulting in alternative forms of masculinity...in some cases, this alternative masculinity falls back on aspects of hegemonic masculinity" (p. 139). Baldwin's words demonstrate a hegemonic masculinity which has slid backward. Whether we are a self-described progressive or openly gay, it's a reminder how we can all slip.

### **Telling Times:**

The disconnection between Baldwin's words and actions is something more than a "mind-numbingly stupid explanation" of his offensive anti-gay epithets (TMZ, 2013). They are telling of our times. Indeed, these words were such a part of my adolescent life, hurled at me daily at school, to not have heard them would have felt queer. Even today I over hear 'fag' so frequently in the conversations of youthful male passers-by, I've grudgingly accepted it as a minor malfeasance and an indignity endured as part of a regular day. Perhaps Baldwin is correct. They don't mean 'fag' as in homosexual, they mean 'fag' as in some ethereal colloquial pejorative; a vernacular I'm simply too queer to comprehend.

I'm rarely surprised by the invocation of 'fag' or 'faggot'. What I find bewildering however, is when anti-gay nomenclature is viewed along-side other identity slurs and the disparity in reactions. While riding public transit one cold February day during rush-hour, my brimming double-length articulated bus stopped at a busy urban transit depot.

The multitude of waiting passengers pressed through the open doors, so many in fact the doors were unable to close. The clearly exasperated bus driver, with an angered voice emanating from the loudspeaker, commanded that some would have to leave otherwise the doors wouldn't close and we would remain parked. From the front of the bus, an unamplified yet thundering voice rejoined: "everyone off the bus who isn't Canadian". Embarrassed silence, followed by the same hostile directive: "everyone off the bus who isn't Canadian". This time gasps, followed by the driver's reverberating command for speaker to "get off the bus". Brief applause from the forward cabin of the vehicle as he departed, and eventually doors close and we departed. However we decipher 'isn't Canadian', its intent was clearly to marginalize and separate the 'other' from the normative herd.

Interestingly, forty-five minutes earlier, when I first embarked the vehicle, a raucous group of secondary school boys were bantering and deriding each other. Some mild rough housing ensued with few a boys 'wrestling' in their seats as we rode in the not-yet-filled transport. Suddenly, one of their crowd, apparently annoyed with the undertaking, denounced his comrades to be "fucking faggots". What ensued was an exercise in determining "who was the biggest fag", as the bus slowly travelled its peak-period route gathering more riders. No one was asked to leave, just a few smiles and occasional laughter of some of the passengers at their youthful shenanigans and light-hearted repartee.

Stepping off the bus, a voice in my skull admonished me for analysing the event too closely or assessing blame; "it was just a misunderstanding," and a misconception probably my own. Yet rereading the event in my journal, it has the semblance of

concession and as Jervis and Kyle (2012) suggest: “what we may see as compromise may have a deeper significance” (p. 3). The deeper significance can be an accommodation, and an internalized settlement on what others feel is tolerable versus our own percolating outrage. A better, more publicized example, might be the juxtaposition between Baldwin’s words and those of American food guru Paula Deen. In 2013, Deen was the target of a lawsuit alleging discrimination and requiring the celebrity chef to provide a deposition, in which she admitted using the ‘N word’ (Duke, 2013). What ensued was the total unravelling of Deen’s empire as she lost cooking shows, product endorsements, and publishing deals totaling an estimated \$12.5 million in revenue (Lazarowitz, 2013). Baldwin’s career, apart from losing a low ratings show on a little watched network, never skipped a beat. For a fag like myself the difference was startling, and a dichotomy which seemed largely lost on the main-stream media:

After witnessing the crucifixion of Paula Deen, and the comparatively tepid criticism received by Alec Baldwin after the *30 Rock* actor tweeted a barrage of vile, homophobic remarks at a reporter for the *Daily Mail*. The disparate reactions speak volumes about society’s attitudes toward racism, homophobia, and celebrity. (Stern, 2013)

These discourses matter to gay people, even if largely overlooked by, well, other onlookers. From the vantage of the queer other, they form a literacy practice “embedded in real life activities” and connected to a life largely unknown to those outside our similarity (Kneller & Boyd, 2008, p.136). That real life narrative is foundational to queer knowing and a ‘man knitting as queer pedagogy project’ demands this discourse be inserted, not merely because it provides glimpses into awkward moments in queer lives, but because it helps articulate and illustrate queer world views and knowledges. Grace and Hill (2001), suggest that deploying queer knowledges and

being open to queer meanings permits us to peer-sideways at the world, creating “radical inclusiveness and...[opening] a space for political activities and for personal and social transformation” (p.5).

Homosexuality has largely been constructed in opposition to the normative practice of heterosexuality, meaning queer knowledges are typically qualified by that other dominant narrative. The bi-product is a binary straight/gay construct which interprets worth and meaning almost exclusively through the dominant lens of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. As a consequence, Oesterreich (2002) argues, that heteronormativity has limited the democratic options of the gay other because their bodies and beliefs are subjugated and viewed with suspicion. Read in this context, ‘it was just a misunderstanding’ can be translated by the gay listener as ‘you’re just over reacting’. Inserting knitting needles in a man’s hand, and allowing a fag researcher like myself to investigate his performance’s meanings, might therefore bring forth a different reading, a queer rendering potentially different than one produced by a non-queer counterpart.

I’ve had all manner of reactions to my knitting: not only its performance but even the mere mention that I knit. A typical response begins with awkwardness. The oddness of my knitting is commonly confirmed by a smirk, raised eyebrows, snickers or with the clumsy interrogative “you knit?” It’s dubious anyone producing such a response would acknowledge its motivations lie in the miss-match between the perception of knitting as feminine and witnessing a man perform it. There is an element of queer-fear contained within the response, because the event breaks through “the constraints and possibilities of the existing gender order” (Connell, 2002, p.82). But who would describe an awkward

response to a man knitting as homophobic response? If admitted, wouldn't it implicate self in the subtlety of an anti-gay reaction? Yet, if our response is situated in a perception that the performance is effeminate, isn't that homophobic?

Like Baldwin, many support gay rights. Since we support these rights, and are therefore open to other/ed expressions of sexuality, how could we be implicated in anything homophobic? Interrogating awkward responses to a man knitting becomes tricky business. It demands "an account of identity that allows us to think through its contradictions and to trace its effect" (Love, 2007, p.44). Interpreting negative responses to a man knitting can be deeply problematic, particularly a queer examination which renders it as homophobic. But then again, we could just be over-reaching: "it's just a misunderstanding."

### **Queer Pedagogies:**

Queer pedagogies can provide opportunities to coach us beyond a catechism of overreaction and implied misunderstandings. Throughout this research project, I've adopted this disquieting pedagogy because it seemed analogous with the oddity of a man knitting. Borrowing Morris' (2003) definition of queer pedagogies, this doctoral project acknowledges that "queer pedagogies perform the difference... [they] trop up the difference through different forms of symbolic representation" (p.189). The instructional heart of this work, reads pedagogy as "the process of education in its widest sense – materials, methods, theories and their applications" (Reynolds & Trehan, 2001, p. 358). But it recognizes that "men and masculinities are...symbiotically entwined, in so much as they coexist in a political landscape that assumes a natural gender order to things" (Whitehead, 2002, p.5). As an interdependent enterprise, they

have been collusive with a binary which differentiates straight from gay, and masculinity from femininity. Queer pedagogies challenge “the significance of recognizing differences of sexuality...to situate the essence of subjectivity at the psychic or somatic core of human desire” (Trifonas, 2013, p. 2).

According to Richardson (2010), this binary divides heterosexuality/homosexuality, with its accompanying pressure for heteronormativity, privileging “particular forms of masculinity at the expense of femininities and other, subordinate, masculinities” (p. 738). The dominant (straight) narrative can be so loud, it’s nearly impossible for us fags to shout over it, or hide from its uproar. At times, particularly when I’m on holiday in a romantic local, surrounded by opposite-sex couples holding hands or arms and inevitably kissing, I want to clamber up some rock and shout: ‘stop flaunting your sexuality’. It feels not only overwhelming, but deeply oppressive. I haven’t as yet hollered, while on holiday or otherwise, but I’ve also rarely witnessed gay couples expressing the same level of public affection at vacation destinations.

Knitting can ‘fuck’ with the crowd, and my knitting needles remain at the ready, in case I’m feeling particularly downtrodden and need to mess with all that romance. For me, it’s queer pedagogy, a gurdy-man instruction deployed with knitting needles and poking “codes of behavior and norms of everyday behavior that are not necessarily conscious” (Kirsch, 2000, p. 45). Learning can occur through innuendo, and like Sedgwick (2003), I accept it isn’t necessary to be aware that we’re learning while we’re being taught. All of that informal teaching quietly getting performed before us, picked up, internalized, and replicated. It’s subtle but important. A man knitting performs difference,

because his accomplishment diverges from the norm: “certain kinds of acts are usually interpreted as expressive of a gender core or identity, ... these acts either conform to an expected gender identity or contest that expectation in some way” (Butler, 1990, p. 278).

A man knitting not merely opens the landscape to the possibility of other/ed performances, he can also awaken a sleepy scenery too highly gendered, into a dynamic place where we all get to experiment. The space can become a geography imbued with honesty, authenticity, and choice, and where people are not afraid be found out. There is something deeply rhetorical in men knitting; it motivates and persuades. For the maker, it stimulates the desire to improve capability. For the audience, it opens a critical discourse, not simply about crafts, but about the possibilities for altering and adjusting our signifiers. Undeniable, “the political climate now allows some men, those who are brave enough to accept stereotyping, to knit in public,” but their performance will be considered subversive (Wills, 2007, p. 54). For Kelly (2014), this subversion lies precisely in the ability of a knitting man to “trouble gender norms and contribute to the construction of alternative masculinities and femininities” (p.133).

Giunta and Sciorra (2014), recognize that needlework “can function as an artifact of the imagination, a repository of dreams, hopes, disappointments, desires” (p. 4). Knitting functions in a similar way, it’s an expressive vehicle to create and cope with the world around us. But under the unintended watchful gaze of passers-by, knitting can feel self-conscious and artificial. It can feel like pretence and pretend, like we’re making believe we are someone else; someone not ourselves. At those moments, when I have unintentionally drawn the eye of another, knitting can feel oppressive.

It's critical to recognize, "oppression consists not only of the marginalizing of the other; it also consists of the privileging of the 'normal'" (Kumashiro, 2002, p. 37). In the case of a man knitter, his conduct can be parsed as abnormal not because it is unusual and unexpected, but because it is feminine. Even among male knitters like myself, the performance remains startling: "I am admitting that knitting is not an activity I would expect a man to perform" (Whitton, 2001, p.100). But it functions as queer pedagogy, because it creates confusion and questioning and a brief opportunity to testify difference. Not just witnessing knitting needles in a man's hands, but reflecting on his depiction and pondering its (broader) implications:

Learning from the other is paradoxically also about learning in relation to ourselves. What is beyond in the other also exists within us. The subject is beyond, and to a degree created by, the other's signifiers. It is in alliance with the other. Facing the unknowable other is facing the unknowable dimensions in ourselves. (Herbert, 2010, p. 4)

### **Queer Theory:**

According to Shasko (2005), queer theory, like queer pedagogies, shares a similar desire, in that both seek to undo normative or normal values which privilege one identity, knowledge, or insight over another. This includes the manner in which identity, knowledge, or insight are obtained and contained. While this typically references more formal sites where these claims are enacted, such as schools, it doesn't have to be. Queer theories and pedagogies are open to troubling the less formal and unofficial, the mundane and ordinary sites of the everyday. The glance of the observer for example, is a place of privilege equal to other more officious venues, and it too demands interrogation:

The gaze itself is not neutral but invested with powers, in so much as it comes with a set of moral, social and cultural codes or assumptions: an 'economy of

looks' that places values on the body, and different values on different bodies. (Whitehead, 2002)

Queer theory, as a complement to queer pedagogy, was the methodology selected for my research project because it equally erodes identity construction, including the glance. When you're a male knitter, you are going to be gawked at, and unpacking 'the look' is essential. Queer theory "provides a framework for understanding how differences are constructed and communicated," including the meanings and implications of the gaze (Slagle, 2003, p. 142). As Butler (1990) suggests, "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent it is performed" (p. 276). As a performative undertaking, gender is largely communicated by witnessing its performance, by noticing its intended and unintentional meanings. Essentially, sensual examination and seeing/hearing/touching/feeling for ourselves what it is to be a woman or a man, gay or straight. Queer theory contests meanings and disputes certainties about fixed identities including gender: "gender projects are not one-dimensional or smooth" (Connell, 2002, p. 82).

Queer theory's active resistance to the dominant and normative within culture, seemed ideal for a men knitting project. Given Butler's insistence on the largely performative quality of gender, and that a man knitting draws into question identity and gendered assumptions, queer theory felt like a copacetic methodology for my research. However, very quickly into my research project I became slightly hesitant of queer theories research claims. During my early adulthood, I was active in the gay rights movement becoming initiated into the reclamation of 'queer' as a resistance word. We called ourselves queer as a rallying cry to challenge the establishment and empower the gay community (Halperin, 2003; Warner, 1993).

At the beginning of my research project, my connection to queer came largely from my passion for the queer movement which I had experience first-hand in the street demonstrations in which I participated. Selecting queer theory as a methodology had something to do with my recollections of roadway resistance. Queer theory entered academia in the 1990's, when "scholars from a diverse range of disciplines, concerned with the absence of sexuality in mainstream theory," began "to address the issues surrounding sexual identities" (Slagle, 2003, p. 130). At the same time, the identity politics of queer, its connection to gay community identification, began to be questioned and later nullified by "queer theorists seek[ing] to question any notion of a coherent 'identity politics' inherent in the gay and lesbian movements" (Whitehead, 2002, p.75). 'Queer' gave up on the gays, in favour of the 'theory'.

If a homosexual choose to identify self as queer, the academic expectation is they would cease to describe themselves as gay. For fags like myself, it's a difficult compromise. Gay identity politics has historically been situated within community, "the arena in which people acquire their most fundamental and most substantial experience of social life" (Cohen, 1985, p. 15). Central to gay community experience is 'coming out', the process of revealing your sexuality to self, community, and society. Coming out stories are narratives of commonality, binding community together, because "visibility is so important...especially for many youth who are still struggling" (Tenn-Yuk, 2014, p. A13). Given "we still live in a heteronormative society in which opposite-sex attraction is seen as the norm," identifying with a gay community where you can more easily find reflections of yourself is critical (Tenn-Yuk, 2014, p.A13). Queer became disconnected from gay lives by "dismissing 'gay' and 'lesbian' as categories" in favour of perpetually

disordered identities which can never be codified (Kirsch, 2000, p. 34). Queer became queer theory, appropriated by academics who seemed less interested in street resistance than deconstructing identities: “an identity category that has no interest in consolidating or even stabilizing itself” (Jagose, 1996, p.2).

So why did I stick with queer theory as a research methodology? Largely because queer theory is “a fluid locus and label of resistance to dominant heterosexual meanings and definitions” (Whitehead, 2002, p. 76). Furthermore, it’s well established within academia and “illuminates the ways in which sexuality is a fundamental influence in the ways that human beings behave and communicate” (Slagle, 2003, p. 130). Again, a man knitting communicates queerness, so deploying a research methodology ripe to interrogate those assumptions seemed logical.

### **Making Space:**

Queer theory is ultimately about making space, pushing at the edges and creating room for the yet to be identified other. But what happens if you feel pushed out? That’s my experience of queer theory; I’m a queer who has been forced out.

Dasgupta and Rosello (2014), provide excellent analysis of the schisms within queer theory:

For some queer critics,...mobilized against the American state’s indifference to AIDS constitutes the most authentic or quintessential queer movement. Others disagree. In the United States, many regret that queers now concentrate on the wrong object when they argue in favor of gay marriage or the presence of gays in the military. (pp. 4-5)

Very clearly, having been active in the gay rights movement during the AIDS crisis, I tend to view queer authenticity as positioned in the political protests of queer activism. Living in a country like Canada, where same-sex marriage and adoption rights

are entrenched in law, the answer seems easy: these rights matter and improve the life of all gay peoples, whether they decide to marry, adopt, or not. These had won rights are legitimized and although there is a long way to go, they are important gains. Interestingly, there is a tendency among my gay friends to think most of the heavy lifting has been completed. We've done the hard work, essentially achieving the same rights as our heterosexual family, friends, and neighbours.

We put life and limb at risk, but gradually our identities became less “embedded within a web of cultural and political relations” so intent on demonizing the decadence of a homosexual lifestyle (Shilts, 1987, p. 169). As White argues, gays won the sympathy through raising AIDS awareness, and as other minority others began to realize the injustice and prejudice and experienced by the gay community (White, 2014). Gays, began to be perceived as just another minority community, and therefore warranted minority status:

Gays had converted many people to the belief that they constituted a minority – like Jews or African-Americans or Asians. It was a strange sort of minority, truth be told, to which one's parents didn't belong and which was made up mostly of members who could 'pass'. It was more an identity than a minority, and identity that one could assume at age six or sixty or never. (White, 2014, p. 26).

Baldwin, as simultaneous supporter and denier of gay rights is allegorical of the current composure of men knitting. This supports gay rights while simultaneously denying gay dignity. It's a kind of peek-a-boo logic, of 'now you see me, now you don't' rights were justice is at one moment spoken, and in another denied. A similar situation exists for the knitting man. In his work *Knitting with Balls*, del Vecchio (2006) describes the work as “here to prove those people wrong who talk about knitting not being a proper hobby for boys” (p. 7). Even Richard Rutt (1987) in *A History of Handknitting*,

generally regarded as the first thorough history of British hand knitting, states “there is nothing sex-linked about hand knitting” (p. 157). There is a rational sense that knitting is an occupation opened to all, including men. But when a man actually knits, “gender is called into question,” and peoples who would otherwise claim an openness to men’s inclusion, can suddenly get nervous (Medford, 2006, p. 4). The right to knit is simultaneously acknowledged and denied, as we both claim the right of men to knit while being distressed by its accomplishment. Wills (2007) suggests that a reason for gays identifying and engaging with knitting is that they themselves are a subculture; knitting has largely been disregarded so it attracts gays because they too are marginalized.

### **Conclusion:**

We can only wonder what Baldwin meant by gay advocacy fundamentalists, given the actors self-avowed promotion of gay rights, including supporting GLAAD and gay marriage equality causes. Indeed, he does have a history of advocacy for homosexuals, including guest roles on the gay-cult sit com *Will & Grace* and playing a gay character in the 2006 off-Broadway production of *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* (Gouttebroze, 2013). As a gay man, I wonder if Baldwin was implying that politicized homosexuals are so entrenched in their ‘life style’ as to be incapable of understanding the subtly of his meanings. Perhaps the problem is ours, we gay zealots. We just didn’t understand that he didn’t mean ‘fag’ as in fag, but ‘fag’ as in, well, something derogatory. Maybe our strict adherence to our ‘sexual orientation’ blinded us from recognizing he didn’t mean ‘queen’ as in a gay effeminate man, but ‘queen’ as in anyone who projects the very worst characteristics of entitlement and privilege. The

mistake was ours. After all, how could we take issue with his words given his progressive leanings, liberal-minded activism, and deep desire to end homophobia in all its guises?

A man knitting is pedagogically queer because he appears effeminate; he acts like a fag. In picking up knitting needles he's opted out of traditionally defined masculinity and chosen an/other path. For those people who state it's a non-issue to be gay, or claim there's no stigma in engaging in activities which make you appear gay, I suggest "most of these comments have come from straight-identified individuals who haven't had to deal with the stigma" (Tenn-Yuk, 2014, A13). According to EGALE Canada (2013), 33% of gay youth have made suicide attempts compared to 7% of straight youth. Loneliness and isolation are common place as it can be very difficult, even for very 'out' homosexuals, to find a connection to the broader straight culture narrative. Representations of gays are still rare, and in a cultural where we roughly represent 10 percent of the population, it's deeply troubling. When homosexuals are represented in mainstream media they usual function as a trope, either as the frivolously funny fag (*Will & Grace*; *Modern Family*), the totally over the top (*Queer as Folk*; *Boy meets Boy*), or those destined for disaster/suicide (*Broke Back Mountain*; *The Imitation Game*). It's difficult to find yourself, and relate to straight television: "instead of the lack of gay characters on television, maybe I should have said, there is a lack of gay characters I look forward to tuning in for and supporting and seeing myself in" (Dupuis, 2015).

A man knitting matters, but it's not for the faint of heart. The bony corpses of earlier masculinities still scaffold our identity, and they continue to frame everyday

identification. Whether we claim to have opted out of these identities or not, we should recognize that “a central organizing principle of dominant cultural definitions of masculinity is fear of being seen as ‘not a real man’, especially by other men who scrutinize and ascribe meaning to their masculine performances” (Richardson, 2010, p. 740). What makes Baldwin’s comments crucial here, is they bring these fears to the fore. His words are used to rebuke and punish men he’s angry with, by zeroing in on and denying their masculinity. He does so by implying queerness, all the while being an emphatic supporter of the gay community.

Clearly what is missing is an acknowledgement that the real sting or ‘fag’, ‘faggot’, and ‘queen’, the cultural power they wield as derogatory talk, lies precisely in their homophobic implications and masculinity denied. Baldwin, when initially asked about his tantrum, claimed that his rant was the result of him being fearful for his family’s safety, when confronted by aggressive paparazzi (TMZ, 2013). Perhaps that’s the case, but what makes this fag fearful is other people’s fear:

Violence and harassment is justified by people claiming that they were afraid. But very rarely does it feel to me like the person harassing me is actually afraid. Startled, maybe, for a second or two. (Coyote, 2014, p. 208)

A man knitting can be a startling performance. Without saying a word, he ‘outs’ himself even if not gay, because his performance is carried out against a backdrop of a still surprisingly rigid heteronormativity. His performance is a queer pedagogy, because it simultaneously implicates him in a dainty endeavour and denies him the ability to pass as a nominally masculine male. His performance has placed his identity in jeopardy, and raises suspicions: “is he, or isn’t he?” It does so because of the implied effeminacy, or perhaps what might be qualified as ‘queeny’ behaviour? Ironically, Baldwin’s use of

'queen' as a perjorative is not just disconcerting, it feels erroneous. Queens are the champions of the gay community; they are our superheros:

Queens are that part of gay society that can't hide. The queens are the ones that are the most visible queers on the streets. The flaming queens are the ones who get laughed at and jeered at; they are the ones used by straight society for a good hahahahahahaha. No wonder queens are the first to be in the streets. What do we have to lose: your respect, our position in the community, our standing? We've got everything to gain, namely our rights over our bodies and how to use them. (Lonc, 1991, 224)

So what's Baldwin's real problem with queens? I really don't know. Perhaps it similar to our issues with the knitting man; he thinks he's someone to whom the rules don't apply. As a queer pedagogy, a man knitting educates us about breaking boundaries and risks ridicule all the while "reclaim[ing] a devalued feminine craft" (Kelly, 2014, p.133). But should we admire or despair at his performance; marvelling at the bravery of his undertaking or become too embarrassed for words? We can sit in wonder at the queer goings on, a man crossing frontiers, declaring "a purposeful challenge to gender norms" (Kelly, 2014, p.135). For myself, the gay-guy knitter earning the ogling, I'm mostly exasperated: that it's such a big deal, and that so many don't recognize how big a deal it really is.

In the end, this research project was intended as a preliminary step. To contribute in a small way, to an absent field of research I hope will flourish. Next steps for other researchers could be to gather data in the forms of interviews, and thus add to the literature. Other interesting contributions, might look at regional aspects of men knitting: is there more openness to male knitters in countries which traditionally have long knitting histories? My hope is that this project will provide future researchers with some primary resources, and that it has bared witness not only to my knitting narrative

but too others. Knitting, is “a calm and peace pastime; unless you’re a man” (Brodeur, 2014). I remain resolute that this homely occupation provides an excellent site to explore gender reversal, a traditional feminine occupation only slightly inhabited by men. As such, it provides imaginative investigators creative opportunities to explore not only craft-practices, but how and why these practices remain so resolutely gendered.

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