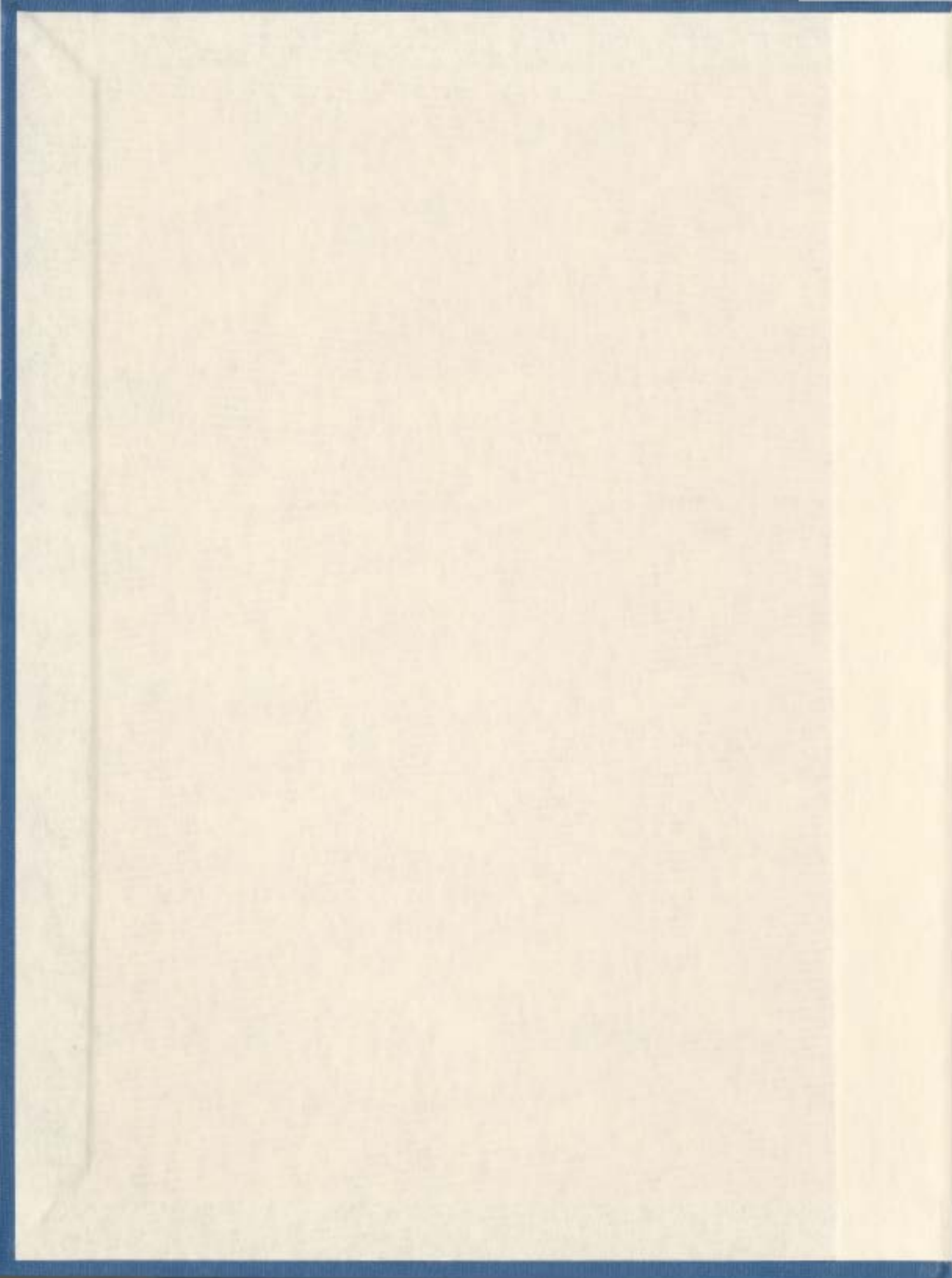


CONTEMPORARY HOBBY KNITTING:
THE PRESERVATION AND REINVENTION OF
TRADITIONAL CRAFT

ROSIE PATCH



**Contemporary Hobby Knitting:
The Preservation and Reinvention of Traditional Craft**

By Rosie Patch

A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts.

Department of Folklore
Memorial University of Newfoundland

January 2007



Library and
Archives Canada

Bibliothèque et
Archives Canada

Published Heritage
Branch

Direction du
Patrimoine de l'édition

395 Wellington Street
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

395, rue Wellington
Ottawa ON K1A 0N4
Canada

Your file Votre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-31276-6

Our file Notre référence

ISBN: 978-0-494-31276-6

NOTICE:

The author has granted a non-exclusive license allowing Library and Archives Canada to reproduce, publish, archive, preserve, conserve, communicate to the public by telecommunication or on the Internet, loan, distribute and sell theses worldwide, for commercial or non-commercial purposes, in microform, paper, electronic and/or any other formats.

The author retains copyright ownership and moral rights in this thesis. Neither the thesis nor substantial extracts from it may be printed or otherwise reproduced without the author's permission.

AVIS:

L'auteur a accordé une licence non exclusive permettant à la Bibliothèque et Archives Canada de reproduire, publier, archiver, sauvegarder, conserver, transmettre au public par télécommunication ou par l'Internet, prêter, distribuer et vendre des thèses partout dans le monde, à des fins commerciales ou autres, sur support microforme, papier, électronique et/ou autres formats.

L'auteur conserve la propriété du droit d'auteur et des droits moraux qui protègent cette thèse. Ni la thèse ni des extraits substantiels de celle-ci ne doivent être imprimés ou autrement reproduits sans son autorisation.

In compliance with the Canadian Privacy Act some supporting forms may have been removed from this thesis.

Conformément à la loi canadienne sur la protection de la vie privée, quelques formulaires secondaires ont été enlevés de cette thèse.

While these forms may be included in the document page count, their removal does not represent any loss of content from the thesis.

Bien que ces formulaires aient inclus dans la pagination, il n'y aura aucun contenu manquant.


Canada

Abstract

Knitting today is a hobby activity that provides knitters with a sense of connectedness with their families' past and of participating in a fundamental element of their culture. Knitting's existence in contemporary popular culture demonstrates the widespread desire in Western society to make links with an idealized past. This thesis is based on interviews with ten knitters, in St. John's, Newfoundland, analysis of the objects they produce and observations of a regular gathering of knitters.

This study has found, knitters emphasize the importance of the act of knitting, as well as the importance of producing functional objects. Contemporary hobby knitters preserve tradition by continuing to use the same techniques as have a long tradition of use in their families and their communities. However, knitters strive to make hand knit objects functional for today's users by conforming to contemporary fashion trends and using modern materials. Migrating away from, and back to, Newfoundland has had the effect of solidifying some knitters' sense of knitting as symbolic of Newfoundland culture. Knitting also offers today's frequently migrating urbanites comfort by providing a sense of belonging to a universal culture that goes beyond the sense of belonging to a particular place or time. Furthermore, the contemporary phenomenon of knitting as a hobby reflects the strength of the knitting tradition in Newfoundland, despite the influence of external culture, such as printed patterns, and hobby knitters today contribute to the evolution of Newfoundland knitting. My aim is to discover how women today are using traditional knowledge as a force for social change.

Acknowledgements

This thesis was made possible by the contributions of all of the knitters I interviewed and interacted with at Wool Trends' Knit Out Nights. I would like to thank my primary informants: Hazel Abbott, Kaya Anderson-Payne, Helen Ball, Lewis Cranford, Sue Curwin, Laura Pomeroy, Erin Sharpe, Gillian Strong, Martina White and Kathleen Winter. I also thank my grandmothers who taught me to knit many years ago.

I am very grateful for the financial support I received from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council; and also from Memorial University of Newfoundland.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Gerald L. Pocius for many inspiring conversations, and for all of his suggestions and guidance. I also thank the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore Department professors, staff and students who have encouraged me and helped me by bringing new perspectives to this research. I thank the department's support staff, Sharon Cochrane and Cindy Turpin, for their perpetual good cheer and helpfulness with a variety of administrative tasks. I am grateful to all of my classmates who have helped shape this research and supported me.

I thank all of the people who have helped me with processing and writing this thesis, especially Susanne Harwood, who edited every chapter, and Luke, a kind astronomer from Colorado, who brought paper, from the US, which allowed me to print out these pages, in the UK. I thank my mentors Jane L. Cook and Megan D. Williams, who have been so encouraging to me over the past several years. In addition, I would like to thank my family – especially my husband Louigi, Gwyn and Barbra – and friends for all their support.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Table of Contents.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Chapter 2: Learning to Knit and Practicing Knitting as a Hobby: Cultural Continuity and Conspicuous Conformity	19
Chapter 3: How and What Hobby Knitters Knit	46
Chapter 4: Reinvention: The World of Hobby Knitting Today	92
Chapter 5: Conclusion: Creating the Future Out of the Past by Knitting.....	132
Works Cited	142
Appendix: Informant Profiles.....	146

List of Figures

Figure 1: Lewis posing, in his home, in St. John's, with hats made for him by a neighbour he grew up with.....	26
Figure 2: Dishcloth, knit by Sue using red, white, and green yarn for Christmas.....	41
Figure 3: Typical Newfoundland knitwear for sale at the Cod Jigger.....	47
Figure 4: Hazel's casting on method, demonstrated by the author.....	49
Figure 5: The four steps involved in knitting, demonstrated by Hazel.....	50
Figure 6: Bag, knit by Martina, mainly in garter stitch.....	51
Figure 7: Stockinette stitch sample, knit by the author.....	52
Figure 8: Gillian holding the yarn in her right hand the English/American way.....	53
Figure 9: Varieties of knitting needles.....	55
Figure 10: Martina's collection of knitting needles.....	57
Figure 11: Martina holding a warm shawl she made.....	61
Figure 12: Fashion accessories, home decorations and ornaments produced by hobby knitters.....	62
Figure 13: Erin shopping, at Wool Trends for the perfect yarn for her next project.....	65
Figure 14: Garter stitch shawl, knit by Helen using exotic, luxurious fibres.....	67
Figure 15: Shawl with bilateral symmetry around the central stitch motif, knit by Martina.....	68
Figure 16: Sweater, knit by Laura, for her father-in-law.....	70
Figure 17: Laura working on a pair of socks while minding her store.....	71
Figure 18: Tea cozy, designed and knit by Martina, exhibits balance between innovation and the aesthetic norm of repetition of stripes.....	72
Figure 19: Gillian posing with her knitting materials and the first sweater she knit.....	74

Figure 20: Shawl made of pure wool and embellished with an acrylic border, by Sue....	75
Figure 21: Sweater, knit by Erin, exhibiting borders with contrasting colours and stitch patterns which highlight traditional zigzag motifs.....	77
Figure 22: Cat bed, knit by Martina using recycled wool, and felted.....	79
Figure 23: Queen-sized blanket made of left-over scraps of yarn, by Martina.....	80
Figure 24: Mittens demonstrating the common technique of knitting bright coloured motifs with white or natural coloured background, by Erin.....	81
Figure 25: Scarf, knit by Helen, exemplifying her love of bright, playful colours.....	83
Figure 26: “Separatist mitts,” knit by Erin, incorporating Québec symbolism and Newfoundland design.....	85
Figure 27: <i>Scrumbling</i> piece, produced by Martina using a combination of knitting and crocheting and scraps of all different kinds of yarn.....	88
Figure 28: Chart showing Stitch ‘n Bitch Groups listed on Stitch ‘n Bitch Chicago’s website.....	94
Figure 29: Kaya Anderson Payne, as pictured in <u>Spokeswoman</u> magazine.....	96
Figure 30: The front cover of <u>Stitch ‘n Bitch: the Knitter’s Handbook</u>	98
Figure 31: The front cover of <u>Stitch ‘n Bitch Nation</u>	98
Figure 32: Photo of a knitting bee, circa 1916, demonstrates the historical precedence of knitting as a focal point of social gatherings.....	101
Figure 33: Caricature of contemporary knitters depicting them as fashionable and ethnically diverse	101
Figure 34: Photo of young people having fun while wearing clothing knit from patterns in <u>Stitch ‘n Bitch</u>	102
Figure 35: Photo promoting the “Queen of hearts bikini” pattern asserts knitting can be used to create sexy clothing	102
Figure 36: Photo promoting knitted backpacks as fashionable accessories handy for carrying all sorts of items, including knitting projects, to bars	103

Figure 37: <i>Stitch 'n Bitch Chicago</i> 's “knitter girl,” called Purl, as well as the group's Born to Knit logo and image suggest that knitting is an aggressive, powerful act.....	105
Figure 38: Poster advertising a public knitting gathering organized by the Anna Templeton Centre, in spring 2006.....	108
Figure 39: Wool Trends, 238 Hamilton Ave., St. John's, as seen from the street.....	110
Figure 40: Wool Trends logo pictured on the sign outside the store and on the website.....	110
Figure 41: Knitting equipment on display in the entrance room at Wool Trends.....	112
Figure 42: Second and third ground-floor rooms at Wool Trends.....	112
Figure 43: Shelves next to the cash register, at Wool Trends, displaying exotic yarns..	112
Figure 44: Hazel (left) showing Helen (right) how to establish the gnome pattern.....	115
Figure 45: Knit Out Night attendees (from let to right: Helen, Kathleen, Sue) focusing on their knitting as they converse and/or await Hazel's instruction	117
Figure 46: Memorial University of Newfoundland students (from left to right: Judith, Joanna, Caroline and Tara) contradicting the image of knitting as a primarily domestic activity by knitting at Bitter's, the graduate student bar.....	126
Figure 47: Phentex slippers belonging to the author.....	137

Chapter 1. Introduction

This thesis is about hobby knitting as a popular culture phenomenon, as a way of producing material culture, and as a promoter of cultural continuity and social cohesion. My research was based on a case study of a public knitting event, called ‘Knit Out Night,’ that has been taking place in St. John’s, Newfoundland, since March 2005, and my conversations with ten hobby knitters, whom I interviewed individually, two to four times each for at least an hour. I recorded five, two hour long, Knit Out evenings in 2005 and 2006. My objectives were to discover why young, hip¹ urban people today choose to knit in their leisure time; to discover the link between knitting today and knitting in the past; and to document knitters’ experiences, their productions and their practices.

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to define hobby knitting and to clearly enunciate my objectives in this research and writing process. I will provide background information about my personal involvement with knitting both for solitary pleasure and as a social activity. That background information will reveal my perspectives. For the purposes of providing context for this research, I will summarise the key writings on knitting in Newfoundland which precede this study of hobby knitting. I will also situate my interest in hobby craft among writings on studio/professional craft in contemporary culture. Next, I will explain how I conducted field research and briefly introduce my informants. Finally, I will provide an outline of the chapters of this thesis.

My study of knitting focuses on individuals’ practices and their thoughts about knitting. I have followed Simon J. Bronner’s suggestion, “Studying behaviour, the doing of craft, is an effective way for the student of culture to get at thought and idea – at mind”

¹ I use the word *hip* to mean being aware of and conforming to the latest fashions and pop culture trends.

(xi); and Gerald L. Pocius' direction to scholars to "pay attention to the fabrication of cultural activities into traditions that are marketed in the modern world in order to create artifactual connections to perceived pasts and people" (1997, 18). I write from the perspective of a hobby knitter, as well as an academic folklorist.

Hobby knitting throughout this thesis refers to the contemporary leisure practice of creating textile garments, and other objects, using knitting techniques. Knitting – a centuries' old process – is the production of interlocking loops of fibre to create fabric and shape it into garments or other domestic items. Unlike knitters in previous times, who knit to meet basic needs, today's hobby knitters use the process to fulfill a variety of emotional needs, including relaxation, recreation and connection with older people and previous ways of life. Most hobby knitters today are women, but some men also knit recreationally. I use the term knitting events to signify social gatherings where the main activity is knitting and most, if not all, of the participants are hobby knitters; these events occur both in public places and in private settings. While eight of my ten informants said that they enjoy the social aspects of knitting events, they also take pleasure in knitting as a solitary pastime.

Knitting is believed to have been brought by crusaders from Egypt to Europe, where the craft was first practiced by men and was so esteemed as to merit the formation of knitting guilds (Hansen 1990, 47). However, once knitting was transferred to women it was practiced domestically, the guilds dissolved and the work was no longer monetarily rewarded. European settlers then brought knitted goods and knitting to North America. In her 1990 doctoral thesis, Robin Orm Hansen wrote, "by the twentieth century the women's rights movement had neglected to think about preserving this set of women's

knowledge” (75) and as a result a “residue of disinterest, discomfort and condescension” (76) surrounds knitting in Western culture today. That said, despite the negative image of knitting and the increase in consumer goods that has eliminated the necessity of producing knitwear domestically, people have continued to knit as a leisure activity.

I was introduced to knitting and other crafts by my grandmothers when I was a child. I remember my mothers’ mother teaching me to knit when I was nine years old, when she came to visit shortly after my youngest sister was born. However, I grew up in Prince Edward Island, which is thousands of kilometres away from my grandmothers, who lived in Ontario and British Columbia, so I did not have regular encouragement to knit. In addition, I sensed my culture valued physical and intellectual activities, such as sports and reading, more than spending time doing crafts. Like many of the hobby knitters I have spoken with over the course of this research, I did not sustain my interest in knitting as a child. It was not until I was on the threshold of independence, the summer between my graduation from high school and my first year of university, when I was nineteen years old, in 1997, that I began knitting as a hobby. Now that I think back to that time, I recognize that I was struggling to demonstrate to myself and to my family my capability in the world. Spending over eighty dollars for enough yarn for my first project, a cardigan sweater, was a symbol of independence, of self-determination, and of taking the plunge into the next phase of my life, which I would create according to my own abilities. I chose a challenging pattern with a variety of stitches to complement the high quality, expensive pure woollen yarn I bought.

By the time I arrived at McGill University, in September, I had had enough downtime at work over the summer to complete the body of the sweater. Throughout the

fall and winter I carried my knitting around with me and worked on the sleeves whenever I had time. At this point I continued to be aware of some of the sorts of negative attitudes toward knitting that Hansen identified (noted above), although on the positive side, I received requests from fellow students for me to teach them to knit. In 1999, I began hosting a weekly social gathering at the McGill Women's Union called the Textile Arts Revival, for students to help and inspire one another to do craft projects. The most popular activity at these gatherings was knitting; some people came to learn to knit and those who already knew how to knit came to spend time knitting with others. I wondered what inspired middle-class young women to knit, and whether living away from the influences of family and tradition, in an urban, academic context, had anything to do with their choice to knit as a leisure activity.

Whenever I talk about my research on contemporary hobby knitting, either in academic or social settings, I am presented with new accounts of people's experiences with knitting and their recollections of people they know, or have known, who knit. This topic is fascinating to both knitters and non-knitters because it provides an example of how people relate to their culture: they can identify members of previous generations who knit and also contemporary knitters. The exchanges of information that ensue allow people to recognize their common culture and to relate to one another personally.

I have been encouraged to recognize my study of contemporary hobby knitting as relevant and to take a feminist approach by Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye's assertion that studying "traditional knowledge can assist in social change in affording women a stronger voice in developing our own destinies, as we come to understand how we have

always sought [power in public and private spheres] and how we have sometimes achieved it” (329).

Methodology and Approach

In conducting my research, I have employed the material culture mode of investigation. This is to say, I have focused on objects to explore cultural questions (Schlereth 1992, 27). Thomas J. Schlereth advocates the collection of three kinds of knowledge about culture via objects: (1) *referential knowledge*, which is gained by seeing pictures of or reading references to examples of the object of study; (2) *mediated knowledge* from hearing accounts of the object from those who use it; and (3) gaining *experiential knowledge* by actually interacting with the object (Schlereth 1982, 62). The fieldwork component of this research was conducted mainly from October to December 2005, with follow-up meetings with informants in February and April 2006. I used information sheets about my study and consent forms approved by the Memorial University of Newfoundland Ethics Council in order to insure that everyone whose personal information or comments I considered provided informed consent for participation in this research. I interviewed each of ten knitters individually, one to three times each, in order to gain mediated knowledge of hobby knitting from their perspectives. In keeping with the behavioralistic orientation to material culture studies, which “assumes that each individual is unique in his or her beliefs, values, skills, and motivations” (Schlereth 1982, 58), over the span of my fieldwork I paid close attention, to details of my informants’ personal lives, such as their family situations. By taking note of other elements, beyond knitting, of my informants lives, I have learned how

knitting fits in with their other values, beliefs and behaviours. I obtained referential knowledge by reading knitting books and magazines; in addition, I met with my informants in their homes whenever possible and photographed knitted objects they had produced; and I made experiential contact with hobby knitting by participating in and recording Knit Out Night gatherings at a store called Wool Trends, and by knitting with my informants in coffee shops, bars and in their homes.

Unlike many diachronic studies of distinct cultural groups' artistic expressions (e.g., Salvador; Price), which analyse the socio-economic and demographic factors which have contributed to changes in materials, techniques and aesthetics over time, this study is synchronic. I have studied ten hobbyists' experience with knitting (and crochet) and have considered as much personal information about their lives as possible. I have allowed my image of traditional Newfoundland knitting to be shaped by my informants' images of what is traditional, but I have not focused on judging the differences between the knitted items produced by hobbyists today and those produced in the past. Eli Bartra warns that focusing more on objects than on the artists who create them would be a mistake (7); and Joyce Ice asserts that studying the "process is as important as the product" in feminist readings of material culture (221).

My approach to studying hobby knitting is feminist because my aim is to discover how women today are using traditional knowledge as a force for social change (Greenhill and Tye 329). At the outset of this research, my primary interest was to learn the significance of women choosing to knit today in view of the past when practically all women had to knit to produce necessary clothing for their families. By focusing on material culture – this is to say, the objects knitters produce and their production context

rather than printed patterns – I have avoided the use of the literary linguistic model, which Ice claims “contributes to the unofficial hierarchy of the genre” by giving primacy to the study of verbal, public, masculine cultural creations, and secondary status to domestic, non-verbal, feminine creations (218).

In conducting my research I was aware of using feminist methods for gathering information that are non-hierarchical and that call for the researcher to disclose her own perspective/bias as much as possible. I attempted to honestly inform the knitters I spoke with of my personal belief that knitting as a hobby is a way of aligning myself with women’s culture and of making a feminist political statement. However, I was aware of not focusing on my own opinions in interviews; in my writing I present my informants’ perceptions of and attitudes toward knitting. Also, my choice to use participant observation research methods was motivated by my personal feminist ideals: my desire to have as natural and egalitarian relationships as possible with my informants; and to dispel vestiges of social status disparity between producers of intellectual materials (myself, as an academic researcher) and producers of functional objects (my informants, as knitters).

I met half of my informants through attending a regular gathering of knitters and the other half through chance encounters at community events. My informants are idiosyncratic; this is far from a statistically representative sample. Nonetheless, I speculate that their views and behaviours may be informative of knitters in St. John’s, Newfoundland. Of the ten hobbyists I interviewed, nine are women, one is a man; nine are knitters, one crochets; seven are Newfoundlanders and three are “CFAs” (this is an acronym for “Come-From-Aways”, which is a term used in Newfoundland to refer to people who moved to the province from elsewhere). Their ages range from 21 to 55

years of age. They are middle-class in the Newfoundland context and upper-class in the global context, but they are not affluent: four are salaried employees, three are self-employed, two are students, and one is unemployed but working on a plan for starting a small business. A short description of each of my informants can be found in the appendix. Though I have come to know these people and to consider them my friends – I recognize that we have some common interests – even those whom I met at social events are not people I knew before I began this research. I made deliberate efforts to pick a diverse range of people for my informants and to avoid interviewing people whom I already knew well.

Literature Review

The literature on knitting and craft that my research builds on falls into five main categories: definitional articles which attempt to pinpoint what authentic folk crafts are; writing about studio crafts that theorise what is important about handmade objects in contemporary society; historical analyses of knitting in Newfoundland and Labrador which are written in a somewhat academic style but which may also be of interest to amateurs; theoretical works on the feminist implications of doing crafts, which appeal mainly to academics; and popular and instructional writings aimed at hobbyists.

Definitional articles about folk crafts create criteria to use as a basis on which certain crafts can be categorized as authentically *folk*. For example, Warren Roberts' chapter, "Folk Crafts," in Richard M. Dorson's pivotal work Folklore and Folklife establishes that in order to be considered *folk crafts*, objects must not have been mass-produced; the objects must be used generally across entire populations rather than

restricted to the elite; and the skill for making the objects must have been learned informally. Writers of definitional articles explicitly excluded hobbies within the category of folk crafts because hobbyists' techniques and designs are learned from books. Rather than using the term *folk crafts*, Henry Glassie uses the term *vernacular technology* to refer to handmade objects made out of primary resources that remind both the users and the makers of natural origins and of human endeavour (1992, 49). Like Roberts, Glassie views the existence of written plans for design as "a sign of cultural weakening" (1992, 50). The authors of definitional articles seem to have been motivated by desires to create special status for, and thereby contribute to the preservation of, elements of material culture that they see as especially significant and at risk of disappearing.

Writing on studio crafts focuses on the cultural significance of handmade objects. These articles benefit the craft industry because they help marketers to understand why people choose to buy crafts. Gloria Hickey, for example, argues that giving gifts is a way of forging and maintaining social bonds, and giving crafts as gifts signifies a special relationship between the giver and the receiver because they are considered rare, sophisticated, precious and expressive due to their reference to tradition (1997, 85). Hickey believes that "awareness of craft is often based on exposure to it through leisure activity" (1997, 87). This statement suggests that the existence of studio crafts, which are high-end, handmade objects produced for sale, is to some extent contingent on ordinary people's hobby craft practices.

My ethnographic study of hobby knitting complements academic writing on studio crafts that offer suggestions about the significance of craft in contemporary culture. Paul Greenhalgh's identification of *place* as an issue of concern in the crafts

scene (4) links the literature on studio craft to my discoveries about the meanings of hobby craft practices. Crafts are useful, as consumable products, for “those people who live away from places that identify and give meaning to their cultural heritage” (Greenhalgh10) because crafts “exude a sense of permanence, history and symbolic weight” (Greenhalgh10). The practice of craft as a hobby has a similar function for individuals’ sense of identity. Pocius believes that crafts have meaning as nostalgic invention of “our past – our traditions – through objects that express our own modern values (the handmade, non-mechanized, natural)” (1994, 127). Scholars who write about studio craft, such as Pocius (1994), acknowledge that craft items function in the creation of individual and group identities; my study further explores this process of identity creation by looking at people’s choice to actually create craft objects.

My thesis adds to writing on the history of knitting in Newfoundland, which includes writing focused on knitting styles, as well as the province’s historic knitting institution, called the Newfoundland Outport Nursing and Industrial Association (NONIA). Hickey’s series of articles, entitled “Picking Up Lost Stitches,” which was published in three parts in the Crafts Council Magazine, focuses on the origin and evolution of Newfoundland knitting styles. Hickey illustrates how the socks, caps, sweaters and mittens designs marketed today as “traditional” have their roots in the English and Irish communities from which the first settlers to Newfoundland came. The “Picking Up Lost Stitches” articles were aimed at the members of the Crafts Council of Newfoundland and Labrador, who are professional craftspeople interested in the province’s crafts history but not all are knitters themselves, therefore details are not given for production of knitted garments. Primacy is given to knitting developments rather than

analysis of the importance of the craft for individuals or the cultural significance of the act of knitting. She asserts, “Knitting became fashionable in the 1950s, for that is when women began to knit for themselves” (no pag.). However, because of the emphasis on historical details of the evolution of knitting styles, analysis is not given of the social implications of knitting – this is a gap in the scholarship on knitting that my thesis helps to fill.

Accounts have been written about the history of NONIA, a charitable organization that offered an opportunity for outport women to earn money by knitting. Edgar House’s writing about NONIA focuses on the administration and the people who ran the association. The association would buy hand-knit garments and resell them, at first in England and later in the NONIA shop in St. John’s. NONIA knitters were – and continue to be – provided with patterns to knit specific designs. The objective of this fundraising via knitting was to provide families with supplemental income which would allow them to pay nurses to provide medical services in their communities. Many Newfoundlanders continue to have great esteem for NONIA as an institution and for the quality of NONIA knitwear. One of the knitters I spoke with said she was flattered that someone from NONIA offered to pay her to knit for the association because she believes the association’s products are “high quality and NONIA has a good history but I like to choose my own patterns and colours” (Erin 02-11-06). Lynda Harling Stalker’s sociology Master’s thesis explores the dynamics of the homework economic system. Her writing demonstrates how traditional craft plays a role in the lives of Newfoundlanders through a study of women who knit for NONIA (known as NONIA knitters). She found that though her informants were paid for their knitting by the association, they were

motivated to knit more to pass time and to have structure in their lives than to earn a wage or to be creative. NONIA's system of buying hand-knit items and selling them in the St. John's shop continues today.

Pocius' Textile Traditions of Eastern Newfoundland falls into several categories: definitional in so far as textile crafts enumerated in this book are defined as *traditional*; historical to the extent that past techniques are documented; and theoretical because he discusses the functioning of aesthetics in folk cultures. Pocius describes the entire process of producing textiles from raising sheep to shearing and spinning wool, to quilting blankets, hooking rugs and knitting garments. Pocius' findings include: that the most common knitted articles were mitts (1979, 23); that except for black and grey produced from the wool of black sheep, there was little colour available for decoration; and that women placed greater value on proper form than on innovative cosmetic designs (1979, 57). His study also found that a specific mental template existed which was "used to maintain the stability of the self-adjusting tradition by providing clear notions of what is good from generation to generation" (1979, 61). He believed that the decline in crafts, due to increased prosperity and social changes, might lead to the decline of traditional aesthetics. However, in his subsequent case study, "Newfoundland Traditional Crafts: Types and Stereotypes" – which is a theoretical discussion of the evolution of Newfoundland craft aesthetics – Pocius concluded that his informant's decorative crafts, made for her own recreation rather than to fulfill needs for warm clothing, were "the modern manifestation of a long tradition, aesthetically-speaking, if not in function" (1981, 20).

Rozsika Parker's historical study of the feminist use of embroidery engages in a theoretical discussion about the difference between art and craft. She believes the distinction is made based on who makes the objects and where they are made: crafts are expected to be produced domestically, by women; whereas art is produced by men, in public places (5). Parker points out that embroidery has a history of being used by women to gain power by depicting words and iconography of resistance, as suffragettes did on banners (197); because this activity is considered harmlessly feminine, it goes unsanctioned by patriarchal forces. Another example of research aimed at discovering the feminist messages in women's crafts is Linda Pershing's case study of the iconography on a "Sunbonnet Sue quilt," which depicts a girl (Sue) with an oversized sunbonnet covering her face. She points out how women may subtly manipulate the passive iconography typical of textile crafts to make feminist statements and take power. In addition, Pershing demonstrates how Joan Newlon Radner and Susan S. Lanser's theory of feminist coding strategies is applicable to the material culture women produce; for example, the quilters in her study appropriated male gender roles by depicting Sunbonnet Sue in male poses such as slouching and smoking a cigarette.

Despite the writing of authors mentioned above, knitting has attracted little academic attention and the bulk of the writing on knitting is found in how-to manuals aimed at knitters. These books generally provide a mixture of information including some social history of knitting; written and illustrative descriptions of how to knit; and patterns for creating specific objects. One of my informants reported she especially enjoys the historical descriptions of the origins of the mitten patterns in Hansen's Flying Geese & Partridge Feet: More Mittens from Up North and Down East. This book is laid

out with knitting patterns on the left hand pages and histories on the opposite, right hand, pages.

Other knitting books, such as Debbie Stoller's Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook and Stitch 'n Bitch Nation, provide details about the designers, often hobby knitters themselves, who created the patterns. This may contribute to the knitters who read the books' sense that designing their own patterns, and even publishing them, is achievable. The orality of Stoller's writing style, the attractive layout and glossy photos not only add to the appeal of the books but also enhance the image of knitting as an easy, enjoyable activity. (I describe and analyse the significance of the Stitch 'n Bitch books in chapter four.) Stoller's second book, as well as Elizabeth Zimmerman's Knitting Without Tears, emphasise instructions on how to alter commercial patterns and to create original designs. Although these books appear to contribute to the move away from the unselfconscious, self-adjusting tradition of design in folk cultures that Pocius identified in Newfoundland (1979), they also make sustaining the traditional practice of knitting possible.

I have explicitly avoided making this thesis into a primarily definitional argument showing how contemporary knitters' productions might be considered authentic folk crafts, in order to heed Regina Bendix' warning that searching for *authentic* culture may lead to exclusion. I do not want to set up a definition of authenticity that would create qualifying criteria for some hobby knitting while excluding some as fake. The problems with creating criteria for authenticity are the same as those for bounded definitions of identity which cannot be maintained in culturally plural environments: they inevitably imply subjugation (Abrahams 199). Hierarchies are established based on peoples' needs

for exclusive definitions, such as the distinction between art and craft or between studio craft and hobby craft, and exclusive identities, which lead to ethnic conflict (Abrahams 207). I have followed Bendix's suggestion to "eschew value judgements distinguishing between real and fake and become interested in description of the performance and the setting" (209).

My research objectives were to learn why people today choose to knit as a hobby; to discover the link between knitting today and traditional knitting; and to document knitters' experiences, productions and practices.

Chapter Outline

In the following thesis, I will discuss three different ways in which women today are using the tradition of knitting in three chapters. In the conclusion I will draw together the three arguments with some general observations about the progression of tradition and the function of hobby knitting for contemporary urban women.

Chapter two, "Learning to Knit and Practicing Knitting as a Hobby: Cultural Continuity and Conspicuous Conformity," focuses on the implications of being introduced to knitting during childhood in domestic settings. Although most of my informants did not initially sustain the practice of knitting, they made conscious choices to take up knitting as a hobby some time during adulthood. In this chapter, I describe some of my informants' recollections of learning to knit during childhood and the associations which they formed between knitting and home, family and cultural belonging. I also consider the significance of factors present in knitters' personal lives influencing their decisions to relearn to knit. Based on what knitters have told me about

their hobby knitting practices and their associations with the craft, I conclude that knitting is a tool women use to express conformity to traditional gender roles within families. Knitters take pride in having and sharing a skill that they see as admirable in part because of its association with their foremothers. This conformity provides knitters with reassurance about their belonging to their culture and their families.

In chapter three, “How and What Hobby Knitters Knit,” I describe the process of knitting as it has been demonstrated to me by my informants, and analyse the objects they produce. I also describe the tools and materials hobby knitters use. I compare the aesthetics of contemporary hobby knitters’ productions with the traditional aesthetic rules for Newfoundland crafts which Pocius identified in 1981. My objective in this part of my research was to determine whether/how the aesthetics for hand-knit items have changed. With photographs and descriptions, I present typical forms for Newfoundland hand-knit objects (i.e., warm, functional garments) and whimsical, decorative objects produced by hobby knitters. Among both the typical and non-typical forms I found conformity to the traditional aesthetic rules of using symmetry, borders, bright colours and recycled materials. Hobbyists use knitting as an outlet for innovation to assert their individuality, and as a means of demonstrating their cultural belonging by conforming to both traditional aesthetics and contemporary fashion trends.

The fourth chapter, “Reinvention: The World of Knitting Culture Today,” focuses on group knitting events and hobby knitting as a popular culture trend. Whereas the previous two chapters explore how hobby knitting is used to create links with the past, this chapter analyses hobby knitting using feminist and popular culture theory to understand how knitting unites my informants to contemporary western culture. Though

there are a variety of mass-media sources through which hobby knitting is promoted, including books, magazines and websites, I have chosen to focus on two books by Debbie Stoller, Stitch 'n Bitch: the Knitter's Handbook and its sequel, Stitch 'n Bitch Nation, because my informants identified them as proof of knitting's popularity today. Stoller promotes the formation of knitting groups to knit in public places, which she terms *Stitch 'n Bitches* (Stoller 2003, 115). I will explain how my informants express coded feminist messages (Radner and Lanser 1993) to justify their participation in the public knitting event I studied, called Knit Out Night. The evasive pleasures (Fiske 50) that they take from spending time knitting in a women-only space allows them to amass strength to take productive pleasure (Fiske 55), that is to make shifts in power in their relationships with their families.

In the conclusion, Chapter five, I will draw my three main arguments together by elaborating on how hobby knitting demonstrates Glassie's theory of tradition as constantly evolving based on the influences of the past and the needs of present-day users. Hobby knitting is used to sustain memories and feelings of the past my informants gained from their first introductions to knitting. My discussion in Chapter three of the objects knitters produce will lead to my concluding discussion of the perpetuation of Christopher Alexander's *homeostatic process*². In addition, my discussion of knitters' reinvention of knitting to serve their contemporary needs for leisure time and a sense of belonging will allow me to make an over-all conclusion that the use of hobby knitting

² Alexander's notion of the homeostatic process is a self-organizing system of design in which the builders and users of forms share a common culture and understanding of unspoken formal rules. Builders who produce forms unselfconsciously, with little thought about design, limited division of labour, and no written records or intercultural exchange (33), consistently produce objects of good fit (38). The homeostatic process depends on the basic principle of adaptation, "that reaction to misfits and non-reaction to good fits will lead to equilibrium but this process takes time and cultural stability" (50).

today relates to the culture in Newfoundland of having a sense of belonging based on place and the sharing of spaces and resources (Pocius 1991).

Chapter 2. Learning to Knit and Practicing Knitting as a Hobby: **Cultural Continuity and Conspicuous Conformity**

Hobby knitters I have spoken with recall having been taught to knit at home when they were children. Learning to knit served as a promoter of cultural continuity because, though my informants grew up in settings where knitting was not used as a means of producing much clothing domestically, living members of their families, such as grandmothers, great aunts, and cousins, had knit necessary work clothes. These family members are the ones who introduced my informants to knitting. Through their introductions to knitting, hobby knitters learned to associate the activity with their families and culture, and also with the domestic and social values of previous generations.

For my informants from Newfoundland, knitting became a symbol of Newfoundland identity because they learned from people, and in places, that are symbols of Newfoundland and of home to them. Later in life, they used relearning to knit as a means of creating a link with the past. Some hobby knitters use knitting to boldly display their conformity to traditional values, especially gender roles within families.

In this chapter, I will provide an overview of my informants' experiences of learning to knit. My research has found that learning to knit reinforces specific relationships between knitters and their knitting teachers, and also affirms their sense of belonging as Newfoundlanders. For both Newfoundlanders and CFAs the act of knitting helps them to assert their membership in the Newfoundland cultural group. For example, for Helen, who is a CFA, knitting helps her to feel a part of the broad community of Newfoundlanders because knitting is a common interest she shares with her coworkers;

and for Kaya, Gillian and Erin, who were born in Newfoundland, knitting is an activity they engage in with their elderly relatives, whom they believe are more representative of Newfoundland culture than they are, and with whom they have little else in common. Learning to knit offers knitters a sense of belonging by allowing them to gain a skill that they associate with Newfoundland.

The most common pattern in my informants' experience of learning to knit is: first, being introduced to knitting when they were children; and then later, seeking assistance to relearn to knit as adults. The one-on-one, oral teaching method, which is used for teaching knitting, fosters intimacy between the student and the teacher and serves to solidify their relationship. Knitters are firmly in favour of person-to-person instruction because they believe that some techniques are much more easily learned by seeing them demonstrated than by following printed directions. For example, when the time came for Sue to make the buttonholes for her cardigan sweater, she waited to begin this step until she could sit down with Hazel Abbott, the owner of Wool Trends, to have the steps explained and shown to her. Knitters learned by trial-and-error practice – which is to say, their mistakes were corrected by a seasoned expert, as they went along. In addition to solidifying specific relationships and knitters' sense of group membership, the apprenticeship model of passing on knitting skills promotes cultural continuity and conformity to societal values, such as appreciation of handmade objects and respect for the rural self-sufficiency lifestyle of the (supposedly) true Newfoundlander.³ Through their learning experience, knitters came to associate knitting with the emotions and values

³ Mythologies of rural Newfoundland (Overton, and Narváez) are a dominant part of middle-class, urban Newfoundland culture. Being taught to knit by people who symbolize that lifestyle and who knitters admire for their knitting skills contributes to sustaining the image of the goodness of bygone times and ways of producing objects.

that the people who taught them to knit represent: these include domestic calm, maternal security and competence, rural self-sufficiency, and working-class inventiveness.

Knitting reminds Kaya, for example, of her paternal relatives' hardworking, rural lifestyle: she said, "I'm really proud of them for all the work they put in" (10-23-05). I will first describe knitters' recollections of their childhood experiences of being introduced to knitting; then I will discuss their experiences of relearning to knit as adults; and finally I will describe how some knitters use their hobby knitting deliberately to promote social cohesion, cultural continuity and to demonstrate their conformity to dominant social values, in particular to traditional gender norms for women.

Learning to knit during childhood

Invariably, the hobby knitters I spoke with reported having been shown how to knit when they were children by a well-meaning, older (usually female) relative or close family friend. My informants first learned to knit when they were between four and twelve years old. While for some knitters, learning to knit at this early age was self-instigated – Kaya, for example, remembers wanting to do what her grandmother did so she asked to be taught to knit. Others were taught to knit simply as a matter of course because knitting was a part of the standard training for girls.

Knitting instruction took place in domestic settings and in an informal way, so knitting was imbued with connotations of routine and everydayness. For example, Kaya, who spent the summers of her childhood with her grandparents, and Martina, whose grandmother lived in the same household as she did, described a scene that included sitting on the couch in the kitchen or the family room with the television on, showing a

soap opera, while their grandmothers taught them to knit. Martina said, “I think my grandmother taught me to knit just to keep me out from under foot. When I was really, really, really young – like probably four years old [...]. She taught me on those little white plastic pins with square heads on them that women used to use to put rollers in their hair.” (10-17-05).

Many knitters told me that they remember learning the primary stitch used in making knitted fabric right away rather than starting with the process called “casting on,” which is necessary for establishing the knitting: for example Kaya said, “at first, she [Kaya’s grandmother] would actually do all the casting on for me” (11-18-05). The teachers demonstrated the knit stitch by holding my informants’ hands to give them a feel for the movement required to produce stitches. (In Chapter 3, I will describe, with words and images, the process of knitting.) Most knitters remember knitting every row, back and forth, in garter stitch, for their first knitting projects: these were mostly scarves for themselves (Lewis, Hazel) and for their dolls (Martina). Other childhood projects my informants remember include a pointed hat (Kaya), a burgundy sweater with balls on it (Laura), a pair of mittens (Laura), and *practice* strings (Sue). Some knitters were made to *practice* knitting, only a few stitches – a string – before they began making useable items. This was a major source of frustration for those beginners who had their sights set on producing the kinds of items their teachers made. Kaya, Martina, Laura, Hazel and Helen also remember learning the purl stitch, as children, and how to increase and decrease stitches. They sat next to their teachers and learned by a process of trial and error in which their mistakes were immediately pointed out and corrected. If they got confused, or accidentally dropped or added stitches, the teacher would fix the mistakes and then

hand the knitting back to the learner to continue with. The intimacy of the setting and of the literally hands-on way knitting was taught contributed to knitters' feeling that they formed a special relationship with the people who taught them to knit as children: for example, Martina said, "Even though, I think she might have taught me just to keep me out from under foot, once I learned it was nice because it was something we could do together" (10-17-05).

Lewis's story of learning to knit demonstrates how the education process can itself be functional for providing family support. Despite being a man, and hence a rarity among knitters, Lewis's feelings about knitting, which grew out of his learning experience, are common to other knitters.

So I learned to knit. Yeah. Yeah. It was interesting: I was actually probably about ten years old; it was me and, my twin brother, Les. So we were home and my mother had just suffered a loss [a miscarriage] and it was pretty serious to her. And she used to knit and all that kind of stuff. And she wasn't feeling so well as a result of this loss so we thought we'd do a little something to cheer her up, so to speak, so we asked her to teach us to knit. That was the sole purpose at this point, to start knitting. So she taught the two of us to knit. So what we'd do is, we'd hang around where she was to and we'd start it off. Then we'd ask her, "how about this?" and "how about that, now." "How do you start this?" or "How do you end this?" or "How do I get this next row started?" [As he told this story, Lewis demonstrated the small, uncertain, knitting movements of a child.] So for us it was pretty important and it made her feel pretty good. We'd go to work [on knitting] and we really didn't know how to stop. The scarf ended up being about 15 feet long and it was multi-coloured. You'd use what ever you had around. You'd get her to show you how to wire in the new colour. And after that, when there was no wool left for each person you'd just [unravel it] and start again. Maybe the sole purpose [of learning to knit] was to interact with mom and make her feel a bit better (11-09-05).

Lewis's memories of learning to knit illustrate feelings that many of my informants express: that the social relationships enhanced through this transfer of skills are more memorable and important than the actual objects produced by knitting. For Lewis, distracting his mother from the pain of mourning was the primary function of knitting. Unravelling his knitting to start over again when he ran out of wool was not

troubling to Lewis because he was more interested in the educational process. He used learning to knit – acquiring a practical skill – to broach an emotionally difficult issue. Lewis recognized his mother’s struggle, but because of their gender and generational difference he could not talk with her about the situation; thus learning to knit was a neutral activity that facilitated conversation and allowed Lewis to express care for his mother and appreciation of her skill.

Because knitting requires fine movements, Lewis and his brother had to be very close to their mother in order to get help with their knitting. This gave them an excuse to be around her. While Lewis remembers being motivated to learn to knit by wanting to provide comfort to his mother, the closeness to her may also have been an important source of comfort for the boys at this time of domestic stress caused by the miscarriage. Lewis used knitting to create a sense of domestic calm. The first scarf that Lewis and his brother made, using their mother’s left-over yarn, is symbolic to him of rural Newfoundlanders’ resourcefulness and creativity. His predominant association with his childhood is of “making and fixing anything we could” (11-09-05) and “using whatever stuff we could get for free or from the woods” (11-09-05). Now that he lives in St. John’s, he believes learning to knit is a “good way for city people to get a taste of what it was like to live in a place where we had to make our own fun” and of ensuring that the rural way of life continues to be valued (11-09-05).

Many of my informants use knitting to express allegiances with rural Newfoundland and to affirm their own belonging as Newfoundlanders. This is especially important to those who were born in Newfoundland, but those who have moved to the province from other places also use knitting to assert their belonging and their greater

affinity for the rural, rather than urban, lifestyle. Both Newfoundlanders and CFAs take advantage of knitting's identification in contemporary, urban Newfoundland culture, as an essential element of the rural self-sufficiency lifestyle which is both emblematic of Newfoundland⁴ and symbolic of a better way of life. For example, Lewis attributes his interest in knitting to the values he grew up with, in particular his belief that being able to build and repair all sorts of domestic objects is highly admirable. Since he moved to a suburban area of St. John's, he has observed that people who grow up in the city are surrounded by entertainment options and consumer goods, so youth have no incentive to "make their own fun" or to learn handicraft skills (11-09-05). He said, "[Knitting is] something that I think is probably pretty important. If I were to have a son now, or a daughter, I would be encouraging them to do a bit of knitting and to learn that stuff, even if they had to go and take a course to learn to do it. Of course, I would prefer if they could learn from somebody [in the family], but nonetheless I think it's a pretty important part of our heritage" (11-09-05).

Knitting is closely associated with the domestic settings (and the women who inhabited those settings) in which Lewis (Figure 1) and other hobby knitters learned to knit and witnessed family members knitting. When they think of knitting they think of their family homes, of their own worry-free childhoods, and of times when life was simpler. Laura's words exemplify this association: "hearing that clickety, clickety, click [of knitting needles] is just a comforting sound – it reminds me of being a kid" (10-29-05). Memories of learning to knit remind them of their connections with their family and

⁴ As James Overton claims, "mythologies" about Newfoundland have been formed by a "bourgeoning neo-nationalist movement" made up of middle-class "academics, politicians and artists" (102). The mythologies of rural Newfoundland include images of jolly people enjoying self-sufficiency activities. Making the necessities of life has come to be equated with the virtuous activity of making one's own fun.

their culture. The activity of knitting conjures up these positive associations and provides knitters with a general sense of wellbeing. Thus, for knitters themselves and for others, knowing how to knit is a source of concrete proof of their membership in their family and cultural group.



Figure 1: Lewis posing, in his home, in St. John's, with hats made for him by a neighbour he grew up with.

The oral teaching system provides those who learn to knit with immediate response, and thus allows them to hone their skills quickly and to experience the satisfaction of successfully producing objects. Hobby knitters who have knit more or less continuously since their first introduction to knitting are those who lived with, or nearby, the person who taught them to knit; these knitters reported witnessing the production of marvellous, elaborate sweaters and other functional knitwear, which they longed to be able to make. In addition, living with her knitting teacher meant Martina was able to get immediate feedback and to build enthusiasm for knitting. The experiences of being taught to knit by a relative or another member of their community, in their homes, and of

routinely seeing people knitting, have reinforced knitters' belief that knitting is an important part of their culture.

However, many hobby knitters reported their first introduction to knitting, during childhood, did not inspire them to keep knitting. Some of them remember learning to knit during childhood as an unpleasant experience imposed on them by people who thought knitting skills were essential. They believe their first teachers were unable to make knitting engaging for children because the emphasis was placed on learning the mechanics of knitting rather than on the production of useful objects. Sue said, her grandmother "should have at least taught me to make a scarf or something" (10-15-05). During childhood, Sue was made to "practice" knitting just a few stitches, as an exercise that produced a narrow cord with no apparent function beyond that of a piece of string or a book mark; this sort of knitting experience caused frustration and led some of my informants to "think that knitting was a boring, useless waste of time" (Sue, 10-15-05).

Having been introduced to knitting early in life contributed to some hobby knitters' choice to develop the skill later in life because they learned that knitting was a cultural norm for adult women. For example, once Sue married, left her community in rural New Brunswick and developed an urban, middle-class lifestyle, she began to view learning to knit as a challenge to be overcome in order to avoid feeling she had failed to learn an important woman's skill that her grandmother had attempted to pass on. Sue adamantly stated, one of her primary reason for choosing to relearn to knit is, "I don't want to get to the end of my life and have any regrets or feel like I didn't rise to the challenge" (Sue 10-14-05). In sum, other knitters' choices to relearn to knit are

motivated by a variety of factors which include the associations they formed with knitting during their childhood introductions to the craft.

Relearning to knit during adulthood

Relearning to knit during adulthood with the goal of having a hobby that has positive cultural and familial associations is common among knitters. Often, their renewed interest in knitting comes at a time of transition in their lives, such as leaving their parents' home, or moving away from or back to Newfoundland. Sue, Helen, Kathleen and Gillian report being inspired to relearn to knit, at these times, by friends or colleagues who were keen knitters, and by wanting to have a meaningful and "useful hobby" (Sue 11-14-05). Acquiring the skills to knit as a hobby during adulthood is used by knitters as a means of communicating their valuation of women's domestic production and their personal identities as members of their families and cultural groups.

Several of my informants who relearned to knit as adults found the learning process much easier and more rewarding than learning to knit during childhood. For example, Erin said, "I was always interested [in knitting]. I just couldn't sit down that long. I was a real fidget as a kid and it's just in the last couple of years that I've been able to sit down for more than five minutes at a time" (11-26-05). In addition, as adult learners they were able to pick first projects that were immediately useful to them, such as Sue's dishcloths, or ambitious projects that they were motivated to finish and are extremely proud of, such as Gillian's first sweater. Furthermore, being able to purchase materials rather than having to knit with whatever materials were provided to them, as they did when they were children, is a factor that encouraged some to relearn. Helen, for

example, claims to have been motivated to take up knitting by beautiful materials she saw for sale at a knitting supplies store and that she wanted to work with.

Some of my informants relearned to knit upon realizing that they were not contributing tangible objects to society. Among my informants there are students, musicians, teachers, writers, and office workers, who do not create objects as a part of their jobs. For example, knitting offers Erin an activity that contrasts the more oral, dominant activities in her life, which are teaching and playing the trumpet. Learning to knit as adults provides knitters with self-confidence and a sense of their productiveness in their families and communities. For example, Kathleen, who is a writer, said that learning to crochet makes her feel “like a real person” because she can produce practical items that others, especially her husband and daughter, appreciate (12-09-05); and Sue, who is currently unemployed, explained that knitting gifts is a way for her to save money and thereby assuage her guilt about not earning money (11-14-05).

My informants from Newfoundland report having chosen to relearn to knit at times when their place in the world, or their identity, was uncertain due to moving. When they lived away from Newfoundland or were living in St. John’s rather than in the more rural communities they identify as home, relearning to knit provided a *portable sense of place*⁵ that reminded them “of the people back home who knit” (Lewis 11-09-05) items they grew up with, and of the lifestyle of these places. Similarly, when Martina, a

⁵ Paul Greenhalgh, who writes about the place of fine crafts in the world today, believes that the handmade objects themselves provide people with a portable sense of place. This explains why crafts are popular as souvenirs and why “peoples who, for whatever reason, live away from the places that identify and give meaning to their cultural heritage, create places by surrounding themselves with artefacts” (10). For my informants, it is the making of artefacts, rather than simply having them, which fulfills their need for a sense of place.

lifelong knitter, moved back to Newfoundland, after living “away” for five years, she found herself knitting with renewed vigour.

The hobby knitters I spoke with selected people to teach them to knit whom they admired and wished to emulate. My informants commonly used effusively complimentary terms to describe the people who inspired them to relearn to knit, for example, “she’s just *so* creative” (Helen 11-22-05) and “she’s the best knitter I’ve ever seen” (Erin 11-26-05). Their knitting teachers embodied motherly competence at the times when my informants craved home and domestic stability, or self-confidence at knitting creatively when my informants were uncertain of their place in the community due to not producing valued objects. Some knitters recognize, in retrospect, that part of their motivation for relearning to knit may have been simply to spend time with the people who taught them to knit. Others, such as Kaya, said that they relearned to knit in order to express their admiration for the legacy of women’s work, of which knitting is a part.

While every knitter who chooses to relearn to knit as an adult is clearly influenced by unique circumstances, Gillian’s experience of relearning to knit when she was nineteen years old and living in Vancouver, 6000km away from St. John’s, demonstrates common themes in knitters’ stories: the transmission of knitting skills provides reassurance of individual identity, group membership and familial connectedness.

Gillian recounted:

I hitchhiked [to Vancouver] with my boyfriend, at that time. And when I got there, I hated it so much – I really was miserable. I’m from here, and this is a comfortably small enough place for me. And I got to Vancouver, and it just seemed so big and so unwieldy and so massive, and I was very lonely and sad. And things weren’t very good with my boyfriend either and there were things happening at home, [in Newfoundland]. *Anyway*, I ended up working in this toy store, called “It’s All Fun and Games.” And I made friends with this woman,

Jasmine Crawford who was 36 and had a daughter, and she was a big knitter. And she told me that she started knitting when she was pregnant because she really couldn't do anything else, after a while, she was just so pregnant. Anyhow, I really wanted to learn to knit again and she took the time [to teach me]. She became like a surrogate mother to me. She had a pattern that she's sort of made up herself for a circular needles sweater. And I wanted something big, like an ambitious project, so I started making that sweater (10-18-05).

Gillian said, her feelings of homesickness and anonymity were somewhat quelled by learning to knit because the activity reminded her of members of her own family, especially her grandmother, and because spending time with Jasmine Crawford fulfilled Gillian's desire for familial interaction. Learning to knit, when she was in Vancouver, was a comfort to her because it was familiar and connoted the better, simpler lifestyle she has always felt Newfoundland offers.

For the knitters I spoke with who were born in Newfoundland knitting is a symbol of their homes, which they used to remind themselves of home wherever they are. Gillian's experience of relearning to knit as an adult living away from Newfoundland, may appear to have been motivated by a desire to have a connection with a co-worker, but for her the importance was feeling she was participating in one of life's simple virtues. Knitting's positive association with Newfoundland – or with home in general – is used by knitters to cope with the forces of urbanization and independence. Learning to knit from someone who “was like a surrogate mother” (10-18-05) was Gillian's way of coping with turmoil in her relationship with her boyfriend, and her feelings of discomfort with the anonymity of urban life. Gillian associates knitting with her home province but also with her family because she remembers both of her grandmothers as “fervent, ardent knitters” (10-18-05). When she was away from Newfoundland, learning this skill confirmed her relationships with family and of her membership in a distinct cultural group. As mentioned above, rural-to-urban migrants within Newfoundland, such as

Lewis, believe knitting is a meaningful way of retaining their connections with the places where they spent their formative years and where they feel that they belong.

My informants who moved to Newfoundland from other places use learning knitting skills as a tool for asserting their membership in their new community and as a tool for social engagement. For example, Sue and Helen mentioned appreciating the social contact with Newfoundlanders that Knit Out Night offers them and looking forward to interacting with Hazel whenever they need help with their knitting. CFA knitters said they sometimes get tired of being reminded of their outsider status in Newfoundland even though they have lived in the province for many years and that knitting allows them to participate in an activity that is valued by local people and associated with true Newfoundland identity. For example, Kathleen, who was born in England but grew up in Newfoundland, knows she is not truly accepted as a Newfoundlander but she feels that producing useful items by crocheting has increased her husband's valuation of her skills and contribution to society: she said, once she learned to crochet, "he started to see me as a *real worker*" (12-09-05).

In short, relearning to knit during adulthood serves as a response to ideological and identity questions. Knitters who judge contribution to society in terms of objects produced but do not work in jobs that entail the creation of objects solve their dilemma by acquiring skills to produce useful objects in their free time. They use relearning to knit to resolve their concerns about membership in their cultural group and connectedness with their families. In addition to continuing to reassure themselves of their place in society, once the skills are acquired, hobby knitters use the activity ongoingly or periodically to overtly demonstrate their allegiance to the values connoted by knitting.

The benefits of having learned to knit

Just as other forms of folklore do, knitting promotes cultural continuity through the repetition of messages about cultural norms, values, beliefs, and aesthetics. (In Chapter 3, I will explore how hobbyists choose to conform to and to reject aesthetic norms for crafts.) Learning the technique of knitting is functional (Bascom) in that it links today's hobbyists to previous generations of knitters. Laura believes that carrying out the same knitting procedures used for hundreds of years to produce ordinary, functional objects, teaches appreciation for the work of previous generations. In addition, Erin pointed out that knitting has taught her to have greater respect for the labour and resources that go into all of the objects in her life. Throughout most of Newfoundland's history knitting was a routine part of women's work; conversely, today, knitting is a middle class leisure activity (Hickey 1997, 87). As a result, hobby knitting offers people the opportunity to participate in an element of the lifestyle of the past, and to have something in common with diverse members of society. Knitting today is used by some knitters, in particular by Sue, to maintain the traditional role of women as domestic producers.

Knitting as a source of integration between generations, social groups, and cultures

While knitting is an inherently item-centred, productive activity, for contemporary hobby knitters the social benefits of knitting are often more significant than the items they create. As discussed above, learning to knit offers an opportunity for learners and teachers to interact intimately, and knitting provides a link between generations that reinforces hobby knitters' sense of belonging in Newfoundland because

it allows them to feel that they are *like* the people they see as true Newfoundlanders. The transmission of knitting skills provides both learners and teachers with a sense of cultural continuity. Another benefit my informants attribute to having learned to knit is the humanizing, integrating effect of having a skill in common with people from different social and cultural groups.

Many knitters emphasized the opportunity for making meaningful connections with older relatives as a benefit of having learned to knit. This demonstrates the importance they place on intergenerational connections, their valuation of social cohesion and cultural continuity. The knitters I spoke with have a strong interest in maintaining family connections and being aware of their histories; they feel guilty that they do not know more about their older relatives' way of life and learning to knit helps them to appease this guilt. When Gillian, Kaya and Erin visit their elderly aunts, mothers-in-law and grandmothers, they told me, they bring their knitting because – in Erin's words – “they might fall asleep on you, so you've got to have something to do, but also they just like it; they like to see that two generations later people are still doing it” (11-26-05). Knitters sometimes bring their knitting queries when they visit elderly relatives who are experienced knitters. Getting assistance from a family member serves to periodically reaffirm associations knitters have between learning to knit and their families, and also their valuation of family for passing on culturally important skills. For example, Gillian described one of her recent visits to her grandmother, in the hospital, as being somewhat upsetting because while her grandmother wanted to help Gillian with her knitting, “she can't really [knit anymore] because the arthritis in her hands is really bad now and she has dementia” (11-25-05). Gillian's regret about not being able to have her grandmother

assist her with her knitting reflects a common feeling among contemporary hobby knitters that this is a skill that should be learned and practiced among families, especially in Newfoundland.

Some knitters praise knitting as an implement of social cohesion within their own families because knitting bridges ideology and generation gaps. These knitters find it difficult to sustain conversation and making connections with much older members of their families, who have lived their entire lives in different social contexts and who have contrasting social values. Examples of contentious issues between my informants and their relatives include: sexual orientation (Gillian); language (Sue); religion (Sue); whether to pursue university education (Kaya); and whether to live alone or to have a family (Martina). Knitting provides my informants with a diversion from the lifestyle differences between themselves and their relatives by giving them a common focus that is in no way controversial. Talking about knitting with their relatives gives my informants the feeling that they are making meaningful connections and that they are a part of the family group. For example, Kaya said that, since learning to knit, chatting on the phone about knitting with “my grandmother is nice because I get to bond with her and I feel like a good granddaughter” (11-18-05). While Kaya has lived most of her life in St. John’s and is currently a university student, Kaya’s paternal grandmother lived her entire life in Buchans and had little opportunity for education. Hence, Kaya feels they have little common ground for conversation, but knitting helps to remedy this problem.

Almost every hobby knitter has stories of connections with their relatives that have been enhanced through knitting, and many others have stories about friendships formed through knitting. For example, Gillian recounted how knowing how to knit

allowed her to bond with Janet Moore, an elderly woman with Down's syndrome. Gillian worked in L'Arche, Cape Breton, a planned community for people with disabilities where her role was to simply be a presence in the community. Janet and Gillian would sit together for hours knitting and joking with one another. At the end of the day Janet would unravel her knitting and start over again the next day because the knitting was more about spending time together than about completing an object. Gillian explained that she really liked Janet and that the feeling must have been mutual because despite her memory deficit, Janet recognized and was pleased to see Gillian when she returned to L'Arche after having been away for a year. Gillian's and Janet's friendship demonstrates that knitting not only provides a link between the generations, but also serves to humanize and integrate people.

The activity of knitting provides knitters with an instant link with other knitters from far away places, and also a means of starting conversations when travelling. For example, when she spent time in the Himalayas as a Canada World Youth volunteer, Erin used knitting to solidify friendships by producing mittens for people in need and by demonstrating how to knit. In addition, she had meaningful interactions with local people through comparing knitting techniques when she travelled in Eastern Europe. Just as other knitters send their knitted items to friends and family who live away from Newfoundland, since she has returned to St. John's, Erin sends mittens she knits to friends made while travelling. She commented, "I like sending things I knit from traditional patterns to my friends in other places. It's a good way of spreading Newfoundland culture" (11-12-05). Just as Kaya recognizes the benefit of knitting for providing an element of common culture to share with her grandmother, and Gillian was

able to benefit from knitting as a means of community integration at L'Arche, Cape Breton, Erin attempts to facilitate integration across international boundaries.

Knitting's use as a medium for promoting cultural continuity

A common practice among Newfoundland hobby knitters is to knit for anyone who requests a particular knitted item and supplies the knitter with materials. While at first glance I perceived this practice as primarily indicating the low value placed on knitting skills, through my conversations with knitters I have come to understand their willingness to knit for acquaintances or even strangers as a gesture of commitment to community and an attempt to maintain the culture of sharing skills and resources that is ubiquitous in rural Newfoundland. Knitting for others, my informants pointed out, also provides them with the secondary benefits of having their skills recognized; of allowing them to practice their hobby without always having to spend their own money on knitting supplies; and of giving them a push to try new projects, techniques and materials and thereby to enhance their knitting skills. In his study of the use of space in a Newfoundland outport, Calvert, Pocius found that the sharing of natural resources and spaces was the basis of community and also individual identity (1991). My informants' comments demonstrate that sharing knitting skills without expecting reciprocation of any particular kind has a similar social function – for solidifying connections among community members.

Some knitters told me they believe that knitting for members of their community is a part of their culture and they are proud to never charge for their knitting. For example, Laura compares her own practice of knitting for anyone who asks her to with

her grandmother's knitting for charities, such as the Red Cross, to help out neighbours with large families, and for bachelors who had no female relatives to knit for them. Some knitters develop specialties for knitting particular items, such as socks and mittens, for which they become known among their friends, families and colleagues, and so receive regular requests: for example, Betty Loo Waylen has become known among her acquaintances as a sock knitter and there is an elderly man who asks her to knit multiple pairs every year before Christmas and he gives them as gifts to his relatives. Not only do they enjoy the process of knitting, but they also enjoy seeing hand-knit items in use, because these remind them of the past and the way of life they associate with home and their childhood. Laura's comment, "you don't see kids in hand-knit stuff much anymore, but it's nice because it shows that there are other people like us who still care – I remember always wearing sweaters my grandmother made for skating and playing outside" (10-17-05), reflects the sentiments of other hobby knitters.

Knitters said that it is not necessary to have their labour recognized by the person who eventually receives the knitted object as a gift. Being asked to knit is sufficient recognition of skill. Rather than taking offence at being asked to knit without monetary recompense, knitters are flattered because requests signify that their knitting is recognized as high quality. In sum, this practice of knitting for anyone who requests is some hobby knitters' way of contributing to the persistence of hand-knit garments in the everyday experience of Newfoundlanders.

While they regret the high price of hand knit goods in St. John's shops, hobby knitters are acutely aware of the problem of the low price of knit clothing from the perspective of professional crafts people who count on the sale of knitwear to make a

living. All of my informants agreed that they wish knitters could earn more money for their labour. However, Gillian said that despite the low wage professional knitters earn from the sale of knitwear and her desire to support knitters, she does not consider buying hand-knit items from St. John's shops because she cannot afford them. In addition, Martina said she is reluctant to pay for knitwear she could produce herself: for example, when she saw an exhibition of knitwear at the Crafts Council of Newfoundland and Labrador gallery, Martina felt pleased to see knitting recognized by being displayed in that setting but she was taken aback when she noticed scarves priced at \$80 each. On one hand, hobby knitters are highly appreciative of the effort and skill that goes into producing hand-knit garments: Martina said, "I don't want to undermine the work that knitters do by saying that knitting is overpriced" (11-09-05). On the other hand, knitting is such a commonplace part of their everyday experience that some knitters feel making knitting a market commodity is detrimental to the culture of sharing that promotes social cohesion in rural Newfoundland communities (Pocius, 1991). Laura, for example, feels that if people do not knit as a hobby, hand-knit items will be accessible only to tourists and the wealthy.

Knitting as conspicuous conformity to traditional female gender roles

Learning to knit as children taught my informants about their culture's gender delineation of tasks. The people they saw knitting when they were children were almost exclusively women, and it was generally women who taught them to knit, so they understood that knitting was an activity for women and girls. Learning knitting skills gave them an impression of, and an appreciation for, women's work prior to

industrialization. While they admit that they did not fully appreciate their mothers' and grandmothers' work when they were children, having been introduced to knitting at an early age contributed to my informants' beliefs that women's domestic tasks are valuable and admirable. Thus relearning to knit as adults and knitting as a hobby is a way for Kaya to express her appreciation for traditional women's work by choosing to do some of that work; for Sue learning to knit useful objects, such as dishcloths, was a way of expressing her valuation of traditional gender roles.

Though knitting's association with domesticity is a matter of concern for some contemporary hobby knitters, which I will further discuss in Chapter 4, others embrace this association and use their knitting to deliberately conform to the gender role of women as domestic producers. Even though knitting was once something many women were obliged to do by social convention and economic necessity, and thus may carry connotations of women's exploitation as domestic labourers, today some women use knitting to demonstrate their choice to conform to women's domestic roles. Some knitters, especially Sue, believe that the traditional male-female division of labour within households is critical to maintaining the strength of the traditional heterosexual family as the basic unit around which social life revolves in Western culture. Knitting provides relief from struggling to advance in the labour force and to achieve financial success equivalent to their husbands'. Many hobby knitters deliberately attempt to conform to the traditional role of women as producers of necessary domestic items because they believe that this is an important part of women's culture that is worthy of recognition and

preservation.⁶ Knitters enjoy the social recognition they gain from family members and friends for their knitting and they take pleasure in being authorities on knitting.

Women knitters contribute to their households by doing a variety of typically feminine domestic maintenance tasks, including cooking, grocery shopping, cleaning and laundry. However, while they feel that these domestic tasks are important, they know such tasks are often taken for granted and go unnoticed by society. Knitting, especially as gifts, is a way some women demonstrate to their families and friends the value they place on women's work and their desires to uphold the traditional division of labour in the family. For example, Sue feels that it is important for husbands and wives to support each other in their distinct roles and she is happy that her husband and in-laws have been impressed by her knitting, because their appreciation of her knitting causes them to notice and value traditional women's work.



Figure 2: Dishcloth, knit by Sue using red, white, and green yarn for Christmas

⁶ Even today, societal pressure on women to produce domestic objects for members of their families is a reality, which I explored in my paper entitled, "The Giving (and Accepting) of Domestic Advice in Women's Magazines." I found that many of the same conservative values promoted in the earliest women's magazines, such as *The Ladies' Home Journal*, are visible in *Seventeen*, to this day.

The dishcloths Sue knits (Figure 2) are simultaneously tools for maintaining domestic cleanliness, social relationships, and social conventions for home décor. She explained,

I'm making a set of dishtowels and dishcloths for my next-door-neighbour. I made her a set in the Christmas colours and now I'm making her a set in the colour of her kitchen. I'll give her this [the red, white and green dishcloths] before we go away for Christmas for a week, for a gift because she looks after our cats [...] And when we leave for good [to move back to the Maritimes] I'll give her all this stuff, the colour of her kitchen, as a thank-you for being a good neighbour while we were here (11-14-05).

The dishcloths are iconic of the social norms of seasonal colour themes and of colour coordination within rooms of the house insofar as they match the décor of her neighbour's kitchen. Sue's awareness of her neighbour's taste is signalled by her knowledge of the colours to choose for the dishcloths, and the closeness of their relationship is indicated by the gesture of the handmade gift. Dishcloths are indexical to the extent that they are associated with the task for which they play a crucial role: cleaning dishes. As such, they are the epitome of humble, ordinary, domestic objects. They are symbols of housework so making dishcloths by hand demonstrates the concern Sue has for housework and for the status she achieves through meeting or exceeding the cultural standards for domestic cleanliness.

Until recently, the only knitted objects Sue made were dishcloths – she made them for her own home, for her cottage, for her in-laws, and for other friends. I was surprised and impressed by how common knitting dishcloths is among St. John's hobby knitters, and how well-liked these hand-knit kitchen cleaning implements are. My initial assumption was that taking the time to make these everyday objects by hand and giving them as gifts raised the status of the objects and perhaps also the status of the tasks (and the people who performed the tasks) with which dishcloths are associated. However,

several knitters assured me that making dishcloths domestically is primarily relaxing, and knitting these objects reminds them of their childhoods and of seeing their mothers and grandmothers making them. By demonstrating conformity to the traditional gender division of labour in families through their knitting – especially of domestic items, such as dishcloths – knitters today benefit from reassurance of their place in their familial history and from feelings of security from contributing to cultural continuity.

Conclusion

Through talking with hobby knitters I learned that there is a common pattern of stages through which they acquired knitting skills and became committed to knitting as a leisure activity. Knitting has common associations and connotations that knitters use to express their allegiances and values. In this chapter I have shown how my informants use knitting to cope with their personal, ideological, and identity dilemmas, to foster a sense of community cohesiveness through sharing their skills, to demonstrate their willingness to conform to some aspects of women's traditional gender roles by maintaining a link with the past demonstrated to them when knitting was first introduced during childhood.

Having been introduced to knitting as children caused my informants to form associations between knitting and home and family; in addition, my informants, who are from Newfoundland, learned to associate knitting with their Newfoundland identity. Learning to knit in domestic settings promoted awareness of the gender delineation of tasks within families and appreciation for women's work. Knitters' experiences demonstrate that they chose to relearn to knit to reassure themselves of their place in their culture and in their family, at times when they felt overwhelmed by urbanization and

globalization, and at points when their lives were in transition. Those who moved to the province from elsewhere use the craft to demonstrate their allegiance to the idealized image of the rural Newfoundland lifestyle.

The social relationships solidified by learning to knit contribute, at least on the individual level, to social cohesion and to cultural continuity. Hobby knitters themselves enjoy the sense that they are continuing a longstanding practice. In addition, other members of the community who see knitters in action and who come in contact with hand-knit items are also reminded, by knitting, of their culture's past.

Knitting is reassuring to knitters because they have memories of their own family members knitting, and because knitting has historical precedence as not only an acceptable activity for women but also a valued and even necessary one. Knitters may take refuge from the challenges of the capitalist marketplace and gain recognition for their skills and family contributions by knitting, an activity that is recognized as valuable in Newfoundland society.

By knitting for their loved ones and also for anyone who requests a hand-knit item, knitters contribute to ensuring that handmade items are accessible to and used by ordinary Newfoundlanders. In addition, hobby knitting serves to reinforce societal valuation for handmade gifts.

However, despite my informants' respect for women's handwork and the rural lifestyle, they are not blindly nostalgic; instead, hobby knitters learn and practice knitting in order to preserve the tradition of knitting in a form that is relevant for them in their social context. Learning to knit has provided my informants with a relaxing leisure activity that reminds them of the culture they belong to and are proud of. Hobby knitters

enjoy the sense of the past that knitting gives them, but rather than focusing on recreating historically accurate knitting experiences and objects, they use knitting to suit their personal needs, such as combating homesickness and making social contact with other knitters. My research found that the predominant use of knitting among urban hobbyists is for creating a sense of belonging and for contributing to the continuation of a traditional practice they feel is symbolic of their culture.

By producing useful textile goods domestically, hobby knitters' craft serves to maintain the visibility of a once pervasive kind of production. Now that I have described the psychological and social benefits of learning to knit and of knitting, in the next chapter I will turn my attention to how knitting is accomplished and how knitters both conform to and expand on the aesthetic norms for Newfoundland crafts. I will describe how knitting needles are used to create and repeat loops of yarn to produce fabric, and the preferred tools and materials of hobby knitters. By describing the items hobby knitters produce and the forms of hand-knit objects, I will show that the tradition of innovation is being carried on by hobby knitters.

Chapter 3. How and What Hobby Knitters Knit

This chapter is about how to knit – the actual mechanics, tools and materials of knitting – as well as the objects hobby knitters create. Using readily available materials and tools and the ingenious but simple techniques of knitting, people both conform to the aesthetic norms for Newfoundland crafts and attempt to expand on conventions. This combination of conformity and innovation allows people to define themselves, through the objects they produce, in terms of their cultural past and in terms of their present desires – this is to say, knitters take pride in producing the same sorts of warm, functional clothing their foremothers made, and they choose projects that are either simple or challenging depending on their desires for relaxation or intellectual stimulation. The objects knitters make that demonstrate conformity to stereotypical aesthetic norms for Newfoundland crafts are ones that have borders, use bright colours and symmetry. These include shawls, dishcloths, hats, scarves, mitts, socks, sweaters, belts, and purses. However, some of the objects knitters create are not stereotypical (Figure 3) forms for Newfoundland knitting.⁷ For example, the purses and belts knitters make conform to contemporary fashion trends: Alice Finn said, “I knit these funky belts that my granddaughters just love because they’re like the ones Britney Spears wears” (Knit Out Night 04-27-06). Knitting trendy garments and accessories allows knitters to see themselves as members of a culture that can be traced through objects and practices. This is because the objects conform to Western society clothing styles and because the act of knitting conforms to contemporary trends in leisure activities and to historical practices.

⁷ For my informants, Newfoundland hand knit goods are typically warm, functional and made of wool. They pointed to St. John’s craft shops – NONIA, the Cod Jigger, and the Crafts Council of Newfoundland and Labrador shop – as places where Newfoundland knitting could be found. Several knitters made comments such as, “what I knit is not real Newfoundland knitting” (Helen 11-22-05).

In this chapter, I will explain the mechanics involved in the most basic stitches used to knit, e.g. the knit stitch and the purl stitch. I will point out the distinct techniques I have come across among St. John's knitters. Then I will describe the knitting tools and the materials used for knitting. Knitting supply stores, such as Wool Trends, provide knitters with a boggling array of yarn and needles for knitters to choose from, based on their individual tastes, economic circumstances, and principles. I will report what, for my informants, constitutes *good* knitting; in other words, the aesthetic rules to which they aim to conform. Finally, through an examination of the objects that knitters produce, I will demonstrate how they conform to the aesthetic norms for Newfoundland crafts (Pocius 1981), and also how they deliberately eschew aesthetic norms in order to increase the relevance and utility of knitting skills and hand-knit objects in contemporary urban society.



Figure 3: Typical Newfoundland knitwear for sale at the Cod Jigger.

How to knit: how to loop thread into cloth

The essence of knitting is making interlocking loops of fibre to create fabric. A single thread generally runs through the entire knitted object – other threads of contrasting colours may be added to create decorative motifs.

The first step in knitting is *casting on*.⁸ The objective of this procedure is to create loops of yarn on a knitting needle. Though knitters are often familiar with several methods for casting on, in general a knitter will routinely use only the method that she finds most intuitive. The casting on method (Figure 4) which Hazel teaches, and which I observed most commonly, is accomplished by “knitting stitches on” (Hazel 04-27-06). In order to cast on using Hazel’s method, first, make a slip knot of yarn on the left hand needle and insert the right needle (step 1); next, wrap the yarn around the right needle (step 2); then draw the right needle down through the original loop and catch the new yarn to form a new loop (step 3); finally, give the new loop (on the right needle) a half twist and place it back on the left needle (step 4). Now there are two stitches on the left needle. Repeat this process of adding loops until the desired number of stitches is realized.

⁸ There are apparently limitless ways of casting on. I continue to be surprised by learning new methods for realizing the casting on process when I meet new knitters and read knitting instruction manuals.



Step 1: Insert the right needle into the slip knot on the left needle.



Step 2: Wrap the yarn around the right needle.



Step 3: Create a new loop on the right needle by draw the yarn up through.



Step 4: Slip the new loop back onto the left needle to create a new stitch.

Figure 4: Hazel's casting on method, demonstrated by the author.

As mentioned in the preceding chapter, often when knitting is introduced the teacher does the casting on and the learner is taught the *knit stitch* first. This basic stitch is produced, by all of my informants and every other knitter I have ever met, using four steps, which, once mastered, knitters accomplish in one smooth movement. Hazel accomplishes a single knit stitch in one second⁹. Knit stitches are produced by first, inserting the right needle up into the first loop on the left needle; then, wrapping the yarn between the crossed needles, around the right one; then, drawing the right needle down

⁹ Taking photos to illustrate the steps knitters use to produce stitches was challenging because they are no longer conscious of the four steps. I made a video of Hazel knitting a stitch which takes only one second.

through the original loop, thereby creating a loop of new yarn on the right needle; and finally, sliding the left needle away from the stitch allowing the original loop to slip off (Figure 5). The knit stitch is repeated in every loop across the row for plain knitting or interspersed with variants of knit stitches and purl stitches to create patterns, such as ribbing and cables. When all the stitches on the left needle have been worked over to the right needle, the knitter switches the needles from one hand to the other in order to knit back the other way and continue building up the loops to make fabric.



Step 1: Hazel inserts the right needle in to the first loop on the left needle.



Step 2: Hazel wraps the yarn around the right needle.



Step 3: Hazel draws the right needle down through the original loop creating a loop of new yarn on the right needle.



Step 4: Hazel draws the left needle away from the stitch allowing the original loop to slip off.

Figure 5: The four steps involved in knitting, demonstrated by Hazel.

If every row is knit, the term for the resulting pattern is *garter stitch*; fabric knit in garter stitch has a bulky, ridged texture (Figure 6). In order to achieve the flat smooth texture that is most characteristic of knit fabrics – not only hand-knit fabrics but also commercially-made fabric used for garments such as T-shirts and sports socks – alternate rows must be worked in *purl* stitches. Purl stitches are the inverse of knit stitches.¹⁰ Rather than letting the original stitch pass over the new stitch, away from the knitter, to the back of the work, the purl stitch allows the original stitch to be brought over the new stitch toward the knitter. This creates a little half-round lump. When alternating rows are knit and purled, all of the backs of the knit stitches, e.g. the purl stitch lumps, are on the back side of the fabric, and the front side of the fabric is smooth and flat. The effect achieved by knitting alternating rows in knit and purl stitches is called *stockinette stitch* (Figure 7).



Figure 6: Bag, knit by Martina, mainly in garter stitch.

¹⁰ In French, purl stitches are called *envers*. The word *envers* is polysemous: it also both means backward, and inside out.

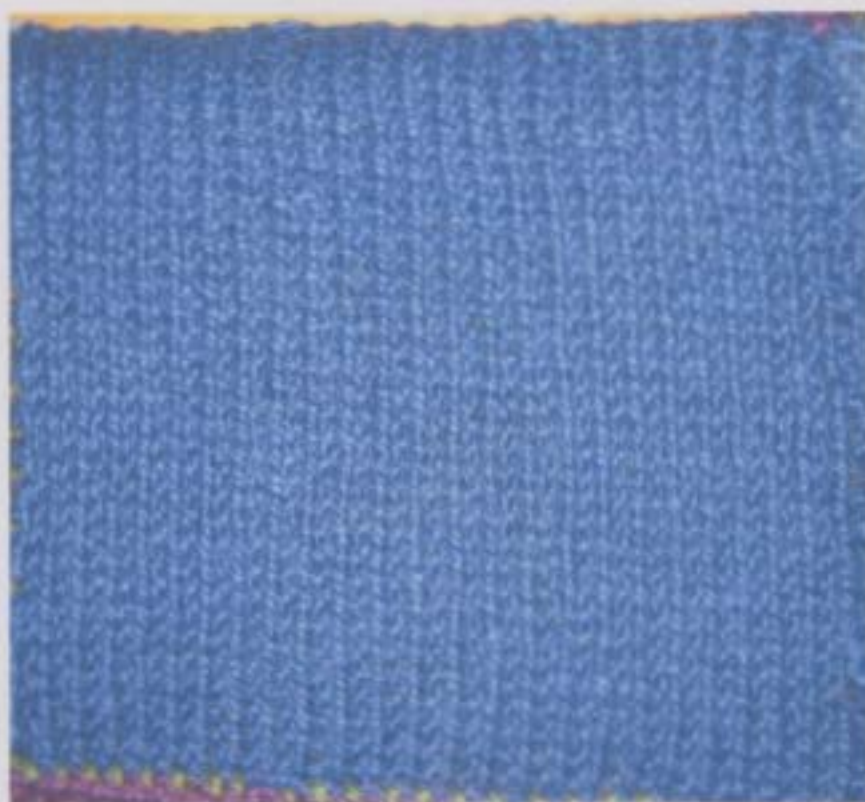


Figure 7: Stockinette stitch sample, knit by the author.

The final step in creating a piece of knitted fabric is *casting off*. The loops must be secured to one another to ensure that the knitting does not unravel. Unlike for casting on, there is a single method for casting off which all my informants use. The final row of knitting is started by knitting the first stitch and then second stitch from the left needle to the right needle. Then, before knitting the third stitch, the first stitch is passed over the second stitch and allowed to fall between the needles. The third stitch is knit on the right needle and the second stitch is passed over it. This process is repeated until only one loop remains on the right needle. At last, the yarn is cut and drawn through the last loop to secure the knitting.

The striking similarity among all the knitters I spoke with in St. John's is their tendency to knit the *English/American* way rather than the *German/Continental* way.

This is to say, knitters hold the yarn in their right hand. They wrap the yarn around their right pinkie, ring or middle fingers for tension and manoeuvre the yarn around the needle using their right index fingers (Figure 8).



Figure 8: Gillian holding the yarn in her right hand the English/American way.

Though I was originally taught to knit the English/American way, I tend to knit the *German/Continental* way because I find it more efficient. I keep the yarn wrapped around a finger on my left hand and swing it around the right needle, using my left index finger. My informants found my technique fascinating; our different ways of knitting gave us a point of comparison. Most of them had never seen anyone knit the way I do. Some were interested to figure out how my method worked and to give it a try. Unsurprisingly, they found the left-handed way of knitting more awkward and resolved to stick to the method they are more familiar with.

Tools and Materials

In their most basic forms the tools and materials for knitting – wool (or any other fibre spun into yarn) and pointed sticks – are the same as they have always been. Today, however, there is a vast array of products for knitters to choose from. Knitters take great delight in both the familiarity of some knitting products – they identify yarns still available that their mothers and grandmothers used – and the novelty of others: indeed Hazel attributes the resurgence of interest in knitting in the past five years or so to the new “fashion yarns that have come on the market” (11-17-05). Though standardized, technical systems exist for comparing and quantifying the differences between yarns and needles; in fact needles have gauges (different in the US and in Europe) and yarns have weights, so knitters’ choice between products is a matter of personal taste, economy, and principle. Knitters are also quick to point out that the yarn and size of needles they use are to a large degree determined by the functions of the objects they knit and the people who will use the objects. For example, Martina said, “I only knit with one hundred percent wool for people who are going to appreciate it and take care of it” (11-09-05); and Laura has learned that garments she knits for children must be made of acrylic fibres or cotton rather than wool, not only because these fibres are more washable, but also because children do not tolerate the roughness of wool.

Most knitters do most of their knitting on single pointed knitting needles. Wool Trends stocks such needles in sizes as small as 2mm and as large as 15mm in diameter (Figure 9). Generally speaking, thinner needles are used for knitting finer yarn and thicker needles are used for coarser, chunkier yarns. But fine yarn may be knit on thick

needles to produce lacier knitting and heavier yarn may be knit on thinner needles to produce denser, more rigid knitted items. Helen said, "My knitting is like a kid writing big loops because I use mostly those big, fat needles [to make lightweight] flowing shawls" (12-04-05). Needles also come in a variety of lengths, because longer needles are necessary when knitting a larger project so that all the stitches can fit on either one of the needles.



Figure 9: Varieties of knitting needles (from left to right: 5mm metal circular; 3mm bamboo double pointed; 4.5mm plastic double pointed; 9mm plastic single pointed).

Using single pointed needles necessitates turning at the end of every row and knitting back the other way. This turning – and the purl stitch, mentioned above – may be avoided by using a set of four or five double pointed needles or a *circular* needle. To use double pointed or circular needles, stitches are cast on, distributed on three of the four needles or around the circular needle, and joined. Knitting progresses continuously

around the circle rather than back and forth. Thin double pointed needles (sizes 2mm to 5mm) are generally used for making mittens and socks; hats may be knit on double pointed needles of any size; and pullover sweaters are often knit on circular needles. Martina uses circular needles rather than double pointed ones whenever possible because she can save time by never having to change the position of the knitting in her hands.

Most knitting needles are made of metal, plastic and wood. Some knitters prefer wooden needles because they like the warm, soft feel of wood in their hands better than plastic or metal. Wooden knitting needles contribute to knitters such as Erin's feeling that knitting is a holistic, natural activity. Gillian told me "plastic needles are better [than metal needles] because they have a bit of give to them. Some people who knit a lot, and for deadlines, can get carpal tunnel syndrome from using the metal ones" (11-25-05). Other knitters said that they prefer to use metal needles because these provide the most satisfying clicking knitting sound; as mentioned above, this sound is a part of what makes knitting relaxing and also reminds knitters of their childhoods. Knitters build up a collection of needles as they embark on new projects (Figure 10). Knitting needles cost between five and ten dollars per set, which is much less than the cost of enough yarn for almost any project.



Figure 10: Martina's collection of knitting needles.

The classic material for knitting is wool. The association between wool and knitting is so strong that people often use the word *wool* to refer to any knitting material, but a great deal of the knitting material people use is *yarn* of other fibres. Yarn is available in an enormous variety of colours, textures, fibres and prices, which appeal to knitters' visual, tactile and olfactory senses, as well as to their budgets. The cost of yarn is difficult to compare because companies package yarns in different ways; quantities of yarn are indicated on packages in length (for example, a skein of yarn may be 200m long) and also in weight (for example, 200g). Generally, yarn prices are determined by fibre content and way of production (hand-spun and hand-dyed vs. machine-made). A general schema for least to most expensive yarns is as follows: acrylics, acrylic-wool blends, acrylic-alpaca/mohair blends, pure wool, wool-alpaca/mohair/cashmere blends, pure alpaca/mohair, pure cashmere, and hand-spun/hand-dyed pure natural fibres. Phentex

and Patons are brands knitters associate with inexpensive acrylic yarn; Briggs & Little is a popular brand for mid-priced pure wool and acrylic-wool blends; and Fleece Artists is a high-end, luxury brand that some knitters buy to indulge themselves, and others long to purchase. Most of my informants tend to be open to using all sorts of fibres: for example, while Helen often buys Fleece Artists products, she also knits with basic Patons acrylic yarn when that kind of yarn is most suitable.

The major advantages of knitting with acrylic fibres, knitters told me, are that acrylic is more affordable, acrylic does not itch and, unlike most wool, acrylic is machine-washable. Thus, knitters use acrylics for knitting garments for children who cannot tolerate the roughness of wool and for people who knitters doubt will take the time to do laundry by hand (Martina 11-09-05). However, most knitters said that they prefer to buy one hundred percent wool and other natural fibres. Knitters believe that wool is warmer and more durable (if properly laundered), so it is more appropriate for the winter garments they produce.

Some knitters favour pure wool as a matter of principle because they believe “wool is traditional” (Erin 11-26-05) and more in keeping with the spirit of hand-knitting: they like the feel and aroma of wool. The smell of lanoline, which minimally processed wool emits, reminds knitters of the natural resources that go into clothing and of the woollen clothing they wore as children. Knitting with wool also makes Erin think of the amount of labour and resources that go into all the objects in her life, and strengthens her resolve to be a responsible consumer by buying local products. Erin enjoys a fantasy of one day living in a rural place and raising her own sheep to experience every stage of the

production of wool (02-11-06). Conversely, Martina said, “I know people who practically get the sheep themselves but I’m not into that. I’m just as happy to go out and buy wool. Knitting is enough for me” (11-09-05).

Though there is no large scale production of yarn in Newfoundland, some knitters choose Briggs & Little yarns, manufactured in New Brunswick, in order to support a “good ol’ Atlantic Canadian company” (Erin 11-26-05). The coarse texture, the ‘itchiness,’ of Briggs & Little yarns is a positive symbol of its authenticity for some knitters, who refer to this brand as *homespun*.¹¹ The sensory experience of wool is part of what is important to many knitters about hand-knitting.

Knitters who are not attached to wool as a reminder of nature and of domestic production favour pure wool and other natural fibres for aesthetic reasons. They find products made of natural fibres appealing for their novel, bolder colours and luxurious textures. For example, Helen said, “I know that I’m a wool snob: I mostly knit with wool and alpaca. This may be a class thing but I just don’t see acrylic yarn as good for real knitting” (12-04-05). Natural fibres may be highly refined to produce soft, cushy, fluffy yarns. These yarns, especially the ones produced by Fleece Artists, are among the most expensive at Wool Trends. When knitters touch these hand-dyed wool/mohair blends they ooh-and-ah longingly.

¹¹ Domestically-spun wool is called *homespun*. Prior to the wide-scale availability of consumer goods in Newfoundland, before Confederation in 1949, raising sheep and spinning wool domestically was practically universal among Newfoundland households (Pocius 1979, 4). One knitter told me that before I left Newfoundland, I “should try knitting a pair of socks with homespun,” by which she meant Briggs & Little yarn.

The objects knitters produce and their aesthetic rules

The objects hobby knitters produce represent their desires to knit garments that conform to their view of traditional knitting and their desires to express their individuality by making “unique things that aren’t too expensive” (Sue 11-14-05). Knitters emphasize the functionality of the objects they make in order to link their contemporary knitting to the traditional hand-knitting they value. For example, Martina (Figure 11) said, “like to knit things to keep people warm, like shawls, scarves, mitts and hats” (10-17-05). But part of the key to making functional knitted items, knitters know, is making them usable in the contemporary context as well as appealing to contemporary taste. Erin likes to produce items that are not only identifiable as handmade but also different from items other knitters make, and uniquely suited to the people for whom they are made. This is to say, Erin selects colours and fibres that appeal to her and to the people for whom she knits. Knitters also modify patterns and create their own designs to produce objects which they consider better than those available commercially. For example, Laura, who makes dishcloths out of white cotton yarn, said “you can’t buy those big potcloths [so] you have to make them big” (10-17-05). Knitters enjoy experimenting with techniques and materials to expand the range of knitted forms, but knitters take care to contain their experimentation within the criteria they believe constitute *good* knitting.



Figure 11: Martina holding a warm shawl she made.

As mentioned above, knitters define traditional knitting primarily as items that have definite practical functions – socks, mitts, scarves, sweaters and hats are quintessential traditional knitted items according to my informants. Traditional knitted objects, Erin and Gillian believe, have active functions that fulfill the need to provide warmth and protection from the elements rather than passive, decorative functions. Many knitters consider pure wool the only suitable material for traditional knitting but some accept the incorporation of acrylic yarn into traditional knitting. Work garments, handmade of homespun wool, are the pinnacle of traditional knitting and also of *good* knitting for some of my informants. Though Gillian believes sweaters made using knitting machines are not traditional, and Erin speculated items with cable patterns may

not be traditional because these patterns do not add warmth, my informants view most of the knitted items for sale in St. John's craft shops as traditional knitting.

In addition to the warm winter garments that make up most of hobby knitters' production and which they consider somewhat traditional, some produce fashion items and novelty home accessories (Figure 12), including bags, purses, belts, cellphone cases, cat beds, blankets, tea-cozys, knitted gnomes, and miniature willie warmer¹² Christmas tree decorations. While knitters identify these items as different from traditional knitted items, these objects do conform to some of the aesthetic norms for Newfoundland crafts, as well as to knitters' own rules on what constitutes good knitting.



Figure 12: Fashion accessories, home decorations and ornaments produced by hobby knitters: purse (Mary Berry), gnome (Helen Ball), willie warmer (Martina White).

¹² Willie warmers, Martina explained, are penis covers that are worn under kilts in lieu of underwear. She knit a number of miniature ones as Christmas tree decorations for gifts for her gay friends.

The basic criteria for *good knitting* is that hand-knit items must be useable. This means they must not necessitate such cautious treatment that their usability is diminished, and they must be appropriate for contemporary users in the contemporary context. Knitters recognize that due to today's home heating systems, garments they make need be less warm than hand-knit garments made before homes had oil and electric furnaces. As mentioned above, knitters are adamant that items prone to getting dirty should be machine-washable: for example, some knitters believe dishcloths should be made out of sturdy, white, one hundred percent cotton so that they are not harmed by bleach (Laura 10-17-05); others said that Phentex brand acrylic yarn is best for slippers because it never wears out or loses its colour. Essentially, *good* hand-knit items are those that are functional for today's users. In addition, knitters strive to make their knitting comfortable and stylish. For example, Laura believes the hand-knit socks she makes are *good* because the "thin wool makes them wearable inside shoes and the two-tone grey colour makes them good to wear with jeans" (10-29-05).

Another of knitters' criteria for good knitting is that items be free of any obvious mistakes. There are two ways of approaching or negotiating this rule: some knitters are quite rigorous, willing to unravel, and ready to reknit their work as many times as necessary in order to create flawless items; other knitters have a more laissez-faire attitude, they feel that if the fabric holds together properly and has the right shape, then they are satisfied to correct any minor mistakes – such as dropped stitches – by sewing them up once the project is complete. Helen, for example, tries not to worry too much about details; she said, "[If I dropped a stitch] I would either have to go back and darn it

or just pull the whole thing out, so chances are I would just go back and darn it, because I don't know how to pick up stitches" (11-22-05). By contrast, Martina insisted, "I'm not a perfectionist but I don't mind starting over to fix mistakes, to get it right" (10-17-05).

The more experienced knitters I spoke with also discussed the importance of proper tension; this is achieved by knitting test squares, called *swatches*, of the same yarn with different gauges of needles in order to find the ideal match, to ensure that the finished garments *drape* nicely. Gillian explained that knitting swatches is not fun but it is necessary because "[Knitting] has to drape a certain way; it can't be too loose or too tight. If you're making a sweater you want it to hang in a certain way that looks natural, you want it to look smooth and not too chunky. You want to knit it in such a way as to allow for a little bit of shrinkage because there will be wear and tear over time" (11-25-05)



Figure 13: Erin shopping, at Wool Trends for the perfect yarn for her next project.

Hobby knitters define good knitting in terms of its appropriateness for the individual who will use it. They also expect hand-knit items to exhibit the maker's creativity and ability to customize the design to suit the user. Erin (Figure 13), for example, carefully considers users' tastes and needs when choosing yarn colours and fibres, and also knitting patterns. Sometimes she goes to the knitting supply store with the people for whom she knits in order to get them to pick out the materials of their choice. Furthermore, some knitters believe that in order for knitted items to be considered truly handmade, commercial patterns should be modified or else the knitter should invent her own pattern (Gillian 11-25-05). This personalization of each knitted item, some hobby knitters feel, makes their objects superior to mass-produced objects, and perhaps also to the hand-knit items for sale at craft stores. However, knitters do draw

on the common aesthetic norms that govern Newfoundland crafts: repetition, borders, symmetry and bright colours, as well as recycling (Pocius 1981).

Symmetry and Repetition

The repetition and bilateral and tripartite symmetry Pocius found to be aesthetic rules for Newfoundland crafts, continue to dominate contemporary hobby knitting (1981). Objects knitters create tend to have regular symmetric forms and symmetric decorative patterns. Some knitted objects exhibit both bilateral and tripartite symmetry. An aesthetic rule knitters almost invariably conform to is that edges must be smooth and straight. Thus, knitters must learn to increase and decrease stitches in an even, regular pattern so that the edges of flat pieces are perfectly straight. For example, symmetry in the triangular shawls (Figure 14) Helen makes is evident in that each half of the triangle is the mirror image of the other. This bilateral symmetry may represent Helen's unconscious struggle with "life's basic paradox" (Pocius 1981, 18): despite Helen's insistence that knitting is a way for her to break rules and avoid prescribed social norms, she does strive to give her knitting regular forms and she does unravel knitting that does not conform to the aesthetic rule of symmetry. The basic paradox in Helen's knitting is that while she appreciates traditional forms, such as sweaters she buys from craft shops, she chooses not to recreate them because she does not want to be constricted by societal rules for how her knitting should turn out nor be restricted to using practical, one hundred percent pure wool fibre.



Figure 14: Garter stitch shawl, knit by Helen using exotic, luxurious fibres.

Martina used tripartite symmetry in both the poncho and the shawl she made. Of all her knitting projects, the one she is most proud of is the shawl (Figure 15) because she overcame design challenges to create a garment that actually fits her. Instead of increasing one stitch per row, as Helen does to create a more pointed triangular shawl, Martina designed her own pattern to create a more obtuse-angled triangle by increasing several stitches per row; however, she still managed to produce straight smooth edges and a symmetrical pattern. In this shawl, the row of fan shapes form a central motif around which each side is symmetrically-balanced. This tripartite symmetry represents “life’s balance” (Pocius 1981, 18). The non-standard angles of the knitting on either side of the central motif help to highlight the importance of the opposing sides of the design. Martina recognizes her life as a balance between two equally important parts: her home life and her working life. She enjoys the work she does at Convergys and her

relationships with her colleagues but, at work, she lacks an outlet for her creative energy; her home-life is dominated by seasonal and ongoing craft projects but Martina said, “I love making things and knitting but I sure wouldn’t want to have to earn a living doing crafts and selling them” (02-09-06).



Figure 15: Shawl with bilateral symmetry around the central stitch motif, knit by Martina.

Knitters demonstrate their awareness of traditional aesthetic norms of repetition and symmetry even with objects that do not have symmetrical forms, such as mittens. The shape of the mittens is of greater importance to knitters than the decorative motifs, but knitters do attempt to insure that the motifs are repeated in a regular way. For example, Erin said she regrets that the pattern on the palm of the “separatist mitts” did not work out seamlessly – she considered unravelling the mitts and starting again but decided that the imperfect repetition was not a damning fault. However, symmetry of pairs of mittens and socks is critical for Erin: she would like to make a replacement mitt

for her boyfriend who lost one of the *trigger mitts*¹³ she made for him but because she cannot find exactly the same colour wool, she said, “I’ll probably just knit him a new pair.” Erin feels that her boyfriend would feel uncomfortable wearing a pair of mitts that were not a match. She considered my suggestion that she could knit the replacement mitt out of a complimentary but different colour, but this idea does not conform to her aesthetic ideal.

Repetition provides a sense of comfort and stability to the user and the maker. Repetitive patterns are easier to knit, Erin said: one of the hardest projects she ever completed was a pair of socks with a variety of colours and a pattern that never repeated itself. She did not find that project relaxing because she had to pay careful attention to the written instructions for every row. The worst part, she said, was finishing the first sock because then she had to knit the same difficult pattern again. After the first few repetitions, once knitters establish regular patterns, they said, they no longer have to look at the instructions or concentrate on knitting.

Laura enjoys knitting sweaters and socks with repetitive patterns of stitches rather than colour patterns because she can smoothly alter her stitches, while she finds changing colours more awkward. Once she has been knitting for a little while, even if she has to make a pattern with different stitches, she said, the rhythmic “sound of the needles is just so relaxing” (10-17-05). Knitting with a variety of stitches that combine to form a decorative pattern is encouraging – it keeps her wanting to knit to see how the pattern

¹³ Trigger mitts have a separate compartment for the index finger, thereby offering the warmth of conventional mittens and the manual-dexterity potential of gloves. Though this design is not unique to Newfoundland, they are marketed by craft shops as emblematic of the province. They also have been known as “sealers’ mitts,” a name which may account for the mitts’ emblematic quality.

will be revealed. Laura says her greatest knitting accomplishment was the grey cable knit sweater she made for her father-in-law (Figure 16).



Figure 16: Sweater, knit by Laura, for her father-in-law.

Laura (Figure 17) has recently become enthusiastic about knitting socks with *clocks* (the term for vertical stitch patterns on socks) on the ankles. She enjoys knitting the decorative stitches so much that she modified the pattern to continue them from the ankle onto the foot. She said, "I like to write out the stitches on another piece of paper so that I can follow that and I don't have to think it through on each row" (10-29-05).



Figure 17: Laura working on a pair of socks while minding her store.

Martina said the stripes she used on her tea cozy (Figure 18), are functional because they were done in purl stitch so they provide texture and allow the tea cozy to bunch up snugly around the teapot (02-09-06). They also provide a link to the traditional aesthetic norm of repetition for this otherwise innovative object. Aesthetic norms reassure the users of objects that they themselves and also the objects in their lives are part of a culture that has a place in relation to history and to other cultures. Knitters such as Martina and Erin are proud of their innovative, non-conformist knitting projects because of their uniqueness. However, by using the historically precedented techniques of knitting as their medium for their own self-expression, and by conforming to some of the aesthetic norms for Newfoundland crafts (identified by Pocius (1981), knitters signal their valuation of traditional knitting and assert their membership in the folk group of

Newfoundland knitters: for example, Erin said, "I like to do the traditional things. When I'm doing a gift for someone, especially someone who's not from here, I really prefer to do traditional things because I'm from here and it shows them a bit of what Newfoundland is like. But it's not like if it's not traditional then I'm not touching it." (11-26-05).



Figure 18: Tea cozy, designed and knit by Martina, exhibits balance between innovation and the aesthetic norm of repetition of stripes.

Borders

Pocius notes that borders are used to bind off all kinds of creations, not only textile crafts but also architecture (1981, 17). The border asserts that the creation is finished and finite, and signals that it is a structured cultural creation, as opposed to a part of nature. Knitters take pride in the tidiness of the edges of their knitting and often use

contrasting colours, materials and stitches to highlight their borders. The borders on a knitted garment or other objects serve a similar function to frames around a picture or the metaphorical frames used to distinguish performances from ordinary communications (Berger and del Negro 15), for example wearing an apron might be used to frame the performance of serving a meal. With a few exceptions – such as different, more elastic stitch patterns (called ribbing) used to draw in hems, cuffs and collars – borders do not contribute to the use value of knitted items. However, borders on knitted items signify the importance of the knitting because they indicate that the knitting is culturally significant. Borders are also used as symbols of knitters' control. Because borders are generally easily modifiable, even for inexperienced knitters, they provide opportunities for knitters to customize pre-existing patterns.¹⁴

The first sweater Gillian ever knit (Figure 19) has rolled edges on the neck and sleeves which are knit in bright white to starkly contrast the rest of the sweater which is dark blue. The borders draw attention to the whole sweater. Gillian says that this garment is no longer her style because the hem, which is also white wool, is knit slightly more tightly than the body of the sweater so it draws the garment in around her waist (10-18-05). Also, she no longer likes the bold contrast of the white and blue. Now, she prefers to use more subtle ways of making her knitting stand out, such as paying careful attention to the tension, drape and other details of the stitches (11-25-05). However, for a

¹⁴ Sally Price, in her research on the pace and persistence of innovation in Surinamese textiles, found that in response to their lack of economic or social power, women “exploit the margins of material culture” (31); women’s innovation and experimentation in Surinam always took place at the edges of their textiles.

first project, it is unsurprising that she chose to conform to the aesthetic norm of highlighting her knitting with a bold border.



Figure 19: Gillian posing with her knitting materials and the first sweater she knit.

The shawl (Figure 20) Sue is knitting with one hundred percent pure, royal blue wool was a plain, strictly functional object until she decided to embellish it with a border of shimmering, fluffy acrylic yarn. Sue chose pure wool because she wants the shawl to

be warm as well as breathable, because she experiences hot flashes as a side effect of menopause; in addition she has poor circulation so she needs to dress in layers to stay warm (11-14-05). She chose royal blue because it is her favourite colour. Having grown up in a rural place surrounded by farms, Sue said she is all too familiar with the realities of natural materials and does not appreciate the remnants of straw which are spun in with the Briggs & Little wool she is knitting with. While for many knitters the smell of lanoline and the bits of straw in Briggs & Little wool have positive connotations, for Sue they are a reminder of elements of her childhood from which she wants to distance herself, including her family's lack of ambition or pride in doing things to Sue's standards (11-14-05).



Figure 20: Shawl made of pure wool and embellished with an acrylic border, by Sue.

The border on her blue shawl provides Sue with a sense of control over the past, which the woollen material of the shawl connotes, and a means of representing the present. Sue is proud to report that by marrying Mike, she “moved up, from an upper lower-class family to a middle-class family” (02-09-06). She attempts to make her new social standing visible by choosing possessions that, she feels, reflect her own “good taste” (02-09-06). The border on the shawl is just a few stitches wide but it transforms the garment from something plain, which might have been hurriedly made to fill an immediate need, into a carefully crafted garment which symbolizes the knitter’s personal taste and gives her a sense of control over others’ perception of her.

The creamsicle-coloured sweater (Figure 21) Erin produced using a pattern designed by Barbara Harper¹⁵, has a border which employs a different colour, decorative stitch work, and classic shapes to draw attention to the garment and to celebrate traditional aesthetic norms. The inner part of the border uses the combination of the classic zigzag line and diamond shapes in white wool to call attention to similar patterns, which are more subtly repeated throughout the sweater with contrasting stitches. Pocius notes that diamonds are considered a more decorative shape and therefore appear on important areas of display (1981, 17). The outer part of the border serves to draw attention to the zigzag and diamond motifs throughout the sweater with a contrasting pattern: the two and a half centimetre wide band of alternating yellow and white stitches provides visual relief from the dominant motifs. For Erin, knitting this sweater was a

¹⁵ Barbara Harper owned a knitting store on Duckworth Street for many years. Erin loved the store and regrets that it went out of business. Erin has great admiration for Barbara Harper’s knitting skills.

great accomplishment and a symbol of taking ownership of her culture (11-26-05): the material (one hundred percent wool), decorative motifs and even the design are significant to Erin because she sees them as symbols of her heritage.



Figure 21: Sweater, knit by Erin, exhibiting borders with contrasting colours and stitch patterns which highlight traditional zigzag motifs.

Bright Colours and Recycled Materials

In Newfoundland, the recycling and reuse of materials is a part of craft culture which some may assume to be rooted in a history of economic necessity, but Pocius believes these practices are based primarily on aesthetic preferences and the makers' desire to challenge themselves. In the past, when knitting was the pervasive way of making necessary work clothes, using the most basic stitches – e.g. alternating rows of knit and purl stitches to produce stockinette stitch garments – maximized efficiency. Minimal decoration was added to the basic garments but stripes of contrasting colour were sometimes used around cuffs of mitts and socks, and around the collars of sweaters (Pocius 1979). Though natural white was the dominant colour, along with black and grey

accents, some wool was also dyed to make other bright colours for decorative touches. Because dyeing wool added extra cost and extra work, colours of wool other than natural white, grey and black were exceptional, so it is no wonder that bright colours of wool, connoting higher, middle class status, have always been part of the aesthetic preferences of Newfoundland knitters. Other traditional Newfoundland crafts display a diverse palette of colours. Hooked mats are an example of Newfoundland craft makers' taste for bright colours. Often made of recycled silk stockings or leftover yarn, they are also an example of Newfoundlanders' practice of recycling materials for use in crafts.

For today's hobby knitters recycling yarn from second-hand clothing and finding ways of using leftover yarns is not only important because they believe these practices are traditional but also because knitting with recycled materials demonstrates skill and creativity. All of my informants from Newfoundland recalled images of their older relatives carefully saving leftover yarns and making use of them in other projects. Resourcefulness is a quality they admire and attribute to their foremothers. Many hobby knitters, such as Gillian, Martina, Erin, Kaya and Kathleen, view old clothes as the primary resources of the urban environment and get a thrill from collecting and remodelling them. In addition to always trying to use up her leftover bits of yarn from past projects, Erin believes any craft she can do that uses second hand clothes provides a service to the community because these objects might otherwise be wasted. Furthermore, within the knitting community there is an unarticulated agreement that knitters who produce beautiful or useful objects without spending very much money are among the most talented. Thus, by knitting with recycled yarn, knitters gain status by doing

something that simulates the image of their grandmothers, and knitting recycled yarns adds status to the objects produced because it demonstrates the knitter's skill of being able to create something without purchasing brand-new materials.

Martina is primarily motivated to recycle old sweaters by her own thriftiness and desire for a challenge. She said, "I go to Value Village and I buy those ones from Peru, you know, those big sweaters with all the different colours. I take them and I unravel them and I use them to knit other things" (10-17-05). By availing herself of the urban excess materials that are equivalent to the raw materials rural people gather from the natural environment, Martina finds satisfaction in knitting beds for her cats (Figure 22). While the effort of unravelling a sweater is far from the effort of raising and shearing sheep, and carding and spinning wool, recycling provides Martina with the benefit of the awareness of her capabilities, which Glassie attributes to vernacular technology (1992). Using the cat beds for her pets is a reminder for Martina of her skill as a knitter, and producing useful objects out of almost-free materials contributes to her sense of self-worth.



Figure 22: Cat bed, knit by Martina using recycled wool, and felted.

Some knitters' purist desires cause them to limit themselves to natural fibres and natural dyes but even these knitters opt for bright colours when buying yarn and dyeing their own. Gillian, for example, believes "the good thing about natural dyes is that nature's colours always go together – unlike chemical dyes, natural dyes can never clash" (12-04-05). So if she confines herself to nature's palette, she will be incapable of creating uncomplimentary shades and be at liberty to combine any colour of wool she dyes using berries, lichens, onion skins and other natural ingredients.

Unlike Gillian, for Martina, as long as the colours are bright and appealing, she is happy to combine them in knitting (02-09-06). For example, Martina is pleased with the look of the blanket (Figure 23) she made out of leftover scraps of all sorts of commercially-dyed fibres, as well as yarn she dyed herself.



Figure 23: Queen-sized blanket made of left-over scraps of yarn, by Martina.

A common trick knitters use to enhance colours' brightness is knitting patterns with contrasting bright colours of yarn with a white or pale/natural shade of yarn (Figure 24). This combination of bright and light colours is typical of traditional Newfoundland knitting. In the past, when other colours were not often available, knitters alternated naturally white wool with black or grey wool to create patterns. Today, mittens and socks sold at St. John's shops that target tourists, use white and another colour. While coloured wool is now as accessible as white wool, the norm of using colours parsimoniously has become an aesthetic preference rooted in the desire to preserve the cultural link to the past.



Figure 24: Mittens demonstrating the common technique of knitting bright coloured motifs with white or natural coloured background, by Erin.

When making the creamsicle-coloured sweater, though Erin considered conforming to the pattern's directions to use white and brown wool for the sake of tradition, she opted to knit with the creamy orange wool because the colour appealed to her. Without realizing it, Erin conformed to the aesthetic norm of opting to use bright colours whenever possible.

Choosing the colour of yarn for knitting projects is a source of pleasure for hobby knitters. Colour is a design choice open to all knitters, even those who do not feel confident designing their own patterns. The range of choice of colours is a symbol of freedom and artistic possibility for knitters. Helen, for example, said she discovered she prefers knitting with blues, purples and gem tones more than other colours when she began making a knitting-needle case for a friend out of bright orange wool. "When I was knitting it, I found it very tedious but I think that was because it was orange" (Helen 11-12-05). Because of her interest in antique quilts, she knows what a luxury it is to have access to a wide selection of materials and the financial means to buy craft supplies rather than being restricted to using whatever is available to be reused. She celebrates this luxury by buying knitting supplies simply for the pleasure of having them in her home and being surrounded by colour; she said, "my response to wool is an emotional one, I just love colours and textures. Sometimes I buy wool on impulse just because it's purple" (12-04-05). Bright "shocking" colours are sources of childish fun, which allow Helen to distance herself from societal rules for adult behaviour, which subdued, conservative colours symbolize. During one of our meetings to discuss her knitting I discovered a bright red, fluffy scarf (Figure 25) made of acrylic yarn that has sprigs of

ribbon woven into it, giving it a fireworks look. As I was admiring this scarf and attempting to discover how it fit in with Helen's taste for antique furniture and handmade quilts, she said, "For me knitting is more about breaking rules and doing something subversive" (02-09-06). Therefore knitting as a hobby offers her a way of expressing her opposition to the expectation that handicrafts should have dour appearances that signify thrift and fastidious work.



Figure 25: Scarf, knit by Helen, exemplifying her love of bright, playful colours.

Choosing to Eschew Aesthetic Norms

Contemporary knitters deliberately attempt to surpass what they see as the boundaries of traditional Newfoundland knitting. They experiment with and attempt to expand the range of acceptable forms and aesthetic rules for knitting in their efforts to assert their individual styles, their sense of independence, and to contribute to the evolution of tradition. Glassie argues that tradition is constantly evolving under the influence of present day culture and historical precedents (2003). This argument suggests that traditions persist, evolve (sometimes beyond recognition), or disappear from current practice regardless of individuals' desires, and only if a particular tradition is relevant will it be allowed to continue in a society¹⁶. I found that my informants sometimes deliberately avoid aesthetic rules and typical forms for knitting. The paradox highlighted by Glassie's theory of the constant evolution of tradition is that knitters' attempts to expand on and even to eschew aesthetic norms is, in fact, the conventional path of tradition.

Though knitters appreciate commercial patterns and use them some of the time, they believe that strict adherence to aesthetic rules is unnecessary, and perhaps harmful, to the preservation of traditional knitting. For example, Erin said, "let's do our traditions but let's not be afraid to branch out" (Erin 11-26-05). Thus, knitters often combine elements from various patterns to create new designs that they feel are functionally improved and aesthetically meaningful on a personal level. For example, Erin explained,

¹⁶ This is problematic for the preservation of some sorts of intangible cultural heritage, such as traditional knowledge. For example, traditional knowledge of where and how to fish cod in Newfoundland is becoming irrelevant, on a practical level, since the 1992 moratorium on cod fishing. However, some Newfoundlanders believe that this knowledge is an important part of their culture and they wish to find ways of preserving it.

the “separatist mitts” (Figure 26) she is making for her Québécois friend employ the form of a Newfoundland mitten, because they have a gusseted thumb, and the fleur-de-lys motif which is on the Québec flag. Erin invented the decorative pattern herself and chose the colours, blue and white, because they represent Québec. She said, “I was happy when I noticed that the traditional Newfoundland salt and pepper motif, which is just checks, looks like mini fleur-de-lys” (11-26-05). Erin explained that she searched for the fleur-de-lys image on the Internet and converted it into a knitting pattern on graph paper. In order to create the fleur-de-lys motif on the back of the mitt, she had to allow the salt and pepper pattern on the palm of the mitt to be slightly irregular. Rather than being dismayed at the disruption of the traditional Newfoundland salt and pepper motif, Erin is proud she managed to incorporate the pattern, at least to some extent, into her original design.



Figure 26: “Separatist mitts,” knit by Erin, incorporating Québec symbolism and Newfoundland design.

Knitters tend to adhere closely to commercial patterns and instructions when they first learn to knit but once they gain confidence at knitting they report modifying the instructions or inventing their own design, because, in Kathleen's words, they "hate to be told what to do" (12-09-05). For Kathleen, as for others of my informants, the pleasure of hobby craft comes from its lack of structure. She likes to allow her projects to evolve as she goes along and tries not to envision her finished projects before she starts. She has "learned how to combine truth and fiction" (12-09-05) by making objects which combine natural and synthetic fibres, and new and second-hand yarns. Kathleen, a writer, explained that crochet has taught her the importance of embellishment in creative expression: she often starts with practical, natural fibres and adds swatches of flashy synthetic colours to bring her pieces to life; the parallel in her writing is she has begun to experiment with adding details that are less realistic and believable in order to make the story more appealing to readers. "I start by making it [a story] a simple form, like a hat or scarf, but after that, I've learned from crochet, everything is fine – gluing on glitter and natural fibres are all okay" (12-09-05). Combining synthetic and natural materials represents, to Kathleen and other hobbyists, a breach of aesthetic norms for Newfoundland knitting. In addition to practical hats and scarves, Kathleen has made belts, which her teenage daughter finds stylish, a "diva cape" and cell phone cases, which make her marvel, "It's like grandma meets the twenty-first century" (12-09-05).

Unlike Kathleen, most knitters do not object to patterns *per se*, but rather create their own designs when those available commercially do not suit their needs or their tastes. Martina, for example, broke with tradition entirely by combining knitting and

crochet in a non-repetitive, asymmetric, borderless (as of yet, functionless) piece (Figure 27). The technique, called *scrumbling*, is one she learned about through an Internet site. The chaotic appearance of this piece was achieved by crocheting an oval in the centre, to start, and then adding on knitting and crochets stitches randomly wherever she chose. Martina has not yet decided whether she will continue scrumbling until the piece is large enough to make into a blanket or stop at this point and mount it on the wall (02-13-06). She would like to contribute to enhancing the status of knitting by putting this knitting/crochet piece in an actual picture frame and “putting it on the wall as art” (02-13-06). While Martina is happy to conform to the norms of recycling – the yarn is all leftover from other projects – and bright colours in this piece, she is careful not to fall into a pattern that appears repetitive. Martina also rejected my suggestion that she might knit or crochet a border out of a single colour to create a knitted frame. Making this piece has been enjoyable because of its formlessness and patternlessness, “I’ve just had fun doing whatever,” she said (Martina 02-13-05); she wants to preserve its free-form look as much as possible to remind herself of that sense of freedom and her own creative potential.



Figure 27: *Scrambling piece*, produced by Martina using a combination of knitting and crocheting and scraps of all different kinds of yarn.

Conclusion

By occasionally opting to buck the aesthetic norms for typical Newfoundland crafts and even their own aesthetic rules, knitters highlight their awareness of those rules. However, knitters are inclined to conform to aesthetic norms, this is to say, they use repetition, symmetry, borders and bright colours, and they favour reused and recycled (or at least economical) materials. This conformity provides knitters with comfort. By creating objects that have familiar aesthetics, knitters see themselves as members of the community. Knitters also enjoy using hand-knitting to create one-of-a-kind accessories that help them to fit into contemporary fashion.

The way people knit and the objects they produce demonstrate a mixture of convention and invention that is entirely typical for folk/vernacular/traditional expressive

culture. Knitters use techniques which are passed onto them orally in addition to readily available materials from their (urban) environments. The tools they use are similar, if not identical, to the ones their foremothers used. Knitters are able to experience the soothing sound of clicking knitting needles that reminds knitters of their past and of nature. Conversely, materials available for knitting are far more varied than they were in the past; thus knitters take pleasure in choosing knitting materials based on the sensory appeal of yarns' colours, textures and smells. Using the same, universal knit and purl stitches, as well as seemingly limitless variety of yarns, and a few different sorts of tools, knitters are able to create objects that are as similar to or as different from the typical forms of Newfoundland knitting as they choose.

Hand-knitting provides those who knit, and those who see and use the objects knitters produce, with the benefits of vernacular production (Glassie 1992): this is to say, hand-knit objects reassure their makers – and everyone who comes into contact with the objects – of the ingenuity of the people who developed the technique and of human capabilities generally. (In the conclusion of this thesis, chapter five, I will further elaborate how hobby knitting as vernacular technology functions in society and benefits my informants.) Hobby knitters pay tribute to the efforts of their foremothers, who produced full wardrobes of functional clothing for entire families by producing items that are functional in today's context using exactly the same motions.

While hobby knitters' efforts and productions may be dismissed as symbolic of middle-class nostalgia and romanticism, the people I spoke with neither idealize the past, nor dwell on the hardships of previous generations. As is the case for ordinary people

who watch professional wrestling and visit recreated historic buildings (Pocius 2005), what is most important to knitters is not that objects are certifiably authentic but that they offer quality experiences and sentiments. Knitters use their hobby to remind themselves of social and familial connections with the past. However, they mostly avoid being puritanical about the designs, materials or even ways of knitting – what is important is that they experience a similar sensory activity of creating interlocking loops of yarn to produce useful knitted items just as previous generations did.

A key to understanding tradition, folklorists have found, is recognizing that from generation to generation, tradition is constantly evolving to suit the needs of the times (Glassie 2003). In fact, the pattern is for traditions to constantly but slowly modify the practices that are deemed traditional in order to make them relevant for the people who live with them. Knitters have a sense that the items they produce which are not exact copies of the typical forms for Newfoundland knitting are radical experimentations. However, we can see that contemporary knitters are the latest contributors to the evolution of the homeostatic process (Alexander) of hand-knit forms: middle-class urban hobby knitters, who produce objects that recall the past, as well as objects that conform to contemporary fashion, out of both 100% pure wool and also acrylic yarns, may be seen as today's "traditional" knitters.

Whereas in chapter two I described the significance of learning to knit in the twenty-first century, and in this chapter I elaborated on how knitting is accomplished, what knitters produce and the aesthetic norms they recognize for knitting. In the next chapter I will analyse the contemporary popularity of hobby knitting in North American

popular culture generally, and how this knitting trend is manifested in St. John's. I will report the findings of my research about public knitting events in St. John's as well as how St. John's knitters react to the US-based *Stitch 'n Bitch* movement. In addition, I will report how knitters take power and pleasure from the creative fulfillment knitting provides and from gathering with other women to spend focused time on their hobby.

Chapter 4. Reinvention: The World of Knitting Culture Today

Many contemporary hobby knitters draw attention to how their knitting is different from their grandmothers' knitting by contrasting both what and how they knit: Kathleen crochets fashion accessories whereas her grandmother made blankets; and all of my informants recognize that knitting for them is relaxation whereas for their grandmothers it was a necessity. Knitting's transformation from a primarily private, work-related activity to a public, leisure activity has been critical for its reinvention. Gillian, Erin and Kaya, for example, make deliberate statements about the cultural importance of this once domestic craft by knitting in venues where knitting might be seen as out of place, such as bars, cafes and public transit buses. Though knitting today is, to an extent, an inherently preservationist act, knitters struggle to find new ways to redefine knitting and to insure the activity and the objects they produce remain relevant in today's context.

In this chapter I explore the significance – in individuals' lives as well as for society as a whole – of the twenty-first century phenomenon of knitting in public as I experienced it in St. John's, Newfoundland, and as it has been popularized by books, magazines and *knit cafés*¹⁷. I first describe the contemporary mass-culture portrayal of knitting in the primary commercial publication to which St. John's knitters refer: Debbie Stoller's Stitch 'n Bitch books. Next, I describe the setting, the participants and the goings-on at Knit Out Night, the knitting event that takes place once per month at a

¹⁷ Knit cafés are businesses that operate as coffee shops but also sell knitting supplies and often offer knitting lessons or workshops. They encourage knitting as a public, social activity. Knit cafés link knitting with self-indulgence by selling decadent foods and drinks and high-end knitting supplies. St. John's knitters gave The Knit Café, at 1050 Queen Street West, in Toronto, as an example.

knitting supplies store, called Wool Trends, about two kilometres west of downtown St. John's. There are other public knitting groups in St. John's, which I draw attention to in order to point out that knitting in public is not restricted to Knit Out Night. Finally, I demonstrate that contemporary hobby knitting as it is promoted in popular culture, and as it manifests itself in public knitting events, is a feminist statement which reverses the stereotype – which knitters feel still exists in the society – of knitting as a predominantly private, rural, old women's pastime, while also paying tribute to the efforts of women of previous generations. For example, Gillian feels "aligned with knitting as a womanly art" and she said, "I just find it funny and it sort of bothers me when people make comments like, 'Don't mind Nan sitting in the corner knitting,' when they see me knitting at public meetings" (11-25-05). By knitting in public, knitters proclaim the value they place on traditional women's work and their belief that women have the right to use time, money and public space for creative, self-expressive activities. Furthermore, knitting helps women to make micro-political power gains in their own relationships.

While hobby knitters are certainly affected by the cultural history of knitting and by precedence within their own families, they are also influenced by the popularization of knitting in the past five years or so. Knitters backed up their assertions about the popularity of knitting today by telling me about movie stars, such as Julia Roberts and Russell Crow, who knit; and about knit cafés they have heard of or visited in Toronto, Ottawa, New York and London. For example, Gillian said, "I know knitting is trendy for a bunch of reasons, for political reasons. But I'm really interested to see if it will happen in five years. Someone I know just went to Ottawa and there was a knitting café where

she could get a pedicure or a foot massage while she knitted” (10-18-05). Hazel Abbott, the owner of Wool Trends, has no doubt that knitting’s presence in popular culture has contributed to the increased interest in knitting that she has witnessed at her store in the past few years. Meeting in public to knit, at *Stitch ‘n Bitch* groups active all over the world (Figure 28), is the face of knitting today. To understand what the benefits of knitting as a hobby are to young, hip, urban women, and to understand the significance of knitting in public in St. John’s, Newfoundland, and elsewhere, it is critical to study the way knitting is depicted and promoted in popular culture.

COUNTRIES with S ‘n B Grps	NUMBER of S ‘n B Grps
United States	316
Canada	21
Australia	10
Austria	1
Belgium	1
China	1
Costa Rica	1
Czech Republic	1
France	1
Germany	2
Ireland	1
Israel	2
Korea	2
Netherlands	8
New Zealand	1
Norway	1
Singapore	1
Spain	3
Sweden	2
Switzerland	3
United Kingdom	17
TOTAL Countries = 21	Total Grps = 396

Figure 28: Chart showing *Stitch ‘n Bitch* Groups listed on *Stitch ‘n Bitch* Chicago’s website.

The presence of hobby knitting in popular culture represents a shift of women's expressive culture from mostly private and everyday spheres into public settings and into the realm of special events. Whereas in the past knitting was a routine activity carried out by women, in their homes, amidst other domestic chores, today, hand-knitting is an unusual activity that often takes place in public where it signifies leisure. Some hobby knitters are concerned that the capitalist hegemonic power structure might have eliminated some of knitting's creative aspects in order to make knitting marketable and profitable. For example, Gillian disapproves of the widespread use of mass-produced yarns and commercial patterns because they encourage knitters not to make their own design choices (11-25-05). In addition, Kaya (Figure 29), who is a self-proclaimed feminist speculated, "I think [the knitting trend] could be a ploy, by the patriarchy, to keep women sitting down, in a nice coffee shop, with other women, and not doing whatever it is that men don't want them to do" (10-23-05). However, while knitting in the company of other knitters provides the purely self-indulgent pleasure of participating in a familiar activity with like-minded individuals, which popular culture theorist John Fiske terms *evasive pleasure* (55), knitting in public also provides knitters with the pleasure of making microlevel shifts in power, which Fiske calls *productive pleasure* (55). Participating in public knitting events allows knitters to increase the visibility of women's expressive culture and to take time away from other responsibilities, such as family and school work, to enjoy their hobby in a social setting.



Figure 29: Kaya Anderson Payne, as pictured in Spokeswoman magazine.

Knitters use a number of the strategies identified by folklorists Joan Newlon Radner and Susan S. Lanser to express feminist messages through their knitting: *appropriation, juxtaposition, indirection* and *incompetence*. In this chapter, I will explain these terms and how individual knitters, as well as mass media promoters of knitting, use these means to gain power for women. Though hobby knitting is trivialized by the dominant culture in Western society – because feminine activities, such as knitting, are seen as unimportant (Berger and del Negro 12); and because scholars have tended to avoid focusing on hobby crafts, which some consider lesser imitations of either true folk crafts or art (Mead 142), and instead use the term *hobby* to refer to a category of objects they exclude from their study (see for example, Hickey 1997, 87; and Roberts 1972, 238) – in fact, hobby knitting today is promoted in Western popular culture as a vehicle for women's communication, relaxation and creativity.

Knitting's Promotion in Popular Culture

I have chosen to consider the contemporary popular culture portrayal of knitting as part of my research into hobby knitting in St. John's because my informants believe that, in Helen's words, "knitting is on the leading edge" (11-22-05) and part of a trend which is taking place all over the Western world. Knitters' awareness of knitting's popularity in other places comes mostly from the knitting magazines and books they buy, but also from the Internet. Not only do mainstream publications explicitly encourage knitting in public but these publications may also contribute to normalizing the sight of young, hip, urbanites knitting. As mentioned above, knitters backed up their claims that knitting is a popular trend by citing famous people who have recently taken up knitting. They also pointed to Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook (2003) (Figure 30) and Stitch 'n Bitch Nation (2004) (Figure 31), by Debbie Stoller, as particularly cogent proof of knitting's mass popularity. Hazel's comments that business experienced critical growth in correlation with the publication of these books – she said, "in 2002, I thought it [Wool Trends] was going to die, but shortly after that suddenly there was this boom and then there was a lot of people getting into it, so many young people" (11-17-05) – further encouraged me to study the messages these works deliver.

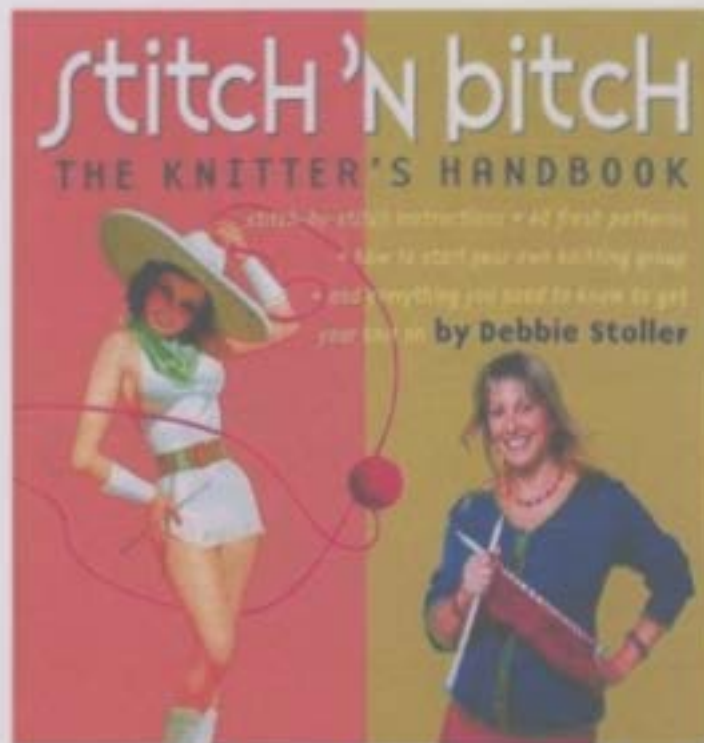


Figure 30: The front cover of Stitch 'n Bitch: the Knitter's Handbook.

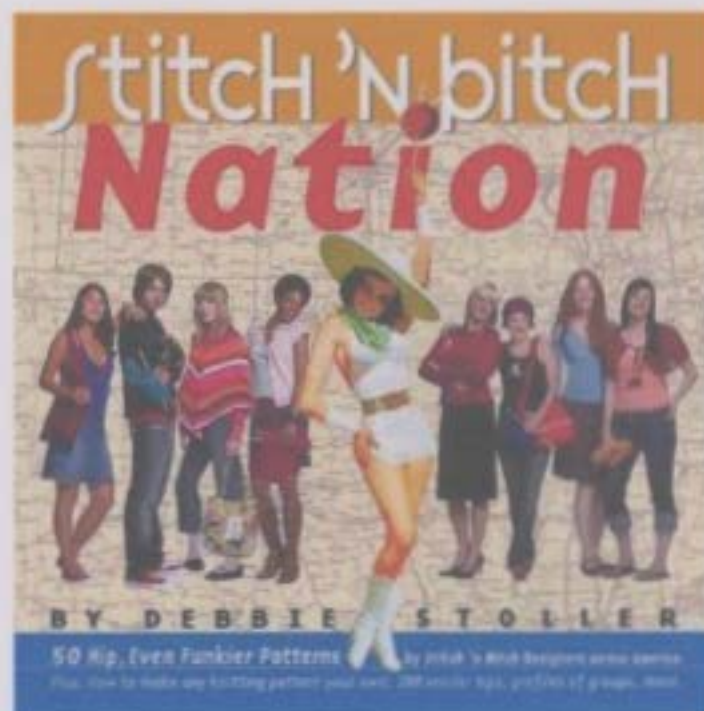


Figure 31: The front cover of Stitch 'n Bitch Nation.

When Hazel started her yarn and knitting supplies business in 1996, her customers were mostly older people who had been knitting all their lives. Hazel believes

that young people simply do not have as much time to knit as people used to have, so knitting has to be made fun and easy in order to provide them with the same benefits as other leisure activities. Nowadays, knitters spend more money on materials than they did in the past, and choose projects that they can finish quickly; Hazel said, “people get the impression from books and magazines that knitting is just like going to the movies, so they want to try it out and they expect to pay for it” (11-17-05).

Subsequent to her own rediscovery of knitting, in 2000, while visiting her maternal grandmother, Debbie Stoller started her *Stitch ‘n Bitch*¹⁸ group, in New York City, for knitters to meet in a coffee shop and share their enjoyment of knitting. Stoller also began writing about the joys of knitting in Bust, the teenage girls’ magazine, which she edits. In 2003, she published Stitch ‘n’ Bitch, an instructional manual for knitting with a feminist mandate: she writes, “I firmly believed that knitting – a centuries old craft that women had perfected – deserved to be as respected and honoured as any other craft, and I wanted to make sure that it got its props” (9). Stoller found meaning in her own sense of connectedness with her family and women’s culture generally; knitting is, for her, a symbol of womanhood, which if dismissed contributes to the general dismissal of women’s culture.

The book has the appearance of a revolutionary manifesto that challenges stereotypes of knitters as old, serious, unfashionable, sexually inert and solitary. The title, Stitch ‘n Bitch, connotes aggressive bursts of emotion rather than the passive

¹⁸ While the name *Stitch ‘n Bitch* for gatherings (of women) to work on needle crafts long predates Stoller, her formula for gatherings of knitters has novelty because she emphasises meeting in public in order to include the widest possible segment of the population and to proliferate hobby knitting.

femininity with which knitting is more conventionally associated. The subtitle, “the knitter’s handbook,” suggests that this is a manual for all those who identify themselves as knitters. On the front cover, a caricature figure of a woman with a Barbie-doll figure in an impossibly short sweater dress and a cowgirl hat, brandishing wool as if it were a lasso, stands next to the image of a real woman (Debbie Stoller, herself) smiling, holding her knitting crossed in front of her chest as if they were defensive weapons, with her hair blowing in the breeze. The book contains photos of 1900’s to 1960’s women knitting (Figure 32) contrasted with sketches of contemporary, tousle-haired, ethnically-varied, assertive-looking knitters (Figure 33 (Stoller 2003, 10)). The black and white photographs depict knitters of the past in a variety of serious and laughable poses, which demonstrate that knitting has long been a source of pleasure and a creative outlet for women. The contemporary photographs, especially those on the glossy pages in the centre of the book, are of groups of joyful young women and a few men (Figure 34 (Stoller 2003, 123)) in sexy (Figure 35 (Stoller 2003, 148)), stylish outfits (Figure 36 (Stoller 2003, 132)). The message is clear: knitting is a powerful force grounded in history that young women are entitled to use to reinvent the image of femininity.



Figure 32: Photo of a knitting bee, circa 1916, demonstrates the historical precedence of knitting as a focal point of social gatherings.



Figure 33: Caricature of contemporary knitters depicting them as fashionable and ethnically diverse.



Figure 35: Photo promoting the "Queen of hearts bikini" pattern asserts knitting can be used to create sexy clothing.



Figure 36: Photo promoting knitted backpacks as fashionable accessories handy for carrying all sorts of items, including knitting projects, to bars.

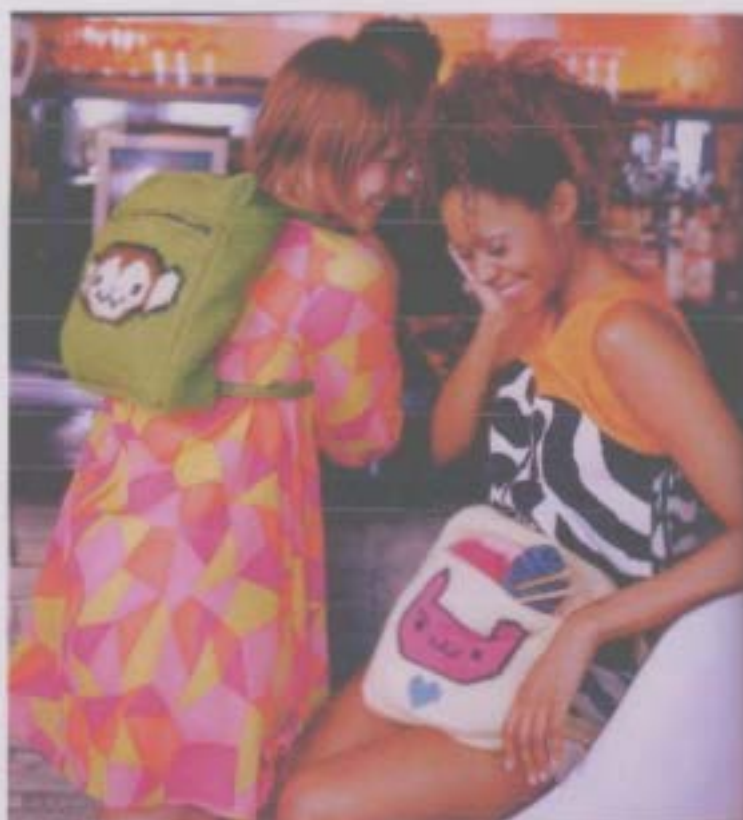


Figure 36: Photo promoting knitted backpacks as fashionable accessories handy for carrying all sorts of items, including knitting projects, to bars.

The text in Stoller's books is written in a chatty, conversational tone that is reminiscent of the face-to-face, informal way in which knitting skills are commonly passed on. This style of writing, as well as the emphasis on knitting communities, contributes to the feeling that knitting is an easy and enjoyable form of entertainment that can be used to unite the "Nation," that is, the US, and perhaps the world. For example, Stoller passes on a "legend known to all knitters across the land," entitled, "The Rules of Engagement, or What not to Knit for Your Boyfriend":

It is bad luck to knit a sweater for a boyfriend, as it guarantees that the relationship will end. Of course, if you're looking to rid yourself of a boyfriend, this might not be the most direct way of going about it. Like most myths, it holds a good amount of truth. If you've spent a month or two working long and hard on a sweater for your guy, only to have him not appreciate it enough or not wear it very often (and this happens all the

time), you might catch a lingering resentment and wind up dumping the ungrateful lout. The theory, I suppose, is that if you're married to the guy and make him a sweater he never wears, you're still stuck with him (71).

Stoller promotes the formation of *Stitch 'n Bitch* groups by describing them as relaxing and also intellectually stimulating social events open to the general public. She writes, "By the evening's end, I've usually made good progress on whatever I'm working on, and I've shared some laughs with a bunch of smart, funny ladies (and gentlemen)" (113). She also provides instructions for how to start a *Stitch 'n Bitch*. The second book, *Stitch 'n Bitch Nation*, published a year after the first one, has pages throughout the book dedicated to *Stitch 'n Bitch* groups in different parts of the US. The public locations of these meetings and the personal descriptions of the people involved, as well as photos of knitters meeting in public, make this sort of event appear achievable to organize and foster a sense of community among knitters. For example, Sara Daily reported to Stoller about the *Stitch 'n Bitch* group of Chapel Hill, North Carolina:

The savvy stitchers of the SnB Chapel Hill came together in the summer of 2002 after founding member Gwen Schlichta read the article in *Bust* about the joys of stitching and bitching. She and four friends KIPed (knit in public) in local coffee shops to encourage other knitters to join in. Word of mouth spread quickly, and the small Sunday afternoon knitting circle blossomed into a group with 127 members and three knitting circles a week (2004, 107).

If the number and proliferation of *Stitch 'n Bitch* groups is taken as an indication of success, it may be safe to say that Stoller has realized her goal of making sure that knitting *got its props*. On the website of the Chicago *Stitch 'n Bitch*, which was the first group to model itself after Stoller's New York *Stitch 'n Bitch*, there is a list of *Stitch 'n Bitch* groups in 21 different countries (www.stichnbitch.org (see Figure 28)). Both the

female image called Purl, and the Born to Knit image, which the Chicago group uses on its promotional material, associate knitting with radical, if not militant, social action, and suggests that knitting can lead directly to young women's empowerment (Figure 37).



Figure 37: *Stitch 'n Bitch Chicago's* "knitter girl," called Purl, as well as the group's Born to Knit image and logo suggest that knitting is an aggressive, powerful act.

Most of the knitters I have spoken with were unequivocally enthusiastic about the promotion of knitting as a hip pastime for young women in these books. One knitter's comment – "I think it's great that they teach people to knit in a fun way because the more people who know how to knit, the more we can just sit around anywhere and drink tea and knit" (Martina 10-17-05) – represents the shared sentiment that knitters would like knitting activities to be more common. Though I have not heard of anyone learning to knit exclusively from these books' written instructions, knitters said they reference the *Stitch 'n Bitch* books for inspiration and to be reminded of how to carry out specific techniques. Martina said, "I always had a problem when picking up my work to

remember where I was but now I use the Stitch 'n Bitch book's description [on page 54] of how a knit stitch appears as opposed to how the purl stitch appears" (02-13-06).

However, there are also hobby knitters who roll their eyes at the mention of *Stitch 'n Bitch* groups and of Stoller's books. As mentioned, some knitters disapprove of the culture industry's provision of all the materials and designs for knitting because they believe that the ethic of knitting which aims to reclaim an element of the past that combined artistry and necessary production, is being usurped by self-indulgence. For example, Gillian said, "I don't think there's anything very artful about buying a Stitch 'n Bitch book and getting Patons' golden skein number 322 and knitting something [by precisely following a commercial pattern]" (10-18-05). These hobby knitters, in particular Gillian and Kaya, express their aversion to the popularization of knitting by both eschewing some public gatherings of knitters and by avoiding commercial knitting patterns.

Despite some negative responses to the way knitting is promoted today, the existence of knitting in popular culture is necessary for some people's participation in the craft. For example, Helen, Sue and Laura claim to be completely dependent on commercial patterns they find at knitting supply stores and in books and magazines, such as Easy Knit and Crochet Ideas, which is affiliated with Woman's Day magazine, and Knit It, which is a Better Homes and Garden's Publication. Helen said that she prefers to use the patterns the yarn companies produce and which are included with the purchase of certain yarns. Furthermore, Kaya would not have been reintroduced to knitting had it not become a popular pastime among her group of friends. In other words, because most

contemporary young urbanites do not have daily interactions with people who once knit routinely and out of necessity, they neither have someone to teach them to knit nor the familiarity with the act of knitting that might cause them to consider knitting an achievable hobby. Thus, mass culture publications, such as the Stitch 'n Bitch books, and public knitting events are the catalysts for contemporary knitting.

In addition, to the knitting gathering I will describe below, knitters informed me of other organized public knitting gatherings, in St. John's, and of numerous instances of knitters getting together with their friends to knit in one another's homes. Gillian told me about a *Stitch 'n Bitch* gathering that took place on Sunday evenings, at Hava Java, a St. John's coffee shop, during the summer and fall of 2005; Martina said crafts are frequently the focal point of evenings of socializing with her friends; and as I was walking downtown I noticed a poster advertising a knitting event called the Knit Wits Café, organized by the Anna Templeton Centre (Figure 38). Learning of these events confirmed my awareness that gathering to knit is a popular trend and enhanced my interest in what happens at these events and who participates in them. My examination of Knit Out Night serves as a case study of this phenomenon.



Figure 38: Poster advertising a public knitting gathering organized by the Anna Templeton Centre, in spring 2006.

Knit Out Nights at Wool Trends

Starting in March 2005, Hazel Abbott began hosting Knit Out Night, a monthly gathering of hobby knitters at her store, Wool Trends, which is located at 238 Hamilton Avenue. Knit Out Night happens on an ad-hoc basis, whenever Hazel has time and feels that the store's customers will be inclined to attend. She offers a fifteen-percent discount on the entire store's merchandise for the duration of the evening. Each time she hosts a Knit Out Night, Hazel emails customers who she previously speaks with in the store about the gathering to let them know when to come. Knit Out Nights occurs from 7pm to 9pm on either Tuesday or Thursday evening.

When Tara Simmons, a fellow Memorial University of Newfoundland student who knew of my research interests in knitting, invited me to attend the first Knit Out Night, on March 8th, 2005, I was thrilled to do some preliminary research for my thesis and to spend an evening working on my knitting.¹⁹ Tara had learned about Knit Out Night from Hazel while shopping at Wool Trends; she wanted to attend in order to learn from Hazel how to *turn the heel*²⁰ of a sock. Like many other knitters, Tara does not feel confident simply following printed patterns to learn new techniques.

The Setting

The three-story building with pink clapboard siding that houses Hazel's store was once a single-family residence, so aside from the white and red wooden sign, the building does not stand out from the other homes on the block (Figures 39 and 40). Through the front window, from the street, a room packed with yarns and racks of knitting patterns is visible. A narrow, rutted driveway runs along the side of the building to a gravel parking area, where the back yard would have been, and to the entrance of the store, which is at the back of the building. The first time I entered the store, just after 7pm on March 8, 2005, I felt as though I was entering a family home.

¹⁹ Even if I had not been researching hobby knitting, I would have chosen to attend Knit Out Night for my own enjoyment. Thus, though, I am focusing my attention on writing about other knitters' experiences and reactions, I also consider myself a participant in this group knitting event.

²⁰ *Turning the heel* is a notoriously tricky knitting technique that is perplexing to beginner knitters, such as Tara, because it allows a continuous piece of fabric to flow around a right angle. After knitting the tubular leg portion of the sock, the knitter reserves half the stitches for the top of the foot and continues knitting half the stitches using a technique called *double knitting* to reinforce the heel flap; then she decreases the stitches evenly on both sides of the flap to create a corner; and then she picks up stitches along the edge of the heel flap to meet up with the reserved stitches.



Figure 39: Wool Trends, 238 Hamilton Ave., St. John's, as seen from the street.



Figure 40: Wool Trends logo pictured on the sign outside the store and on the website.

As Tara and I came in that first night, Hazel was still bustling around, rearranging the yarn displays but she stopped what she was doing to introduce herself. Hazel

explained, “I first had a franchise counter at Sears, in 1996, then I moved out to Allendale Road, and then I bought this place and moved it here five years ago.” Though the store is located in a residential area, Hazel said business was good and “knitters will always find stores like this one” no matter where they are located. Most of Hazel’s customers are local women but there are also some men who buy knitting supplies at Wool Trends and she does mail order sales to Canada and to the United States, via the store’s website (www.wooltrends.ca). The store takes up most of the three-story house, but Hazel and her mother live in a section of the house that has been converted into an apartment.

As we waited for other knitters to arrive, Hazel continued to tidy up the cash register-computer/business space near the door, as Tara and I browsed the ground-floor of the store. The first room (Figure 41) is filled with displays of needles, knitting accessories and bins of discounted yarns. The next two rooms (Figure 42) have walls lined with shelves of yarn and free-standing racks for yarn and patterns. Surfaces not covered in merchandise hold knitting samples that Hazel has knit to give customers an idea of what they can make with the products. The yarns displayed in the spaces closest to the cash register-computer area are the most expensive yarns, made of exotic fibres such as silk and hand dyed mohair (Figure 43). The ground-floor room farther away from where Hazel does most of her work houses the more conventional yarns made of hundred percent wool and acrylic fibres. The second and third floor rooms also have walls lined with floor to ceiling shelves of acrylic-wool blend yarns. This set up, with many small rooms rather than a single open space, contributes to the feeling that Wool Trends is a home rather than a commercial space.



Figure 41: Knitting equipment on display in the entrance room at Wool Trends.



Figure 42: Second and third ground-floor rooms at Wool Trends.



Figure 43: Shelves next to the cash register, at Wool Trends, displaying exotic yarns.

When, Madonna, another one of Hazel's customers arrived, Hazel brought us up a flight of stairs to the front room on the second floor which has a picture window that looks out over the street, and a non-working fireplace on the far wall. The room, like all of the rooms in the store, has hardwood floors. It is furnished with a couch, which Hazel reupholstered, and is decorated with two walls of colourful yarn; more seating is brought in as needed. This cozy, living-room-like space is where Knit Out Night routinely takes place.

Who Attends Knit Out Nights

People who attend public knitting events represent a diverse section of the population. Broadly speaking, Knit Out Night attendees may be characterized as urban and suburban women who have some disposable income and time for hobbies, and who have cars or are otherwise mobile. Unlike Tara and me, who generally attended Knit Out Night together, attendees tend to come by themselves rather than with friends. Knit Out Night attendees represent parents, singles, lesbians, heterosexuals, working-class people, students, professionals, unemployed, religious, agnostic, Newfoundlanders, Come-From-Aways, and range in age from their twenties to their fifties. The demographics that were notably absent are visible minorities, senior citizens and men. I speculate that visible minorities' absence may be accounted for simply by the small number of non-white residents of Newfoundland; senior citizens do not come because they do not know about Knit Out Night, because they lack mobility, or because they have retained the association between knitting and routine domestic activities; and men do not attend because even those who knit are certainly aware of knitting's association with women and they may assume social events focused on knitting are intimate gatherings for women only.

Of the six Knit Out Nights I attended, there were between four and eight knitters present at each event; Hazel said that the maximum number of people to ever attend her Knit Out Night was fourteen.

Since the establishment of Knit Out Night, some of the regular participants have become friends. Knitters say they look forward to the monthly gathering as a pleasant social event and as a way of having contact with people who they do not otherwise cross paths with. During months when Hazel has not scheduled Knit Out Night, knitters have emailed her to encourage her to organize the event. Even though Knit Out Night has no fixed schedule, most knitters who attend once become regular attendees. This suggests that knitters who experience knitting in groups enjoy the event and become willing to make gathering to knit a priority in their lives.

What Happens at Knit Out Nights

Typically, Hazel is kept busy all evening helping Knit Out Night attendees with their projects; knitters come with their knitting queries and wait in sequence for one-on-one guidance (Figure 44). The knitting issues brought forward at Knit Out Night tend to be specific rather than general questions about how to knit. For example, Helen brought a magazine pattern for knitted gnomes that she needed help figuring out; Sue asked Hazel to teach her how to make “lazy daisies” as decorations and how to attach the sleeves to the body of the cardigan sweater she made for her mother-in-law; and Tara asked for help making appropriate buttonholes for a sweater she made. Knitters often encourage one another and sometimes share tips; for example, Helen said “Someone at Knit Out Night suggested I add one stitch on either end of the row so that my shawls would be more

luxurious, and the proper shawl shape" (11-22-05). However, at Knit Out Night, Hazel is recognized as the authority and she does most of the teaching.



Figure 44: Hazel (left) showing Helen (right) how to establish the gnome pattern.

At the first Knit Out Night, Hazel offered us coffee and tea, which encouraged conviviality, and animated the evening with talk about learning to knit so that we would all certainly have something to contribute to the conversation. She told us about learning to knit from her father, a fisherman, when she was a little girl. Hazel had seen her father "knitting nets" and had begged to be taught to do what he was doing, but because of his view of the gender division of tasks, he taught her to knit woollen clothing rather than fish gear. This sparked a conversation about why Hazel's father accepted his own knowledge of how to knit clothing, which he considered a woman's task, but was not willing to pass on his knowledge of knitting nets, which he considered men's work, to his daughter. Madonna said, "I know some women used to do it." But Hazel explained, "I don't really know why, he just said, 'That's not for girls,' and told me to get some needles from mom." Over the course of a couple of hours, she also showed Tara how to

turn the heel of her sock, and refreshed Madonna's childhood memories of the basics of knitting. Hazel's enthusiasm for getting knitters together for social events is motivated not only by her business interests but also by her own interest in knitting as a hobby and her beliefs in the individual and societal good that knitting can serve. Hazel related her fantasy of some night getting a group of knitters to "take over Starbucks" to demonstrate publicly the joy of knitting and the importance of being productive. Hazel said that knitting is like yoga because the rhythmic act of knitting is relaxing and it helps her to clear her mind. Because knitting requires less space and less equipment than sewing, she said, "it's less like work." At the end of the evening, Hazel's encouraging words, "invite any other knitters you know, for the next time, and all your friends who'd like to learn," reinforced the feeling that knitting is an engaging, social activity that diverse groups can enjoy together.

Habitually, during Knit Out Nights, as knitters work on their projects or wait for Hazel's assistance, the room is always abuzz with conversation (Figure 45). Sometimes a few conversations are carried on at once but often all of the women talk about the same thing. Reminiscences about childhood experiences, such as learning to knit, attending school and negotiating fashion trends, and the differences between men and women are especially common topics. Knitters take pleasure in learning that others have lived through similar life situations, particularly minor traumas or hardships, such as having to wear bloomers under school uniform skirts until girls were finally permitted to wear pants to school. Conversations often begin with a detail of one of the knitters' lives and lead back to a more general topic that everyone in the group can contribute to. There remains a degree of impersonal distance in conversation that allows knitters to express

strong emotions without revealing many details of their personal lives that would make the group more intimate. For example, at the Knit Out Night on April 27, 2006, Natalie said, "My son was in a play at school and he had to wear these woollen pants for his costume but he just couldn't stand to wear them, they were just too itchy. So I had to make a lining for them." Mary, Alice and Hazel, who all went to school in Newfoundland, remembered wearing woollen skirts as a part of their school uniforms that were quite itchy; the solution to that problem Mary Loo said, was "wearing those kind of bloomers underneath." Natalie, who went to school in California, also remembered wearing bloomers under her skirts to school, "but then," she said, "in high school, they started letting girls wear pants for the first time." The Newfoundlanders also remembered when girls were first allowed to wear pants to school but that change did not occur until after they had graduated.



Figure 45: Knit Out Night attendees (from left to right: Helen, Kathleen, Sue) focusing on their knitting as they converse and/or await Hazel's instruction.

On the evening of October 6, 2005, as the Knit Out Night attendees were engaged in a discussion about the pros and cons of using fluffy yarns, the ringing of Sue's cell phone led to a discussion about the different ways men and women cope with relationship break-ups. Sue explained, "I'm waiting for the next time my cell phone rings. Because I'm going to have an interesting chat with the next girl that's on the other end of the phone because what's happened is I was given the phone number that her ex-boyfriend used to have and she keeps calling me to try to tell him off." Hazel asked, "So what's she so mad about?" but Martina suggested, "Why don't you just tell her she's got the wrong number?" Sue reported the convoluted story of the separation in as much detail as she could and concluded, "You know, the one thing I found out from this screw up is *Men just are not that complicated!* Women give men far too much credit." Hazel agreed that "Men are simple, they really are simple people," and this led to a further discussion about how differently men and women behave. Hazel validated her opinion by mentioning a popular psychology book called Men are from Mars Women are from Venus that she read and Martina joined in the discussion by comparing her mother's and father's domestic contributions. The Knit Out Night attendees agreed that the caller should give up trying to change the ex-boyfriend's behaviour. This vein of conversation also allowed the knitters to share their thoughts on, and to make light of, the differences in the ways men and women approach relationships and separations.

Another element Knit Out Night participants look forward to is the fifteen-percent discount on all the merchandise in the store. Some knitters reported trying to save up all of their wool expenditures for these occasions in order to save money, while others feel justified in buying additional knitting supplies because of the discount. Often at Knit Out

Night, knitters arrive early in order to browse the store to pick out materials for a new project – this allows knitters to benefit not only from saving money but also from Hazel’s guidance in establishing their knitting during the course of the evening. During Knit Out Night, as knitters work on their project and chat, Hazel encourages them to help themselves to extra yarn and to pay later, on their way out. At the end of the evening, around 9pm, as everyone files downstairs, there is inevitably a line up at the cash register. Knitters are obviously inspired by one another’s projects, as they commonly ask each other to point out precisely what patterns and materials they bought to knit particular items. Buying knitting supplies is always a joy to knitters because the materials make them think of new projects, new challenges and the thrill of creation. Socializing with other knitters as they shop at Wool Trends adds to their enjoyment and also helps them to justify their expenditures. As knitters leave the store, hugging their packages, their smiles and body language demonstrate the relaxation and empowerment the evening’s events have imparted.

The Passive and Productive Pleasures of Knitting

Hobby knitting is rooted in tradition and in contemporary mass culture so it offers people the security of knowing that they are spending their time on an activity for which a precedent of acceptance has been set. Alexander states, “Design decisions made within a ‘style’ are safe from doubt for the same reason as those made under tradition and taboo rather than one’s own responsibility” (10). In the words of Millie R. Creighton, an anthropologist who studies contemporary urban women’s craft, “because craft allows individuals to rely on each other and on tradition, nearly everyone has the capacity to

create beauty and this does not necessitate individual creative genius” (113). Creighton’s assertion echoes Alexander’s notion that very little is required of craftspeople: all they need to do is to recognize failures in the designs of the objects they produce and react to them; and even these changes need not be successful since the homeostatic, that is self-organizing, process allows only improvements to persist (53). Following commercial patterns and using traditional techniques are aspects of hobby knitting that provide the *evasive pleasure*²¹ of conformity (Fiske 50). Knit Out Nights also provide evasive pleasure because participants are all women, so they are allowed to focus on woman-centered culture, and they share a common interest that makes social interaction unchallenging. Knitting, like other sorts of “traditional knowledge can assist in social change [by] affording women a stronger voice in developing our own destinies” (Greenhill and Tye 329). Knitters use gathering together to knit, as well as the act of knitting, to achieve the *productive pleasure*²² of effecting micro-political changes in their relationships (Fiske 57), which include asserting their rights to spend time and money on their own leisure activities.

Because knitting is different from knitters’ work activities, knitters find the activity relaxing. Indeed, the act of knitting can provide a contrasting activity that women use to amass energy to continue with their routines. Some knitters are careful to choose projects that are as simple as possible, such as dish cloths or shawls knit in plain stockinette stitch, so as to insure their knitting’s results and so they do not have to focus on the pattern. Consequently, they can use time spent knitting to process other thoughts.

²¹ According to John Fiske, *evasive pleasure* comes from spending time on a self-indulgent form of entertainment that requires no effort (55).

²² *Productive pleasure* results from using energy and confidence amassed from evasive pleasure to make small changes in the power dynamics of relationships (Fiske 55).

For example, Helen likes to buy wool and patterns that correspond, so that all the wool gets used up and so she has no doubts as to whether or not her knitting project will be successful. She is adamant that “hobbies should be relaxing. You don’t have to be working at it and getting it right all the time” (11-22-05). Other knitters use the activity to regain energy between more challenging or stressful elements of their lives. They reported using knitting to unwind after work, or even during their work/study breaks, by doing something different that makes them feel rested. They knit while watching television and while talking on the telephone after work to create a sense of calm (Hazel 11-17-05); knitting may also unconsciously symbolize domesticity, providing the feeling of being at home rather than at work. Knitting at work, in some cases with their colleagues, allows women to temporarily evade the pressures or boredom of their jobs while taking refuge in an activity they find relaxing, worthwhile and a source of social interaction.

Clearly an important part of the pleasure of knitting comes from the satisfaction of successful creation. Knit Out Night provides knitters with an opportunity to advance their projects, and also to get help from Hazel to insure that their knitting is successful. Hence, knitters come to feel empowered by the time they spend at Knit Out Night because they further their creation of useful objects. For example, though knitters enjoy taking on the challenge of new knitting projects, they sometimes fall back on knitting simple objects, such as cotton dishcloths, in order to relax and to quickly experience the reward of creation that refuels their enthusiasm for working on more challenging knitting.

Another source of pleasure that knitters report gaining from their hobby comes from teaching other people to knit; once knitters have mastered the skills they can pass

them on to others. For example, Martina remembers teaching everyone in her eighth grade class to knit. The process of teaching people to knit is empowering because it puts the teacher in a place of authority, and having others express interest in their skills gives knitters the sense that their expertise is valued. Though teaching knitting does not provide productive pleasure in Fiske's sense of accomplishing political change, the benefit that passing on their skills provides knitters may extend beyond the amassing of energy and confidence. For example, Hazel takes joy in offering knitting and crochet instructions to all Wool Trends' customers, as well as at Knit Out Night. She has been teaching people to knit for over thirty years and feels that providing assistance is part of her responsibility as a seller of knitting supplies. Hazel finds the feedback and gratitude she receives from people once they finally catch on to knitting or crocheting extremely rewarding:

I've actually held the needle on for people who started crocheting and they couldn't get the knack so I actually held on to the needle and helped to guide them along the way [...] Sometimes, when I go out of town I run into them now. And they tell me about all the nice doilies and things that they've crocheted. And they say, "I wouldn't have been able to do that if it wasn't for you," and, "you inspired me" (11-17-05).

As described above, Knit Out Night is a social event that attracts women who have a common interest in knitting as a hobby. Attending Knit Out Night provides knitters with the passive pleasure of being in a women-only space with others who share common values and experiences. Knit Out Night participation serves to validate group values and experiences through talk of moral questions about which everyone in the group agrees, and also about experiences every Knit Out Night attendee has lived.

The passive pleasure knitters glean from spending time with people who are like them allows them to build up confidence to productive pleasure. Knitters gain power in

their relationships with their spouses by buying yarn and materials at Knit Out Night.

The fifteen-percent discount justifies their spending but the agreements they have worked out with their husbands regarding spending – for example, Yvonne said, as the December Knit Out Night, “He spends money on tools and I spend what I want on wool. That’s just the way it is with me.” (12-13-05) – demonstrate that knitters have used their hobby as a way of gaining power in their relationships.

Knit Out Night attendees who have families also take pleasure in getting away from their domestic responsibilities to participate in this social event. They also use their knitting at home to demonstrate to their families that they are taking “some *me* time” (Laura 10-29-05). However, whereas when they are at home, knitters said, there is always something else they need to get done, or someone asking them for something, by going out they send the message to their families that they are taking a break from all domestic responsibilities.

Feminist Messages Expressed through Knitting

By holding meetings in public, knitters manage to carve out room for women’s expressive culture in public spaces and in knitters’ own schedules. In addition, knitting in public helps to turn knitting into a special event that sets the activity apart from the everyday and gives it greater status. Pauline Greenhill and Diane Tye write that women’s folkloric performances have typically been restricted to private spheres and all-female contexts. Being restricted to performing in private spheres is seen as negative for women because public, male dominated performance spaces have higher status in Western culture; however, positive effects have been realized from the intimacy of women’s only

gatherings because women feel more comfortable expressing themselves when men are not present (Greenhill and Tye 323). The Knit Out Night at Wool Trends takes place in a semi-public space, in one of the upstairs rooms of the store; therefore, it has the benefits of private space – that is, no risk of being interrupted by non-knitters and immersion in woman-centered culture – and also of public space – that is, separation from the everyday because the meeting does not take place in a home. Contemporary Stitch ‘n Bitch groups use *appropriation* to claim their right to public spaces normally occupied by men (Radner and Lanser 10).

In the Stitch ‘n’ Bitch books, Stoller explicitly advocates knitting as a means of appropriating creative space dominated by men with chapter titles such as “I knit it my way” (2004, 1). This title is a play on the song, “My Way,” adapted by Paul Anka from the original French version by Claude François and Jacques Revaux, which is all about the power of the independent man. In this chapter, Stoller provides instructions for how to design knitted garments so that knitters can avoid being dependent on commercial patterns. Stoller’s “Take back the knit” (2003, 2) chapter is so named to recall widespread international rallies, called Take Back the Night, held in protest against violence against women and in support of women’s rights to freely use public spaces any time of the day or night without being harassed. Whereas in order for women to *take back the night*, that is to go out at night without risk of violence, men’s cooperation is required, ‘the knit’ may be ‘taken back’ by knitters alone. Using knitting for self-expression allows individual women to gain confidence that may lead to micro-political shifts in power. Making women’s self-expression visible by knitting in public demonstrates

women's empowerment, which feminist knitters such as Stoller believe can contribute to broader societal change.

One way for women to gain the power that appropriation yields, without taking the risk of being socially-sanctioned for invading masculine domains, is by appropriating elements of expressive culture already designated as feminine, and repeating them with exaggeration. This strategy is called *mimicry* (Radner and Lanser 10). Inherent in their association between knitting and better, by-gone times, is an image of a society in which women had more clearly-defined roles than we have today. Though knitters expressed their gratefulness at not having to "be responsible for a whole bunch of people 24/7" (Kaya 10-23-05), they enjoy domestic tasks such as cooking and cleaning, as well as knitting, when they have time for them, and wish these tasks were given more social recognition. Knitters identify their grandmothers as their inspiration for knitting. By mimicking an element of the expressive culture of their grandmothers' generation, knitters today associate themselves with the strength they attribute to their hard-working foremothers.

Symbolic inversion is any "act of expressive culture which inverts, contradicts, abrogates, or in some fashion presents an alternative to commonly held cultural codes, values, and norms" (Babcock 14). Lynda Pershing's study of a Sunbonnet Sue²³ quilt in which the image was symbolically inverted – by depicting Sue in a variety of scandalous poses, the quilters took pleasure and power in symbolically appropriating male activities - revealed that the process of production and the gathering of quilters was as significant to her informants as the images. When women knit in public, especially in particularly

²³ Sunbonnet Sue is a commonly quilted image. She is a childlike figure who sports a large bonnet that conceals her face. Typically she is depicted doing feminine activities such as gardening and baking.

male-dominated spaces such as bars (Figure 46), they are inverting the image of knitting as an activity restricted to the private sphere. Meanwhile, rather than completely inverting the traditional image of knitting as a domestic activity, Hazel and the Knit Out Night participants meet in a semi-public space. Thus, knitters take advantage of knitting's image as trivial and they mimic the traditions of knitting in order to gain power from knitting's positive connotations.



Figure 46: Memorial University of Newfoundland students (from left to right: Judith, Joanna, Caroline and Tara) contradicting the image of knitting as a primarily domestic activity by knitting at Bitter's, the graduate student bar.

Knitters use *juxtaposition* to contrast the unthreatening, feminine act of knitting with more masculine activities such as smoking and drinking. Knitters told me they work to dispel notions that knitting is a passive activity by knitting publicly while engaged in public events, such as community meetings and musical performances. For example, Gillian suggested we do our second interview at The Ship Pub, a downtown St. John's

bar, so that we could have a Friday afternoon pint of beer while chatting. Gillian boasted that when she was a smoker she could smoke and knit at the same time. By knitting in bars and smoking while knitting, Gillian contrasts and neutralizes the image of knitting as an activity reserved for harmless old women that she believes many people still hold and which she opposes. She also expresses the feminist point of view that women's activities should not be confined by socially-prescribed gender norms or domestic spaces.

Knitters also use the feminist coding strategy known as *indirection* – in which metaphor is used to create distance and ambiguity – to give knitting more importance. Although knitting is clearly a hobby for all of my informants, with the exception of Hazel who does knitting for her business, they use the word *work*²⁴ to refer to time spent knitting. This helps to legitimize their activity by emphasising knitting's productive value while distancing knitting from its existence as a leisure activity. Referring to knitting as work contributes to its association with a time when knitting was a necessary part of domestic production and with the positive sentiments associated with simpler, better times gone-by, when knitting was a routine part of women's work. Another benefit of linking knitting to work lies in work's role as personal identification in North American culture. A primary way that people define and relate to one another is through their jobs or professions; the common social question, *what do you do?*, may be interpreted as *what do you produce for our community?* Knitters who do not have jobs where they produce tangible, useful objects and knitters who feel insecure about their employment status, use knitting to identify themselves as producers, that is to say, as contributing members of their families and society.

²⁴ Rozsika Parker resisted the use of the term *work* to refer to knitting because it “engendered an ideology of femininity as service and selflessness and the insistence that women work for others, not for themselves” (6).

The Knit Out Night participants justify their participation in the gathering by claiming to *need* help with their projects, that is, they claim *incompetence*. For example, as Tara and I walked, for forty minutes, from our homes near the university to Wool Trends for Knit Out Night on March 8, 2005, Tara talked about how busy she was with school and her doubts as to whether she would have time in the semester to get all of her work done. Fortunately, Tara's inability to advance the socks she was knitting without help allowed her to make attending Knit Out Night, and even taking a long walk to get there, more of a priority than her school work.

At Knit Out Night gatherings, as mentioned above, knitters line up to get Hazel to help them read patterns, solve design problems and troubleshoot. The other knitters at the December 13, 2005, Knit Out Night laughed heartily in agreement with Helen's comment that "Hazel always says, 'Oh yes, you can do that,'" (12-13-05) whenever knitters hesitatingly ask how to make the sample items that Hazel has knit and displays in the store. But Hazel protested, "What am I supposed to do? Am I supposed to say 'Oh no, don't do that'?" The knitters admitted they had managed to complete the projects that Hazel had recommended but they continued to refuse to let go of the expressions of incompetence, which validate their interactions with Hazel (Knit Out Night 12-13-05) and their presence at Knit Out Night. By expressing incompetence, knitters send the coded feminist message, *I need and deserve the attention of an authority*. Thus this coding strategy serves to justify women's Knit Out Night attendance, and allows them to enjoy this knitting gathering and to have uninterrupted leisure time.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how knitting is used by hobbyists in St. John's, and how it is promoted in popular culture, to challenge the stereotype, which many of my informants believe most members of society still hold of knitting, as a passive feminine activity performed by old women in domestic settings. For example, Erin said, "most people at my high school thought only grandmothers knit and at first they'd make fun of me when they saw me knitting. But after a while, they got used to seeing me knitting in the halls and some people even asked me to teach them" (12-11-05).

Because of knitting's longstanding association with women's work and its contemporary manifestation as a hobby, knitters feel the dominant culture may consider knitting inconsequential. For example, Helen pointed out that knitting needles are now, once again, permitted on airplanes, though other seemingly harmless, but gender neutral items – for example, fingernail clippers – continue to be prohibited. She said,

I imagine I could do way more damage with a pair of knitting needles [than with any of the items in a manicure kit] but needles are allowed because of their association with women and women are considered harmless. And of all women, knitters may be considered the most harmless (02-09-06).

This dismissive view of knitting, which knitters such as Erin and Gillian experience in their everyday lives, provides an opportunity for knitters to express coded feminist messages without necessarily drawing attention to their expressions or directly confronting the patriarchal social structure. Knit Out Night takes place in a semi-public setting, which allows the women attending to avoid the more direct challenge of appropriating a truly public space, such as a coffee shop, while still appropriating time and financial resources for their own leisure. By knitting publically while relaxing in all

sorts of social situations, young women combat cultural norms that confine women's creative expression to private spheres. Incompetence, which they express to justify their Knit Out Night attendance and their interactions with Hazel, is strategically employed to carve out more personal time and space for knitting in their own lives. Furthermore, attending Knit Out Night is a valorizing activity insofar as knitters demonstrate their valuation of knitting as an element of women's expressive culture. Not only do knitters want to develop their own skills, but they hope that more people will be exposed to knitting due to the existence of public venues for knitting, such as Knit Out Night and that the practice will become a more widespread hobby.

Some of the primary pleasures that knitters experience from knitting are relaxation and self-indulgence; when these pleasures are experienced in groups, knitters feel validated and supported. For example, Kathleen said, "I really like going to Hazel's and being with only women because everyone understands and I feel better buying wool when other people are there buying it too" (12-09-05). Thus, knitting in groups provides knitters with the confidence to assert their personal desires and to take power in their relationships. Knitter's consumption of knitting supplies at Wool Trends, especially on Knit Out Night, is empowering both because the products make knitters think of their own capability for creating future projects and because the social environment encourages their sense of entitlement to financial resources for their personal pleasure. The conversations at Knit Out Night often revolve around hypothetical situations or impersonal topics that allow the knitters to express their opinions without revealing personal details of their lives. Other common subjects are reminiscences about childhood and the differences between men and women. Knitters said they found the women-only

space at Knit Out Night cozy and relaxing because they felt free to express themselves. This sort of discourse serves to unify the group, and even the community more broadly by reinforcing social values and cultural memories.

The mass-mediated depictions of knitting as a force for feminist social change are positive, so they appeal to many hobby knitters who appear to be growing in number (or at least in visibility), in St. John's. Knitting is promoted as a pleasurable, youthful, self-indulgent activity. Group knitting events provide knitters with evasive pleasures of conformity, often focus on woman-centered culture, and require little effort from participants. However, a minority of knitters disapprove of these events and the promotion of knitting in popular culture because they feel that capitalist, patriarchal institutions are deliberately eliminating the creativity in knitting in order to control women's behaviour. Nevertheless, the promotion of knitting in popular culture, with the publication of Stoller's first book, in 2003, has contributed to making knitting as a hobby a paradoxical act of conformity and defiance in which young, hip urban women can find the pleasure of a women's activity that has historical precedence and that is validated by contemporary mass culture while confronting the patriarchy and appropriating male public terrain, such as bars.

Chapter 5. Conclusion: Creating the Future Out of the Past by Knitting

Henry Glassie's characterization of tradition as the "creation of the future out of the past" (2003, 176) provides a link that draws together the popular culture phenomenon of knitting and my informants' feeling that knitting is an important part of their cultural history. Although the knitters I spoke with want to participate in an element of the way of life of their foremothers, they realize the objects they produce must be relevant in today's context. This is to say, those objects must be usable and must conform to contemporary fashion. Their efforts to promote knitting as a hobby and also to disseminate hand-knit items reflect their desires to ensure that hand-knitting continues to be a part of the everyday material culture of their community.

In this chapter, I situate my thesis in the broader context of scholarship on craft and I elaborate three conclusions I have drawn which help to explain the significance of knitting in contemporary urban Newfoundland. First, this study has led me to conclude the practice of hobby knitting today illustrates Glassie's notion that tradition is constantly being reinvented by its users according to the present influences of their culture and their awareness of the past (2003). Similarly, it also reflects Alexander's theory that "tradition makes the problem of increase in quantity, new materials and social patterns easier to cope with" (4). Second, I found hobby knitting provides my informants with a sense of "their position in the universe" (Glassie 1992, 49). This is to say, creating knitted objects gives knitters a sense of participating in something fundamental or greater than themselves. I believe that for some contemporary urban people, knitting is an appealing hobby because the activity offers them a sense of belonging to a community of people,

not bounded by place or time, who share aesthetics and ideals. Knitting offers knitters the sense of *belonging to a place* that rural people gain from lifelong sharing of spaces and resources in Newfoundland outport communities (Pocius 1991). Third, I argue that the contemporary phenomenon of knitting as a hobby reflects the strength of the knitting tradition in Newfoundland despite the influence of external culture, such as printed patterns, and that hobby knitters today are contributing to the evolution of Newfoundland knitting.

The broader context of scholarship

This thesis is a part of a diverse range of academic writing about the significance of the handmade and waves of interest in craft in western culture. Contemporary hobby knitting in St. John's has elements in common with, as well as differences from the late nineteenth century Canadian crafts revival described by Ellen Mary Easton McLeod in her book, In Good Hands: the Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild. Though McLeod's work focuses mainly on the history of the founding of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild and on the people involved in the organization's establishment, it relates to my study of hobby knitting in St. John's because it provides documentation of domestic crafts' valuation in Canadian society from over a hundred years ago. The founders of the Guild shared with today's hobby knitters an idealization of the pre-industrial past and a sense that rural lifestyles were somehow more pure than urban ones. The *raison d'être* of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild was to promote art, preserve heritage and create employment opportunities whereby rural women could earn income from home (McLeod 3). Though these philanthropic and social improvement goals appear to have more in common with the goals of the Newfoundland Outport Nurses Industrial

Association (NONIA) than with ordinary people's motivations for knitting as a hobby, some of the knitters I spoke with feel all women would benefit from experiencing the personal rewards gained from knitting, in particular, relaxation and a sense of satisfaction from creation. For example, Kaya is critical of what she perceives as women's conformity to social pressure to be constantly active. She said she hopes one day women will get "sick of doing yoga and pilates all the time and maybe when they knit they can actually talk to each other and feel good about themselves" (11-18-05).

Making functional objects by hand in the twenty-first century, as diverse members of society do, is implicitly a critique of mass production and mass consumption (Triggs). Hobby knitters share a common ethos with others who hand-make all sorts of objects, from textile crafts such as cross stitch (Turney) to punk fanzines (Triggs). Recognizing common valuation of the handmade among diverse members of society suggests several questions for future comparative research. For example, how do various producers of handmade objects balance their social criticism and their consumption of finished, designed objects for their do-it-yourself activities? Another area of future research is about the sense of morality surrounding the valuation of the handmade and how hobbyists justify the sense that making objects by hand is somehow more ecologically or socially sustainable than purchasing mass produced objects in light of the development of a whole new industry that supplies materials for one-off productions. The notion attributed to William Morris that material objects and techniques for producing them are indicative of societies' or cultures' moral fabric, McLeod claims, is still evident today (51). Tracing the roots of craft practices is a common theme in academic research on crafts, for example Hickey's Picking Up Lost Stitches, through which authentic, original

forms are sought. This focus on the past in crafts research serves to discredit, or at least to diminish the significance of, contemporary productions. Though some scholars have trivialized folk revivals, for example Frances Collard claims the historical revival of the late eighteenth century “suggested a state of cultural confusion” (35), Neil V. Rosenberg has elevated the topic of revivals in folkloristics. Rosenberg characterises the folksong revival of the 1930s to the 1970s as a means for “scholars and revivalists alike to choose from the folk culture which best fit their preconceptions of art” (182). My synchronic analysis of the uses and social functions of knitting as a hobby in twenty-first century St. John’s, demonstrates how the revival of folk practices may benefit individuals and communities.

Thesis Conclusions

Knitters’ emphasis on the importance of the act of knitting, as well as on the importance of producing functional objects, demonstrates my first conclusion that contemporary hobby knitting reflects Glassie’s notion of tradition as reflecting the past but also meeting the needs of the present (2003, 176). Though they have respect for the utilitarian forms their grandmothers produced, the objects today’s hobby knitters make demonstrate they are not interested in preserving knitting exactly as it was practiced in the past. What is important to many knitters is *making objects that fulfill immediate needs*, just as did the objects members of their families produced in previous generations. As mentioned in chapter three, knitters enjoy producing warm winter garments that recall the strictly functional knitting of previous generations, but also produce items that symbolize modern frivolousness, such as the cat beds Martina makes, and fashion accessories that reflect popular culture.

Another example of how the tradition of knitting is evolving is the balance knitters find between their ideals of using natural materials, which are in keeping with the past, and their acceptance of synthetic yarns, which may be more functional. Their desire to use natural fibres comes less from a puritanical, preservationist, elitist point of view and more from their notions of what is sustainable. They balance their desire to use natural materials with their recognition that their grandmothers' main concern was not the materials they knit with but producing objects that served the user as efficiently as possible, in terms of durability and economy.

Some knitters use the act of knitting as a hobby, along with the objects they produce, to demonstrate their conformity to traditional social values. Knitters such as Lewis and Erin feel these values still persist in rural places but are being eroded by the pressures of modern urban living. For example, Erin uses knitting to combat the mass-consumption and anonymity she witnesses in contemporary urban Western society. She believes part of the key to a better way of life is through awareness of the materials and production process of the everyday objects she uses. Erin said,

I wanted to learn to knit because I was really interested in being able to do more things for myself, and not be buying things from some big company. I mean, I know that you still have to buy your wool and your needles but if you buy Briggs & Little's yarn or something, then that's a good ol' Atlantic Canadian company, and that's better than the Gap or something. So that was part of it and the other part of [my reason for learning to knit] was wanting to be attached to the things that my ancestors have been doing for a long time. Because they didn't have a choice, they had to make all of their own stuff. So I wanted that independence and that connection (11-26-05).

Erin favours natural materials because she believes they are more ecologically correct and also appreciates the feeling of connectedness with rural Newfoundlanders, who once produced their own wool, when she uses this fibre. Nevertheless, her desire to maintain

connections with her family motivated Erin to put aside her preference for pure wool in order to knit Phentex slippers (Figure 47), just as her grandmother did. Erin explained,

You know those slippers with the checkers? Nan did a million of those slippers. And I actually went and bought Phentex when she died to knit these slippers for all of my cousins. Well, it actually never materialized because I found that it [the Phentex yarn] used to slip a lot. I'm used to working with natural fabrics and I found this stuff actually really difficult to work with and I couldn't get it to go but I'm hoping to get that done some time in my life because we always had these slippers as kids (11-26-05).



Figure 47: Phentex slippers belonging to the author.

Knitting in the presence of her great aunts, as I discussed in chapter two, provides Erin with a way to bridge the generation gap in their relationship, and also with reassurance that despite their different social contexts they share a common culture. Knitting for others, as discussed in chapter three, is Erin's means of contributing to her community's memory of the work women such as her grandmother did, and of the objects people had prior to the pervasion of mass production and mass consumption in Western culture.

My second conclusion is that knitting offers today's frequently migrating urbanites a sense of belonging to a universal culture that goes beyond the sense of

belonging to a particular place or time. Many of my informants associate knitting with rural Newfoundland; however, I believe the combination of their idealization of their ancestors' rural lifestyles and their choice to knit as a hobby actually demonstrates a longing for community connectedness, which many find lacking in contemporary urban lifestyles. The fact of having been involved in some form of migration – either within Newfoundland, away from Newfoundland, or to the province – is a link between my informants and a factor in their choices to knit. Migrating multiple times over the course of their lifetimes is accepted by Kaya, Gillian, Erin, Helen, Martina and Sue as an unavoidable reality of the contemporary middle-class lifestyle in Western culture. Taking up knitting may serve as an antidote to not having a sense of belonging to a particular place. As a form of *vernacular technology* (Glassie 1992), hand-knit items, as well as the process of knitting, offer those who engage with them constant reminders of “the validity of their culture” (49).

Though Glassie defines vernacular technology as handmade objects out of primary materials, he also states that “the key to vernacular technology is engagement, direct involvement in the manipulation of materials and active participation in the process of design, construction and use” (1992, 52). Hobby knitters clearly share Glassie's belief that manipulating materials and customizing the design of objects to meet individuals' needs is culturally significant. Some hobby knitters, such as Erin, favour natural materials because they view these fibres as environmentally sustainable and because they represent the legacy of human interaction with other species and with the natural environment. However, as the story of Erin's Phentex slippers illustrates, knitters may find materials significant for personal reasons as well. Hobby knitters are highly aware

of the symbolism of the materials they choose so they carefully consider their options and choose materials for practical as well as ideological reasons.

Hobby knitters' recycling efforts are their way of using readily available resources from their environments. Buying second-hand clothing and breaking it down into its component parts in order to reuse those parts in craft projects mirrors the harvesting and manipulation of natural materials engaged in by previous generations. Both of these means of obtaining knitting materials reassure knitters of their place in the world and of their own abilities. Producing useful objects contributes to knitters' sense of self-worth and they feel good about the entire process of production, from choosing materials to making design decisions to actually forming loops of yarn to create fabric.

Finally, though Alexander would argue that hobby knitters are considerably removed from the homeostatic, unselfconscious process of design because they use written patterns, my research demonstrates that hobby knitters' efforts are a modern example of the homeostatic process. Because they are often the builders, users and maintainers of the objects they knit, "failures or inadequacies of form lead directly to action" (Alexander 50). Martina said, "I don't mind unravelling things two or three times to get it exactly right" (11-09-05). When she produces a garment for someone, she does not mind taking it back to make alterations or repairs over the course of the object's use. She is skilled at both customizing commercial patterns and at inventing her own designs to fill the individual needs of the users of her knitwear, such as items for her girlfriend's mother who uses a wheelchair. According to Alexander the basic principle in the homeostatic process is that adaptation to misfits and non-reaction to *good fits* produces static equilibrium which is constantly, albeit slowly, evolving. Knitters' tendency to

repeat their successes and to either unravel or else never reproduce items or patterns that are unpopular or unsuccessful is a part of this process. Many hobby knitters take pride in always incorporating some of their own innovation into commercial patterns, but do not feel confident to create objects entirely from their own designs; thus I believe printed patterns are a help rather than a hindrance to the continuance of knitting in Newfoundland tradition.

In addition, St. John's' hobby knitters are clearly contributing to the process of the evolution of Newfoundland knitting because they create new designs based on commercial patterns, old forms and traditional aesthetics. For example, Hazel designed mittens with moose and puffin motifs on them which reflect and respect notions of traditional Newfoundland knitting so faithfully that both Newfoundlanders and tourists who see them assume they are made from historic patterns. Although the motifs on the mittens are Hazel's original designs, she used a mitt her grandmother knit as a guide for the form of her new mittens. Hazel said, "A lot of tourists are coming around and asking me if I've got a book of traditional Newfoundland patterns and I'm sure with a little bit of guidance and knowing where to go and what to do I could make one and sell tonnes of them" (11-17-05). Hazel believes people's perception of her mitten designs as traditional is inaccurate and in order to produce a book of traditional Newfoundland patterns she would have to research in the provincial archives. She says she would like to do this because she would like to "revive the old patterns" (11-17-05). However, according to the theories of Glassie and Alexander, Hazel's designs are indeed part of traditional Newfoundland knitting because she takes elements of old forms and refashions them with motifs which appeal to present day tastes. In addition, despite Hazel's modesty in

asserting her patterns are not traditional because they are not historically documented, the importance to most knitters, and to others who experience knitted items, is not that the knitted objects are certifiably authentic but that they provide quality experiences and sentiments that remind them of the past (Pocius 2005).

Public knitting groups, such as Knit Out Night at Wool Trends and also Stitch 'n Bitch groups, recall the culture of visiting that Pocius documented in Calvert (1991) because the activity around which they revolve connotes everydayness and inspires a sense of intimacy among participants. They offer knitters a way of fitting into their busy urban existences an element of rural culture which they feel enhances their lives and the community by making a link between diverse members of the population. These knitting events provide women of varying backgrounds with opportunities to reinforce one another's values and experiences, to relax in women-centered spaces and to make feminist statements. As discussed in chapter four, knitters use gatherings such as Knit Out Night to enjoy both passive and productive pleasures; the relaxation of spending focused time on knitting with others who share their hobby and their values allows women to amass strength for making subtle but significant shifts in power in their relationships. Most importantly, whether they knit on their own or in groups, in public spaces or at home, opting to spend leisure time on this activity so firmly associated with women has the effect of linking knitters to women's culture, to a sense of belonging as Newfoundlanders, to specific Newfoundland communities, and to their families' past.

Works Cited

- Abrahams, Roger D. "Identity." Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture. Ed. Burt Feintuch. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 198-222.
- Alexander, Christopher. Notes on the Synthesis of Form. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974.
- Anderson Payne, Kaya. "My Experiences as a Sex Column Writer." Spokeswoman (Spring 2004): 8-10.
- Babcock, Barbara A. ed. The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978.
- Bascom, William. "Four Functions of Folklore." Journal of American Folklore. 67 (1954): 333-349.
- Bartra, Eli, ed. Crafting Gender: Women and Folk Art in Latin America and the Caribbean. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- Bendix, Regina. In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.
- Berger, Harris S. and Giovanna del Negro. Identities and Everyday Life: Essays in the Study of Folklore, Music, and Popular Culture. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2004.
- Bronner, Simon J. The Carver's Art: Crafting Meaning from Wood. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996.
- Collard, Frances. "Historical Revivals, Commercial Enterprise and Public Confusion Negotiating Taste 1860-1890." Journal of Design History. 16:1 (2003): 35-50.
- Creighton, Millie R. "Nostalgia, Identity and Gender: Woven in 100 Percent Pure Silk." Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Crafts. Ed. Gloria Hickey. Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization with the Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft, 1994. 100-13.
- Fiske, John. Understanding Popular Culture. London: Routledge, 1989.
- Glassie, Henry. "Artifact and Culture, Architecture and Society." American Material Culture and Folklife: A Prologue and Dialogue. Ed. Simon J. Bronner. Logan: Utah State University Press, 1992. 47-62.
- . Material Culture. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.
- . "Tradition." Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture. Ed. Burt Feintuch. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 176-97.
- Greenhill, Pauline and Diane Tye. "Women and Traditional Culture." Changing Patterns: Women in Canada. Ed. Loraine Code Sandra Bruner, and Lindsay Dorney. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1993. 309-37.
- Greenhalgh, Paul. Ed. The Persistence of Craft. London: A&C Black, 2002.
- Hansen, Robin. Flying Geese & Partridge Feet: More Mittens from up North and Down East. Camden: Down East Books, 1986.
- Hansen, Robin Orm. "Knit One, Purl Two: Traditional Knitting in Hand and in Print in North America, Britain and Scandinavia." PhD. Boston University, 1990.
- Harling Stalker, L. Lynda. "Wool and Needles in My Casket: Knitting as Habit among Rural Newfoundland Women." MA. Memorial University of Newfoundland, 2000.

- Hickey, Gloria. "Craft within a Consuming Society." The Culture of Craft. Ed. Peter Dormer. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997. 83-100.
- . Picking up Lost Stitches: Research into the History of Knitting in Newfoundland. St. John's: Crafts Council of Newfoundland and Labrador, 2002. 11 July 2006
<<http://www.craftcouncil.nf.ca/magazine/content.asp?id=1&con=181>>
- House, Edgar. The Way Out: The Story of NONIA in Newfoundland. St. John's: Creative, 1990.
- Ice, Joyce. "Feminist Readings of Folk Material Culture Studies." The Material Culture of Gender, the Gender of Material Culture. Eds. Kenneth L. Ames and Katharine Martinez. Winterthur: Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, 1997. 217-235.
- Jones, Michael Owen. Craftsman of the Cumberlands. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989.
- MacAulay, Suzanne P. Stitching Rights. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2000.
- Macdonald, Anne L. No Idle Hands: A Social History of Knitting in America. New York: Ballantine Books, 1988.
- McLeod, Ellen Mary Easton. In Good Hands. The Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999.
- Mead, Margaret. "Work, Leisure, and Creativity." Art and Aesthetics in Primitive Societies: A Critical Anthology. Ed. Carol F. Jopling. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1971. 132-145.
- Narváez, Peter. "The Newfie Bullet – The Nostalgic Use of Folklore." Media Sense: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum. Eds. Martin Laba and Peter Narváez. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1986: 65-76.
- Overton, James. Making a World of Difference: Essays on Tourism, Culture and Development in Newfoundland. St. John's: ISER Books, 1996.
- Pershing, Linda. "'She Really Wanted to Be Her Own Woman:' Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue." Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture. Ed. Joan Newlon Radner. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993. 98-125.
- Pocius, G. L. Textile Traditions of Eastern Newfoundland. Paper No. 29. Ottawa: National Museum of Canada, Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, 1979.
- . "Newfoundland Traditional Crafts: Types and Stereotypes." Artisan 4 (1981): 15-20.
- . A Place to Belong: Community Order and Everyday Space in Calvert, Newfoundland. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991.
- . "Craft and Cultural Meaning." Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft. Ed. Gloria A. Hickey. Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994. 125-131.
- . "Material Culture Research: Authentic Things, Authentic Values." Material History Bulletin 45 (1997): 1-26.
- . "Art." Eight Words for the Study of Expressive Culture. Ed. Burt Feintuch. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003. 42-68.
- . "Is It Authentic, Is It Real, Does It Matter?: The Lessons from Professional Wrestling and Buildings." Bean Blossom to Bannerman, Odyssey of a Folklorist: A Festschrift for Neil V. Rosenberg. Eds. Martin Lovelace, Peter Narvaez and Diane Tye. St. John's: MUNFLA Publications, 2005. 343-64.

- Price, Sally. "Always Something New: Changing Fashions in a 'Traditional Culture'." Crafting Gender: Women and Folk Art in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ed. Eli Bartra. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 17-34.
- Radner, Joan Newlon and Susan S. Lanser. "Strategies of Coding in Women's Culture." Feminist Messages: Coding in Women's Folk Culture. Ed. Joan Newlon Radner. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993. 1-26.
- Roberts, Warren E. "Folk Crafts." Folklore and Folklife. Ed. Richard M. Dorson. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972. 133-51.
- Roseberg, Neil V. "'An Icy Mountain Brook:' Revival, Aesthetics and the 'Coal Creek March.'" Songs About Work: Essays in Occupational Culture for Richard A. Reuss. Ed. Archie Green. Bloomington: Folklore Institute, 1993. 163-183.
- Salvador, Mari Lyn. "Kuna Women's Arts: Molasses, Meaning and Markets." Crafting Gender: Women and Folk Art in Latin America and the Caribbean. Ed. Eli Bartra. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. 47-72.
- Schlereth, Thomas J. Ed. Material Culture Studies in America. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982.
- . Cultural History & Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992.
- Stoller, Debbie. Stitch 'N' Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook. New York: Workman Publishing, 2003.
- . Stitch 'N' Bitch Nation. New York: Workman Publishing, 2004.
- Triggs, Teal. "Scissors and Glue." Journal of Design History. 19:1 (2006): 69-83.
- Turney, Jo. "Here's One I made Earlier. Making and Living with Home Craft in Contemporary Britain." Journal of Design History. 17:3 (2004): 267-282.
- Zimmerman, Elizabeth. Knitting without Tears. New York: Fireside, 1971.

Personal Interviews and Recordings

- Abbott, Hazel. Personal Interview. 11-17-05.
- Anderson Payne, Kaya. Personal Interview. 10-23-05.
- . Personal Interview. 11-18-05.
- . Personal Interview. 02-10-06.
- Ball, Helen. Personal Interview. 11-22-05.
- . Personal Interview. 12-04-05.
- . Personal Interview. 02-09-06.
- Cranford, Lewis. Personal Interview. 11-09-05.
- Curwin, Sue. Personal Interview. 10-15-05.
- . Personal Interview. 11-14-05.
- . Personal Interview. 02-09-06.
- Knit Out Night. Field Recording. 03-08-05.
- . Field Recording. 10-06-05.
- . Field Recording. 11-15-05.
- . Field Recording. 12-13-05.
- . Field Recording. 04-27-06.
- Pomeroy, Laura. Personal Interview. 10-17-05.
- . Personal Interview. 10-29-05.

---. Personal Interview. 02-13-06.
Sharpe, Erin. Personal Interview. 11-26-05.
---. Personal Interview. 12-11-05.
---. Personal Interview. 02-11-06.
Strong, Gillian. Personal Interview. 10-18-05.
---. Personal Interview. 11-25-05.
White, Martina. Personal Interview. 10-17-05.
---. Personal Interview. 11-09-05.
---. Personal Interview. 02-13-06.
Winter, Kathleen. Personal Interview. 12-02-05.

Appendix: Informant Profiles

Informants who attended Knit Out Night:

Hazel Abbott, the owner of Wool Trends, started her business selling yarn and knitting supplies seven years ago. She is 55 years-old. Hazel's enthusiasm for getting knitters together for social events is motivated not only by her business interests but also by her own interest in knitting as a hobby. She has a fantasy of some night getting a group of knitters to "take over Starbucks." Hazel says that knitting is like yoga because the rhythmic act of knitting is relaxing and it helps her to clear her mind.

She learned to knit from her father, who was a fisherman, when she was a little girl growing up in Musgrave Harbour. Hazel remembers seeing her father mending fishing nets with a shuttle and wanting to learn to do what he was doing. Hazel said her father didn't want to teach her to make fishing nets because he said, "that's not for girls." He told Hazel to get some wool and some knitting needles from her mother and he taught her to knit.

Helen Ball is a 45-year-old social work professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland. She lives in downtown St. John's with her three cats. She grew up in Caledon, a farming region of Ontario about an hour drive from Toronto, but was inspired to move to Newfoundland after she came to visit a friend, in St. John's, in 1993. One of her enduring memories of that first trip is of the elaborate hand-knit sweaters she saw for sale at prices far lower than those in Ontario. Helen was eager to buy Newfoundland knitwear but she was also inspired by these garments to relearn to knit.

Helen first learned to knit as a child, from her mother. She took up knitting again two years ago because she was drawn to the colours and textures of wool she saw in a large knitting store she visited with a friend in Toronto. She favours simple stitches and patterns so the beauty of the colours of the wool are highlighted to their full extent.

Sue Curwin moved to Paradise, Newfoundland, two years ago in order for her husband, Mike, to take a job. She is originally from Munciton, New Brunswick, and is anxiously looking forward to moving back to the Maritimes, as soon as her husband is able to transfer. Sue is 39 years of age. An important issue in her life for the past several years has been her inability to conceive and her struggles with the adoption system – Sue has recently decided to give up trying to become a mother. Sue is currently unemployed but she is working on writing a business plan for a second hand clothing store that she will start up once she moves away from Newfoundland. She says that these days she contributes to the family, economically, by doing home repairs and decorating which will make their house more valuable when they move.

Sue was taught to knit by her grandmother when she was a child but at that time, she found knitting purposeless. A year and a half ago, however, Sue asked a co-worker, at the call centre where she was employed, to show her how to knit so that Sue could make her own dishcloths.

Martina White lives with her girlfriend in the basement apartment of her parents' house in Mount Pearl, a suburb of St. John's. She is 37 years of age and is happily

employed at Convergys, a call centre that offers telecommunications technical support to people who call from the United States. Martina enjoys her job and the social contacts she has with her coworkers but she finds the work uncreative and lacking Newfoundland community context. Knitting and doing other crafts are ways Martina asserts her membership in Newfoundland community and contributes to insuring the persistence of traditional practices and aesthetics. Martina grew up in a suburb of St. John's but she has relatives in Buchans and having learned to knit from her grandmother, Martina associates knitting with Newfoundland heritage, especially her family's rural roots.

Kathleen Winter is a 46-year-old fiction and poetry writer who lives in Holyrood, a community fifty kilometres away from St. John's, with her husband and two daughters. She was born in England but grew up in Newfoundland; after, she graduated from journalism school, in Ottawa, she moved back to St. John's. Kathleen was inspired to learn to crochet by her admiration for her grandmother's crochet skills. She said that learning to blend different fibres and materials in crochet has helped her to blend reality and fantasy in the stories she writes. Pure wool or other natural fibres are her preferred materials for crochet and Kathleen enjoys the challenge of restricting herself to materials that she finds on sale and second hand but she is also open to sometimes using new materials and acrylics that appeal to her senses.

Informants who did not attend Knit Out Night:

Kaya Anderson-Payne is 21 years of age and currently studying in the Women's Studies Department, at Memorial University of Newfoundland. Though she grew up in St. John's, she spent some years of her childhood with her grandparents on the West Coast of the island and has an affinity for rural living. She attributes her drive to be constantly productive to the influence of her parents' whom she says are both extremely hard-working – her father is a folk musician and her mother is a civil servant. Kaya uses knitting as a way to feel, and to appear, productive while satisfying her desire to have creative control. Knitting for Kaya is a feminist statement and a means of demonstrating her anti-hegemonic political ideals.

I came to know Lewis Cranford through the St. John's Storytelling Circle's monthly gatherings. As amateur storytellers preformed, I sat in the audience knitting and Lewis introduced himself as a fellow knitter and volunteered to be interviewed for this study.

Lewis has worked for Aliant, the regional telephone company, for eighteen years; he is responsible for repairs to the message management system. Lewis is forty years of age. Though he enjoys his job and the home he owns in a suburban neighbourhood, he admires the more rural lifestyle he grew up with in Polish Point, near Bay Roberts. Though Lewis is not currently working on any knitting projects, he would like to have more time for such productive activities. Knowing how to knit and having other creative

self-sufficiency skills, such as auto mechanics, are symbols of his rural Newfoundland and family identities.

Laura Pomeroy is the owner of the homebrew shop in downtown, St. John's, called Wine Kitz. She is 37 years of age and lives with her husband and daughter, near Bowring Park, in St. John's. Laura moved to St. John's from Gander when she was four years old. She learned to knit as a child from a friend's mother and has kept up the practice on and off ever since. Laura knits mostly socks, sweaters and dishcloths both as gifts for her relatives and for anyone who asks her to knit and supplies her with the materials. Laura's other hobbies include bicycling and marathon running.

I saw her knitting when I went into her store one day and asked her if she would like to be an informant for my research. Like some other knitters, she agreed to participate but she also modestly downplayed the significance of her own knitting and suggested that I might speak with some more accomplished knitters. Over the course of our conversations and as a result of thinking about my questions, such as "how could your knitting be seen as a feminist statement," Laura said that she realized that knitting has significance that reminds her of important familial relationships.

Erin Sharpe is substitute music teacher, who lives in downtown St. John's. She is 25 years of age. Though Erin grew up in St. John's, she also has family on the West Coast of Newfoundland and she feels an affinity for her rural roots. Erin uses knitting as a way to routinely remind herself of her family's history, especially her mother's Micmac

and French ancestry. She tends to favour natural fibres and historic knitting patterns but she is open to new materials, such as Phentex acrylic yarn, and she believes that traditional knitting designs and methods must be allowed to evolve. Erin believes that handmade objects are intrinsically valuable because of the human effort that goes into designing and producing them. Knitting, for Erin is a way of aligning herself with traditional producers and against large-scale commercial production that she feels jeopardizes communities and Newfoundland culture.

I met Erin, in the fall of 2005, at the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore Society conference, at which I presented my research on the significance of trigger mitts.

Gillian Strong is a 24-year-old student at the Anna Templeton Centre for Craft, Art and Design in downtown St. John's. Though she is enrolled in the Textile Studies Program, which aims to train professional craftspeople, Gillian's career goal is to become a therapist and to use crafts in her work with people with disabilities. Gillian grew up in the suburbs of St. John's but she did not learn to knit until she left Newfoundland and lived in Vancouver. Knitting was a tool for her to combat the loneliness of being away from home, family and familiar culture.

I met Gillian at a housewarming party of some acquaintances which we attended in the fall of 2005. Gillian was wearing a pale pink cowgirl hat which she sewed herself out of Fun Fur fabric so I was anxious to learn more about her creative efforts; upon discovering that she knits, I asked to interview her.

