

Knit Together: A Study of Late Nineteenth-Century Knitting Patterns Through Contemporary  
Eyes and Hands

by © Courtney Moddle

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## **Abstract**

Despite, or perhaps because of its familiar role in society, knitting has often been considered as little more than a craft or hobby and too mundane to study in an academic sense. Yet, everyday activities, like knitting, can often offer significant information about society, culture, and individuals' lives. Focusing on the connections between past and present, between current knitters and their predecessors, my project examines historic knitting practices through a contemporary feminist lens. My research argues that a study of knitting books published in the late 1800s can provide new perspectives on women's lives and the knitting culture that they participated in. Furthermore, a thorough analysis of these texts may change the way modern knitting culture is perceived. To deepen my understanding of the historic knitting patterns, I engaged in an autoethnographic knitting project as I knit through historic patterns.

**Keywords:** autoethnography, knitting, stitch 'n bitch, 19<sup>th</sup> century, leisure, craftivism

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Table of Figures	vi
Chapter One: Introduction	7
1.1 Why Knitting?	7
1.2 My Story	10
1.3 My Project	12
1.4 The Pattern Books	18
1.5 Chapter Outline	24
Chapter Two: Literature Review	25
Chapter Three: Theory and Methodology	37
3.1 Theory	37
3.2 Methodology	44
3.3 Feminist Research Methodologies	45
3.4 Ethnographic Content Analysis	49
3.5 Material Culture Studies	50
3.6 Autoethnography as Method	52
3.7 Writing as Inquiry	54
Chapter Four: Knitting as Inquiry: My Autoethnographic Journey through Late Nineteenth-Century Knitting Patterns	58
4.1 Knitting as Inquiry	59

4.2	Autoethnographic Project	62
4.3	Getting Started	62
4.4	Beginning to Knit	68
4.5	Choosing Materials	70
4.6	Historic Patterns vs. Contemporary Patterns	76
Chapter Five: In Women's Words: Understanding Knitting History Through Women's Writing		82
5.1	Knitting for Pleasure	82
5.2	Process-Oriented Knitting	83
5.3	Anne Langton	85
5.4	L. M Montgomery	86
5.5	The Rural Diary Archive	89
5.6	A Look at the History	97
5.7	Women's Roles, Knitting and Feminism	100
5.8	Conclusion	105
Chapter Six: Conclusion		107
Works Cited		111

## Table of Figures

Figure 1.1: A pair of mittens I recently knit, and matching sweater and mittens knit by my partner's grandmother.	12
Figure 1.2: Knit section of "No. 116 –Lace Collar No. 5" from Home Work.	16
Figure 4.1: Pattern for "Ladies' Zouave Jacket, or Hug-me-Tight, Knitted by a Diagram."	63
Figure 4.2: An image of my project, a ladies' hug-me-tight in progress, nearly ready to begin the second sleeve.	72
Figure 4.3: The ladies' hug-me-tight after completion.	73
Figure 4.4: Image titled "Grandmother's Scholar."	79

## Chapter One: Introduction

### Why Knitting?

As I begin this thesis, I start with a question that I have been asked before, “Why knitting?” Out of all the subjects and issues that I could be studying, how did I land on something so seemingly mundane as knitting? Primarily, this is because I am a knitter. I spend a lot of time knitting, looking at patterns, talking about knitting, and thinking about knitting. If I was going to be spending all of my time knitting and learning about knitting anyway, it made sense to turn it into a research project.

Yet, this project is, of course, more than just a way for me to write about my personal interests for academic credit. As Joanne Turney explains in *The Culture of Knitting*, knitting is a very recognisable activity in our society and one that most people are familiar with to some degree (1). Even if they do not knit themselves, they likely have known a knitter and have some understanding of the process (Turney 1). Despite, or perhaps because of its familiarity within society, knitting has often been considered as little more than a craft or hobby, too common or unimportant to study in an academic sense (Fisk 162). As such, “what [knitting] represents and means is so culturally constructed and embedded that it is assumed there is nothing more to say” (Turney 1). Indeed, everyday activities are often determined to be already understood or too ordinary to be worth studying.

A recent example of this phenomenon of knitting being viewed as unimportant, and not taken seriously, may be seen in certain reactions to the “Pussy Hat Project.” From November 2016 to January 2017, this initiative took place primarily in the United States,

but it also spread throughout the world. The project asked women throughout the United States to knit pink hats with cat ears to send to Washington D.C. to be worn by women attending the *Women's March on Washington* in January to protest threats to women's reproductive rights, and the sexually violent comments made by the recently inaugurated president (PussyHatProject). It received a lot of positive reactions, yet was critiqued by some, including one journalist for *The Washington Post* who wrote “the Women's March needs passion and purpose, not pink pussycat hats” (Dvorak). By describing the hats as “gimmicky” and “cute” and “fun” (Dvorak), the author implied that she did not see the movement as a serious approach to activism and believed that pink knit hats did not add passion or purpose to the women’s march. Although there may be some valid critiques of the Pussy Hat Project, I would argue that much of the reasoning behind such criticisms is linked to the projects’ use of knitting and crochet, which have connotations of softness and women’s work. Laura Brehaut responded to Dvorak in an article written for the *National Post* titled, “The important questions: Can soft and fuzzy “domestic crafts’ make a hard statement?” She argued that knitting, crochet and sewing are particularly appropriate mediums for craftivism because of how they have been traditionally discounted as “mere domestic craft[s]” (Brehaut).

This concept of craftivism (engaging in activism through the use of craft) has been written about in recent years (Greer, Fisk, Springgay); however, authors have often positioned the engagement of activism through knitting as a new phenomenon unique to the current generation of knitters. In the process, they highlight the perceived differences between this generation of knitters and earlier ones, comparing contemporary craftivism with what they call “granny knitting” (Minahan and Wolfram Cox; Fields). Brehaut also



engages with this idea, but takes a slightly different approach to the comparison writing:

“‘[t]his is not your grandmother’s knitting’ is a popular phrase used by the uninitiated.

Actually, it is. It belongs to your daughters, sisters, mothers, aunts, and grandmothers. It’s ours” (Brehaut). In this way, her comments recognize that we draw knowledge and inspiration from past generations. While some researchers have engaged with the “not your grandmother’s knitting” trope (Fields, Minahan and Wolfram Cox; Myzelev; Stannard and Sanders), my work seeks to move away from that viewpoint and instead sees knitters from different generations not as completely unique, but rather as linked or, perhaps more evocatively, “knit together.”

When I think about my own knitting experience, it is inextricably entwined with the lives of other women. Although we often think of mothers and grandmothers, I see my knitting practice as knit together with many women who I both have and haven’t met, and reaching beyond the sphere of my family. My knitting practices have been fostered by so many women; these include my mother, my grandmother, my aunt, my partner’s grandmother, and mothers of friends. It also includes all of the people I have sat and knit with for an evening or an afternoon, the pattern makers, and test knitters and creators who have contributed to the patterns that I have used, and even those knitters whose work I follow online. The contemporary knitting culture that I am a part of is influenced by many things, including current societal influences as in the case of the pussy hats and the *Women’s March on Washington*. However, it is also intimately linked to the knitting history upon which it is built. As I gain a better understanding of historic knitting through my research, I work to narrow the gap between the past and present by exploring how the generations are linked, or knit together.

## My Story

One weekend in my second year of university, I was visiting a friend at their parents' house. That Saturday afternoon, my friend's mother taught me how to knit. After a few hours of knitting together, I brought the materials home and continued on my own, learning and re-learning from online tutorials and videos, as well as from my own family members when I was home visiting. Because I am a competitive sibling, I was determined to learn how to knit, despite the number of times I had to look up tutorials for basic stitches: my older brother had recently taken up knitting after being taught by my grandmother and, so I knew that I could not give up. My first project was a very uneven scarf that I later unravelled and re-knit into something different. Next, I moved onto a hat that ended up much too big because I did not yet understand sizing. I soon settled onto dishcloths for the next little while and was excited to find that the internet is plentiful with knit dishcloth patterns. There was a department store across the street from my apartment where I could purchase yarn, and for under \$2 a skein and a free pattern I found online, I could get to work on a new dishcloth design. I learned a great deal about knitting during the next year, on trains, in bus stations and alone in my bedroom, as I worked through a range of dishcloth patterns and then, slowly, a greater variety of projects.

Although I have worked on numerous creative pursuits in my life, from musical instruments, to crochet, writing, embroidery, and sewing, I identify primarily as a knitter. Knitting is the craft that I have spent the most time with and the one I consider myself most accomplished at. I have made many projects in the years since I first learned to knit, both simple projects and more complicated projects, and I have knit for a variety of purposes. I've knit items for gifts, to sell, for myself to wear, for decorations, and to

donate to charities. Like many women before me, knitting has become central to my life and my identity.

Because, from the start, my knitting practice has been infused with the experiences of so many different people, this research project is not really a new endeavour for me. For instance, when I visit my partner's parents' house I always take time to admire the knit blankets that his grandmother made. I frequently study the designs and wish that I knew the patterns that she had used so that I could knit them myself. And as I study the knitting, I think about the connection I feel to a woman who I will never be able to meet.

The way that knitting links past with present, joining generations of knitters, has always been fascinating to me. Two years ago, I knit my partner a pair of mittens for Christmas that were a copy of a pair of mittens that his grandmother had made him as a child – same colour and same patterning, just larger to fit adult hands (see fig. 1.1). He opened the gift at his parents' house, in a room surrounded by the blankets that his grandmother made.



*Figure 1.1: A pair of mittens I recently knit, and matching sweater and mittens knit by my partner's grandmother.*

The image above shows the matching mittens, made by two women who have never met, nearly twenty years apart, given to the same person and likely motivated by similar feelings of love and caring. This thesis project is in some ways a continuation of that one, as I work through historic patterns seeking to draw connections between different generations of knitters, explore contemporary designs based on historic patterns, and gain a greater understanding of women's historic knitting practices.

### My Project

Focusing on the connections between past and present, current knitters and their predecessors, my project examines historic knitting practices through a contemporary and feminist lens. My research suggests that a study of knitting books published in the late 1880s can offer new perspectives on women's lives and the knitting culture in which they participated. Furthermore, I argue that a thorough analysis of these texts can change the

way modern knitting culture is perceived. As explored further in the next chapter, a review of contemporary academic literature about knitting culture and trends points to several key themes that have anchored my analysis. These themes include: knitting and the grandmother stereotype, activism or political engagement through crafting, and connectedness, both to social communities and to the self through mind and body, through knitting as a leisure activity.

My study is based on written knitting patterns published in a selection of books available to middle and upper-class female knitters who resided primarily within, or near Toronto, Ontario during the 1880s and 1890s. The late nineteenth century was a transitional age in Canadian history; it was a period of major urban growth and the development of an urban-industrial economic society. Canada's urban population grew significantly in the last years of the nineteenth century, and this in turn had an impact on women's actions, and the women's rights movement. Between 1880 and 1920 the Canadian urban population rose from 1.1 million to 4.3 million. In 1881 Toronto had a population of 96,000; it grew to 208,000 by 1901 and to 424,000 by 1911 (Kealey 4, Solomon 17). The profound societal changes that occurred at this time make it a particularly significant period to study. Contemporary knitters are often described as reacting to technological changes, (Minahan and Wolfrom Cox 12); and by exploring how technological and societal changes impacted the knitting behaviour of late nineteenth-century Canadian women, this research extends that work.

The pattern books at the heart of this study are: *Home Work: A Choice Collection of Useful Designs for the Crochet and Knitting Needle Also, Valuable Recipes for the*

*Toilet; The Art of Knitting* and the 1887 and 1894 editions of *Florence Home Needle-Work*. I also turned to a selection of women's autobiographical writings, books and poetry from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These sources provided additional contextual information beyond the pattern books and have allowed me to better understand the lives of women in Ontario in the late nineteenth century. They enabled me to look for, and make connections between knitting and my research themes.

In addition to this, I have incorporated an autoethnographic element into my research. Throughout the research process I have engaged in a personal knitting project inspired by the historic patterns that I studied, journaling about my experiences as I worked. This autoethnographic process helped me to bring the two generations of knitting culture and experiences closer together, providing me with new insights and an opportunity to share my knitting experience at an embodied level.

Autoethnography is a method that uses the researcher's autobiography to understand their cultural expectations (Chang 9). Referencing Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, Chang presents culture as our knowledge, beliefs, customs and habits that all contribute to our culture and our understandings of our place within a cultural community (Chang 18). As well, being part of a specific cultural community gives the researcher a unique ability and understanding to analyze that culture. For example, my position as a twenty-eight-year-old Canadian woman who knits was integral to how I understood and experienced my research. The cultural community for this work is the knitting community – a group of people who share a specialized skill and the knowledge associated with it. For example, they share the ability to understand and decipher the codes in knitting patterns and the knowledge needed to turn a chart into a mitten. The community is also built around

shared interests. The appreciation and enjoyment of knitting is perhaps the primary one, but the members of this community are also united around an affinity for purchasing or collecting yarn.

Using knitting as part of my research process was a way to engage my body in my research as well as my mind. In her book on performative autoethnography, *Body, Paper, Stage*, Tami Spry writes that bodies are part of the “meaning-making process,” and that the body is an integral part of the research process as the body affords a critical understanding of how our lives intersect with wider sociocultural attitudes and expectations (51). Spry recommends reading the body as a “cultural text” and recognising that our bodies exist within a specific cultural context. She contends that culture can be read on the body, perhaps through the movements that it makes and the clothing that it wears (Spry 30). As knitting is a physical task that involves the body through the hands, engaging an autoethnographic knitting project allowed me to integrate my body into the research process and helped me gain a deeper level of understanding. Throughout this thesis, I incorporated my autoethnographic reflections in italics and I have included numerous photographs of my knitting. I examine autoethnography as a methodology in more detail in Chapter three.

This thesis engages with several main questions that have guided the work. What can we learn about the embodied lives of women, past and present, through the study of knitting culture? How can we understand and discuss historic knitting culture when it is analyzed in light of the current feminist themes, and does this comparison also influence how we view contemporary knitting practices?



Figure 1.2: Knit section of “No. 116 –Lace Collar No. 5” from Home Work.

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*I have a confession to make. Recently I have been knitting “No. 116 – Lace Collar No. 5” from Home Work (see fig. 1.2) and I kind of hate it (A.M 342). I think that it is beautiful, but I don’t want to finish it. I hate the needles that I bought to use for it. They are metal needles and I almost always use wood or bamboo needles when I knit. I can’t remember why I’m using these anymore, whether it was an attempt to be more historically authentic or maybe it just because they were the only ones I saw that were the size that I needed. I hate the way that they feel in my hands, their weight, their grey colour, the sound that they make when they scrape against each other. The ends are too dull for the lace weight yarn I am using and it’s such a struggle to poke it into the tiny stitches. I need a pointier, sharper needle. I miss the warmth of wooden needles. Just thinking about them to write this description is making me frustrated. And it’s so slow. I*



*have already knit enough to see how the lace design looks with this yarn, and now I am dreading the tedious repetition necessary to finish this project. Rows and rows of the same pattern, with the needles constantly scraping against each other, fumbling with dull ends.*

*As I have stared at this small, partially finished piece of knitting that I'm not sure I'll ever be able to convince myself to complete, I have been trying to figure out what to write about it. I want it to have taught me something important about knitting, unlocked some historic secret within the pattern. What if it is just a small frustratingly beautiful piece of material, with little to no meaning or purpose attached? I've realized that one of my biggest fears is that my research is not important enough and that once finished I won't know how to adequately justify my work, to myself, to others. I want to write a story about it, to have it say something important about knitting. I want to be able to justify this project to anyone who believes that knitting doesn't matter, that it is not a valid pastime, let alone, topic of academic research.*

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In her autoethnographic project “Anthropology from the Bones: A Memoir of Fieldwork, Survival and Commitment,” Cynthia Keppley Mahmood writes “You don’t want to read the rest of this story” (1). While hers is a story of violence, the words “you do not want to know” still resonates (Mahmood 5). Yet she writes because although it is a difficult story to tell and to read, it is one that should be heard (9). For me, rather, there are things that I would rather not tell. It goes against my instincts to expose fears and

insecurities. Honesty can be difficult for both author and reader, but it is a necessary part of this project. Knitting is a “soft” topic, but it is not devoid of complicated emotions.

As a writer, it is often easier and more comfortable to avoid vulnerability. Yet I realize that as much as I am fascinated by women’s history of knitting and the connections between generations, my research is as much guided by my fears. They drive me to seek a deeper understanding of why women knit and to try to imagine the complexities and the emotions held within each knit project. At the heart of it all are the vulnerable questions and fears about the importance of knitting that truly drive my research as I search for the meaning behind my own knitting through a study of historic women’s work.

### The Pattern Books

The following pattern books form the basis of my research, and an overview of their publishing history, contents and role within society, is an integral part of this thesis introduction. *Home Work: A Choice Collection of Useful Designs for the Crochet and Knitting Needle Also, Valuable Recipes for the Toilet* was published in Toronto in 1891. It was collected, corrected, and arranged by an author identified only as A.M. The book includes a preface as well as many knitting and crochet patterns with illustrations (A.M). It was published by a Canadian publishing company based out of Toronto called the Rose Publishing Co. Ltd. The Rose Publishing Company, founded by Scottish immigrant George Maclean Rose, began by publishing inexpensive editions of novels, mostly repeats (Hulse). The company also published history, biography, poetry, and fiction. As a

family business, the publishing company was managed by George Maclean Rose's eldest son and two other sons were involved with the company. In the 1880's, they entered into the textbook publishing field (Hulse).

In his obituary, George Maclean Rose was described as being part of a printing and publishing company that “expressed the aspirations of the new nation” (Hulse). This indicates that the books published by Rose Publishing Co., including *Home Work*, played an important role in forming the identity of the recently founded nation of Canada (Hulse). Of the publications that form the basis for my analysis, *Home Work* is the only one that was published by a Canadian company. This book offers a glimpse of Canadian life, aspirations, and roles for women during the 1890's. It also offers the opportunity to compare and contrast a Canadian work with the American counterparts also available in Canada at the time.

As the title indicates, *Home Work* is more than a knitting pattern book. The 384-page book is divided into three main sections: Crochet, Knitting, and Recipes for the Toilet (A.M.). I drew primarily on the knitting section for my research. The majority of patterns are lace designs or edging patterns; however, the second half of the knitting section offers more clothing patterns, such as a ladies' vest, gaiters, baby boots, and stockings (A.M.). The clothing patterns are primarily for women's or children's items. The recipes for the toilet, meanwhile, contain preparations for the face, the hair, and the hands, as well as for perfumes (A.M.). While several of the patterns and sections in *The Art of Knitting* and *Florence Home Needle-Work* offer detailed descriptions and information about the patterns, the Canadian pattern book *Home Work* is a simpler

example. This approach gives it a more serious, practical presentation. It is also evident that this pattern book was designed for the experienced knitter (A.M.). The preface of the books explains that the goal of the book is not to teach the reader how to knit or to teach new techniques but rather that it should be a “companion for those who love to crochet and knit” (A.M. iv). Indeed, the patterns within the book offer very little in the way of instructions for beginners.

*The Art of Knitting* was published in 1892 by the Butterick Publishing Company based out of London, England and New York, USA. Although the pattern book was not published in Canada, it was readily available to women living within Toronto. The book was listed for sale in the Eaton’s Spring and Summer catalogue of 1896 (T. Eaton Co. 228). It was also advertised in 1895 in the Butterick’s women’s magazine *The Delineator*, which was published in Toronto (*The Delineator* 441).

The company was founded in 1866 by the Massachusetts’s-based Butterick family to sell men’s and boys’ clothing patterns but quickly expanded to produce women’s patterns as well; they moved operations to New York within a couple of years (Butterick). The company introduced its first magazine, *Ladies Quarterly of Broadway Fashion*, in 1867, and added a monthly bulletin *Metropolitan* in 1868 (Butterick). These publications advertised the latest fashions and Butterick patterns. Publication of *The Delineator* began in 1873 as a pattern marketing tool. It later developed into a general interest magazine for women and gained popularity and readership (Butterick). By 1876 the company had over 100 branch offices and 1,000 agencies within the United States and Canada allowing their pattern to reach a sizable number of women (Butterick).

*The Art of Knitting* describes itself as “the most complete of its kind, and the only one devoted wholly to the occupation or pastime of Knitting ever published” (3).

Additionally, the book boasts that the publishers have “endeavoured to present the best of everything in the way of designs” (Butterick Publishing Co. 3). Indeed, it certainly is a comprehensive text. When compared to *Home Work* and the *Florence Home Needle-Work* editions, this book includes more patterns and greater detail.

*The Art of Knitting* is quite diverse. It begins with general instructions for knitting and a section of fancy stitch patterns, edgings and insertions (Butterick Publishing Co.). Next the book includes general information about knitting items and calculations for sizing, before moving on to the chapters with garment patterns. The garment patterns begin with a section of patterns for women’s clothing, including items such as hoods, petticoats, capes, and jackets (Butterick Publishing Co.). The men’s section is next with patterns for belts, ties, caps, suspenders, and sweaters. Doilies, mats, spreads, and rugs make up the next section. Children’s wear and toys, and miscellany finish off the pattern section (Butterick Publishing Co.). The last few pages of the book are devoted to advertisements for other publications by the Butterick company such as the book *The Art of Crocheting*, *The Delineator Magazine*, *The Art of Modern Lace-Making* and the *Metropolitan Culture Series* – a series that provided books on topics including social life, good manners, and homemaking and housekeeping (Butterick Publishing Co.). *The Art of Knitting* book was a valuable source for study because it offered such a range in patterns, from practical items such as stockings, to more decorative items like doilies. For example, it includes tips for knitting with wool or silk, knitting plain stocking versus knitting fancy

stockings; and patterns for both practical hunting cap for men (Butterick Publishing Co. 85), and pair of lace mittens for ladies decorated with ribbon (Butterick Publishing Co. 70). As a stark contrast to the Canadian book *Home Work*, *The Art of Knitting* presents detailed paragraph descriptions and information for many of the patterns. The amount of instruction presented in this book is impressive and I can see how it would have been a popular and valuable resource for many knitting women at the time of its publication.

*Florence Home Needle-Work* was published by the Nonotuck Silk Co. of Florence Massachusetts between 1887 and 1896. There were ten editions published and for my research I focused on the 1887 and 1894 editions. The books offer patterns and instructions on many subjects including knitting, crochet, embroidery, macramé, and bead work. I chose the 1887 and 1894 editions because they devoted a higher number of pages to knitting content than other editions. As with *The Art of Knitting*, these books were not published in Canada but they were advertised and would have been available to Canadian knitters. In the 1890s, the Nonotuck Silk Co. changed their name to the Corticelli Silk Co. and they had a division based in St. Johns, Quebec. A quarterly magazine, *Corticelli Home Needlework*, was published in English out of Quebec beginning in 1899 (Corticelli Silk Co. 7). The first edition of the magazine included an advertisement for all of the needlework instruction books that had been published by the company and were available by mail order (Corticelli Silk Co. 9). Although the magazine was published in Quebec, it listed contributors from Ottawa and New York, and also featured women who also worked for the *Ladies Home Journal* and *The Delineator*, demonstrating that the magazine had reach beyond Quebec (Corticelli Silk Co. 3).

Since these pattern books were published by the Nonotuck Silk Co., all of the patterns are designed to be knit in silk. As such, they are of a more decorative nature, and there is an emphasis on quality. For example, the publication takes time to advertise the lustre and colour of Nonotuck Silk, highlighting it as a superior knitting silk. The 1887 edition devotes approximately the first thirty pages to patterns for crochet, beaded purses. The book features several women's mitten patterns, two patterns for gentlemen's socks, and two for ladies' slippers, and one pattern for baby slippers (Nonotuck Silk Co., "Florence 1887"). The two books feature several pages of what the editors term "fancy patterns" which are lace sections that are designed to be worked into stockings, mittens cuffs, or used as edgings on projects. There are over thirty patterns in the categories of "fancy patterns" and "lace edgings and insertions" (Nonotuck Silk Co., "Florence 1887"; Nonotuck Silk Co., "Florence 1894").

These pattern books form an important foundation for my research. They offer a glimpse into women's historic knitting culture and have allowed me to understand what types of items women knit. *Home Work: A Choice Collection of Useful Designs for the Crochet and Knitting Needle Also, Valuable Recipes for the Toilet; The Art of Knitting* and the 1894 and 1887 editions of *Florence Home Needle-Work*, provide the unique opportunity to read and work the same patterns that nineteenth-century Canadian women read.

## Chapter Outline

Chapter Two comprises the literature review, describing the foundational research that my work is based upon. Chapter Three lays out the theoretical framework for my research, engaging primarily with theories of embodiment, activism, and femininity. This chapter also details the methodological approach that I have taken with my work, introducing my feminist approach and the research methods that I have used including ethnographic content analysis, material culture, autoethnography and writing as inquiry. In Chapter Four, I detail my autoethnographic experience of knitting a garment from a historical pattern, and examine the questions raised through that process. Chapter Five brings together historical women's writings, including diaries, poetry and chapter excerpts to gain a deeper understanding of nineteenth-century knitting in women's own words. Finally, in Chapter Six, I conclude with overall observations and findings, personal reflections and further areas in which this research could be built upon in the future.



## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

Knitting has been a topic of academic interest in recent years, with a range of scholars, among them Joanne Turney, Stella Minahan and Julie Wolfram Cox, Anna Fisk, Corey D. Fields, Kelly Maura, Joanna Mann, Alla Myzelev, Mandy Moore and Leanne Prain, Beth Ann Pentney, Stephanie Springgay, Casey R. Stannard and Eulanda A. Sanders, all publishing works beginning in 2007. These researchers have focused on the apparent rejuvenation of knitting with the emergence of a generation of younger women who knit. Of particular interest are knitting women who identify as feminist as some observers express surprise or confusion that young feminist women would engage in an activity with such feminine and domestic connotations (Springgay 116).

In 2007, Minahan and Wolfram Cox published “Stitch’nBitch: Cyberfeminism, a Third Place and the New Materiality,” one of the first scholarly articles to focus on the recent resurgence of knitting. Their purpose was to discuss the emergence of the new craft movement where knitters, especially women, would gather to knit and talk, a phenomenon often referred to as “Stitch’nBitch”. They argued that this public and social aspect of knitting was a new development (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 6). The authors further asserted that the Stitch’nBitch movement was political and revolutionary in nature and they identified several main motivations for participation. These included remedial, progressive, and resistant, possibilities (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 5). Remedial knitting is related to increasing a feeling of community and connectedness with others as a response to the individualism of the information society (Minahan and Wolfram Cox, 12). Progressive knitting is associated with feminism and focuses on women’s independence,

creativity, and self-expression (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 12). Resistance knitting, meanwhile, is a response to the gendered and devalued nature of knitting and seeks to elevate appreciation for the craft (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 12).

Research by Kelly, Myzelev, Stannard and Sanders, Springgay, Pentney, and Turney, has further examined the feminist implications of young women taking up knitting. While Minahan and Wolfram Cox worked from the understanding that for young women knitting is a political and feminist act, later researchers such as Kelly and Pentney challenged the idea that the recent resurgence of knitting is inherently feminist or revolutionary. Pentney and Springgay in particular have drawn attention to the fact that knitting as a hobby is a privileged activity that can only be engaged in by those who have the time and the disposable income to devote to materials. They question whether such a privileged activity can be considered feminist. Kelly argued that while knitting *can* be feminist, a conscious effort needs to be made engage with feminist principles, such as feminist activism (142).

Another common thread in contemporary knitting research focuses on the possibility of knitting's role in activist work and the concept of craftivism. The term craftivism surfaced in the first few years of the twenty-first-century and increased in popularity with the launch of the website [craftivism.com](http://craftivism.com) in 2003 (Greer 2). Put simply, craftivism is the act of using craft to express political opinions or to enact social change; it "allows for creativity to expand previous boundaries and enter the arena of activism" broadening conceptions of what activism looks like (Greer 2). In "Knitting as an Aesthetic of Civic Engagement: Re-conceptualizing Feminist Pedagogy through Touch,"

Springgay writes about teaching students to knit during a Women's Studies class (116). Students were taught to knit and then knit during class lectures (Springgay 118). After a term of learning and discussing possibilities for knitting as a form of civic engagement, the class members hosted knit-ins to raise awareness for various campaigns, used knitting to raise money, and knit scarves for a local women's shelter (Springgay 118). Springgay wrote that this form of activism appealed to many students because it was seen as "‘peaceful’ and different from what they imagin[ed] ‘traditional’ activism look[ed] like” as of them seemed to associate activism with marches and protests (118). There has also been the craftivist trend of “yarn bombing” which is the practice of covering public items, like a lamp post, or railing with knitting or crochet to add a degree warmth to the cityscape (Fisk 173). Craftivism acts, like yarn-bombing and the recent pussy hat project that I discussed earlier, use creativity and crafting skills for activism in ways that are different from the standard forms of protest such as marching, petition signing or letter writing.

One theme that struck me in the early stages of my research was that several researchers make a distinction between younger and older generations of knitters and their knitting practices and motivations. This perceived difference is highlighted through the authors' language and word choice. For example, they use words such as “activism” (Kelly 133; Stannard and Sanders 108), “protest” (Kelly 134, Minahan and Wolfram Cox 11), “movement” (Fields 152; Kelly 138), “revival” (Stannard and Sanders 99), “resistance” (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 11), “revolutionary” (Kelly 135), “subversive” (Myzelev 149), “progressive” (Kelly 142), “power” (Kelly 143; Myzelev 152), “action”

(Fields 152), and “change” (Myzelev 156) when referring to younger knitters. Authors often describe young knitters as “trendy” (Stannard and Sanders 99), “hip” (Kelly 135), “sexy” (Kelly 135), social (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 6; Kelly 138), and politically engaged (Fields 152; Minahan and Wolfram Cox 5; Myzelev 155; Stannard and Sanders 108). When writing about older generations of knitters, researchers have used words and phrases such as: “grannies,” (Stannard and Sanders 99) “Granny’s hand-knitted jumpers,” (Myzelev 156), and “not your Grandma’s knitting” (Fields 150).

As Corey D. Fields writes, “knitting’s aesthetics are shifting from rocking chair to riot grrrrl” (Fields 152), a formulation that pits generations and their motivations against one another. In “Knitting as Feminist Project?” Kelly interviews several young knitters and quotes one as saying, “Knitting is so different today than what it was back in the thirties or fifties or the 1800s” (Kelly 137). What this appears to suggest is that contemporary knitters believe young women today knit for entirely different reasons than women in the past. However, I argue that such an approach may well ignore many of the ways that previous generations of women also used knitting as a form of self-expression, a source of pleasure, and as a tool for activism, or social connectedness.

A review of the contemporary academic literature about knitting culture and practices prompted me to seek to understand more about historic knitting culture and to examine whether knitting as a feminist, activist, and social activity is a new development or whether it has historic roots. Rozsika Parker writes in *The Subversive Stitch* that “[t]o know the history of embroidery is to know the history of women” (3). Although Parker specifically references embroidery, there is also much about women’s history that we can learn through a study of historic knitting culture. Perhaps we can gain a greater

understanding and appreciation for how women in the past lived and engaged socially and politically if we look at the role of all forms of domestic crafting in their lives.

My research finds connections between previous generations and the current generation, bridging gaps between past and present while developing a comprehensive understanding of historic knitting culture. Here I draw on three main sources: Richard Rutt's *A History of Handknitting*, Anne L. Macdonald's *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting*, and Shirley Scott's *Canada Knits*. These three books provide comprehensive knitting histories of Britain, the United States, and Canada.

Richard Rutt's *A History of Handknitting* is designed to be a history of handknitting throughout the world; however the focus is primarily on Britain. Although *A History of Handknitting* contains significant detail about the development and rise of knitting in Europe, Rutt's chapter about the Victorian Age is the most relevant to my research as it includes the time period that I am working with. Rutt explains that in the 1830's knitting, which previously had been a cottage industry, became a fashionable pastime for English and Scottish ladies (111). Since a large number of knitting books were printed during that time period, it is clear that many women were knitting, especially women who had the financial well-being to purchase pattern books (Rutt 111). The growth of the wool trade with Germany during the 1800's also had a significant impact on knitting in Britain. Wool from Saxony, often referred to as "Berlin Wool," was a high-quality wool from merino flocks. This made it very soft, and it was known for taking dyes well (Rutt 112). In reference to Berlin Wool and its availability in England, Rutt writes, "rich in both hues and tones, this attractive yarn stimulated the rise of knitting as an artistic pursuit" (112). This point is important in relation to my research, since the

increased availability of high quality wool, corresponded to the rise of knitting among higher class ladies, and an increase in decorative or “fancy knitting” (Rutt 112). Many of the patterns included in the publications that form the basis for my analysis are considered fancy knitting.

*No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* by Anne L. Macdonald focuses on the history of knitting in the United States beginning with colonial knitters of the 1640’s and extending until the 1980’s. Since this book explores the social history of knitting, there is a greater focus on the societal factors that influenced knitting practices. Macdonald connects knitting with political and social change, specifically in relation to the dress reform movement of the late nineteenth-century. Her chapter, “Sporty Victorian Knitters,” is of particular relevance to my research since it focuses on the nineteenth-century. Macdonald notes a change in knitting styles as the dress reform movements and women’s participation in sports both grew in the late nineteenth-century (Macdonald 160). For example, sweaters began to replace shawls as one of the most popular knitted items because sweaters were easier to walk and work in (Macdonald 161). Macdonald also notes an increase in “sphere” knitting, or knitting circles, where women would gather and knit together. This brought knitting out of the home and into the public sphere, as a social activity during the same period (Macdonald 164). The idea of “sphere knitting” is noteworthy, because of its resemblance to the contemporary Stitch’nBitch movement I referenced earlier.

Macdonald notes that by the end of the nineteenth-century many women had moved from being producers and providers of goods for their families, into new roles as

purchasers or consumers (175). This led to some concern that women were losing their domestic skills because they could simply buy what they needed instead of making it (Macdonald 181). However, this also meant a significant rise in the number of women who were able to knit for pleasure, rather than out of necessity. “Knitting,” opines one magazine published during this period, “was once every woman’s duty. Now it is her pleasure, her relaxation, her nerve-smoothing occupation for leisure moments in a busy life...Knitting has taken on a new dignity” (qtd. in Macdonald 181). The rise in women knitting for pleasure is evident through the popularity of lace and silk, or “fancy” knitting during this time period (Macdonald 182).

*Canada Knits: Craft and Comfort in a Northern Land* by Shirley A. Scott provides an overview of the history of knitting in Canada from the east to west coast. It begins with the precursors of knitting: indigenous people weaving and sewing with animal and vegetable fibres and the Norse in Newfoundland who used Nalbinding techniques (S. Scott 2). While *Canada Knits* is an important and useful history, it is a shorter book and works best at providing an overview rather than an in-depth understanding of Canada’s history of knitting. A significant portion of the book is dedicated to heritage knitting traditions on both the east and west coast as Scott tells the story of the Cowichan sweater industry in British Columbia, and NONIA in Newfoundland and Labrador. When it comes to the late nineteenth-century, the history is quite brief. In just a couple of pages, Scott discusses the popular trends of hosiery knitting, lace knitting, and shawl knitting during the nineteenth-century (S. Scott 51-53). She offers the example of a pattern for a delicately knit lace gaiter found in *Home Work*:

*A Choice Collection of Useful Designs for the Crochet and Knitting Needle*, explaining the popularity of knitting lace undergarments (S. Scott 51). Fine cotton yarns had become plentiful in Canada by the nineteenth-century and women were knitting lacy, patterned stockings and gloves. Scott imagines women showing off the lace around their ankles on their gaiters, or “flutter[ing]” their hands to draw attention to the craftsmanship of their wristers (a type of mitten-like garment but designed to cover only the wrist) (S. Scott 52). She explains that while we may not know exactly what women were thinking when they chose a pattern to knit, we can make some guesses when we look at the patterns that were most popular (S. Scott 52). Women frequently wore shawls for warmth in the nineteenth-century, and while a plain shawl may be worn for working, decorative lace shawls were worn as a “garment of distinction” (S. Scott 53). These garments of distinction fall into the category of fancy work that Macdonald and Rutt also made reference to when they described the popularity of lace and silk knitting during the late nineteenth century (Macdonald 182) and the rise in availability of high quality wool, in various colours (Rutt 112). Although Scott does not provide an in-depth history or social analysis, she does offer insight into the possible motivations that women had for what they knit, such as a public demonstration of skill, or a show of wealth. Scott moves beyond the idea of women knitting out of practicality or simply because it was necessary for warmth.

These three books present a primarily historical overview of the craft of knitting but they do not fully explore the culture of knitting. Although both Scott and Macdonald do make attempts, neither offer much in the way of significant social analysis. In his book, Rutt explains definitions and techniques and creates a helpful timeline that features



major events and key historical figures in knitting's history. However, he includes little insight about possible impacts on society. For example, he includes information about knitting texts that were published in the late nineteenth-century such as *Beeton's Book of Needlework* and Weldon's *Practical Needlework* (Rutt 136). Rutt indicates the publication date and the number of volumes, and explains that the texts contain instructions for knitting, tatting, crochet, smocking and macramé (Rutt 136). However, Rutt omits information about these texts that would help readers gain a better understanding of the knitting culture. For example, one does not learn whether the patterns are primarily clothing, or home décor and Rutt does not say where and how these texts were made available or who would have had access to them. While readers can learn about several key figures, and ample history of the craft of knitting, they do not learn much about the knitting culture that any woman would have participated in. While Scott does undertake a history of how knitting has shaped communities and been influenced by culture, her book is rather short, and much of the focus is on rural and coastal Canada, rather than urban areas (S. Scott 14).

While a focus of the historical writing about knitting has been the creation of a timeline that traces knitting's evolution from its origins through early techniques and the major trends and up until the 1980's (Rutt, Macdonald), some authors do draw connections between knitting and activism. In "American Women and Wartime Handknitting, 1750-1950," Susan Strawn makes the historical connection between knitting and activism, arguing that knitting has long been a mode of political action used by women (248). She contends that knitting has given women the opportunity to make

financial contributions, participate in war-time efforts, make political statements, and connect with other women (Strawn 256). Scott, too, makes reference to the financial contributions women have made to their communities through knitting. As she writes, “Canadians would be truly astonished if they could tally up the number of churches built, the number of missionaries supported, and the number of homeless clothed with money made from knitting” (S. Scott 120). Scott offers the example of the Newfoundland Outport Nursing and Industrial Association (or NONIA) which was founded in 1924 to raise money through the sale of hand-knit garments to fund nursing stations in the outport communities. Although the nursing service was taken over by the government in 1934, NONIA still exists as a non-profit today (White).

The social and political aspects of contemporary knitting culture are currently being addressed in academic literature, with significant analysis in regard to the relationship between knitting and activism and feminism; however, the social history of knitting, specifically within a Canadian context is an area that has yet to receive significant attention. Although some suggest that knitting and knitters today are very different from the past (Kelly 137) – an argument that, as I have previously indicated, has intriguing echoes in the nineteenth century as well – further research into the history of knitting is required to see how true that is. While knitting currently may be used for feminist activism and efforts to increase social connectedness in a digital world, there is some evidence to suggest that knitting’s relationship to both political action, and social connectedness is not an entirely new event (Macdonald 164, S. Scott 120, Strawn 256).

*Women and the Material Culture of Needlework & Textiles: 1750-1950*, edited by Maureen Daly Goggin and Beth Fowkes Tobin, includes thirteen essays that examine

what we can learn about women's personal identities, cultural identities, and political engagement throughout history through the study of the material culture of needlework and textiles. These essays consider a range of needlework crafts featuring; quilting, home sewing, lacemaking, embroidery, and hand knitting. This book also seeks to redefine what we count as art and to recover women's marginal spaces and practices, such as – needlework and the private home, and insert women into the historical record to a greater degree (Goggin "Introduction" 2-3). In her chapter, "American Women and Wartime Hand Knitting," Susan Strawn examines why *what* is created through knitting is relevant. She argues that knitting can only be understood by looking at the objects that are knit, not solely through a study of the action or technique of knitting (245). Strawn contends that while quilting and embroidery in particular have gained recognition for their contributions to our understanding of the cultural history of women, the significance of handknitting has received less attention. She writes, "[p]erhaps the process and products of knitting simply fade too easily into the background of everyday life. The countless hand-knitted stockings, gloves, mittens, hats, sweaters and such were utilitarian – darned and patched, raveled and re-knitted...Knitting has been the unremarkable stuff of daily life..." (Strawn 245). While I would argue that historically some knit items were more decorative than others, and some "fancy knitting" would not necessarily have been considered utilitarian, arguably the knitted goods from the past that we are the most familiar with today are the everyday items such as socks, mittens, and hats. If one accepts Strawn's argument that knitted objects fade into what we consider everyday and not worthy of thought, it becomes clear that a focus on the material object is essential when

we think about knitting. Understanding knitting culture means not only reflecting on the women who knit, but also, analyzing the items that they produced.

The scholarship on knitting that I have just reviewed was the starting point for my research, and I have worked to address the gaps and challenge the stereotypes that I have found. This study attempts to contribute to a social history of knitting that focuses on knitters rather than the creation of a historical timeline. It also challenges the trope of the grandmother knitter; and questions the creation of generational divide between knitters. It builds on existing literature to highlight common themes, including activism or social change, and connectedness, both to social communities and to the self through mind and body.

## **Chapter Three:**

### **Theory and Methodology**

#### Theory

My research emerged from the existing academic literature about knitting, as I was inspired to work to fill the gaps and challenge the stereotypes that I found. As I researched, I engaged with a theoretical framework and methodology that has allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of knitting practices and patterns in Canada during the nineteenth-century. The theoretical framework within which I approach this study of knitting includes an engagement with the following concepts: embodiment, constructions of femininity, and feminine leisure. For this I draw primarily on work by Iris Marion Young, Julia Serano, Marybeth C. Stalp, and Linda M. Scott.

As knitting is a tactile experience, it is important to consider the role of the body. Knitting engages the body through multiple senses; consider, for example, the colour of the fibre, the softness of the yarn on skin, and the light sound of needles clicking. Knitting can also occupy the body in uncomfortable ways. Chloe Flower draws attention to the “hunched shoulders, aching backs, eyestrain” that can be associated with long hours of needlework, especially if it is done in low light, or without comfortable seating (9). I am reminded also of my own experiences of sore wrists and cramped hands resulting from working with tight stitches or from the weight of the wool when working on a heavier project. While knitting may be seen as a sedentary task, one that does not require the actor to be in good physical health, knitting *is* a physical act that is not always without pain.

This physical aspect of knitting can be grounding, Fisk describes her knitting experience as a way to be “at home in the world (162), while Springgay characterizes

knitting as “a tactile embodied form of connectivity” (111), that connects the mind to the physical world through the body. Knitting creates active subjects by engaging the creator’s senses in the creation process (Springgay 111). A finished knitted object then becomes a symbol with meaning; it is a tactile item with sensory information that can be understood and experienced by others. The concept of embodiment extends to knitted items that are often worn as clothing by the creator or a recipient providing warmth, or decoration, and impacting how one’s body feels and is seen by others.

Young writes about female embodiment in *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*. In her chapter, “Women Recovering Our Clothes,” the author observes that different items of clothing are associated with different kinds of persons and situations (Young 63). She further identifies clothing as a way to try on or express identities (Young 63). Young suggests that there are three main pleasures that women take in clothing and these are related to touch, bonding, and fantasy (69). Touch relates to the feeling of clothing and how materials attract; it is the idea of loving clothes for their warmth, the softness against skin, and the way that the materials drapes or sways with the body’s movements (Young 70). For women, clothing is often a source of bonding, it is something to talk about with women they are close to as well as an area of common ground with women they do not know very well. Women discuss the clothing that they like, where clothing came from, point out items that they appreciate, and express how certain pieces of clothing makes them feel (Young 71). Women also experience bonding through the sharing of clothes. Lending an item to a friend, or passing clothing along to a younger female relative, forms or strengthens connections between the women (Young 71).

The last pleasure that Young writes about is fantasy and here she explains that women take pleasure not only from wearing clothes, but from looking at and imagining clothes (Young 72). Looking at clothing they do not own, through a catalogue or in a store, draws women into situations and personalities that they can play at (Young 72). The pleasures that Young associates with clothing are highly relevant to knitting; yarn is often chosen by touch for its softness against the skin, and knitted items are often made for others or passed down through generations because of sentimental value. Just as women find potential in fashion magazines, they flip through the pages of a knitting pattern book, imagining themselves in clothing that is pictured, or fingering yarn in a store imagining how it would feel against their skin as a sweater.

Young also explains that women and their clothing are often seen as being on display and can be viewed as decorative objects, perhaps clothed in frills and lace (64). In a patriarchal society, women are the “supreme object”, thus women’s historically restrictive yet beautiful clothing made them into a decoration (Young 68). They were a display of proper femininity and domesticity within the home. This understanding of women in the home has guided the way that I have conducted my research, in that it has directed me to look for information and insights in private, domestic spaces. As women’s primary domain in the nineteenth century was the private sphere, I have spent time reading women’s journal entries. The concept of the woman as decorative object through the clothing that she wears also contributed to my decision to create a women’s garment as my primary knitting project for this thesis.

As an ordinary, feminine domestic task belonging to the private sphere, knitting has not always been appreciated as an artistic or even worthwhile leisure activity. In the

introduction to her book, *Stitch 'N Bitch: The Knitters Handbook*, Debbie Stoller interrogates why this is. Recognizing that her conversations about knitting were not met with respect or enthusiasm, Stoller questions: “Why was [knitting] still so looked down on? It seemed to me that the main difference between knitting and, say fishing or woodworking or basketball, was that knitting had traditionally been done by women. As far as I could tell, that was the only reason it had gotten such a bad rap” (Stoller 7).

This trend of viewing feminine activities as unimportant or uninteresting can be explained through the lens of Serano’s notion of the “scapegoating of femininity” (327). Serano argues that “certain pursuits and interests that are considered feminine, such as gossiping or decorating, are often characterised as ‘frivolous’” while pursuits with more masculine connotations, even those that are recreational such as sports, are not trivialized in the same way (327). As Stalp writes, “femininity and the domestic arts have ‘ick’ stuck to them and are relegated to the drudgery of everyday housewife unpaid work (269).” Stalp argues further that in conversations about leisure, inactive or sedentary leisure activities such as knitting or quilting are frequently passed over (Stalp 266).

Scott discusses a similar concept, with fashion as the focus of her argument (L. Scott 12). Excessively feminine clothing or a high attention to dress, with make-up and heels, is often targeted as problematic. Yet complete inattention to dress is not acceptable either, as women are expected to appear well groomed, clean, bathed, hair and teeth brushed, and presumably in clothing that is not ripped or torn (L. Scott 12). As she explains, “no one can dress in a way that signifies nothing” (L. Scott 12); a refusal to groom indicates carelessness, resistance or incapacity, while too much of a focus on fashion may be deemed anti-feminist. It demonstrates frivolity and shows that a woman



cares too much about the attention of men; and it means that she cannot be taken seriously (L. Scott 12). This sets up a situation where there is no winning, as both ends of the spectrum are problematic and the middle ground can be difficult to negotiate.

Furthermore, Scott argues that this expectation for women to dress a specific way to be a feminist, or to be taken seriously, allows us to ignore the inequalities present in society. She writes that “by asserting that women must all dress the same way - conform to the same ideal” - we make a space where we can overlook the unequal access to the goods used in grooming and dress (L. Scott 13). Women come from different cultural backgrounds where ideas about personal grooming and dress may be different, and have different access to the time and money needed to dress and groom themselves, and women have different careers that call for different ways of dress (L. Scott 13). Scott uses the word “permissible” while discussing feminism and fashion and argues that we cannot simply believe that all women stand on an equal footing when we determine what type of dress is permissible (L. Scott 13). This argument can also be applied to knitting: making judgements about what is permissible, or elevating some knitting behaviour over others, overlooks the fact that knitters are different, with unequal access to supplies, internet, education, leisure time, and money. Knitters have unique family responsibilities, different priorities, and even different preferences and skills.

Much of the contemporary literature about knitting, as highlighted in the last chapter, suggests that knitting is elevated, or more valid when it subverts the stereotypically feminine. For example, contemporary research works to position younger knitters as active agents of resistance, and distances these knitters from the domestic connotations of knitting (Kelly 135; Minahan and Wolfrom Cox 11; Myzelev 155). These

comments suggest that the feminine and domestic are still looked down upon. For instance, despite being an act of protest, the Pussy Hat Project mentioned in the introduction was still viewed as too cute and too pink to be a considered serious act of resistance by some observers (Dvorak). Serano and Scott propose that conversations about elevating the status of knitting to earn it greater respect need to also work to empower femininity (Serano 341). Many of the words commonly associated with knitting – passive, soft, warm, delicate, and gentle – are the same as those we use to describe normative femininity.

As Scott argues, the idea of discrediting, ridiculing, or distancing oneself from femininity has been a standard tactic in feminist rhetoric. Early feminists were often described as unfeminine by the public and as a defence, feminists worked to argue that feminine traits were undesirable (L. Scott 54). Early feminists positioned the more traditional women as exaggerated stereotypes of trivial or extravagant women, attempting if not to renounce femininity, to recast the image of what an acceptable woman looks like thus positioning themselves as a more serious and respectable example of womanhood (Steiner 190). This trend has had a significant impact, the results of which can still be seen today, as both words and items with feminine connotations, including knitting, the colour pink, and feminine attention to clothing or make-up, are often viewed as frivolous, or not to be taken seriously (L. Scott 54; Springgay 116).

Another common thread within discussions of knitting is the divide between leisure and chore. Knitting has often been positioned as a hobby and a leisure activity engaged in by choice by younger knitters, but as an involuntary chore for older generations (Fields 158; Kelly 137). This question of leisure will be investigated further

in the upcoming chapters so here I hope only to begin a conversation about women's leisure in order to set up the context for that later discussion. As both sedentary and feminine, women's leisure pursuits including quilting, sewing and knitting, often remain on the sidelines of leisure research (Stalp 261). Feminine leisure is frequently associated with the private sphere and aging women and researcher bias has put greater focus on more typically masculine, outdoor activities (Stalp 261).

Feminine leisure activities differ from masculine leisure as women, who often have less leisure time than men, are typically expected to multitask leisure with other activities (Stalp 267). Stalp describes leisure as "temporarily escaping," and even sedentary activities can provide an element of temporary escape for women (Stalp 267). Interestingly, feminine leisure activities often threaten the amount of time women can devote to domestic responsibilities, suggesting that what women may be escaping are responsibilities at home, even when their leisure activity may not take them outside of the home (Stalp 267). For example, Stalp observes that "[q]uilting requires time, space, money and attention of the family member who in very feminine ways is expected to be devoting time to family members" (267). And so, women learn to integrate quilting or knitting within their family structure. They find portable projects and they give items as gifts. In this way, women are multitasking care-work as their leisure time becomes both part of familial responsibilities as well as an escape from them (Stalp 267).

These theoretical concepts are the threads that knit my thesis together. I continue to draw from and refer to them as I engage with the physical act of knitting and I return to ideas of femininity and women's leisure through both the autoethnographic portion of my work and through a study of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century women's

autobiographical writing in the upcoming chapters. The following methodology section details the techniques and tools that I have used during my research process.

### Methodology

My research follows a feminist research methodology and uses a mixed methods approach. In particular, I draw on ethnographic content analysis, material culture studies, autoethnography, and writing as inquiry. A mixed methods approach is useful because it allows “one method to enable the other to become more effective” (Hesse-Biber, “Research Practice” 363); multiple methods used together provide the researcher with a fuller understanding of the research. A feminist research methodology significantly influences my overall approach to research by reminding me to keep feminist principles and theory at the centre of my work. An autoethnographic method allows me to have the opportunity to include my own embodied experience as a woman who knits and the added insight that that offers. Combining a material culture studies approach with the ethnographic content analysis allows me to use both written texts (pattern books) and knitted objects as the focus of my study, and provides a deeper understanding than I might receive if I used solely traditional written texts, for example (Goggin, “Introduction” 5). These multiple research methods all bring different sets of questions and offer different ways of approaching the research. Used together, they work to deepen my analysis, as I approach my subject from multiple directions. Finally, I write about the process of writing as inquiry, describing how the practice of writing has been a research tool in and of itself and not simply a method of recording my observations.

## Feminist Research Methodologies

Referencing Sandra Harding, Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber argues that feminist research methodology is not simple to define as there is no singular method. Rather feminist inquiry focuses on “the emergent questions and issues that feminists raise about the social reality and the practices of traditional research,” and offers a perspective from which to approach and question research (“Feminist Research” 5). As such, feminist research methodology should be used as a plural term recognizing that it is a comprehensive area of practice and debate (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 15). A key aspect of feminist research is that the study is “grounded in the set of theoretical traditions that privilege women’s issues, voices, and lived experiences” (Hesse-Biber, “Feminist Research” 3). As Hesse-Biber observes, gender is at the centre of inquiry for a feminist researcher and the focus of the research is on social issues, seeking to “forg[e] links between feminism and activism, between the academy and women’s everyday lives” (Hesse-Biber, “Feminist Research” 3). My research works to bring women’s knitting history into academia in new ways, exploring feminism and activism and working to contribute to a greater understanding of a traditional aspect of women’s everyday lives.

Feminist research methodology recognizes the power inherent in the position of researcher and contends that the researcher bears a moral responsibility for their work and is accountable for “what knowledge is produced and how” (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 14). This power is particularly relevant when it comes to interpretation or data analysis as the researchers’ own biases influence how they interpret information (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 116). The researcher or author also has power over representation; for example, I

have the power over the way in which I present myself and the group of women that I am writing about.

While I have aimed to represent the subjects of my research fairly, there is, as Maureen Daly Goggin notes, a risk of over-romanticising both women and the process of needlework (“Introduction” 3). As Goggin herself writes:

The relationship historically between needlework and women has been far more complex than previously assumed, and than commonly held views certainly grant. For women of all stations of life and in all socioeconomic classes, needlework has been both a domestic and domesticating labor, both a tool of oppression and an instrument of liberation, both a professional endeavor and leisure pastime, both an avenue for crossing class boundaries and a barrier confirming class status. It has been constructed and pursued as a religious duty and a secular pleasure, as a prison sentence and an escape, as an innocuous pastime and a powerful political weapon. Depending on a woman’s station, needlework was either a necessity to live or a luxury reserved only for those who could afford leisure time. Reviled and celebrated, it has nevertheless been a significant cultural practice of meaning-making. (“Essamplaire” 312)

For my research, it is important to recognize that knitting is not only one thing or the other. If I ignore that knitting may have been a method of escape for some women, yet a tool of oppression for other women during the same time period and location, that will misrepresent both knitting and knitters and would be an abuse of my power as the researcher. As noted earlier, much of my motivation for this research came from the

frustration that grew out of seeing knitters presented only as young activists, on the one hand, or as housewives and grandmothers, on the other. Understanding that knitting culture is complex, I want to avoid perpetuating similar stereotypes, or replacing them with different, but equally problematic stereotypes. As Hesse-Biber argues, feminist research aims to destabilize binaries like sex/gender “by examining the interconnections between categories,” and I aim to break down binaries between contemporary knitters and those from older generations, working to avoid reinforcing new categories or binaries (“Research Practice” 383).

Although there are many strands of feminist methodologies, they are united by the desire to create knowledge “that focuses on the lives of women and other oppressed groups and that uncovers new voices and perspectives” (Hesse-Biber, “Research Practice” 365). This work focuses on an undervalued and understudied area of women’s history through a study of the everyday activity of knitting. Yet, I am also concentrating my research on upper and middle-class women who were primarily white, Protestant, and of British descent. White upper and middle-class women were a highly privileged group of people and their experiences were not universal. As such, they cannot be extrapolated to all women.

There is significant privilege associated with contemporary knitting culture as well. Pentney draws attention to this, arguing that it sometimes goes unrecognized as knitting typically “is not overtly recognized as a privileged activity” within our culture. However,

It is crucial that the conditions under which it is possible for certain groups and individuals to engage in knitting as a political tool be considered in light of global and economic factors that concurrently produce and reproduce unequal distributions of wealth in which handknitting is also a form of underpaid labour or a means to save money on clothing. While many women and men can incorporate knitting into their daily lives as a form of community building, as a reclamation and celebration of feminized craft, or as a political tool, the constraints faced by others who cannot afford this opportunity...must not be overlooked. (Pentney)

Pentney's comments echo Goggin's aforementioned caution against the over-romanticizing of those who engage in needlework. Although there may be many people who use knitting as a feminist political tool, it is necessary to remember the privilege inherent in that.

In consideration of my own experience as researcher, I am a white graduate student, living in Canada and without dependents. I am in a position of privilege compared to many in consideration of leisure time and class. For me, knitting is a pastime I often use to relax with in the evenings or during weekends; it is a luxury that I recognize that many do not have. Feminist research principles remind me to acknowledge this bias within my research and to recognize how my work is impacted by my own life experiences, biases, and privilege.

Feminist research methods recognize that theories of power are relevant to all research and that knowledge cannot be separated from experience; it is shaped not only by theory and ideas, but also by social, political and intellectual conditions (Ramazanoğlu



and Holland 14). The autoethnographic component of this project, which I describe in greater detail below, is a valuable method for highlighting my personal lived experience and examining how it has shaped the knowledge found within my research. However, it must be acknowledged that my personal experience is limited and cannot be taken as general knowledge (Ramazanoğlu and Holland 125).

### Ethnographic Content Analysis

Ethnographic content analysis is a qualitative data collection and analysis method that can be used to discover “emergent patterns, emphases and themes” in documents (Altheide). It is an integrated method used to identify and analyse the relevance and meaning of documents with a focus on searching for contexts and underlying meanings in order to make inferences from texts (Altheide; Weber). Studying a text, in my case knitting pattern books and women’s biographical writings, gives the researcher information about the author and the messages being sent to the audience/reader (Weber). An ethnographic research method offers an opportunity to understand people within their culture and social setting with “the subject matter – human beings engaged in meaningful behaviour- guid[ing] the mode of inquiry” (Altheide).

An ethnographic content analysis is useful to reflect cultural patterns of groups or societies and this is my primary motivation for engaging with this research method (Weber). A content analysis of nineteenth-century pattern books and women’s writing gave me the necessary information and insight into nineteenth-century knitting habits and the lives of female knitters during that time.

While ethnographic content analysis is not an inherently feminist method, it is important to consider feminist methodology when analyzing data and to keep in mind that data interpretation by the researcher is a “key process in the exercise of power” (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 116). Interpretation often involves managing conflicting interpretations and feminist research cautions against reading into a story what you wish. There is a risk of seeing only the information that fits the story that you want to tell and ignoring the information that does not (Ramazanoğlu & Holland 116).

### Material Culture Studies

Since the process of knitting results in a tangible, physical object or artefact, a material culture studies approach forms an essential aspect of my methodology. Taking a material culture studies approach to my research has meant considering the relationships of objects to the lives of the makers and users as well as recognizing that most people throughout history leave their marks in mundane ways, often through objects (Glassie 48). For my work, this has meant that thinking about knitting needles, knitted garments, pattern books, and short diary entries, to gain an understanding of women’s everyday lives. Henry Glassie believes that an inclusive study of humankind should begin with everyday artifacts (48), and recognizing these objects and things as imbued with symbolism and meaning (Knappet 7). A focus on the meaning of things and objects, means taking a deeper look at the meaning behind knit clothing. For example, it involves viewing mittens as more than something to keep hands warm and recognizing that they

also carry information about the maker as well as the time period and location in which they were made.

Gerald Pocius discusses material culture in relation to the concept of “art” in an article that is relevant to the study of knitting. Drawing on work by Henry Glassie, Pocius challenges the notion that art is something only “created by, and for, a limited few” and encourages the researcher to consider many ordinary and unexceptional things as art, and as such, as worthy of study (414). Expanding our understanding of what art is, and what may be judged worthy of academic study, also ensures that we value the process of creating, since items will not be judged solely by the financial worth of the final product (Pocius 416).

Springgay highlights the importance of seeing knitting as more than the creation of practical items. She differentiates between objects, things and “thingness,” writing; “[t]he “thingness” is not the object itself per se but its excess, its temporality, and its sensuousness” (114). This allows us to move beyond understanding simply “what” an object is, and its useful purpose, into seeing artifacts as loaded with sensory information. We can begin to understand how knitting can “intertwine subjects through various bodied encounters” (Springgay 114).

This mixed methods approach, combining feminist research practice, content analysis and a material cultures perspective has allowed me to centre women in my work, challenge stereotypes and learn about the relationship of knitted objects to women’s lives, through a study of historical pattern books and autobiographical writing. In order to centre my own embodied experience with knitting into my work, I have carried out an

autoethnographic knitting project, to involve myself with my subject matter on a deeper personal level.

### Autoethnography as Method

Drawing on women's personal experiences is also an important part of feminist research. As Ramazanoğlu and Holland write, "feminist knowledge of theory is framed by theory, but if theory is not grounded in, and informed by, women's knowledge of their experiences, it is hard to see what is feminist about it" (125). Research should be rooted in women's actual lived experiences (125). I have read both interviews with contemporary knitters in current academic literature on knitting culture (Kelly, Springgay), and nineteenth-century women's autobiographical writings about knitting. I also decided to include my own personal knitting experiences through autoethnography, thus bringing forward a variety of women's experiences.

As knitting is a physical process – it is "doing" – I have engaged with the physical act of knitting throughout the research process by creating my own knitted artifacts by hand. To explore embodied knowledge and to ensure that I remain engaged in my subject matter, I employed a performative autoethnographic methodology in my work, using scholarship about autoethnography as method by Tami Spry and Heewon Chang as guides. Throughout the research process, I worked on my own knitting projects, inspired by nineteenth-century patterns found in the books I am researching as a way to bring myself closer to the women who originally used these books.

The process of knitting a pattern is entirely different from the process of reading one. An autoethnographic approach to knitting has led me to contemplate aspects of knitting history that otherwise would not have occurred to me. Knitting has also helped me to slow down and to consider my research in different ways. While it is easy to skim through the patterns while reading, paying attention only to titles and headlines, knitting through a pattern requires a much closer attention to detail. The process of knitting has led me to ask new questions about the role of knitting and the materials used, and to contemplate the differences between historic and contemporary patterns.

Chang defines autoethnography as a “research method that utilizes the researchers’ autobiographical data to analyze and interpret their cultural assumptions” (9). My knowledge of the techniques and culture of knitting has allowed me to understand the pattern books I am studying in a way that someone who has never knit could not. The knowledge with which I have approached this research has brought the gaps between the historic and the present into clearer focus, as I was drawn to outdated aspects of the patterns and I noticed elements that are unfamiliar or strange to me.

In *Body, Paper, Stage*, Spry writes that bodies are part of the “meaning-making process”; in other words, the body is an integral part of the research process and the body provides a critical understanding of how our lives intersect with wider sociocultural attitudes and expectations (51). The body is to be read as a “cultural text,” that exists within a specific context. Culture can be read on the body, perhaps through the movements that it makes and the clothing that it wears (Spry 30). As knitting is both an activity that the body engages in, and an act that often results in knitted clothing designed

to be worn on the body, the role of the body must be considered during the research process. I engage with Spry's work as I study how the body's participation in the process of knitting, through the physical act of creating a knitted object or through wearing knitted clothing, relates to the larger cultural context of women's role in society, social change, and expectations and presentations of femininity.

As a performance artist, Spry focuses on autoethnography as performance. Although knitting is not a performance conducted on stage, it can still be considered a form of performative autoethnography. It is a physical action that is often observed, and influenced by other people. For example, my experiences are different if I knit in public, in front of friends, or if I am alone. Knitting becomes a performance again, if I wear something that I have knit. It impacts how I am viewed by others and often changes the types of conversations that I have.

### Writing as Inquiry

As I planned and designed the autoethnographic aspect of my thesis, I drew on Joanna Mann's article "Towards a Politics of Whimsy: Yarn Bombing in the City." For her study Mann created and installed thirty yarn bombs in her city, posting a photograph and narrative of each item on a public blog dedicated to the project ("Politics of Whimsy" 68). The yarn bombs had a tag attached to them that included a link to the blog so members of the public could find them and visit the blog and leave comments about the project (Mann, "Politics of Whimsy" 68). While writing about her methodology, Mann noted that the performative project "encouraged [her] to adopt an attitude that attended to

the vital material relations that surrounded [her] (“Politics of Whimsy” 68); in other words, the project helped her to think about her city in a more physical way and to notice people and places that she otherwise might ignore due to familiarity. It changed the way that she related to her city (Mann, “Politics of Whimsy” 68). Although our projects may seem very different, Mann’s process of performative ethnographic fieldwork was served as an inspiration for my work.

I have modified Mann’s process to better suit my own research. Rather than a public blog, I kept a personal journal about my experience and referred to it while writing this thesis. For my knitting projects, I created several small swatch samples to test out lace designs and gain an understanding of the language used in the patterns. I have also created one larger knitting project, a “Ladies Hug-Me-Tight,” which is a small sweater-vest type jacket. I detail the process of knitting this in the next chapter.

This autoethnographic component has added personal complexity to my writing and has helped me to bridge the gap between the generations that I have researched. I explored nineteenth-century patterns but with new materials and from a contemporary mindset. Engaging my own body in my research through knitting has helped me to consider the concept of embodiment. I experienced the full knitting process from selecting a pattern, working out the measurement, choosing yarn, knitting the item, and wearing the finished item. The autoethnographic process has given me the opportunity to consider whimsy, utility, and activism as I judged the purpose of my project and the role it serves in my life and possibly those of others. Taking part in the physical activity of knitting helped me to contemplate new questions that I might otherwise not consider. The

process of regular journaling has also helped me to engage in reflexivity while I conducted my research.

The process of reflexivity is essential to feminist research. For my understanding of feminist reflexivity, I draw on work by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Deborah Piatelli, and Laurel Richardson. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli argue that knowledge is mediated by the self and that “what can be known can only be known through oneself, one’s lived experiences, and one’s biography” (560). The knowledge that the researcher gains is heavily influenced by their own personal location and understanding of the world. Reflexivity can help researchers to understand their social position and how their biography influences their approach to the research. Sitting down to knit has offered me with an opportunity to reflect on my research process and contemplate how my lived experiences influence my work and how in turn, I am shaped by my research. Hesse-Biber and Piatelli suggest that researchers keep a reflexive diary to help them check in on their research and reflect throughout the process (573). My autoethnographic journal served as an avenue for reflexivity and I have used it to engage with issues, questions and feelings that emerged during the research process.

In “Writing: A Method of Inquiry,” Richardson argues that writing can be used as a research method to aid in discovery and analysis and that writing helps the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the self and the research topic. Writing is more effective when it is emphasised as an integral part of the process rather than left as a “mopping up activity” to be done after the research has been conducted (Richardson 516). Used as a reflexive task, writing regularly has been a method for me to recognise and nurture my



own voice and improve my text by allowing me to “relate more deeply and complexly to [my] materials” (Richardson 524). Writing throughout the research process increased the time spent on experimentation and revision and enabled me to work on making my writing interesting and enjoyable to read. Richardson notes that the “researcher’s self-knowledge and knowledge of the topic develops through experimentation with point of view, tone, texture, sequencing, metaphor and so on,” and this can only happen when writing is prioritized and the researcher allows the time needed for experimentation (523). The autoethnographic research journal that I have kept also afforded me an outlet for experimentation and a place to explore my own voice throughout the research process.

My theoretical framework and methodology as outlined in this chapter is a necessary set up for the following two chapters of analysis. I begin this analysis with an autoethnographic project inspired by Mann and guided by Chang and Spry as I consider the cultural context of my work. I use a content analysis approach as I study the historical pattern books and the historical autobiographical sources introduced in Chapter Four. I use a material culture approach throughout, as I consider the significance of the knitted objects that I make and read about. This project is guided by an overarching feminist framework as I endeavour to represent the women that I study fairly, recognise the power inherent in the process of interpretation, and bring light to aspects of women’s history that have historically not received significant attention.

## Chapter Four:

### Knitting as Inquiry: My Autoethnographic Journey through Late Nineteenth-Century Knitting Patterns

*As I flip through the pages of my printed copy of The Art of Knitting I am drawn in by the illustrations. Not every pattern has a diagram, but many do. Hand drawn, black and white. I'm not sure how to explain it, but there's something different, something special about a knitting illustration – maybe it is just because I have become so used to photographs. I'm looking for a pattern to make for my research. Something substantial – I have already made several lace swatches and a doily to familiarize myself with the historic patterns. Something unique – although not necessarily the same styles, I have made shawls, socks, hats, slippers and doilies before. Something to make for myself, that other women would have made for themselves. Maybe something pretty, or something warm and comforting. I come upon a “ladies’ hug-me-tight” (The Art of Knitting 68). This fits the unique category as I have certainly never heard of a hug-me-tight before. Judging from the name and illustration it meets the category of cozy, and is also pretty, useful and something a woman would make for themselves. I love the name, it evokes feelings of closeness and comfort. Of being wrapped up and held. Of self-care, and self-love. And, perhaps most importantly, I notice as I quickly read through the instructions, it doesn't look too complicated.*

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### Knitting as Inquiry

In this chapter exploring knitting as a form of inquiry, I draw on work by Lisa Heldke, Richardson, and Mann, who respectively used cooking, writing and knitting as methods of inquiry. I find inspiration from all three authors and see parallels between my research and theirs as well as similarities shared by the processes of knitting, cooking, and writing. The insight that I gained from their work heavily informed my own autoethnographic project.

In her autoethnographic essay, “My Dead Father’s Raspberry Patch, My Dead Mothers Piecrust: Understanding Memory as Sense,” Heldke tells the story of using frozen raspberries from her father’s raspberry patch to make jam and an attempt to preserve her mother’s final piecrust after their deaths. Her story resonates with my work as both baking and knitting have strong associations with the feminine, with tradition and ancestry, and with home and comfort. Both have the ability to evoke “extreme remembering,” as Heldke describes the memories associated with her parents and baking and the deep emotional reaction that takes an individual back to a specific time or place (87). Heldke also writes about the process of making – making jam from her father’s raspberries the way her mother used to do, of reading her mother’s recipe cards while she bakes (Heldke 87). Referencing David Sutton, Heldke describes the sensory experience of memory as a form of communication – a channel between past and present – and credits cooking and baking for bringing the memories to life (87).

Both knitting and baking are essential elements of our lives; they feed and clothe us, hold our memories, and I would argue, they offer unique opportunities as methods of inquiry. Yet, they remain largely unexplored partially due to as Heldke describes, a “curse

of irrelevance” where they are largely viewed as unimportant in an academic sense (19). As Heldke writes, “traditionally, western philosophers have regarded such women’s activities to be philosophically irrelevant, they have defined them out of existence, rendered them invisible, described them through their silence” (19). As everyday feminine activities, they are not seen as relevant to research, despite the integral role they play in our lives. As a result, their possibilities for inquiry have been ignored.

Richardson focuses on the use of writing as a method of inquiry and as a mode of “discovery and analysis” (516), rather than just a necessity for writing up the research. The use of writing as inquiry may perhaps be viewed as less radical than the idea to use knitting and baking as inquiry, yet the way that Richardson describes the process is similar to how Heldke and Mann describe the role of baking and knitting as inquiry. Richardson explains that writing is a way of knowing, not only a method of telling – it is a process for “finding out about yourself and your topic” (516). Similarly, Heldke writes that baking “promotes a self-reflective and interactive model of an inquiry relationship that merges the theoretical and the practical” (15). In other words, Heldke suggests that the act and process of baking provides the researcher with time to reflect on their work, ask questions, and reach a deeper level of understanding on the topic, as the act of research and making join together. This is similar to the way that writing offers time for reflection.

In her research working on skilled practice, with a focus on Shetland lace, Mann describes how the interactive process of knitting a shawl based on an 1860’s pattern directed the trajectory of her research and the questions she asked. Mann writes, “knitting...guided my journey through the archive by raising questions and highlighting

differences, which would have otherwise have gone unnoticed” (“Knitting the archive” 2). For example, when Mann noticed how slowly her knitting was progressing, she asked questions about the techniques used by Shetland women in the 1800’s. These questions guided her research so that she was able to learn that women often used a belt with a small leather pouch to hold the end of their right-hand knitting needles, allowing them to walk and knit with more ease (Mann “Knitting the archive” 9). Mann also discovered that she was holding her knitting needles in a different way than the women she was researching would have (“Knitting the archive” 10). Mann explains that during the late nineteenth century a change in hand position took place in the way that women were taught to knit. This subtle difference in the way that the hands are held was deemed to look “prettier” but in turn was also slower (Mann “Knitting the archive” 11). As knitting was adopted by upper-class women as a domestic art, there was an effort to distinguish themselves from lower class women who knit for a living and looks took priority over speed (Mann “Knitting the archive” 11). While I employ a similar method of inquiry, my work takes a different focus from Mann’s, emphasizing the role of knitting in the lives of nineteenth-century women in Canada and looking for connections between that generation and the current generation of knitters.

When knitting is used as a method of inquiry, the process of knitting guides the research. As Mann writes, “the papers, the yarn, the knit-wear and the needles...[drive] the direction of the research by raising questions about techniques, materials, environments and patterns” (“Knitting the archive” 5). Similarly, the process of knitting a garment from a historic pattern led me to ask questions about the materials women used in the nineteenth century. It has helped me to learn more about what was available to

knitters during this time period, the role that knitting played in their lives, and the place of knitting within a community.

### Autoethnographic Project

The second part of this chapter guides the reader through the story of one knitted object, a ladies' hug-me-tight, made from a pattern found in *The Art of Knitting*. Guided by the insights above, from Heldke, Richardson and Mann's work, I use an autoethnographic approach to situate myself within the research, and explore an uncommon method of inquiry. As Mann argues, knitting through a pattern helps to guide the researchers' journey by raising questions during the knitting process ("Knitting the Archive" 2). Indeed, I found that while the pattern I chose seemed simple at first glance, there were many questions that I encountered as I worked that likely would not have been raised had I limited myself to simply reading the pattern.

### Getting Started

I began this project by familiarizing myself with the patterns from *The Art of Knitting*. I chose smaller items to knit at first, making test swatches of lace edgings or insertions, as well as doilies. This allowed me to gain a basic understanding of the patterns, determine clarity of instructions, and learn any unfamiliar terminology before embarking on a larger, more time-consuming project. For my main project, I chose the pattern "No. 20. Ladies Zouave Jacket, or Hug-me-Tight, Knitted by a Diagram" (see fig. 4.1) from *The Art of Knitting* (68).

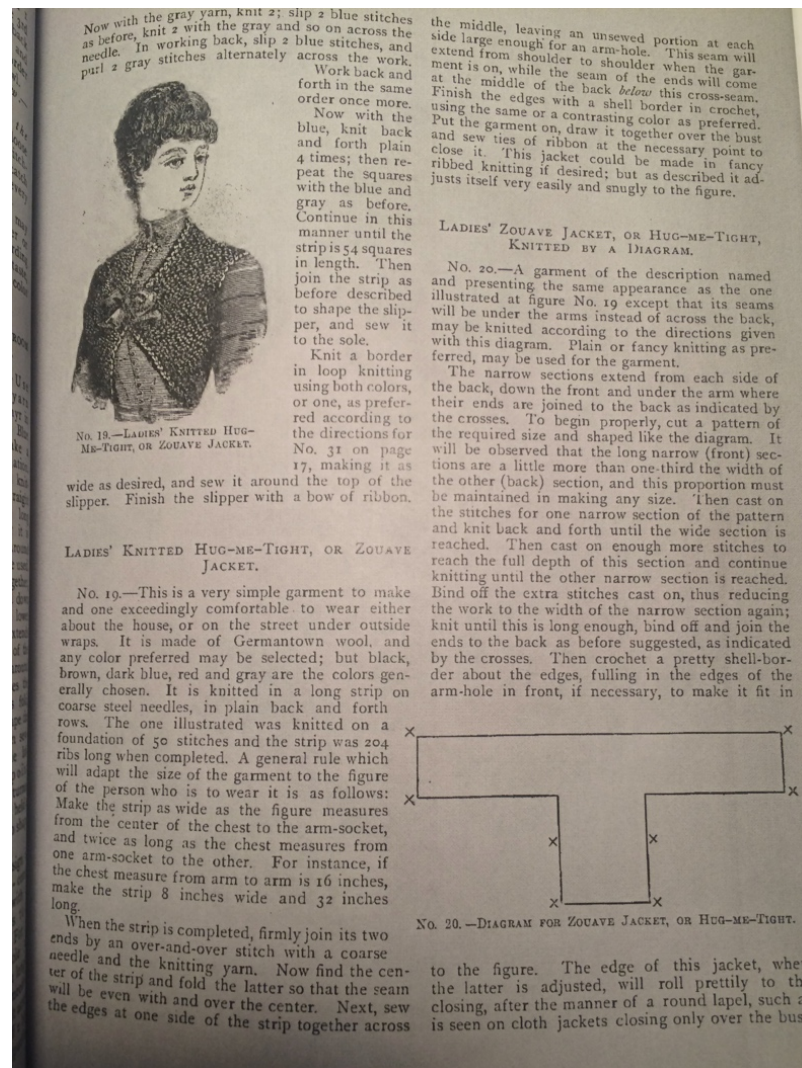


Figure 4.1 The pattern for "Ladies' Zouave Jacket, or Hug-me-Tight, Knitted by a Diagram" (Butterick Publishing Co.

68).

When I was working on the test swatches for practice, I did not pay very much attention to the materials that I used. For my test work, the yarn that I used was whatever I had around and could spare as my primary goal was not accuracy, but to familiarize myself with the language and format of the written patterns. However, for the "Ladies

Hug-Me-Tight,” I wanted to make an effort at historical accuracy within my material choices. I quickly learned that this would be more difficult than I had originally thought. One of the first pieces of information that I look for when I start to knit a new pattern is the yarn that is used: quantity, type of fibre (wool, cotton, etc.), and the yarn weight (thickness). In most contemporary patterns, this information, including needle size and project gauge (stitches per inch when using recommended yarn and needles) are the first items listed. This helps the knitter quickly determine what is needed for the project, and what materials they will need to find or purchase. I own a significant amount of yarn that I have bought on sale, or been given in the past, so when I am looking for a new pattern to knit I often search for a pattern that fits the yarn that I already have on hand.

In these historic pattern books, the details about the materials required were not as clear as I am used to, or they included references to terms I was not familiar with. I also noticed that the amount of information provided about the pattern differed between pattern books. For example, in *The Art of Knitting*, the patterns often recommend a type of yarn (Germantown Wool, Berlin Wool, Saxony yarn) and a needle size. However, no gauge is specified. In *Home Work*, the information about materials varies significantly by pattern. Some patterns, such as “no 24. – Quilt in Stripes” (A.M. 373), offer no direction about what materials are to be used, perhaps assuming that the reader will know what to use on their own. However, other patterns within the same book do offer some direction. For example, the directions for “No. 2. – Baby’s shirt” (345) recommend the use of “two small bone knitting needles,” while other another pattern “No. 10. – Child’s Mitts” suggests using “coarse needles” (A.M. 354). Another, “No. 1. – Vest for Lady”, advises using “bone, wooden or rubber needles,” (A.M. 344) while “No. 9 –Child’s Mitten”



recommends actual needle sizes; “two steel knitting needles number 10, and two finer ones, number 14” (A.M. 354). Many patterns do not give any indication of which yarn to use. Searching through *Home Work*, I found a small number that do; for example, “No. 17. – Skull Cap for Elderly Lady” indicates that “saxony yarn and small sized bone needles” should be used (A.M. 357) and “No. 2.0 - Leaf Bedspread” directs the knitter to use “No. 12 cotton and two needles to correspond” (A.M. 361).

This difference between contemporary patterns and more historic patterns may indicate a number of things, among them the availability of knitting materials. For example, if only one or two types of yarn were available to knitters during this time period, perhaps the authors did not think that information was necessary to include. A look at the T. Eaton Co. Limited catalogue from the fall and winter of 1889 offers some insight into what materials were available to Canadian women during that time period. Page fifteen advertises the knitting needles available and includes: “item C365 wooden knitting pins 5c pair”; “C398 steel knitting needles, all sizes, 3c set;” and “399 rubber and bone knitting needles 10c pair” (T. Eaton Co.). Page nineteen describes the wools and yarns available, with four primary headings; Berlin Wools, Fancy Wools, Fingering Yarns, and Mending Wools (T. Eaton Co.). Berlin wools are advertised as 4 and 8-fold yarns and available in black, white and colours (T. Eaton Co.). Thus, there was a wide range of knitting materials available to knitters during this time.

The knitting blog *String-Or-Nothing*, addresses the topic of vintage yarn terms. Based on the author’s experience with historic patterns, they indicate that a 4-fold Berlin or Germantown yarn refers to what would be a 4-ply worsted weight yarn in contemporary terms (kbsalazar). Worsted weight is one of the most commonly used yarns

today and is often used for mittens, hats, sweaters, and blankets. An 8-fold yarn refers to a somewhat heavier weight yarn, often called “bulky” today (kbsalazar). Fancy wools denote various types of specialty wools, such as Angora wool, or Shetland floss. Advertisements for the specialty wools include a description hinting to what each type would be used for. As an example, angora wool is “used exclusively for babies’ bonnets,” Shetland floss “has a pretty effect when made into babies’ jackets, fascinators, shawls, etc.” and pompadour wool is a “silk and wool mixture suitable for trimming woolen garments” (T. Eaton Co. 19).

The term “fingering” is still used today to describe a light weight yarn, used in projects such as socks. There are several different brands of yarn listed under this heading in the catalogue, including Baldwin’s “Bee Hive” and Saxony knitting wool. This leads me to understand that patterns suggesting the use of a “Saxony yarn” are referring to a lighter, fingering weight wool. According to the blog *String-Or-Nothing*, these yarns would be typically used for knitting baby items (kbsalazar). Silks and cottons for knitting or crochet are listed on page 12 of the catalogue, and are offered in sizes 4-20 (T. Eaton Co.). This search through the 1889 Eaton’s catalogue indicates that women did have a variety of yarn to choose from. This surprised me, as I had initially thought that the lack of information given in the patterns regarding the type of yarn to use implied that women had access to so few materials that the choice would be obvious. However, the selection of yarns sold by Eaton’s suggests that this is not the case. Instead it hints that pattern book authors and editors relied on an assumption of a certain embodied knowledge among their audience; taking for granted that a knitter would instinctively know what yarn would work best for the pattern, thus deeming it unnecessary to be written into the pattern.

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*When I think of my own knitting, the degree to which I rely on a pattern has changed as I have gained experience. While in the past I may have sought to buy the closest yarn possible to what the designer used, I now know what combinations of materials and yarn work for different types of projects and I rely less on the pattern designers' recommendations. I know what yarn to use for socks, and which needles to use with it, and how many stitches to cast on for a pair of socks that fit my feet. I know what yarn I prefer to use make a dishcloth, or a pair of socks, or a hat, and the corresponding needles and approximate stitch counts. I can look at an image of a pattern and make a pretty good guess about what materials were used. And of course, women living in the late nineteenth century would have been the same. Often, I experiment with a pattern – I'll knit a bit and unravel it if it's not the right size and try again. I know how to knit a swatch and measure it to determine how many stitches a project will need. The women who used these patterns would have known that a shawl should be made from a thicker wool, that perhaps a doily should be made from cotton, and baby items should be made from some type of finer wool. More experienced knitters would use the pattern as guidelines, using the materials that they wanted and making the pattern fit their desires. Less experienced knitters likely would have asked someone for advice – a teacher, a mother, an aunt, a neighbour.*

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Interestingly, many of the historical abbreviations used in the patterns are the same as those I am used to in contemporary patterns; “k,” “p” and “sl” are still used for “knit,”

“purl” and “slip stitch” respectively, casting on and casting off remain the same. When I had to look up a couple of abbreviations, I again turned to crafting blogs. Because of the availability of historical knitting patterns online, many who have come before me have asked the very same questions. A blog post on *Roving Crafters* offers a page of translated vintage knit terms that explains some of the commonly used abbreviations in older knitting patterns (knitsbyjenn). The only terms that I had come across so far that really stumped me were “th o” and “n.” I learned that “th o” is an abbreviation for “throw over” and is the same as the contemporary “yo” or “yarnover,” often used in lace patterns (knitsbyjenn). It increases the pattern by one stitch and also creates a small hole for the lace design. The most common way to decrease the number of stitches in a pattern is to “knit 2 (stitches) together,” creating one stitch from two. The commonly used abbreviation for this is “k2tog.” The historical term used in the patterns I have been reading is “n” for “narrow” since when you knit stitches together, the pattern becomes narrower (knitsbyjenn). Although the abbreviations are slightly different, the techniques are the same as those I am familiar with, and the historical terms make sense, so they are easy enough to remember.

### Beginning to Knit

While the writing style is a bit different from contemporary patterns, the instructions are relatively straightforward to understand. Lace pattern instructions are written stitch by stitch, row by row. There are no charts as there are in many contemporary patterns. Many of the garment patterns are more like a set of directions than a step-by-step pattern. The “Ladies ‘hug-me-tight’ knitted by diagram,” for example,

does not specify a set number of stitches to cast on, nor offer row by row directions. It does not suggest precise measurements as would be common in contemporary knitting patterns; rather it provides a small diagram of a T-shape piece of material (see fig. 4.1) and offers some insight into proportions. The pattern recommends cutting a pattern of the required shape and size to determine the appropriate measurements. I ended up pinning pillow cases together in the recommended shape and then measuring it to try to get an idea of size and how many stitches to cast on. The pattern describes how the item is to be knit and that it is to be sewn together “the narrow sections extend from each side of the back, down the front and under the arm where their ends are joined to the back as indicated (in the diagram)” (Butterick Publishing Co. 68).

This is much different from most contemporary patterns that I use, that inform knitters exactly how many stitches to cast on and how many inches to knit for their required size. This historic set of directions allows for more experimentation and greater flexibility as knitters don’t need to fit their work into pre-set sizes. However, the knitter who wants to take up this project does need to know or be willing to learn, something about knitting pattern design and construction. As the pattern does not denote specific measurements, the knitter needs to determine for themselves not only how many stitches to cast on but also how many rows to knit. The knowledge requirement for this pattern narrows the divide between knitter and pattern designer, as the knitter has to actively work to determine the pattern measurements and cannot rely on simply following a list of specific instructions.

The pattern also advises that “plain or fancy knitting as preferred, may be used for the garment” (Butterick Publishing Co. 68). Again, the pattern includes no directions for

“fancy knitting” so it is up to the knitter to determine any decorative pattern that they would like to include. This gives the knitter the opportunity to add more of their creativity and skill into the pattern. For example, for my project, I decided to incorporate an edging pattern from an earlier section in *The Art of Knitting*, “No. 9 Knitted Leaf Edging” into my project (A.M. 26). The freedom to experiment within this pattern is a primary difference that I noted between historic and contemporary patterns. This suggestion to improvise is put simply, with no suggestions offered. A knitter who is looking to create a fancier garment is forced to be creative and act in part as a pattern designer themselves, determining the more complicated design that they wish to incorporate, and then figuring out how to make it work.

### Choosing Materials

When it came to choosing the materials, the shrug pattern recommends using a Germantown Wool of black, brown, dark blue, red or gray. I chose a gray worsted weight wool. Due to the limitations in my knowledge and the materials I had access to, I knew that I would not be able to replicate the pattern in an entirely historically accurate way. I did want to make an effort to maintain some historical similarities in order to create a garment that would not appear too out of place in the late nineteenth century. The pattern does not recommend a needle size but I reasoned that this might be implied by the suggested weight of the yarn. Today, a medium weight yarn typically uses a 4.0-5.0 mm knitting needle. Therefore, I chose a pair of 4.00 mm circular knitting needles.<sup>1</sup> Because

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<sup>1</sup> Circular needles are where the two needles are attached by a long, typically plastic cord. They are used for knitting items in the round, or when a project calls for more stitches than could fit on standard length needles.

this pattern seemed like it would require a large number of stitches, especially when knitting the back section of the jacket, I automatically reached for circular needles. It wasn't until I was several inches, and a few days, into the project that it occurred to me that circular knitting needles, especially my interchangeable needles with a plastic cord, are a fairly new invention. Although I had made an effort to be historically accurate with choice of pattern and yarn, I had completely overlooked this entire element of the project.

I realized that these historic patterns were somewhat constrained by the materials, in this case knitting needles, that were available. This means that some items were constructed differently than they typically would be today; blankets are a prime example. If a knitter cannot hold a large number of stitches on their needle, then a blanket would have to be constructed in smaller sections and sewn together, rather than knit all in one piece. Indeed, as I explored this further, I observed that the blanket patterns available in these books are knit in counterpanes or strips. This means multiple squares or sections of a certain pattern are knit and then sewn together upon completion.

According to a forum conversation on the website *Knitting Paradise*, circular knitting needles appear to have emerged in North America around the 1920's, although they did not really gain in popularity until later (ceejay42; Dcsmith77; Elder Ellen). Participants in this forum conversation uploaded images of their mother's or grandmother's circular knitting needles. The images reveal that early circular needles were made of steel wire and were not particularly flexible (beazy). Commenter Dcsmith77 describes them as "horrible to work with" and Chrochetknit remarked that they "can't imagine how Grams did [it]."



*Figure 4:2 An image of my project in progress, nearly ready to begin the second sleeve.*

I wondered if I should start anew with different needles but I was not sure what needles I would use instead. I knew that this may just be the beginning of the historical inaccuracies so I took it as a point of learning and discussion and continued to knit. The rest of the knitting went relatively smoothly. There were a few places where I needed to recalculate, or re-work what I had planned, as I realized the design wasn't quite working out the way I had intended it to. I decided that I wanted the leaf pattern on both sleeves to point in toward the body (see fig. 4.2). To achieve this, I ended up knitting the second sleeve separately and seaming the pieces together. I also forgot how many stitches I had started out with and I had to do a lot of counting before starting the second sleeve, to make sure it was right. Finally, I finished, cast off, seamed and admired my work (see fig.



4.3). I am fairly happy with the result, even though it doesn't quite fit my body as comfortably as I would like. If I were to make the pattern again, it would need some adjusting to achieve a better fit.



Figure 4.3: The ladies hug-me-tight after completion.

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*I've realized how easy it is to overlook things, to take elements of my knitting habits for granted. I realized how little I know about the history of knitting tools, and how much there is to learn. I've realized that this knowledge may be hard to come by – as*

*some of the most useful sources to me thus far have been blog posts, and online forum conversations rather than formally published texts. I have so many questions that I don't have answers to - how many pairs of knitting needles would a woman have owned? I have a large collection of needles in various diameters and lengths and made from different material (bamboo, wood, plastic, metal). This small thing – the needles that I had chosen – put into focus how far I am from the women who originally read these patterns. Despite the amount of time I have spent researching knitting, there is so much that I don't know. Despite attempts at authenticity, my garment is probably quite unlike any knit during the nineteenth century. The materials that I used are different, my yarn was spun and dyed using newer techniques that resulted in a different textured wool. My gauge may have been off if I was wrong about what contemporary yarn corresponds best to a Germantown wool. The design that I choose, using a leaf edging pattern along the bottom section might be a very strange design choice in the nineteenth century. Because, while I know that fancy knitting often describes a lace design, there are many different designs and stitch styles that could be incorporated into this garment. This also means that attempts to recreate an authentic shrug may be impossible, as each woman brought her own unique design choices to the project.*

*The distance in time and materials that separate me from a nineteenth-century knitter makes it difficult to understand their lives and knitting practices through knitting a historic pattern alone. This process raised many questions, highlighting how much there is that I do not know, yet it also brought unique insights. I have an increased realization of the individual skills and creativity needed to complete these patterns. From my experience knitting this pattern and the time that I spent planning and designing the*

*garment, I feel that even if knitting is considered work, or a chore it is a different than most other chores. It is not the same as sweeping, washing dishes, or doing laundry. The level of planning and creativity needed to complete this project puts knitting on a whole different level from many of the everyday tasks that women have done and continue to do.*

*I also began to consider other points of difference between generations. I generally knit while watching TV; it gives me something to occupy my mind, and knitting helps me to feel more productive while I indulge in a movie or binge watch a show. I've also noticed that over the years I've grown increasingly unable to sit and watch without working on something else. Now, typically unless I am out at a theatre, I find it very hard to watch television or a movie without also working on a knitting or embroidery project. I just find it boring and a waste of time. For various intervals throughout this project, I have made an effort to sit and exclusively knit, in silence or simply with music in an effort to focus on my work, and to ensure that I was focusing my thoughts on my project. Still, however, most of my knitting time was probably spent in front of a screen. It is interesting to think that this part of my knitting, the screen time that is so standard and commonplace to me and sometimes the only time that I knit, would have been unheard of in the historic time period that I am working with. Yet, this brings up a new line of inquiry (which will be discussed further in the next chapter) about the role of knitting and leisure time for women. Despite the fact that I don't need to knit – nobody is relying on my knitting for clothing – I feel more productive if I use my leisure time to knit. I feel more accomplished when I multi-task my leisure time.*

## Historic Patterns vs. Contemporary Patterns

While I found enough similarities between historic patterns and contemporary patterns to find the historic pattern familiar and understandable, there are still significant differences. Most patterns written and sold today are longer and more detailed. They include several pictures and row-by row directions. For example, a shawl pattern that I recently purchased, published in 2016, is five pages long, includes two charts, over fifteen steps, and three pictures (softsweater knits). This is fairly standard for most contemporary patterns that I come across. Conversely, the shrug pattern that I am working with is written up in two paragraphs, with no designated steps and takes up less than half a page worth of space (Butterick Publishing Co. 68).

Yet, contemporary patterns do not start out with that level of detail. In my experience, test-knitting a contemporary pattern is similar to knitting a historic pattern. I recently test-knit a pattern for a knitwear designer out of Vancouver. Typically, pattern designers seek test knitters to knit through a pattern before releasing it for sale to ensure that the pattern is clear and error-free. Technological advances since the late nineteenth century have made it common for contemporary patterns to be accompanied by many high-quality pictures, but since this pattern was in an early stage of development, there were fewer directions and no pictures. In finished patterns, designers typically include photos of the finished project and they also often include pictures of the project in process, particularly of more challenging sections. Test knitting however, was simply looking at several pages of text in black and white knitting code. I had an idea of what it was (a large, round, lace shawl knit in a bulky weight wool), and the designer had given the estimated amount of yarn to be used, but there was very little additional information.

When I made a mistake, it was hard to know if it was a mistake in the pattern or something that I had done wrong. Test-knitting involved a much higher level of uncertainty and a greater need for problem solving than most patterns that I usually follow. I remember having difficulty figuring out the edging that created the border of the shawl. Without any pictures, it was especially hard to determine what to do. When the pattern was not clear and without visual references, I remember trying it a couple of different ways, and making several mistakes along the way before I understood how it really worked.

Rutt explains that the first knitting pattern books appeared between 1835-1840, and gained popularity soon after (109). This means that the historic patterns that I used for my research *are* fairly early versions of written knitting patterns. Pattern writing style and technique has grown and changed over time, similar to how a contemporary pattern is adapted through edits. Here I am reminded of Mann's comments on the transmission of skill; she argues that "practice never replicates, but only resonates with that which has gone before" ("Knitting the archive" 13). What she means by this is that due to the many differentiating features between generations, and individual knitters, a knit design can never be perfectly duplicated. Differences between materials, knitter style and skills, individual improvisation, and designer choices mean that very different projects can be created from the same pattern. Yet at the same time, all patterns resonate with that which has come before, as all patterns are based on the same basic stitches and techniques.

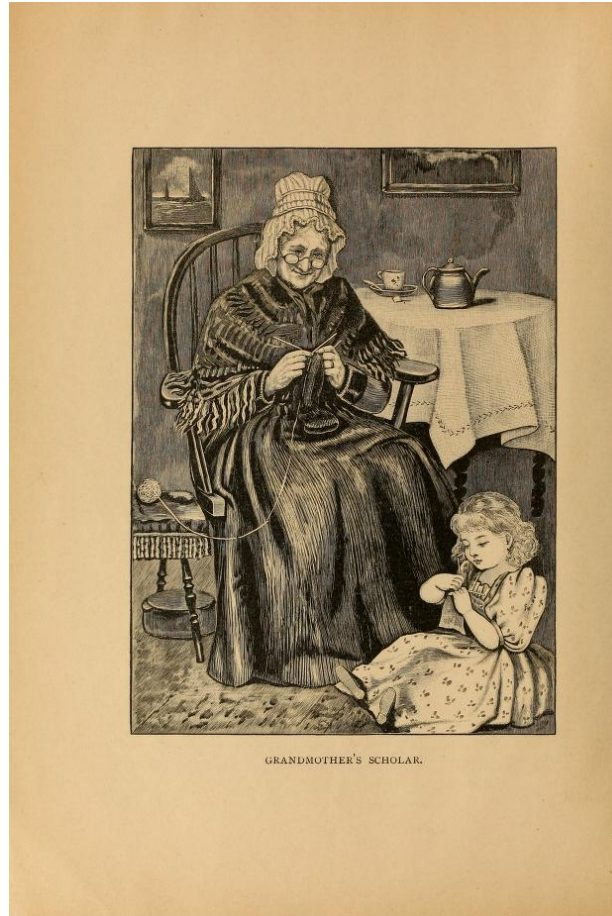
As mentioned above, in comparing a historic pattern to a contemporary pattern, the basic format is similar and many of the abbreviations are the same. Contemporary patterns take the elements of historic patterns and build on them, adding in more pictures,

perhaps more colour, and greater detail in the written instructions. Mann's argument resonates with my own autoethnographic work, as through my attempt to create an authentic historic garment, I learned that there are many gaps in my knowledge and materials that make authenticity impossible.

It is important to note that although contemporary patterns may be viewed as updated, with greater detail and colour, this does not necessarily mean improved. Modern patterns have significantly more detail, yet that detail means that contemporary knitters are less reliant on others for teaching. Nor are they necessarily required to develop the same problem-solving skills that earlier knitters needed. Contemporary patterns also allow less room for improvisation; because someone else has planned it all out and written it up clearly, a knitter can knit for many years without having to think about how or why a pattern works. As a result, most contemporary knitters have less knowledge of pattern design. Another result of the detailed contemporary patterns is that our teachers have changed. It is less necessary to have a friend or family member available to introduce new knitters to knitting techniques. Simple, clear patterns, photo tutorials and YouTube videos make knitting accessible to an increasing number of people.

This has led to a shift in the way that the skill of knitting is transmitted. Women still learn knitting techniques from one another but the stereotypical image of the grandmother teaching her granddaughter (see fig. 4.4) is no longer an accurate representation of how women learn to knit. For myself, I know many young women who knit, and it would not be unheard of for them to teach women who are older than themselves, either in person or through online videos. In fact, there are knitting

techniques that I have learned through online tutorials and then taught to my mother in turn.



*Figure 4.4: Image titled "Grandmother's Scholar" (Butterick Publishing Co. 6).*

There has also been a shift in what knowledge is required to make a knit object from a pattern. While there are many talented knitwear designers today, as noted above, contemporary patterns do not require a knitter to have the same design knowledge that the historic patterns demanded. For most contemporary patterns, it is not necessary to have strong understanding of pattern design or construction. The skills needed for

improvisation have been replaced with a need to read, understand and follow instructions (Mann, “Knitting the archive 7).

For instance, during her research of Shetland lace Mann noticed that there are few written patterns of Shetland lace from the 1800’s. Mann learned that most knitting was not worked from a pattern and in fact the majority of designs were never written down (“Knitting the Archive” 6). Rather, women would knit by imitating other work or through the “incorporation of the immediate environment,” meaning that the knitter would create a lace design inspired by some environmental element that they observed such as a leaf, a shell, or a wave (Mann, “Knitting the Archive” 6). These knitters had a deep knowledge of imitation and improvisation and really understood *how* knitting works. They knew how to design a lace pattern without writing it down, and how to increase or decrease to a desired shape. More than simply understanding the theory, they could put it into practice. For example, although I have made many lace shawls from patterns and I think of myself as a competent lace knitter, I do not know how to improvise or design a lace shawl.

The autoethnographic project detailed in this chapter provided me with significant insight about the process of knitting a historic pattern. This activity brought forth many questions about historic knitting practices while I worked. In particular I needed to learn about the materials that were available at the time that the patterns were written and familiarize myself with historic terminology in order to complete the pattern. As I worked, my lack of knowledge about the lives of women living in the late nineteenth century truly came into focus. I realized that while I can learn about a pattern by knitting it, it is significantly more difficult to gain an understanding of the role that knitting played in women’s lives in nineteenth-century Canada. In order to learn how knitting acted as



chore, leisure activity or a source of comfort, I needed to be able to listen to nineteenth-century women's own voices, as they wrote about their experiences with knitting. This is the subject of the next chapter.

## **Chapter Five:**

### **In Women's Words: Understanding Knitting History Through Women's Writing**

The previous chapter focused on my own personal experience knitting a historic pattern. While this exercise provided me with insight and knowledge about historic knitting patterns and knitting habits, it remained difficult for me to imagine the actual life and knitting practice of a nineteenth-century woman. This chapter draws on women's autobiographical writing from the late nineteenth century, as well as poetry, and non-fiction excerpts from the early twentieth century. Working to gain a deeper understanding of the role knitting played in women's lives and to understand how, why, and when women knit. This chapter responds to questions that emerged in Chapter Four through the autoethnographic process of knitting as inquiry. It challenges contemporary stereotypes of past generations of knitters while examining themes of leisure, pleasure, well-being, and distraction.

#### Knitting for Pleasure

As I began to discover and read women's autobiographical literature from the late nineteenth-century, I noticed several familiar themes emerge. Many themes from the contemporary literature about knitting that I had read were present in these diaries, despite the fact that much of the contemporary literature often implies that they apply only to modern knitters. One of the primary themes is the idea of "knitting for pleasure," by which I mean knitting that is done as a benefit to the self, rather than as work, or as a chore. For knitters in the late nineteenth century – as well as contemporary knitters –

knitting for pleasure is multi-faceted and it includes knitting for relaxation, for therapeutic or calming benefits, to create gifts for oneself, and knitting as a source of pride. Here, I will primarily focus on the *process* of knitting, rather than on the end project, and the simple suggestion that knitting was and continues to be a pleasurable act.

As I have argued earlier in this thesis, much of contemporary literature about knitting makes assumptions about older generations of knitters and their knitting habits. In particular, this literature often argues that knitting historically has been a chore rather than a source of pleasure. However, viewing women's historic knitting simply as a necessary part of a woman's domestic role (Minahan and Wolfram Cox; Fields), limits the potential to fully imagine the role that knitting played in the women's lives. A reading of women's autobiographical accounts presents a more accurate understanding of their knitting habits.

### Process-Oriented Knitting

Because many knitters describe knitting as a calming or relaxing hobby, there is a significant amount of contemporary literature that addresses the meditative nature of knitting, and the corresponding potential physical and mental health benefits. As a repetitive activity, knitting "creates a rhythm" based on the sound and movement of the hands, yarn and needles (Turney 152). The repetitive action inherent in knitting creates a "transcendental or meditative state" that allows the knitter to distance themselves from the world, create a mental space for problem solving, and enhance well-being through a calming activity (Turney 52). Fisk, for example, credits the tactile engagement with

physical artefacts, and the rhythmic, meditative nature of knitting, with helping to ease depression in her life (162). She writes “knitting has helped me to *become at home in the world*, when depression made me want to leave the world” (Fisk 162; italics original). Riley et al. describe knitting as both “a process and a product-oriented occupation,” (55) meaning that the process of knitting is equally important as the resulting creation and suggests that people knit for the experience of physical act of knitting rather than simply because they want or need the end product. Riley et al. conducted an online survey in which respondents were asked to list their primary reasons for knitting. The most common responses related to benefits that came from the process of knitting, including “relaxation, stress relief, and its therapeutic and meditative qualities” (Riley et al. 37). Respondents also described knitting as calming and soothing and proposed that knitting helped to improve their mood and organize their thoughts (Riley et al. 38).

Fields, touching on the idea of process over product, describes the relationship to knitting among women in a Stitch’nBitch group. He writes, “knitting was less about the utility of the projects one makes and more about the fulfillment ones gets from the activity...The process of knitting was as important at the project being knitted (Fields 157).” Furthermore, the women within the group characterized knitting as “very personal and often invoked a language of human fulfillment” explaining that “[k]nitting provided balance when juxtaposed against their professional lives and was not a taken-for-granted part of women’s domestic role” (Fields 158). Fields’ observations reflect a belief that knitting historically has been an expected female responsibility. While the author indicates that the research participants believe that their knitting is a fulfilling activity,

they also believe this experience is unique to a younger generation of knitters (Fields 157-158).

Stereotypes that ignore women's experiences and argue that women historically knit simply to fill an expected domestic role, discount women's experiences and the agency that they enacted over their own lives through knitting. A study of late nineteenth-century autobiographical writing demonstrates that at least some women experienced knitting as more than a chore and that they found ways improve their well-being, experience personal fulfillment, and draw benefits from the knitting process in a similar manner as the contemporary knitters described by Riley et al., Fields, Fisk, and Turney, even while expressing the traditionally expected feminine and domestic role. While we are no longer able to interview nineteenth-century women about their knitting habits and the role that knitting played in their lives, we can access their private journals and diaries. These reveal that women were aware of knitting's potential benefits and its possibilities for self-expression. They show that knitting was not taken-for-granted.

### Anne Langton

I turn first to the journals of Anne Langton. Langton was a gentlewoman, artist and pioneer settler in the Kawartha Lakes region of Ontario. Born in 1804, her published diaries and letters range from 1834-1847 (Langton and Williams xi). While Langton lived in a northern, rural area in Ontario, she belonged to an aristocratic British family, meaning that she had the ability to travel, and the means to purchase or order knitting materials, patterns, or ready-made goods (Langton and Williams 31). Langton details

many aspects of her life as a settler in Upper Canada in her diary and she makes several references to knitting. In one journal entry Langton describes her great aunt knitting by the fire in a depiction of the evening environment in her home (Langton and Williams 72). In another entry, she mentions gaiters she knit for a family member (Langton and Williams 264). However, one entry in particular stands out: “Sunday December 22, 1839. As I sat at my knitting yesterday, a great many things came into my head that I thought I should say when I resumed the pen, but they appear to have escaped me” (Langton and Williams 265).

Although this may be a short, seemingly offhand comment, it reveals that Langton recognizes the meditative possibilities of knitting, describing it as a time to think, problem solve, and develop ideas. Although in this example the thoughts developed during knitting may have been quickly forgotten, this short comment about knitting still acknowledges the process of knitting and its potential for contemplation and reflection. The focus is not on *what* she was knitting – in this entry, she does not mention what she is knitting – rather, the emphasis is on the thoughts that came to her while she was knitting. This entry also references knitting as benefitting and influencing other aspects of life, and suggests that knitting was part of her process of relaxing and processing information. In this example, knitting is more than a chore; indeed, it is connected to her writing process.

### L. M Montgomery

Popular Canadian writer, Lucy Maud Montgomery is known primarily as the author of *Anne of Green Gables*. Born in PEI 1874, she moved to Ontario in 1911 after

marrying. Montgomery regularly featured knitting women in her fiction yet she did not often write about knitting in her diary (Rothwell 133). In a 1914 journal entry written while she was living in Ontario, Montgomery references knitting and its benefit on her personal well-being:

Tuesday, January 27, 1914

The Manse, Leaskdale, Ontario

I have been most miserable ever since last writing. I am beginning to feel discouraged...*To-day I began to knit a quilt.* That sounds like an arrant folly in a woman who is as busy as I am. Yet there is a method in my madness. There have been so many days lately that I could do nothing, not even read because my nerves got in such a state. Now, *knitting* has always had a good effect on me when I am nervous. I was always very fond of knitting and I find that it helps me greatly these bad days. So I began the quilt. It doesn't matter if I never finish it. (Montgomery et al. 142-143; italics in original)

This quote clearly evidences that Montgomery found the process of knitting to have therapeutic benefits when she writes, “knitting has always had a good effect.” It is also significant that she notes that knitting might seem like an “arrant folly” for a busy woman, again challenging the notion that historically women knit purely out of necessity. This journal entry presents an example of knitting for the process not the product; as Montgomery states, it “doesn’t matter” if the quilt is never finished. What she desires is not a new quilt, but the benefits that she enjoys from knitting.

Montgomery carries on the idea of knitting for pleasure, or for personal enjoyment as she continues the journal entry. She explains that she has previously knit two lace quilts, one had worn through, yet the second (knit ten years before this entry) she still owns. She started the first quilt during a winter spent in Malpeque, PEI with her aunt. Describing this time, she writes, “Every girl and woman in Malpeque had knitted, was knitting, or intended to knit a quilt – some of them several quilts. They possessed many patterns and considerable rivalry went on. Lace knitting was very popular also. I caught the fever and began a quilt” (Montgomery et al. 142-143).

I want to highlight a few sections of this quote. Montgomery writes that some women had knit several quilts and it seems from her writing that “several” would not have been necessary. Furthermore, the suggestion of a rivalry proposes that knitting quilts was a test of skill between women – an area in which to compete and show off proficiency and talent. It also implies community and social connectedness between women who knit. Whether they sat and knit together or not, women would have talked to one another about knitting and shown off their work. Montgomery also describes lace knitting as “popular” and a “fever” which indicates that knitting was surrounded by a level of excitement, joy, and pleasure.

Both Langton and Montgomery offer glimpses into the mindset of a nineteenth-century woman and her thoughts and feelings about knitting. Although neither of these women frequently wrote journal entries about knitting, those entries that do exist demonstrate that knitting held a deeper role in their lives than that of merely another chore. Langton and Montgomery’s diaries are unique in their length, detail, and



prominence, yet they are not the only nineteenth-century Canadian women who wrote journal entries about knitting.

### The Rural Diary Archive

The *Rural Diary Archive* hosted online by the University of Guelph offers further examples of women's autobiographical writing about knitting. The archive currently hosts over 130 Ontario diarists from 1800 to 1960. Many of these diaries have been transcribed by students or volunteers and can be searched by keyword. A search for "knitting" offers several results (University of Guelph). These diaries typically feature short, regular entries of not much more than a few sentences. The entries focus primarily on actions; they touch on what was done in a day rather than on feelings or emotions. Although the diaries are a bit outside of the desired time and location for this project, they do present with a unique glimpse into the lives of women living in Ontario during the nineteenth-century, including the role of knitting in their lives.

In many of these entries, knitting seems to occupy an interesting space between leisure and chore, as an everyday element of life that was mentioned without significant thought or importance. Knitting is written about occasionally, but probably not every time that it occurred. For example, in Mary Williams Trout's 1867 diary, we find the following entries:

December TUESDAY, 3 1867.

Storming like sixty to day can hardly keep from freezing knitting mittens this evening

...,

SATURDAY, 14

Home all day B. L had the sewing machine finished my mittens Finished my dress. (Trout)

There are several entries between these two entries of December 3 and December 14, but none of them mention knitting. Given that Trout started and finished a pair of mittens during this period, it is likely that she knit several times in between those dates, but did not consider it an event worth writing about.

Neither quite leisure or chore, knitting could possibly be understood as a leisurely occupation, yet potentially still work. For example, the Robert Mayes Diary Collection was written by multiple members of the Mayes family and details life on their farm between 1874-1877 in Muskoka County, Ontario. Within this diary collection, there are entries about knitting interspersed with entries about outdoor chores including chopping wood, going into town, or digging a cellar. One entry reads: “Tuesday 6 Rained all day, we were all Knitting mittens for winters use mother made ten plum puddings reading for the raising day” (Mayes). Another reads: “October 26, Tuesday: Wet all day indoors knitting” (Mayes). These two entries are short and very to the point, emphasizing the everyday role of knitting. Interspersed with other entries about more physical tasks, they point to the leisurely nature of knitting. These journal entries also link knitting with the weather; it is an alternative to outdoor work when the weather is poor.

We might also consider this entry from the Lucy Middagh Diary Collection 1884-1887: “Thursday February 9 1888 it is very cold I am knitting Edging and taking care of

Baby the Baby is very good the Children all go to school it seems so good and quiet when they are at school they don't seem to mind it but they make me nearly crazy some times" (Middagh). This example shows that knitting is something that is done while it is raining, or along with another task (such as caring for a baby) that does not require one's total attention; it is not actual hard labor, but nor is it idleness.

I find Middagh's entry fascinating because it expresses a lot, despite its brevity. Once again, she draws a relationship between knitting and the weather in ways that evoke images of coziness and comfort. S. Scott takes up this idea of knitting as a comforting activity during colder months in *Canada Knits: Craft and Comfort in a Northern Land*. Scott writes of the early necessity of knitting in Canada and the need for comfort; "...it is winter that grips that Canadian imagination. For all but the most insulated city dweller, winter is both a natural and spiritual force to be reckoned with. Knitting is a remarkable weapon on both scores" (S. Scott 1). Scott argues that knitting affords more than just "warm serviceable clothing"; it also acts as entertainment and as a comforting activity during long winter months (S. Scott 1). It is noteworthy that all of the diary entries that I have included thus far were written between the colder months of October to February. This suggests that women knit when they would not have been working outside. While some of their knitting may have been in service of making needed winter clothing, it also included other items. L.M. Montgomery described knitting a quilt, for example, and Lucy Middagh was knitting edging. Both Montgomery and Middagh's diaries indicate that knitting may have served as a way to cope with the emotional effects of winter weather. Lucy Middagh describes knitting as somewhat of a break from her other responsibilities;

knitting with the baby is “good and quiet” while when the other children are home it makes her “nearly crazy sometimes.” This again highlights the position of knitting as a space between leisure and work. Middagh seems to value her time knitting with the baby and contrasts it with the commotion of when the other children are home. Knitting appears to offer her a quiet time of relaxation and calmness.

Phoebe Mott’s diary delivers further noteworthy examples, as she often writes about knitting and many of her entries follow similar themes. Phoebe Mott was between thirty-four and thirty-seven years old when she wrote these entries and living in Oxford South, Ontario. She was single and living with her widowed mother (University of Guelph). Mott writes about knitting several times and I have included the most pertinent examples, entries that offer insight into when and why Mott knit and the role of knitting in her life:

Oct 1888

Tue 16 Rained by spells this afternoon several heavy claps of thunder Mother ironed, I knit all day.

Wed 17 Rained a little towards night Three weeks today since the wet weather commenced. Threshers came to Charlies to-night; he went up for Nancy. I finished the mittens for Nellie’s birthday present.

Thur 18 A nice day, didn’t rain any, favorable for threshers Mother & I shelled off the Walnuts some that grew on our own trees, consequently we are proud of them, but not proud of our hands since doing it; they look ugly. I am now knitting a pair of mittens for Kate.

Fri. 19 Wet till middle of afternoon then it cleared up colder Threshers finished about noon, got their dinner & went to John's Will called in on his way from village, told us of Ellen Atkin's death. I knit all day.

Sat. 20 Bright morning, turned very cold towards noon Squally in afternoon I hurried & got my work done up to finish the mittens. Will called in & I came home with him to stay all night, finished the mittens after I got here. (Mott 22)

I find the entry from Saturday, October 20<sup>a</sup> to be particularly noteworthy as Mott writes that she "hurried" to get her "work done up to finish the mittens" (22). This implies that she does not consider the knitting to be work, or at least sees it as a preferred chore. This entry thus functions to dispel the misconception that knitting historically has been simply one of many tedious chores for women. Of course, as a single woman, Mott's experience of work and leisure time was likely different from those of many women who were wives or mothers. However, it is unlikely that it is entirely unique. Mott writes of knitting gifts for Nellie and Kate, presumably friends or family members, demonstrating that she still held familial and domestic obligations despite being unwed. Another aspect of Mott's biography that is worth bringing attention to is her age at the time of writing. Mott was between thirty-four and thirty-seven years old when she wrote her diary and as an older single woman she was unlikely to become a mother at this point. Her life story itself further challenges the perception of knitters as mothers and grandmothers; Mott was neither.

The themes found in these autobiographical writings are also mirrored in *Florence Home Needle-Work* from 1894. The pattern book includes a ten-page article simply titled “Knitting” that offers many instructions including needle and silk recommendations, and a description of various stitches with diagrams. In the introduction to this article, the author writes, “besides its practical use knitting is an easy and pleasant pastime that can be taken up at odd minutes and even carried out whilst talking or reading” (Nonotuck Silk Co., “Florence 1894” 31). This quote again highlights that knitting was a hobby, or pastime, even for nineteenth-century women.

This article also includes the quote: “In former days knitting served mainly for the manufacture of stockings, and even now, in spite of machines, hand-knit stockings and numberless other useful and ornamental articles, such as shawls, counterpanes, cradle coverings, gloves, laces, etc., are in great request” (Nonotuck Silk Co., “Florence 1894” 31). Once more, hand knitting is not positioned as necessary, rather it is done out of desire. Knitting is described as useful *and* ornamental. This passage is not indicative of a mother knitting hundreds of pairs of plain socks and mittens for her children but instead a woman knitting pretty and fancy things for her home or herself.

The quote also brings to mind the argument that the contemporary surge in young women knitting is in response to technological advances and a desire to return to making things by hand (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 12). I find the phrase, “even now, in spite of machines” fascinating in this light. The time period that we look back on now, also positioned their knitting behaviours in response to technological advances. Although not explicit, there is the implication that hand-knit items are *better* in some way than machine

knit items. Today, when machine-knit items are readily and cheaply available, hand-knits are viewed as something special because of the time, skill and knowledge that went into them. The themes and mindsets that we often consider modern, were already common over one hundred years ago.

Minahan and Wolfram Cox did acknowledge that movements seeking to elevate the status of craft, and act as a protest against an increasingly technological world, have existed for over a century (12). They create a timeline that includes primarily the British and American Arts and Crafts movement which developed in response to the technological advances of the Industrial Revolution during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 12). This suggests that knitting has been imbued with a sense of nostalgia for longer than many people believe. When Minahan and Wolfram Cox describe nostalgic participants in the Stitch'nBitch movement as "young women knitting their way back to the world of their grandmothers," their grandmothers and even great grandmothers may have already been doing the same (14).

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*As I have worked – read, knit, written – I have reconsidered this desire to elevate the status of knitting that is present in my work, and within the work of other authors. Perhaps this effort to have knitting taken seriously – to be seen as art, or activism, takes something away from knitting. Women have often been told what to do and what not to do, and we are so often criticised for our choices. Maybe we have turned knitting from a domestic chore into a social justice chore. For myself I often feel that there is a greater validity to my work if I am engaging in craftivism, in part because so many contemporary*

*conversations about knitting seem to insinuate that to be a feminist who knits your knitting must be activist, or subversive. It often seems knitting must have a greater purpose than leisure. I want to be able to talk about knitting without justifications. To find a way to elevate the status of knitting without leaving behind the women who don't fit into our image of a modern knitter. To me, there something significant about knitting for yourself without explanation. I knit where I want. I knit what I want. I knit why I want. Knitting can and should be a technique used for activist or artistic endeavours, but we still need to respect knitting when it is not.*

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Another common thread between the generations is the questioning of the validity of women's leisure activities and whether women are allowed to have leisure time at all. Recently a friend sent me a story that had been making rounds on the internet. At a 2017 Stanley Cup Playoffs game, a former NHL hockey player and current sports commentator filmed and tweeted a short clip of a woman knitting in the crowd with the comment "C'mon, can't be knitting at an NHL StanleyCupPlayoffs2017 game tho LOLOL..." (Weekes). The woman featured in the video, who goes by Pens Knitting Lady<sup>2</sup> on Twitter responded: "I knit at the 2009 Cup Final Game 7 in Detroit. I knit where I want" (PensKnittingLady). I loved PensKnittingLady's response and the power behind the words -- "I knit where I want" -- as the words act as a refusal to explain or justify her knitting.

In an interview, Pens Knitting Lady, whose name is Michelle, says, "I had no idea that so many people were upset that someone knits at a hockey game. Some of the

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<sup>2</sup> Pens as in Pittsburgh Penguins, the hockey teams she supports



comments were really offensive. I have to say that I felt shocked at the outrage and rudeness of the posts” (Montanez). She also indicates that the online comments she received almost caused her to stop knitting at games (Montanez). Even though knitting has become a common component in activism, this story highlights the fact that there is still something controversial about women quietly enjoying themselves in public. A woman who chooses to engage in the feminine activity of knitting in the traditionally male space of a hockey game, somehow invites online attention and criticism.

### A Look at the History

The efforts to justify or elevate knitting have been present for many years. The introductory pages of the 1887 edition of *Florence Home Needle-Work* describe the quality of Florence knitting silk and provide information about the manufacturing process. Part of this description reads: “[w]hile our grandmothers did well with crude materials in their day, scientific progress in the dyeing and spinning of silk, and the working of metals and glass has been so great since then, that the materials offered now should afford superior specimens of this handicraft from their descendants” (Nonotuck Silk Co., “Florence 1887” 8). I find this appeal to the scientific aspects of silk production noteworthy because this is not the language that I expected to encounter in a pattern book from the nineteenth century, targeted towards women. I suppose that I expected to find language that was more stereotypically old fashioned and feminine.

Additionally, these descriptions of scientific progress and the quality of silk serve not only as a way to advertise their product (they do caution against the risks with purchasing a less superior knitting silk) but as an effort to elevate the craft. This type of

language also shows an appeal to class as the author differentiates their product not only from the past, but also from cheaper, lower quality goods. Turney explains that when we consider the separation between art and craft, crafts such as knitting and simple embroidery tend to be associated not only with the feminine and domestic, but are also linked with boredom, thrift and a lower social class (15). *Florence Home Needle-Work* attempts to change the connotations of knitting and crochet from those of boredom, plainness, and lower-class thrift, and instead associate it with skill, leisure and high quality, luxury goods, and the middle or upper class. It tries to bring knitting further from craft and closer towards art.

The patterns in *Florence Home Needle-Work* are primarily for fancy work which refers to more elaborate and intricate works. For example, there are several pages of beaded knit and crochet purses. There is an emphasis on skill and quality, and as is demonstrated in the above excerpt, an effort is made to elevate the status of women's needlework and remove it from some of the connotations of a boring, old-fashioned domestic chore as they set their patterns and materials apart from the "crude materials" of their grandmothers (Nonotuck Silk Co., "Florence 1887" 8). This is clear not only from language that is used but also from the types of patterns within the book. For instance, there are patterns for lace mittens with ribbons, several purses, and decorative home items, made from high quality silk. The patterns in this book are not items that would be made as a chore. In an introductory article about the "crocheted silk purses in bead-work," they are described as an item to occupy "the leisure hours of women" (Nonotuck Silk Co. "Florence 1894" 7). This emphasis on high-quality leisure, that is associated with an upper-class woman, is also balanced with the utility of the project (Nonotuck Silk Co.,

“Florence 1894” 7). For example, the beaded purses are described as excellent gifts that women can give, within their means, for birthdays, weddings and holidays (Nonotuck Silk Co., “Florence 1887” 8).

L.M. Montgomery’s previously quoted diary entry about knitting a quilt is an example of the historical justification of knitting habits. It is important to note that even though it is a private journal entry, and thus not meant for anyone but herself, Montgomery still defends her knitting and explains why beginning to knit a quilt, what seems an “arrant folly,” is actually an important and endeavour. This is similar to the contemporary call to the Pens Knitting Lady to defend or explain why she knits during hockey games (Weekes). I often see this same justification today in myself as well as among other knitters that I know. There is a feeling that we must have a reason or a justification for why we knit.

Knitting can be art, and knitting can be activism, but it does not need to be. An effort to elevate knitting always works by raising one type above another, invalidating certain practices to validate others. It also works on the assumption that dualities have not always existed within knitting, or that harder, more active associations with knitting are necessary – that a soft, simple domestic practice cannot be a valid one. We don’t have to make knitting feminist for it to be valid; rather, we need to put effort into remembering that feminine activities are valid. The focus does not need to be on elevating the status of knitting but on resisting the urge to give into the assumption that connotations of softness and domestic work are somehow bad. The concept that feminist knitting needs to be separate from any connotations of domestic work excludes women of different classes and simply serves to limit women’s choices and identity. Of course, there are some

knitting habits that ought to be questioned and it is beneficial to contemplate the role your knitting plays in the broader world. However, I do believe that we need to move beyond this understanding that knitting needs to be explained or justified and allow knitting, at least sometimes, just to be. As Stalp argues, “we are all entitled to spend our leisure time doing something that we personally enjoy” (267), and it can be as simple as that.

### Women’s Roles, Knitting and Feminism

While I have argued that knitting does not need to be an overtly feminist or political act to be a valid leisure activity for women, craftivism and knitting as a feminist activity have been prominent themes in contemporary academic literature about knitting. While this connection between feminism and knitting may be considered a modern idea (Fisk 171) a study of women’s movements in the past might bring forth evidence of a historical link between knitting and feminism. A brief overview of nineteenth-century feminist thought is an important background to this discussion.

The first generation of feminists in Canada emerged in the 1870s and 1880s, primarily becoming involved out of a desire to open up new areas of employment for working-class women (Kealey 9). In a contrast to the working-class feminists, the late nineteenth century also saw a rise in social or maternal feminism particularly among middle class women (Roberts 17). White, Christian, middle-class citizens who were alarmed at the apparent moral degradation that appeared in cities along with rapid urbanization, renewed discussions of women’s role in society as mothers (Roberts 30). The National Council of Women was founded with the mission of “mothering,” under the

belief that caring for the poor and homeless was a means to improve their society, and end the moral degradation (Roberts 30). Deborah Gorham describes that in “prewar Toronto, most women’s activism was more directly related to conservative social reform than it was to a commitment to equal rights for women” (59). Most of women’s reform efforts went into the creation of charities and the improvement of public welfare and health policies (Gorham 59).

The majority of reformers believed that women should be primarily mothers and upholders of the family and for these women “conversion to women’s suffrage came only when they were convinced that the vote was necessary to achieve the social ends for which they were working” (Gorham 59). While there were some more radical feminists outside of this majority, women who sought suffrage as a symbol of woman’s personhood, the dominant support for women’s role in politics, “did not involve a challenge to society’s dominant ideology” in terms of women’s roles (Gorham 59). However, this appeal to maternalism attracted women who may otherwise have rejected the reform and suffrage movements (Mitchinson 151). For women who were part of the more conservative maternal feminism movement, knitting and other domestic tasks would have formed part of their identity as a social reformer.

Women’s social reform movements are credited with an increase in women’s organization, with the development of societies, associations and charities, and with increased women’s visibility within the government (Mitchinson 167). Many women who otherwise supported society’s traditional views of women, became supporters of suffrage when they realized it provided their greatest opportunity to influence the government on

the issues they cared about, including prohibition (Mitchinson 167). Thus, the women's reform movement reached women who may otherwise not have been interested in women's rights and suffrage (Mitchinson 167). This historical context provides a lens into the political scene for women in Ontario during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a time when we begin to see knitting move from private diary entries and into more public and political conversations through the work of Nellie McClung, and P. Florence Miller.

Canadian feminist Nellie McClung makes an interesting appeal to maternal feminists, connecting knitting, women's war efforts, and suffrage in her 1914 book *In Times like These*. In her chapter, "What Do Women Think of War? (Not That It Matters)," is a conversation about World War One. Here McClung addresses the viewpoint that much of maternal feminism was based on, that "the hand that rocks the cradle rul[es] the world" (22). McClung suggests that this viewpoint is a lie that has been told to women to keep them quiet, arguing that if it were true, sons of "faithful, patient, homeloving, obedient" German woman would never have gone to war (McClung 23-24).

McClung writes, "Since the war broke out women have done a great deal of knitting...Men make wounds and women bind them up, and so the women with their hearts filled with love and sorrow sit in their quiet homes and knit" (23). She continues on to write, "women have not only been knitting – they have been thinking" (McClung 23), in particular, thinking that these "theories of the world" (McClung 23), on which maternal feminism was based, may not have as much weight to them as women may have thought.

McClung begins a metaphor, describing societal change brought about by wartime knitting writing: “[t]he nimble fingers of the knitting women are transforming balls of wool into socks and comforters, but even greater change is being wrought in their own hearts. Into their gentle souls have come bitter thoughts of rebellions” (McClung 24). Once again, we see the relationship between knitting as a quiet pastime and thinking, meditation, or reflection within McClung’s writing. She equates maternal feminism with “knitting women” and positions wartime hand knitting as an activity that left women the time to think and re-think their feminist actions. She writes:

The knitting women know now why the militant suffragettes broke windows and destroyed property, and went to jail for it joyously...The knitting women remember now that they have said hard things about the suffragettes, and thought they were unwomanly and hysterical. Now they know that womanliness, and peaceful ways prayers, petitions and tears have long been tried but are found wanting... Many of the knitting women have seen a light shine around their pathway, as they have passed down the road from heel to the toe.(McClung 25)

McClung positions knitting both as a starting point for feminist action and as an activity that offers the time for meditation and reflection that leads to changing of opinions. Of course, it is not knitting on its own that evokes this change but knitting in relationship to the war. However, it is important that McClung has chosen knitting as a metaphor. This choice demonstrates that McClung recognizes the relationship between knitting and maternal feminism. She notes that women had previously believed that providing care through domestic actions like knitting could change the world, and that at

this point, knitting rather than any other action associated with the war has given women the motivation to reconsider their feminist efforts. As McClung puts it, “women have seen the light...as they have passed down the road from heel to the toe” (25). She clearly associates the change in mindset with the process of knitting socks.

Continuing the theme of wartime knitting, “The Knitting Marianna” is a poem written by P. Florence Miller and published in 1916 in the *Distaff*, a publication based out of St. John’s Newfoundland. Although this written source moves a bit beyond my chosen time and location, it affords an interesting perspective on how women have understood knitting in the past. Written by a woman in Newfoundland, the experiences recounted in the poem could, and likely would, have been similar for women in Ontario.

As noted earlier, Nellie McClung wrote that while men were at war, women “sit in their quiet homes and knit” (23). Miller’s poem offers more insight into what sitting at home and knitting would have looked and felt like:

...She only said – “O heart so weary,

The lonely years ahead!

But living men are cold and dreary,

And one must knit,” she said.

...,

She only paused, at while, to sway

The orphan’s cradle at her side.

The winter twilight’s gloomed apace,

And deepened into winter night,



....

And so at morn, and noon and night

Her needles joined the battle-song (Miller 10).”

This poem taps into several previously discussed themes. Miller explores the concept of knitting as waiting; it is an activity that women used to keep busy while at home waiting, far from the war front. When Miller writes “and one must knit,” I am reminded of Nellie McClung’s writing that men fight and women sit at home and knit. Taken out of context from the rest of the poem, or seen outside of McClung’s writing, the action of sitting at home and knitting sounds passive. Yet Miller describes knitting as joining “the battle-song” (10) and knitting is thus positioned as an actionable element of war. Similarly, McClung does not characterize the knitting woman as a passive figure; rather the knitting woman is restless and actively contemplating the next steps for resistance (25). It can also be seen as women working to find power in their lives. Not only was knitting for soldiers a way to play a part in a situation that is beyond their control, it also was also a way to bring calm and comfort into their lives. It highlights the role of knitting as a calming or comforting activity (Montgomery et al. 142-143; S. Scott 1).

### Conclusion

After completing my autoethnographic project, I was still left feeling that there was a large gap between myself and the women who knit during the nineteenth century. Although I had studied historic patterns, and knit one myself, I still found it nearly

impossible to imagine how earlier women felt while knitting, and even why they knit. It was very difficult to find writing about Canadian women's knitting habits prior to World War I, either in contemporary historical accounts or in historical examples of published women's writing beyond personal diaries. Before this era, knitting appears to have been something that was rarely mentioned. This is likely in part because of the everyday nature of knitting. As Turney explains, "this kind of familiarity means that it defies discussion or contemplation – and tends to be ignored (1)."

The inclusion of women's historic writings in this chapter provides the necessary information to bridge that gap between my experiences and nineteenth-century women's experiences. These writings bring a greater understanding to how knitting acted as leisure and comfort, provided an opportunity to think or relax, and became a political act during World War I. They remind us that the reasons why late nineteenth-century women knit were probably as diverse as they are today.

## Chapter Six:

### Conclusion

*I turn back to my unfinished lace collar. As I have angrily contemplated this dainty piece of knitting, I have thought about the duality of knitting. Why is something so small, so white, so delicate so upsetting? It occurs to me that knitting has always been full of contrasts. The opposition between hard and soft, leisurely yet challenging, frustrating but calming. While modern acts like yarn bombing may work to bring juxtapositions out into the open, such dichotomy between grey concrete cityscape and a bright, soft yarn the complicated nature of knitting is not new -consider the dichotomy between delicate lace knitting and a cold rainy day. I think back to the historic diary entries that I read that describe the warmth of knitting contrasted with cold and rainy weather, mentions of knitting edging in a discussion about difficult children.*

*I started out this project with the question “why knitting?” in an attempt to introduce, explain and justify my work at the outset. However, Twitter’s Pens Knitting Lady reminded me that knitting doesn’t need an explanation or a justification. She reminded me that knitting can be anything - activism, protest, leisure, even domestic caring, but also perhaps most importantly it can just be knitting. I learned from reading nineteenth-century women’s diaries that there are many reasons to knit, and that they can be mundane, and they can be intensely personal and important. I also learned that we have been explaining why we knit for too long. Despite the differences between the years and modes of communication, Pens Knitting Lady, L.M. Montgomery and Lucy Middagh in particular have together had a significant impact on my own understanding of my*

*knitting practice. Whether I turn to knitting as a calming activity, to relax, combat stress or just because I want to, I will have these women come to mind as I knit.*

*I know why I knit; every knitter knows why they knit, and it may change from day to day. We know that knitting matters, and that the “why” doesn’t. So now, many pages and stitches later, I want to revisit my opening question again. Why knitting? Maybe I knit to pass time, maybe I knit because I have an urge to create, maybe I knit for activist reasons, maybe I knit as a connection to the past and other women, maybe it is for all of or none of these reasons. Maybe it is because I can spend a sunny afternoon by the harbour knitting a lace shawl, because of hours spent charting out a historic pattern, for when my hand-knit socks are admired when I take my boots off at yoga. When I make my bed and I lay out my pink lace circular blanket as the final flourish. Because of every time my long-distance partner sends me a picture of the cats lounging out on the colourful blanket that I made and left at his house. Working on a challenging project using yarn I bought on vacation. When my dad sent me a picture of the mittens I made him with a hole, and I was excited to know that he’d used them enough to wear them out. Because I like the way I look in my purple tuque. Because of Icelandic sheep and vintage wools from the thrift store. Because of the hand-drawn diagrams in historic pattern books. Shawls and snow days, unfinished and abandoned projects. Thousands of ripped out stitches. Sore wrists and satisfaction, ugly socks and too many scarfs.*

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Contemporary conversations about knitting typically focus on highlighting the difference between generations of knitter, often with a heavy reliance on the trope of the

grandmother knitter. This trope positions younger knitters as more interesting, more politically engaged, and more feminist than their predecessors. It often suggests that younger knitters knit by choice while older knitters knit out of expectation. As I have demonstrated, this stereotype has the potential to misrepresent both generations of knitters as the reasons why knitters knit are complex and bridge generations. This thesis has worked to narrow the divide between generations that other writers created.

For this, I engaged in a study of historic knitting pattern books published in the nineteenth century that were available to Canadian women. By engaging in an autoethnographic project in which I knit a garment from a historic pattern, I sought a deeper understanding of what knitting was like for women living in the nineteenth century. This project raised many questions about knitting materials in particular as I discovered differences between the materials that are available today, in comparison to those available at the time that the patterns were written. The many differences between the way that patterns were written in the late nineteenth century versus today was also highlighted through this project. Although I gained significant knowledge about historic knitting patterns, I still felt a large gap between myself and the actual women who lived and knit in Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

In an effort to learn about women's day to day lives and the role that knitting played, I turned to historic diaries written by women, as well as a poem, and a book chapter. Through this I learned what women had to say for themselves about their knitting practices. I discovered that when it comes to the reasons that women knit, there are many connections between women living in the twenty-first century and those living in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. While contemporary writers may use the phrase

“not your grandmother’s knitting” to describe modern knitting, knitters of all generations knit for similar reasons. These include, comfort, relaxation, productive leisure time, self-reflection and political motivations.

While this thesis has added to the body of literature about knitting, particularly making an addition to the social history of Canadian knitting, there is still much to explore. Through my research I discovered many historical sources – diaries, magazines, knitting pattern books, many of which have been digitized and are available online. While I was able to incorporate several of these sources into my writing, as a whole they remain, in my opinion, under-examined. There is significant work that could be done to bring to light nineteenth-century women’s experiences.

As contemporary writers will undoubtedly continue to write about knitting, it is my hope that we will see a shift in the way that it is done. I would like to see more conversations about knitting that do not rely on creating a divide between younger knitters and older generations in an effort to elevate the younger knitters’ work. I look forward to seeing more research that takes the time to appreciate and recognize the women who have come before us and on whom we have built our own practises. I would also like to see research that does not attempt to separate knitting from the feminine, but rather appreciates and celebrates the pink, and the frilly or lacy knitting, even when it is not associated with an activist project. As I continue to knit, and read about knitting, I anticipate seeing more work that seeks to bridge divides, challenge stereotypes, and bring light to the unrecognized aspects of women’s history.

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