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Knitting as Dissent: Female Resistance in America Since the Revolutionary War

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Primarily a feminine duty or pastime with granny connotations, knitting actually has a deliciously rich history of political subversion—and it's surfacing again in the new millennium with young generations. Historically, knitting has been an occupation of necessity—work, not leisure—with the dual purpose of clothing one's family and possibly training for future employment or extra income. These skills of discipline and obedience were instrumental in America's War for Independence, when women's knitting allowed the colonies to gain critical independence from the tyranny of imported British goods even before they gained political independence as a country. Women's knitting skills would be (falsely) touted as a necessity in future American wars, albeit under more aggressive national guidance, complete with catchy propaganda to encourage participation. In post-industrial twentieth century America, knitting's popularity and necessity waxed and waned, and the reasons women picked up needles morphed, but political and social dissent remained a repeating—not to mention overlooked—motivation.

It has been speculated that knitting has always been women's work because it was an activity compatible with breastfeeding and childcare in that it could be interrupted and resumed easily.¹ Girls learned to spin and knit at very young ages, and then did so continuously to keep up with the time- and labor-consuming demand of clothing their families. These skills were put to the test in the years leading up to the Revolutionary War. Spinning, sewing, and knitting circles existed primarily as social work gatherings in America's early colonial period, until Britain imposed increasingly hefty taxes on her colonies, culminating with the Stamp Act of 1765. To discuss the unconstitutionality of the Stamp Act and to prove they could and would purchase no more British goods until it was repealed, women's "spinning bees" were restructured as "spinning meetings," political demonstrations where women would compete to spin, weave, and knit the most fiber goods, to compensate for the boycotted material. Often hosted by local ministers thus "sacralizing daily work,"² spinning and knitting demonstrations became well-attended, festive spectator sports that the men of the community would observe and cheer. In stark contrast to solitary domestic knitting, spinning parties could have as many as ninety participants (though they were generally closer to fifty).³ Those industrious women who could clothe themselves and their families in homespun and recycled garments from head to toe were deemed "patriots"—a term usually reserved for men.

Though patriotism was an important component—even the impetus—of these spinning gatherings, only 6 of 46 American meetings documented by Laurel Thatcher Ulrich between 1768 and 1770 (30 in 1879 alone)⁴ actually described themselves as members of the explicitly political Daughters of Liberty—"Young women" was the usual designation," Ulrich writes, "though terms like 'Daughters of Industry,'

¹ Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: the First 20,000 Years* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 29.

² Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, ed., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: the University Press of Virginia, 1989), 221.

³ Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, "Daughters of Liberty," in *Daughters of Liberty: Religious Women in Revolutionary New England. Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 215.

⁴ *ibid*

‘the fair sex,’ and even ‘noble-hearted Nymphs’ were occasionally used.”⁵ There would be similar puzzling reluctance of women to admit and embrace the political implications in the knitters of the 1960s and ‘70s.

In the years leading up to the Revolution, colonial women gradually became accustomed to clothing their families with homespun and hand-knit textiles, so it was a short leap to providing their men uniforms and combat apparel when America finally went to war with England. Congress appointed a Clothier-General to assess and fulfill the army’s needs for clothing and blankets. The burden of fulfilling these supplies often fell to townships, some of which published names and tallies of knitters and their output to encourage healthy competition and increase production.⁶ Martha Washington, for her part, would meet visitors while knitting stockings for herself and her husband.⁷

In the lowest moments of the war, with especially unfortunate soldiers reportedly going naked, some industrious women would round up blankets, yarn, and worn-out clothing which they would patch and darn, unravel and knit into “new” stockings, shirts, breeches, and blankets. They would often personally transport these upcycled textiles to the front to distribute⁸— as women they were able to slip past the British more easily. Knitting is so cozy and unthreatening that its very execution has been used to cover subversive deeds, though history books rarely include the stories of female characters like “Old Mom Rinker,” who would transport enemy information overheard in her family’s tavern in messages to General George Washington inside her knitting balls of yarn, which she would drop from a high, adjacent mound to the passing troops.⁹

Though they were absolutely critical to the boycott and war effort, women such as Eliza Wilkinson did get rankled about being relegated to domestic participation: “I would not wish that we should meddle in what is unbecoming female delicacy, but surely we have sense enough to give our opinions... without being reminded of our Spinning and household affairs, as the only matters we are capable of thinking, or speaking of, with justness or propriety.”¹⁰

In *Women in the Age of the American Revolution*, Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert wrote, “Women had been embedded in the military aspects of the war against Britain, but their roles were politically invisible.... On the other hand, women were visible, even central, to the Revolution and to the patriot effort to transform political culture... crucial if the Americans were to sustain the claim that they were doing more than refusing to pay their fair share of taxes. Americans claimed both implicitly and explicitly that they were creating a new kind of politics, a democracy in which the people acted as constituent power in which every adult citizen had an obligation to play an intelligent and thoughtful role in shaping the nation's destiny.”¹¹

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 32.

⁷ *ibid*, 39

⁸ *ibid*, 33

⁹ *ibid*, 37

¹⁰ Eliza Wilkinson, “Eliza Wilkinson to Miss M—P—,” in *Letters of Eliza Wilkinson*, no date, excerpted, Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 61.

¹¹ Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Women in the Age of the American Revolution* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 17.

The success of America's boycott of British textiles and goods was dependent upon women's endorsement and active contributions, no small feat as it significantly increased women's workload.

The Victorian era was somewhat of a regression for political knitting, which was once again reduced to charity work by well-off women with excess time; however, there were exceptions. During the Civil War (1861 – 65), in the fall of 1864, Sojourner Truth, proto-feminist and Civil Rights activist, traveled to refugee camps of freed people where she demonstrated sewing, knitting, and cooking to teach people skills that might allow them to be financially independent. Victorian activist Clorinda Nichols managed to become a member of Kansas's first state constitutional convention where she demanded expanded women's rights—paradoxically deemed an “unwomanly” pursuit—even while she “tended strictly to her knitting” during the convention.¹² In her book *No Idle Hands*, Anne Macdonald hypothesized that Nichols' predilection for this traditional feminine pastime perhaps tricked male members into “underestimating her crusade for more liberal property rights for women.”¹³

In the decades bookending the turn-of-the-20th-century, the reformist settlement movement addressed health problems in growing slums of the larger world cities such as London, New York, and Chicago. At New York City's Henry Street Settlement, social reformer Lillian Wald fed, nursed, and educated Jewish immigrant children, where knitting was taught as both a domestic craft and as means to make money.¹⁴ In spite of efforts by these organizations, knitting among the young fell out of favor in the revolutionary 1920s after American women won the right to vote. The Depression of the '30s, and subsequent wars, revived the practice.

Though wars were certainly not waged specifically to tether women back to feminine pursuits like knitting, they were exploited as convenient opportunities to tap into women's desire for patriotic acknowledgement. To wit, women's historical ability to combine female handiwork duties with war organization was called into play in the first and second World Wars, even as women took over men's industrial jobs too. The Red Cross led government-sponsored knitting initiatives, asking women to “express with your knitting needles that sympathetic love for those [war refugees] who suffer”¹⁵ to keep American troops warm abroad by producing socks, mufflers, sweaters, and the more disturbing amputee stump covers and gauze bandages. Though these items could be more quickly and efficiently produced by industrial methods by this time, mass media including the American government and periodicals patronizingly implied mass-produced goods actually deprived women of meaningful work. To wit, on January 22, 1942, the *New York Times* hyperbolically declared:

“The propaganda effect of hand knitting cannot be estimated in terms of hard cash, but it is considerable.... A helmet for a flying cadet, made by some devoted woman in a small town far from the war, is sure to arouse interest in the navy or Air Force among the friends of the woman doing the knitting. And she herself feels that she has an active part in this vast conflict; she is not useless, although she can do nothing else to help win the war.”

Likewise, ubiquitous “Knitting for victory” posters were pointedly aimed at women, such as “Remember Pearl Harbor—Purl Harder,” and on November 24, 1941, *Life* magazine prompted: “To the

¹² Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 143

¹³ *ibid*, 143

¹⁴ Lela Nargi, ed., *Knitting Through It: Inspiring Stories for Times of Trouble* (St. Paul, MN: Voyageur Press, 2008), 27.

¹⁵ *Potomac Division Bulletin*, Supplement, February 21, 1919, excerpted, Anne L. Macdonald, *No Idle Hands: The Social History of American Knitting* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 240.

great American question ‘What can I do to help the war effort?’ the commonest answer yet found is ‘Knit.’” An avid knitter herself, Eleanor Roosevelt launched the World War II patriotic knitting fad at a Knit for Defense tea in 1941, and was frequently photographed with knitting in her lap. Meanwhile, “Few at home thought to knit for the women who served as WAVES (Women Accepted For Volunteer Emergency Service), WACS (Women’s Army Corps), and WASPS (Women Airforce Service Pilots). They were not actively fighting and they were women, so it was assumed by many knitters that if they needed knitwear they could knit it themselves. The push was knitting for “The Boys,” the men on active duty.”¹⁶

A lull in knitting popularity followed the post-war decades, but in the radical, feminist ‘60s and ‘70s, knitting’s role remained contested, as both reclamation of feminine history and pride, and a symbol of historical and female subjugation. Second-wave feminists generally viewed knitting as a symbol of women’s oppression: work that bound women to their homes and occupied them in invisible, unrewarded labor. This refusal to acknowledge the empowering and political aspects of knitting in the ‘60s and ‘70s echoed the equally puzzling reluctance of colonial women who refused to name their politically motivated knitting groups with explicitly political names. Perversely in the name of feminism, many women willfully rejected the importance and value of women’s knitting precisely because it had always been a dominantly female activity. In her thesis “Unraveling Myths: Knitting and the Impact of Feminism During the 1960s and 1970s,” Tobi Voight found that, even among women who now chose to knit recreationally, “many... did not feel the feminist movement influenced their decision to knit. Knitting, they repeated, over and over, was a personal choice, while feminism was a public political movement. Most of the knitters failed to see a correlation between the two.”¹⁷

Editor of the feminist magazine *Bust* and author of *Stitch ‘n’ Bitch*, Debbie Stoller wrote, “...all those people who looked down on knitting—and housework, and housewives—were not being feminist at all. In fact, they were being anti-feminist, since they seemed to think that only those things that men did, or had done, were worthwhile.”¹⁸ The feminist contradiction continued: women knitters seemingly must be bound by patriarchy, but even if they choose to knit for pleasure, it is not deemed worthwhile.

After a handcraft slump in the 1980s, there has been a youth-driven revival of yarn arts in recent decades, a statement against mass production and reclamation of women’s crafts. In *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art*, Maria Elena Buszek argued that:

“...activism involving knitting are all connected to a shifting economy that has eviscerated the textile industry in North America and Europe, in turn creating conditions ripe for a revival of crafting practice.... Only by making these links can the trivialization of women’s work that leads to seeing radical knitting as only radical in form be avoided.... Further, because globalization and capitalism affect differently across lines of gender... the work of activist knitting and other craft offers a rich promise....”¹⁹

Activist crafters—labeled “craftivists” since the War on Terror post-9/11—have begun incorporating

¹⁶ Paula Becker, “Knitting for Victory – World War II,” last modified August 19, 2004, http://www.historylink.org/index.cfm?DisplayPage=output.cfm&File_Id=5722.

¹⁷ Tobi M. Voight, “Unraveling Myths: Knitting and the Impact of Feminism During the 1960s and 1970s” (MA diss., SUNY College at Oneonta, 2006).

¹⁸ Debbie Stoller, *Stitch ‘n’ Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2003), 7.

¹⁹ Maria Elena Buszek, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 199-200.

large-scale knit and crocheted pieces into political public art statements. Knitting is a component of the DIY movement where people—typically women—reclaim old-fashioned skills to rebel against “the sleek, the mass-produced, the male.”²⁰ There continues to be a clash between those who view knitting as necessarily feminist, anti-capitalist, and radical, and those who read it as *antifeminist* in that it is a marker of feminine repression as relegated to domestic drudgery. In her article “Nesting Urge Won’t Remove Cause of Fears” from the March 23, 2003 edition of *The Charlotte Observer*, Tonya Jameson argued that the post-9/11 knitting resurrection is not subversive at all: “Too many sisters fought to free women from aprons and mops for me to voluntarily become Aunt Bee and pretend it’s by choice.... Instead of fighting for real control, like lobbying legislators for patients’ rights, we’re playing Holly Homemaker.”

The Revolutionary Knitting Circle (RKC) directly repudiates these concerns. Founded in 2000, the RKC promotes anti-capitalist and environmental policies via non-violent knitting protests. Promoting local sustainability to achieve independence from questionable corporate or disadvantageous government trade agreements, the RKC directly references the self-sufficiency achieved by women knitters during the War for Independence. In addition to organizing knitting events clearly inspired by colonial spinning meetings, members of the RKC regularly meet with local, regional and national government representatives to discuss political issues. Their call for action is reminiscent of Marxist rhetoric, empowering the disenfranchised: “The G8 claims to be a gathering of democratic leaders. The Revolutionary Knitting Circle proclaims that they are anything but. The G8 is a meeting of the wealthiest of the world to decide the fates of the vast majority of the world who are in no way represented by these ‘leaders.’”²¹

Debbie Stoller of *Bust* magazine referenced familiar feminist rally cries like “take back the night” when coining new craftivist ones like “take back the knit”—reclaiming pride in a feminine craft as part of a strong female tradition, while encouraging knitters to do so thoughtfully and publicly. Stoller organized public knit-ins to give visibility to the act, removing it from its domestic exile, and encouraged a new generation of post-feminist women to acknowledge there can be personal satisfaction derived for the knitter—it is not all tedium and toiling.²²

“Yarn bombing” or “yarn graffiti” are yarn installations that have cropped up since the 1990s. They may beautify public spaces and add a touch of the handmade to our industrialized environments, if temporarily—drab urban landscapes are the usual sites. More overtly political yarn bombers may literally blanket military tanks or relevant statues; for example, Marianne Jørgensen organized a collaborative project to stitch a pink tea cozy over a combat tank to protest Denmark's involvement in the Iraq war in 2006, contrasting the threatening weaponry with the comforting safety of a woolly domestic object. Jørgensen wrote:

“Unsimilar to a war, knitting signals home, care, closeness and time for reflection. Ever since Denmark became involved in the war in Iraq I have made different variations of pink tanks.... For me, the tank is a symbol of stepping over other people’s borders. When it is covered in pink, it becomes completely unarmed and

²⁰ Debbie Stoller, *Stitch ‘n Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2003), 10.

²¹ “Revolutionary Knitting Circle Call to Action: Global Knit-In,” last accessed 2002, <http://g8.activist.ca/calltoaction/knit.html> in *The Culture of Knitting*, Joanne Turney (Oxford: Berg, 2009), 204.

²² Debbie Stoller, *Stitch ‘n Bitch: The Knitter’s Handbook* (New York: Workman Publishing, 2003), 9.

it loses its [*sic*] authority. Pink becomes a contrast in both material and color when combined with the tank.”²³

Lisa Anne Auerbach’s *Steal This Sweater* (an homage to Abbie Hoffman’s anarchist Yippie manifesto *Steal This Book* of 1971) similarly provides knitting patterns for leftist political message garments, such as “Body Count Mittens” that list Iraq War death toll counts and accompanying dates within a traditional graphic intarsia motif—the result is two slightly mismatched mittens, as the body count number increases in the time it takes to knit the second mitten.

The Little Red Sweaters Project invites participants worldwide to knit and contribute a tiny red sweater for each soldier killed in Iraq since the U.S. war in 2003. By simply changing the scale, this project voids the usefulness of sweaters knit for living soldiers by women during the American Revolution—just as the Industrial Revolution technically voided the need to hand-knit sweaters for troops at all.

KnitKnit zine’s Sabrina Gschwandtner’s *Wartime Knitting Circle* installation combined nine machine-knitted blankets as a backdrop to a space where the public could work collaboratively on wartime knitting projects while discussing the Iraq war (with diverse political perspectives). The wall-hung blankets further referenced knitting’s history by depicting images of knitting during past wars.

These works mark a definitive change: knitting is becoming an “...increasingly mass performative activity, involving public displays of knitting, engaging new or non-traditional participants... and, secondly, as a form of social engagement aimed to instigate political, cultural and social change.”²⁴ 19th century craft movements, specifically the Arts and Crafts Movement, were based upon the belief that “creative work would improve the environment, lead to an equitable system of the distribution of wealth and generate psychologically fulfilled peoples. In this sense, craft—creative work—was about the empowering of individual workers, about the political control of the work situation.”²⁵ Knitting has been a celebrated feminine craft as well as a method of continued female subjugation. Though there has always been contention around continuing a hobby that has been inextricably entwined with the female role as mother and domestic provider, artists like Lisa Anne Auerbach, Sabrina Gschwandtner, and Marianne Jørgensen suggest that knitting is being repositioned as a political tool for empowering female craftivists, a much-belated extension of colonial women’s work during America’s Revolutionary War. It is significant that this latest surge in knitting interest has not coincided with government-funded pro-knitting propaganda, which will hopefully give it an extended life and even more radical trajectory. Contrary to its innocuous grannie associations, knitting can *politicize*.

²³ Marianne Jørgensen, “A Tank Wrapped in Pink,” accessed August 2012, <http://www.marianneart.dk/>.

²⁴ Joanne Turney, *The Culture of Knitting* (Oxford: Berg, 1994), 203.

²⁵ Peter Dormer, ed., *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), 34.

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