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Rosemary L. Sallee

*Candidate*

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American Studies

*Department*

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This dissertation is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication.

*Approved by the Dissertation Committee:*

Rebecca Schreiber, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, American Studies, University of New Mexico

---

Michael L. Trujillo, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, American Studies, University of New Mexico

---

Ronda Brulotte, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Anthropology, University of New Mexico

---

Joyce Ice, Ph.D.

Director, Museum of Art, West Virginia University

---

**FEMMAGE AND THE DIY MOVEMENT:  
FEMINISM, CRAFTY WOMEN, AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER  
PERFORMANCE**

**BY**

**ROSEMARY L. SALLEE**

A.B. American Culture, Vassar College, 1992  
M.A. American Studies, University of New Mexico, 2003

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy  
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# **FEMMAGE AND THE DIY MOVEMENT: FEMINISM, CRAFTY WOMEN, AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER PERFORMANCE**

By

Rosemary L. Sallee

AB American Culture, Vassar College, 1992  
MA American Studies, University of New Mexico, 2003  
Ph.D, American Studies, University of New Mexico, 2016

## **ABSTRACT**

Through a variety of lenses, contemporary crafting is examined as a complex and contradictory gender and class performance that serves as a form of communication among women that both enables and contains oppositional and gender role explorations. Crafting is created through myriad texts which transform into an individual form of expression, a societal spectacle, a fashion trend, a subculture, an addiction, a coping mechanism, an oppositional act, and a means of healing both physically and emotionally.

This study investigates how the objects women make and collect reflect and define crafters' negotiations between personal desires and public personas, help them voice their own identities, tell their own stories, and connect with – or distance themselves from – other generations of “crafty women.” The role of objects and their multiple meanings in individuals' lives is examined. Specifically, how objects narrate gender identity and debates, are evidence of resistance to dominant gender and class narratives, enable acceptance of economic and gender norms, and incorporate aesthetics and consumption.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### CHAPTER I - From Retail Therapy to Apartment Therapy: Crafting Narratives About Gender and Class

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <i>Introduction</i>   | 1  |
| <i>Key Scholarly Texts and Theoretical Approaches</i>                             | 7  |
| <i>Threads of Change? Marxism, Politics and the Do-it-Yourself (DIY) Movement</i> | 12 |
| <i>From the “Terrain of Culture” to “Aspects of Selfhood”: Objects in Private</i> | 18 |
| <i>Methodology and Demographics</i>   | 23 |
| <i>Connecting Threads: Themes and Leitmotifs, Different Faces of Crafting</i>     | 32 |

### CHAPTER II - “It’s not immoral, illegal or fattening, and it’s cheaper than a psychologist!” Crafters, Collecting, and the Pleasure and Pathology of the “Stash”

|   |    |
|---|----|
| <i>Introduction</i>   | 41 |
| <i>Understanding the Collection: Theory and Practice</i>        | 46 |
| <i>“Body and Soul Together”: Crafting, Class, and Tradition</i> | 51 |
| <i>Crafting and Communities of Consumption</i>                  | 61 |
| <i>“Fables” and “Fabrics”: Crafters and Anti-Materialism</i>    | 64 |
| <i>Conclusion</i>   | 70 |

### CHAPTER III - Scrapping Feminism? Scrapbooking as Consumption, Collection and Construction

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <i>Introduction</i>  | 74 |
| <i>The Scrapbook as Consumption, Collection and Construction</i>             | 77 |
| <i>The Hierarchy of Public and Private, and the Politics of High and Low</i> | 82 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <i>Scrapbook as “Femme”: Feminist Possibilities</i>                                       | 86  |
| <i>Scrapbooking and the Single Girl: A Personal Archive</i>                               | 92  |
| <i>Sentimental Indoctrination: Scrapbooking as Public Archive</i>                         | 95  |
| <i>Conclusion</i>   | 102 |
| <b>CHAPTER IV - Stitch–n–Bitch: Conversations about Gender, Spectacle, and Opposition</b> |     |
| <i>Introduction</i>   | 107 |
| <i>Generational Debates and Class Dynamics</i>  | 111 |
| <i>Objects and Opposition</i>   | 113 |
| <i>Crafting as Debate: Gender Roles and “Verbal Art” Among Second Wave Quiltmakers</i>    | 118 |
| <i>The Visual Language of Opposition: Inserting the Female into a Male World</i>          | 123 |
| <i>“Aspects of Selfhood”: Personal Aesthetics, Identity &amp; Biography</i>               | 129 |
| <i>Femininity, Sexuality &amp; the Body</i>   | 131 |
| <i>Conclusion</i>   | 134 |
| <b>CHAPTER V - Consuming Passions: Crafting, Cataclysm and Cultural Memory</b>            |     |
| <i>Introduction</i>   | 140 |
| <i>Piecemakers and Peacemakers: Quilting, Cataclysm, and Cultural Memory</i>              | 148 |
| <i>The “Deluge”: Technologies of Private Memory</i>                                       | 159 |
| <i>From Apartment Therapy to Retail Therapy: Consuming Passions</i>                       | 164 |
| <i>Conclusion: A New Normal</i>   | 171 |



|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>CONCLUSION - A “Cosy [sic] and Unhurried Rebellion”:<br/>Crafting and the “Darker Corners” of the Material</b> | 175 |
| <i>Recurring Themes and Critical Viewpoints</i>   | 178 |
| <i>Applications for Practitioners, and Areas for Further<br/>    Research</i>                                     | 188 |
| <b>FIGURES</b>  | 194 |
| <b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b>   | 206 |

## CHAPTER I

### From Retail Therapy to Apartment Therapy: Crafting Narratives about Gender and Class

*As many Americans were spending Christmas night with their families, Olek, a New York based artist was near Wall Street, freezing her fingers to the bone while outfitting the famous "Charging Bull" into a giant knitted cozy. Why did she feel compelled to crochet a sweater for the brass Bull? Partly, it was because of the economy and partly because she was homesick. "I wanted to make it for all those people who couldn't make it to their families and for those people who don't have coats and don't have any money." ... like much 'guerrilla art,' Olek's work was not on display for long. She says the caretaker of the park tore it apart early in the morning. Still, Olek remains optimistic about the future. "I really hope that I can do it again. This crocheted cover represents my best wishes to all of us..." (Wollen, 2011) (Figures 1 and 2).*

#### **Introduction**

Over the years it has occupied Wall Street, the hulking brass bull symbolizing stock market success has likely been dressed and decorated in a variety of ways; the stealthy dress-up of this oversized symbol of male power and American capitalism with a bright, even tacky, hand-crocheted sweater early Christmas morning 2010 is the perfect visual metaphor to begin the conversation that will become this project (Figure 1). Starting with this image of contemporary crafting, quite literally wrapped around a sculptural symbol of American economic power and male potency, this project examines and unpacks narrative threads about gender, class and tradition that are woven through the modern American capitalist "culturescape," to borrow a term from folklorist Jeannie Banks Thomas (2003, 2). Olek's "yarnbombing" of the Wall Street bull is an embodiment of the way that crafts and crafting play a prominent visual, economic and emotional role in early millennial society. Through this project, I seek to unpack crafts and

crafting as an individual pursuit, a traditional behavior, and a visual presence in American expressive culture and media to explore how crafting visualizes a conversation among women.

In a variety of ways and through a variety of lenses, I argue that Contemporary crafting is a complex and contradictory gender and class performance, one that serves as a form of communication among women, a language that both enables and contains oppositional and gender role explorations. As a language has specific words that shape not only how humans express themselves, but also *what* they say, crafting is at once a means of expression that enable women to express emotions, connect with other women, cope with stress and frustration, and also a means of containing and delimiting their expressions of gender roles and narratives.

Associating women's art, and women's work, with language and self-expression has a long history; Judith Butler's notions of gender as performance offer a point of departure for exploring the ways that crafting is performative and communicative. She argues that her "view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts ... the gendered stylization of the body" (Butler 1999, 205). I argue that crafting is just such a "sustained set of acts," clearly a "gendered stylization," through which women perform class and gender. Susan Pearce, a museums and collecting scholar, also draws parallels between language and material culture, "The ability to make things and the ability to say

things – two closely intertwined facilities – stand at the root of human culture” (Pearce 1995, 443).

Crafting as performance is a means by which women create a female space within a male dominated culture. Art curator Annette di Meo Carozzi notes that, “it is part of the appeal of yarn bombing: the surprising juxtaposition of something that is clearly personal, labor-intensive and handmade in an urban, industrial environment” (Wollen, 2011). “Street art and graffiti are usually so male dominated,” commented Jessie Hemmons, an experienced knitter who yarn bombed the Rocky statue outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art. “Yarn bombing is more feminine. It’s like graffiti with grandma sweaters” (Hemmons cited in Wollen 2011). As Carozzi suggests, the fine art world continues to incorporate craft motifs and women’s traditional arts in a way that we have grown accustomed to.

The behaviors upon which I focus in this project are those of the non-professional, or sometimes semi-professional artist, since the line between the two are increasingly blurred. Analyzing crafting through the lens of play, rather than as a form of work, is a more useful way for me to explore the ways it carries meaning for women. Marybeth Stalp, a sociologist who studied quilters as consumers and collectors, argues that quilts are complex objects with many meanings; looking at the process of quilting is even more nuanced and multivalent (Stalp 2008, 4). I argue that crafting is similarly complex, and its appeal is both “personal, labor-intensive and handmade” (Wollen, 2011) within

the high-tech urban environment. Like Stalp, I also focus more on the process of crafting than the product, but the artworks and other end products are of interest.

Olek's work, which she terms "art" (she dislikes the term "yarn bombing") may be read in a variety of ways, and tells many stories about isolation, compassion, transgression, "vandalism," a feminizing of the male space of business, finance, and the urban world, the drama of the "Great Recession" of 2008, and a metaphor of the handmade. Her performance – the act of knitting, the stealthy graffiti techniques – is as meaningful as the visual product it produces. The mischievous project was also, undoubtedly, a savvy piece of self-promotion for professional artist Olek. She creates commissioned art furniture for individual buyers, crocheting covers for chairs, stools and the like, and for larger institutions who commission her to crochet covers for larger objects and installations, such as locomotives, walls, and even an entire apartment. Her crocheted sweater embraces the bull – also a potent male symbol (interestingly, the bull itself is a piece of art erected without permission from the city of New York) of Wall Street, American capitalism, and prosperity. Crafts are being used by women to transgress, critique, and also, in a very concrete way in the case of Olek's bull sweater, to embrace capitalism, technology, economic power and prosperity. As Jessie Hemmons comment suggests, perhaps the most important intervention of yarn bombers and the spectrum of crafters whose stories make up this project is perhaps to insert and weave threads of women's experience into a very male cultural space.

Crafting is not an idiosyncratic trend, but rather, it “grows out of the larger D.I.Y. movement, which seeks to resurrect traditional handicrafts ‘more typically associated with grandmothers, like knitting, canning, gardening and even raising chickens’” (Carlozzi cited in Wollen, 2011). Crafting, in the minds of many, is philosophically linked to the slow food movement, which shares its values of the handmade and locally grown over the mass produced. I argue that crafting is not in the midst of “resurrection;” rather, I assert that it never really died; crafts and crafting have a history of gaining and declining in prominence depending on societal whims, needs, and crises, and to a variety of ends. Pastimes and products that were private activities for 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century women are, much as they did during the hippie revolution of the 1960s and 70s, appearing in public in a significant way (Figure 3). Not only is crafting happening, but women are talking about it and performing it in public in ways that are political and pointed. The internet age has brought new technologies that continue to change ideas of handmade; and emerging forms of communication allow crafters to build community and engage in collaboration in new ways.

Crafting is being created through myriad texts, as well as being an individual form of expression. It is also a societal spectacle, a fashion trend, a subculture, an addiction, a coping mechanism, an oppositional act, and a means of healing both physically and emotionally. In this project, I investigate how the objects women make and collect reflect and define crafters’ negotiations between personal desires and public personas, helping them voice their own identities, tell their own stories, and connect with – or distance themselves from – other

generations of “crafty women.” I examine the role of objects and their multiple meanings in individuals’ lives; how objects narrate gender identity and debates, are evidence of resistance to dominant gender and class narratives, as well as an acceptance of economic and gender norms, and incorporate aesthetics and consumption. Central to my research is the work of feminist scholars such as Erica Rand, Linda Pershing, and Margo DeMello, who explore the ways individuals use material culture to communicate, and narrate their struggles and experiences, whether in play or in protest. In this project, I will explore how a variety of different approaches to gender and material culture scholarship; through folklore, popular culture and other fields, illuminate how women’s relationship to objects reflects and constructs their internal narratives and external identities.

This project focuses on a population of white, middle-class women between 25 and 60. Different chapters will focus on slightly different subgroups within this population, including young women, feminists, mothers, and different regional groups, including women who are expert practitioners in one medium as well as those who dabble or experiment with many. My dissertation forefronts questions of class, but with ideas of intersectionality shaping conversations about women, feminism and society; this project must address the ways that class is defined and intertwined with other categories, most notably race, and is also a function of white privilege and spectatorship. While this population may be mostly white and middle-class, important perspectives and examples from practitioners of other groups have been important to include, as the “histories” of crafts and

crafting vary greatly among racial and class groups. Just as there is no singular “woman’s” voice, there is not a universal “crafter” subject, and even mostly white groups contain diversity and polyvocality that may be difficult to perceive on the surface.

### ***Key Scholarly Texts and Theoretical Approaches***

The objects women make are sources of political discourse, whether narrating the effects of dominant forces or showing agency and opposition in the face of the pressures of mass culture. My project will explore how a variety of fields, including folklore, popular culture and material culture scholarship, illuminate this process. Robin D.G. Kelley stresses that, “terms like ‘folk,’ ‘authentic,’ and ‘traditional’ are socially constructed categories” (Kelley 1992, 1402). Rather than emphasize a strict delineation between these fields, it is more useful to recognize the similarities in the way they work. These disciplines examine objects and the ways they occupy the interstices between producer power and consumer agency, between the handmade and the mass-produced, between the public and the private. Many of the scholars and texts that are most central to my analysis, including Erica Rand, Marita Sturken, Margo DeMello, Susan Stewart, and Jeannie Banks Thomas, call upon all three of these fields to speak eloquently about objects, gender and creativity.

Central to my project is analyzing the ways that the “folk” and the “popular” aspects of women’s crafting interconnect, diverge and define each other. I look to an approach that conceives of both fields as central to the study of expressive culture, full of fluid and even precarious intersections and contradictions in the



tradition of Joan Radner, Michael Owen Jones, Simon Bronner, and Linda Pershing. Folklore scholarship has traditionally addressed informal culture, encompassing what Robert Armstrong terms “affecting presences:” music, art, aesthetics, material culture, and the myriad other playful and performative aspects of everyday life. Art is my principal concern, and rather than emphasizing distinctions between “folk” and “fine,” again I find it most useful to look to the common aspects of both. The most important differences for my purposes are principally semantic ones, including attention to the ways that that which is defined as “art” has had societal preferences not granted to other forms. Approaching these fields and their perspectives in conversation will illuminate the articulations of material culture, identity and class in ways that working in just one of them cannot. Putting multiple disciplines in conversation on the topic of objects and their meanings can create a polyvocal *assemblage* of images and impressions about how objects work toward public and private ends, and what meanings they may hold for individuals and the societies they inhabit.

The contemporary folklore scholarship that is most important to my research takes into account the communicative and expressive aspects of mass culture; folklorists have found tradition and continuity among Internet users, rave participants or university students, tracing how these individuals find public forums for internal creativity and expression. In this project, I examine how scholars use material culture as a site for examining both the “private” worlds of gender and identity, as well as how they become public and thus political. Folklorist Linda Pershing addresses the synergies between popular imagery and

folk forms in quilting, examining both the historical and contemporary interconnections between the folk and the popular. Pershing analyzes a quilt made by a group of Texas quilters that constitutes a satirical, feminist commentary on the classic, somewhat cloying, “Sunbonnet Sue” quilt pattern, which sprang from “Sunbonnet baby” illustrations that became a turn-of-the-century aesthetic trend that found its way into both folk and popular forms. By emphasizing how two distinct fields are intertwined, she reinforces the feminist possibilities of a “folk” form, arguing for the relevance of and agency found in quilting, which can retain traditional values while incorporating “popular” themes.

Aspects of popular culture scholarship also inform my research, principally texts that focus on producer/consumer relationships, and the ways consumers participate, negotiate, and transgress the “public” messages and pressures of mass culture in their private lives. Erica Rand notes that popular culture can underscore how consumers use material culture – Barbie dolls specifically – to analyze and transform a purchased object into a sign of personal identity and even transgression. Rand’s approach echoes the classic feminist mantra, “the personal is political.” Her personal, even intimate illustrations of the ways that gender, race, and class shape and are shaped by consumers’ play with Barbie give insights for the reasons why individuals collect, display, and use material culture of all kinds. Rand’s research incorporates both a popular culture emphasis on the producer messages surrounding material culture with an

ethnographic focus on how real individuals use cultural products to transgress, or reinforce, dominant narratives about gender and society.

I leverage the work of other scholars from outside the fields of popular culture and folklore in my research, including cultural studies scholars who combine ethnographic research with critical analysis of leisure, play, and aesthetics. Anthropologist Margo DeMello analyzes the articulations of class, aesthetics and personal adornment, envisioning tattoos as cultural products that both transgress and reinforce hegemonic power. DeMello argues that middle-class standing is at once confirmed and rejected by an individual's choice of tattoo: the act of wearing a tattoo rebels against middle-class values and aesthetics, yet sophisticated tribal or Asian patterns mark wearers as middle-class: affluent, educated and artistically "in the know." So, by an act of "rebellion" against middle-class aesthetics, the individual is actually confirming and reinforcing his or her own class status. For the GenX population, DeMello argues, their acts of resistance show their discomfort with the homogeneity of consumption, technology, and mass media, seeking a more authentic and "modern primitive" aesthetic than contemporary consumer society promises. DeMello's work illuminates the tensions between societal power and personal aesthetics, while literature scholar Janice Radway envisions personal choice, activism, and resistance in a different way through analysis of romance novel enthusiasts. While she notes that reading is an isolated activity that might actually keep women from coming together to solve problems, she argues that romance readers see the act of reading as "combative and compensatory," and

view the time that women take for themselves; refusing to give in to demanding spouses, families, and domestic responsibility, as a form of resistance. This “combative” activity is ambiguous in nature; if feminist scholars would like for women’s oppositional behavior to lead to activism and change, Radway argues that romance reading has the potential to disarm and deflect women’s oppositional impulses as well. DeMello and Radway both speak to the ways playful, pleasurable expression, whether adorning oneself with tattoos or relaxing with a juicy novel, has potential for both opposition to and acceptance of societal norms.

Considering how to summarize my approach, I borrow a concept leveraged by feminist artist Miriam Schapiro and folklorist Linda Pershing, to create a “femmage” (feminine / feminist + assemblage / image) with texts, to juxtapose scholarship from folklore, popular culture, anthropology, literature, and other fields to form a multi-layered, multiplicitous image of women’s creativity, and explore what is at stake for feminism when they use their copious resources and energies in this way. I seek to dispel romantic notions about women’s work, challenging notions that traditional forms such as scrapbooking, knitting, and quilting were ever “pure” folk activities made by women who were isolated from a male-dominated world, and who were unable to assert their own political opinions, or participate as consumers in the marketplace. I argue that crafts, like any other art forms, have always incorporated and responded to the popular culture, economic atmosphere and political sentiments of the creators’ times. Women are and always have been active participants in political speech and

action, whether these activities emerge in the form of written texts or material culture. Robin D.G. Kelley complicates the nature of folk culture, moving away from notions of pure, 'authentic' folklore, critiquing how Levine's interpretations fail to flesh out "the degree to which 'folk' culture – especially during the past century – is actually *bricolage*, a cutting, pasting, and incorporating of various cultural forms that then become categorized in a racially or ethnically coded aesthetic hierarchy" (Kelley 1992, 1402). In short, I feel that the type of activism and agency I find in crafting, rather than being a "new" product of a "resurgence" in crafting, has always been a part of women's traditional artwork.

***Threads of Change? Marxism, Politics and the Do-it-Yourself (DIY) Movement***

Notions of the handmade and debates about making things, are front and center in post-9/11 society that is still recovering from the economic crisis of the past 8 years. Women's creativity is not just spurred by internal needs and desires, it responds to and resonates with larger societal issues, movements and debates. Michael Pollan, a noted author and journalist who has championed the slow food movement, joins a chorus of voices (including Mark Frauenfelder, DIY author and journalist) who believe slow food, and the DIY movement in general, is about control. These voices argue that people turn to making things: meals, hats, chicken coops, brewing their own beer, or turning old wooden pallets into furniture, not so much to save money, but because they are tired of being alienated from the rewards of their efforts as workers. In a capitalist society, ostensibly, workers put hours of work into "the system," and they receive the

funds with which to purchase the goods and services they need. This fulfills our immediate economic needs, but not necessarily the emotional ones. The act of making our own sweaters, handmaking gifts and holiday cards, cooking our own food, and perhaps growing it too, is an effort to “buck” the system, take back control from the capitalist corporate machine, and take care of things ourselves. DIY, Pollan and Frauenfelder argue, is our way of reassuring ourselves that we still *can* take care of ourselves and others, including those closest to us: our children, our spouses, and our communities (Namdi and Pollan 2013). Pollan’s passion for food and cooking echoes the responses of many of the women documented in this project who report that their creative efforts, whether in the form of knitting, sewing or other types of crafting, is not only rewarding, but like yoga, is actually therapeutic. Regular creativity is part of coping with everyday life; necessary for reduction of stress. Pollan asserts that it is “as important for our health as regular exercise” (Ibid.). Like the slow food movement, crafting is also a mark of a leisure society; not everyone has the time and finances to cope with stress and alienation through leisure activities such as crafting, or growing and purchasing all organic food, or raising chickens, goats or other livestock for personal enrichment rather than out of economic necessity.

In a capitalist society, objects are visible signs of our relationship to power: economic, social, cultural, and personal. This project is informed by the work of scholars in a variety of fields; perhaps most importantly material culture, popular culture and folklore, who share an interest in the ways objects play a role in power relations. Ian Woodward suggests that humans’ relationship with objects is

troubled; rooted in an activist tradition (Woodward 2007, vi). Material culture studies scholarship owes much to the theories of Karl Marx and Antonio Gramsci, interrogating the class and socioeconomic narratives surrounding people and the objects they make and buy, and examining the connections linking material consumption, alienation, and hegemony. Folklorist José Limón refers to the tradition of Marxist scholarship that informs folklore and other disciplines that examine expressive culture as “Western Marxism,” and he complicates notions of folklore as passive, the outdated “concept of mass, laboring society as a passive victim caught in the grip of an unrelenting hegemony” (Limón 1983, 49). Marx is central to the western scholarly canon, but while his views are impossible to ignore when considering objects and the economic and social contexts where scholars find them, other scholars from the fields of material culture, popular culture, and folklore elaborate on, complicate, and critique Marxist viewpoints in ways that are more valuable for studying the meaning of things.

Understanding women’s relationships to objects, which Ian Woodward terms “the fundamental units of analysis in capitalist society” (Woodward 2007, 36), is a necessary step to help us to understand women’s relationship to power in such a society. If, he notes, that “objects are important for Marx because they represent of fundamental processes of capitalist society: alienation, exploitation and estrangement” (Ibid.). Woodward cautions that Marx discusses material culture “in a way that completely obliterates the possibility for an interpretative or cultural account of the meaning of objects” (Ibid.). If Marx’s analysis is unsatisfying with regards to material culture, many scholars have transformed

Marxist thought into concepts more friendly to a nuanced analysis of objects and power, analyses that better capture the personal significance of objects.

Raymond Williams mitigates the idea of an “unrelenting” hegemony; his analysis of art and culture as it relates to hegemony has made his scholarship a base for many who study expressive culture and creativity. Williams relates hegemony to the whole of a lived experience: “It is in just this recognition of the wholeness of the process that the concept of ‘hegemony’ goes beyond ‘ideology’” (Williams 1977, 108-9). Williams adds,

People using their physical and material resources for what one kind of society specializes to “leisure” and “entertainment” and “art”: all these active experiences and practices, which make up so much of the reality of a culture and its cultural production can be seen as they are ... as elements of a hegemony... to form and be formed from, this whole area of lived experience (Williams 1977, 111).

If Williams implicates cultural production as a site of hegemony, he asserts, “The reality of any hegemony, in the extended and political cultural sense, is that, while by definition it is always dominant, it is never either total or exclusive. At any time, forms of alternative or directly oppositional politics and culture exist as significant elements in the society” (Ibid. 113). Subsequent chapters will address the ways that material culture, specifically crafts and crafting, participates in “alternative or directly oppositional” hegemonies.

Pierre Bourdieu is a Marxist scholar, whose *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, expands on notions of a cultural hegemony and the way that objects participate in this process. Bourdieu argues that taste is a product of culture, and that our “cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-



going, reading, etc.) and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level ... and secondarily to social origin” (Bourdieu 1984,1). He links objects with this realm of cultural practice. “Art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfill a social function of legitimating social differences” (Ibid. 7). Bourdieu suggests that few texts are

...more obviously predisposed to express social differences than the world of luxury goods, and, more particularly, cultural goods, this is because the relationship of distinction is objectively inscribed within it, and is reactivated, intentionally or not, in each act of consumption, through the instruments of economic and cultural appropriation which it requires (1984, 226).

In this project, I examine crafting as consumption; understanding crafts and crafting in the context of luxury and “social differences,” as Bourdieu puts it, is central to my work. Written in 1968, Jean Baudrillard’s *The System of Objects* is another seminal work that redefined how objects have been analyzed in relation to power, using Marx as a starting point. Baudrillard elaborates on Marx’s notion of use value and exchange value, and places emphasis on objects’ societal meanings rather than uses. Like Bourdieu, he addresses “luxury” goods, such as “antiques.” Antiques, like many of the crafted objects studied here, “refer to the past,” and that “gives them an exclusively mythological character. The antique object no longer has any practical application, its role being merely to *signify*” (Baudrillard 1968, 74). Woodward clarifies Baudrillard’s views that, “objects should be studied in terms of their sign value rather than their use or exchange value” (Woodward 2007, 74), by stating that, “we begin to see how Baudrillard gives Marxism a consumption orientation. In fact, in contrast to other Marxist interpretations, Baudrillard makes the radical proposal that it is only

through studying *the opposite of production* that we can understand contemporary capitalism” (Ibid. 75). More importantly, Woodward situates Baudrillard’s work as one of the roots of contemporary material culture scholarship, moving the focus from the activities of consumers to the objects themselves (Ibid. 74).

Objects, Marxist scholarship, power and crafting converge in many of the texts referenced here, and this project examines the ways that consumption, societal power and gender are visible in the things women make and the narratives they tell about the making. Continuing the conversation about class and material culture initiated by the scholars mentioned above, political commentator and satirist David Brooks offers one of the most useful and concrete paradigms for an environment that has led to crafting as an increasingly visible means of expression for middle-class women. The “BoBo” is Brooks’ equivalent to the 1980s term “yuppie,” the “*Bourgeois Bohemian*,” Brooks’ paradigm for understanding the emerging middle class at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Brooks argues that historically, the bourgeoisie and the bohemian element of society have been at odds. He catalogs the middle-class qualities that the bohemians detested: in addition to “their materialism,” the bourgeois were guilty of being “dull, joyless, unimaginative, and conformist” (Brooks 2000, 66). This traditional relationship, Brooks argues, has been upended by the information age, however, ushered in the conflation of the world of ideas (the bohemian) with the world of business (the bourgeois), hence, the emergence of the BoBo, a member of the affluent middle-class elite, who while living a “bourgeois” lifestyle,

also prioritizes bohemian ideals. In a 1960s idealization of bohemian culture from Paul Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*, the bohemian beatniks "had a more pleasant life than the middle class, better food, more comfort, better music", including a relaxed, "good sense" attitude toward sexuality. The bohemian lifestyle was the one "that most people would live if they were allowed to" (Goodman 1968, Brooks 2000, 76).

Brooks' work chronicles the ways the 21<sup>st</sup> century middle class has adopted a bohemian outlook, including a love of fine food and wine, an affinity for handmade tools, furniture and other personal accoutrements, and perhaps most importantly, an aesthetic where wealth and education are proclaimed not with excess, gaud, and bling, but with craftsmanship, quality, and function. Brooks notes that not only is bohemian culture more comfortable and less restrictive than the "dull" bourgeois lifestyle, he also notes how profitable it has become, "If you had taken that idea in 1960 and made it the cornerstone of your investment choices, you would be a billionaire today" (Brooks 2000, 77). Brooks' monograph was published in 2000, and speaks to the types of consumption, class identity and aesthetics that I argue is central to the importance of crafting in the two decades that have followed.

***From the "Terrain of Culture" to "Aspects of Selfhood": Objects in Private***

The previous section focused on how scholars have conceived of objects as having relationships to power; Ian Woodward asserts that Marxist analysis of material culture reflects the "fundamental processes of capitalist society:

alienation, exploitation and estrangement” (Woodward 2007, 36), but he also speaks to objects as agents.

People tend to think it is they who control and direct objects, electing to use them on their own terms... in important ways objects have a type of power over us ... People require objects to understand and perform aspects of selfhood, and to navigate the terrain of culture more broadly (Woodward 2007, vi).

In this project, I examine the ways that objects not only speak to the public “terrain of culture,” they also participate in individuals’ private performances of a variety of “aspects of selfhood.”

I am concerned not only with how crafts and crafting form a societal conversation about class and gender, but also how individual crafters use these objects to explore “aspects of selfhood.” Material culture scholar Daniel Miller’s work is particularly important in exploring the ways objects may be relevant to individuals on a personal level. In his anthology, *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*, he and his contributors address questions of how material culture “matters” in the lives of “everyday” consumers. In his introduction, he critiques structuralist or linguistic models such as Baudrillard’s, approaches that “treat objects as signs but do not account for the degree to which they matter to people” (Miller 1998, 19). Miller argues for the import of adding ethnography to a linguistic analysis of objects, noting that there are areas of the personal that cannot be adequately understood by an analysis of commodities. “Ethnography tends to lead to a much deeper involvement in people’s lives than just what they say about themselves. Ethnography used in material culture also tends to emphasize careful observations of what people actually do and in particular do

with things” (Ibid. 12).

Miller argues that much of what people understand about objects “emerges largely through ethnographic inquiry.” Miller notes that “ethnography” must examine behaviors as well as what informants say about material culture. The essays in *Material Cultures* examine “the differences between what people say and what they do” with objects, trying to probe the delicate territory of understanding how objects “matter” to people who may deny or downplay their significance (Ibid. 19).

Ethnographic field work also plays an important role in my explorations of the feminist and activist possibilities of women’s crafting. Popular culture scholar Erica Rand offers a framework for understanding how material culture is gendered; her research examines what people “say and do” with one particular object – the Barbie doll. In *Barbie’s Queer Accessories*, Rand’s analysis blends ethnography and an examination of the corporate messages that toy conglomerate Mattel puts forth about Barbie and her many “accessories.” Rand argues the importance of examining mass-produced objects like Barbie, stating that “cultural products need political attention. Political battles are fought over and through the manipulation of cultural symbols” (Rand 1995, 5). Her intervention, one that is invaluable to this project, is her assertion that “people also glean their sense of possibility and self-worth partly from available cultural products – objects, narratives, interpretations” (Ibid.). If theorists such as Baudrillard and Bourdieu assign “luxury goods” with special powers of signification and meaning, Rand’s popular culture approach finds no distinction

between “art” and commodified, mass-produced products; the “useful,” or mass-produced object has the same potential for analysis as the “useless” artwork.<sup>1</sup>

Rand’s approach echoes the classic feminist mantra, “the personal is political.”

Her personal, even intimate illustrations of the ways that gender, race, and class shape and are shaped by consumers’ play with Barbie, give insights for the

reasons why individuals collect, display, and use material culture of all kinds.

Rand’s research balances a popular culture emphasis on the producer messages

surrounding material culture with an ethnographic focus on how real individuals

use “cultural” products to transgress, or reinforce, hegemony.

In this project I enlist scholarship that presents a variety of approaches to the analysis of objects and how they illuminate the ambiguous nature of agency

and resistance; if Erica Rand is representative of popular culture scholars who

address these themes, many folklore scholars also speak to the potential of

women’s crafting to both reproduce and disrupt hegemonic notions of gender.

José Limón argues that Marxists view folklore as “collective behaviors whose

fundamental character” is in opposition to the “dominant social order of state

capitalism” (Limón 1983, 34). Other folklorists also see a fluid relationship

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<sup>1</sup> Like Rand, for the purposes of this project, I often downplay distinctions between art, craft and mass-produced objects in favor of their functional similarities. Rand purports to examine Barbie and the “artistic intention” that created her though she acknowledges that “Mattel’s major intention ... ought to be deemed other than artistic; Barbie’s meanings are primarily crafted in the service of product sales” (Ibid. 38). Rand argues against,

...the common distinctions between art and craft, between fine arts and applied arts, and between art and popular culture are underpinned by a false separation between art and capital – and by the idea that, the more artists ‘do it for the money,’ the less they are ‘expressing’ the special vision that makes them artists (Rand 1995, 38).

between agency and complicity, echoing Williams' notion of alternative, and even openly oppositional, hegemonies, existing alongside the "dominant."

Folklorist Joyce Ice examines quilts as objects with powerful personal meaning to their makers, as well as implications for power relationships. For the upstate New Yorkers she studied, "quiltmaking provided a way to express and cope with ... [life and economic] changes. Literally and metaphorically, quiltmaking embodies a sense of warmth, continuity, and connectedness to others, encompassing, yet contradicted by, feelings of isolation, loss and instability" (Ice 1997, 231). "Quilts simultaneously work at multiple levels to reinforce *and* challenge tradition. And like all elastic and powerful symbols, quilts are subject to manipulation. Quaint and romanticized images of quilts may vie with their potential to disrupt and transform..." (Ibid. 231). Ice describes a quiltmaking project sponsored by the Power Authority of the State of New York (PASNY), where local women created quilt blocks representing each town through which new and controversial power lines passed. Though the quilt was created ostensibly to celebrate the initiative, many of the women's blocks expressed their anger over the institution's shady dealings in acquiring land for power projects. Ice points out that craft and needlework projects in "service to hierarchies, secular institutions, including state agencies, museums, and businesses, have also succeeded in engaging women in activities that may ultimately serve to disempower people and distance women from the products of their labor" (Ibid. 232). Ice speaks in directly Marxist terms about the ways that folk forms can be deeply complicit with capitalist institutions, even those, like

museums, working for the public good; these same objects can be deeply personal creations and symbols of warmth, family and creativity for the women who make them.

### ***Methodology and Demographics***

The methodologies I use in this project consist primarily of ethnographic research and participant observation. To support my findings through these interactions, I examined and analyzed many handmade objects, and included readings of pop culture “texts” surrounding crafting, craftivism and consumption, including how-to books and videos, Etsy and social media posts, documentary films and journalism surrounding crafting, and the DIY movement. I have often fielded questions about what it was about *myself* that I was hoping to discover through this particular project, as one fellow scholar put it, “Because you know, research is *ME*-search!” (personal communication with Katherine, student, 2011). The story of “crafty women” is indeed mine, in many ways; this project can be called an auto-ethnography. As a researcher, I write about and analyze a demographic group that I belong to. Like many of my informants, I am a white, middle class, well-educated and economically stable woman in my early forties. I come from a background that has much in common with many of the men and women I interviewed. As a group, most of us were raised in a suburban, middle-class environment that was much richer in examples of “mass culture” than “folkways.” Digging a bit deeper, however, for myself and many of my interviewees, connections to our ancestors, ethnic traditions, and rural life emerge; my parents, like many of theirs, were not exactly poor, but they spent



their childhoods on the outskirts of the middle classes in families headed by strong women who made things for a variety of reasons. Our lives are about negotiating the many contradictions in our experiences; I consider myself a feminist, yet I participate in a highly traditional, heterosexual domestic family situation.

As my research plan began to gel and I shared my ideas with colleagues, a good friend from the hard sciences asked whether the subjects I planned to research were “too close to home” for me. How could I do an adequate job of objectively studying a group if my own agendas and experiences were mixed and mingled with theirs? Many scholars, from anthropologist Deborah Reed-Danahay, to sociologist Margo DeMello, have detailed the many tensions and contradictions inherent in ethnographic research. The field of American Studies has investigated notions of objectivity, proximity and ethnography for decades; scholars are all called upon to situate themselves in the context of their work and agendas, and we seem to recognize that “objectivity” is neither truly possible nor even, perhaps, desirable. My proximity to my subjects, in some ways, allows me insights into the experiences of the people I spoke to and observed, though as a quilter interviewing many knitters and crocheters, I still felt in many ways an outsider. My closeness, perhaps, grants me greater freedom to critique; if I am uncomfortable passing judgment, looking critically at the work and play of the people who have generously taken the time to share their stories and experiences with me, I am much freer to examine and critique myself and my own life, both as a middle-class female crafter and as a middle-class, white

American. My own notions of gender roles, feminism, race and class dynamics and consumption come into question as much as those of the other crafters interviewed here.

The use of ethnography is central to this project. It would be possible to examine women's crafting solely by analyzing the artworks themselves; indeed the fine art and fine crafts world has engaged with the topic of the emergence and popularity of crafts, women's work and folk forms in their spheres with enthusiasm, as recent exhibits including *40 Under Forty: Craft Futures*, from 2012-13 at the Renwick Gallery in Washington, DC; *Playing with Art of Victorian Photocollage Pictures: The* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010; *Unknitting: Challenging Textile Traditions*, at the Rubin Gallery at the University of Texas El Paso, 2008; *Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting*, and its follow-up, *Pricked: Extreme Embroidery*, both appearing in 2007 at the Museum of Arts & Design, and many others. While these exhibits explore part of the topic, my goal is to take their analysis one step further to understand how and why non-professional artists use and express oppositional themes and imagery in their work, and to what end.

As folklore scholars Jeannie Banks Thomas, and Margo de Mello would assert, the stories that individuals tell about the things they make and how their practice is transformative for them, is as important to my argument as a visual analysis of the objects themselves. This is also a point where scholars from different fields intersect; indeed, many popular culture scholars whose work has broad appeal for folklorists, cultural studies and material culture scholars do

ethnography to investigate and explore the meanings of art and material culture in the context of society.

In her work on the Barbie doll and popular culture, Erica Rand leverages folklore techniques by using ethnography, including conversations with her preschooler friend and informant, Hannah, and her own thoughts, musings and fears about Barbie play. Rand delves into the messages and meanings supplied by Barbie “producer” Mattel, but at the same time she recalls her own experiences with Barbie and her initial foray into “Barbie studies” when she used a provocative photo of Barbie by a queer feminist photographer in an art history course. She notes that she focuses on ethnography and personal narratives rather than “elegant content analyses” because her primary goal is to illuminate “how Barbie signifies to her consumers” (Rand 1995, 19). Rand uses ethnography, echoing Daniel Miller, to illuminate how commodities like the Barbie doll can have meaning and import for individuals who can choose to work with, or circumnavigate, the messages put out by her powerful Mattel producers.

I conducted many formal interviews, but some of the richest and most interesting data and observances come from participant observation. There is a fuzzy, amorphous boundary between the two: a place where informal interview blends and blurs into an informal chat. Part of my argument is that crafting is not just an individual practice, but a larger trope, one that is present in individual narratives, but also in popular culture, visual culture, media and consumer culture. I spent hours sitting in drop-in knitting and crocheting hours at yarn stores, but my research rarely ended when I walked through the door at the end

of the evening. I spent as much time or more combing through craft and hobby shops, browsing with friends through scrapbooking and paper boutiques, attending indie craft fairs and chatting up anyone who I found knitting in public, or wearing a handmade garment. I lurked (online and in person), stalked, and shamelessly eavesdropped on conversations between women who spoke the same language, chatting about knitted garments each was wearing, or comparing purchases in the line at the checkout counter, or quilt pattern books in the library. Part of this is exactly because crafting is not just a popular pastime that many women enjoy, but a societal movement; crafts have become part of our popular culture and visual culture.

My own relationship to the people I studied was complex and ever-changing; like many ethnographers I became practiced in the art of crossing the boundaries between “insider” and “outsider” status. I felt an insider in mostly-white quilting groups; my research life was born as a result of my membership in the Los Alamos Piecemakers quilt guild from 1998 through 2005. If I was in my comfort zone talking with educated mothers in suburban milieus, I felt like a dinosaur when interviewing a 20-something tattooed knitting teacher and blogger in a hip coffee shop in Oakland, California. I had fun hanging out with my crafty friends and their crafty friends; I felt more ill at ease sitting among groups of friends that were not my own. I got warm fuzzies from other moms with young children, who, like me, were juggling parental responsibilities, crafting and paid employment. Though I had requested, and was granted, permission to attend a men’s knitting circle at a hip Northern Virginia yarn shop, I felt like a spy. I sat

uncomfortably for over an hour, pretending to work on a beginner project, as they interacted with me as little as possible; the session grew even more uncomfortable when they found out I preferred *crocheting* to knitting. I thought I had many shared experiences with an African-American quilting group from Prince George's County, Maryland, but they had other ideas, "You sure don't know quilters!" one of them jokingly needled me. Even as an ethnographer and scholar I am an insider/outsider depending on what group I'm mingling with; as an academic, I hold a position of privilege, but as DeMello might assert, scholars are themselves securely entrenched in the middle class.

Many women are comfortable thinking about themselves and their craftiness in terms of gender; class dynamics proved a less comfortable terrain to explore. I was put on the spot by a member of the Los Alamos Piecemakers quilt guild, who scowled a bit, and asked, "What do you *mean* by *class*?" The unspoken, half-joking, question seemed to be, "What are you saying about us – are we low-class? Or are we high-class? Are you saying we have *no class*?" I answered that I was interested in the middle class, that I studied middle-class quiltmaking and crafting, and then addressed her concern in the most descriptive way I could, by placing my notions of middle class in opposition to other class identities. A "traditional" or nostalgic view of crafting might bring to mind works made by women who might not claim middle-class status. Indeed several high profile recent quilting exhibits showcased the work of women in remote rural regions, Gee's Bend, Alabama, and Amish communities in the mid-Atlantic and Midwest. Whether these "traditional" crafters were rural women living in small

towns or remote agricultural regions, of low to moderate income, or the historic “poor” who by necessity had to use whatever scraps and bits and pieces they could find to create the very bedcovers upon which they relied to keep warm through the winter.

My work, I told my quilting colleague, focused on women who chose these media not out of economic necessity but out of a passion for and a connection with the materials, techniques and their histories. I also shared with her my definition of “middle class,” which involved a somewhat imprecise confluence of education and socioeconomics that placed women among more affluent, educated and professional populations than one may “traditionally” assume are involved in making quilts. Notions of the middle class, while we can trace a history of crafting and women’s work associated with them, stand in contrast to scholars’ ideas about folk art as oppositional or transgressive. The middle class, in the words of José Limón, are often characterized as “sell-outs” (Limón, 2014), those who ally themselves with the owners of the means of production rather than the working populace. The middle class is invested in maintaining the status quo, not overturning it, especially economically.

Theoretically, Margo DeMello is the scholar whose class paradigm best embodies the taste and socioeconomic distinctions and connections I documented in my research. DeMello, for her tattooed population, feels that the central most important data point for her definition of class is education; college education is a requisite for middle-class status. She notes that socioeconomics, including job type, income, property ownership and the like, are a less indicative

of class status for her subjects, members of the tattoo community (DeMello 2000, 90). For the crafters I study, education is likewise of primary importance but socioeconomics are also key, certainly a more important consideration for my population than for DeMello's. My analysis involves examining the costly nature of the handmade objects that are important to these women; their economic power is central to their ability to participate in crafting in the ways that I examine. Like DeMello, however, the techniques and styles they prefer are connected with their levels of education; they make sophisticated and ironic choices based on the fact that they are college-educated, well-read, and well-traveled. Like DeMello and Brooks, I also assert that middle-class crafters, by adopting forms and messages that are oppositional to traditionally bourgeois values, actually reinforce their own class status.

If the roots of crafting began with women's work -- women making quilts, knitting socks, and crocheting table covers -- when the act of making things oneself was the only way of obtaining them, the crafters I examine are not engaging in crafting as a necessity, because one's socioeconomics demanded it, but rather, approaching crafting as luxury. For many of the women (and men) I spoke with, the desire to craft emerges from a desire to be unique, to create something that reflects one's own personality, style, and values. In addition to the fact that women are bombarded with messages to buy, purchase, consume, and offered products of every shape, size and price, the creativity and individuality of her choices may also be a point of social commentary. Her own family may be at odds with individualistic impulses as well. Investing \$40 on luxury yarn with which

to make a hat and scarf for a child, then spending a weekend knitting it herself, takes far more resources, financial and otherwise, than to choose an inexpensive example, manufactured in China or Thailand, for less than the cost of a takeout pizza. Rather than purchasing a brand new comforter set at a big box retailer for \$29.99, others invest \$3000 in equipment and supplies, purchasing \$75 worth of fabric, and spending eighty hours to create a unique quilt for her child's room.

The very recent "basic bitch" meme, originally a hip-hop critique of middle and upper middle-class white female consumption, speaks to this conversation; and the ways that, as David Brooks notes, a class performance emphasizing bohemian creativity and quality, critique a more passé display of luxury goods and conspicuous consumption. The "basic bitch," a derogatory term for a young, attractive woman who has plenty of money but no creativity, who wears and enjoys mass produced clothes and goods that are expensive but uninspired, exactly like those that thousands of other women purchase: Ugg boots, Pumpkin Spice Lattes, Gap T-shirts, gold hoop earrings, and Louis Vuitton handbags (Buchanan 2014). Though many feminists challenge notions that any woman should be judged by her wardrobe and consumption choices, "basic" has become an aesthetic insult, a condescending judgment of one woman by another. The hipster crafter may be proclaiming the same level of economic success, and consuming at the same pace, but rather than being branded as bourgeois and "basic," she shows her creativity, skill and savvy by making items that are unique and fashionable. This dissertation explores the causes and consequences of these narratives and preferences as they are visible in the crating community.



***Connecting Threads: Themes and Leitmotifs, Different Faces of Crafting***

The crafting industry is an economic powerhouse. In a 2003 presentation to the Piecemakers Quilt Guild in Los Alamos, New Mexico, publisher Nancy Tubesing reveals that there are over 12 million quilting households in the United States, containing more than 15 million American quiltmakers, who spend between \$200 and \$2400 annually (figures updated based on more recent industry data) on their hobby. Tubesing and other crafting gurus focus on quilters (and I argue, other crafters, especially knitters) as consumers and collectors, emphasizing that the pleasure of buying and collecting fabrics is an integral part of the crafter's creative process. In addition to the pleasure of creating handmade objects, alone or in groups, this buying and collecting of supplies and materials, especially fabrics, yarn – building a “stash” – is another factor responsible for bringing women together. Crafting as a pleasurable act of consumption is not a new phenomenon, however. Since the dawn of the industrial age, women and crafting have been closely connected to fashion and marketing trends. In Chapter 2, “Cheaper than a Psychologist: The Pleasure and Pathology of the ‘Stash,’” I explore the ways in which crafters are collectors, and the meanings surrounding their collections of mass-produced and handmade objects, including the ways that these objects are used by women to form connections and community with their peers, and for claiming and legitimizing their own identities, creative time, space, and possessions. Important to this section is a study of the theory of objects and collecting. By juxtaposing popular and folk scholarship and texts, I address how both fields conceive of the ways that individuals make

meaning from the collection and display of mass produced objects. I discuss the history and “tradition” surrounding crafters as collectors, arguing that, rather than being unique to contemporary 21<sup>st</sup> century craft pursuits, consumption has always been a part of middle-class creativity. Here I explore the ways that women find community and connect with fellow crafters in the worlds of the retail store and the Internet, and how these overlapping zones of activity bridge the public and the private. Finally, I address how the crafters negotiate conflicting and dissonant messages about consumption and anti-materialistic values surrounding handmade items.

One of the main threads connecting these different areas of scholarship is the notion that divergent, even contradictory, messages and meanings coexist side by side. In several chapters, I complicate notions of mass culture and consumption as forces that limit and contain women’s voices and agendas by showing how women appropriate and re-vision their creativity in the context of dominant messages reinforcing traditional gender roles and lifestyles. In Chapter 3, “Scraping Feminism? Scrapbooking, Class and Ideology,” I explore how images of domesticity in contemporary scrapbooking both reflect and reinforce a very limited spectrum of class, gender roles, and family values, while at the same time giving evidence of women’s agency, creativity and community. Photography scholars such as Laura Wexler and Shawn Michelle Smith draw connections between images of domesticity and empire in the work of early 20<sup>th</sup> century professional female photographers, showing how these photographs, marks of women’s contributions and creative visions within a male-dominated artistic and

documentary field, also contributed to dominant notions about gender, race and empire. Contemporary women are still using photography to construct images of domesticity through the popular creative pastime of scrapbooking. Using online scrapbooking web site communities as my “texts,” I support my arguments with other popular culture and mass media examples of the imagery and ideology in contemporary scrapbooking.

In Chapter 3 and at other points in this project, I explore the question: is scrapbooking, and crafting as a whole, evidence that middle-class women are “scrapping” feminism? Scrapbooking is rooted in a tradition of “women’s work,” and like the work of Laura Wexler’s “lady photographers,” incorporates technology, is influenced by marketing and consumption, and reflects distinct gender viewpoints and values. Scrapbooking is almost entirely dominated by women; according to some popular scrapbooking publications, as little as 2% of the scrapbooking public is male. A woman’s passion for scrapbooking may be her efforts to place her own desires, successes and priorities at the forefront of her life in a creative and concrete way, but I argue that images of contemporary domesticity found in scrapbooking media serve to contain women’s creativity within the bounds of traditional gender roles and conservative political and religious values.

If scrapbooking is fertile ground for understanding the ways middle-class women’s stories and expressions are contained and shaped, other forms and media may offer more fluid possibilities for affluent, middle-class women to negotiate, or even transgress the sexual, economic, and gender boundaries that constrained older women of their class. Chapter 4, “Stitch and Bitch: Crafting and

Feminist Debates,” addresses the ways women, through the objects they make, buy and display, engage in a societal conversation about women’s traditional arts, crafting and feminism. Feminist scholars such as Miriam Schapiro and Linda Pershing leverage the idea of the “femmage,” a technique of feminist assemblage in which women purposefully reposition and recontextualize images and symbols in ways that are meaningful for them; Guerrilla Girl artist and critic Lucy Lippard terms this technique “positive fragmentation.”

My research explores how third wave feminists, a group encompassing younger women belonging to the generation that came of age in the 1980s and 90s, engage in just this kind of repositioning and recontextualizing of vintage femininity. Though they did not “discover” knitting, quilting and cross stitch, women’s traditional arts were extremely important to second wave feminists in establishing women artists, and women’s history, as legitimate and important. Artists like Schapiro, together with Judy Chicago and Faith Ringgold, broke new ground in incorporating patchwork, quilting, lace and embroidery into their very political and contemporary artworks. Newer generations of feminists also align crafting and creativity with their own agendas – but their aims are not necessarily those of their predecessors. For example, Debbie Stoller, the third wave spokesperson and author and co-founder of Bust Magazine, is also the author of the hugely popular *Stitch-n-Bitch* series of hip and irreverent knitting and crocheting manuals.

Looking at women’s traditional arts may seem a fertile ground for exploring intergenerational debates between younger and older feminists.

Lippard and Schapiro's generation of artists can be critical of the views and issues important to the third wave (Lippard 1995, 136); indeed, even many third wave feminists like Andi Zeisler, co-founder of *Bitch Magazine*, are troubled by the recent trend of finding feminist agency within the crafting movement. Zeisler argues that it takes more than reclaiming women's work to make a feminist life; the crafts themselves must be political or oppositional to show true activism. If artists do find feminism in creativity, it is often not the feminism that the second wave had in mind.

Crafters and bloggers trying to bring together roles as artists and stay-at-home moms, note that crafting is one way to bridge the gap between career and family, redefine feminism by finding ways to help women be creative, and pursue non-traditional or informal careers and livelihoods while staying at home with their families. By providing a window into the third wave's vision of women's traditional arts, contemporary crafting serves as a platform where women can discuss and debate definitions and manifestations of feminism, and a means of performing their own narratives of opposition to male-dominated culture.

If crafting can allow women to align or distance themselves from their "foremothers" and from feminist traditions that they disagree with, there is also continuity in the ways that new forms, technologies, and techniques can hold meaning. The creation of art in response to life's events and tragedies is deeply rooted in tradition. Quilts, for example, have long been used to record and commemorate events both public, such as the retirement of the town parson, a son going off to war, and private: the death of a family member, or a dear friend's

move to another community. In Chapter 5, “Consumption and Compassion: Cataclysm and ‘Women’s Work,’” I compare these traditional forms with more contemporary traditions associated with the making of quilts and other folk forms in response to political events or natural disasters. Recent natural disasters such as Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, mass murders such as the shootings at Columbine and Sandy Hook, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, resulted in graphic and visceral imagery that made its way into quilts, *retablos* and other contemporary crafts and traditional artworks. These objects speak not only to the traditional roots of this practice, but also to the “folklorization” of the new technologies that have changed the way information is disseminated.

Women use quiltmaking and other forms of creativity to make sense of life’s tragedies and to begin the healing process in the face of personal, as well as community, “cataclysm”: death, illness and other life-changing events also inspire creation. In this chapter, I explore how individuals come to terms with tragedy, both public and private, through creativity, by making, buying and decorating objects. As in previous chapters, consumption is a factor that both enables and complicates the creative process.

If creativity can bring comfort and a sense of community and purpose during periods of upheaval, it can also give evidence of darker forces at work. The making and buying of objects to memorialize is fraught with questions of agency and complicity. Recent works by popular and visual culture scholar Marita Sturken, and folklorist and poet Susan Stewart, both deal with similar subject matter: the material culture of tourism and memory. Stewart focuses on

the interiority of the experience, to bring to light the ways that “mass produced objects” carry the “handwriting of the personal.” Visual culture scholar Marita Sturken pinpoints how even mass-produced objects can reflect and reinforce societal anxieties and personal narratives with her example of the snow globe souvenir from Oklahoma City, or post-9/11 New York: the miniaturized, hand-held world these objects represent offers an idea of “containment,” that the terrorist-plagued localities are in fact under control and back to normal. This chapter explores the tensions between public and private, between comfort and complicity that women enact when creating objects of memory.

Crafting is at the center of debates about power, economics, and anxiety in America. Looking at scholarship that examines tradition as well as mass culture, I endeavor to document and analyze our societal obsession with making things. Curator and art scholar Glenn Adamson analyzes craft as “an approach, an attitude, or a habit of action. Craft only exists in motion. It is a way of doing things” (Adamson 2007, 4). Adamson’s thoughts echo those of Jeannie Banks Thomas and Susan Stewart, who conceive of art as verb, and collecting – and crafting, the combination of the two -- as problem solving. Clearly, we as a society feel that making things can in some way help us solve our problems – but many scholars question and complicate these impulses.

Writing about stress, pain, and hardship, as well as about creativity, consumption and ingenuity, it is important for me to consider context. I write about American life and the American middle class, which, even in the face of the economic downturn starting in 2008, is a very comfortable place to be. I write

about September 11, 2001 and our many other subsequent disasters and crises from the position of a society that is safe and secure compared to life in much of the world. Many of the crafters interviewed here understand that, if crafting helps them cope with the stresses and anxieties of their middle-class lives, these struggles pale in comparison to hardships that their counterparts in other parts of the world are facing.

Every day is not a desperate struggle for survival. My family is healthy and happy. Nobody I love got killed by a wild animal, or is likely to. I'm not living in a refugee camp across the border from my country engaged in a civil war. Nobody is trying to kill me because I belong to the wrong tribe or religion or political party. On balance against the lives of billions of other people on this planet, I have it *good* (personal communication, B. Anderson, 2013).

The 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Betty Friedan's landmark feminist work, *The Feminine Mystique*, coincided with the final months of my field work. Like Friedan, my efforts centered around examining a specific slice of women; those who have the education and wherewithal to express themselves in almost any way they choose. The reasons why they choose to do it through crafting is at the center of my inquiry. As in an election year, stories about the power and importance of women voters are on everyone's lips; when I began researching, I was naively surprised to find quilting such a passionate pastime among a group of very educated, affluent and technical professional women. My subsequent research has involved examining the traditional and the transgressive behaviors of this seat of societal power; keeping in mind the relationship of these *powerful* women to their less affluent, educated, and liberated counterparts in western culture and elsewhere is key.



I examine Janice Radway, and use her interventions with romance novel readers to examine how agency can be found in areas that on the surface seem anti-feminist and utterly complicit; yet I also question whether such actions are enough to constitute true resistance. I use Marita Sturken's analysis of the perils of using material culture for comfort in such times of stress, but also consider the ways that creative people use crafting to help soothe stress and ease grief and anxiety. My intervention is to offer, in Michael Trujillo's words, a "more generous reading" of some of these behaviors. I will consider the important critiques, and offer possibilities for finding meaning and agency.

## CHAPTER II

### **“It’s not immoral, illegal or fattening, and it’s cheaper than a psychologist!” Crafters, Collecting, and the Pleasure and Pathology of the “Stash”**

*Admittedly addicted to fabric collecting, Kelly uses addiction terminology when talking about her fabric shopping. She refers to fat quarters [small inexpensive pieces of fabric that are excellent for small projects] as crack cocaine, calling the fat quarter tables where set up in front of the shop the ‘crack tables.’ ... any outsider privy to the conversation might have been tempted to report ‘two nice-looking girls’ to the police as potential crack users (Stalp 2008, 84).*

*It was like GASP! she was having an orgasm just looking at the fabric (Ibid. 83).*

#### **Introduction**

The women quoted above, perhaps surprisingly, use the lexicon of sex and drugs as a metaphor for the addictive and pleasurable power of quiltmaking and the shopping and collecting activities that accompany it. In addition to being crafters, the vast majority of the creative people examined in this project are also collectors. Collecting is generally thought to be rooted in pleasure, but the crafters examined here report that intermingled with the pleasure, there is a measure of pathology as well. Crafters collect for many of the same reasons they craft; to soothe themselves in the face of stress, irritation, and boredom, but separate from the addictive nature of the activity itself, the collecting behaviors can themselves become an addiction, an obsession. Susan Stewart notes the multivalent nature of the collection, the connections between the creative act of collecting and narratives of “the self,” and how both are contained within a physical and metaphorical space.

The collection is a complex interplay of exposure and hiding...the collection relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined by these boundaries, just as the self if invited to expand within the confines of bourgeois domestic space (Stewart 1992, 157).

She continues, “For the environment to be an extension of the self, it is necessary not to act upon and transform it, but to declare its essential emptiness by filling it” (Ibid.). Stewart’s notion of “exposure and hiding” speaks to crafters and collectors as experiencing both joy and connection, as well as shame and denial. Stewart also illuminates the ways that crafting, and collecting, are narratives of class and identity, as collecting helps to fill the “emptiness” of women’s lives, as they are, contained by the “confines of bourgeois domestic space.”

To distinguish collecting from general consumption and shopping, a collection, simply put, “may be described as the gathering together and setting aside of selected objects,” notes collecting and museum scholar Susan Pearce (Pearce 1993, 235); an aspect of individual and social practice which is important in public and in private life as a means of constructing the way in which we relate to the material world. Crafters have strong emotional attachments to the items they collect, whether or not the materials ever turn into a finished product in the form of a quilt or other needlework. An analysis of crafters as collectors emphasizes their behaviors rather than the end product, and illuminates how gender, class, and tradition intertwine and converge, giving insight into the ways that creativity that reproduces both resistant and dominant narratives.

Understanding relationships between people and objects, mass produced and

handmade, and the ways that marketing, mass culture and media may shape notions of handmade and help crafters negotiate the space between their public personas and private desires.

In this chapter, I explore the meanings of crafting as collection, the narratives surrounding collections of mass-produced and handmade objects, and the ways these objects are used by women to form connections and community with their peers, and for claiming and legitimizing their own identities, creative time, space, and possessions. I examine the theory of objects and collecting, leveraging both popular and folk scholarship, paying attention to how both fields conceive of the ways that individuals make meaning from the collection and display of mass produced objects. I discuss the historical and “traditional” contexts of collecting, arguing that, rather than being unique to “modern” craft pursuits, consumption has always been a part of middle-class needlework and craft histories. I interrogate the ways that women create community and connect with fellow crafters in the “modern” worlds of the retail store and the Internet, how these overlapping zones of activity bridge the public and the private, examining the life of the “self” in the confines of “domestic space.” Finally, I address how the crafters negotiate conflicting and dissonant messages about consumption and anti-materialistic values surrounding handmade items.

Quiltmaking is perhaps the medium where the connections between collecting and creativity are the most obvious; quiltmaking and collecting have, in many ways, traditionally gone hand in hand. For a rural farm woman in the nineteenth or early twentieth century, making a quilt may have involved months

of searching out and amassing scraps from clothing remnants, worn-out blankets, and livestock feed sacks before stitching the pieces together into a pleasing product, or trading fabrics with a friend in order to have enough of one color or pattern to complete enough blocks to make a quilt. A quilt often stands alone as a “collection” of fabrics, stitches and techniques – quilters would argue, quilts are often a collection of memories, experiences and interactions as well. As crafting, including quiltmaking, knitting, crocheting, scrapbooking and “upcycling,” thrives among middle-class, urban and suburban women in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, collecting habits are still integral to the creative process, though the nature of the collecting may have changed. Craft retailers, on both the local and national levels, capitalize on crafters’ affluence and sophistication, appealing to them as consumers, and emphasizing that the pleasure of buying and collecting fabrics, yarn and other materials as an integral component of the craft. I argue that in addition to the pleasure of creating the objects themselves, this collecting of materials – building one’s quilting or knitting “stash” – is not only part of the creative process, but also an effective lens through which narratives connecting society, consumption, and material culture can be examined, and a jumping off point for the understanding and analysis of crafting, gender, and class that this project represents. As Susan Stewart puts it, collection is a “process of commodification by which this narrative of the personal” (Stewart 1993, 138), the crafter, the “self,” navigates its way through contemporary consumer culture. Collecting behaviors, perhaps as much as creative behaviors, are a force for

building connection and community among crafters, and for asserting one's individual identity as an artist.

In analyzing interviews, memoir and other texts centered primarily on quilting and knitting, I argue that, for a white, middle-class population, crafting has historically been as much about social status, economics, and technology as it has been about thrift, femininity, and community. Examining the class and socioeconomic factors that surround crafting, both historical and contemporary, shows that consumption can bring groups together, creating a common bond (Tubesing, 2003). By looking at contemporary crafters as *collectors*, paying attention to the popular texts surrounding craft media, including how-to books, magazines, and television programs, catalogs, web sites and other consumer materials focused on marketing to the crafting community, I show how the incorporation of popular culture motifs and the effects of class and consumption depart from a nostalgic notion of what "traditional" crafting should be. I also present evidence that crafting, for a middle-class population, probably never conformed to this mythical image. Crafters themselves are re-visioned; early folklorists focused on craft and handiwork as the visual expressions of individuals who were, perhaps, not among the powerful; looking at their handmade objects was an attempt to access the voices of those who were not among the wealthy, educated elite of their societies. Crafting continues to flourish among women who are by no means without economic resources or the societal power to express themselves verbally, professionally, or academically. I argue that crafts have had a relationship to consumption and popular culture for

centuries, and that looking at both historical and contemporary examples of crafters as collectors can shed light on our notions of what constitutes folk and popular culture, and where they can be found.

### ***Understanding the Collection: Theory and Practice***

Crafting is not just a hobby, it is a multi-billion dollar business and a major cultural phenomenon where notions of tradition and innovation, of the handmade and the mass-produced, are blurred and complex. For a greater understanding of the “folk” and “popular” aspects of collecting and creativity and the ways creativity and consumption are intertwined, I place folklore and popular culture scholarship in conversation. In this chapter, I analyze creative people, communities and collections by juxtaposing folk and popular culture texts and techniques. I also situate the data collected through ethnographic research and participant observation within popular and mass culture texts, and the narratives and messages these texts convey, about crafting and collecting.

Folklorists Susan Stewart and Jeannie Banks Thomas discuss the power of mass-produced objects to hold meaning for individuals and the ways individuals use these objects to create meaning in their lives, to transform “popular” mass-culture items into collections - creating “art.” Stewart iterates the power of a purchased, mass-produced object to allow an individual to internalize the public, “the souvenir moves history into private time” (Stewart 1993, 138). With the transformation of a mass-produced commodity into a private possession, the purchase of a mass-produced object (she uses the example of a picture postcard) becomes “a kind of private experience as the self recovers the

object, inscribing the handwriting of the personal beneath the more uniform caption of the social” (Ibid.). Stewart explores,

...the ways in which the collection furthers the process of commodification by which this narrative of the personal operates within contemporary consumer society. A final transformation of labor into exchange, nature into marketplace, is shown by the collection. Significantly, the collection marks...the place where history is transformed into space, into property (Ibid.).

Stewart’s argument illustrates how consumption, agency and creativity are brought together to tell a story about an individual’s life, memory, and identity in the context of society. Her comments about “labor into exchange” point to the very concrete way in which collecting illustrates class identity and notions of personhood; the crafter-as-collector is not only “filling the emptiness” of her individual bourgeois space, she is doing so in a way that is particular to her status as a member of the middle class.

Jeannie Banks Thomas examines the “marriage of story and form” to shed light on the problems solved by art. For Thomas, it is not enough to simply analyze the object as a sign, to fully understand its meaning, scholars must also examine the “story,” or in Thomas’ case, the narratives surrounding the objects in the “culturescape” (Thomas 2003, 2). “The fact that the material culture is the focus of a significant amount of folklore indicates that these forms are meaningful enough so people not only register them visually but also talk about them” (Ibid.).

Thomas sees her project as,

...that of a folklorist looking at how people use, personalize, ‘folklorize,’ and make meaningful a range of forms, including mass-produced ones... [this work] adds to the literature concerning folklore and material culture by examining mass-produced material culture in relation to the folk narratives



and behaviors it generates (Thomas 2003, 3).

Her intervention is to “folklorize” creativity of all kinds as she examines stories creators tell about yard art (folk art), messages surrounding Barbie and GI Joe (mass-produced objects) and cemetery sculpture (“high” art) together. The collection, viewed through the lens of these two scholars, helps give shape and space to identity, and to the social context in which we find ourselves. Souvenirs and collections help to form a visual and tactile narrative about women’s lives and their negotiations of both societal expectations and limits, as well as personal goals and struggles.

Banks Thomas and Stewart both conceive of the collection in terms of “bricolage,” which Webster’s dictionary defines as the “construction or creation from a diverse range of available things.” The term was developed by anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) to mean the ways that individuals engage in various types of “problem solving behavior” (Banks Thomas 2003, 109), develop ingenious solutions to challenges, or create cultural meaning, by reaching across social strata to gain resources, whether material or metaphorical. Banks Thomas refers back to this history and applies this definition to the re-contextualizing of mass-produced objects. Thomas pays particular attention to the ways that “the consumption of consumer goods is bricolage” (Thomas 2003, 95) when she examines the work of Yuki, a man who creates an elaborate installation of yard decorations and statuary. Yuki buys decorations, and arranges them in a different context, or even alters them – for example, painting Asian hair and features onto his mass-produced Caucasian female yard

sculptures -- thus changing their meaning (Ibid.). According to Stewart, the collection becomes a form of art. Thomas insists that “art” is a verb as well as a noun: an active pastime, a way that people, like Yuki, make sense of the world, a “problem solving behavior” (Thomas 2003, 109). Even when collecting objects that are mass-produced, collectors are agents, not passive consumers, creating new contexts and meanings when they collect. For crafters, their collections, as part of the “problem solving” role that their art holds in their lives, speak as much to the roles of crafting in their lives as their creations do.

If art is a “problem solving” behavior, crafters note that their hobbies may create as many problems as they solve. Crafters like Christa Baber report treading a fine line between pleasure and pathology, between being a “collector” and a “hoarder” of the materials that attract them, whether they be quilting fabrics, yarn, raw wool, or other raw materials. They jokingly refer to their habits as addictions or obsessions, but the humor may often deflect feelings, whether their own or judgments of others, that they are carrying their passions too far. Stewart argues that, “It is clear that there is a correspondence between the productions of art and the productions of insanity” (Stewart 1993, 154). Stewart differentiates collecting from hoarding, which she terms a similar “attempt, marked by desperation, to ‘keep body and soul together’” (Stewart 1993, 154), a merging of the physical and psychological needs for objects, a way of surviving. Crafters laugh about the “addictive” qualities of quilting, with the caveat that it’s a much “safer” obsession than many they could choose. One quips, “Hey, I could be drinking, gambling or smoking – quilting is much healthier” (Stalp 2008, 80).

Quilt author and television personality Eleanor Burns echoes this sentiment in discussing her passion for collecting fabrics. “It’s not immoral, illegal or fattening – and it’s cheaper than a psychologist!” After I presented an earlier version of this research at a popular culture conference, a fellow attendee, commented on the economic heft of the crafting industry, “I’m a therapist. I’m not sure that quilting, as you’ve described it, *is* actually cheaper!”

It is just this tension between industry and transgression that makes crafting so appealing. Edith Eig, knitting guru to the stars with a trendy store in southern California, shares reflections from her celebrity students, including actor Julianne Moore and pop star Carnie Wilson, who agree that knitting, similarly, is a self-indulgent yet guilt-free treat that accomplishes a very tangible goal, an enjoyable pastime that allows successful women to “focus” and “be productive and relax at the same time” (Eig 2010, 37). Women see knitting as an activity that is at once acceptable yet selfish; they can be “good” and “bad” at the same time. They are “productively” making useful items, while they are asserting their own value by reclaiming time and space – and economic resources -- for themselves. They are at once indulging in the physical pleasures of handwork and the “naughty” emotional rush of a shopping spree.

The analysis of collecting as pleasure goes back several decades; the study of collecting as a sign of pathology, illness and insanity has an even longer history. Mid twentieth-century psychologists such as Jones, (1950) Abraham (1927) and Fenichel (1954) (Pearce 1995, 288) discuss collecting habits as symptoms of mental illness or sexual dysfunction, with assertions such as “all

collectors are anal-erotics,” (Jones 1950, 430, Pearce 1995, 293), or that one’s “passion for collecting is frequently a direct surrogate for a sexual desire,” noting that bachelors, once married, often pursued their collecting hobbies far less assiduously (Abraham 1927, 67). In 1968, Jean Baudrillard connected this historic association between collecting and the compulsive and pathological, with a newer notion that collecting is in fact a more complex sign of the nature of “human relations.”

...the accumulation of materials: e.g. the hoarding of old papers, stockpiling of food – midway between oral introjection and anal retention – then [comes] the serial accumulation of identical objects. Collecting tends toward the cultural ... while maintaining their own interrelation, [the collected objects] introduce social exteriority, human relations, into the process (Baudrillard 1968, 147-5, Pearce 1995, 317).

***“Body and Soul Together”: Crafting, Class, and Tradition***

It is limiting to consider how consumption and mass culture are somehow influencing or changing the “folk” nature of crafting; greater possibilities emerge when instead examining how the two have long been intertwined. Quilting scholars note the influence of popular publications and mail-order sources on quilters’ creative choices, “By 1876, the crazy quilt was coming into vogue. Quilt styles and fabrics were changing” (Lipsett 1985, 20). Popular publications such as *Godey’s* again encouraged such fads and trends, deriding cotton patchwork quilts as dowdy and old-fashioned, “unless in silks.” Such magazines even offered women bundles of pre-cut pieces for crazy quilting through mail order (Lipsett 1985, 20). Pat Ferrero connects quilting fads with middle-class women’s lifestyles, when fashion turned to crazy quilting in the last decades of the nineteenth century, “The role of many middle and upper-class white women had

shifted from essential producers of goods in the home to that of consumers for and moral protectors of it” (Ferrero, Hedges and Silber 1987, 25). *Peterson’s Magazine* and *Godey’s Lady’s Book* urged women to make decorative quilts: the trappings of affluent, white, middle-class lives, which responded to the fashionably cluttered, layered, and highly embellished Victorian aesthetic.

I began researching contemporary crafting from the inside, as a member of a local quilting guild, the Los Alamos Piecemakers. When I first encountered the group, I was amazed with the highly technical and commercial nature of their work. As I delved deeper into the quilting industry, I began to realize that the Piecemakers’ work was not idiosyncratic, but rather exemplary of contemporary quilting among many urban and suburban educated, largely white, middle-class communities. Los Alamos, New Mexico, a town of about 17,000 residents<sup>2</sup>, there are over 200 quilt guild members. In getting to know the Piecemakers, it quickly becomes clear that a large part of the pleasure of contemporary quilting is involved in activities such as shopping, purchasing, and collecting. Pam Aguilera relates her entrée into quilting which happened, naturally, in a quilting store visited during a vacation to California. Her comment about her passion for batik fabrics (see introduction) expresses some of the passion, the fascination with exotic textiles and patterns, and the hefty economic commitment that characterizes quilting in Los Alamos and elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> When I first moved to Los Alamos several of the locals boasted that though their town was small, as many as one in five residents held PhDs. I never located any hard data about exactly how many PhDs there were per capita, but this idea has worked its way into the town’s folklore. In 2012 Los Alamos made US News & World Report’s top ten list of “Most Educated Places to Retire” (Brandon, 2012).

Well, [this store] had batiks. I had never seen anything like them before; they had fabrics in gold, bronze, and silver, and a lot of already-made quilts everywhere ... There was a class going on and I just got hooked. I spent over \$1,000 in about 2 hours. My mom said that she had never seen me more excited about anything (personal communication, Pam Aguilera, 2003).

Quilters are not the only crafters who report “binge” buying and a physical and mental “rush” from their purchases. Knitting author, novelist and blogger Rachael Herron describes how she developed an interest in spinning her own yarn after many years of avid knitting. Her shopping spree began with the impulse purchase of a plane ticket to a fiber festival where she could pick out her ideal equipment. After traveling across the country, she purchased both a spinning wheel and the raw fiber that she planned to transform into yarn for future projects. Even the impulsive decision to buy her plane ticket online produced a heady physical sensation.

I needed my own wheel. I *had* to have one of my own...a festival would display all of the different makes and models. I'd get to try whichever one struck my fancy. I'd have choice...My breathing shallow, I closed my eyes and clicked the Buy button for the airplane ticket (Herron 2011, 1430).

Herron uses the Internet to research and locate her wheel, but, “keeping body and soul together,” she still needed to touch, feel, and choose the right equipment in person. Once at the festival, she continued her binge. “I scooped up armful after armful of unspun fiber. Nothing was safe from me...I wanted it all, and I wanted it in every color of the rainbow” (Herron, 2298). Herron found the perfect wheel and “I bought it on the spot. I was blowing through money like it was water, but I felt such a need to spin that it was almost like a physical urge,

like hunger or sleep. I didn't understand where the need came from; I just fed it" (Herron, 2306).

Dara, a Piecemakers' Quilt Guild member and accomplished artist, was the first person I interviewed to make a direct connection between quilters' love for fabrics and the habits of collecting. She used a familiar concept to explain her acquisitions to her confused spouse. "My husband used to ask me lots of questions about why I was always buying fabric... I finally told him that I was a fabric *collector*, I was building a *collection* (emphasis hers) of fabrics.... He seemed to understand after that" (Sallee, personal communication, 2003). Dara was not only putting her expenditures into a framework that her husband could grasp, she was also asserting the legitimacy of her habits and the economic commitment that accompanies it.

The acquisition of fabric is important and often exciting, Dara continues, because of the changeable and fashion-influenced nature of the quilting industry.

Every time I use up a good portion of a fabric, I tend to panic, and feel I need to replace it. If it has been a while since I bought it, I may never find it again, they don't keep making the same fabrics year after year...so sometimes it's hard to use some of my "stash" because it means I have to deplete my "collection!" (Ibid.).

Dara's comments point at once to the emotional ties that a collector has for her collection, and the bittersweet pleasure and anxiety that accompanies the building – and depleting -- of the collection. She also points out the overlapping meanings and contradictions between the idea of a "stash," the quilter's palette for creating quilts, made to be used up, and a "collection," built of one-of-a-kind

fabrics that change seasonally with fashion and marketing trends. In fact, the stash and the collection are one and the same.

The “stash,” rather than the scrap bag, is the contemporary term for a quiltmaker’s collection of fabrics from which they draw to create their quilted projects (Figure 4). Knitters and crocheters also refer to their collections of yarn as a “stash” (Stalp 2008, 79). Though a “scrappy” or mismatched look may be highly sought-after, middle-class quilters purchase high-quality, mass-produced fabrics for \$8.00 or more per yard. Quilting textiles often depict popular and cartoon motifs like Harry Potter, Pokemon, or SpongeBob SquarePants, or offbeat trends such as stuffed sock monkeys or the “red hat” ladies. Knitters acquire high-end yarns made from specialty wool, hand-dyed with organic dyes, again for premium prices. It is not uncommon for a knitter to spend many times the amount it would take to purchase a mass-produced garment in a retail store on the yarn required to complete a similar pattern oneself. Sophisticated quilters may choose fabrics inspired by the art of Henri Matisse or Andy Warhol. Ebay Internet auctions and Etsy online stores are popular places to acquire interesting and unusual fabrics or yarns, or to get rid of materials that are outdated, or leftover from a completed project. Many quiltmakers use the Internet to collect vintage fabrics, such as fabrics printed on feed sacks from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, or foreign fabrics and textiles. Japanese cotton prints, for example, are very popular and can be costly.

Quiltmakers do not collect just fabrics; another Piecemakers’ member collects antique and vintage sewing machines, which she uses to enter online



quiltmaking “challenges.” For instance, she might use her 1870 Singer to make a quilt in a late-19<sup>th</sup> century pattern with Civil War reproduction fabrics, or her 1930s featherweight machine to make a quilt using a depression-era quilt pattern and 1930s reproduction fabrics (Sallee, field notes, 2003). Knitters may collect vintage knitting needles, or in the case of one avid knitter, one trip to an antiques store yielded an entire sewing cabinet filled with antique and vintage needlework accoutrements. And of course, quiltmakers and knitters alike collect the finished products: quilts, or handmade sweaters “unappreciated” and donated to thrift stores and rummage sales.

Branded quilting retailers and publishers like Eleanor Burns’ Quilt in a Day, Fons and Porter, Jinny Byer, Thimbleberries, and others have marketed to and thrived on quilters’ collecting tendencies. Eleanor Burns, a 30-year veteran of the quilting industry, has a Martha Stewart omnimedia-like presence in the quilting world. She started out in the 1970s with a photocopied book that instructed readers how to make a log cabin pattern quilt in one day, and her “Quilt in a Day” brand was spawned. Her trademark technique was to use rotary-cut strips to make attractive, traditional quilt patterns very quickly. Currently, Burns writes books, produces her own television series, teaches quilting workshops, and designs her own line of fabrics manufactured by Benartex. Like the clever cross-marketer she is, Burns uses each of her media to market the others. She demonstrates her published patterns on her programs, all executed using her own line of fabrics, and markets all of the above on her web site, [www.quiltinaday.com](http://www.quiltinaday.com). In later years, Eleanor Burns’ has devoted several

programs to quilter's fabric collecting, featuring her own collections of quilts, vintage patterns and publications, and sewing equipment. She has a decided passion for women's history and quilting history, and often creates designs based on homemaking columns or mail-order patterns advertised in local newspapers in the early to mid-twentieth century. Many of Burns's programs emphasize collecting, and the historical connections between quiltmaking, publishing, and popular culture.

One notable example occurred during a series of programs based on her book, *Still Stripping after 25 Years*, a semi-autobiographical collection of patterns based on her experiences during her 25-year career. In one of the shows in this series, demonstrating how to make her "Fabric Gal" pattern (likely a play on an older quilt pattern name, "Lazy Gal"), Burns intersperses stories about the design and production of her line of fabrics with quips about the joy of collecting fabrics. Her justification for fabric expenditures, she laughs, is that buying fabric is a "safe outlet;" neither immoral, nor illegal, and easier on the waistline and pocketbook than sweets or therapy. Burns' motives are clear – by emphasizing the fun of collecting fabrics, along with stories about her own fabric line, she emphasizes the centrality of collecting to quiltmaking as a pastime. By emphasizing the long history of women's publications and marketing patterns and products to the quiltmaking community, Burns positions herself as a bearer of tradition rather than a dark force "corrupting" a once-pure folk art.

Among middle-class crafters, a population that is generally educated and often well-traveled; quilting fabrics and patterns mimicking textile traditions from

other cultures are particularly favored; examples include Indonesian batik, African Kente cloth, or Japanese Sashiko (Figure 5). Questions of race and class become intertwined when considering crafters' appreciation and appropriation of racial and ethnic forms in their crafting pursuits. Without making an exhaustive study of the racial and ethnic demographics of contemporary crafters, marketing data about crafters and my own observations allow me to make generalizations about the group. The crafters I have studied are largely individuals who identify as Anglo-American, with a smattering of Latino/as, African Americans, Native Americans and other ethnicities participating.<sup>3</sup> Folklorists and scholars such as Dorothy Zopf (Zopf 2001,13) have discussed the quilting differences in forms, patterns, and fabric choices among Anglo and Hispanic quilters in New Mexico and the Southwest. Quilter and historian Kyra Hicks has compiled data (*Black Threads*, 2002, p.10; *This I Accomplish*, 2009; *1.6 Million African-American Quilters*, 2010) about the differences in habits among African-American quilters and their white counterparts. Recent books and museum exhibitions have celebrated quilting as an art form among Native American and African-American communities around the country (McDowell and Dewhurst, 1997 and Arnett, 2002), including the post-colonial quilting traditions of the indigenous peoples of Hawaii (*Hawaiian Quilting*, Root, 2011). Though I have chosen to focus on issues of gender, class and consumption in this project, issues of race are difficult to ignore when making

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<sup>3</sup> Quilting groups studied have been largely homogenous, with smatterings of other races and ethnicities represented: the Los Alamos Piecemakers are mostly white (with perhaps 7-10% of the membership reflecting other groups), and likewise the Uhuru Quilting Guild of Prince George's County, Maryland, is a mostly African American group with a few white and Latina members.

a study of quilting, knitting and other forms of crafting. The racial makeup of crafters as a group – largely white, European-American in origin – combined with an intense passion for learning about the history of needlework and textile traditions within other racial and cultural groups and incorporating these styles and designs into their own works, suggests that racial identity and appropriation are inseparable from class identities that shape the work of this group.

The racial and ethnic dynamics of the Los Alamos quilting community may be idiosyncratic, but the Piecemakers are not unique in their interest in quilting traditions from other ethnic groups within the United States and abroad. If an abundance of books, magazines and television programs are an indication of interest, then white, middle-class quiltmakers as a whole are extremely enthusiastic about researching and imitating textile traditions from other countries and ethnic groups (Figure 6). Recent how-to books such as *Kake-Jiku: Images of Japan in Applique, Fabric Origami and Sashiko*, by Kumiko Sudo (2006), and *Quilt Inspirations from Africa: A Caravan of Ideas, Patterns, Motifs and Techniques* by Kaye England and Mary Elizabeth Johnson (2000)<sup>4</sup> are evidence that many contemporary quiltmakers have a passion for learning about “other” quilters and traditions, whether or not these traditions are authentically – or even respectfully – represented in such sources. In Los Alamos, interest in these forms of quilting is, perhaps, a familiar and non-

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<sup>4</sup> Though these books may not be intended to give an “authentic” view of the traditions of a particular group or locale, some quiltmakers do look at such works with a critical eye. In reviews of this book on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), England and Johnson garnered criticism from quiltmakers who expressed disappointment that the authors had no particular expertise in African art or textile traditions, and were not African Americans themselves. Other reviewers found some of England’s introductory statements about African textile traditions “offensive.”

threatening way for white women in a community lacking a measure of the racial, ethnic, and class diversity found in other parts of the Southwest to explore commonalities and differences with quilters of other races in a way that is comfortable and non-confrontational. Likewise, knitters and crocheters look to texts such as *Knit Kimono* by Vicki Square (2013), or Marianne Isager's *Knitting out of Africa* (2006), *Inca Knits* (2013), or *Japanese Inspired Knitting* (2013). In middle-class communities where women's economic circumstances allow education, travel, and cultural pursuits, combining two pleasurable and familiar activities – crafting and study – may increase the rewards of both. Again, crafting both relaxes and stimulates; it is safe and adventurous at the same time.

Quilters' and knitters' shopping habits are also often associated with middle-class lifestyles; some engage in “souvenir” yarn or fabric shopping, purchasing specialty fabrics or locally-produced yarns while on vacation (Herron 2011, 109). They may later incorporate these materials into a project that commemorates the trip. Curator Elizabeth Siegel argues, in her catalog of scrapbook artists who were female members of the British aristocracy, that collections were part of the markers of affluent, cultured society (Siegel, 2009, 14-15). Women who grew up surrounded by privilege, whose advantages included education, leisure time, artistic training, and the amassing of photographs and *cartes de visite* from similarly prominent and cultured aristocrats, created scrapbooks because it was an outlet where they could acceptably express themselves, showing resistance to societal norms within bounds (Siegel 2010, 14).

Susan Stewart, likewise, illustrates that,

...the collection is often about containment on the level of its content and on the level of the series, but it is also about containment in a more abstract sense. ...collections...seek to represent experience within a mode of control and confinement” (Stewart, 159).

Margo DeMello and Dick Hebdige also emphasize how the commodification of “native” and radical forms acts as a force to contain radicalism and incorporate dissonant views into middle-class propriety; society appropriates and normalizes subcultures and “outsider” influences by turning them into commodities (Hebdige 1980, 94 and DeMello 2000, 8). Experiencing other cultures through crafting and consumption offers women a way to explore beyond their own limited racial and ethnic experiences in a way that they can, as Stewart asserts, “control” and “contain.”

### ***Crafting and Communities of Consumption***

I have established that collecting, consumption and mass culture have long been part of the “tradition” of crafting; also deeply ingrained in traditional notions of the handmade is the idea of women building connection and community through their work. The idea that community can and does form around consumption patterns is not new. Notions of a “consumption community” were first used by historian Daniel Boorstin, who argues that “in the modern era of high mobility, people look not only to neighborhood as a basis for feelings of community but also to communality of consumption behavior (e.g., drinking the same brand of beer)” (Friedman, Vanden Abeele and De Vos, 1992 126-27). The study finds that a “psychological sense of community” (PSC) was reported

not just among groups, like knitters and quilters, “who share more highly aggregated consumption behaviors (consumer lifestyle and consumer expenditures)” (Ibid.), but also among consumers with connections as limited as buying the same brand or type of consumer items (make and model of car, for example, or Mac computer users) (Ibid.). Boorstin’s ideas emerged in the early 1970s, as American culture was in transition; increasingly, young people went away to school, then often relocated to other cities or regions for work. Populations moved from rural to urban and suburban locales. Consumption communities, Boorstin argued, replaced the sense of community gained from living in shared neighborhood or town (Boorstin 1973, 2922-2936).

For crafters, the concept of a community of consumption is apt, but the sense of neighborhood and locality is also relevant; the center of a crafter’s creative universe is not her residential neighborhood, but rather the local retail outlet that specializes in yarn, fabric, or paper goods. Alison Franks documents folk behavior and community among thrift store shoppers. The act of shopping in one particular place for a particular type of item is another example of the blending and hybridization of the virtual and the physical; the consumption as a means of finding community and connection. Knitting author and shop owner Edith Eig argues that the retail establishment is a substitute for the female connections of times past. At her store, “La Knitterie Parisienne ... knitters reconnect with something important that is missing in their lives, to feel some connection with their mothers and grandmothers, to their roots” (Eig 2010, 1140). Eig continues,

In a city like Los Angeles, where everybody is from somewhere else, it's hard to...develop friendships, and even harder to replace that feeling of having older female relatives – a mother that you can call on when you feel out of your depth (Eig 2010, 1146).

As a retailer of craft materials, it is certainly in Eig's best interest to emphasize the "warm fuzzy" (pun intended) aspects of finding friends in a retail environment, but her sentiments are echoed by many other avid knitters and quilters; the retail space becomes the center of community.

Executive and accomplished knitter Stacey Mulligan relies on her local shop in Alexandria, Virginia for help when she gets stuck on a project or needs help with a new technique. Many stores offer "drop in" hours when crafters can come in and chat or receive assistance free of charge. Author and blogger Rachael Herron's local yarn shop in Oakland, California, is her home away from home, both physically and emotionally, "Tattooed and pierced indie artists staff the counter, and I'm always kind of thrilled when someone knows me there, as if I'm walking into the *Cheers* of yarn (except they're calling Rachael! instead of Norm!)" (Herron 2011, 1746). The store is in the "hippest" neighborhood in Oakland, adding to its youthful caché.<sup>5</sup>

Technology also enables notions of "community" that blur the boundaries between shopping and connecting, people and purchases. Ravelry.com, a knitter's social media web site, has been examined for its social and economic impact by web gurus, economists and knitters alike. Online, as in bricks-and-mortar establishments, the business press is eager to

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<sup>5</sup> Herron lives in an area where I used to live, and returned to for research purposes. In her memoir she cites many of her hipster hangouts, which I also frequented throughout my research.



...try and tease out the complexity that exists in the environments that don't fit neatly into commercial or noncommercial, market or non market, but instead embody a range of practices that spread across all of these forms in the same space. Ravelry offers a strong example of such an environment (Humphreys 2009, 4-5).

I expand this to include all crafting retail spaces; they cross boundaries between retail outlet, community gathering space, hangout, and classroom. Rachael Herron finds community not just physically, in her local shop, but also online.

I can look at my relationship with [these friends] to define how my relationship with yarn has changed over the years...I didn't talk knitting with anyone. I just did it at home, privately...then, the Internet opened knitting up – I believe that the reason knitting became trendy was because knitting information became so readily disseminated and available online. People started to talk about it (Herron 2011, 1769).

Again, even though the Internet is an important tool for connecting, physical proximity and shared pleasures are necessary too. “Another thing you can't do on the Internet is sit around knitting on a random Saturday afternoon while appreciating vegan food” (Herron 2011, 1761). Using the Internet as a site for collecting and building community, crafters “are creating material versions of the Internet immateriality” (Franks 2009, 5), indulging in an obsession that combines both physical and social pleasures, and keeping “body and soul together,” as Stewart argues.

### ***“Fables” and “Fabrics”: Crafters and Anti-Materialism***

There is a clear connection between crafters' collecting habits and the very values they hold dear as a group. If consumption habits serve not to isolate crafters but to bring them together, what are the implications for crafters' notions of the handmade? How do crafters make sense of the complex interconnections

between individuality and mass culture? During one springtime monthly meeting of the Piecemakers quilt guild, featured speaker Nancy Tubesing, editorial director of the award-winning children's book entitled *The Quiltmaker's Gift*, launched into the presentation she prepared, entitled "Fable to Fabric."

Tubesing's talk focused on the ironic connection between the popular culture world of book publishing, and the very savvy marketing decisions that led to the publishing of *The Quiltmaker's Gift*, an anti-materialistic tale about an enchanted quiltmaker and a greedy king who must give away all his possessions before he can have one of her bewitching creations. The author of the beautifully illustrated children's book, Jeff Brumbeau, spent years trying to find a publisher for his manuscript. Only when Tubesing and Scholastic realized the powerful marketing potential of the book was it actually published.

Tubesing began by relating her own initial naiveté about the potential for a book about a quilter. She was not really a quilter herself, and was unfamiliar with contemporary methods and techniques, did not understand the strong community connections among quiltmakers, or the extended language of quilting jargon. More to the point, *she didn't realize how much money they spent on their hobby*. Tubesing shared some of the market research that was integral to the decision to publish the book; her corporate research revealed that there are 12 million quilting households in the United States, or over 15 million American quiltmakers (Scholastic Publishing 2003). Most of these households, she continues, spend \$100 annually on quilting (this comment drew snickers of scorn and disbelief from the Piecemakers, as if to say "yeah, right! I spend that in a month!").

Tubesing added, with a twinkle in her eye, that a smaller proportion of these are considered “dedicated quilter” households, which spend upwards of \$2000 per year on quilting (this time, hearty guffaws from the Piecemakers, as if to say “that’s more like it!”).

The editor’s presentation continued, including details of the merchandising push that occurred as the book’s popularity soared. Tubesing co-authored a book of quilt patterns based on those in the book, and worked with fabric manufacturer Benartex to develop a line of high-quality fabrics around themes from the book’s beautiful illustrations by Gail de Mercken. The illustrations themselves, Tubesing noted, were created with the “dedicated quilter” in mind, to incorporate “all the little things quilters love,” (Tubesing 2003). The book can be purchased in a “gift pack” containing fabric and instructions for various projects. The book’s web site provides details on how and where to purchase all of the related products, and also lists ideas for teachers who wish to use the book in elementary school reading curricula and plan accompanying quilting-related activities to go along. Equally notable is the “Generosity” section of the web site, which again points out the dissonant messages surrounding the book and its publishers: the book and related products are obviously products of savvy marketing practices and a desire to capitalize on the affluence of middle-class quilters. Tubesing herself relates these details, matter-of-factly, without shame. But they are also intended to respond to and promote the “traditional” values associated with quilting: generosity, charity, and community concern. Quiltmakers are surrounded by the conflicting messages of consumption, spending, and collecting, while also

associating themselves with a non-materialistic concern for the poor, needy, and hungry worldwide.

Through her work on the book, Nancy Tubesing has become a quilter. She speaks about collecting fabrics, refers openly to the pleasure of buying and collecting fabrics as an integral part of the quilting process, and her discourse subtly asserts that it is this buying and collecting, in part, that brings women together. Quilting as a pleasurable act of consumption is not a new phenomenon, however. Since the dawn of the industrial age, women and quiltmaking have been closely connected to fashion and marketing trends. As notions of femininity differed for women from different classes, suggests Pat Ferrero, so did connections between consumerism and quiltmaking (Ferrero et al 1987). According to notions surrounding the cult of true womanhood, 19<sup>th</sup> century women were, “‘by nature’ domestic and maternal,” tasked with playing a narrowly defined role in the home, “to uphold morality against the encroachments of the materialism, competitiveness and greed of the new commercial and industrial world” (Ferrero et al 1987, 23). If women were supposed to *give the appearance* of being somehow above or oblivious to the world of business and commerce, quiltmaking scholars point out that in the realities of their lives, this was hardly the case. Curator and author Barbara Brackman in her exhibition catalog essay for “Patterns of Progress: Quilting in the Machine Age”, an exhibit at the Autry Museum of Western Heritage (now the Autry National Center), includes 19<sup>th</sup> century trade cards from many of the larger sewing manufacturers, including

Singer and Domestic (Brackman 1997, 15), evidence that white, middle-class women and their sewing habits have always been the targets of marketing.

As there is ample evidence that women are historical consumers, at least for the middle classes, quilting and other types of needlework have always been pursuits on which women spent their money. Brackman notes that early sewing machines produced in the middle decades of the nineteenth century cost as much as \$100; if the average yearly income was around \$500 during this period, such technological advances were within the reach of only the middle and upper classes (*ibid.*). It is important to emphasize that the “middle and upper classes” most certainly excluded quiltmakers of color during this period. Though the rich quiltmaking traditions of African-American and Native-American communities have rightfully received greater attention in recent years, theirs is a very different history from that of the largely white, middle-class crafters discussed here.

Contemporary knitting also juxtaposes resistant, anti-materialist narratives alongside marketing messages, consumption and popular sources, though the values expressed may differ from those of their quiltmaking counterparts. Knitting may in fact be more popular with younger women; currently there are more knitters among “young” women, 24-35 years old, than in any older age groups (Shone 2012). Rather than emphasizing the connections based on charitable sentiments and compassion, knitters are often called to be unique, to “stick it to the man” by creating their own garments rather than purchasing them at retailers that may exploit foreign workers, pollute the environment, or treat their domestic workforce unfairly. Anti-materialism adopts the rhetoric of

environmentalism when knitters are encouraged to purchase high-end organic yarns or create garments made from recycled materials. According to Shere Ross, author of *Punk Knits*, knitting is subversive, making your own clothes is resistant: “what’s NOT punk about knitting?...in your own personal way, you can snub the corporations that try to strip away your individuality by knitting garments instead of buying them” (Ross 2007, 9).

Rachael Herron, in her memoir, notes that her early knitting projects were inspired by her own graduate student poverty; she needed warm clothing as she completed assignments in her damp, low-rent basement apartment. She acknowledges feelings of both jealousy and disgust when a well-meaning, affluent tech-industry friend takes her shopping for cashmere in a local boutique. Herron refuses to splurge on high-end clothes, and relies on her knitting skills to solve her problem. True to her west-coast hipster lifestyle, she scoured thrift stores looking for damaged or stained merino or cashmere sweaters, which she “frogged” or unraveled and re-knit into new sweaters in patterns she preferred. Her creations were hip yet luxurious (all natural fibers), environmentally friendly and inexpensive (Herron 2011, 451). Herron’s own history illustrates the tension between creativity and consumption; the knitter who prowls thrift stores for low-cost cashmere is the same person whose impulse spending includes a last-minute plane ticket so she can spend hundreds of dollars on yarn and equipment. The pleasures are similar, whether the thrill is finding the five-dollar cashmere cardigan that can be remade into something stylish, or the rush of running up credit card bills in the pursuit of the perfect spinning accouterments.

Edith Eig's story reflects a similar notion of knitting as a rustic, hands-on activity that helps the rich and famous cope with their fast-paced, busy lives. Opening a knitting store in the Studio City, California, her clients include television personalities and media industry mavens who turn to knitting as a "real" activity that gives them a break from the unreal and "virtual" professional worlds they inhabit. The contradictions are many. I interviewed Stacey Mulligan, who, though not a movie star, is by all accounts an affluent and successful 35-year-old executive with her own flat in a pricey neighborhood in the Washington, DC area. She notes that however thrifty it may *feel* to knit your own socks rather than buy them at the store, it's an economic boondoggle. With high-end yarns and organic dyes, not to mention the time it takes to make the garments, she laughs, "I end up spending, like, sixty dollars on a pair of socks or mittens! It's ridiculous!" Clearly, knitting, once a necessity of life for many, may now be a financial stretch for women with less time and resources to spend.

### **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this chapter, Susan Stewart's quote situates collecting within the home, both in the physical and metaphorical sense: "For the environment to be an extension of the self, it is necessary not to act upon and transform it, but to declare its essential emptiness by filling it" (Stewart 1993, 157). This chapter examines the ways that crafting as collecting does exactly this; "fills" but does not necessarily "transform" a woman's middle-class life. Limitations are not eclipsed, and financial, work and family obligations persist. Daniel Miller, in *The Comfort of Things*, also works with notions of emptiness and

fullness in the domestic space in his analysis of homes and possessions as “portraits” of individuals (Miller 2009, 289). Rather than assuming that relationships with objects somehow take the place of, or compromise, relationships with people, Miller asserts that empty homes are often evidence of empty lives. He finds that “the opposite is true; that possessions often remain profound and usually the closer our relationships with objects, the closer our relationships are with people” (Ibid. 75). I have examined how using the lens of collecting and collections can help to illuminate not only how and why crafters create, but also the ways gender and class identities shape, and are shaped by, their expressions. Collecting, and crafting is not an interior, solitary pursuit, but is instead, as Baudrillard puts it, a place where objects bring “social exteriority, human relations” into the process (Baudrillard 1968, 147-5, Pearce 1995, 317).

Looking at quiltmaking and collecting, sociologist Marybeth Stalp argues that quilting, whatever the product, represents a woman’s effort to assert her own selfhood, and reclaim time for herself in the face of familial and professional obligations (Stalp 2008, 5). Whatever the values and messages surrounding craft objects themselves, the praxis of crafting, looking at the objects in the context of all the activities surrounding them, can help us better understand crafting as a sign of women’s agency and resistance to the forces that have claims on her time. Jeannie Banks Thomas argues that collecting is an art, a “problem solving behavior.” Likewise, Marybeth Stalp argues for a “marriage of story and form” in such enquiry. “Quilts are complicated, have multiple meanings, and can be political. ...[but they] are just the finished cultural objects. The process of quilting



is even more complicated, as it involves the creation, reception, and use of these complex cultural objects” (Stalp 2008, 4). Collecting, for crafters, is an important part of this “process,” part of the “problem solving behavior” that is art.

Marybeth Stalp examines how quilters, and I would also include other crafters, like upcycler Christa Baber, “must engage in subterfuge to successfully enjoy their hobbies under the radar of other family members” (Stalp 2008 78). I argue that this furtive, illicit aspect may in fact be part of the joy of crafting, but Stalp notes that building a collection may help to make women feel better about the time and resources they spend: “Having a stash legitimates many women’s claims in identifying themselves as quilters” (Ibid.). The physical reality of the collection reifies a woman’s claims to legitimacy and importance. “The presence of the fabric stash in the home also establishes the need for women’s leisure space in the home” (Ibid.) (Figures 7.1 and 7.2). The economic power of the crafting population, and the fact that they are willing to spend significant resources, whether financial, temporal, or spatial; openly or covertly, on themselves, shows that they view their own hobbies and passions as legitimate, real.

Contemporary crafting, knitting and quiltmaking in particular, as illustrated in the story behind *The Quiltmaker’s Gift*, incorporates contradictory messages; anti-materialistic narratives exist within heavily-marketed, and often very costly, products. Michael Owen Jones, a folklorist who focused attention upon traditional or “folk” behavior among the middle classes, argues for the importance of understanding the connections between crafting and collecting. “To treat any

work of art as simply an object, without regard for the processes of...  
*consumption*, is to fail to understand the meaning for the art..." (Ice 1993, 166,  
emphasis mine). Especially for white, middle-class crafters like the Los Alamos  
Piecemakers, a better understanding of the class dynamics within the community  
and the consumption surrounding their works helps to illuminate the many  
"meanings" embedded in the objects they create.

### CHAPTER III

## Scrapping Feminism? Scrapbooking as Consumption, Collection and Construction

### *Introduction*

Scholars Laura Wexler and Shawn Michelle Smith connect images of domesticity and empire in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century photography, focusing on the ways that photography contributed to hegemonic notions about gender, race and politics. Wexler defines domestic images as,

...complex, multivalent signs whose symbolic meanings are determined by their insertion into underlying cultural and political patterns. As such, domestic images are historical representations. They are crystallizations of forces (Wexler 2000, p 21).

Contemporary women continue to use photographs, “multivalent signs” in and of themselves, to construct narratives of gender and domesticity through the popular creative pastime of scrapbooking, and make their private images and narratives public by uploading their very personal creations into online galleries and communities. In this chapter, I explore how images of gender and domesticity collected and displayed in contemporary scrapbooking both narrate and reinforce dominant notions of class, gender roles, and motherhood, while complicating this “multivalent” image with evidence of women’s agency, creativity, and community. At the center of the scrapbook is the personal photograph. I apply Wexler's and Smith’s scholarship dealing with photography *of and by* women in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to a 21<sup>st</sup> century photographic medium incorporating images of and by women. My texts include examples of layouts –

individual pages created by scrapbook enthusiasts – shown in person, collected in books, and displayed online in scrapbooking communities.

Scrapbooks and the layouts that comprise them function as collections on many levels. Individual layouts are miniature collections of photographs, mementos and design elements depicting a particular event or moment in time. Together, layouts form a scrapbook that may be entirely private, or semi-public; a collection that celebrates the bonds between friends, members of a family, or colleagues in an organization. A scrapper may create a scrapbook as a gift for a special friend or significant other, commemorating a very private connection with another person. The online communities and publications that collect these layouts together can also be considered archives, setting and enforcing the boundaries of what is and is *not* considered a scrapbook. Shawn Michelle Smith notes the constructive nature of the archive.

An archive circumscribes and delimits the meaning of the photographs that comprise it, investing images with import calculated to confirm a particular discourse. ...the archive maps the cultural terrain it claims to describe. In other words, the archive constructs the knowledge it would seem only to register or make evident. Thus archives are ideological; they...make specific claims on cultural meaning (Wexler 2000, p. 21).

As “archivists” of their own images and histories, individual or familial, scrappers are constructing ideological narratives. By presenting these narratives online, in a community of fellow enthusiasts, scrappers are, like Smith’s archivists, “mapping” a very distinct “cultural terrain” of gender, motherhood and middle-class whiteness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Viewing this online body of scrapbooking layouts as an archive itself, we see several types of ideologies and

discourses emerge. Wexler's analysis of commercial portrait photographer Gertrude Käsebier connects photography and Käsebier's images of "ideal motherhood" and "real motherhood" with the ideology of white privilege. Käsebier's photographs served to facilitate "by exchange the kinship relations within the tribe, or class, of those to whom they were precious objects of an ideal white motherhood" (Wexler 2000, 189). Her "domestic" photos served race and class agendas and built cohesiveness among white middle-class clients. In this chapter, through an analysis of scrapbooks as collections both private and public in nature, I argue that scrapbooking likewise "circumscribes and delimits" the discursive space that women may use to tell their own stories. Scrapbooks, and the online communities that are also "archives" of women's visual narratives, serve the class and "ideological" functions that Smith describes, performing the work of "sentimental indoctrination," (Ibid. 285) constructing class and gender identity and cohesiveness through the shared experiences of femininity, courtship and motherhood.

I also call upon Wexler's notions of domestic images, seen in a modern form through scrapbooking, as "crystallizations of forces;" multivalent texts that contain ambiguous, even contradictory discourses. However, in reading products of creativity, such as quilts, scrapbooks, as archives of a specific ideological and "cultural terrain," the creations are only part of the story. Quilting scholar Marybeth Stalp notes that the artworks themselves are "just the finished cultural objects. The process...is even more complicated, as it involves the creation, reception, and use of these complex cultural objects" (Ibid.). Stalp uses the

notion of praxis, the idea that a greater understanding of an action can be reached by examining the entire set of processes, feelings, and social sharing surrounding the practice, rather than the action itself. In this chapter I will also consider the praxis of scrapbooking as well as the “texts” themselves; scrapbook pages created by women and shared online.

I consider the ways that scholars from a breadth of fields analyze how women use texts such as photographs, artwork and scrapbooks themselves to negotiate their place in a gendered society. I posit women’s scrapbooks as both expressing collective ideas about women and gender roles, *and* as individual narratives that speak to the ways women negotiate their own identities within a gendered society. I focus on the multivalent nature of these “cultural objects,” analyzing how scrapbooks function as archives in a variety of contexts: as texts reflecting aesthetic debates surrounding women’s work and “high” and “low” artistic traditions, as photographic archives of family experiences, and as collections of handmade and mass-produced memorabilia. I argue that women assert their own identities using a medium that “circumscribes and delimits” these actions, while at the same time claiming membership in, or sometimes distancing themselves from, a collective women’s experience.

### ***The Scrapbook as Consumption, Collection and Construction***

It seems appropriate that my study of scrapbooking emerged after a lighthearted conversation with Robin, a friend and fellow American Studies scholar. Chatting with her about my research on contemporary quiltmaking and discussing the technology, class, and gender issues surrounding this creative practice, she

wagged a finger and cried, “Scrapbooking!” She rolled her eyes. “If you’re interested in gender, crafts, and class, you should write about that. It’s HUGE! All the stores are full of scrapbooking materials, and people spend so much money on it” (personal communication, interview with Robin, 2002).

My friend is an avid and accomplished knitter, so I was somewhat surprised that her enthusiasm for her own crafty pursuits, and those I studied, clearly did NOT extend to scrapbooking. Her comments brought images to mind of women similar to those in the quilting groups I studied: women at midlife who are affluent and family-oriented. Perhaps even to a greater extent than quilting, the creation and embellishment of scrapbook pages containing personal photographs and texts seemed like a wonderful lens for exploring feminist debates and examining how women use them to tell their own stories in a very concrete way.

Scrapbooking may give a unique insight into how white, middle-class women create narratives about themselves and their values, and how consumption and technology complicate their work, but the medium has challenges for feminist interpretation. Embroidery, knitting and other crafts have gained a hipper, younger following in recent years; scrapbooking has retained an association with a more traditionally feminized aesthetic and themes. As scrapbooking author Paul Gambino suggests, scrapbooking’s appeal for a new audience is dampened by a sweet, cloying look and feel centered around “smiley faces...teddy bears,” and “corny sentiments” (Gambino 2006, 9). Gambino echoes my friend’s suggestion that scrapbooking as a rich text for exploring middle-class identities and agency, femininity and consumption; like other examples of women’s cultural production

explored by scholars, scrapbooks have multiple readings and meanings. They are burdened with cultural assumptions about women's work, and if other crafty pursuits are gaining a following with the younger, "cooler" crafter, scrapbooking retains its associations with older ideas about gender, family, and identity. Through scrapbooking, debates about women's work are still being contested; this medium gives insight into the ways women use technology, negotiate their own identities, and make sense of family and societal obligations and gender roles. Scrapper and blogger LeNae Gerig offers a simple definition of a *scrapbook*.

A scrapbook is simply a decorated photo album that also preserves the stories behind the photos (called journaling), it can also hold memorabilia (tickets, certificates, letters, etc.) (Gerig 2006).

Scrapbooking is rooted in a tradition of women's work, and like the work of visual culture scholar Laura Wexler's "lady photographers," it incorporates technology, is influenced by marketing and consumption, and reflects distinct gender viewpoints and values.

Scrapbooking, or "scrapping," is a term for all the activities surrounding the making of a scrapbook. "Scrappers" create pages or layouts which they collect together in books, each representing a person, event, or other theme in the life of the maker. Such pages are usually based around photos taken by the scrapper, but often include assemblage techniques incorporating a wide variety of other media. These many include souvenirs and mementos such as ticket stubs, restaurant napkins or programs; text elements such as notes, poetry and personal narratives, sometimes referred to as "journaling"; decorative papers, buttons, pins, textiles and ribbon; special fonts, digital images, and many other



high and low-tech design elements. Gerig notes that creating scrapbooks is not only a “creative hobby” that gives practitioners a more attractive and individual way to organize photos, but is also motivated by the desire to preserve photos for posterity. Unlike many commercially produced photo albums, most scrapbooking materials are acid-free, and contain no substances that could damage or degrade photos over time. The scrapbooking topics of choice are heavily centered on the most traditional of women’s roles; motherhood and parenting, friendship and romance are among themes often treated in the myriad of slick scrapbooking how-to publications.

If a scrapbook is a collection of images and other media, scrappers are also collectors; scrapbooking enthusiasts report almost as much enjoyment from shopping for supplies as from creating the pages themselves. The scrapbooking industry is a powerful economic force in the craft and hobby industry and markets heavily to this enthusiastic audience. According to a survey by *Creating Keepsakes*, “America’s no.1 Scrapbooking Magazine,” scrapbooking was a \$1.4 billion industry in the United States (Millet and White 2006). By 2006, an *Economist* article notes that the industry volume had risen to an impressive \$2.6 billion, and had become the most popular craft in America, with a scrapper residing in about twelve percent of American households (*Business, Economist*, May 26, 2007). The ultimate goal of scrapbooking is to produce meaningful family photo albums, but through the Internet, scrapbooks can become a means of self-expression and commentary in a totally public arena, with a wider audience, perhaps, than if the works were displayed in a museum or gallery

space. Through scrapbooking family life and kinship bridges the boundaries between public and private spheres. Using web sites like [www.scrapbook.com](http://www.scrapbook.com) or [www.scrapjazz.com](http://www.scrapjazz.com), scrappers can upload examples of their layouts so thousands of Internet users from the world at large can appreciate and comment on their work.

Scrapbooking seems to be almost entirely dominated by women; very few, if any, men appear to participate. The Los Angeles Times reported on marketing trends in the scrapbooking industry, indicating that there may be some small percentage of male practitioners, but so few, they are being courted as a potential new market (Amter, 2006). An online scrapbooking publication notes that only 2% of its visitors are male ([www.scrapjazz.com](http://www.scrapjazz.com), 2006). There have long been male artists who work in media that has been traditionally considered “women’s work,” and even groups and “circles” of male quilters and knitters, but by all accounts, scrapbooking is a creative arena that is almost exclusively female.

Demographic information about women participating in scrapbooking is readily available. According to surveys by Creating Keepsakes and [scrapjazz.com](http://scrapjazz.com), the “average” scrapbook-maker is a married woman aged 35 to 49, having attended “some college.” Almost as many participants hold bachelor’s degrees, but far fewer have advanced degrees of any kind (Ibid.). If mid-life mothers are the meat of the scrapbooking industry, the Los Angeles Times suggests that scrapbooking businesses are hoping to attract younger women, from “tweens,” pre-teen girls 8 to 12 years of age, to college students and twenty-

some things. High-profile celebrity scrapbookers like talk show hosts Leeza Gibbons and Oprah Winfrey, and homemaking gurus like Martha Stewart, are all involved in the industry and may help to attract younger women, and their spending money, to this creative pastime (Amter, 2006).

***The Hierarchy of Public and Private, and the Politics of High and Low***

Even the term “scrapbook” seems to map a very specific cultural terrain, one that presumes a certain aesthetic, and excludes class, gender and family discourses that lie too far outside the norm. A 2006 *Economist* article on the vast popularity and huge economic impact of the scrapbooking industry points out the implications of scrapbooking’s image problem, while expressing a disdain for its disappointingly “saccharine” aesthetics.

...scrapbooking may be popular, it has never been fashionable. The prevailing aesthetic is saccharine. It includes glitter, polka dots and lots of pink...a slightly more sophisticated style...will earn scrapbooking a little more respect. Other crafts, after all, are taken seriously (*Economist*, May 26, 2006).

The fact that *The Economist* addresses changes in the scrapbooking industry illustrates that the pastime is both an economic force and part of a cultural phenomenon about which the “serious” business press should take an interest. That the short article calls into question the effect that aesthetics has on the popularity of this medium is also telling; the purpose of the article is to comment on Martha Stewart’s entrée into the market for scrapbooking supplies and kits. Stewart’s “more sophisticated style,” *The Economist* argues, would help scrapbooking to be “taken seriously” as a business and an art form. Analyzing scrapbooking web sites, magazines and how-to literature, these impressions seemed apt. Contemporary

scrapbooking relies on stereotypical “feminine” elements: hearts, flowers and puppies, more than a few clichéd taglines, and few resistant – or even ironic – themes.

More troubling were the themes and messages underneath the “look” of the pages, the topics they addressed represented only the most traditional of gender roles. These aesthetic and ideological judgments are complicated when viewed in the context of one case study, a young woman in my family who became “obsessed” with scrapping in college. Examining how the work of Madison, a young woman from the “millennial” generation with some decidedly non-traditional qualities, engaged with these images and messages, her stories about scrapbooking convey how her notions of femininity and gender roles dovetailed – or didn’t -- with the conventional, fluffy picture painted in scrapbooking examples online. Furthermore, other scholars have since responded to my arguments, suggesting several scrapbooking texts that complicated the overly feminized, even sanitized, image of scrapbooking. But as I explored these resources I continued to find that the “alternative” visions of scrapbooking, if they did sometimes have an edgier look and feel, topically still *reinforced* controlled, contained notions of gender and femininity far more than they re-visioned these spheres.

Scrapbooking, however concretely it seems to illustrate women’s efforts to tell their own stories – scrapbooks are narratives that women create about their own lives, after all – has left a negative impression among feminist scholars, artists and journalists as *The Economist’s* deprecating comments show. Scrapbooks show how women actively construct their own narratives; in their works, they are literally writing

and illustrating their own life stories. But scrapbooking has not garnered the same enthusiastic interest and hearty support as a visual medium that gives evidence of women's agency and the ways they negotiate the pressures and limitations of gender. Perhaps scholars expect feminism to look a certain way; there are troubling implications when women choose to assert themselves as followers of tradition rather than forces subverting it.

Karen, a retired art educator living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, identifies herself as a "book artist" rather than a scrapper. It may be that artists, like Karen, who use collage and book art techniques to express edgier, less family-friendly topics may be simply choosing a different moniker for their creativity; they may refer to themselves book artists, and describe their work in terms of collage or altered art. The "scrapbook" as "cultural terrain" is delimited not only by a certain spectrum of techniques and media that constitute scrapping, but also a particular set of subjects and ideological frameworks, and a certain place on the continuum of fine art vs. "craft." Whatever the differences in how these artists identify themselves, Karen acknowledges the connections between the two genres. She notes that creating art in book form is very different from creating art that hangs in a gallery for all to see. "Books are *intimate*," Karen emphasizes. A crowd of people "can look at a painting at one time while it's hanging in a gallery; you have to spend time, to *interact* with a book" (personal communication, interview with Karen, 2009). The act of reading a page, of picking up a book, turning pages and reading words, is a one-on-one experience that is different from viewing art in a "fine art" setting. Kay Turner and Suzanne Seriff's study (Turner & Seriff, 1993,

111) of women's altars to Saint Joseph, shows the importance of inquiry into how women negotiate the spaces between individual creativity and community contribution and move between the public and private spheres. The altars appear within the context of a private household, within the realm where women have power, but they are seen and appreciated by the public at large, or at least the "public" who really matter to a particular family or community.

Scrapbooking likewise inhabits a space that is at once public and private. As in Seriff and Turner's analysis, we see a woman's creation as both a personal archive of images, values and ideologies, as well as part of a public "archive" of messages that reinforce gender and class cohesion. A scrapbook may be entirely private, or semi-public: a creation that celebrates the bonds between friends, members of a family, or participants in a club or organization. A scrapper may create a scrapbook as a gift for a special friend or significant other, commemorating a very private connection with another person. Through the Internet, scrapbooks can become a means of self-expression and commentary in a very public arena, with a wider audience, perhaps, than any museum or gallery space. Using sites like [www.scrapjazz.com](http://www.scrapjazz.com) or [www.scrapgirls.com](http://www.scrapgirls.com), scrappers can upload examples of their "layouts," successful pages that they have created, so that thousands of Internet users from the world at large can appreciate and comment on their work. Individual scrappers can open membership accounts on such sites and compile their own galleries with online examples of all of their recent work.

The art and culture hierarchy is also relevant when interpreting the meanings and messages in scrapbooking. It is only by placing scrapbooking in the world of fine art that it becomes acceptable to a certain type of crafter, like my friend the knitter and fellow American Studies practitioner; leaving behind “teddy bears and sunflowers” and embracing more fine art techniques is a move that mass-market authors have sought to legitimate scrapbooking as a creative outlet for “sophisticated” women. Displaying scrapbooks in a museum setting, and comparing the collage and assemblage techniques used by Victorian ladies to the work of avant garde artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century also serves to legitimate this type of art, bringing “sophistication” to the idea of women using “vulgar” mass produced photos. The blockbuster exhibits celebrating the quilts and quiltmakers of Gee’s Bend, Alabama, also sought to place quiltmaking in a more sophisticated context by displaying very vernacular quilts on walls, as two-dimensional works of “fine” art and comparing them to abstract painting of the mid-twentieth century. Women’s work cannot be simply women’s work – it must have a connection to a “higher” plane of aesthetics and creativity to be legitimate, serious, and worthy of study.

### ***Scrapbook as “Femme”: Feminist Possibilities***

An analysis of the politics of high and low culture may help shed light on scrapbooking’s “image problem” (perhaps the *Economist* will finally approve?). However, other tools and approaches may help scholars to fully understand the ways that women’s cultural production can be viewed as “crystallizations of forces,” (Wexler 2000, p. 21) multivalent objects that contain ambiguous,

sometimes oppositional, meanings. It is in acknowledging the “sentimental indoctrination” (Wexler, 2000, p 285) and the sometimes-restrictive class cohesion that scholars most fully flesh out the possibilities for oppositional messages. In recent museum exhibits, academics and curators have begun to explore the possibilities of scrapbooking as a vehicle for feminist agency, not by looking forward, but by looking back. As when examining quitmaking, curators approach historical scrapbooks as a traditional art form that incorporates technology, narrates the politics of class and consumption, and reflects distinct gender viewpoints and values. Again, like quiltmaking, scrapbooking has recently become the topic of fine art, “high-culture” museum exhibits that have pushed the boundaries of our understanding of how women have historically used these works to perform gender and class, and to bend and flex the acceptable limits of both to their own ends.

In the exhibit *Playing with Pictures: The Art of Victorian Photocollage*, curator Elizabeth Siegel of the Art Institute of Chicago featured albums created during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by female members of the Victorian aristocracy. Much like contemporary scrapbooks, these creations incorporated personal photographs from the mass produced *cartes de visite* of the time into pages featuring their own artwork: watercolors, sketches, and backgrounds. Often their manipulation of the characters and events in their social environment is explicit; several artists cut the faces of friends and acquaintances from these *cartes*, then paste these faces onto bodies the women themselves draw, including a spider in a web, or an acrobat on a tightrope. The exhibit catalog argues that in these



scrapbooks, women are creating their own narratives about their lives and roles, both reproducing and resisting existing norms; the resulting books become performances of class and gender in which “photography and femininity are reconfigured in ways that suggest that they are cultural constructions rather than nature-given certainties” (Di Bello 2009, 53).

In her essay “Photocollage, Fun and Flirtations,” Patrizia Di Bello explores the ways in which scrapbooks allow women to transgress restrictive gender boundaries through flirtation, and argues that, in these scrapbooks,

The handmade and the mechanical, personal and social, realistic and fictitious are mixed and stitched together to create photocollages that, with their multivalent and ambiguous meanings, can be read in different ways and at different levels (Ibid.).

Di Bello argues not only that scrapbooks can and should be read “in different ways and at different levels,” but also that these 19<sup>th</sup> century examples also blurred the boundaries of the handmade and mass-produced, the public and the private to offer a “multivalent” view of women’s experience. Di Bello addresses the visuals, the aesthetics, of the books, but puts more weight on the actions and practices surrounding the artwork itself. Marybeth Stalp, in her sociological examination of contemporary quilters, asserts that handmade objects are just such intricate, ambiguous texts, objects are “complicated...have multiple meanings, and can be political” (Stalp 2010, 4) but calls for attention to the “process” as well.

Scholars like Stalp bring these ideas to bear when looking at cultural production, like quilts and scrapbooks, as cultural archives. Ethnographers Tood Goodsell and Liann Seiter adapt Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital (Goodsell &

Seiter 2011, 322) when discussing scrapbooking, arguing that women are building “family capital” for their families using scrapbooks to create a narrative in which their families belong to a “legitimate family type” (Ibid.). They examine the work of one particular avid scrapbooker, “Deborah,” who wanted her children to have a “traditional” upbringing. This “traditional” family life was perhaps disrupted by the family’s choice to reside in a more diverse urban neighborhood that they loved, and to which they felt they could contribute positively, rather than choosing to live in a more affluent, safer suburban area where there were more resources for her children and family (Goodsell & Seiter, 326). In their research on contemporary scrapbooking, Goodsell and Seiter note that the relationship between the commercial messages scrappers encounter as they engage in their hobby, and the “popular resistance” they may reflect in their own work.

...scrapbooking problematizes the relationship between mass culture and popular culture by presenting a situation in which the two are intricately tied together. Scrapbooking is both a large and profitable industry in the United States, but scrapbooks are made into statements of popular resistance to structural conditions (Goodsell & Seiter, 338).

In her catalog essay for *Playing with Pictures*, curator Elizabeth Siegel notes the shared values and experiences that situate scrapbooking among aristocratic Victorian women as “a visual practice specific to a specific class rather than a revolutionary female act in a repressive male world” (Siegel 2010, 14). Siegel argues that these works should be viewed not individually but as a genre to be properly understood; they are not so much a group of individual narratives than a shared phenomenon that marked each woman as an integral “part of Society” with “a capital ‘S’” (Ibid.). I also argue that contemporary online

scrapbooking communities serve the same types of class functions, creating a way for women to join in the shared experiences of femininity, courtship and motherhood, while creating a work allows them to “play” with their gender roles and the way their lives are “circumscribed” by the restrictions of class and social position.

Gender scholars like Michael Kimmel (*The Gendered Society*, 2000, 2012, 182-187) have interrogated the relationship between societal power and gender roles. If Kimmel argues that power in the workplace has been elusive and difficult to attain for women, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, other scholars have reexamined and re-visioned spheres where women have traditionally had power, looking at environments and activities that make up women’s traditional power base. Linda Pershing crafts an argument around Miriam Schapiro’s notion of “femmage,” a technique of feminist assemblage that “implies a sense of intentionality, the purposeful repositioning and recontextualizing of personal symbols in a manner that is particularly meaningful for the artist” (Pershing 1993, 342-43). Scrapbook pages, like quilts, are assembled by women from bits and pieces; photos, mementos, and other decorative elements that all have meaning and appeal for the scrappers who create them. I interviewed Madison, a twenty-something scrapper living in a small Southern city, who shared a scrapbook she compiled in her role as secretary of her Baptist youth group, proudly noting that she included “something pink” on every page. Including her favorite color was her way of making her work personal; placing her stamp on her organization’s history.

In their analysis of altars to Saint Joseph, patron of families, Turner and Seriff consider DiLeonardo's "ideology of reproduction," the "ideology that arises from women's experience of giving birth to children and rearing them" (Turner & Seriff 1993, 111) and connects this ideology to faith and religious observance. Madison also puts family photos at the root of scrapbooking, noting that it is "always *the mom*, the one with the camera," who is involved in Turner and Seriff's "work of kinship," documenting family history, capturing the prized moments of childhood. Madison may not have intended to emphasize the passive nature of "mom's" role; the mother/photographer is looking on, through the lens of her camera, while her family is actively playing and enjoying life. If storytelling, keeping a diary and working with paper are within the realm of "traditional" girls' play, Marjorie Harness Goodwin's article about language and girls' play may suggest possibilities for finding agency and resistance in a collaborative, non-competitive endeavor such as scrapbooking. The act of assembling and embellishing these photos and turning them into a concrete and coherent "story" about one's network of kinship and connection may be one way women turn this sometimes-passive observation into action, and reify their role as the family historian in a document that expresses their own creativity and aesthetics. As women are responsible for a disproportionate amount of affective labor, there is a danger that framing this activity as simply a creative outlet may be glossing over the ways in which scrapbooking reinscribes heteronormative roles for women, and reinforces an unequal power relationship between the sexes.

### ***Scrapbooking and the Single Girl: A Personal Archive***

Madison's experiences give insight about why young women might be interested in this activity, and what their passion for this medium expresses about their development, their identities, and how they use creativity to negotiate their place in a gendered society. Raised Roman Catholic, Madison attended an evangelical Christian high school, and subsequently joined the Baptist Student Union when she matriculated at a large, public university. As an undergraduate, much of her life revolved around her spirituality and activities with this student group. Her views on politics, race and class leaned to the right, perhaps (though not definitively) aligning with norms she found in her religious peer group. She wanted to be a veterinarian, but she struggled academically, deciding instead on a major in elementary education after abandoning her pre-veterinary animal science track. She is a multi-talented athlete who feels that sports are central to her identity, and an industrious worker who worked two paying jobs in addition to her full-time course load and extracurricular commitments. Her jobs as a surgical technician in a veterinary hospital and caretaker for an historic classroom complex at her university were nontraditional choices for female college students, and were much better-paid than many of her peers' positions at supermarkets and clothing stores. Her work allowed her financial independence, and the ability to live on campus rather than remaining at home with her parents while attending school in her southern hometown (personal communication, interview with Madison, 2005).

Though she loves children, Madison expressed a desire not to "settle down" too early in life. The tall, attractive 22-year-old did not want to "marry young," as is

common in religious, southern, middle-class families like hers. She describes herself as “obsessed” with scrapbooking. It was her main creative outlet and something she looked forward to amidst the stresses and obligations of schoolwork and employment. Madison might not have used the term “feminist” to describe herself; her religious affiliations and convictions might not jibe with a feminist viewpoint. However, the particulars of her life and her interests spoke to her ability to incorporate traditional and non-traditional elements into her own notions about her identity and expectations. Madison’s strong faith and her interest in scrapbooking were perhaps not coincidental; several of the industry’s most prominent publications and online sources have connections to faith and religious groups. Creative Keepsakes and several other scrapping sources have ties to the Church of Latter Day Saints, and are based in Salt Lake City, Utah. An article entitled “Scrapping and the Single Girl” in *Scrapbooking & Keepsakes Magazine*, published by Women’s Day, features layouts created by a young woman and member of the Mormon Church who, like Madison, refers to her activities at temple and her desire to grow spiritually in her layout. The subtitle of the article reads: “What’s there to scrap about if you’re not married with children? Plenty!” Though the headline offers a halfhearted assurance that “not married with children” is an acceptable status for a young woman, the layouts reproduced in the article are disappointingly fluffy, including a layout devoted to one woman’s shoe obsession, and another entitled “Flirt like You Mean It.”

For feminist scholars making inquiry into scrapbooking, messages such as these may cause anxiety. The images promoted by this industry suggest that

young women with no husbands or children have nothing but shopping and coquetry to occupy their time. Worse, the scrapbooking industry may be a sounding board used by religious fundamentalists, encouraging women to throw aside feminist principles and embrace highly traditional gender roles. The content of most of the layouts shared by scrappers online is certainly non-controversial. Almost none dealt with homosexuality, sexual liberation, radical politics, or any of the more distressing aspects of young women's experience, such as eating disorders, substance abuse, or rape. It is unclear whether scrappers are simply not using scrapbooking to tackle the most painful issues that young women face, or if the most controversial pages are actually being edited out by a site's producers. Whatever messages scrappers encounter in the mass media, what women do with their own books is a somewhat different story. If scrappers consciously avoid painful and controversial narratives, they are using their layouts – and online community forums that showcase their work – to comment on feminine stereotypes and gender roles, and to share their own stories about their lives and identities (Figures 8 and 9).

A scrapper's work is made to be shared: either on the internet with fellow artists, or in person, by sitting with a friend or family member and paging through a scrapbook together, reminiscing about the events or people pictured, and using the book as a tool for interpersonal communication. In the world of social media, whether on a scrapbooking themed online community, or a larger forum such as Instagram or Pinterest, the lines between individual and collaborative creativity are blurred. Scrapping-themed social media web sites may also be a forum

where “scraplifting” takes place, a practice defined by Madison as “essentially copying someone else’s layout. This could be good or bad; the point is to be unique, so you wouldn’t want to copy *too* much.” Then she continues, “but if it weren’t for sharing I’d run out of ideas.” Madison is using “hedging” techniques discussed by Joan Radner and Susan Lanser, suggesting the gray area between positive “sharing” and problematic “copying” inherent in “scraplifting.” Obviously, this “sharing,” not only exchanging creative ideas but also building community around an individual pursuit, is an important part of the appeal of scrapping.

***Sentimental Indoctrination: Scrapbooking as Public Archive***

Perusing the vast, online archive of scrapbooks, layouts, and related conversations, images and themes of motherhood are at the forefront. To call on Wexler’s analysis, this is also a “crystallization of forces” (Wexler 2000, 21) both constructing and narrating societal discourses. In their 2004 work, *The New Momism: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it has Undermined All Women*, Susan J. Douglas and her co-author, Meredith W. Michaels refer to “the new momism,” a “set of ideals, norms, and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem on the surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond [most women’s] reach” (Douglas & Michaels 2004, 4-5). Not only is motherhood important, but it is every mother’s duty to go the extra mile, to be outstanding in all respects.

Douglas and Michaels assert that “motherhood became one of the biggest media obsessions of the last three decades, exploding especially in the mid-



1980s and continuing unabated to the present” (Ibid.). They relate the explosion to the right-wing Republican-controlled House of Representatives in the 1980s and ‘90s, when motherhood was extolled, but little legislation in areas such as maternity leave, day care or public education was enacted,; bills that would have benefited mothers, children and families. The Republicans are not the only ones to blame, Douglas and Michaels assert,

Central to the new momism, in fact, is the feminist insistence that women have choices, that they are active agents in control of their own destiny, that they have autonomy. ...the new momism is deeply contradictory: it both draws from and repudiates feminism (Ibid. 5).

There is a common visual language to this notion of “momism.” All of the layouts mentioned share visual elements in common; they use warm tones and floral motifs, and all contain photos of family, including happy moments with mothers embracing smiling children. Visually, the layouts refer to quilting, with overlapping elements, patterns and colors, making a visual reference to another feminine tradition and symbol. Looking at page content and text, in all the examples, motherhood is emphasized, obscuring all other accomplishments. In “My First Name is Mom” (Figure 12) the text suggests that her identity as mother comes before her own name; the photo shows a young woman, half-smiling, almost buried by her two daughters. In “Trophy Mom,” (Figure 15) the inclusion of narrative text, called “journaling” in scrapbook terms, tells a poignant story about a mother’s two children who, having won many trophies and awards themselves, ask if their mother has any trophies. She answers “no,” and the children present her with a trophy for Mother’s Day, in honor of her outstanding

work as a mother. Again, the narrative and image emphasize motherhood and children's accomplishments over the mother's own personal endeavors. In "My Four Feats," (Figure 14) a layout featuring three children sitting next to their mother, whose head has been "cut off" in the shot, but bears her pregnant stomach so that "the baby can be in the picture." Again, the mother's "feats" are her children.

The images themselves were important; equally significant is the way these layouts were presented online. Images of the pages appear next to the brand information from all the products used, and links to web sites where the supplies can be purchased. The web sites also codify and categorize the layouts. Looking at the [www.scrapjazz.com](http://www.scrapjazz.com) "layout gallery," where pages are shared, there were some sixty different "themes," and each theme may have contained 100 layouts. Some popular categories, such as Christmas and animals, contained more than 500 layouts each. The themes included nine pages of layouts about "hair," sixteen about "men," 130 pages of "babies," but only five pages about work. Of those five, many did not relate to paid work or career, but emphasized a spouse's military service, housework, or volunteer work.<sup>6</sup> I found no themes or layouts dealing with queer issues, politics (except a few pages relating to 9/11 or terrorism), activism, abortion, women's rights, or other topics that could be construed as controversial or non-family oriented. Furthermore, there were no signs of layouts dealing even with some of the more complex and

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<sup>6</sup> When I began this research in 2006, the themes were as I documented them. There have been changes to the site since and some of the themes I mention have been deleted; other new themes have been added.

troubling issues surrounding motherhood: juggling work and maternal responsibilities, parenting challenges, fatigue, or single parenting. It is possible that the most controversial pages are being edited out by a site's producers, however, it is more likely that scrappers are simply not using scrapbooking to tackle the most complex and difficult issues that women and mothers face.

Scrapbooking in print media may have a greater breadth of topics and styles than the layouts represented online. There have been attempts by prominent scrapbooking artists and publishers in recent years to encourage and showcase alternate visions to the homogenous, heteronormative, and feminized aesthetics and themes discussed here. Calling on "urban divas and small town rebels," (Gambino 2006, title page) notable authors within the scrapbooking industry have tried to correct these imbalances, and encourage their constituents to scrap about more "real life" topics, using a hipper, younger aesthetic and edgier, more "fine art" techniques. Paul Gambino and Tara Governo published mass-market catalogs of layouts that show edgier themes and topics, including a somewhat more diverse group of scrappers than can be found perusing online scrapbooking galleries. Governo's *Imperfect Lives* collects layouts that document life's tragedies, trials, and tribulations, and includes treatments of topics such as miscarriage, aging, breast cancer, difficult breakups, postpartum depression, addiction, and the death of a child or loved one. She includes more than 40 different artists, of whom 10 to 12% are women of color. Rather than choosing from among existing layouts that women produced for their own scrapbooks, Governo and Gambino both put out calls for artists to produce new layouts

specifically for these publications. In their personal statements, many of the artists expressed excitement and enthusiasm for the opportunity to deal with tougher issues, but these may not have been themes the artists would have attempted without being prompted to do so, encouraged by the possibility of being included in a book for publication.

Gambino's *Scrap City*,<sup>7</sup> perhaps responding to the issues raised in *The Economist*, is an attempt to showcase an aesthetically edgier style of work, rather than an attempt to showcase layouts dealing with controversial issues. His population of artists is also more diverse than those who display their own work online; *Scrap City* includes work by one male artist, at least one queer artist,<sup>7</sup> and several scrappers of color. The choice of projects Gambino includes reinforces that these are not exemplary of "organic" scrapbooking; several pieces are not layouts or even books at all, but examples of other genres that incorporate scrapbooking techniques: jewelry, an altered plastic CD case, and an embellished box filled with memorabilia. Several other pieces might be more aptly termed altered books or art books. While such works do show the breadth of artistic possibilities and the often very narrow line between what is termed "scrapbooking" and "collage art," it also reinforces that, as self-identified "book artist" Karen suggests, the category of "scrapbooking" is dominated by heterosexual women and very traditional gender roles; artists with less

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<sup>7</sup> The racial makeup may have gotten more diverse, but Gambino's example(s) is the only layout by a queer artist I have encountered in over six years of research on this topic. The wealth of books and magazines dealing with scrapbooking is immense – it is a multi-billion dollar industry, so it is possible there are other queer scrappers that I simply haven't encountered; still the heteronormativity of this hobby is striking.

celebratory agendas and a darker visual style may simply not identify as scrappers. Even the hip and edgy themes Gambino includes generally have to do with very traditional notions of family and femininity, including family trips, weddings, love, dating, and the ubiquitous shoe collections.

If scrapbooking and the social media outlets for scrappers “map a cultural terrain” of gender roles and the online forums where women share stories, layouts and resources, interconnections between gender and race become visible as well. Fatimah Tobing Rony and Diana Fuss argue that early film often contributed to the invisibility of people of color (Fuss 1995, 144; Rony 1996, 4-7). In the scrapbooking sources noted here, they were almost not present at all, leaving pervasive images of whiteness as the “norm.” When I began researching web sites containing thousands of scrapbook layouts starting in 2006, I observed only two that featured people of color; likewise I found only one image of a woman of color in each of the scrapbooking magazines examined, one published by Christian company Hobby Lobby.<sup>8</sup> The inclusion of just one image of a non-white family smacked of tokenism, and furthermore emphasized that the realm of motherhood and family as seen in scrapbooking layouts and publications is a realm of white, middle-class values and ideologies. Neither of the two layouts featuring women of color, entitled “Skin Deep” and “*Solo Yo*,” (Figure 13 and 10) pertained to motherhood or family; both emphasized each woman’s identity and

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<sup>8</sup> In the years since I began this research, larger numbers of women of color, especially Spanish-speaking women, have posted layouts on these web sites, especially scrapgirls.com. Still, the percentages of Spanish-language layouts and layouts featuring photos of non-white families is very small – often I uncovered them only by searching for specific text.

self-concept. Both, interestingly, seem to comment on the place of a woman of color within a largely white world; “*Solo Yo*” (Only Me, Just Me), shows a young woman smiling confidently out at the world, but the title reflects both her self-sufficiency and her isolation. “Skin Deep” includes lyrics about beauty by pop star Christina Aguilera, juxtaposed with a self-portrait of a beautiful but wistful-looking young woman. Her layout seems a commentary on standards of attractiveness and her place within a beauty-obsessed world.

The reason why so few women of color are represented may have as much to do with socioeconomics as they do with race. Crafts and hobbies, especially those with connections with technology and consumption of interest to me, are associated with the middle-class realm; describing quiltmaking’s middle-class demographics, the owner of a quilt store quipped that “upper class women don’t do this sort of thing, and [working-class] women can’t afford it!” (personal communication, Pandy Lolos, 2003). Women in the trenches of single parenthood, holding two jobs, or working odd hour shifts so they can manage their parental responsibilities, may have little extra time to engage in creative pursuits. Economic survival takes up too much time and energy to allow for such luxuries. Scrapbooking has a history of being a performance, and a construction, of middle-class or even upper class affiliations and accomplishments. In her exhibit of aristocratic 19<sup>th</sup> century scrapbooks, curator Elizabeth Siegel notes that, whatever its aesthetic properties, scrapbooking plays a role in how women displayed their appropriate female accomplishments, and the affluence that enabled them. Scrapbooking, she argues, “signaled not only refinement and

talent, but it also the ability of the artist to purchase manuals and pay for private lessons” (Siegel 2010, 15) not to mention costly art supplies. Moreover, the Victorian scrapbooker lived a life her aristocratic peers deemed worthy of documentation: she traveled, received *cartes de visite* from illustrious friends and callers, and had ample free time to practice and perfect her own artistic skills. Her scrapbooks are evidence of both the constraints of this “Society with a capital S,” and of her own negotiations within it.

### ***Conclusion***

In examining scrapbooking through the lens of the archive, several types of analyses are possible; it is possible to forefront women’s experiences and narratives while also critiquing the larger public entity, “scrapbooking,” and the limitations this genre places on creativity. Ethnographers and sociologists who have explored in depth the worlds of crafting, crafting communities and individual crafters in recent years often have similar opinions about the implications of their work. Todd Goodsell and Liann Seiter, who investigate scrapbooking, and Marybeth Stalp, a sociologist who documents the work and habits of contemporary quiltmakers, agree that “neither public discourse nor scholarly inquiry has adequately considered the complexity of women’s and families’ everyday lives” (Goodsell & Seiter 2011, 322). We look to the objects that women create for clues not only to understand women’s lives, but as an epistemological model for how to approach women’s identity as a whole. Recalling Miriam Schapiro’s classic feminist trope of the “femmage” suggests that the collage, or the patchwork quilt is a model by which we can understand how women express

themselves and communicate with each other through the purposeful “cutting and pasting” of symbols and texts. Whether in fabric, paper, or the written word, that have meaning to a particular woman (Pershing 1993, 342-43). Scrapbook layouts, like quilts, are assembled by women from “scraps”; not only photographs, but mementos, text, and other decorative elements that have meaning and appeal for the scrappers who create them. Schapiro calls such assemblages acts of “pride, desperation, and necessity,” and notes the deeply emotional consequences of the creative efforts of women whose “...spiritual survival depended on the harboring of memories” (Pershing, 1993, 353). Scholarship that examines the care work undertaken by women is too rare, and women’s “everyday lives,” including the hobbies and crafting that, as “women’s work,” the unpaid care work done on behalf of their families, are often-overlooked “spaces of agency and empowerment ... autonomy and identity development” (Stalp 2010, 8).

Visual culture scholars shed light on how women’s photography and the creative ways these photographs are collected, archived, embellished, and displayed, respond to their cultural contexts as products of a particular political and social environment. Laura Wexler points out the ambiguity and contradiction inherent in women’s photography. In her chapter on the life of Jessie Tarbox Beals, Wexler emphasizes the ambiguous and contradictory messages about motherhood and women’s roles that punctuate the photographer's life. Her career as a “plucky” lady photographer led her to push boundaries and venture boldly into male territory. Yet, at the end of the chapter, Wexler includes a poignant



poem by Beals extolling her longed-for role as mother, a goal that eluded her for many years. Whatever messages scrappers encounter in the mass media, what women do with their own books may be a different story. If scrappers consciously avoid painful and controversial narratives, they are using their layouts – and online community forums that showcase their work – to comment on feminine stereotypes and gender roles, and to share their own stories about their lives and identities.

Is scrapbooking evidence that middle-class women, young and old, are “scrapping” feminist agendas? Again calling on the “femmeage,” and juxtaposing texts considering the variety of ways that scrapbooks function as archives of both personal values and public norms, may be the best way to uncover both the agency and the complicity, the complexity, and the constructive nature of this creative practice. Goodsell and Seiter note the ways that “Deborah’s” archive indeed “circumscribes and delimits” the narrative of family life, and the topics she leaves out are as noteworthy as what she includes. If her neighborhood was known for its history of social problems, there was no mention of that in her scrapbooks. Other tales of conflict, including children who invariably quarrel or get into trouble, are also not included (Goodsell & Seiter, 328). Rather than seeing this action as a whitewashing of the truth, Goodsell and Seiter argue that “creating cultural objects that reify a particular understanding of family allows family members to position themselves vis-à-vis this reality of family: performing supportive roles, extending the story, challenging the story, and so forth” (Goodsell & Seiter, 323). The creation of a particular type of narrative is a sign of

the creator's agency and ability to position herself within, and even critique her own actions and family situations.

In *Gendered Society*, Michael Kimmel argues that the very structure of the "man's world" of education, academic achievement and professional success leaves out the necessary pauses required for childbearing and childrearing. The organization and social dynamic in contemporary classrooms privilege boys and make it easier for them to succeed, and less painful when they fail (Kimmel 2000, 154-55). Especially for young, middle-class women, those not born into the ranks of the educational elite, but with enough disposable income to afford creative hobbies, may feel the tensions between the world of higher education and corporate America and their desires to become wives and mothers as sanctioned by their families and religious communities. If Madison, the young scrapper mentioned earlier, shifted her career expectations from veterinarian to elementary school teacher, it may have been largely because the academic demands of pre-vet studies were incompatible with her other commitments and values, including financial independence, spiritual growth, and fun. A darker reading may suggest that institutional sexism may have discouraged her from pursuing a scientific field, traditionally embracing male students with different economic and social choices. During her college years, she and other young women like her may have felt pressure from the many communities to which she belonged; parents may urge daughters to pursue a lucrative or competitive career track, boyfriends may begin to talk seriously about marriage. Church communities may try to persuade young women to follow yet another path. A

young woman's passion for scrapbooking may be her way of negotiating this tension, and placing her own desires, successes and priorities at the forefront of her life in a concrete way.

For many young women, the period of time between high school and parenthood may be more a time of stress, hard work and tough decisions, than a fun-filled romp of carefree flirting, shoe-shopping trips, and margaritas on the beach. Scrapbooks may be one way young women negotiate the space between who they are told to be and who they *are*, making sense of the "desperation and necessity" of making a living and raising a family in an environment that may be hostile to their success. Through creativity, women may be working for their own "spiritual survival" by creating a work of beauty and pride where they can construct and visualize their own life stories, free from parental, religious and class pressures. A woman's passion for scrapbooking may reveal her agency, as her way of telling her own story and controlling her own narratives about gender and success, but I argue that images of contemporary domesticity found in scrapbooking and the media that surround it serve to contain women's creativity within the bounds of traditional gender roles and conservative political and religious values.

## CHAPTER IV

### Stitch–n–Bitch: Conversations about Gender, Spectacle, and Opposition

*It seems wrong to call them fragments...they are woollen remarks in a larger conversation that is taking place out there, in plain sight. Somewhere, unknown members of an industrious community – of guerrilla knitters or yarnbombers – take the time to knit themselves into a colourful discussion, lending their hand-made voices to a collective statement, made tangible in alpaca and acrylic, lambswool and linen yarn. From London to Mexico City, Bali to Philadelphia, individuals invested in a collective, feminist reclamation of knitting, and of the everyday landscapes of our built environments, have been conversing in colours, in cosies. Moss stitch and stocking stitch, carefully ravelled, speak to the observer's eye of creative energy which, as a London yarnbombing group writes, 'doesn't necessarily need direction or concrete meaning, but should inspire the viewer to similar imaginative innovation' (Treen, 2015).*

#### **Introduction**

Kristen Treen, a British scholar of American Civil War material culture, describes the contemporary crafty spectacle called yarnbombing, the knitted “fragments” that anonymous crafters install in urban spaces, and the ways these handmade graffiti narrate a conversation between women. In this chapter, I expound on Treen’s notions about crafting as conversation, and, like Treen, I examine contemporary, 21<sup>st</sup> century objects next to examples from previous generations. Examining contemporary crafting as protest along with subversive works from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, and also the feminist movements of the 1960s, ‘70s and ‘80s, I argue that crafting is a traditional way women comment on their roles as women, workers, and partners in a male-dominated world.

Rozsika Parker’s feminist classic, *The Subversive Stitch*, conceives of the relationship between feminism and embroidery as a “vicious circle,” arguing that traditional art forms, such as needlework, have both created notions of femininity

that restricted women, and served as a vehicle through which women could redefine and subvert gender norms. “Women have nevertheless sewn a subversive stitch – managed to make meanings of their own in the very medium intended to inculcate self-effacement” (Parker 1984, 215). I revisit Parker’s interventions, and apply her claims about embroidery to “crafting” as a whole: embroidery, knitting, crochet, quilting and other textile and needlecrafts that have exploded in popularity and visibility in the last decade. I explore the tension between “craftivism,” crafting with a purposefully oppositional and activist leaning, and ideas that needlework and crafting are still responsible for producing and reproducing the traditional gender roles that restricted women’s creativity, both for Parker’s second wave feminist artists and third wave feminists who have embraced crafting as part of their generational identity.

Alongside Parker’s analysis of the traditional nature of crafting, gender and protest, I consider Dick Hebdige’s notions of subculture, and his examinations of the punk movement in late 1970s Britain. Hebdige’s work, written within a few years of Parker’s, likewise examines material culture in the context of politics and opposition, and also expresses an ambiguous and circular viewpoint about the possibilities of objects, whether handmade or purchased, to both resist and reproduce dominant societal messages. Hebdige explores the ways that subcultures, even the more radical strains, like punk culture, “can be incorporated, brought back into line, and located on the preferred “map of problematic social reality” (Hebdige 1979, 94). He discusses the complex position of the commodity within the “spectacular” subculture.

The relationship between the spectacular subculture and the various industries which service and exploit it is notoriously ambiguous. After all, such a subculture is concerned first and foremost with consumption. It operates exclusively in the leisure sphere... it communicates through commodities even if the meanings attached to those commodities are purposefully distorted or overthrown. It is therefore difficult ... to maintain any absolute distinction between commercial exploitation on the one and and creativity / originality on the other, even though these categories are emphatically opposed in the value systems of most subcultures" (Ibid. 94-95).

I argue that craftivism, by Hebdige's definition, is indeed a "spectacular subculture," occurring in the public sphere, it is a spectacle that positions itself as an activist artform, with ties to third wave feminists, who as a group have reclaimed traditional art forms such as knitting, crocheting, quilting, sewing and needlework as part of their artistic heritage, and as vehicles for their own expressive and oppositional narratives. Craftivism is also enmeshed "first and foremost with consumption," and it can be challenging to determine where the "commercial exploitation" and the creative impulse diverge. Parker and Hebdige seem to agree that the means of voicing oppositional sentiments may also be the force that holds that opposition within the bounds of societal norms.

...Commodities can be symbolically 'repossessed' in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings, by the very groups who originally produced them. The symbiosis in which ideology and social order, production and reproduction, are linked is then neither fixed nor guaranteed (Hebdige 1979,16).

The NAMES project AIDS quilt is the perfect example of Hebdige's notions put into action, where the quilt – an object with soft, feminine, American, family-oriented associations was appropriated, and re-crafted in support of gay rights. Both Hebdige and Parker inform an examination of the ways that contemporary crafters may engage in such a "repossession" of earlier forms, techniques and

materials. Both theorists can also lend insight into how this material culture and women's work contains and narrates double messages; contradictory meanings that both affirm and oppose dominant narratives about contemporary feminism. Ultimately, Hebdige argues, material culture is the means by which subcultures; like the punks, mods, and glitter rockers "can be incorporated, brought back into line, located on the preferred 'map of problematic social reality'" (Ibid. 94).

The objects women create form a complex and contradictory picture of the young "crafter," someone who self-identifies as a feminist, but with strong connections to tradition and history, wanting to connect with foremothers while rejecting their aesthetics, expressing environmental and anti-materialist sympathies while investing significant time and effort to create "cool stuff" like a knitted replica of a Fender electric guitar (Figure 18) to express themselves and support causes and issues they care about. Politics, art, and self-expression are intertwined; crafters express their sympathy for exploited textile workers, protest "against useless materialism" (Greer 2007, Sabella 2007), voice their desire to reduce, reuse, and recycle, or spend time making objects in support of the issues and causes important to them.

I argue that women's crafting and the narratives women create surrounding their creativity form a conversation, or a debate, about women's traditional arts, gender roles and feminism. This phenomenon is itself highly traditional. I look to past debates centered on folk forms, craft and material culture, and argue that there is continuity in the ways that women have used objects to voice their opinions. I also examine the differences and disagreements

between the second and third wave generations of feminists, and note how the two “waves” come together and differentiate themselves from each other.

### ***Generational Debates and Class Dynamics***

Feminism is often divided into waves, which “can be useful, a way to define the contours of a specific movement at a specific moment,” (Cochrane 216) “First wave” feminism generally refers to movements centering around securing women’s suffrage (ibid); “second wave” feminism often refers to the struggles of women to gain greater equality in the workplace from the 1960s through the 1980s, spurred by the publication of feminist classics such as *The Feminine Mystique* (ibid., 258). The term “third wave” is often attributed to Rebecca Walker, daughter of Alice Walker, whose article in response to the Clarence Thomas – Anita Hill hearings was entitled “Becoming the Third Wave.” A definition of the third wave distilled from an overview of popular sources might include women coming of age in the 1990s whose thoughts and philosophies are post-structuralist in nature, with an activism that leans towards micro-politics, echoing the “personal is political” mantra adopted by the second wave before them (Walker, *Third Wave: Continued*, 2015).

Debates about feminism have a long history of being interwoven with debates about race and class identity. Second wave feminism has been criticized for privileging the voices of middle and upper-class white, heterosexual feminists over those of queer women, women of color, and working-class women; similar race and class dynamics exist among the third wave. Certainly, having the leisure time to engage in artmaking and the funds to purchase materials



suggests a privileged group. Craft industry data discussing minority groups as growing markets suggest, however, that minority women, like white women, spend significant amounts on crafting and craft supplies, and have similar internet habits (Craft & Hobby Association, 2012). According to blogger Ulla-Maaria Mutanen, author of the hobbyprincess.com blog, over three-quarters of American households have at least one family member who spends an average of 7.5 hours weekly engaged in crafting or related hobbies. According to the American Hobby Industry Association the size of the craft & hobby industry in the United States rose from \$20 billion in 2000, to \$29 billion in 2004. Some 15% of American crafters make items to sell, blurring the lines between commercial artists and amateurs.

Journalist Jennifer Sabella cites self-identified third wave feminist crafters Cinnamon Cooper and Annie Tomlin (an editor at *Time Out Chicago*), who note that part of crafting's appeal is anti-corporate and anti-materialistic. "Paying someone substandard wages [for clothing production] is not a feminist act," Cooper asserts. Issues of class and race pervade the debate. Sabella notes that crafting can be an expensive, privileged form of activism she compares to "purchasing all organic food," something many people would love to do, but simply can't afford. Sabella argues that third wave feminists are also looking for meaning in gender identity and construction, reclaiming crafts as part of women's artistic heritage, have reacted negatively to associations between domesticity and the right wing, and are eager to reclaim creativity for feminists (Columbia Chronicle, 2006). Glenna Matthews, scholar on women's work, asserts, "I think

the reason that feminists see domesticity as a trap is because the right wing has so successfully claimed these values and used them to try and drive women into subservient roles” (Matthews 1987, Matchar 2013, 153). It is clear there are debates both between waves and among feminists of the same generations about what crafting means to women, and how – even whether – the creation of handmade objects is activism. Whatever women say, the objects they make speak to these debates in ways that are even more potent than their stated opinions. The subsequent section illustrates how the objects women make serve to narrate and define these debates.

### ***Objects and Opposition***

Scholars from a variety of fields have examined the ways objects can function as unique and eloquent texts revealing the agency and oppositional interventions of groups who have been oppressed and marginalized. Material culture scholar Ian Woodward asserts that, “People require objects to understand and perform aspects of selfhood, and to navigate the terrain of culture more broadly” (Woodward 2007, vi). Thomas Schlereth likewise argues that the study of objects illuminates the lives of the marginalized in ways that examination of more “traditional” scholarly texts cannot (Schlereth 1981, 88). Indeed, the scholars examined here suggest that material culture offers unique possibilities for understanding societal power, consumption and commoditization, personal agency, and class dynamics. Janice Radway argues that material culture may speak to the “Interstices [that] still exist within the social fabric where opposition is carried on by people who are not satisfied by their place within it or by the

restricted material and emotional rewards that accompany it" (Radway 1984, 222). Scholars who examine women's cultural production, investigate objects and the ways they occupy the "interstices" between producer power and consumer agency, the handmade and the mass-produced, and the public and the private. As George Lipsitz argues, the "sideshow" may in reality be the "main event" (Lipsitz 1990, 20). These "interstices" occupied by objects that are "mass-produced...selected, purchased, constructed and used" may tell us more about the nature of our efforts to navigate the "terrain of culture" and perform "aspects of selfhood" than more traditional academic texts and other areas of scholarly inquiry (Woodward 2007, vi). Historian Kristin Treen notes the "power and vitality" that "guerrilla" crafts such as yarnbombing can lend to "mundane" analyses of gender and domestic roles. "Interrupting the public gaze, and challenging the unsuspecting eye with incongruous patches of domestic stuff, yarnbombers use knitting to suggest the kind of things – about domesticity and value, creativity and gender, individuality and power – that we spend so long finding the right words to confront" (Treen 2015) (Figure 16) .

Echoing Rozsika Parker, I argue that women have been agents working in these "interstices" for centuries. Crafting and women's traditional arts have been connected to the development and expression of feminist thought as long as there have been concepts of feminism and women's rights. The handmade object speaks to women's feelings about gender roles, sexuality and the body, their ideas about their own individuality, as well as their connections to other women, past and present. An object made by a woman speaks about her in ways

that written words do not adequately capture; even women who are reluctant to, or have no interest in, voicing their feminist notions verbally, can and do express oppositional feelings and desires through the objects they create. Material culture illuminates an aspect of this population and the debates within and between them and other groups in a unique and exemplary way. Objects can incorporate humor, irony, and inconsistency, and employ hedging techniques in ways that are often missing or incomplete in written and spoken, academic, and other narratives. They also illustrate issues of race, class, technology and consumption that both enable and define women's expression and agency. Their "objectness" is an important part of their power. In this chapter, I will give historical examples of how women used the forms of expression available to them: quilts, textiles, household objects, to voice their political opinions and express support for causes and movements they believed in, such as temperance, women's suffrage, and abolition.

If third wave feminists did not "discover" knitting, quilting and cross stitch, they are certainly using these media in ways that are highly *traditional* among feminist activists, in keeping with how their forbears transmitted values and beliefs. Women's traditional arts were extremely important to second wave feminists in establishing women artists as legitimate and important.

Incorporating elements of women's work, including embroidery, knitting, patchwork, and other traditional textiles into their contemporary pieces was not an immediate or simple choice for feminist artists. Using techniques and materials that had been denigrated by the art world for decades was a risk. Lucy

Lippard describes a meeting of women artists that took place in 1971, and notes that each artist, after describing her projects of “an acceptably ambitious art-world nature” (Lippard 1971, 54), each furtively described what she did in her spare time: “collages... journals, or work with dolls ... a strange, intimate but fugitive world” (Ibid.). Artists like Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and Faith Ringgold broke new ground in incorporating patchwork, quilting, lace and embroidery into their very political and contemporary artworks.

Again, Miriam Schapiro’s notion of “femmage” provides a useful framework (Pershing 1993, 342-43). My work explores the ways third wave feminists engage in just this type of “repositioning and recontextualizing” of vintage femininity in their own creations, utilitarian or not. If second wave artists pioneered in creating work that showcased traditional elements, for third wavers this practice is often intuitive, and comfortable. Typical of this comfort juxtaposing the traditionally feminine with the militant: Debbie Stoller, author and co-founder of *Bust Magazine*, is also the author of the hugely popular series of hip, ironic knitting and crocheting how-to books including *Stitch-n-Bitch* and *The Happy Hooker*.

Looking at women’s traditional arts may seem a fertile ground for bringing generations of feminists together, but the two waves are not always in agreement; often their disagreements are loud, prolonged, and vitriolic. Women who define themselves as feminists may differ greatly in what they feel constitutes a feminist life; second wave feminists can be critical of the views and issues important to the third wave, who themselves have differing opinions about

crafty matters. Andi Zeisler, co-founder of *Bitch Magazine*, is troubled by the recent trend of finding feminist agency within the crafting movement, “Unless you’re doing crafts that are specifically political, it’s really an apolitical act,” she argues. “I would say you’re not living a feminist life simply by virtue of reclaiming a feminine art or something that has been...denigrated as just women’s work” (Slovic, 2007). Zeisler’s contemporary, Jennifer Baumgardner, a *Ms. Magazine* alumna and one of the voices defining third wave feminism, disagrees. She accuses second wave feminists and third wavers like Zeisler of “doing to younger women what men have done to them. Second wavers are saying to us, ‘You’re silly. That isn’t an important issue. What you talk about is dumb. Let me tell you what feminism is’” (Straus, 2000). One of the tenets of the craftivism movement, argues Betsy Greer, artist, scholar and founder of [www.craftivism.com](http://www.craftivism.com), is that crafting does change the world, “...we create to connect beyond ourselves ... Craft and activism both take and inspire passion. When used as a joint force, they can quite possibly begin to slowly challenge and change things” (Greer 2007). Artists do find feminism in creativity, though this may not be the feminism the second wave intended. Jessica Neuman Beck, an artist and stay-at-home mom, notes that crafting is one way to bridge the gap between career and family. “The fact that you can stay home with your kids and still have a fulfilling life outside of that ...I think that’s starting to redefine feminism” (Slovic, 2007).

Exploring contemporary and historical visions of women’s traditional arts, I hope to use objects from fine art, folk art, and pop culture traditions to construct a

visual iteration of debates between the waves about what feminism is becoming today.

***Crafting as Debate: Gender Roles and “Verbal Art” Among Second Wave Quiltmakers***

Handmade objects and their makers have a long history of narrating women’s dissent, and serving as visual records of debates about gender, class identity, and aesthetics. During the height of the feminist movement spanning the 1970s and ‘80s, second wave feminist artists used their work to question and debate issues of femininity, aesthetics and gender roles; however, groups of women who would flatly deny their feminist status likewise engage in spirited and debates through their artwork, which likewise give rise to oppositional narratives.

In the mid-1970s, a group of feminist artists in Britain embarked on a project that started small, and grew into the exhibition, “Feministo: A Portrait of the Artist as a Housewife” (1975-77). The women created a series of artworks, many of which evolved into collaborative efforts when they exchanged the pieces by mail. All of the works used traditional “women’s work” media, such as crocheting, embroidery, and quilting, but with dark, ironic, even oppositional themes. Su Richardson crocheted a replica of a “burnt breakfast,” rendering in yarn a traditional means of resistance used by homemakers to strike back at an overbearing or demanding husband - the “accidental” burning of his meals. Installed in a gallery setting, the pieces were arranged in a series of rooms to suggest a sort of dystopian household. The exhibit conveyed very clearly “a

double message,” (Parker 1994, 208) as it “both celebrated the area of domestic creativity...and exposed it for its paucity” (Ibid. Parker, and Goodall, 1976).

Many of the *Feministo* artists earned their living through their artwork, but non-professional artists around the same time period engaged in similar visual “conversations.” Folklorist Linda Pershing examined how the work of two groups of outwardly very “traditional” quiltmakers engaged in a debate about their own aesthetics, and (perhaps unconsciously) how feminism was shifting the boundaries of their quilting traditions. Pershing’s study focuses on Karen Horvath, a stay-at-home mom and the newest member of the “Bee There” quilting bee of Austin, Texas. Karen’s favorite quilt pattern was Sunbonnet Sue, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century child’s pattern that depicted a plump and stylized pioneer girl in profile, wearing a sunbonnet. Without Horvath’s knowledge, her fellow quilters decided to play a good-natured joke on her, and began creating *Scandalous Sunbonnet Sue*. Each block of the quilt depicted Sue doing something “scandalous” – smoking, drinking a martini, burning her bra, reading dirty novels, showering naked with Overall Bill (Sue’s male equivalent, dressed in overalls and a farmer’s straw hat), and finally, walking down the aisle as a pregnant bride. The group presented Karen with the quilt on her 40<sup>th</sup> birthday, not as a reproach, but rather as a testament to their affection for her (Pershing 1993, 102-3).

The *Scandalous Sue* quilt follows the tradition of giving a presentation quilt or a friendship quilt, but breaks with traditional forms in its rejection of a “cute,” feminine aesthetic and its subversion of restrictive gender images. The Bee



There quilters were not only commenting on the outdated notion of a wholesome, “goody-two-shoes” feminine ideal, they were also announcing their discomfort with Sue’s exaggerated sentimentality. “We were just going to gag!” griped one member about Karen’s enthusiasm for the cute pattern. Sue was too corny, trite, and syrupy for the women’s tastes. They rejected her aesthetic choice as much as her old-fashioned depiction of girlhood (Pershing 1993, 113). The quilters didn’t go too far; Sue wasn’t holding up a liquor store or smoking pot instead of tobacco, or – even more “scandalous” – showering with another Sunbonnet Sue. Gender roles were updated and questioned, but they weren’t thrown out entirely. “Scandalous” is the perfect word for the Bee Theres’ creation, suggesting a shattering of old-fashioned rules of propriety, rather than a subversion of gender roles altogether.

The Bee Theres were not the only group to subvert Sunbonnet Sue’s cutie-pie image – Pershing also analyzes the Eastern Kansas Quilt Guild’s *The Sun Sets for Sunbonnet Sue*. The group, tired of the hackneyed pattern, collaborated on a quilt that symbolically succeeds in “killing off” Sunbonnet Sue altogether. In each block, Sue meets a humorously grisly demise, with themes drawn from the popular culture of the late 1970s. The women played with pattern names and images, and the quilt is in itself a comment on news, politics and popular culture of the period. In *Sunbonnet Sue-icide*, Sue hangs herself, while *Suestown* shows Sue after drinking the purple kool-aid left over from the Jonestown Massacre (Pershing 1993, 114). hilariously, Sue also gets crushed by

a falling Skylab, strangled by a giant flower, executed by the Mob, and eaten by a snake.

In their play with the names as well as the images, the Bee Theres reinforce Bauman's notion of folklore performance as "verbal art" and "oral poetics." Verbally and visually, the quiltmakers enforce their power to control, twist and change the patterns and their meanings to suit their own aesthetics and values. Furthermore, like Barre Toelken's stuffed Jackalope and the stories and lore that surrounded it (Toelken 1996), the Sunbonnet Sue quilts crossed the borders between genres. The quilt is folk art, but it also becomes a joke, a parody, and a comment on the popular culture of the decade: Jaws, Skylab, Three Mile Island, and Jonestown. As with Jane Phillips' contemporary urban legends via email, quiltmakers may have been expressing not only a humorous fascination with technology and "modern life," but also their anxieties about these forces and their real-life desires to avoid the imaginary fates they dealt the unfortunate Sunbonnet Sue.

The Kansas quilters' much darker attack on Sue received a good deal more negative feedback than its "scandalous" counterpart in Texas. "I thought it...was in extremely poor taste," says one quiltmaker and critic. "That [traditional Sunbonnet Sue pattern] merely showed lack of imagination. [*The Sun Sets for Sunbonnet Sue*] showed a lack of good will, and I don't like that" (Pershing 1993, 116). Some critics felt the commentary on the Sunbonnet Sue aesthetic was uncalled for; the attack amounted to a criticism of the taste of women who did appreciate the cute, sweet imagery, echoing Barbara Ehrenreich's critique of the

pink ribbon movement. The perceived attack on the tastes of other “sister” quiltmakers was considered just as inflammatory as the irreverent image of Sue placed in gruesome situations. Other groups, echoing the need for an updated Sunbonnet Sue, responded with quilts that depicted Sunbonnet Sue in less morbid ways; as an outdoor adventurer, or as *Ms. Sunbonnet Sue*, leading the life of a “liberated woman”(Pershing 1993, 116-17).

Thus, the alternative Sunbonnet Sue quilt became the vehicle for a dialogue about women’s experiences and aesthetics. Linda Pershing summarizes, “These women have rejected the notion that their traditional arts may be used only to support and sustain conventional notions of female identity,” (Pershing 1993, 20) and shows how the Bee Theres used Sunbonnet Sue to express the type and level of resistance to gender and aesthetic norms that was comfortable for them. The debate about gender roles and group values was not necessarily intentional; Pershing notes that the women “were more comfortable discussing the technical aspects of making the quilt than about the reasons for making it or what it means to them” (Pershing 1993, 118). But the response of the “audience” of other quiltmakers highlights the very performative nature of quilting, and the changing community values that were the subject of debate.

The Sunbonnet Sue subversions became a dialogue about gender, aesthetics and tradition – subversion and reaffirmation of traditional forms were a type of conversation between practitioners about what is and is not traditional; what should be updated and what is off limits to critique. This example is the essence of how material culture can be performative in nature; not only is a folk

activity taking place, but the activity and the creations, the quilts themselves, spur discussion and debate, or audience response, about the aesthetics and values the group is interested in transmitting. And, the group is in many ways setting limits on how far members are allowed to go. If it is not “OK” to kill Sunbonnet Sue, it may be “OK” to show her in “scandalous” situations. If, as Handler and Linnekin argue, “tradition resembles less an artifactual assemblage than a process of thought – an ongoing interpretation of the past” (Handler and Linnekin 1989, 39), then the makers of the subversive Sunbonnet Sues were in keeping with tradition, looking back at past notions of accepted quilt forms and gender norms and reevaluating both. This example can be applied to the work of contemporary crafters and the issues and debates important to them as well. Like the Bee Theres, the third wave crafters also engage in an “ongoing interpretation” of past forms, updating and re-visioning them as they see fit. Like the pop culture quilts made by the women three decades ago, the creative output of more contemporary crafters also gives evidence of material culture as performance, and the ways crafters privately perform Woodward’s private “aspects of selfhood,” and navigate the public “terrain of culture” as well.

### ***The Visual Language of Opposition: Inserting the Female into a Male World***

Feministo, in the 1970s, followed by the work of the Bee Theres in the 1980s, is evidence of a continuum of second wave feminists (whether or not they would refer to themselves as “feminists”) who gave voice to their feelings about gender roles through their artwork. This section interrogates the ways that generations of younger feminists engage in similar visual discussions, evidence

that the transmission of values can indeed be a thought process. Looking at both groups and the debates that are important to them shows a clear continuity in the ways that objects and creativity are used to voice opinions, and, how objects can speak to women's beliefs and how they view their own gender roles. As in Hebdige's analysis of punk culture, narratives about consumption and collecting emerge and reemerge throughout this discussion, whether objects are created as a backlash against a materialist, disposable society, or whether creativity and inspiration spring from shopping for and collecting yarn, fabric, vintage sewing accessories, mementos, or other objects. The historical nature of such debates emerge again when themes and techniques used in master works, created by feminist masters such as Judy Chicago (including her Dinner Party installation), Miriam Schapiro, and Faith Ringgold, are re-visioned and remade in works by emerging artists and non-professional artists.

Just as *Feministo* united individual women's voices into a collaborative, multivalent exhibit, Betsy Greer describes an emphasis on community and connection that is important to the craftivism movement; works created by groups of artists, and works intended to be shared and copied form an alternate vision that stands in contrast to a world that is hard, urban, individualistic, and male-dominated. The "Quilt of Compassion" created after September 11, 2001 by Laura Fogg, Betty Lacey, and their quilting group in Ukiah, CA, and "One Way Trip" by Alma Carrillo, member of Los Hilos de la Vida, a group of California Latinas who created an exhibit of story quilts documenting their immigrant experiences. Similarly, Lisa Anne Auerbach's "Body Count Mittens," traditional

knitted mittens bearing the number of soldiers killed in Iraq as of March 2005, are available for download as a free pattern on her blog, [www.stealthissweater.org](http://www.stealthissweater.org), to encourage other knitters to “stop making scarves, start making trouble” (Auerbach, 2006). Like the creators of open source software, Auerbach rejects consumption and individual gain by offering her pattern for free; she also emphasizes that the act of knitting is itself subversive, and encourages knitters to work on political projects in public.

Other crafters question the relationships between public and private, individual and community, in more confrontational ways. Kristen Treen envisions yarn bombing as a visual conversation; Malia Wollen emphasizes the gentler impulses associated with these visual jokes.

Yarn bombing takes that most matronly craft (knitting) and that most maternal of gestures (wrapping something cold in a warm blanket) and transfers it to the concrete and steel wilds of the urban streetscape. Hydrants, lampposts, mailboxes, bicycles, cars — even objects as big as buses and bridges — have all been bombed in recent years, ever so softly and usually at night (Wollen 2011) (Figure 17).

Knitters like Jessie Hemmons, 24, often create yarn bombs as a reaction of anger and annoyance to male-dominated visual culture, like bronze statues of male historical figures in public places; telephone poles, phone booths and other phallic symbols of male-dominated, capitalist society. Hemmons notes that by combining graffiti tactics, so “male dominated,” with needlework that is traditionally feminine, yarn bombers at once participate in this male-centered transgressive tradition and offer a female-centered softness to the urban landscape that women must negotiate, but feel they do not own (Ibid.).

There is a nurturing aspect to the yarn bombing movement that is particularly potent; when Polish artist Agata Oleksiak, or “Olek,” created an enormous pink and purple knitted sweater for the bull sculpture on New York’s Wall Street, a symbol of potent male financial dominance, she lamented at the speed with which the bull’s “sweater” was removed by the custodial staff. Given the snow and cold temperatures in New York in the days that followed her Christmas day 2010 installation, she expressed regret that the bull wasn’t allowed to keep his cozy wrap (Poppy Gall, 2011). Olek has her own ideas about how her work fits into the world of fine art; she distances herself from both the term and the movement, insisting “I don’t yarn bomb, I make art” (NY Times, 2010). Her impetus for creating the bull’s winter sweater was not anger at the evils of a male-centered financial sector, she argues, but her concern for the immigrant New Yorkers who, like her, were unable to return to their home countries for Christmas, and who, like the bull, had few comforts to protect them from New York’s chill. Olek’s motives are ambiguous, as she positions herself not as an anonymous yarn bomber with an ironic axe to grind, but as a professional artist whose work is available for purchase – if the bull’s sweater made a fleeting appearance, Olek accepts commissions to produce similar treatments on chairs or sofas that can be purchased and enjoyed in a collector’s home.

If some crafters use their work to interject a soft, “feminine,” collective sensibility into a male-centered, individualistic urban environment, others embrace modernity and self-consciously use and comment on technology in their work, using computers, the Internet and other high-tech tools and accessories to

create anti-materialist and anti-corporate works. Notions of the handmade become complicated. Mercedes Rodgers's knitted blanket (Figure 19) includes a quote from Richard Rutt's *A History of Hand Knitting* (interestingly, an early history of a traditionally "female" medium compiled and documented by a male British clergyman) commenting on the differences between "craft" and art. Knitted using traditional techniques, Rodgers created the text pattern using KnitPro software, enabling her to incorporate text into her work digitally, then print a pattern she can follow by hand. Her choice of text also draws attention to "quality" debates that have surrounded women's work for centuries. Lisa Anne Auerbach, as previously mentioned, is also open about her use of pattern software and even knitting machines to create her pieces.

Technology not only factors into the creation of pieces, drawing attention to questions of the meaning of "handmade," it also enables collectivism, communication and connection among women; craftivism's core values. Blogging about art, crafting and feminism is an important part of this movement; women use their online spaces to exchange ideas, chronicle daily lives as artists and connect with "like minded souls...a deep meditative breath in and a huge exhale out...refreshing" (Komisarski, 2007). The visual conversation has a parallel, and often intersecting, life online. The internet facilitates communication, but also serves as a platform for showcasing one's individual accomplishments. Crafter Christa Baber posts her projects on Flickr and Facebook, noting that since her family "never, ever, compliments me on this stuff" (personal communication, interview with C. Baber, 2010). Posting to the internet helps



provide her with kudos from friends and colleagues who can view her projects and share their approval. Yarn bombers use digital photos and video to document and publicize works that, left out in the open, begin to disintegrate rapidly, or, like the bull's sweater, are hastily removed from public works.

Crafters seek connections that are real and tangible, but also forge imagined connections with the collective legion of ancestors and foremothers who have preceded them, both genetically and artistically. This comment from a Portland, Oregon nurse on the Craftster site illustrates the connections between the generations fostered by crafting.

I get kind of hurt in a special place in my heart when I hear 'This ain't your grandma's crochet' or 'Your mama never made anything like this'... It's a major diss on patriarchy that's rather uncomfortable . . . Here's a big ups to all the moms who brought us to where we are, and here's to us who bring into the material world our own versions of things past" (Martin 2007).

Crafters and authors are eager to embrace the ancestral link to foremothers, but also to insert their own individuality, making the statement that "this ain't your grandma's" crochet, embroidery, or patchwork. Embroidery artist Jenny Hart uses "This ain't your grandma's embroidery" as a tagline for her alternative embroidery pattern company, Sublime Stitching. Equally important is the notion that this crafting departs from that of "your grandma," that it is different, subversive, individual, and that women have appropriated more traditional forms and turned them into feminist statements. A young designer who creates one-of-a-kind clothing items from recycled textiles urges the feminist leanings of crafting, asserting that it is more than just "what women do in their spare time, to make

some extra money, or to satisfy some *cute* impulse...” (Levine, 2009). If there are “big ups” to the history of women’s work, there are also vociferous cries for individuality, feminism, and women’s right to revamp and re-vision what constitutes a feminine aesthetic in modern terms.

In a world of disposable clothes, someone taking the time to create *the fabric* to create the sweater seems impossibly obtuse and backwards, but rewards the maker with so much more in the long run. I think there has always been an [impulse] in young women, taking things from past generations and making [them] their own (interview with Leslie Van Every, 2011).

**“Aspects of Selfhood”: Personal Aesthetics, Identity & Biography**

Women now knit for themselves, for peace and tranquility, the satisfaction of challenge and creativity... 100 years ago women knitted socks for their families - women knit more...as a personal and social act, even to relax and meditate (personal communication, S. Stollak, 2007).

Many of the objects that women make reflect how women’s creativity comes out of their own life stories. The simple act of personal expression when making an object is a reification of the importance of one’s own life story, a creation of a narrative about who a woman is and what is important to her. Second wave artists such as Faith Ringgold, in her “story” quilts – again, emphasizing the importance of the narrative, the “story” of a woman’s life -- use these techniques to reject academic notions of art and art history as only “valid” when it depicts classical, western themes, reinforcing the validity of women’s work and women’s experience as “fine art.” “Dancing at the Louvre” tells a visual story of a group of African-American women and girls in their Sunday best dancing in front of the Mona Lisa and two other masterworks depicting women, placing Ringgold’s women and girls within the context of the most famous art

museum in the world. Ringgold's story quilts, like "Dancing at the Louvre" are classic examples of how artists incorporate both fine art and traditional techniques and weave their own personal life stories into their works in ways that express collective truths about the human – and woman's – experience (Cameron, Powell et. al. 1998: ix).

Works by emerging artists include a knitted Fender guitar created by artist and musician Sarah Stollak (Figure 3), and Boo Davis' "Primer" quilt, with blocks reading "A is for amp" and "O is for Ozzy," the pattern and construction mimics a traditional alphabet quilt often made for children (Davis, 2006: quiltsryche.com). Both works challenge the traditional notions of feminine aesthetics with work that reflects their edgy, individualistic tastes and their participation in the male space that exists within heavy metal and punk genres, but also gives an ironic, though appreciative, nod to more traditional craft forms. If *Feministo* challenged notions of authorship, using collaboration to challenge the male-centered world of fine art, items such as the *Hugbaby* dolls created as a collaboration between a mother and her autistic daughter, show how technology, tradition, activism and consumption intermingle in just one object. Taking her daughter's drawing of a little girl, the crafter scanned the drawing, printed it on fabric transfer paper using her inkjet printer, and sewed the fabric into dolls in the shape of the human or animal figure pictured. The dolls were sold on Etsy.com and Autismspeaks.com, blurring the lines between art and consumption, and illustrating that for many crafters, their activities can be a source of income as well as a passion. Crafter and author Susan Beal feels that the act of earning a living from her art is

activism itself. “In another era, I would have done this as a hobby, but the fact that I can earn my living with my creativity feels very feminist to me...I definitely think it’s a radical act...to make something that’s homemade what it’s so easy to buy something that was made in Bangladesh” (Slovic, 2007). She notes the anti-corporate sentiments that permeate crafty culture, the “radical” act of rejecting oppressive labor practices and corporate colonialism.

Shere Ross, musician and author of knitting how-to book *Punk Knits*, echoes the idea that knitting is subversive in and of itself, and especially the act of making one’s own clothes is likewise an act of resistance. Many crafters link their activities not only to their connections with women in their family, but the punk movement of the 1970s and 80s. “What’s NOT punk about knitting?...in your own personal way, you can snub the corporations that try to strip away your individuality by knitting garments instead of buying them” (Ross 2007, 9). The works of Ross, Stoller, and Davis likewise underscore the theoretical connections between Rozsika Parker and Dick Hebdige: one’s own handiwork is a tool in resisting dominant powers, but is also commoditized. Ross and Davis are professionals who make their living through their artwork and publishing; their work, as Hebdige would argue, turns subculture into a product that can be consumed, a way of normalizing and commoditizing their resistance and opposition into a form that is societally appropriate – even feminine.

### ***Femininity, Sexuality & the Body***

I was trying my best to look bad ass. I have wanted my knuckles tattooed for some 10 years or so now....I just never knew what in the hell I wanted to announce to the whole wide world upon my dainty knuckles. Then after

my two year knit-aversary, last spring, I realized how much knitting has affected me...So it naturally made sense to me to label my hands with the words that have served me so well over the last few years (Tammy George 2011, "Punkrawkpurl") (Figure 20)

Describing the issues and values important to young feminists, Jennifer Baumgardner notes that "young women's primary expression these days is a joy and ownership of sexuality, and that's a form of power, a type of energy" (Straus 2006). Crafters play with, invert or reject gender stereotypes as they incorporate sex and the body into their work. Specific examples include hand stitched condom carriers made by a variety of different artists (tampon and lipstick cases are also common) in a number of different styles. The variety of these small works reflect not only the breadth of media and styles that women choose, but how they feel about expressing their own sexuality: announcing their sexual intentions to the world, or hiding discreetly, maintaining their privacy. Embroidery patterns by Jenny Hart, a needlework artist whose company, Sublime Stitching, markets patterns in a variety of provocative vintage and off-beat styles that engage the third wave's desire to merge images of old-fashioned sexuality in the context of women's power and strength. The pinup-style female figures suggest the ways that young crafters are embracing "girlie culture" and appropriating vintage notions of femininity, once the subject of the male gaze, as a statement of power. The patterns themselves serve as a comment on the nature of contemporary crafting; notions of handmade and store bought are intertwined, and artists can pick and choose which images they use, and how they present them.

Margo DeMello's work with tattoo imagery illustrates the questions of class, as well as the tension between oppositional actions and reproduction of dominant narratives among a young, middle-class population. Tammy George's self-portrait of her tattooed knuckles, above, connects her passion for making things with her personal and bodily aesthetics. While a tattoo may not fit easily into the definition of "object," as a type of personal adornment it has a close relationship to needlework, jewelry, and other personal aesthetic choices that reflect individuality, and speak to notions of class status and "distinction" in the tradition of Bourdieu and Baudrillard. DeMello notes that individuality, spirituality, personal transformation, and empowerment are all important factors in many of the narratives she collected. She details the gender differences that emerged from her research as well, noting that women were more likely than male informants to "explain tattoos in terms of healing, empowerment or control" (DeMello 2000, 173). She concludes by arguing that, even for the middle-class tattoo "majority" she sees emerging, resistance is one of the main motivating factors inspiring individuals to become tattooed. For the GenX population, DeMello argues, their acts of resistance show their discomfort with "the megaconsumerism of the mall, or the often alienating reality of computers" (DeMello 2000, 189) seeking a more authentic and "modern primitive" aesthetic than contemporary consumer society promises. DeMello argues that current enthusiasm for tattoos and body art offers a critique of contemporary culture, and expresses a sense of "alienation" that personal adornment and material culture have the power to address.

As “authentic” and “primitive” tattoo designs from Asia and other cultures permeated the contemporary tattoo vocabulary, displacing more traditional “American” working-class motifs, DeMello argues that middle-class standing is at once confirmed and rejected by an individual’s choice of tattoo. “To wear tribal or Japanese tattoos is to mark one as middle-class, educated and artistically sophisticated, yet it is rejected” as the act of wearing a tattoo rebels against middle-class values and aesthetics (DeMello 2000, 90). So, by an act of “rebellion” against middle-class aesthetics, the individual is actually confirming and reinforcing his or her own class status. Tammy George, like the yarn bombers and their textile graffiti, comments on the tension between traditional male and female spheres as she appropriates a somewhat fierce male form – tattooed knuckles, accompanied by a white tank top and “bad-ass” snarl -- softening it by using the female-centered language of knitting stitches. Her use of humor and irony marks her as “in the know,” and her willingness to announce her passion as a knitter in a most public way on her “dainty knuckles” expresses the ease with which she can appropriate male culture, as well as her comfort with her own female body. Her blog, *Punkrawkpurl*, chronicles not only her creative endeavors, but also her shopping scores, tattoo history, and selfies. Her work as a knitter and crafter isn’t separate from her shopping or body art, it’s all a part of the same creative impulse.

### ***Conclusion***

Resist fashion. Manufacture your own brand. Embrace tradition. Learn from history. Shatter the present. Create the future. Stitch by stitch, we can and will change the world. The revolution is at hand and knitting

needles are the only weapons you'll need. Stop making scarves, start making trouble. Consume less. Create more. Knitting is political. BEGIN IMMEDIATELY (Lisa Anne Auerbach 2006)

Auerbach's "Knitting for a New Millennium" is a call to action to knitters, crafters and feminists. Her message is ambiguous, however. She claims "knitting needles are the only weapons you'll need," but also suggests there's more to the story than just knitting; scarves alone don't cut it. Action, not complacency, is needed to "change the world." Likewise, Kristen Treen's analysis points out the possibilities for critique and misunderstanding of the oppositional potential of craftivism; if the ironic, humorous creations described here "might elevate the knitted object beyond its gendered, domestic associations, but its kitsch levity also undermines a history of knitting-as-necessity in times of conflict, moments in which women went about shaping their identities through the items they made ..." (Treen 2015).

Kristen Treen questions the oppositional potential of yarnbombing, and thus the craftivism movement as a whole, when she compares the contemporary activity she sees to 19<sup>th</sup> century examples of women's handiwork made in support of Confederate soldiers during the Civil War. She argues that objects need to be understood not only in terms of their visual impact, but also the societal context where their protest resides; one woman's unfinished sock, meant to clothe a Confederate soldier but left unfinished when the war abruptly ended, speaks not only to one woman's personal loss, turmoil, and political beliefs, but also the greater evils of southern society and the system of slavery and oppression she worked to protect.



How to make sense of the tension between complicity and opposition inherent in examining women's creativity? Janice Radway's study of romance novel readers expresses a similar sense of ambiguity about the potential of objects to fulfill needs and play a part in individuals' internal narratives and struggles. Radway notes that, perhaps like crafting, reading can be an isolated activity that might actually keep women from coming together to solve problems, but that readers see the act of reading as "combative and compensatory," and view the time that women take for themselves; refusing to give in to demanding spouses, families, and domestic responsibility, as a form of resistance. Radway notes the ambiguous nature of this "combative" activity. "When viewed from the vantage point of a feminism that would like to see the women's oppositional impulse lead to real social change, romance reading can also be seen as an activity that could potentially disarm that impulse" (Radway 1984, 213). Radway finally concludes that even small, ambiguous forms of resistance are meaningful, and an important source of scholarly inquiry.

Commodities like mass-produced literary texts are selected, purchased, constructed and used by real people with previously existing needs, desires, intentions and interpretive strategies. By reinstating those active individuals and their creative, constructive activities at the heart of our interpretive enterprise, we avoid blinding ourselves to the fact that the essentially human practice of making meaning goes on even in a world increasingly dominated by things and by consumption (Radway 1984, 221).

I come to the "sew what." Like the late 20<sup>th</sup> century artists who created *Feministo* and the *Dinner Party*, and the Bee There quilters, contemporary crafters are engaging in a debate about their identities and roles through their

artwork. Perhaps the most important intervention accomplished by crafters is not the cessation of needless scarf production but instead, to use these acts of play and creativity to create an interruption -- a uniquely female space -- to allow women's voices to be heard and their desires and dilemmas to be given a visual presence. Knitter Victoria Mason notes that part of what attracts her about knitting is that it creates for her exactly this kind of female space.

I'm not dressing up to attract a man, to look sexy, or to impress an employer -- I'm dressing for myself, or for the other women who recognize what I'm wearing and understand "the code." *It is a code!* Every time I wear something that I've knit -- or that I've purchased, because I'm always rescuing knitted sweaters from thrift stores, it makes me...I don't know, *sad*, to think of them left there 'unappreciated!' Another woman, a knitter, comments on it, and we have a dialogue, 'oh, I like that pattern,' or 'I did that once,' it's definitely a means of communication (personal communication, V. Mason, 2012).

The objects women produce shed light on the ways they respond to questions about what constitutes a feminist life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and how art, craft, and creativity help women achieve -- or distract them from -- their goals. Linda Pershing offers possibilities for the Bee Theres -- she argues that the Sunbonnet Sue "gender inversions" are not negated by the fact that the women are middle class, white Texans, working during Reagan-era conservatism, when family values dominated the political landscape, but rather "precisely because these women have filled traditional roles, [traditional forms] are all the more significant for them. Their feminist messages are not expressed overtly, but through a coding process of appropriation and inversion, providing both a 'safe' and critical commentary on social and gender-specific norms" (Pershing 1993, 118). "Appropriation" is defined by Joan Radner as the process "by which women

adapt the material of patriarchal culture to feminist purposes” (Radner 1993, 250). One of the techniques for creating such a female space is accomplished by appropriating not only male forms and narratives, and remaking them to further women’s purposes, but also appropriating other *women’s* forms and techniques, and re-visioning them for the purposes of a particular individual. Radner notes that the importance lies not within the objects themselves, but within “the interrelationships of performance and creation and of self and art;” the entire fabric of a woman’s life (Ibid.). Margaret Yocom notes that crafts are “personal texts that present us with multilayered stories of personal change and [allow women to] act against and react to the worlds that seek to circumscribe them” (Yocom 1993, 152-3). Like Parker and Hebdige with their circular models for examining material culture and its potential for resistance, Yocom stresses that these coded messages in a creative context always convey a double meaning, emphasizing the areas of “circumscription” as well as the acts of agency, they “must always signify a freedom that is incomplete” (Ibid.).

In many ways, this chapter offers answers to the questions, the holes, and jagged edges left open by Treen’s critiques of yarnbombing. A reading of crafting as an anonymous “spectacle” may be unsatisfying as a sign of craftivism at work. Observing how real artists and crafters justify and rationalize their investments in crafting helps to probe the ways that such work is oppositional, even if only in the minds of the creators. The women discussed here are creating in opposition to many things – but unpacking these creations shows as much cooperation, assent and compromise as opposition and resistance. Like threads in a weaving, like

fabrics in a quilt, notions of agency, opposition and resistance are interwoven with equally strong, and maybe equally alluring, themes of acceptance, reinforcement, and reinscription of the very values that seem to limit and control women's lives.

## CHAPTER V

### Consuming Passions: Crafting, Cataclysm, and Cultural Memory

#### *Introduction*

My mother passed away the day I started graduate school in late August, 2001. I didn't know, as I coped with this loss during those late summer weeks, that another huge tide of grief, uncertainty and anxiety was about to engulf not only me, but the entire country. In a few brief weeks, I had the experience of living through an individual cataclysm, followed quickly by a societal one, an experience that became a vivid personal memory, and also part of the cultural memory of September 11, 2001.

On the first anniversary of my mother's death, I was writing a week-long qualifying exam in order to advance in my master's program. Several afternoons, after hours of writing and editing, I would get up from my chair, take a brisk walk, then go into my kitchen, and begin baking in spite of the August heat. I made apricot tarts and oatmeal cookies, biscotti and a host of other treats. My mother was a skilled and passionate baker, and even though I don't often bake the desserts that were her specialties, I feel that she is there with of me every time I turn on the oven and get out my measuring cups. After a few evenings of arriving home to a new plate of baked goods, my husband, himself fresh out of grad school, wondered if I had lost my mind. "What's going on here?" he asked, eyeing me with suspicion.

In this chapter, written over a decade later, I attempt to answer his question. My own experiences, and those of other women in this chapter, are

evidence that middle-class Americans, like myself, rely on the creation, purchase and manipulation of objects of memory of many kinds to achieve a sense of calmness, security, and safety during times of trouble; I examine both the cultural and personal aspects of these objects and processes. Visual culture scholar Marita Sturken defines cultural memory as “memory that is shared outside the avenues of formal historical discourse yet is entangled with cultural products and imbued with cultural meaning” (Sturken 1997, 3). Rather than being tangential to the experience of such memory, Sturken argues that objects are central. Cultural memory, she argues, is,

produced through a range of cultural products – public art, memorials, docudramas, television images, photographs, advertisements, yellow ribbons, red ribbons, alternative media, activist art ... these constitute *technologies* of memory in that they embody and generate memory and are thus implicated in the power dynamics of memory’s production (Ibid.)

Sturken’s work documents and problematizes these “technologies” by which individuals create memory. She distinguishes between “cultural” and personal memory, but notes that the two are intertwined, or perhaps “entangled.” Her analysis begins with Sigmund Freud’s influential notions about memory as ultimately entirely personal and subjective, stored in the unconscious; in many ways his theories are “antithetical” to notions of shared memory (Freud 1900, Sturken 1997: 4). In contrast, Sturken leverages the contrasting notions of Maurice Halbwachs, who argues that all memory is shared, by nature it is “socially produced,” that even individual memory is “fragmentary and incomplete, something guided by the script that collective memory provides” (Ibid.). Furthermore, the creation of one’s own personal memories is a social act, as

humans inevitably “recall and rescript their memories through the recollections of others” (Halbwachs in Ditter & Ditter 1980; Sturken 1997, 4). She builds upon Michel Foucault’s notion of “technologies of the self,” the interventions by which individuals “transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality” (Foucault 1980, 18; Sturken 1997, 10) using this tool to create her model for the ways in which cultural products are vehicles of memory.

This chapter will explore the ways individuals use objects to create, “recall and rescript” memory when faced with cataclysm, using Sturken’s “technologies of memory” as a guide. I will trace how individuals create and reproduce cultural memory, and also more personal memories, through the making, buying and manipulation of cultural products – specifically, through crafting, consumption, and the ways these behaviors are visible in the objects and spaces that humans inhabit. I will examine how scholars read objects, then look at cataclysm and creativity on a community and societal level. Creative impulses can allow women to connect with others in the face of shared trauma, but also deflect shared attentions from important narratives. I will also examine cataclysm and tragedy on a more personal level, and the ways that creativity becomes a coping mechanism for getting through personal hard times. Consumption and technology factor into the conversation about creativity and cataclysm, I will address how these themes complicate notions of public and private, of agency and complicity, of dominant narratives and resistance.

I examine a variety of “technologies of memory,” the objects created, purchased and manipulated by individuals, covering a diverse span of media and behaviors: individuals turn to quilting when a loved one passes, or to knitting or crocheting when a partner leaves, they rush out for a dose of “retail therapy” when professional lives get harried, or launch a home renovation project after a divorce. The creative impulse translates into a host of different actions: shopping for materials, the tactile pleasures of choosing the right fabric, yarn, or decorative object, the meditative calming rhythm of repetitive stitching or crocheting, and the emotional connection formed when sharing our activities with like-minded friends. Creativity, like cataclysm, comes in many forms. It bridges the bounds between the private and the public, and is imbued with complications and contradictions.

Cataclysm is defined by Webster’s dictionary as “a sudden, violent upheaval, especially in a political or social context.” The secondary meaning is “a large-scale and violent event in the natural world,” or a “deluge.” Depending on which dictionary one consults, the order of these meanings may be reversed, suggesting the arbitrary nature of distinguishing between events in the “natural” and the “political or social” worlds. The “cataclysm” that I examine here incorporates both of these concepts; the “natural” cataclysms that occur from natural events, including fire, floods, earthquakes, hurricanes, or more abstractly, illness, death, bereavement, abandonment, divorce, as well as those that are “political or social” in nature; such as the terrorist attacks on 9/11 that affected even those it did not harm, and other societal ills and stresses like the economic downturn, workplace stress, discrimination, and random acts of



violence. Disaster is another synonym, but cataclysm has the idea of an upheaval, a “deluge” that is not only life-disrupting, but overturning, upending.

Many of the crafters studied here report that creativity brought comfort and a sense of community and purpose during periods of upheaval, but crafting can also give evidence of darker forces at work. The making and buying of objects to memorialize such events is fraught with questions of agency and complicity. Marita Sturken and Susan Stewart both address the material culture of objects of memory, but they approach this topic in different ways. Stewart focuses on the interiority of the experience; to bring to light the ways that “mass produced objects” carry the “handwriting of the personal” (Stewart 138). Sturken, as discussed earlier, pinpoints how even mass-produced objects can reflect and reinforce societal anxieties within personal narratives. Sturken’s intervention is to dissect the ways objects participate in the intricate web of consumption, politics and complicity that link the public and political – specifically, how souvenirs of tragedy elide notions that American policy is in any way responsible for any of the terrorist attacks of the last decades.

Sturken addresses “technologies of memory” in a very contemporary context, but the creation of art in response to life’s events and cataclysms is deeply traditional. Quilts, for example, have long been used to record and commemorate milestones both public, such as the retirement of the town parson, a son going off to war, and private: the death of a family member, or a dear friend’s move to another community. The making of quilts and other folk forms in response to political events or natural disasters is also rooted in tradition; the

events of September 11, 2001 and the graphic and visceral imagery that made its way into quilts, needlework, Bengali scrolls, New Mexican *retablos* and other material culture reflects not only the traditional nature of this practice, but also the new technologies that have changed the way information is disseminated. Women use quiltmaking and other forms of creativity to make sense of life's tragedies and to begin the healing process in the face of personal, as well as community, "cataclysm": death, illness and other life-changing events also inspire creation.

Scholars differ on whether and how these impulses are evidence of oppositional actions in the face of dominant forces, but understanding this behavior as "traditional" at the core may offer possibilities for exploring the duality of agency and complicity they embody. José Limón argues that a Marxist view of folklore sees traditional material culture as "collective behaviors whose fundamental character" is in opposition to the "dominant social order of state capitalism" (Limón 1983, 34). Limón suggests a fluid relationship between dominant and resistant narratives, echoing Raymond Williams' notion of alternative, and even openly oppositional, hegemonies existing alongside the "dominant." A variety of scholars from a variety of fields – folklore, popular culture, material culture -- have different analyses of objects and how they illuminate the ambiguous nature of agency and resistance.

Folklorist Joyce Ice examines quilts as objects with powerful personal meaning to their makers, as well as implications for larger power relationships.

For the upstate New Yorkers she studied, like the Piecemakers after fire in their community, creativity helped them survive.

Quilting provided a way to express and cope with [life and economic] changes. Literally and metaphorically, quilting embodies a sense of warmth, continuity, and connectedness to others, encompassing, yet contradicted by, feelings of isolation, loss and instability. Quilts simultaneously work at multiple levels to reinforce *and* challenge tradition. And like all elastic and powerful symbols, quilts are subject to manipulation. Quaint and romanticized images of quilts may vie with their potential to disrupt and transform (Ice 1997, 231).

Ice describes a quilting project sponsored by the Power Authority of the State of New York (PASNY), where local women created quilt blocks representing each town through which new and controversial power lines passed. Though the quilt was created ostensibly to celebrate the initiative, many of the women's blocks expressed their anger over the institution's shady dealings in acquiring land for power projects. Ice points out that craft and needlework projects in "service to hierarchies, secular institutions, including state agencies, museums, and businesses, have also succeeded in engaging women in activities that may ultimately serve to disempower people and distance women from the products of their labor" (Ibid. 232). Ice is concerned with the ways folk forms can be deeply complicit with capitalist institutions, even those like museums, ostensibly working for the public good; these same objects can be deeply personal creations and symbols of warmth, family and creativity for the women who make them. Daniel Miller is even more interested in the ways that objects reveal the self, and even shed light on personal relationships with people. He argues that our connection to "possessions often remain profound and usually

the closer our relationships are with objects, the closer our relationships are with people” (Miller 2008: 75).

If such objects of memory reflect women’s personal agendas, Sturken is less optimistic about material culture’s role in public life. Her stance speaks to the evils of consumerism but falls short of interrogating the ways in which collecting, making, and buying may help heal, give voice to grief, and express anger. Sturken examines the teddy bear as a “commodity of grief,” an object of comfort that was “aimed not at children but at adult consumers, and carries with it the effect of infantilization” (Sturken 2007, 6-7). Teddy bears, whether left as a memorial at the site of a tragedy or produced after the fact to commemorate the tragedy or honor rescue workers, “doesn’t promise to make things better, it promises to make us feel better about the way things are” (Ibid. 7). Sturken argues that the toys were ever-present in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Oklahoma and New York over the last two decades, and though they may have imparted comfort, Sturken asserts that the toys deflected Americans’ motivation to take action against the societal roots of terrorism. “Comfort culture and the consumerism of kitsch objects of emotional reassurance are deeply connected to the renewed investment in the notion of American innocence” (Ibid.). Such “comfort culture” in the end, pulled Americans’ attention from the real sources of the terrorist threat, and contributed to “the tendency to see U.S. culture as somehow...unimplicated in the troubled global strife of the world” (Ibid. 4). Sturken explores how material culture played an active role in sustaining

dominant messages that shaped ideas about terrorism and societal responsibility over the past two decades.

The complication, offered by many of the women and men interviewed for this project, is that all seem to desperately need to do something when confronted with tragedy, illness, or the pain of losing a loved one. Most report a strong desire to act, and the result of feeling comfort, relief, and even joy before, during and after their creative forays. Even the artists themselves acknowledge the ambiguity, and sometimes even the pointlessness, of their efforts. What Sturken might urge artists to do is to act in more public, political ways, and to warn them about the dangers of self-comforting in deflecting attention from larger issues. These creative impulses are part of self-soothing; baking the casserole is as much for the comfort of the bystander as for the enjoyment of the bereaved. The subsequent sections examine not only the physical actions that give comfort to makers, but also the emotional connections and sharing that help to restore equilibrium.

### ***Piecemakers and Peacemakers: Quilting, Cataclysm, and Cultural Memory***

Among American quilting groups, such as the Los Alamos Piecemakers in Los Alamos, New Mexico, the tradition of giving quilts as gifts to mark life's milestones still continues, while an equally important tradition is emerging: giving quilts as a comforting response to community heartbreak and disaster. Los Alamos has a special relationship with ideas of cataclysm, especially in its "political or social" form; it is the principal site of the World War II Manhattan Project that developed and produced the first atomic bombs; indeed the

centerpieces of the town's Science Museum are lifesize replicas of "fat man" and "little boy," the two bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Even the street names are iconic; during the two years I was a member of the Piecemakers, my home was located on the corner of Trinity and Oppenheimer drives. The name of the guild, the "Piecemakers," was chosen as a play on the town's history, likely with a mixture of irony and pride, considering that a majority of the members are either spouses of scientists and engineers at Los Alamos National Laboratory (now LASL), or employees themselves (personal communication, interview with Beth Joseph, 2002).

In Linda Pershing's essay on "The Ribbon" around the Pentagon, a collaborative textile installation made of stitched and embroidered panels, directly referencing the NAMES project's AIDS quilt forms, she includes a poem by one of the participants, who, like the Piecemakers, creates textile art, that likewise links the ideas of piecing together fabric and the role of "peacemaker", "The women/Together/Peacemakers/Peacekeepers/Piecers of cloth" (Pershing 1993, 341). The poem also notes the other "peacemakers" in the womens' lives, the male relatives, spouses, and sons: "on the battlefield" (Ibid.), as the military and scientific presence of men working in the defense industry is palpable throughout the town. The "Piecemakers" in Los Alamos may connect with both kinds of peacemakers; the name expresses care for and solidarity with the military and defense workers who see their duties as helping to promote peace, and also honors the women, many of whom see themselves and their creativity as a force that subverts and softens this heritage that is decidedly anything *but* peaceful.

Though the town's identity is linked to a particular historic cataclysm, it has experienced others in its 60-year history. The Cerro Grande fire and subsequent evacuation of Los Alamos in the spring of 2000 inspired the guild to use their annual charity quilting bee, the Sew-a-Thon, to create over three hundred "survivor" quilts for individuals and families who lost their homes or possessions in the fire. The guild obtained donations of fabric from local and regional businesses and held an extra Sew-a-Thon event to create the quilts. Once the quilts were completed, the guild set up locations where fire victims could come and pick out covers that suited their needs and tastes. The quilts ranged in size from potholders and placemats to small wall hangings to king-size bed covers, and ran the aesthetic gamut from mismatched and scrappy to masterpieces of color and technique. The quilts themselves were only the beginning of the quilting-related remembrances given to victims of the fire. Scholastic Publishing donated a copy of *The Quiltmaker's Gift*, a popular children's book about a magical quiltmaker and a greedy king, to each child who lost his or her home in the fire (Tubesing 2003). A classic intertwining of the commercial and the charitable found in the contemporary quiltmaking industry, the gifts doubtlessly reflected not only the desire to comfort and replenish the youth who experienced losses in the fire, but also was an excellent marketing tactic to an extraordinarily affluent quiltmaking community who, due to devastating property losses, were at that time particularly in tune with the book's anti-materialistic sentiment.

The town had barely recovered from the May 2000 tragedy when another struck on a much larger scale. The response of quiltmakers in Los Alamos and

all over the country to the World Trade Center attacks of September 11, 2001, was swift and effusive. One quilting guild in the Midwest pledged to make quilts for everyone who lost a family member in the attack; an episode of Good Morning America that aired several months after the infamous date showcased quilts given to New York City firefighters by female relatives of firefighters in San Antonio, Texas. The quilts are symbols of a concern for those affected by tragedy, and symbols of the common language of grieving, giving and support shared by quiltmakers from around the country. These values of service and compassion are central to the mission of the Los Alamos Piecemakers and other quilting organizations, and constitute some of the most important work continued each year by the Sew-a-Thon.

Each fall, the International Quilt Festival and Quilt Market holds its annual meeting in Houston, Texas. Scheduled just weeks after the terrorist attacks, the staff of the 2001 show put out a call for quilts responding to September 11, and made space in the already-full program to exhibit every single quilt sent to them (Bresenhan 2002). Professional fiber artists and popular quilting authors such as Rosemary Eichorn, Kaffe Fassett, Judy Murrhah, and Caryl Bryer Fallert sent their contributions. Less flashy entries from individual, non-professional quiltmakers from all over the country, such as Brenda Edeskuty of the Los Alamos Piecemakers, were displayed alongside. In New York, quiltmaker Drunell Levinson organized a similar effort, putting out a call for quilt panels measuring three by six feet, roughly the same size as the panels of the NAMES Project's AIDS quilt created in the late 1980s that would be exhibited at different venues



around the nation as well as online (Levinson 2003). The quilts ran the gamut from simple, traditional blocks rendered in red, white, and blue to enormous recreations of the attacks, with planes crashing, towers flaming, bodies falling, and firefighters raising flags through billowing smoke (Figure 22). Women's magazines, such as Mary Emmerling's *Country Home*, sponsored contests and collected quilt blocks. Accomplished Piecemakers' member Suzanne Johnston responded to the request for blocks in a patriotic theme (Suzanne's was a simple American flag; Figure 21) to benefit the victims of the attack. Later, Suzanne found out that out of some 1300 blocks submitted, hers was one of 12 blocks chosen to appear on a poster produced by the magazine. The quilts show firsthand the impact of the images that flooded the media in the days after the attack, and the ways that folk expression blends personal expression and experience with images and narratives drawn from the social context.

The centerpiece of Houston's 2001 Festival was the "Quilt of Compassion," a three-panel raw-edged multi-media collage created by a quilting group in Ukiah, California (Figure 22). Their work, more than any other, reflects the multiplicity of worries that plagued Americans: the outrage, fear and anxiety the attack inspired, the cries for vengeance, the horror at the loss, and the sympathy for victims' families. The quilt expresses visually how these feelings were accompanied by calls for tolerance, peace and unity; the fear of military reprisals and hateful attacks on Muslims and Arab-Americans. Traditional elements of quiltmaking are clearly visible: women working in collaboration, using scraps, bits and pieces, incorporating patterns that express patriotic sentiments,

and using figurative imagery related to disasters, political and social events. As quilts always have and always will respond to popular culture, the Ukiah “Quilt of Compassion” contains graphic images of the tragedy translated almost photographically as they appeared in newspapers and on TV immediately after the event.

Laura Fogg and Betty Lacy of Ukiah, CA, with help from their friends in their quilting group, took only nine days to complete their raw-edge collage measuring a substantial nine by seven feet. The Ukiah Quilt of Compassion also shows how contemporary quilting incorporates and appropriates techniques and imagery used in the fine art world. The work consists of a triptych of three panels, the largest placed in the center. The central “image of devastation,” depicting an airliner hitting one of the World Trade Center towers and the ensuing wreckage was laid out and quilted by Lacy, Fogg, their friends and fellow quilters in “eight wrenching and emotionally exhausting hours” (Quilter’s Newsletter 2001) on September 12, 2001. Friends contributed elements to the collage, including Tibetan prayer beads, Vietnamese prayer papers, and a paper scroll from Afghanistan that reads “Allah is good” in Arabic script (Quilter’s Newsletter 2001). Other visible elements, images of peace, religion, bereavement, and patriotism all merge and overlap. Objects and images incorporated into the side panels include a stuffed angel, photos of Mohandas Gandhi and the Dalai Lama, a lace-bordered image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, police and firefighters’ badges, tiny American flags, a Star of David, and rows of photos of World Trade Center victims clipped from the newspaper. Images from

every world religion are juxtaposed with hippie peace signs, skull and crossbones symbols, and a myriad of tiny, pieced candles and crosses.

Though the work is not usable as a bedcover – it is a quilt for “art’s sake” – the three pieces together are roughly the dimensions of a queen-sized bed quilt. In their triptych configuration, the three pieces suggest an altar or altarpiece. One might conjecture that, once the central panel was begun, donations and contributions of patches, bits and pieces spurred the artists to add two side panels. The use of a triptych, or “altar” form recalls both Latino and Asian traditions, and reflects the love of quilters in the United States for quilt patterns and techniques that appropriate and respond to the art of these growing American populations. The central panel is a striking mixture of imagery and symbolism. At the top of the panel, the head of the Statue of Liberty weeps, perhaps another reference to Hispanic art, specifically images of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores, Our Lady of Sorrows, in which the blessed virgin is depicted, much like Lady Liberty in the quilt, with tearful eyes upcast, and a halo of spikey thorns around her head.

The statue’s head is pieced from several high-end, commercially available fabrics. Looking at the central panel, veteran quilters may recognize some popular name-brand fabrics, and may have recently purchased them themselves (walking through a quilt show, one inevitably hears exclamations of “oh, I have that fabric!” as quilters peruse their colleagues’ work). Lady Liberty may be weeping for the victims of the tragedy themselves or for the blow to freedom and democracy decried in early news coverage. The center of the work is an image of

one of the World Trade Center towers bursting into flames, with pieces of the airliners flying and human bodies tumbling toward the ground. Plumes of smoke billow from the fire. Below the fiery scene is an image of the rubble left after the buildings' collapse; the black and gray girders lurch skyward. To the right, firefighters raise the American flag, an image that references one of the most visible and most often reproduced images of first responders at ground zero, which itself references another iconic image of war and patriotism, the image commemorated in the Marine Corps Memorial, of a cluster of soldiers raising the flag at Iwo Jima. At the bottom of the central panel, a swath of crosses and flaming candles memorialize the victims, perhaps standing in for the assemblage of real candles and remembrances left by New Yorkers at "ground zero." My close reading is taken from images of the quilt; seen first-person at the quilt show it must have been even more affecting.

It is somewhat macabre to see a quilt, the powerful symbol of feminine warmth and familial heritage, convey images of such violence and terror. This quilt, like the media, somewhat sensationalizes the events – after all, the faces of the victims are tiny in comparison to the flaming tower, the girders or the firefighters. Though it is titled "Quilt of Compassion," the artists were obviously as captivated by, and viscerally drawn to, the images of destruction and disaster as was the rest of the nation. It is this fascination with the event, and the cataclysmic images that proliferated throughout the media in the hours and days after the attack that come to the forefront when looking at the Ukiah quilt; the compassion for the victims takes second place. This work is also evidence of the ways

quiltmakers feel free to incorporate “fine art” forms and techniques into their quilts. Though the quilt juxtaposes peaceful and patriotic themes, it avoids any indication of radical notions. The quilt contains little acknowledgement of more radical opinions about the attack, the left-wing emphasis on the United States’s role in world politics that may have precipitated the event, and the right-wing calls for military vengeance that followed.

The Ukiah quilt and the other quilts depicting graphic, narrative scenes of the attacks are not the first instances of quilts to portray themes of violence, cataclysm and disaster. Harriet Powers, an African-American quiltmaker living in Athens, Georgia during and after the Civil War, incorporated narratives of cosmic events and natural disaster into her quilts, only two of which have been identified and are available to the public in museums. Powers’s creations are startling, and bring to light the role of popular culture in “traditional” folk art practices (Georges and Jones 1995). Her works are arguably some of the most important pieces of folk art in existence; one of her two extant quilts is in the Smithsonian’s collection, the other is at the Museum of Fine Art, Boston. Robert A. Georges, Michael Owen Jones, and Gladys-Marie Fry use Powers’s work to support the argument that folk activity does not occur in a vacuum; folk art and folk life are central ways humans respond to conditions around them, a blending of personal experience and social context.

Powers’ quilt also responds to Sturken’s notion of cultural memory, as Powers’ work clearly can be understood as one of the “technologies of memory” which are the constructors, rather than the carriers, of memory, not “vessels... so

much as objects through which memories are shared, produced and given meaning” (Sturken 1997, 9). Just as most of the American public experienced the events of September 11 secondhand through the media, Powers herself was probably not an eyewitness to any of the events she depicted in her meteorological quilt. She may have encountered the events through stories passed on by neighbors or circulated through surrounding areas, or she may have heard newspaper accounts read aloud (Fry 1987). Like Americans glued to their television sets through September that year, Powers was obviously impressed by the stories she heard. Powers’ work expressed her wonder, awe, horror and compassion for those who experienced the event, much like contemporary quilt artists felt a need to give voice to the sympathetic emotions and anxieties they felt in the weeks after September 11.

Not all of the quilts commemorating the 2001 attacks were visually lurid, or displayed violent imagery. Through their creations, American women expressed their kinship with the women in Afghanistan, and their outrage at the oppressive conditions they had to endure, as well as support for US military efforts and patriotic sentiment; one quilt created by Judy Zoelzer Levine of Bayside, Wisconsin, entitled “Wrapped in Glory,” depicts a fluttering American flag wrapped around a female form. In Levine’s words, the work “represents the freedoms women enjoy in our country” (Bresenhan 2001, 68). Her work also alludes to the female form as an allegorical symbol of liberty and justice, and a symbol of hearth and home.

As middle-class, white women in the nineteenth-century created abolition quilts as a show of solidarity with slave women suffering far away, several women used their quilts to express feminist and political sentiments relating to the September 11 attacks, including sentiments of solidarity with women suffering oppression under Islamic fundamentalist regimes (Ferrero et al 1997, 72). Other quiltmakers, like the Piecemakers' Brenda Edeskuty and Suzanne Johnston, created simple American flag blocks, images of Uncle Sam, or patterns of stars and stripes. More important perhaps than the imagery the quiltmakers used, were the emotions they expressed about their work. "I had images in my head of the piece, and was driven to do the work" (Quilter's Newsletter 2002). "The art and its name were gifted through me" (Bresenhan 2001, 28), "I felt as though this image leapt into my hands – it nearly made itself" (Bresenhan 2001, 10). Women wrote about being driven by visionary forces to complete their projects; they were comforted by the acts of ripping or shredding fabric. "I turn to sewing as a healing or meditative activity," another muses (Bresenhan 2001, 93). Others destroyed or transformed projects they had been working on before the attacks, as a way of symbolizing and dealing with the changes in their lives. As one quiltmaker in Pat Ferrero's *Quilts in Women's Lives* asserted, the slow, repetitive act of stitching was a healing process, "like prayer" (Ferrero 1982).

Through their work with fabric, women expressed their anxieties, fears, and frustrations relating to the events taking place in America, but it is this meditative and therapeutic aspect of their efforts that comes to the forefront as

part of the cultural memory of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Though the tragedy unfolded on an enormous scale, and the work responding to it was likewise in the public eye, it is the sense of personal anxiety, loss and patriotism; not calls for broader societal change, political action, or community involvement, that inhabit these objects of memory.

***The “Deluge”: Technologies of Private Memory***

Using Sturken’s “technologies of memory” as a lens, the cultural products of the post 9/11 era may seem to reinforce the darker and more problematic power struggles that occurred after the event. Looking at objects of memory in the private realm, however, may offer a different set of possibilities. Sturken herself notes that it may be difficult to discern where one ends and the other begins. “Personal memory, cultural memory, and history do not exist within neatly defined boundaries. Rather, memories and memory objects can move from one realm to another, shifting meaning” (Sturken 1997, 5). Women use crafting to make sense of life’s tragedies and to begin the healing process in the face of personal, as well as community, “cataclysm,” death, illness and other personal tragedies. Using Sturken’s analysis, these “technologies of memory” are not only “objects through which memories are shared, produced and given meaning” (Sturken 1997, 9), they are the means by which crafters “recall and rescript” the events in their own lives. In *The Comfort of Things*, David Miller also asserts the communicative and transformative power of objects, as “forms that actually mediate and transfer substance and emotion between people” (Miller 2009, 676). It seems to be this communication, more than the objects themselves that impart



the “comfort” central to Miller’s argument. He posits that, rather than considering objects as material possessions that pull an individual’s focus from personal relationships, in fact one’s relationship with objects is analogous to one’s relationship to people. It is in this sense that he can argue that “a CD collection helped someone overcome heroin,” or that a “full” apartment may also indicate a “full” heart, a life filled with meaning (Miller 2009, 99).

Los Alamos quilter Barbara Forslund experienced a very personal cataclysm when she was diagnosed with cancer. Undergoing chemotherapy and radiation treatments not only made her feel terrible, they resulted in her isolation from her work and from other members of the guild. Making quilts during this period, though a solitary activity, helped to alleviate her loneliness and lift her spirits. She describes the process of making a quilt that depicted all the ingredients in the fantasy salad she was not allowed to eat until her immune system recovered. Using machine embroidery, she stitched semi-hidden lines of poetry running beneath each row of vegetable blocks (Figure 23).

I WANT A SALAD NOW! A big crispy salad with bibb lettuce and baby greens...lots of tomatoes, Early Girls from Phil’s garden...crunchy carrots ...dark green broccoli...sweet red peppers and yellow ones for color...a little red onion...Roquefort cheese from France... with olive oil and balsamic vinegar...(personal communication, interview with B. Forslund, 2003).

She continues, describing the challenges of the computer and machine embroidery she undertook, and the humorous, insider verbal art she created.

I like to include humor in some of my quilts so I decided to add text for my own amusement. I particularly liked quilting some of the words in such a way that the average viewer wouldn’t even know the words were there. I liked the challenge of figuring out how to do all the words by machine and

liked using the computer to solve some of that problem (Ibid.).

Her comfort did stem, in part, from the actual construction of the piece, but she expresses particular delight in composing and concealing the poetry she incorporated into her creation from those less “in the know.” Her work garnered much praise at the Piecemakers’s spring 2003 quilt show at the Art Center at Fuller Lodge. If making the quilt provided enjoyment, sharing her work with her peers transports her personal memory, “from one realm into another;” (Sturken 1997, 5) her personal struggle becomes cultural memory: her quilt becomes a narrative of middle-class whiteness in an affluent, suburban community, or of gender, aging, and visualizations of the process of cancer, illness and recovery. Another Piecemakers member, Theresa Feller, describes her grandmother’s use of quilting as a way to cope with long-term illness.

She was not a lifelong quilter, but she did make one quilt during her final years, as she struggled with Alzheimer’s. I wondered why she decided to make this quilt. Was she trying to “make order” out of her life, which must have been so confusing those last few years? I’ll never know for sure (personal communication, interview with T. Feller, 2003).

Quilter, crafter and interior designer Christa Baber experienced another type of personal cataclysm and upheaval that is likewise a shared experience for many women: a journey through infertility treatments and in vitro fertilization. Baber recalls that she became a “power crafter” during this time, and her creative efforts were critical to her ability to cope with the hormonal fluctuations, invasive medical procedures, and monthly cycles of dashed hopes. “[Crafting] really saved me,” she muses. Her projects were varied; transforming objects and furniture with spray paint was a particular passion. Baber used specialty plastic

spray-paint to “renovate” a mass-produced plastic playhouse for her son (Figure 24). She refinished secondhand furniture purchased on Craig’s List, and applied silver leaf to a vintage metal sconce to make it resemble the high-end fixtures and decorative objects she acquires for her clients during the course of her professional life. Baber describes these activities as not only therapeutic, but downright intoxicating:

It’s a high, an emotional rush...it was so satisfying! During the seven months I was going through infertility treatments, I was really a *power crafter*. It took my mind off the difficult issues. It really saved me. I needed the “high” (interview with C. Baber, 2009).

Baber recounts another experience with creative therapy, when as a young woman she ended her first serious relationship. She notes,

As I was ‘moving on,’ I made a happy quilt, a very traditional [pattern], but using non-traditional colors. I made it by hand. Getting through a bad relationship is a difficult time; I picked an equally difficult quilt process with tedious, tedious handwork. I was stitching away my problems (Ibid.).

She recounts that the process of making the quilt paralleled her struggle to get over her first love; in some ways, it marked the end of an era for her. “I was nervous about finishing it, I didn’t want to put the last stitch in!” she noted, with an uncomfortable chuckle. This impulse to craft while coping with stress is not unique to women. Brian Herrera, a multi-media crafter who is both an accomplished quilter and colcha artist, laughed about the hand-quilting “addiction” that blossomed as he wrote his PhD dissertation. He would make a bargain with himself: if he succeeded in writing for a certain allotted time, he would reward himself with a hand quilting break. To make sure he didn’t spend the whole day quilting, he set up a structure of rules: he would allow himself to

quilt just until his thread ran out, and he used a thread only as long as his arm would reach. "I got pretty good at stretching that thread out as long as I possibly could!" he laughs, stretching his arms wide in example (personal communication, B.Herrera, 2012).

Narratives of addiction and obsession; even a physical "high" are not just examples of hyperbole; recent medical research has explored the ways that repetitive motion, like knitting, crocheting or hand quilting, may actually be physically beneficial. If stresses cause the body to release adrenalin, then the soothing, repetitive actions involved in needlework, knitting or crocheting can "activate the parasympathetic nervous system, which quiets that 'fight or flight' response" (Wilson 2014) (Figure 3). Furthermore, pleasurable activities such as knitting, hand quilting, or embroidery, may soothe the nervous system as effectively as pharmaceuticals; such activities release the chemical dopamine, causing the same pleasurable response triggered by eating a good meal, or having sex (Ibid.). When crafters report feeling a "high," this effect may be a physical reality as much as an emotional state. Knitting, quilting and other repetitive crafts have also been associated with positive outcomes in weight loss, the treatment of anorexia nervosa, as well as with a reduced risk of memory loss and other cognitive illnesses in older adults (Brody 2016).

If crafted objects such as quilts are symbols not only of individual comfort, but also community concern for others, the makers are quick to suggest that the process of making the objects may impart more actual comfort than the quilts themselves. Piecemakers guild member and accomplished art quilter Lorraine

Posner muses that the most significant benefit of the guild's efforts to make quilts for each Cerro Grande fire victim was to the makers themselves. "I feel like it served a good purpose for *us*, making the quilts, it gave us something to do [in response to the fire], but I don't know...there were a lot of quilts left over."

Posner is matter-of-fact about her efforts, but still reluctant to give voice to the idea that the quilt recipients might have been less than grateful to receive a quilt. Her next unspoken thought might have been "when your entire house burns to the ground, what good is one quilt?" Wanda Cronin, another woman in her cluster, pipes up,

"I don't think that's true...[our] daughter donated a sampler quilt [and it was given to a family I knew]. When I talked to them later, they had given meanings to all the different blocks, like, the block with a house on it represented their home, the block with the animals represented their pets, they're part of the family. I *do* think it meant something to them" (interview with Nimble Thimbles cluster, 2003).

Clearly, there is meaning on both sides of the relationship of making and giving objects of comfort, and these objects can be vehicles for a "rescripting" of memory. What seems clear is that whether or not the recipients enjoy the gift, the givers are rewarded by the process as much or more than the recipient enjoys the product.

### ***From Apartment Therapy to Retail Therapy: Consuming Passions***

Throughout this chapter, and this dissertation, I question the relationship between the commodity and the handmade. The charitable and the commercial are over and over again intertwined, or as Sturken might assert "entangled," to a

variety of ends. It is impossible to ignore the importance of mass-produced items as objects of memory.

The dismissal of objects of commodities as sources of cultural meaning no longer seems a viable option. ...commercialization and marketing tactics are so pervasive, in which the boundaries of art, commodity and remembrance are so easily traversed, and in which merchandise is so often grassroots-produced that it no longer makes sense, if it ever did, to dismiss commodities as empty artifacts (Sturken 1997, 12).

The hobby industry, in its patriotic response to September 11, was eager to help crafters express their feelings of anger and shock creatively, and simultaneously, to profit from the disaster. George W. Bush's comments encouraging Americans to go out and spend in reaction to the attacks are among his best-remembered verbal foibles, as if the act of shopping and the ensuing economic transactions were a patriotic duty. This societal pressure to shop, buy, and spend illustrates the tension between agency and complicity inherent in therapeutic and even political forms of crafting. Looking at the history of crafts and needlework shows that this is not a new phenomenon, and one that has a unique place in a middle-class American culturescape. In Sturken's analysis of cultural memory, she argues that "it is evidence of the complexity of American culture...that memory is produced not only through memorials and images but also through commodities" (Sturken 1997, 11).

The commoditization of creativity is itself rooted in tradition. As 19<sup>th</sup> century women's publications such as *Peterson's* and *Godey's Lady's Book* deftly featured products and patterns to encourage women in their pursuit of needlework and quilting, women's print media continues to offer women

images of an idealized ,and perhaps sanitized, version of female creativity and the tools with which to re-create those images. As historic quilting responded to commercialism, so do quiltmaking efforts in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Post 9/11, popular quiltmaking catalogs and mail-order businesses offered pages full of patriotic and military-themed fabrics for purchase. American flags appeared on patterns for bed quilts and wall hangings, vests, pillows and tote bags. This effect is magnified with the emphasis on “patriotic spending” that followed after September 11. As economic factors influenced Harriet Powers to sell her beloved quilts to an avid collector, economics and consumerism both emerged after September 11, when Americans, like the Piecemakers after Cerro Grande, were eager to “do something,” and to “help fight the war.” Discount stores were filled with patriotic trinkets and decorations; quiltmakers were likewise offered patriotic patterns and fabrics to help them create works through which they could express their emotions.

For some crafters, the shopping and purchasing aspects of their creative efforts are not just central to their creative process, but are part of the therapy; the notion of “retail therapy” offers insight about the power of shopping and spending to relax and stimulate. It is no accident that one of the most popular decorating and DIY blogs is titled *Apartment Therapy*, and likewise chronicles users’ obsessions with home furnishings, DIY culture, and “upcycling.” For interior designer Christa Baber, shopping is actually part of her work life. She enjoys the purchasing tasks associated with her design projects, but laments that in her work life, the beautiful objects she locates and acquires are for her clients,

not herself. Her own expeditions to thrift and antique stores and craft emporiums are ways that she enjoys herself when she's not at work, and reclaims personal time in the face of professional, civic, and family obligations. Baber is a busy, multi-tasking suburban woman, whose activities, professional and personal, mark her as a member of the upper middle class. She works for an upscale design firm in a large metropolitan area, is active in her neighborhood association, spearheads efforts to maintain and renovate community historic landmarks, and spends time caring for her husband and young son. She relishes her private time, and her shopping hobby helps her replenish her own personal resources, cope with stress, and nourish her own aesthetic sensibilities. "*Nothing* makes me happier," she sighs, than spending a quiet weekend morning on her own, prowling her favorite thrift and consignment stores, looking for inexpensive used furniture she can repair and transform with paint and fabric. Again, she speaks in terms of intoxication and addiction, noting the "thrill of the chase" as she searches for the perfect lamp, light fixture, or side table (personal communication, C.Baber interview, 2009).

Thinking about such objects as "technologies" allows for a fluid relationship between personal memory and cultural memory. The Foucauldian notion of "technology" as a tool or device used by an individual to achieve a particular end overlaps with a more contemporary notion of "technology," the trappings of an age of miniaturized computing and social media. Through this type of "technology," an individual attempt to cope with personal upheaval can become a public, shared experience as well; it may even become a case study or



how-to for other enthusiasts as part of the public Apartment Therapy blog. DIY guru Mark Frauenfelder also notes the “virtuous circle” of Internet and creativity, when makers share “their projects online which inspires others to try making them, too” (Frauenfelder 2010, 222). Frauenfelder is a sort of human embodiment of the ways technology and the DIY movement are intertwined, as a former tech journalist who subsequently founded a magazine devoted to DIY projects and techniques. Christa Baber acknowledges the ways technology enables her own obsession with thrifting and crafting. Even more important to her, she can share her creations almost as they are happening. If the physical act of stitching a quilt or painting a lamp helps to rethink and “rescript” a negative or challenging experience, sharing these experiences on the Internet with friends and strangers alike, especially when in-person compliments may be hard to come by, is equally therapeutic.

I like the internet for sharing [ideas and projects]. For me, uploading my pictures to Flickr or Ohdeedoh, is a limited way to [share my work] and to get positive feedback. Since I live with someone who never, *ever* compliments me on any of this stuff, it’s a way of getting that pat on the back, positive feedback for the projects I finish (Ibid.).

Baber notes that her online communications about her craft projects sometimes overlapped with her emails to friends about her infertility treatments; all her “technologies” bring her closer to, rather than farther from, her support group, echoing Daniel Miller’s analysis of individuals’ relationships with objects as synergistic with, not in opposition to, relationships with people (Miller 2009).

If technology helps enable and inspire her with ideas, she prefers doing her shopping in person. “I don’t really shop online for craft materials, though

occasionally I use Craig's List. It's tangible; I like to see and touch things. Even at [a big box store such as] Michael's, I can *look* at things." One of Baber's techniques when she finds something really good is to snap a photo with her mobile phone and text the image to a friend; either for encouragement, or to share something that person might like themselves. Again, the physical experience of shopping and the subsequent online storytelling, sharing, and "bragging" are intertwined. Material culture scholar Alison Franks notes that there is a "pure and simple deliciousness" inherent not only in the "beloved pastime" of thrift store shopping, but also in "telling about it afterwards" (Koppelman and Franks 2008, 110).

Likewise, for scholar and collector Jo Ann Kelly Graham, technology, connection, physical comfort, and creativity all came together in her "obsession" with collecting Kelly dolls, a miniature fashion doll marketed as "Barbie's little sister." Graham's involvement with the Kelly Konnection, an online community devoted to Kelly doll enthusiasts, crystallized her need for friendship, her enthusiasm for finding and purchasing rare Kelly examples, and her enjoyment of dressing and playing with the dolls. Her Kelly collection became her way of reaching out to others like herself, gaining support to help cope with job stress and finally, the pain and sorrow of losing a parent. The physical aspects of handling, dressing, and brushing the dolls' hair helped calm her and comfort her through visits to the hospital; stealing away from business meetings to shop for new dolls helped mitigate the stress of her successful career as a traveling executive. The communities and comforts that crafting imparts may be a

replacement or stand-in for the functions of a church or faith community. In highly mobile middle-class communities where ties to religion may be weakening, groups surrounding crafting and collecting may provide the support that neighbors and church communities provided decades ago.

If technology can enable creativity by offering inspiration, connection and communication, it can also provide shocking and graphic imagery as food for artistic effort. Artistic and crafting communities in America responded to the attacks on their country in ways that are, in principle, traditional; the creation of traditional forms, including quilts, in response to political events or natural disasters has a lengthy history. The events of September 11, 2001, and the graphic and visceral imagery that appeared almost instantaneously into the quilts and other forms of material culture discussed here; if these behaviors are rooted in tradition, the technologies that have changed the way information is disseminated and consumed have sped up the process of creating cultural memory. If Harriet Powers experienced shock and distress upon hearing stories related orally to her years and sometimes decades after the events in question, the global audience now watches as hurricanes, high school shootings, and terrorist attacks unfold in real time, unedited, on television. Mobile phones enable bystanders to capture video of newsworthy events as they happen, and these videos appear almost instantaneously on television and online. After months of watching the images of the twin towers falling over and over, many Americans may have wished to return to a time when, like Harriet Powers, our imaginations were our only guide in creating images of fireballs and explosions.

Michael Owen Jones helps us to understand the traditional nature of cataclysm and creativity in examining Harriet Powers's quilts, as the personal experience and social context merge and blend in folk art (Georges and Jones 1995, 274). His humanistic explorations of how workers, through a "feeling for form," can transform even repetitive tasks in the workplace into acts of creativity (Jones 1993, ch.7) can shed light on why middle-class women turn to material culture after facing cataclysm, be it a personal, community or societal event. The act of making something can truly make individuals feel better, both physically and emotionally. Humans seek the comfort of "things." Whether individuals renovate their homes, fly flags or patriotic banners from porches, stitch an individual quilt block, or create a quilt-sized collage, these individual creations and collections are part of a group aesthetic process that helps create and narrate the cultural memory of a shared cataclysmic event.

### ***Conclusion: A New Normal***

This chapter traces a trajectory of scholarship and thought about material culture, creativity, cataclysm, and tradition over the past dozen years. As cultural products and personal creations, the objects I discuss as examples of "technologies of memory" come in many forms, as do the types of cataclysm and upheaval that humans experience. In a very visual way, ideas of personal stress and turmoil are becoming "cultural memory." Notions of what constitutes a "cataclysm" have also expanded in this era to include not just large scale weather events like hurricanes Sandy and Katrina; floods and earthquakes in Indonesia, Japan, and Haiti; and smaller droughts, wildfires and tornadoes that occur

around the country every year, but also large societal events such as the 9/11 attacks, and random acts of violence like shootings in schools and workplaces. On an individual scale, lives are derailed by personal tragedies, such as the end of a relationship, the passing of a loved one, or the loss of a job or home, and ground down by everyday stresses, fatigues, and frustrations such as an exhausting job, marital negotiations, or parenting woes.

The pessimism and anxiety spurred on by the quick succession of terrorist events in the past two decades becomes visible in Marita Sturken's scholarship about cataclysm and objects of memory post 9/11. In her work since then, she cautions that when cataclysm happens, these comforting acts of consumption have the power to elide the impulses that might spur individuals to action, and deflect attention from the societal and political forces responsible for conflict. She urges that objects of memory robs individuals of their creative urges to "make things better" and replaces them with inertia, "making us feel better about the way things are."

A more recent take on objects of memory and creativity under duress emerged during a recent exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's Renwick Gallery, entitled *40 under 40*, which documented the process by which Millennial and Gen-X artists incorporate craft techniques into works marketed as fine art. The exhibit features 40 younger artists, all under the age of 40, and summarizes how current artists, and crafters like those mentioned here, may view such events in a different light than their older counterparts. Curator and catalog essayist Nicholas Bell describes the state of living with the more or less constant threat of terrorism

and ongoing military conflict as a “new normal,” and the younger generation of artists have responded to the existence of violence, conflict, and threats of terror not as cataclysms, but rather as an undercurrent of everyday life; an ever-present reality that may no longer completely debilitate us, but adds to the levels of stress, anxiety and tension of modern living (Bell 2012, 20).

It may be these smaller, more constant and more persistent threats that don't overwhelm, but slowly erode, one's mental and physical resources that Nicholas Bell refers to as the “new normal,” the “quintessentially postmodern hazard” (Bell 2012, 20). In many ways the remedy may seem as “hazardous” as the problem itself, as individuals engage in secretive, obsessive or transgressive behaviors in hopes of coping with the stresses and cataclysms, large and small, that plague them. Like Ice's quiltmakers, crafters and collectors are engaged in both challenging and reinforcing tradition, and crafters' relationships to power, when they indulge their “obsessions” with knitting, collecting, thrifting, or DIY projects. Sturken's work is complicated by other scholars and commentators who likewise look at creativity and consumption in a variety of post 9/11 urban culturescapes. Anthropologist Daniel Miller, and perhaps also journalist and editor Mark Frauenfelder, would argue that the act of making does not deflect, but rather *engages* individuals, with society, politics and fellow human beings. Furthermore, contemporary medical research and clinical trials point to the actual physical benefits of creativity and handiwork as remedies for depression and other forms of mental illness; creativity may not just help individuals cope or engage, it may be a real physical necessity.

Marita Sturken's post 9/11 scholarship encapsulates the darkest possibilities for considering the meanings of creativity in the face of cataclysm, but in considering objects of memory from different eras, such as the Vietnam Veterans memorial or the AIDS quilt, she emphasizes the constructive power of these "technologies of memory" to create cultural memory that may challenge dominant, government-sanctioned narratives of how "history" unfolded. Considering the breadth of Sturken's scholarship, rather than isolating her arguments about creativity in the context of terrorist attacks, results in a more complete and more nuanced discussion of the stresses of our "new normal" level of militarism, violence and terror. While keeping in mind her cautions, it is perhaps most useful to consider "technologies of memory" as having personal, as well as cultural, utility. There is continued value, as Daniel Miller would argue, in exploring the ways individuals turn to "the comfort of things" as a means of resetting internal equilibriums, finding a new "normal," and comforting themselves while navigating a post 9/11, postmodern world.

## CONCLUSION

### A “Cosy [sic] and Unhurried Rebellion”: Crafting and the “Darker Corners” of the Material

*This modern approach to knitting as a so-called protest art, smoothes the creases from the craft's dark history of fraught identity politics. In smothering us with the luxuries of leisure, idiosyncrasy, freedom of expression, colour, their approach permits us to take these things for granted. It indulges us, making us lazy readers of bright surfaces, safe in the knowledge that just looking at and considering these works is somehow enough. This soft protest, this cosy and unhurried rebellion, seems to misunderstand the urgency, the drive, the subversion that lies at the heart of so much crafted dissent.... The worrying thing about these objects is their appeal...artifacts that face us with the uncomfortable thought that we almost certainly fail, on a daily basis, to interrogate the darker corners of our manmade things, to consider their origins, the substance that lies beyond the surface (Kristen Treen, 2015).*

In this project, I have attempted to untangle the criss-crossing narrative threads surrounding crafting as cultural production: ideas of self, identity, gender, creativity, consumption, class, cataclysm, and healing. I have argued that crafting constitutes a performance of class and gender, a form of speech, and a debate by and about women whose personal and societal anxieties are narrated through the objects that they make and embellish. I have focused on a population of largely white, middle-class women from late teens to middle age, and explored notions of how amateur, or non-professional artists and crafters weave politics, opposition, family, tradition, emotion, and healing into the objects they create, and the collections they assemble in the production of their objects. At the end of this project, I must summarize not only the “appeal” and the intensely compelling narratives interwoven into these artifacts, but also the “darker corners” of middle-class crafting.



This project emerged as I completed Master's research focusing on contemporary quiltmaking and began to investigate the practice of crafting in a broader sense, considering a wider spectrum of craft media, and their possibilities as forms of expression, opposition, and even activism among young women. As I interviewed crafters from the U.S. Southwest, the east coast and the west coast, I encountered women with a wide variety of skills; some, such as knitting, crocheting, and scrapbooking, fall along discrete, traditional boundaries. I also observed a variety of other "crafty" pursuits: sewing, jewelry-making, upcycling, baking and preserving food, and "hacking" commercial home accessories and prefab furniture. Both online and in person, I began to document women (and men) engaged in creativity, and using this passion as a means of creating community, connecting with fellow crafters, and aligning themselves with "foremothers" who had fewer opportunities for education, career fulfillment, and independence. Especially in the context of tradition, as women's work has a long history of being used in feminist artworks, from the abolitionist quilts and needlework of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the feminist movement of the 70s, the Dinner Party, and the Feminista artists, I wanted to explore whether, and how, contemporary non-professional artists were using crafting to disrupt mainstream gender narratives, and to what ends.

I have argued that contemporary crafting is for individuals a gender and class performance, a language that enables communication, connection, and debate among crafters. It is also a framework for the creation of a female space within an urban, technical, and commercial "culturescape," a space that may

enable women to find comfort, healing, and connection, but also serves to contain these expressions; curator Glenn Adamson notes that the very nature of craft is one of containment and constraint: “art is anything that is called art – craft involves self-imposed limits” (Adamson 2007, 4). In technique and in ideology, craft seems to delimit: notions of femininity are re-visioned and recontextualized, but not created anew; crafting is bricolage, but perhaps not innovation. As journalist and crafter Emily Matchar notes, the choice of handmade over mass produced may be nostalgic or political, but “these are inherently limited actions” (Matchar 2011, 248), and urges DIY enthusiasts to “be expansive rather than exclusive” (Ibid. 249) in their protests. That is to say, craftivism cannot be the sole form of activism if women are to push gender equality forward.

The notion of containment is also apt considering the population that makes up the largest part of the subjects in this project. Most of the women interviewed here are young (40s or younger), affluent, and progressive; one of the most important critical viewpoints is that crafting is gaining visibility, if not actually increasing in the number of practitioners, *because* it is being practiced by a young, liberal, middle and upper middle-class hipster population. Crafting among women and men of color, among poor and working class groups, and older adults who have engaged in these activities for decades, still receives unequal and inadequate attention, and their work and stories are eclipsed by the influx of crafters from this “sexy” younger population. This much-sought millennial

market share has been targeted by the craft and retail industries as ideal new consumers of a packaged, contained idea of the handmade.

### ***Recurring Themes and Critical Viewpoints***

Each of the chapters of this dissertation focuses on a different question, medium or population, but several themes are interwoven throughout the project. Notions of class and gender performance, naturally, are a guiding framework; central to my argument is the idea of art and crafting as “problem solving behavior,” as *bricolage*, or, as Judith Butler puts it, a “sustained set of acts,” a “gendered stylization” (Butler 1999, 205) of the body and the objects that surround it. Also revisited often is the notion of women’s crafting as “femmage,” a technique of feminist assemblage in which women purposefully reposition and recontextualize images and symbols in ways that are meaningful for them. In almost every chapter, femmage can be seen as a framework for crafting and the performative and communicative way women create cultural objects. The idea of femmage is particularly illustrative of the way women juxtapose highly contradictory narratives: consumption and anti-materialism, do-it-yourself individualism and community, connection with fellow crafters. Femmage is a way of understanding how these crafters “recall and rescript” older tropes of femininity alongside more contemporary gender narratives.

As Kathleen Stewart looks at the collection as the expression of “the self” that expands to inhabit “the confines of bourgeois domestic space,” (Stewart 1993, 157) I also question the ways crafting and collecting both express this tension; creativity is clearly an “expansion” of the “self,” but one that is “confined,”

contained within a “bourgeois domestic” realm. In my second chapter, I use the lens of the collection to explore the tension between crafting as consumption and ideas of the handmade; notions of the self-expanding to fill, and being contained by, a “bourgeois domestic space” is an idea that also recurs in almost every subsequent chapter. Similarly, if these “bourgeois spaces” are the site of crafting as class and gender performance, throughout this project I examine the ways that crafting, while “smothering us with...luxuries” of affluence, leisure, and visual appeal, coexists with anti-materialism and environmentalism in the crafter’s sphere.

Many of my chapters explore the ways women’s crafting reinforces their autonomy and agency while at the same time embracing and reproducing dominant narratives. My third chapter focuses on the scrapbook as an archive of domestic images, and leverages scholarship concerned with the ways domestic images and archives serve to construct “the knowledge it would seem only to register or make evident,” (Wexler 2000, 21), “mapping the cultural terrain” of middle-class domesticity, gender and family. Even crafters whose work explores provocative themes that seek to redefine contemporary feminism and femininity, by working in the most traditional of forms, reinscribe traditional gender roles upon their lives.

In my fourth chapter, I explore craftivism; crafting that uses overtly subversive or oppositional themes and imagery, as a highly traditional practice, responding to a long history of women’s work as a form of feminist expression. Citing Rozsika Parker’s explorations of 19<sup>th</sup> century needlework as a force by

which femininity is both constructed and challenged, and Dick Hebdige's notions of subculture, where objects are appropriated for subversive ends then re-assimilated back into mainstream society via commoditization, I analyze the ways craftivism is also enmeshed "first and foremost with consumption." It can be challenging to determine where the "commercial exploitation" and the creative impulse diverge. Parker and Hebdige seem to agree that the means of voicing oppositional sentiments may also be the force that holds that opposition within the bounds of societal norms.

Throughout this project, I examine crafting as protest and the ways it can succeed, or fail, to achieve subversive ends. Margo DeMello argues that middle-class consumption of working class tropes and motifs only reinforces their class status; Glenn Adamson offers the most critical evaluation of the possibilities for opposition, or subversion of gender norms found in women's crafting: "sewing in the living room or woodworking in the garage are activities that reflect a culture of prosperous excess...the successful displacement of unused time into harmless leisure activities has been vital to the project of capitalist expansion" (Adamson 2007, 140). Adamson continues,

[In making things] by hand, amateurs believe themselves to be exercising creativity, or at least to be creating something more authentic than what can be bought at the local mall. But, in fact, the activity is exactly the reverse. Precisely because they are made so lovingly, homemade crafts betray the degree to which their makers are integrated into the larger structure of capitalist ideology (Ibid.).

The very ability to engage in hobbies, Adamson argues, is the ultimate sign of the "prosperous excess" of the middle class; furthermore, the individualist

impulse that drives crafters towards the “unique,” the handmade, and the “authentic” is precisely the force that identifies them as fully “integrated into the larger structure of capitalist ideology.”

If crafting as protest is at best ambiguous, and at worst lazy and excessive, more optimistic possibilities lie in an examination of the healing potential of crafting, the necessity for crafters of having a physical outlet, in movement and texture, with which to combat life’s internal and external stresses. Throughout this project, I examine crafts and crafting produced in response to stress, sorrow, or cataclysm: an “upheaval” of personal or public nature. The vast majority of the crafters whose thoughts and feelings are recorded here referred to their work in terms of addiction, obsession, or compulsion; they also consistently reported that crafting was a necessity, if not a strictly economic one, then a way to claim personal time and comfort in the face of the demands of career, family, and society. These sentiments were shared by almost every individual I spoke with, whether male or female, straight or queer, white or people of color; the sheer repetition of the same remarks by so many very different individuals leads me to stress the importance of these questions. In my fifth chapter, using Marita Sturken’s notions of cultural memory, I explore the ways individuals use objects to create, “recall and rescript” memory when faced with cataclysm. This notion of “rescripting” of one’s life, through the making, buying and manipulation of cultural products, is perhaps the most powerful argument for the performative, and healing, aspects of crafting. As crafters create objects, they also create the narratives and realities with which they choose to identify.

I approached this project with several methodological goals. First, as the world of fine art and fine craft scholarship has explored themes of opposition and resistance in women's traditional art in exhibits such as "Playing with Pictures," "40 under 40," "Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting," "UnKnitting," and "Pricked: Extreme Embroidery," I felt it was imperative as a scholar whose work is rooted in folklore and popular culture to explore how "ordinary" women were negotiating the same terrain using provocative and subversive imagery and themes in their work. I desired to understand the implications of examining oppositional narratives created by women whose lives were "traditional" in many ways; married women, with children, stay at home parents, or professionals employed in mainstream fields. Likewise, of examining the work of younger, outwardly non-traditional crafters, single women, without children, self-employed or employed in artistic or counter-culture fields, whose crafting used forms and media that are among the most traditionally "feminine," associated with women's work, imbued with images and themes of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century domesticity, femininity and gender roles. The activities of middle-class women were of particular interest to me, as I have investigated how they voiced opposition to dominant gender norms through their crafting, and the ways they embraced and reproduced established gender roles.

Additionally, though it would have been possible to explore these themes exclusively through the analysis and close reading of the objects themselves, it was important to my scholarship to include ethnography in my analysis. I felt that recording the voices and observing the makers of the objects, juxtaposed with

the narratives their objects contained, would give a more nuanced and complicated picture of the reasons behind, and the import of women's choices to craft. The praxis of crafting, I asserted, would offer more than the sum of the parts; a fuller, if more complicated, reading about the meanings of contemporary crafters and the DIY movement.

Finally, I wished to look at questions of feminism, consumption and crafting by examining the commonalities among crafters. While many of the scholars whose works I reference focus on a single form or medium, I have traced commonalities and patterns across a variety of media, using each chapter to explore a different set of questions. Knitting and quilting were among the forms to which I devoted the most attention, perhaps because their practitioners are among the most passionate and vocal. These may also be media where consumption, collecting and class play the largest role; in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century women knit and quilted out of economic necessity, to provide for the needs of their families, contemporary middle-class Americans quilt and knit almost exclusively to fill their needs for creativity and personal fulfillment. Scrapbooking is prominent in my analysis as well, also because there is a large volume of publications and products available for purchase. I also spoke with women who considered themselves "crafty" in a more broad sense; women who identified as makers, not limited to any one medium, was reported as often as any of the most popular crafts. I conducted interviews with several multi-disciplinary crafters, who refinished furniture, decorated dollhouses, or made recycled clothing and household objects out of castoff textiles and objects fished



out of the trash. From a practical and professional standpoint, as a museum professional engaged in curation, collections management and conservation projects, it behooved me to expand, rather than limit, my arguments to include as wide a variety of objects and forms as possible.

I embarked upon this project because I believe that crafting and material culture, in a singularly physical and concrete way, speak to the complexities and the contradictions in the experience of millennial middle-class American women. The objects described here could be read as the physical markers of a modern feminist ideal, an experience of femininity that includes power, agency, choice, career fulfillment, marriage and family, creativity, self-care, aesthetics, and prestige; an optimistic reading of crafting may suggest that women finally “have it all,” and are truly free to pursue career, creative and family goals, constructing their identities using a palette of traditional and non-traditional gender roles.

Viewed through a more critical lens, crafting presupposes a limited, confined, heteronormative set of values and gender roles. Women whose paradigms for finding fulfillment, love, and happiness involve a regressive, rather than progressive, viewpoint; looking to the past for clues about how to move forward. Perhaps a still darker view shows a romanticizing of women’s work. As Kristen Treen argues, a blindness to the struggles that “foremothers” faced, racial narratives of exclusion, brutality and privilege. Treen’s lament, at the beginning of this conclusion, iterates the pitfalls of my project; as a scholar, I am tasked with not only exploring the ways that crafting has the power to express women’s

struggles, but also urged not to “misunderstand” the extent to which there are indeed “dark corners” to probe.

Though there may be a darker side to women’s passion for crafting, one that may be obscured by the visual and tactile appeal of the products they create, there is still value and importance in revisiting the lives and pastimes of middle-class women. This project emerges shortly after the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*, when, rather than finding that Friedan’s middle-class subjects have achieved fulfillment, middle-class women continue to search. This project focuses on a population very similar to the one that she examined: white, educated middle-class women who, though they have made inroads into the male world of independence and career fulfillment that Friedan envisioned, are turning back to a “new domesticity” (Matchar 2001) because however comparatively comfortable middle-class lives may be, notions of gender equality and life balance are, for them, still a struggle. Crafting and the DIY movement are, “at heart, a cry against a society that’s not working” (Matchar 2011, p 247), and more to the point, not working for women. Scholars and theorists who have examined issues of class and feminism in the DIY movement, such as Emily Matchar, David Brooks, and Mark Frauenfelder, map a social terrain in which the middle classes have lost ground to the ultra-rich, and middle-class women have the most difficult time navigating the conflicting demands of career and family. Echoing the work of Margo DeMello, the idea of an “authentic,” handmade life is “most attractive to people who are removed enough from the

horrors of rural poverty to find canning charming yet still struggle to find genuinely fulfilling careers and decent ways to balance work and life” (Ibid.).

The main critiques of this approach include a failure to fully interrogate racial privilege and heteronormative messages; journalists like Matchar, and myself, in my role as researcher, have focused on crafting as a narrative of whiteness and middle-class values; the voices of queer and trans crafters, and crafters of color, also need consideration and analysis. Also difficult to discern are the voices of men. If I have argued that crafting is a way women construct a physical and emotional “female space,” there is also a danger that excluding male voices, rather than engaging with men to create a society where both sexes work in the domestic sphere, has negative possibilities (Ibid. p 233).

An analysis of objects that are so compelling in their ability to “draw us in” can be a “worrying” and dangerous project; it is challenging to avoid joining the ranks of, as Kristen Treen puts it, “lazy readers of bright surfaces.” If the fine art world, engaged in exhibiting and collecting contemporary craft, can be “safe in the knowledge that just looking at and considering these works is somehow enough,” (Treen 2015), my field and its methods urge me to go beyond observation and appreciation. In this project, I have leveraged texts that document the ways women’s crafting and handiwork has historically helped marginalized groups voice political and emotional resistance. The many cautions and pitfalls that surround a study of middle-class crafting, and the many troubled narratives of race and class interwoven through it, is all the more reason to revisit the undervalued, and largely underexamined, study of women’s work. Looking at

middle-class women's class, gender and financial struggles through the objects they create, and the narratives they relate about them, may offer insights to help us to better understand how contemporary women continue to be marginalized, and perhaps more importantly, how women of color and LGBT women continue to be excluded from the benefits of "feminism" as experienced by middle-class crafters.

Glen Adamson terms the "amateurism" of craft a "rebuke" against the sexism feminist artists encountered when trying to build careers as professional "fine" artists. For Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro and other feminist artists, though their mastery of mainstream art techniques was as sophisticated as their male counterparts, they still found fewer opportunities. Their choice to use the "amateurism" of craft "functioned as a rhetorical device – a reminder that the playing field was not equal – but also as a means of working through the particularity of a marginal subject position" (Adamson 2007, 143). This project is evidence that, even for middle-class women who have the benefit of white privilege and affluence, the "playing field" was and is still decidedly unequal. The women presented here are still using crafting, a purposeful "amateurism," as a "middle ground" through which it became possible for them "articulate the very difficulty of their position" (Ibid. 151). The middle-class professionals that make up the crafters in this project, it could be said, are also using craft as a "rebuke" against the continuing marginalization in the workplace, and difficulties of creating space for family and creativity in millennial society.

### ***Applications for Practitioners, and Areas for Further Research***

This project centers around ideas of conversation, debate and communication; if this research has a purpose, it is to serve as a catalyst for further debate, and exploration conversation about the possibilities of crafting, gender, class and consumption. I hope my work can inform other studies of how traditional behavior and continuity can be found in “modern” contexts, and how middle-class women negotiate the contradictions and complexities of the variety of roles they must play: activism, politics, financial security, parenthood, health, community, and personal growth. This research, I hope, may participate in conversations about how to “do” contemporary ethnography, and how to integrate ethnographic studies with examinations of material and visual culture; the idea of objects and their meanings, following the work of Daniel Miller, can be better understood by understanding their makers.

My study of crafting through the lenses of gender and class performance, visual culture and societal movement is one voice in a vast conversation that began in the late 90s and continues to grow in breadth and volume. My explorations of these topics just scrape the surface of the complexities of analysis and understanding possible when looking at gender, class and contemporary American crafting. It is safe to say that every week since 2001, I have received at least one, sometimes thirty or forty, emails, texts, clippings, messages and Facebook posts having to do with crafting, quilting, knitting, crocheting, women’s traditional arts, guerrilla art, needlework, tattoo culture, pornographic crafts, American folk art, art therapy, craft-a-thons, quilt-a-thons,

knit-a-thons, scrap-a-thons, knit in public day, indie arts festivals, and a host of other topics directly relevant to this project. My topic has proved to be an ever-expanding one, a moving target, ever-evolving and changing even from one week to the next. It has been impossible to process the entirety of the popular and academic works relating to crafting over the past decade. I have focused on the texts and sources that are most relevant, most provocative, and most important in the histories of crafting and women's experience.

At the outset, my goal was to look at questions of crafting via a breadth of forms and media; this project offers a broad and polyvocal take on crafting, class and gender. There are a wealth of opportunities for scholars to explore smaller microcosms and niches of crafting and the DIY movement, and the ways that gender and class converge in these smaller windows of meaning. In this project, I focused on ethnography, though I feel that, in the words of Jeanie Banks Thomas, there is vitality in creating a "marriage of story and form" – there is potential to concentrate focus on the objects themselves, to expand the content and complexity of the close readings and visual analyses that I included.

My Masters research focused heavily on quilting and technology; as this project has evolved, technologies and Internet venues where crafting is the central topic have emerged and multiplied. Facebook, Etsy, Ravelry and Pinterest are sites that I refer to throughout this project, but that are, in and of themselves, excellent topics for dissertations and scholarly inquiry about women, art, kitsch, opposition and subversion, consumption and collecting. Pinterest especially holds huge potential for understanding women's creativity, aesthetics,

collecting, consumption, communication and material culture. Ravelry, perhaps the premier online venue for crafters, especially knitters, in and of itself could be an excellent topic for a more detailed exploration not only of the questions of interest to me, but also ideas of virtual and imagined community and the implications of crafting that is wholly electronic, completely freed from the bounds of the material realm.

The chapter that I did not include in this dissertation would have been on the topic of male crafters. Though I conducted very fruitful interviews with several men, both queer and straight, who quilt, knit, embroider, and engage in a wide variety of other crafty pursuits, women's issues take precedence over their stories. Many of the exhibits cited in this work contain the works of male fine artists and fine craft practitioners who challenge gender norms through their use of "women's work" techniques and forms; there is also an "underground" American history of men quilting, knitting, and embroidering that I would like to explore more fully, examining both the ways that narratives of masculinity emerge in men's crafting – such as the Oklahoma man who wrote some of the very first published books and pamphlets on machine quilting – and the men, past and present, whose work through these media challenges notions of gender norms and patriarchy.

One of the great strengths of American Studies as a field of inquiry is its ability to engage in unique and compelling analyses of American thought and culture through the lens of race theory. Though I have incorporated ideas of race and intersectionality, and argued for their importance in understanding class and

gender dynamics which are my focus, there are many opportunities to delve more deeply into issues of crafting, race and ethnicity. American Studies is populated with scholars who are equipped to bring a keen critical eye to this topic, and to explore more fully how women of color as a group are subverting the notions of white privilege and middle-class comfort that have surrounded my examples. My agenda was to look specifically at a group that is privileged and mostly white, exploring the oppositional possibilities; scholars who put crafters of color at the center of their projects have a great deal to work with on this subject.

This project has required me to negotiate the analytic tension between exploration, appreciation and critique. Daniel Miller, whose work informs this project in its analysis of the ethnographic process and his study of the emotional and social consequences of consumption, sums up the conundrum of the academic study of all aspects of human play and leisure. "I have found that trying to prove something is usually what prevents us from managing to understand something" (Miller 2013, 73). My goal was to heed Miller's advice. While still doing my academic duty, my agenda was less to "prove," argue, assert or establish than to suggest connections, complicate assumptions, trace continuity and build understanding. Coursework introduced ideas about the tension between giving evidence definitively and overstating a point, missing subtlety, contradiction, and gradations of truth. If I have failed to state many of my points and arguments with the strength and vigor that my field might desire, I hope to have succeeded in offering, as Michael Trujillo put it, a "more generous reading"



of crafters and crafting as obsession, collection, addiction, coping mechanism, and performance of class and gender.

This project has required boundary-crossing between the goals of exploration and meaning-making that is the method for museum research and programming, and the problematizing, deconstruction and critical assessment that forms my American Studies background. The idea of *femmage* as a framework for my project must help me to reconcile the disparate goals, agendas, constraints, and contradictions that surround women's crafting. When discussing *Primitive Art in Civilized Places*, Sally Price connects *femmage*, a "notion that pays *homage* to the artistry of countless women throughout history devoted aesthetic energy to scrapbooks, appliqué, photo albums, and patchwork quilts..." (Price 1989, 5) to the problem-solving notion of *bricolage*, which is her method of juxtaposing texts and images of different types to support her assertions about art and culture. This has been my project and method as I have constructed this dissertation; it is also the project of crafters examined here. Crafting is best understood as *femmage*: a juxtaposition of often-contradictory texts and images, next to one another to create an assemblage of narratives about contemporary crafting among middle-class women. Like a quilt, a collage, a scrapbook, some of these images may be more vibrant, clearer, or more compelling than their neighbors, but my goal is to create a whole that speaks to not only what women create, but why creating is of such importance to them. Janice Radway argues that material culture may speak to the "interstices [that] still exist within the social fabric where opposition is carried on by people who are

not satisfied by their place within it or by the restricted material and emotional rewards that accompany it" (Radway 1984, 222). It is these "interstices" that have most intrigued me in studying middle-class crafters in a post 9/11 America; the gaps and voids that still exist between the success, privilege, and financial comforts that women enjoy. It is these "interstices" where crafting works, as women attempt to find "material and emotional rewards," and to create a coherent whole of their lives and experiences.

## FIGURES

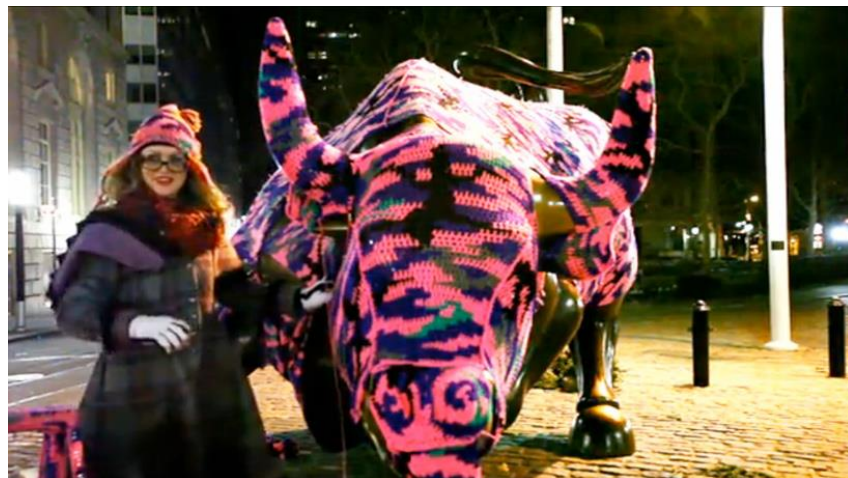
### Chapter I

Figure 1: Olek's bull, fully dressed



COURTESY: OLEK

Figure 2: Olek installing her sweater



*Figure 3: knitters' t-shirt and feminist statement*

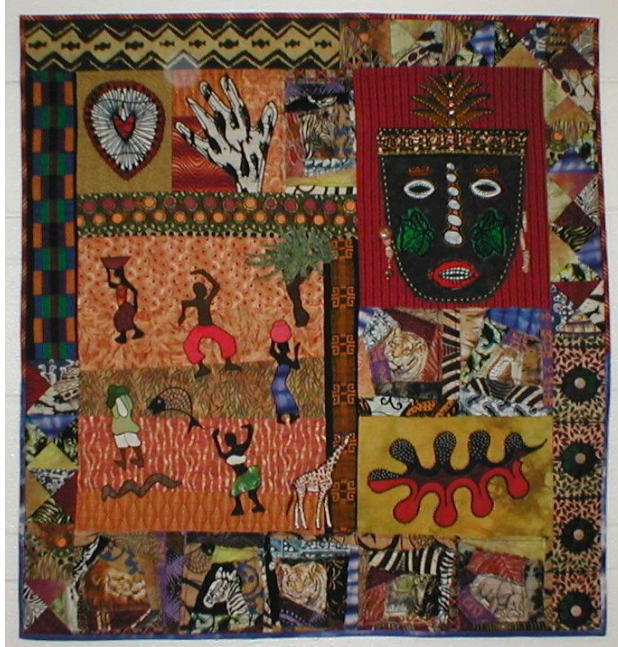


## ***Chapter II***

*Figure 4: A typical quilter's "stash." This stash happened to belong to a married couple who quilted together. Photo Rosemary Sallee, 2005.*



*Figure 5:* Lynn Parker's African Mask quilt. Photo Rosemary Sallee, 2000.



*Figure 6:* A Hawaiian quilt by Los Alamos Piecemaker Jacquita York. White colonists turned Polynesian forms and patterns into western-style appliqued quilts. These patterns are still popular with contemporary quiltmakers.  
Photo Rosemary Sallee, 2000.



*Fig 7.1: "All the little things quilters love": one quilter's sewing room.  
Photo Rosemary Sallee, 2000.*



*Figure 7.2: Shrine to creativity: one crafter's studio is also a display area for her collection of crafted and other items. Photo Rosemary Sallee, 2008.*

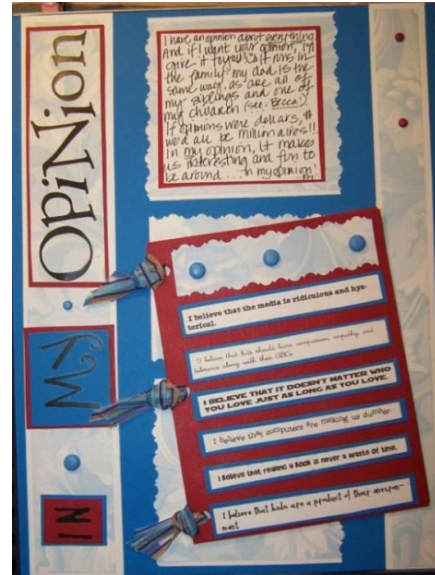


**Chapter III**

*Figure 8: “Face value.”* This young woman’s layout seems a poignant commentary on beauty stereotypes, and may voice her feelings about wearing a tiara and evening gown.



*Figure 9: “In my opinion.”* A list of rants and declarations by an online scrapper who values her own decisive nature. Note that this layout contains no photos.



*Figure 10: “Solo yo” – only me.* A young woman smiles confidently at the camera, proclaiming her self-reliance. Her bilingual layout is evidence that there is racial diversity among scrappers.



*Figure 11: “I am a mommy.”* A layout that celebrates the scrapper’s traditional role as mother and nurturer.



Figure 12: "My first name is Mom"



Figure 13: "Skin deep?"



Figure 14: "My 4 Feats"

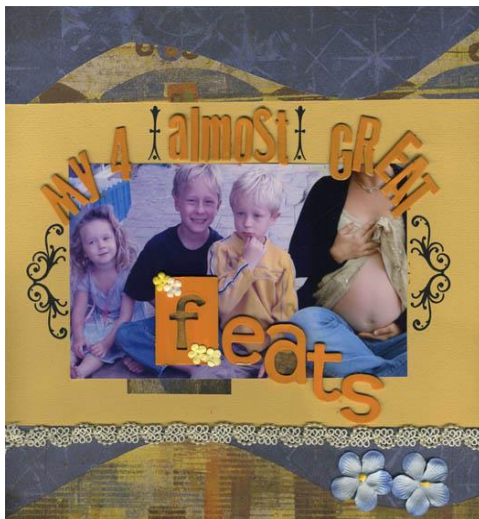
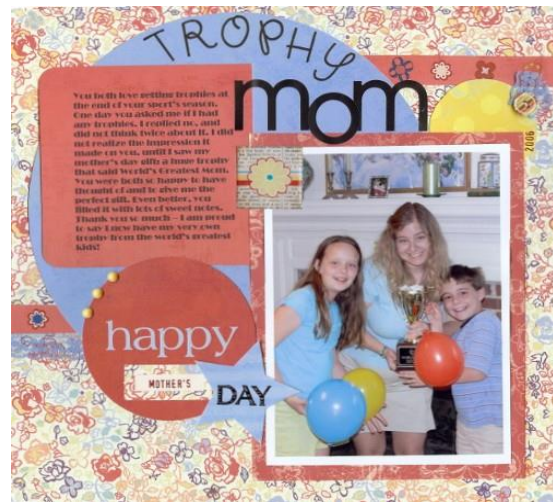


Figure 15: "Trophy Mom"





## Chapter IV

*Figure 16:* A “yarn-bombing” near the public library in Takoma Park, Maryland  
Photo courtesy Jennifer Lewis, 2011.



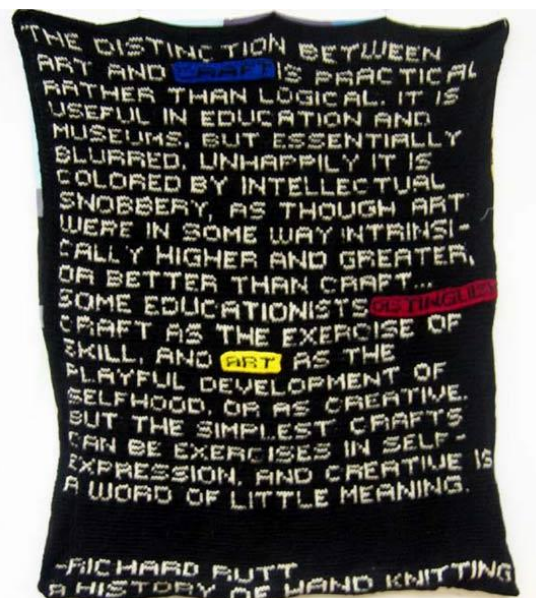
*Figure 17:* The idea goes one step further: a scarf-bombing in a frigid Canadian city leaves warm weather accessories where homeless men and women can find them. Photo courtesy Chase the Chill in Winnipeg.



Figure 18: Knitted Fender Guitar by Sarah Stollak.  
Photo courtesy Sarah Stollak.



Figure 19: Knitted Quotation by Mercedes Rodgers.  
Photo courtesy Merc



*Figure 20: Tammy George, “Punkrawkpurl,” and her tattooed knuckles  
Photo courtesy Tammy George*



## **Chapter 5**

*Figure 21: Suzanne Johnston's September 11, 2001 memorial block.  
Photo courtesy Suzanne Johnston, 2001.*



Figure 22: Laura Fogg and Betty Lacy's Quilt of Compassion.  
Photo courtesy Laura Fogg and Quilter's Newsletter Magazine, 2001.



Figure 23: Chemo Quilt 2 by Barbara Forslund.  
Photo by Rosemary Sallee, 2003.

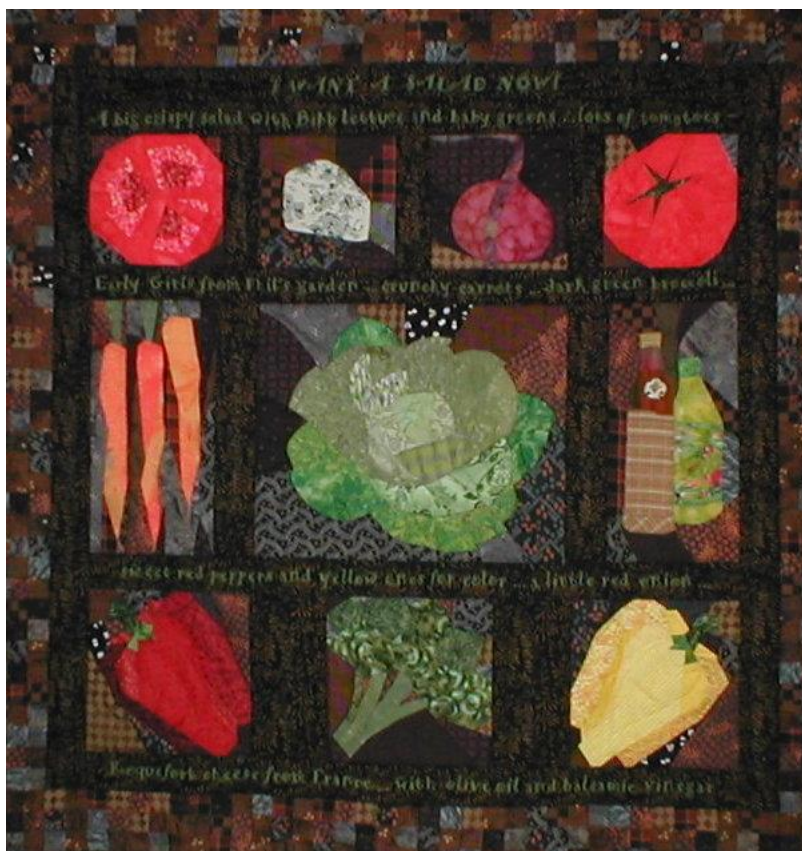


Figure 24: Another Little Tykes Makeover  
Photo courtesy L. Becker, 2010



*Figure: T Shirt.*  
Photo by Rosemary Sallee.



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