STELLA MINAHAN AND JULIE WOLFRAM COX

The Inner Nana, the List Mum and Me: Knitting Identity

Résumé

Nous présentons ici les réflexions de jeunes femmes qui tricotent sur la manière dont elles ont acquis leur savoir-faire dans ce domaine, et nous passons en revue les images médiatiques du tricot et des femmes. Bien que la figure de la grand-mère qui transmet le savoir-faire soit bien claire, la mère est absente ou floue. Cette absence se reflète également dans les groupes de tricot, les blogs et les faux mémoires de l'un des auteurs. Nous proposons des investigations plus poussées de la construction de l'identité par l'intermédiaire des travaux artisanaux, ainsi que de la matérialité et du caractère intangible à la fois des références nostalgiques.

Abstract

Here we present young knitters' reflections on their acquisition of textile skills and we review media images of women and knitting. While the image of the grandmother as teacher is clear, the mother is absent or obscure. This absence is also reflected in knitting groups, blogs and in one of the authors' false memories. We propose further investigation of the construction of identity through craft and of both the materiality and the ethereality of nostalgic references.

In a recent review of identity and heritage, Tilley (2007) argued that the freedom to construct and reconstruct identity has come about, at least in part, because of disruption to traditional roles and cultures in what is now a globalized world. Within this world of instantaneous visual transmissions, remedial engagement with craft and the hand made is increasingly important as "an essential part of the process of making self and social identity" (17). Thus, in contemporary society "[i]dentity becomes, in part, something that may be chosen, constructed and manipulated" (10). In this paper we extend existing analysis of craft (cf. Campbell 2005) and consider the production of textile crafts, especially women's knitting, as a means by which identity may be developed and explored as the knitter casts on and off her creations and both draws on and distances herself from traditions of femininity. In doing so, we adopt Campbell's definition of craft consumption as "activities in which individuals both design and make the products that they themselves consume" (27), although we recognize that knitters may or may not follow patterns developed by others and may often knit for others as well as for themselves.

Knitting has undergone a revival in recent years (*The Economist* 2006).[1] Whether knitting for themselves, for their partners, friends and colleagues, or for their children, or the children of others, women twist and form all manner of goods, including items such as scarves, blankets, socks and hats. Such creations protect, define and warm the recipient while providing an opportunity for the maker to find her own voice through the medium of yarn (Clover and Stalker 2008). As such, knitting as craft is a material accomplishment of skill and mastery as well as a display of creativity and self-expression, one that may form part of "the aestheticization of everyday life" (Campbell 2005: 39; Money 2007). Studies of "new knitting" have concentrated on its

growth, its functions and on the objects produced. Given that young women represent the generation that has created the renewed interest in the crafts, we wanted to know how young women knitters present themselves and discuss their knitting activity, including its place, its value and how it is seen and encouraged—or discouraged—by important others in the private and more public lives of the knitters.

That such engagement may also provide comfort has been the subject of attention in popular culture, where the gendered nature of knitting and, in particular, the nostalgic association of knitting and knitted items with earlier times is embodied through images and references to the grandmother (or "Nana") as a signifier of the past and as a source of comfort and care (Jensen and McKee 2003).

As Lowenthal (1986) has suggested in his wide-ranging analysis of the various functions and disciplinary treatments of the past, discussion of past events does not allow us access to those events or to an assessment of whether or not they ever really happened. Instead, the past is "largely an artifact of the present" (Lowenthal 1986: xvi) and nostalgia may be associated with a repossession of, and yearning for, the past while mourning its lost immediacy. Nostalgia for the past may represent rebellion against the present and mistrust of the future, accompanied by what may be "pathological attachments" (Lowenthal 1986: 11).

Such nostalgia, posits Stewart (1984: 23) is a "social disease" as the reconstruction of the past denies the present and the past is bestowed with an "authenticity." Like Lowenthal, Stewart argues that the past has a reality only in ideology and that it is absence that creates the longing for a desired utopia. There is a desire by the nostalgic to resolve absence by closing the breach and be "united within the walled city of the maternal" (Stewart 1984: 23) that privileges origin and is an imaginary space of purity and simplicity indicative of the "bourgeois domestic" (Stewart 1984: xi). Similarly, Lowenthal (7) has commented that "intimate associations" help to sell nostalgic memorabilia.

In relation to knitting, the longing to connect with a desired utopia may be expressed both in the knitted object and in particular references to grandmothers and grandmothers' times. It is also important, however, to note that there is ambivalence about the role of the grandmother just as, in more general terms, both the past and the future "attract and repel" (Lowenthal 1986: 3). For example, while Nanas provide an important connection with a past that may be celebrated as a source of learning, loving and nostalgic comfort, they may also be tolerated with humour or discounted with distaste (cf. Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007). Accordingly, the image of the grandmother can be read in a variety of ways and it may be that the Nana is a nostalgic representation of a dissatisfaction with contemporary society that needs to be remedied: a (dis)ease that needs to be healed. To be tired and sleepy requires a "Nana nap"; to stay at home rather than go out can be "like a Nana"; to seek comfort is Nana-like and nostalgic, seeking warmth, protection and privacy from the de-professionalization of work (e.g., Campbell 2005), the urbanization of society (Money 2007) and even from the confrontations of global politics.

While membership in knitting groups may offer such refuge, these groups can also be seen as sites for gendered identity construction for, as Green (1998: 171) has pointed out, they are important spaces that enable women "to review their lives, assessing the balance of satisfactions and activities through contradictory discourses which involve both the 'mirroring' of similarities, and resistance to traditional feminine identities." We review this ambivalence within the context of literature on material culture and identity in order to establish the links between gender, knitting and development of identity.

More traditional organization structures exist for the practice of knitting as seen on the website for the Canadian Guild of Knitters. On this site we found evidence of the Nana and the need for balance in life. On the "About Us" page a member of the Guild is introduced as "a 30-year plus knitter taught to knit by her grandmother." She is accompanied by her pet dog whose job it is to remind her owner "to take a break from the computer every once in a while."[2]

Fig. 1
Nana and granddaughter: photograph by Simon Fox, Deakin University.

In illustration, we discuss incidental references to Nanas that were made by young women who are members of various knitting groups and who participated in ten in-depth interviews. (The interviewer is discussed later in the Method section.) We focus on discussions of female lineage and the theme of nostalgia as revealed in interviews with these young knitters who construct identities both in relation to and separate from work. We found that nostalgia reflected a concern with immediate family relationships and a yearning for a better (if fantasized and romanticized) past. We found that these nostalgic yearnings were strong, and created images of previous generations as generous and skilful—to be admired and emulated.

However, while nostalgia was embodied in the Nana, we found that references to the mother were few. The mother was sometimes absent, sometimes present; and even where she was mentioned, the mother image was not as prevalent nor discussed with the same level of emotional connection as that of the Nana. Instead, the mother is revealed either as an occasional tutor or concentrated within discussion of supervisory roles such as the "List Mum" in online communities. The relative absence of the mother in the interview transcripts and images of knitters is discussed and a self-reflexive piece by one of the authors is included where she rediscovers, after many decades, her mother as the teacher of craft.

Thus, we focus on the relationship between grandmothers and granddaughters as one teaches and supports the craft activities of the other, and acknowledge the breach in the lineage with the absence of the mother. Our interviewees reveal complex relationships among Nanas, mothers and selves, intertwined with the acquisition of craft skill. Our conclusions include a call for further empirical investigation of the construction of identity through craft and for recognition of both the substance and the ethereality of nostalgic references.

Craft, Gender and (the New) Age

In many different contexts, craft is acknowledged with pride as a symbol of national identity that is, for example, reproduced through the making of quilts in North America, of story-cloths by the Hmong of Asia, carpets in Iran, tartans in Scotland, and in the spinning and weaving of silk in Japan. To illustrate, the identity of Japanese women is embedded in a national culture of craft that goes back centuries. What has replaced the toil is a

Fig. 2
In Touch with the Inner Nana: photograph by Simon Fox, Deakin University.

culture of the handmade that views spinning and weaving as a leisure activity that plays a role in a collective nostalgia by romanticizing the life of rural communities. However, in one example, Creighton (2001) undertook a study of Japanese women and their search for identity through spinning and weaving. Through their choosing to participate in manual tasks often regarded as "female," Creighton believes that participation in such traditional crafts "reflects attempts to construct personal, collective, and cultural identity" (18). While the women were preserving and continuing the skills of the handmade as part of their own identities and connection with the past, they were also spinners and weavers in charge of their activities, and resisting traditional views of women making handmade objects as signifiers of secondary status.

Craft may also fulfill a productive function for women as they age. In one study into the value of quilting to Amish, Mennonite and Mormon women in the United States, Cheek and Piercy (2008) found that participation in this craft was associated with caring, pride, feeling included and feeling effective. This participation provided a means for the women to negotiate the movement from middle age to old age, which is a transition described as a time when the individual can embrace generativity or

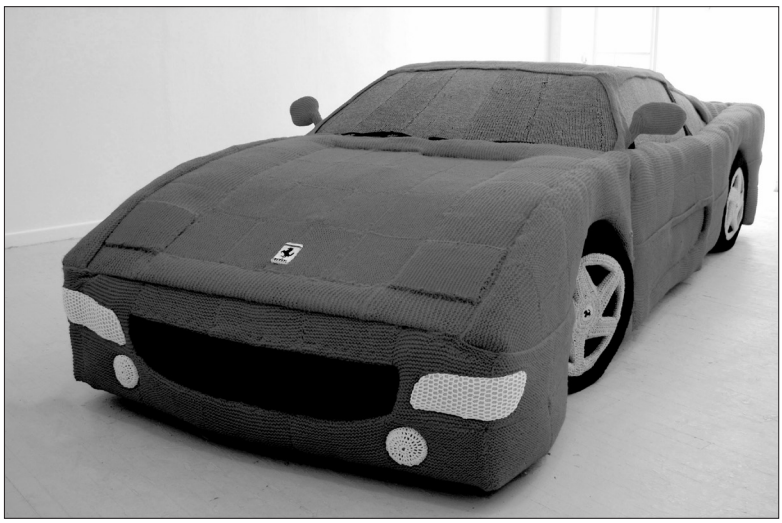

Fig. 3
The Ferrari: 12 Miles of Yarn 2006*; artist: Tricia Porter.*

stagnation (Cheek and Piercy 2008; Peterson and Duncan 2007). While Shukla (2005) found in her study of dress and adornment of Indian women that life transitions are evident by what a woman wears, so too are life transitions evident by the activities that occupy a woman's time.

Despite such potential, the production of textile crafts has long been seen as "women's work" and associated with devalued work in the Western home. According to Perron (1998), this view has led to textile crafts being ignored to such an extent that the crafts lack a grammar that provides meaning; a way of discussing form and structure, the colour, texture and shape that references conventions and provides a means for inter-generational communication. However, the past decade has seen many young women (re)learn to knit, partly in response to the dislocation of the so-called Information Society, where traditional associations of identity with place and community may no longer be necessary or even desired. They knit in their studios, homes and sometimes on public transport on the way to and from work,[3] creating and recreating themselves through their knitted objects and participating in the community through crafts discussed on the Internet.

In what may be seen as a strongly gendered social movement (cf. Taylor 1999), some new knitters choose to belong to predominantly female Stitch 'n Bitch groups, so named after the title of a book written by the editor of the New York-based feminist magazine *BUST* (Stoller 2003). In many Western countries members of these groups meet virtually through the Internet and physically in both private and public places. These groups may offer, among other opportunities, the possibility of nostalgia through a romantic return to simpler times or to an idealized past (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007; cf. Campbell 2005; Wajcman 2004), a form of collective leisure and a means of building connection, community and social capital while remedying the individualism typical of the present Information Society (cf. Arai and Pedlar 2003). While the Stitch 'n Bitch movement has not the celebrity it once had in the popular press, it appears that young females are still turning to knitting. The Knitting Guild Association of America has reported a twenty-one per cent growth in its membership since 2001.[4] At the same time, there has been an extraordinary growth in blogs and blog rings that are based around the topic(s) of knitting (Watt 2006; Wei 2004).

However, one lingering effect of the gendering of craft is that quilting circles and Stitch 'n Bitch groups are normally conducted away from public view—despite the efforts of many knitters to "come out" (with their knitting) during the 1990s and early 2000s by meeting in public places such as hotels and cafes to practise their crafts and socialize (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007). Partial attempts to disrupt (or at least to make absurd and draw attention to) the association between knitting and gender occur through deliberate presentations of the knitting of masculine objects such as soft guns, motorbikes, Ferrari cars, buildings and furniture, typical of works by Janet Morton and Tricia Porter.[5] In 2006, Marianne Jorgensen produced a video documenting the process of covering an armoured tank—note, not a teapot—with a knitted pink cosy. Consisting of more than 4000 squares (15 × 15 cm each) prepared by volunteers from, among other countries, Denmark, the United Kingdom and the United States, this work of art represents a "common acknowledgement of a resistance to the war in Iraq" (Jorgensen).[6] Such efforts are effective because of their incongruity, both referring to and countering the traditional places of and for knitting and the gendered nature of organization that separates the public and private domains (Matthews 2005).

This association occurs in two ways. First, the linking of knitting with the gentility of older women sitting quietly at home has been confronted by the creation of knitted material objects that are sexual in nature. While the knitting of sexual prostheses—variants of the knitted sock adapted to enclose the penis—and a pattern for a knitted condom to be constructed[7] are particularly humorous, the availability of patterns that help one to knit a womb and the full female reproductive system offer new ways of thinking about gender and interiors.

Second, while craft activism has to some extent led to a re-thinking of the association of domesticity with oppression (Farry 2006) and while knitting may now be "cool," many references to contemporary knitting also contain references to its past connotations; for even if we are not trying to knit ourselves back to the worlds of our grandmothers, we are still using Nanas as a reference point. Within the popular press, the association of knitting with nostalgia for traditional roles is frequently embodied through reference to, if not images of, the grandmother. Paiement (2006: 4) refers to the taking up of "elderly pastimes as collective nostalgia, a lifeline to a simpler era" and challenges her readers with the question "Do you behave like a gran in your spare time?" Partly a continuation of the trend to domestic "cocooning" and staying at home that was reinforced by terrorist attacks on America in 2001, partly a low-tech antidote to a high-tech society, possibly a meditative antidote to high-stress living, and maybe a display of retro fashion (Condon 2005; Ferguson 2005; Oestricher Gross 2002: 44), knitting as Nana used to do is no longer something of which one should be ashamed.

Inner Nana

Rule (2007: 13) quotes the twenty-five-year old Melbourne artist, Madeleine Beatty, as saying "I think I definitely have a bit of a nanna inside," and when the character Zoidberg was shown knitting on the animated show Futurama, one blogger commented that "I'm surprised he doesn't knit more; after all his fantasy is to be a grandmother."[8] Another woman located in cyberspace was keen to harness and celebrate her "Inner Nana," that part of the feminine identity that does not wish to be involved in the wider, global society; a nurturing quiet part of the identity that is happy to be enclosed in the perceived safety of the home. This woman's blog[9] exists at a site designed as a gathering place for people in the arts world and she presents her mini manifesto to the readers as follows:

> Who is the Inner Nana?
>
> Well, I may look twenty-something on the outside, but as Yoda said, 'The Inner Nana is strong in this one, Luke.'
>
> I call on you all to embrace hand-knitted bed socks, Lovett's crosswords, going to bed after *The Price Is Right*,[10] and Gardener's hand-cream.
>
> When you next receive an invite to a glamorous arts event, I urge you to decline and instead seek solace in the Doona, spiritual home of all Inner Nanas.
>
> When your job is giving you the Heebie-Jeebies, when you couldn't give a Fig, when the world is going to Hell in a Handbasket—all you need is a Bex and a good lie down.[11]

Fig. 4
The Tank: Pink M 24 Chaffee*; artist: Marianne Jørgensen; photographer: Barbara Katzin.*

Being in touch with the Inner Nana means to care for the warmth of knitting, the mental ease of word puzzles, the luxury of sleep and the sensuousness of lotions, all of which sound most attractive to those among us in need of a place of refuge.

Thus, we pursue a different approach on the topic of knitting, exploring the ways in which the predominantly young female group members present themselves and talk about their craft. In the next section we introduce our study, concentrating our discussion on how young women knitters present themselves and relate to (or dismiss) the importance of their female lineage; and how the knitting of identity is an intricate mix of identification and skills transfer that privileges the generative role of the grandmother and a nostalgic imaginary.

Method

Due to the recent prominence of Stitch 'n Bitch knitting groups and the lack of empirical research into these groups (Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007), we undertook a preliminary cross-sectional survey, using face-to-face interviews in order to gain first-hand perspectives from within Australian Stitch 'n Bitch groups. We identified potential groups from websites and public advertisements (e.g., in craft shops) and made twelve visits to four groups across a mix of geographic areas. Potential interviewees were contacted during these visits,

Fig. 5
Femmebomb*; 2004 mixed media installation on the facade of The School of Human Ecology, University of Wisconsin, Madison; artist: Janet Morton; photographer: Paskus.*

resulting in a sample of ten that was drawn from members across the four groups. All interviewees were under forty. Interviews were conducted in varying locations and ranged from thirty-one to fifty-one minutes in length. The main interviewer was a young woman (aged under thirty), as we aimed for both interviewer and interviewee to be from the same generation.

A semi-structured interview approach was chosen to allow a mix of consistency and flexibility. Ethics approval was obtained and all interviewees gave informed consent. They were asked about why they learned to knit, why they continue to knit, what they knit, where and with whom they knit, how they joined the group, contacts at the group, feelings about the group, use of technology, other forms of recreation, the reception of others to their knitting, and past and social influences on knitting. All interviews were taped and transcribed. A template analysis was conducted based on the interview topics and on themes of gender, age and generativity identified from relevant literature including: remedial, progressive, resistance, nostalgic and ironic interpretations of contemporary knitting, as identified by Minahan and Wolfram Cox (2007).

As these data are drawn from a small sample, we used blogs on the topic of knitting to supplement the interviewees' discussions of their motivations for knitting in private, socially and at work. We also reviewed images of women and craft publicly available via a Google Image search in recognition of the importance of visual as well as verbal narratives within research into domestic material culture (Hurdley 2006; Money 2007). We found many thousands of images of women and craft, particularly knitting, and the review finished once there were no new images to view.[12] The images were reviewed with a focus on craft activities that involved grandmothers, mothers and daughters as female lineage was a core category in the interview data that we now present. Where quotations are included, the interviewee's name and age appear in brackets.

Coming Out Knitting

In response to the interviewer's questions about where knitting took place, our participants commented that while knitting is acceptable on public transport when travelling to work, it is not acceptable once at work. For example, Elizabeth, a sales coordinator in her thirties who learned to knit from adult friends, reported that, at her workplace, men regarded her participation in the Stitch 'n Bitch group with humour. The humour was gendered with comments about the woman as consuming (buying the wool) and the man as the carrier of the yarn (in his arms):

> The guys at work have a good laugh, one of the guys … mentioned … that his wife knits and [he said]: "I go wool shopping with her, I am the arms, I carry all the wool." They all think it is funny, like "Liz, what are you doing tonight, are you going to your knitting group again?" I think they think it is a bit old-fashioned. (Elizabeth, thirty-three)

Elizabeth would talk with knitters on the tram on her way to work where the responses were very different and "usually very positive. I tell them I am in Stitch 'n Bitch and talking about stitching on the tram and getting a few people and doing Stitch 'n Bitch sessions on the tram. They say 'great,' usually very positive" (ibid.).

Kylie, a web developer who took up knitting while unemployed, lacked self-confidence and was much more timid about her experiences with knitting, which she saw as something she would prefer to keep from public view:

> I feel that it's something that I don't want to tell anyone about. It's something that I need to keep covered; it's not the kind of thing where I start knitting in the lunchroom or something. And it's a bit of a bummer that because it would be really nice to be able to just, you know, do it in my lunch hour somewhere. (Kylie, thirty)
>
> Interviewer: What kind of reactions would you expect from your workmates then?
>
> I think, I think it would be that you would be seen as not being quite as professional or something

> like that, um, I guess it would be along the lines of someone who is like, you know, trying to bake in their lunch hour, it's just, it just does not fit. (ibid.)

We note that Kylie compares knitting with another traditionally feminine pursuit—baking—and views both activities as incompatible with the work place. In contrast, Lynne was the only woman we interviewed who was unconcerned about knitting at work. She liked to maintain control over her interactions with others and would openly knit while waiting at work; waiting for others to arrive, or when there was nothing better to do:

> Well, when you see a new pile of yarn sitting on my desk or I have put my bag out or something, or I am waiting for a meeting to start and I decide, stuff it, I am going to knit for a while, while I am waiting for everyone to show up, it is sort of obvious. I don't really knit during work time unless I am, unless there is nothing better to do while I'm waiting. (Lynne, thirty-eight)

Lynne also knitted on public transport and remarked that "some of them [men] are fascinated and some of them like to look the other way." It appears that this public production process is quite confrontational to men; they are either intrigued or possibly offended by the sight of a woman knitting. This idea of knitting being a particularly personal activity is reinforced later in the interview when Lynne remarked that knitting provided her with a means of limiting her interaction with the rest of the world: "It gives me a chance to step away. It is a little bit of a barrier between me and the world and it is something that calms me down" (ibid.).

Others have also viewed knitting and needle work as means for controlling interaction. In one example, Patricia is a skilled and committed knitter who values creativity in the knitting process and enjoys getting together with her girlfriends every few weeks to knit and chat. For Patricia, a highlight of recent gatherings has been their high level of productivity in a setting also described as a "haven," although from a somewhat different perspective:

> I think we feel a bit more productive than usual because usually we're just sitting down, eating, drinking and talking, whereas I think we feel like we're … you know how women need to multi-task. I think it satisfies that inherent need in women to do as many things as possible, all at once. I think it's … we're busy women generally, we've all got full-time jobs that are fairly demanding and social lives that are really demanding. It's just kind of like a little haven, where we can sit down and do something like that, yes, so it's generally a great feeling. (Patricia, thirty-two)

Fig. 6
Untitled (Domestic Interior)*, 2000; artist: Janet Morton; photographer: Sarah Quinton.*

Presences: The Nana and the Inner Nana

In discussions of why, rather than where, knitting takes place, nostalgia was evident throughout the interviews (cf. Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007). Associated with this nostalgia was a common and compelling theme denoting the presence of grandmothers and the presence or absence of mothers in the knitting stories. Nana (the grandmother) was often referenced in a fond and caring manner as providing skills, company and nurture. The young knitters sometimes embraced the role of the grandmother into their own perceptions of self and became the "Inner Nana," requiring rest and comfort. While the images of the Nana and Inner Nana were prevalent, the mother was presented as the other: an authoritarian and shadowy figure who set the rules. At other times, the mother took part in the transfer of skills, but this was secondary to images of the grandmother.

Like many other women, Patricia remembered her grandmother knitting and her memories are of women knitting items for someone else: "That's the thing I remember, that they weren't knitting for themselves." Patricia believes that this represented

Fig. 7
Homage to Meret Oppenheim, 2000*; artist: Janet Morton; photographer: Sarah Quinton.*

"another manifestation of how women can be too selfless at times" (Patricia, thirty-two). Perhaps this indicates that the women approaching old age wished to "give back" to the community, to "make a difference" to the world and future generations through their actions. One of the mindsets occurring in this approach to old age, we propose, is the wish to transfer skills of the handmade; in this case the craft of knitting. This may be one of the reasons behind the frequent appearance of grandmothers in the interviews.

However, as Suzanne tells us, the relationship between gender, identity and craft is richer and more complex than first views suggest: "Nana taught me how to knit, strong images of Nana. Sometimes mum, sometimes girlfriends. But I don't want to be seen as a Nana, but maybe it isn't so bad after all" (Suzanne, thirty-one). Pondering who passed on the skills of knitting, this young knitter explores the ambivalence of her own identity and her participation in craft and material culture with her mother and her female peers. She has "strong images" of her Nana (grandmother) as the transmitter of the skill of a craft that she enjoys, but she corrects herself; her mother and her girlfriends also helped her learn to knit. Her ambivalence in relation to images of the Nana is evident as she is not sure whether she wants to be associated with the older woman, her mother or her peers.

Thus, the relationship with Nanas is complex, and at the extreme, the image of the crone is subject to derision. For example:

> Yeah, I can't avoid the fact that I knit. It is a bit obvious and some of them say, "did you knit that?" when I wear something, like "yes, oh woo, that is fabulous," and others look and go "knitting granny. (Lynne thirty-eight)

The Absent Mother

We noticed with interest that most of the other women who were interviewed also stated that they had been taught to knit by their grandmothers. Indeed, among the ten interviewees, the most common response was that they had learned to knit at an early age (four to seven years) and had been taught by their grandmother. However, the strength of the Nana image contrasted markedly with absent or obscured images of their mothers, which we discuss below in relation to Irigaray's (1993) argument that the lack of representations of the mother results in a breach in female lineage. Arguably, this lack of a connected female lineage leads, in turn, to the reductionist view that women exist because of "their biological capacity to satisfy men's erotic, social and procreative needs" (Sharp 2002: 70), for in a patriarchal society women have no clear representation of themselves and images of genealogy are frequently of mother and son. Alternatively, this disruption may be a reflection of conflict in particular maternal/daughter relationships or, perhaps, of contemporary familial structures. It may also be plausible to consider the shadowy figure of the mother as resulting from socio-economic changes that have resulted in many mothers working in and out of the home. This may be a factor for this age group of eighteen- to thirty-eight-year old women, but what also needs to be considered is that many of the grandmothers would also have been working outside the home. We suggest that the breach in the lineage is much more likely to be created by cultural conditions that create mothers who do not have the time or the emotional space to act on feelings of generativity. While Tilley (2007) notes that people in contemporary society are able to construct and reconstruct their identity, we suggest that this may not be the case for young mothers who have to fulfill so many demands as well as manage careers, that the chance to engage in material culture activities may not be available beyond cooking playdough. Alternatively, we should also recognize that the "imagined line" (cf. Déchaux 2002) from granddaughter back to grandmother may itself be a subjective construction, one in which memories of particular forebears are invoked and which serves as "a line for the self, a reference or touchstone that one does not necessarily share with one's closest relatives" (Déchaux 2002: 239), but which allows for at least some sense of stability and tradition in contemporary times.

In one interview, Elizabeth had clear and fond memories of her aunt knitting, but her memories of her mother were not as positive. She was looking forward to "letting her know when it comes to craft I am not completely useless, just because I can't sew a straight line doesn't mean I am hopeless" (Elizabeth, thirty-three).

A critical mother might just be satisfied once it could be revealed at a family gathering "Elizabeth is knitting, finally" (ibid.). Gaining the skills to knit appears to be an important rite of passage for this family. A moment of maturation occurs when the female child becomes part of the production process rather than the role of the consumer that Elizabeth had enjoyed so much as a child. The connection between mother and daughter appears to be fraught and disjointed when situated within the crafts.

While the interviewees talk about their mothers as teaching, advising and helping them select yarns, the strongest images were of their grandmothers:

> So you know I can ... that is a vivid memory [in her grandmother's house] and she was always knitting so whenever we were visiting her—she lived overseas—but whenever we were overseas visiting, she was knitting and my mum knitted clothes for us as a kid as well, I can't visually picture her knitting but I know some of the clothes we wore as kids had been knitted by her. (Diana, thirty-four)

Mother had a role in producing clothes for the children, but Diana cannot picture the m(other) at all. Similarly, with Kylie, the image of the mother is vague:

> The way that works is that my grandma taught me when I was little, so I think I was about four or five … I learnt pretty much all the basics back then ... through my grandma. And, um, I guess my mum did a little bit of knitting as well, but it was only my grandma who taught me all of that stuff back then. (Kylie, thirty)

Thus, mothers were secondary figures who had taught their daughters or been an adjunct to the teaching of the grandmother. Several other women were taught by their friends or from classes.

This image of the Nana was so strong that one interviewee, Suzanne, immediately responded that her Nana taught her to knit, but on reflection she said:

> It's funny because, when you ask who taught me to knit, I automatically say my Nana, but it would probably have been my mum and my Nana, but you remember, I suppose, the older generation teaching you. (Suzanne, thirty-one)

In our review of online marketing and promotion images it was remarkable that we found no images of mothers and daughters knitting together. The common images were of elderly women (grandmothers) knitting with young girls (granddaughters). Thus, the genealogical line through grandmother, mother and daughter was broken, incomplete with the mother absent. Other images did include women as mothers, but these were generally represented by a pregnant woman rather than by mothers and daughters.

There are many literatures that discuss, evoke and analyze the complexity of the relationship between mother and daughter. Since the Eleusinian Mysteries of Persephone and Demeter, the bond between mother and daughter has appeared at the margins, and when explored, is seen as a battleground—conflict-ridden, full of angst and rarely celebrated. As Gubar explains, "the grievous separation of mother and maiden implies that in a patriarchal society women are divided from each other and from themselves" (Gubar 2006: 305).

While the Inner Nana does not want the organization of events, work and politics, and the Nana appears as the teacher, we locate the mother as organizer in the interviews. The role of the mother is present now in cyberspace rather than through the memories of childhood, at least in terms of knitting. In cyberspace, the mother is the administrator, the one who admits participants and controls the communal knitting activities and who is known as the "List Mum." Wei (2004) sees the blog administrator (List Mum) as a type of "community designer." The List Mum may be the maker of the official rules but she does not create or control the norms of the community. The Knitting Bloggers' community suggests that community designers, such as the administrators of web rings, can create member guidelines, but actual practice by members will also shape these communities (Wei 2004).

The List Mum

This view of the List Mum in online knitting blogs held true for our interviewees. It is the List Mum who controls access to the online chat rooms and web rings devoted to knitting, but the List Mum can be a peripheral figure as described here:

> ... there is one lady that set it all up and she kind of regulates the list and makes sure everyone's happy, but other than that you just join up, come along when you want, you don't have to come

> along, or you can write stuff or just read. (Kat, twenty-seven)

This view was also supported by Diana who commented on the lack of a formal structure for the group: "So, it is open for people to take up that, you know, role of organising something within the group if they want to. So it is quite relaxed" (Diana, thirty-four).

The List Mum presents in a variety of styles. At times she is a figure, protected by the anonymity of cyberspace, punitive and bureaucratic in the operation of the web ring. In other instances she is the marginalized but gentle person of the List Mum, described by Kat and Diana. Suzanne was quite clear that the organization of the Stitch 'n Bitch group was very different from that of traditional hierarchies. She states:

> I don't think there's a formal structure or anything with someone sitting there at the top of an ivory tower going this is the way it will be or whatever, it's just the way it's grown and the way it's happened. (Suzanne, thirty-one)

She enjoys this informality and lack of a formal hierarchical structure:

> which is probably part of what I like about it, that it's not someone sitting there going we have to do this then and there, taking control. It's a lot of people sending in different things on the message boards, there's got to be someone who sits in there and works out if people are sending stuff that's inappropriate. Other than that I don't think there's anyone kind of holding reins and steering things in a particular direction. (Suzanne, thirty-one)

Lynne referred to the group organizer as the Nest Mother. Like the List Mum, Lynne's view of the nest mother was of a very benign character who did not control the group: "... it has got a nest mother but I can't call her the most organised person in the world, and she doesn't exactly drive everyone with the iron fist whether it is in a velvet glove or not" (Lynne, thirty-eight).

… and Me

For some of the young knitters, the mother was not mentioned at all, an absence that spoke loudly to one of the authors, Stella Minahan. In a conversation, Minahan states that she "cannot remember who taught her to knit or how old she was when she learned." The obliteration of the mother's participation in Stella's learning of material skills was complete. In 2008, her mother died and during the period of grieving, images returned to front of mind, including images relating to knitting. "Please mum, will you count these stitches for me?" "Mum, I have dropped a stitch; will you pick it up for me?" "Mum I need you to help me cast off." These cries for assistance were heard and the problems rectified or the knowledge given. It was a simple and fruitful relationship between mother and daughter that resulted in a connection to textiles and art that has continued to this day. The donor provided a language and grammar more powerful than the spoken word. The learning was not forgotten, but the source of the learning was—a reminder that "a false recollection can be just as durable and potent as a real one, especially if it sustains a self-image" (Lowenthal 986: 200). This obliteration of the image of the mother is discussed in the writings of Kristeva (cited in Höpfl 2000: 102) who suggested that daughters must reject the mother as nurturer and turn to the father in a world of oppression of the female. This abandonment of the mother includes the rejection of the material symbols and practices of the mother as embodied in the craft. For Minahan, the mother had been obscured completely but was now, at least in this respect, restored. It was in the process of grieving that the association between nurture and material culture was remembered.

Knitting Identity

We argue that the work of Irigaray provides one way to consider the findings from our interviews and research about young women, craft and images of organizing. A theme from Irigaray frames the argument that women's lineage needs to be claimed, particularly the connection(s) between mother and daughter. Irigaray considers the construction of women as subjects. Women, she argues, have been excluded from culture without a separate identity from the masculine (Irigaray 1993; Robinson 2000: 57). Irigaray's work is, in part, a criticism of Freudian psychoanalytic theory that saw women as being defined by the absence of a phallus; as creatures whose existence is known only in opposition to or in reproduction of the male; as "other" in support of the masculine. Media images emphasize father/son and mother/son relationships, and the feminine—in particular the relationship between mother and daughter—is absent (Irigaray 1993; Robinson 2000: 57). She calls for a reassertion of the feminine and for images of mothers and daughters to be placed in domestic and public places, not only to balance the mother/son images

so prevalent in our culture, but to provide girls with a sense of their own history and development, as "these representations give girls a valid representation of their genealogy, an essential condition for the development of an identity" (Irigaray 1993: 47).

The mother-daughter relationship, she argues, needs to be revealed. The relationship is not one of sameness, but of closeness:

> I am trying here to outline a difference between the archaic love of the mother and love for women—sisters. This love is necessary if we are not to remain the servants of the phallic cult, objects to be used by and exchanged between men, rival objects on the market, the situation in which we have always been placed. (Irigaray in Whitford 1991: 44)

In seeking a new order, Irigaray does not define an outcome for women, nor seek to prescribe a new identity for women. She is committed to the belief that it is essential that women define their own identities.

While acknowledging that Irigaray's comments are primarily epistemological rather than literal, we suggest that there are several opportunities for such arguments to contribute to our understanding of the role of craft in female identities. The stories of mothers need to be gathered so that their perspectives can be included to complete the picture of female lineage. Grandmothers could be interviewed to see how they are de/re/constructing their identities as they transit to older age, embracing generativity or stagnation. A trilogy of stories of the transfer of the skills of the handmade will provide a unique perspective to understand the needs of women as they travel through life, extending and perhaps complicating existing and more general research into the changing constructs of grandparenting in contemporary society (cf. Attias-Donfut and Segalen 2002; Goodman 2007), and highlighting the important role of domestic material culture in familial relationships among adults (Money 2007; Slater and Miller 2007).

Craft is intertwined with the construction of identity, including the development and expression of generativity (Cheek and Piercy 2008), and needs to be seen as part of female heritage with an unbroken lineage. At this time, the List Mum represents either an authoritarian figure (cf. Adorno et al. 1950) or an organizationally inadequate "nest mum." Neither of these views of the mother is appropriate, and the need for shared traditions or the creation of new traditions is an important facet of human society. Knitting and associated crafts require us to reflect on our mothers as carers and also as transmitters of material culture, and to present those images publicly in an effort to remedy the breach in lineage.

In doing so, we are not arguing for an unreflexive nostalgia, but for recognition that a retrospective gaze may have generative potential (Wolfram Cox and Hassard 2007). Nostalgic references help to locate us in terms of both what was present and what was absent in the past. Drawing on the work of Smith and Simmons (1983), Fiol (1991) argued that we assign meaning to that which resides in the "empty spaces" as well as to what becomes visible through "repeated patterns of the manifest" (547). Thus, in terms of the crafting of identity discussed here, it is the (gendered) interplay of stories and images of grandmothers and mothers that helps us to interpret contemporary young women's craft, for we have based our analysis not only on what was figural and material, but also on what was absent or ethereal. Further research into this separation or boundary between presence and absence, between what is discussed and what is deferred (cf. Cooper 1986) will assist in development of the initial themes identified here, for absence can indicate a range of emotion (Wolfram Cox 1997) and the images of the grandmothers that were visible and present were themselves presented with some ambivalence. One lens for examining their importance is through the notion of prosthesis, raised only in humour above, for (metaphorical) prosthesis can serve as a means for restoring what is absent and reconstructing the semblance of a functional whole. Despite strong concerns about the association of such thinking with the notion of "stumped identities" and deficiency (Kurzman 2001: 374), it certainly offers possibilities for consideration both of what is knitted and from whom knitting is (and is not) learned. More generally, this study points to the importance of exploring both ethereality and materiality in nostalgic references, for identity has as much to do with distinguishing who we are (and with whom we see ourselves) as who we are not (Carroll and Levy 2008; Zerubavel 1991).

Knit on.

Notes

1. See article from the February 6, 2006 issue of *The Economist* at http://www.economist.com/node/5476137 (accessed April 6, 2011).
2. See http://www.cgknitters.ca (accessed April 1, 2010).
3. See World-Wide Knit in Public Day at http://wwkipday.com (accessed April 5, 2011).
4. See The Knitting Guild Association at http://www.TKGA.com/media (accessed April 5, 2011).
5. See "Artist Profile for Janet Morton" at the Centre for Contemporary Canadian Art (CCCA) website at http://www.ccca.ca/artists/artist_info.html?languagePref=en&link_id=5793&artist=Janet+Morton (accessed April 4, 2011). See Tricia Porter's website at: http://www.lauren-porter.co.uk/ (accessed July 12, 2011).
6. The information here comes from personal communication with Jørgensen, as well as from her website at http://www.marianneart.dk/ (accessed May 27, 2011). The process of covering the tank was documented with a video and this video was shown in Nikolaj, Copenhagen Contemporary Art Center (Copenhagen, Denmark) as part of the exhibition *TIME* which ran from April 27 to June 4, 2006.
7. See "The Anticraft" at http://www.theanticraft.com/archive/lugh06/familyplanning.htm where Robyn Wade offered Marvin Gaye's Let's Get it On as suggested listening material (accessed April 5, 2011). See also M. K Carroll's the Knitted Womb at http://knitty.com/ISSUEwinter04/PATTwomb.html (accessed 4 April 2011).
8. See comment by Scooty Puff Snr on Planet Express website at http://www.peelified.com/cgi-bin/Futurama/3-000737-1/ (accessed April 5, 2011).
9. See http://innerNana.artsblogs.com/blog/blog.asp?blogId=8370 (accessed March 7, 2009).
10. A popular television game show.
11. Bex pills and powders had analgesic properties but are no longer available in Australia. See http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=340661 for further information on this popular reference (accessed May 31, 2011).
12. While none of them appear in this article, we were fortunate to locate and view many images at the Getty Image Library at http://www.gettyimages.ca/Search/Search.aspx?contractUrl=2&language=en-US&family=creative&p=knitting&assetType=image (accessed May 26, 2011).

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