

## Knitting Activism, Knitting Gender, Knitting Race

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Graffiti knitting, the practice of knitting objects and installing them without permission in public, is part of a larger craftivist turn in contemporary activism. It builds on a feminist history of activist knitting and resonates today because of its synthesis of the material and the affective, and through these means crafting a more participatory politics. This approach has facilitated, however, blindness to the racial politics of a largely White feminist appropriation of graffiti. This works against craftivism's political potential and mirrors larger concerns about participatory politics. As a scholar-activist, I critique graffiti knitting to point toward ways for it to evolve and become a more intersectional activist practice.

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On February 21, 2011, a herd of miniature sheep balanced on the railing of London Bridge. With names like "Hungry Hairy Harriet," "Sparkly Sheila," and "Wilhem, the Wool-Hungry Wolf in Sheep's Clothing," the women of Knit the City (KTC) designed and hand made each creature. Along with *The Guardian* arts journalist and documentarian Alt Artist, KTC secured the sheep to the bridge with loops of fishing line. The KTC women—aka Deadly Knitshade, The Fastener, and Shorn-a the Dead—knit the sheep and installed them on London Bridge in an artistic appropriation of the ancient English privilege "Freedom of the City." That circa 1237 law gave "freemen" the right to drive their sheep across London Bridge. KTC knitter The Fastener proclaimed to Alt Artist's camera, "Even though we aren't freemen, we're free knitters!" The women photographed their handmade herd and then left, abandoning their tiny creations to the mercy of the wind and interest of the passersby (see Figure 1). Each sheep bore a small tag with the KTC website, encouraging people to take the sheep home and let the knitters know where they eventually ended up.

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**Figure 1. KTC "Handmade Herd" yarn storm.  
Photo: Knit the City.**

This is graffiti knitting. Generally called "yarn bombing" or "yarn storming" by participants, Magda Sayeg is widely credited with the practice's founding in 2005. Graffiti knitters (who might, technically, crochet) generally create their work in private spaces, attach a physical "tag" identifying the group or their website, and install their knitting in a public area. Posting pictures of the installed pieces online has been part of the practice from the start. The knitting may be slipped onto their targets, as with car antenna cozies; fastened with buttons, as with tree-hugging blankets; attached with string, as with fiber letters hung on chain-link fences; or secured with plastic ties, as with toys and dolls. Removing graffiti knitting is simple, and the yarn deteriorates by itself within a few weeks. Technically in the same legal category as graffiti painting, graffiti knitting itself has never been grounds for prosecution or arrest, although the knitters are regularly stopped by authorities. Activists who deploy knitting and sewing in the context of larger protests have been both teargassed and detained by police (Robertson, 2011; Solomon, 2013; Tolokonnikova, 2015).

Graffiti knitting is one practice in a diffuse movement of "craftivism," wherein practitioners pursue political aims through traditional crafting techniques (Corbett & Housley, 2011; Greer, 2011; Orton-Johnson, 2014; Robertson, 2011; Tapper & Zucker, 2011). Although the term "craftivism" is new, it is far from the first time that handcrafting's particular qualities have featured in politics. In one prominent example, Arts and Crafts luminaries like William Morris and John Ruskin put proto-socialist principles to work by creating craft centers and advocating the sociopolitical importance of handwork in the face of growing industrialization and technological change (Luckman, 2013; Minahan & Cox, 2007; Morris, 2010). The Arts and Crafts Movement is often now critiqued for its paternalism, whereby "in general women were

relegated to the practical application of the ideas publicly espoused by the heroic figure of the Victorian man" (Luckman, 2013, p. 252). By contrast, craftivism is generally led by women and often pursues both feminist and populist aims.

Craftivists employ a wide variety of arts, but at their heart, craftivist actions are "participatory projects that value democratic processes, the use of various cross-disciplinary media, and an ongoing commitment to politicized practices, issues, and actions" (Black & Burisch, 2010, p. 614). KTC's Handmade Herd demonstrates such a project in action. KTC intervenes in a context in which driving sheep across the bridges of London is a semiregularized political publicity stunt. Freeman Jef Smith became one of the first modern sheep-driving freemen when he led two of his sheep across Tower Bridge in a bid to draw attention to elderly rights ("Protest Freeman," 1999). There is now an annual "Great Sheep Drive of London Bridge," in which both celebrities and local politicians walk sheep over the London Bridge to raise money for the charitable trusts of the Lord Mayor's Appeal and the Worshipful Company of Woolmen ("Barbara Windsor," 2015; Bennett, 2013). Women, like Great Sheep Drive participant actress Barbara Windsor, may now become "freemen," but the title points to women's taken-for-granted absence from the historical public sphere. Even more than gender, freeman status signals class privilege; if police caught freemen being drunk and disorderly, they were to send them home rather than to a cell, and, upon being made a freeman, Windsor told reporters that she wished her mother was still alive so she could tell her "at last I'm posh!" ("Barbara Windsor," 2010, para. 2). In contrast to England's better known heritage-based class system, freemen privileges were intimately connected with business and trade. The reason early freeman wanted the right to drive sheep across London's bridges in the first place was to get the animals to market.<sup>2</sup>

KTC appropriates this spectacle to transform its political connotations and affective emphasis. The knitters explicitly point out that they are not freemen but "free knitters"—possessors of a subcultural identity usually associated with women who implicitly should have rights and privileges in regard to animals so prominent within female-dominated crafting and knitting subcultures. The Handmade Herd redefines the "freedom" of the city as the creation of a shared public commons on the bridge, on which anyone may see, handle, or even take home the knitted sheep. KTC's version of freedom contrasts sharply with both the "freedom" of free markets originally intended by the law and the invitation created by other modern London Bridge sheep drives to simply sit and watch a spectacle of elite philanthropy.

I take up Black and Burisch's (2010) call for "productive strategies to maintain [craftivism's] radical potential" (p. 609) by analyzing several graffiti knitting actions as well as the responses those actions generated in popular and subcultural press. In the sections that follow, I frame graffiti knitting as a form of participatory politics in the context of debate about the political potential of participatory cultures, particularly those entangled with the material. Graffiti knitting installations are "participatory objects" that inspire political feeling and discussion by allowing outsiders access to what the knitters felt in a specific geographical location (Marres, 2012). However, this affective approach has facilitated graffiti

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<sup>2</sup> As such, the lack of livestock markets in contemporary London leads police spokespeople to continually reemphasize that contemporary sheep-driving is technically no longer an actual right but rather an indulgence from the police.

knitting's silence on questions of race and ethnicity, framing its appropriation of graffiti practices strictly within White feminism. I apply this critique to point toward how graffiti knitting could become a more intersectional activist practice, an "ethical spectacle" that builds from diverse participation rather than simply dazzling a particular public (Duncombe, 2007).

### **A Brief History of Craft and Political Participation**

Graffiti knitters like KTC take up the mantle of a long history of female activist knitters. Surprisingly, most craftivists do not build on this history and often frame their actions as a radically new resignification of women's work (Groeneveld, 2010). Women connected craft practices with politics long before and long after the Arts and Crafts Movement famously theorized this association at the turn of the 20th century. Knitting was a means for political action, particularly during wartime, when hand-knitted garments clothed both soldiers and refugees, and knitting circles were a venue for women's political speech (Macdonald, 1988; Sapelly, 2016; Wills, 2007). Much modern activist knitting still relates to war, although from the 1960s onward, knitters largely switched from supplying wars to protesting them, building on conversational themes documented in earlier wartime knitting circles (Groeneveld, 2010; Macdonald, 1988; Minahan & Cox, 2007; Robertson, 2011; Turner, 2006). Knitting and sewing were central tactics in the multiyear Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp antinuclear protest (Robertson, 2011). This line of critique continues: In Barb Hunt's antipersonnel, she researches landmine construction, production, and victims, and displays this information next to her soft, pink, hand-knitted but technically accurate replicas of the more than 350 existing models of mines (Black & Burisch, 2010, p. 612).

As with KTC's reinterpretation of the freedom of the city to mean freedom for the public rather than for private businesses, craft-based activism has historically been concerned with economic politics and industrial change. The Whole Earth Catalog brought craft tools and supplies, along with other DIY equipment, to the 1960s New Communalist Movement that sought to create alternative, self-sufficient settlements in the tradition of Thoreau's Walden (Groeneveld, 2010; Turner, 2006). Craftivists often ally with antiglobalization and prolabor causes. For instance, the Calgary Revolutionary Knitting Circle set up a knit-in to protest the 2002 G8 Summit in Canada; the Craftivist Collective hand-embroiders small pieces of cloth with prolabor sentiments and attaches them to strategic public locations (Black & Burisch, 2010; Corbett & Housley, 2011; Robertson, 2011).<sup>3</sup>

As a traditional craft most often practiced by women, knitting brings with it connotations of essentialized femininity—particularly in the eyes of nonknitters—and nostalgia for an idealized past (Groeneveld, 2010; Luckman, 2013; Robertson, 2011). Threaded through the history of activist knitting are thus contrasting interpretations of women's craft, from feminist calls to abandon household chores and seize political power more directly to conservative voices framing knitting as a sign of traditional femininity to activist knitters proclaiming its progressive political potential to other radical activists decrying

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<sup>3</sup> Much graffiti knitting and craftivism takes place in the Global North. But the importance of fabric to globalization cannot be overstated, and this has led to differently inflected craft-based activism in the Global South. Gandhi, for example, advocated for Indians to spin and weave their own cotton so as not to be reliant on the colonial British textile industry.

knitting's nonconfrontational nature (Robertson, 2011; Sapelly, 2016). For instance, suffrage periodicals in early 1900s America and feminism's first wave often took an approach that integrated discussions of politics and domestic life (Groeneveld, 2010). At the same time, the more conservative knitting magazine *Stitches* proposed the craft as an antidote to these "strenuous times of 'equal rights' and masculine garb" (Macdonald, 1988, p. 180). In that same time span, feminist Haryot Cahoon exhorted women to abandon knitting altogether, writing, "If you wish to knit lace because you have more time on your hands than you know what to do with, you are the very one the world needs, with your youth and your energy and your industrious spirit" (Macdonald, 1988, pp. 180-181). Similarly, from their early history forward, American women's sewing circles varied between those that "taught women their traditional gender roles and tasks within the household" and those that "allowed women to transgress the domestic sphere and speak, sew, and sell in public to help transform American society" (Sapelly, 2016, p. 138)

From this historical perspective, it is striking, but not surprising, how familiar these attitudes toward knitting sound today. Graffiti knitting collective KTC created a page on their website entitled "Why?" to respond to the many questions from people "desperate for us to be waving woolly protest banners, setting yarny bras on fire and shoving little old knitting ladies face-first into a vat of hot stitched subversion," i.e. acting as the stereotypically humorless feminist, or "frustrated to see we're not battling society's horrors by knitting jumpers for homeless baby penguins with tuberculosis," (Deadly Knitshade, 2016, para. 1) acting as the stereotypically feminine conservative. Robertson (2011) warns that predicating graffiti knitting's activist potential on its overthrow of these stereotypes artificially limits its potential and leads toward craftivism's erasure and capitalist incorporation, rather than change.

The problem of analyzing craftivism's politics in relation to stereotypes resonates with a broader scholarly debate about audiences, media, and society. Jenkins (2008) influentially theorized the post-Internet age as the convergence of cultures and technologies based on ideas of communication as one-to-many broadcasts, with culture and technologies drawing from an idea of communication as many to many. Scholarship interrogating this "push towards a more participatory culture" (Jenkins, 2014, p. 272) often locate political possibility in many-to-many communication cultures (Brough & Shresthova, 2011; Delwiche & Henderson, 2013; Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton, & Robison, 2009; Jenkins, Shresthova, Gamber-Thompson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Zimmerman, 2016; Punathambekar, 2011). The key cultural values and practices that define a participatory culture are "access, expression, sharing, mentorship, the need to make a difference, and the desire for social connection" (Delwiche, 2013, p. 11). There is clear overlap between this definition and craftivism's key practices of democratic process, wide-ranging media use, commitment to political action, and figuring "sustainable community-based activity and relationships" as the base for political engagement (Black & Burisch, 2010, p. 614).<sup>4</sup>

Critiques of participatory culture theory argue that it tells too simple a story, wherein digital media users as "the subversive textual poacher" are empowered through shattering the stereotype of broadcast audiences as passive and "the manipulated dupe" (Andrejevic, 2008, p. 25; Carpentier, 2011b; Hay & Couldry, 2011). Carpentier (2011a) argues that rhetorically framing contemporary audiences as

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<sup>4</sup> Unlike craftivists, however, participatory culture practitioners and theorists often do connect to the long, predigital history of their peer-to-peer practices (Delwiche, 2013; Jenkins, 1992; Petrik, 1992).

"users," "producers," and "prosumers," rather than as audiences, defines out of existence the possibility of users' passivity and disempowerment. This can obscure important ways in which user "activity" is governed and exploited and overstate the progressive political potential of technology (Andrejevic, 2002; Jodi Dean, 2005; Hay & Couldry, 2011; Morozov, 2011).

For feminists, these concerns are inflected with a critique of postfeminism, an ideology that works "to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism . . . to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer" (Tasker & Negra, 2007, p. 2). Again, invoking the active/passive binary, postfeminist poster girls are invariably active, in contrast to earlier representations of "women as a vague mass of passive consumers," but the activity in question is "not struggle for social change but rather capacity for entrepreneurship" (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 56). In her study of DIY women's craft in Detroit, for example, Dawkins (2011) argues that contemporary craftwork's core values of autonomy, choice, pleasure, and self-fulfillment "might produce forms of self-exploitation and precarious labor that best serve the interest of post-Fordist capitalism" (p. 277). As with the skepticism about the role of technology in digital participatory cultures, craftivist scholars critique postfeminist crafting's emphasis on product rather than process, particularly luxury and artisanal objects (Black & Burisch, 2010; Luckman, 2013; Solomon, 2013).

A graffiti knitting installation, a particular arrangement of yarn placed in a specific location, is a participatory object (Marres, 2012). It materially expresses the affect that activists feel in a certain place and acts as a spectacle through bypassing reason and argumentation in favor of fantasy and imagination as modes of political speech (Duncombe, 2007). These material spectacles draw from craftivism and participatory politics more broadly in that engagement with the graffiti knitting, rather than its installation as such, is the activists' focus. Graffiti knitting speaks through creating a spectrum of participatory possibilities rather than flipping the overly reductive active/passive binary. To be effective, it requires the participation of activist knitter organizers, sometimes other contributing knitters, everyday viewers, official authorities, and detractors. Critique, disagreement, and even the removal of graffiti knitting, is thus a sign of its impact, rather than its failure. Not all graffiti knitting is effective, and "insofar as engaging objects are happening or 'lively' objects, their participatory capacities fluctuate—objects may become politicized (or 'issued') easily, but their normative charge may be lost or transformed into something less lively just as quickly" (Marres, 2012, p. 21). At its best, graffiti knitting practice is an ethical spectacle that "never arrives at one answer. Open to the noisy diversity of participants, observers, and settings to create the completed work, it . . . rests in a field of possibilities" (Duncombe, 2007, p. 142). In the next two sections, I analyze the importance of affect, identity, and aesthetics in installations by *Ishknits*, *Knitta Please*, and *Knit the City* to demonstrate how graffiti knitting creates multivalent participatory possibilities—and sometimes falls short.

### **The Affect of Postmodern Identity Politics**

Robertson (2011) persuasively argues that an "eclipse of identity politics" (p. 195) and "a shifting economy that has eviscerated the textile industry in North America and Europe" (p. 199) were essential to craft's resurgence as a social hobby, a fine art practice, and an activist tool. Graffiti knitting shows, however, the continuing importance of identity processes. Earlier feminist activism often built on ideas of

essentialized womanhood and, later, a feminist “real me”—stable social identities around which to rally and for which to advocate (McRobbie, 2006; Robertson, 2011). With postmodernism’s deconstruction of stable identities, particularly ones based on gender, such thinking became untenable (McRobbie, 2006, p. 530; Robertson, 2011). Much democratic political theory also became problematic in its organization around abstract, stable, and idealized concepts of citizens, rights, claims, rationality, and the value of equality (Marres, 2012; McRobbie, 2006). If we believe that there are valid public and political demands that are not generalizable, for example, which come from the particular situation of White women or of African American men, then there is a clear limit to how far discourses of equality and rationality can take us (Fraser, 1990).<sup>5</sup>

Postmodern feminist politics works with a “social self,” an affective self who “uses desire and will in order to understand the process of subjection,” working through connection with other, different, social selves (McRobbie, 2006, p. 529). Such political speech operates rhetorically via affective and emotional language, such as “walk a mile in my shoes,” creating empathy across lines of difference. As Papacharissi (2015) argues in the case of the Twitter, such media “invite people to feel their own place in current events . . . to interpret situation by feeling like those directly experiencing them, even though, in most cases, we are not able to think like them” (p. 4). Although this speech is often characterized by “facialization,” or selecting a particular person and their story to represent a broader situation, graffiti knitting constructs affect through the material objects of urban geography and yarn (Berlant, 1997, p. 187). For instance, Ishknits twice graffiti knit the bronze statue of Rocky Balboa outside the Philadelphia Museum of Art, a popular tourist picture spot (see Figure 2).<sup>6</sup> The first time, she clothed the bare-chested boxer in a pink shirt, with a message encouraging tourists to go see the work inside the museum, and a year later she recast Rocky himself as a tourist via the addition of knitted camera and fanny pack.

These additions change the statue’s participatory valence. They create a position from which viewers can temporarily connect with Ishknits’ social self, feeling her frustration looking at the statue outside the museum. Shocking pink yarn points to feminist disgust with the heavy bronze as an emblem of hegemonic masculinity. The words “Go See the Art” and the tourist gear point to a high-culture disdain for the popular culture icon. These feelings are not innocent or necessarily progressive—Ishknits’ mocking of popular culture suggests a classism that has long argued that the Rocky statue belongs by Philadelphia’s sports arena, not its art museum (Benner, 2012; Holzman, 2014). But whether the viewer agrees with Ishknits or not, the graffiti knitting creates an affective position that invites participation through seeing what Ishknits feels as well as the impetus to, like her, act on one’s feelings. Rocky’s camera and fanny pack only bedecked the statue briefly before native Philadelphian tourists argued with Ishknits, wanting to take the knitting down and eventually calling the police to have it removed (Benner, 2012). Graffiti knitting the statue opens the public landscape up to challenge, alteration, and discussion by passersby in a way at odds with both the heavy bronze statue and the museum’s imposing classical edifice.

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<sup>5</sup> The references here to a “White woman” or an “African American man” are not intended to set up a larger set of stable identities, but to signal the way identity processes are constructed intersectionally.

<sup>6</sup> Rocky Balboa is the character portrayed by Sylvester Stallone in the *Rocky* film franchise, much of which takes place in Philadelphia.



**Figure 2. Ishknits 2011, 2012.**  
**Photos: Conrad Benner of Streetsdept.com.**

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Exploratory, everyday political discussions like that about the Rocky statue are vital for an active, civically engaged public. Starting and maintaining conversations like this is often not easy, organic, or comfortable—don't talk politics at the dinner table (Vraga, Thorson, Kligler-Vilenchik, & Gee, 2015). Even, or especially, many people in familial relationships who "regularly expose their unclothed bodies and private languages to one another can be peculiarly coy when it comes to disclosing their political identities" (Coleman, 2013, pp. 152–153). Public political discussion is one utility of networked communication technologies. Papacharissi (2015) points out that many young people using trending Twitter hashtags as an excuse for "impromptu forays into topics that are taboo in some environments" (p. 108), such as a proto-feminist statement that "any guy is #undateable if they say #ideservehead" or frustration with the stereotyping of Islamic identities, such as "#69factsaboutme I'm muslim and I'm not a terrorist. Xoxo" (p. 103).



Craft history shows that knitting circles long provided women the chance for such discussion together. Graffiti knitting adapts the circle to include knitting outsiders as well. Although graffiti knitting is installed in particular material places for variable lengths of time, pictures of the pieces also circulate widely online. This increases the possible audience for the work and corresponding opportunities for conversation. Larger organized projects have also taken advantage of the Internet to create global social selves. The Grandmothers to Grandmothers exchange constructed HIV and AIDS as a transnational problem, bringing grief and a need for hope to families in both Canada and South Africa, where grandmothers collaboratively yarn-bombed trees "as a symbol of hope and a reminder of families in need" (McRae, 2014, para. 1).

Although graffiti knitting creates social selves, those selves are not defined by the willed desires of the knitters. Media coverage of graffiti knitting often frames it as a cute hobby, rather than as art or political speech. In one early article on "Knitta Please," journalist Keith Plocek writes,

Poly and AKrylik wish to remain anonymous, but we can tell you they're both working mothers in their early thirties, both attractive and both brunette. They almost look like sisters, sitting on the couch at Poly's house, knitting and talking. (Plocek, 2005, para. 7)

Repeatedly, he emphasizes their appearance and location inside the family sphere rather than their status as workers, civic actors, and public artists who hang out and frequently graffiti knit at their neighborhood bar. Narrating the two yarn bombing "on a school night," Plocek spends fewer words describing three of Knitta Please's tags than on their one stop home to deliver pizza to their families.

Journalism such as this rewrites graffiti knitting women's public actions as fun to be had along the way of completing family-focused consumerist errands. It eliminates the political voice of Knitta Please's graffiti knitting through typecasting, even as it is largely positive in tone (Robertson, 2011; Solomon, 2013). Articles like this are reminders that stereotypes of women as passive domestic consumers still exist and act to structure discourse, despite both feminist critique and the rise of postfeminism. It is easy to see why graffiti knitters and other commentators are drawn to counter such portrayals by emphasizing the public, political nature of graffiti knitting activity. But this move closes down useful debate, as does the article itself, by suggesting that all graffiti knitters and knitting are the same.

### **A Politics of Silly Objects**

When *The New York Times* wrote its first article on graffiti knitting, the only accompanying image depicted the "Charging Bull" Wall Street statue covered in a neon pink and purple crocheted cozy. This is a strange choice: Olek, the artist who cozied the bull, refuses association with graffiti knitting, saying "I don't yarn bomb, I make art." She argues that "lots of people have aunts or grandmas who paint. Do you want to see that work in galleries? No. The street is an extension of the gallery. Not everyone's work deserves to be in public" (Wollan, 2011, para. 21). Olek's elitism has a particular flavor, that of the female artist struggling to be recognized in the still male-dominated world of fine art. Female artists like Olek, who work their way through the art school and gallery system, are continually forced to defend their work as more than stereotypically female hobbies—one of the "advantages" of being a woman artist is the

reassurance “that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine” (Guerrilla Girls, 1989 [poster]). Historically, some female artists confronted this challenge through their style. Although Olek uses the traditionally domestic material of yarn, as seen in Figure 3, her crochet-entombed people, places, and objects figure femininity as suffocating.



**Figure 3. Olek 2011 "I Do Not Expect to Be a Mother, but I Do Expect to Die Alone." Photo: Olek.**

Graffiti knitting’s aesthetic is very different. Its bright colors, silly shapes, and random applications of cuddliness are remarkably continuous across multiplying groups and evolutions in style. This aesthetic of gentle absurdity is core to the practice. It creates arenas for play in public, zones for collective imagination of what could be. As silly participatory objects, graffiti knitting rejects the clear reason and argumentation deployed even by many other craftivists and which have largely characterized progressive political tactics in recent decades (Duncombe, 2007). It instead confronts existing power regimes in the terrain of the hegemonic “patriotic public sphere . . . [which] frequently use the silliest, most banal and erratic logic imaginable to describe important things, like what constitutes intimate relations, political personhood, and national life” (Berlant, 1997, p. 12).

One such public spectacle is the Olympic Games. In London's successful bid for the 2012 Summer Games, the city touted its reputation for vibrant street art by featuring some writers' work during the opening ceremonies and having the official London games logo designed in a graffiti lettering style. This institutional approval of graffiti at a national level signals graffiti's changing cultural status, moving away from protest and illegality toward gentrification and the gallery (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Ellsworth-Jones, 2013). Such incorporation is not, however, total or complete. Various governmental bodies made it a mission to eliminate graffiti from the city before the games. Police stopped four retired or "legit" graffiti writers at train stations on July 17, 2012, in a "preemptive sweep" and banned them from coming within a mile of any Olympic venue or traveling on any London public transportation under threat of arrest until the end of November (Duggan, 2012). Ironically, Darren Cullen, the most prominent of the group, was also approached to paint the Great British athletes' housing in the Olympic Village and commissioned extensively by Adidas, a major Olympics corporate sponsor. South London councils entered a year-long campaign to remove graffiti, especially that involving the Olympic logo. Their purge even took down images from walls where the artists had building owners' permission to paint (Cafe, 2012).

KTC took the opportunity to create their "Great British Button Biathlon" on a Shell Centre utility shed on London's South Bank (see Figure 4).<sup>7</sup> The knitters drew from the broader lexicon of craftivism and glued just shy of a thousand buttons onto the shed wall to form a British flag and their KTC tag. In stark contrast to paint graffiti's emphasis on speed, KTC deliberately prolonged their time in public by not creating anything in advance and installing the piece over a five-hour span during the middle of the day. They invited passersby not only to take photographs but to "hel[p] add the odd button" (Deadly Knitshade, 2012, para. 29). The Button Biathlon was clearly noncritical; if anything, pro-nationalistic. Despite this, and the implied winking consent of security guards whom KTC photographed near the piece, the Shell Corporation still required its removal. The graffiti knitters documented this two-hour process (removal is the second event of their "biathlon"), and left a tiny red button heart on the shed in defiance.



**Figure 4. Knit the City 2012 documentation of the "Great British Button Biathlon."  
Photos: Knit the City.**

<sup>7</sup> Graffiti knitting did not figure in either the Olympic branding or the police crackdown.

By creating a cute and colorful flag tag, KTC rhetorically aligns itself with the nation. They strengthen this association and build the installation as an ethical spectacle by incorporating passersby into their process, be they general London public, tourists, or visitors to the Olympics. Subtly, KTC also aligns with the on-the-ground security guards, whom the women were able to photograph and negotiate with rather than run from (as a paint graffiti artist no doubt would have needed to do). Although security guards are the face and physical presence of corporate and governmental authority, they are certainly not the ones who decide policy—here, they demonstrably lacked authority over their beats. By performing both the creation and dismantling of a public zone for play and whimsy, KTC exposes the basic, authoritarian desire for control over space that ultimately underlies graffiti policy: “People making the public happy with unauthorised art? We can’t have that now can we?” (Deadly Knitshade, 2012, para. 21).

KTC framing the piece’s creation, documentation, and removal as part of their action demonstrates craftivist focus on process, rather than product. The ethical spectacle of a graffiti knitting action like the Biathlon is constructed through the time and skill-intensive commitments of the knitters, but it also honors lighter weight investments of time and energy (Duncombe, 2007). Here, although KTC framed their action as an Olympic event requiring strength and endurance, they also created scaled-down opportunities to participate via adding one or two buttons, taking a picture, talking with the women and other passersby, or even simply watching the work. This stratification of participation is a hallmark of politics based in the material, which emphasizes what actors can do rather than what they should know (Marres, 2012). It offers those who are curious but hesitant a way to get a feel for activism and edge their way in, rather than keeping out all but the most dedicated.

Scholars and activists increasingly recognize continuing campaigns as essential for significant progress, but this requires a great deal from the activists. As craftivist Sarah Corbett writes,

In 2007 I felt like a burned-out activist. . . . When you campaign to disarm the world of weapons, you are asking a lot of yourself and fellow activists, and often you are aiming for impossible things, so you never feel that you have succeeded. (Corbett & Housley, 2011, p. 345)

Craftivism offered her a way to affectively recharge while still pursuing politicized ends. Graffiti knitting, like many craftivist projects, incorporates a certain amount of messiness and imperfection into its aesthetic, one very at odds with much artisanal craft as well as activist concern for ideological purity. Having both simple “I can do that” examples and lauded exemplars is key to participatory media creation cultures (Ito, 2010). Through its material, affective aesthetics, graffiti knitting moves beyond “grim scenarios of success that depend upon ‘trying and trying again’” (Halberstam, 2011, p. 3), the few faithful up against the overwhelming system.

### **Knitting Race**

In the only public statement Magda Sayeg has made about her crew name “Knitta Please,” she explained that “just as there are gangsters, there’s gangstas. We felt like we weren’t just knitters, we were knittas” (Nicolosi & Gonzalez, 2013). “Just knitters” are the postfeminist stereotype of

grandmothers: politically inert but domestically skilled. "Mothers" are too serious, humorless, and driven to knit at all. "Knittas" are daughters, contemporary young women. "Knitta Please" remixes the grandmother in spite of the mother's strictures by appropriating the African American slang "nigga, please." It assumes a fellow-feeling affect between hip-hop and graffiti knitting based on youth, sublimating ethnicity. I return to these stereotypes because unspoken assumptions of these "mothers" and "grandmothers" class and ethnic identities are powerful exclusionary mechanisms that echo across graffiti knitting practice. This familial framing assumes its subjects to be white women with disposable income (Tasker & Negra, 2007).

Indie crafting often appears an overwhelmingly White subculture (Dawkins, 2011; Groeneveld, 2010; Solomon, 2013). Even in downtown Detroit, an area with a majority African American population, 91% of craft and Maker Faire study respondents self-identified as White/Caucasian. A Toronto-based craft organizer said,

I think it's odd when people submit work and they are of a nonwhite ethnicity, their work tends to mirror their ethnicity somehow. It's kind of weird to me—well not weird that they would do that, but weird that it is a common thing. (Dawkins, 2011, p. 268)

But decisions like the intended-to-be-ironic crew name "Knitta Please" just as strongly indicate a White ethnicity, particularly to those who do not share their privilege (Dyer, 1997). Some White crafters are defensive, as one blogger argues that "[knit graffiti, pasting, and seed bombing] may or may not have been embraced by POC and their communities, but it was never INTENDED to be exclusionary" (Ohwhatatragiccst, 2013, para. 14). These responses indicate blindness to ethnic privilege and a sense that White crafters "own" the movement to which people of color might enter (hooks, 2015). This is painfully ironic in the case of graffiti, which originated with African American working-class men.

Tortillachronicles (2013), who identifies as "latino/xicano/mexican," argues that White feminists "offer yarn graffiti as an alternative w/o understanding that although sexism is a problem that persists in the graffiti world, we cannot ignore the problems of racism and classism that are contributed by these co-optive side-graffiti arts" of street art and graffiti knitting (para. 3). Her argument that "it is insulting that these feminists believe they're solving our problems as women when they have no idea what it is to be a woman writer at the bottom of the graffiti hierarchy" (para. 4) echoes critiques of feminist sisterhood that encourages bonding based only on the experience of shared victimization by men (hooks, 2015; Tortillachronicles, 2013). There is no question that homophobia and sexism heavily inflect paint graffiti culture. New Zealand police, for example, forced convicted taggers to wear fluorescent pink vests while cleaning up graffiti as a way of "turning their fame to shame" (Calman, 2008, p. A2). But particularly as the originating crew, Knitta Please sets a model for graffiti knitting that allows the largely White activists to speak about gender and labor-based oppression while sidelining ethnicity and race-based oppression.

Paint graffiti subcultures are experiencing inner turmoil as well-known writers transition from the streets to the galleries and branding agencies (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Ellsworth-Jones, 2013). Some argue that street art's very emergence delegitimizes paint graffiti as viable political expression (Hahner & Varda, 2014). Graffiti knitters' privileged status as largely White, middle-class women accelerates and smooths

that movement, such that some see graffiti knitting's capitalist incorporation and political neutralization as a *fait accompli* (Caldwell, 2012; Hahner & Varda, 2014). As Magda Sayeg says, "In the early years I identified with underground graffiti artists. Now the very people I feared I would get in trouble with are the ones inviting me to do this work for them," with corporations like Etsy sponsoring her to "graffiti" their offices (Wollan, 2011, para. 28).

Some White crafters rather baldly ascribe indie crafting to privilege, arguing that "the ability to choose and distinguish between making something out of necessity and making as part of a larger aesthetic or moral calling was a matter of (white) privilege and of cultural capital" (Dawkins, 2011, p. 268). Such responses confound race and class. Non-White graffiti knitters and indie crafters most certainly exist. But they are often subsumed under an invisible aesthetic of whiteness—crafters of color sometimes recruit lighter skinned friends to model their items in photographs or refrain from using images of their own face or hands online (Close, 2016). The debate about Knitta Please inspired discussion by some indie crafters of color. Shannon Riffe decided to make her online avatar a picture of her face because even though

I would be perfectly content to be behind the scenes, and not show my face . . . I think it's important for me to be visible [as a black crafter], simply because by my face being here, maybe someone will visit my blog and think, "Oh, I'm not the only one." (Riffe, 2009, para. 5)

White crafters who do recognize graffiti knitting's apparent racial homogeneity as a problem are often conflicted and frustrated, like Detroit Urban Craft Fair organizer Allison Davey:

We live in a very segregated place, we call ourselves "Handmade Detroit," and we're all white. . . . It scares me that it is kind of an aesthetic movement. . . . We all like modern stuff, and vintage stuff, and like, white-people aesthetic. And that's why we're here. That feels so hollow, and I don't feel hollow when I am doing it. But I have no idea. . . . I feel like it is more than just—I don't even know how to put it into words. I mean why did we feel that we needed to get together and form a community? I don't know. I have no answers at all. (Dawkins, 2011, p. 269)

Her concern is palpable, but also paralyzing. Perhaps it does not even occur to Davey that as a craft fair organizer she has the power to reach out to crafters of color and at the least start a dialogue. These are failures in constructing social selves, ones unfortunately not new to activist knitting. Historically, classism prevented poor knitters from joining middle-class sewing circles dedicated to charity, and "most female anti-slavery bees prohibited freed black women from joining!" (Sapelly, 2016, p. 2).

Inclusion is important, but advocating inclusion without broader (sub)cultural changes is not enough. To see how change must happen, it is essential to understand the affective charge that "graffiti" brings to craftivist knitting. As queer theorist Eve Sedgwick might argue, graffiti knitters are enabled through one set of oppressions, a policing system that automatically reads minority and male public action as criminal whereas White and female public action seems benign, and by that very same positioning

disabled through sexism that reads women's public actions as meaningless. When KTC cozied an iconic British telephone booth in Parliament Square, police gave the women an official Stop and Search warning but allowed them to leave the cozy up for half an hour and even took photographs of the piece themselves. Similarly, *The New York Times* reports, "In the few instances when they are stopped, yarn bombers say, the police are more likely to laugh at them than issue a summons" (Wollan, 2011, para. 22).

When police laugh at yarn bombers, they are not arresting them, but they are not laughing with them. Even in Putin's Russia, when Pussy Riot band member and activist Nadya Tolokonnikova and artist-activist Katya Nenasheva wore prison uniforms and publicly sewed the Russian flag in Bolotnaya Square, they were detained but avoided formal arrest and prison time—the officers could not find something in the traditionally feminine act of sewing to charge them with—as opposed to Pussy Riot's notorious and hard-edged "Punk Prayer" musical performance (Tolokonnikova, 2015).

Bourgeois White women must construct their identities differently so they can be out of order and out of place. Therein is paint graffiti's appeal, as an identity practice associated with young men of color already assumed to be out of order. Graffiti knitters do not, however, attempt to "pass" as the Other. This is an important point of leverage from which more aware and collaborative social selves can be built. Because graffiti knitters never actually embody their appropriated identities, they can create graffiti even in "the police-swarmed environs of Parliament Square" (Deadly Knitshade, 2009, para. 2), often in broad daylight. Unlike those whose identities they appropriate, the KTC women will never realistically "go to prison . . . [and have to] dig the Shawshank-style tunnel out of there with your crochet hook" (Deadly Knitshade, 2012, para. 24), as the knitters acknowledge with their hyperbole, and so they are in a position to critique the regime of public surveillance—particularly of Black and Latino male graffiti artists. By laying down humorous, hand-knitted graffiti pieces, graffiti knitting implicitly argues for the foolishness of CCTV and its racialized scheme of public surveillance, saying "This giant neon orange knitted squid, this is what you're watching for?"

Craftivism's detractors argue that the knitters' "tactics are so nonconfrontational as to be completely ineffective . . . a safe form of activism (if it is even activism at all), both for those practicing it and those covering it in the media" (Robertson, 2011, pp. 188–189). This criticism echoes arguments against technologically mediated activism, arguing that actions making use of tools like Twitter or Facebook are "slacktivism" that avoids the difficult, time-consuming, personally challenging work of "real" activism (Jodi Dean, 2005; Jonathan Dean, 2012; Gladwell, 2010). Nowhere is this critique more applicable than in questions of race. But it also stems from a history of critical and political thought that is dismissive of both the feminine and the material. There is a deep-seated suspicion that a political or social grouping that is organized through things cannot possibly be a true public, but is sure to present a consumerist, domesticated parody of it, particularly when the public in question is the stereotypical figure of the consumer—middle-class White women (Marres, 2012, p. 9). Even when the activist knitters at protests like the Greenham Commons or antiglobalization rallies do put their physical bodies on the streets and on the line, many of the same critiques are still made (Black & Burisch, 2010; Robertson, 2011). Rather than dismissing the material politics of craftivism and graffiti knitting as outside the realm of actual activism, scholars must critique them as forms of feminist politicization (Jonathan Dean, 2012). Graffiti

knitters and scholars must both do more, in different registers, to address the hidden assumptions that detract from the work of feminist politics.

### Conclusion

The massive Knit the Bridge project points toward a more fully realized intersectional participatory politics (see Figure 5). These graffiti knitters covered the Andy Warhol/7th Street Bridge in Pittsburgh with knit and crochet squares made by more than two thousand people (Gross, n.d.). It emphasized hyperlocal participation through constantly updating maps showing where contributing crafters lived, covering all Pittsburgh neighborhoods, Allegheny County townships, and southwestern Pennsylvania townships. Attention to already existing populations at a granular level actively works against racist appropriations of, for example, urban Detroit as a blank DIY canvas (Dawkins, 2011). Like other large-scale graffiti knitting installations, Knit the Bridge only loosely coordinated the colors and designs for participant contributions. This patchwork aesthetic visualizes the extensive processes of collaboration and network building that underlie the project. Each knitted panel or square responds to its maker's desires, and the overall spectacle builds strength, vibrancy, and approachability from this imperfect aesthetic diversity—a panoply of social selves. Like KTC's Button Biathlon, Knit the Bridge includes tear-down and deinstallation as an essential part of the project. Volunteers restitched the fence sections into blankets distributed to participating homeless shelters, safe centers, and animal rescue organizations.



**Figure 5. Knit the Bridge installation.**  
**Photo: Knit the Bridge.**



By continuously remaking and resituating in a particular material place, through collaboration between all those who already live there, Knit the Bridge functions as an ethical participatory political spectacle. It requires contributions of differing intensities, from an organization agreeing to take in blankets to a beginning knitter making her first squares to the organizers framing and managing the process of knitting an entire bridge. Equally central were open days in which anyone could walk around the bridge, talking and taking photographs and identifying different sections by contributing knitter and location. The installation imagines the public space of the city as both spectacular and silly, the home of a collectivity rather than the property of a distant authority. These are best practices for graffiti knitting, and participatory politics more widely, in becoming more intersectional and fully realized activist speech.

Graffiti knitting is already established. My goal has been not to analyze whether it would, in the abstract, be desirable for people to engage in graffiti knitting but to understand how it has been materialized and to critique it with an eye to building stronger activist practices. As a particular case study in a growing craftivist political movement toward a more participatory politics, it is essential for an activist scholarship to understand both graffiti knitting's flourishes and its failures. Its troubles knitting race come directly from the ways in which it knits gender. But by analyzing what internal logics make this speech resonate for some, it is possible to see a way to knit activism together.

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