TEXTILE
Cloth and Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rftx20

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To cite this article: Susan Jones (2022): Knitting and Everyday Meaning-Making, TEXTILE, DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2022.2092967

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2022.2092967

Published online: 29 Jul 2022.

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Abstract

Knitting has long established meanings in everyday life. As popular and academic interest in yarncraft has surged, these meanings are being re-made. Recent times have also seen a proliferation of ways to make and share meanings, and recognition of the interaction of modes and materials, and affective and aesthetic engagements involved. This article draws on interdisciplinary approaches to meaning-making to present three strands, each offering a different way of looking at the relationship between knitting and meaning-making in contemporary everyday lives. The first explores the deep-rooted connections between knitting and meaning-making activities conventionally understood as literacy. The second strand draws on Ingold's taxonomy of lines to explore knitting as correspondence between maker and the material world. The third draws on Saito's work on everyday aesthetics to examine how long-established meanings of knitting, in particular its associations with the "ordinary," are entwined with newer meanings across the private and public faces of contemporary knitting practice. Entwined together, these strands demonstrate that knitting is a powerful metaphor for exploring everyday meaning-making. In addition, and significant to the recognition of previously undervalued voices and experiences, this also (re)opens ways of understanding the value of knitting as a meaning-making practice in its own right.

Keywords: knitting; amateur yarncraft; everyday; meaning-making; literacy

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Textile, Volume 0, Issue 0, pp. 1–13
DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2022.2092967

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Textile practices, including knitting, have a significant role in the long and rich history of meaning-making activities that can be traced back to the efforts of our earliest ancestors to find "system and story" in their worlds (Dissanayake 2000, 86). Although the term "knitting" has been associated with the textile craft we recognize today since the late sixteenth century (Rutt, 1987), the meanings associated with knitting have, of course, changed over time. Amateur knitting, after a long period of being "marginalised (although never really marginal)" (Turney 2009, 8), has in recent years seen a reported resurgence in popularity (e.g., Silver 2021). Such reports commonly present new knitters as a refreshing reboot of stereotypes linked to gender, age and cultural relevance (although they often simultaneously reinforce these tropes). In fact, as Turney (2009) points out, claims for such revivals are nothing new. However, as popular and academic interest in knitting develops, and it features within wider public discussion on issues including health and wellbeing, identity and heritage, political activism and sustainability, knitting is taking on new meanings, transforming understanding of its role in everyday lives.

Just as the meanings of knitting have changed, over time the multiple semiotic systems drawn upon by humans to make meanings "have been afforded different degrees of legitimacy" (Burnett and Merchant 2021, 362). Pertinent to my argument in this article is the privileging of written over visual forms of communication (Dissanayake 2000). However, more recent times have seen a proliferation of ways to make and share meanings. This includes the many digital formats that facilitate easy visual communication with people in other places, often in real time. Alongside this there has been growing scholarly recognition of the ways in which meanings are made in the informal and domestic contexts of everyday life (Jones 2018; Highmore 2011; Miller 2010) as well as how meaning-making results from a complex interaction of modes and materials, and affective and aesthetic engagements (Pahl 2014; Rowsell 2020).

The aim of this article is to examine more closely the relationship between knitting and meaning-making in contemporary everyday lives. I want to take note of Collins' (2016) call for academic writing to move from metaphors of building (the framework, etc.) to those reflecting textile practice, including stitching and piecing. Pérez-Bustos, Sánchez-Aldana and Chocontá-Piraquive (2019) note that, while textile metaphors are widely used to represent social phenomena, they are often "used without a conscious awareness of the complexity of the making practices that sustain them":

> *Being aware of this interference – of textile-making in our thinking of textile makings – is a call to become more responsible for what these textile material metaphors have to offer in our understanding of these knowledge practices. (370)*

By evoking the looping together of different threads into a "string figure," Haraway (2016) also draws our attention to the way meanings are created through the knotting of the material and semiotic. In response to these points, my argument has three strands which combine to follow the stages of the transformation of yarn into a piece of hand knitted fabric. Taken separately, each strand reflects a different way of looking at knitting and meaning-making. The first begins with the etymological relationship between text and textile and the deep-rooted connections between knitting and meaning-making activities conventionally understood as literacy. It will explore how the historical marginalization of fiber crafts as forms through which meanings are made and shared has conversely contributed to their power as communicative resources. Inherent to this is the plurality and mutability of meanings, illustrated both through the process and product of knitting. Secondly, I draw on Ingold's taxonomy of lines (2007) to explore knitting as correspondence between maker and the material world, through which threads are transformed into surfaces. The third strand uses everyday aesthetics, in particular the work of Saito (2017), to explore how long-established meanings of knitting, in particular its associations with the "ordinary," are entwined with newer meanings across the private and public faces of contemporary knitting practice. These three strands present a view of knitting as constituted through the entanglement of diverse material, social, cultural, and political meanings across time, places, and spaces. Through their entwining across the course of the article, I aim to demonstrate not only that knitting is a powerful metaphor for exploring everyday meaning-making more broadly, but also that thinking about knitting in this way can (re)open ways of uunderstanding this craft as a meaning-making practice in its own right.

Making and Meaning

One of the first links between knitting and meaning-making as active and creative processes is to be found in the shared origin of the words "text" and "textile," which come from the Latin *texere*, to weave. Text and textile remain idiomatically entangled in English, as in other languages (spinning a yarn, weaving a narrative), reflecting the influence of textile practice on ways of thinking about lived experience. Barthes (1986, 60) has argued that "the text is a fabric," woven from a plurality of signifiers. Conversely, in her exploration of women's weaving as "society's first texts" (22), Kruger (2013) has noted that "textiles, like a sheet of paper, convey meaning, their language a grammar of fiber, design, and dye" (11).

The historic use of amateur handcrafts to "transform materials to produce sense" (Parker 1996, 6) highlights the privileging of certain voices and modes of communication. For example, Ulrich explains that, "[b]ecause far more women were accustomed to using needles than pens, textiles may offer the richest unexplored body of information in early American women's history" (1990, 205). The ephemeral and degradable nature of these "texts" means many have been lost. However, the undervaluing of knitting has made it a powerful tool for functional communication and the encoding of information. During World War II, female spies and members of the resistance stitched messages into their knitting, which could be passed on in plain sight of dismissive observers (Napoleoni 2020). Kuchera (2018) notes that the stenographic qualities of fiber crafts have been similarly leveraged in the history of feminist, non-binary and other marginalized and minority groups to share messages and subvert meanings.

The iconography of specific knitting traditions illustrates the representational function of knitting to communicate meanings linked to time, place and identity. Examples in European knitting include the stranded color work of Fair Isle or the three-dimensional patterns of Irish Aran, taken far from its original remote roots to successful commodification as a lucrative economic and cultural national export (Corrigan 2019). Traditional fishermen's ganseys have attracted renewed interest in recent decades, with stitch patterns replicated and ascribed various meanings (Rutt 1987; Rutter 2019). The mutability of tradition and authenticity is illustrated by the recent popularity of the Christmas Jumper. As Turney (2009) points out, the significance of this item of knitwear for a new generation of wearers embracing its kitsch design is as a "paradoxical object, taking meaning from its context and use."

The iconography and meanings attributed to knitting infer that it expresses a non-changing activity and aesthetic, a general and popularly held view of craft per se: stability and continuity [...] This is one of the many paradoxes of knitting, indicative of its ability to situate itself within two seemingly separate and opposing spheres at the same time. (17)

I will pick up the idea of "separate and opposing spheres" later. In the meantime, viewing knitting as a communicative practice demonstrates how its meanings resist being fixed. Gschwandtner argues that "knitting is writing" (2012, 414), and Westermann (2017, 18) also notes how, in both activities, "ideas in our heads become material reality through the careful movements of our hands." She connects the repetition of stitch formation that creates structure in knitting with the practice of the earliest storytellers, for whom repetition enabled stories to be handed down across generations. Despite this repetition, pieces of knitting, like stories, are not the same in every retelling. Turney (2009) describes knitted objects as "physical narratives" (144) embodying the identity and life experiences of the maker. Even when it is the result of following a knitting pattern, the "presence" of the maker (Sennett 2008, 133) is evident in the physical construction of a knitted object: "the uniqueness of the object comes through the choice of textures, colours, tension and more importantly, the unique touch of one's hand" (Myselev 2009, 151). Pérez-Bustos, Sánchez-Aldana, and Chocontá-Piraquive (2019) also include in this list of factors the (often female) genealogies of textile craft practice. In the next strand of discussion, I focus on the process and product of knitting as the result of unique configurations of material and physical factors shared between maker and materials, and explore the implications of this for understanding knitting as a meaning-making activity.

Threads, Traces and Surfaces

Although the practice of knitting encompasses a complex range of products and a rich, social political history, its diversity is underpinned by a simple orthodoxy, one underlying law: the knotting and looping of thread. (Whittaker and Padovani 2012, 172)

Ingold's anthropology of lines (2007) offers a way of understanding knitting both as representing a "meshwork" of meaning and as a valuable resource for meaning-making in its own right. To illustrate the key points drawn on in this section, I start by outlining the structure of knitting using the example of a piece of knitting constructed as a color coded daily record of an academic research project.

Knitted fabric is formed from the action of looping and knotting a continuous strand of yarn, using two basic stitches: knit, where the yarn is wrapped at the back and passed from one needle to the other through the front of the work, and purl, where it is wrapped and passed from the front to the back. Any number of complex patterns and effects may be achieved by combining these two stitches. The emergence of worked stitches in a flat piece of knitting resembles boustrophedonic script, the direction of which reverses on alternate lines, as the work is turned at the end of a row before starting the next. Separate rows are therefore joined at each end. Each stitch on a row is knotted to the one below and the one above. Figures 1 and 2 show two sides of a piece knitted in garter stitch (all "knit" stitches). When new colors are joined at the start of a row, they are entwined with existing yarn to secure them into the work. On the reverse side (Figure 2), the changing colors illustrate how individual stitches are constituted not only in a horizontal relationship with neighboring stitches, but also vertically, creating a surface from continuous thread.

In Ingold's taxonomy of lines, "a thread is a filament of some kind, which may be entangled with other threads or suspended between points in three-dimensional space" (2007, 41). He relates the thread to the "trace" of writing, that is: "an enduring mark left in or on a solid surface by a continuous movement" (43). Threads and traces seem categorically different to each other. As discussed above, thread has historically been marginalized, partly due to the lack of preserved examples, but also because work with threads, as opposed to written traces, has long been regarded as women's work (Ingold 2007, 42, citing Barber 1994). However, Ingold illustrates how knitting takes on the qualities of writing as "the knitter binds her lines into a surface, upon which the original threads now figure as traces, namely in the regular pattern formed by their entwining" (52). Rather than threads and traces being categorically opposed, therefore, "each stands as a transform of the other: threads may be transformed into traces, and traces into threads." Ingold argues that

it is through the transformation of threads into traces [...] that surfaces are brought into being. And conversely, it is through the transformation of traces into threads that surfaces are dissolved. (52)

At the heart of the structure of knitting is the knot, which Ingold says is "surface-creating. The surface we see, however, is not the knot, but the space taken up by it" (2007, 62). Embodying the coming together of

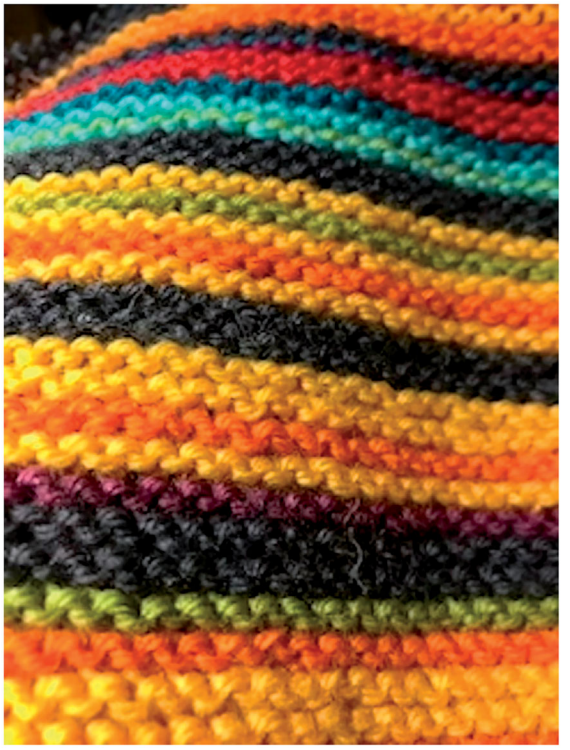

Figure 1
Detail from a piece of knitting (made by the author).

different threads, the knot resists being fixed or isolated in time and place:

Knots are placed where many lines of becoming are drawn tightly together. Yet every line overtakes the knot in which it is tied. Its end is always loose, somewhere beyond the knot, where it is groping towards an entanglement with other lines, other knots. (Ingold 2013, 132)

For Ingold, this challenges anthrocentric notions of making as a premeditated - or "hylomorphic"—project, where "practitioners impose forms internal to the mind upon a material world 'out there'" (21). Rather, he argues that making *is a form of correspondence: not the imposition of preconceived form on raw material substance, but the drawing out or bringing forth of potentials immanent in a world of becoming. (31)*

This might be surprising in the context of knitting, especially given many amateur knitters follow patterns with what may seem to be predefined outcomes. As was explored above, however, even knitting from a pattern is highly individualized. This could reflect what Ingold describes as

making-in-growing, wherein forms arise from the careful nurturing of materials within a field of correspondence, rather than from their having been imposed from without upon a material base. (2015, 128)

The image of correspondence is particularly pertinent when discussing the role of knitting in the making and sharing of meanings. It is suggestive of dialogue, rather than a one-way process, and evokes longer-term relationality: "to correspond with the world, in short, is not to describe it, or to represent it, but *to answer to it*" (2013, 108, italics in original).

Viewed from Ingold's perspective, knitting is a powerful way of thinking about everyday meaning-making. It is an example of an active process of entwining disparate threads. The resulting meshwork is subject to

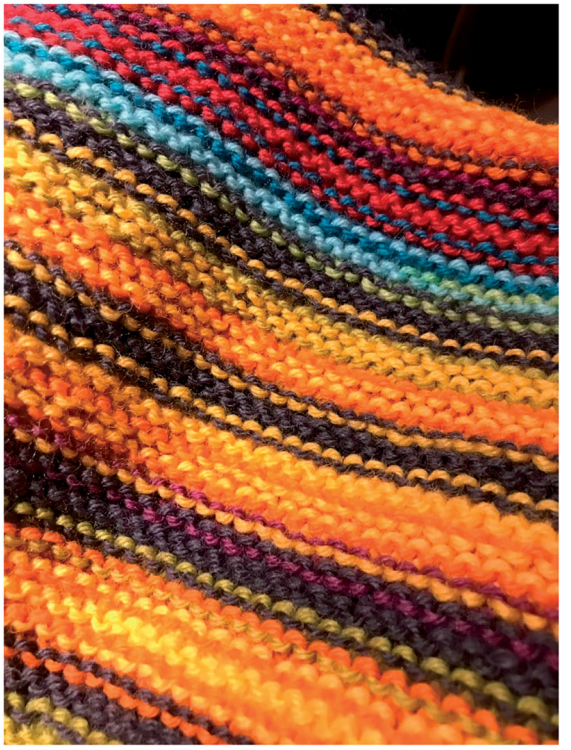

Figure 2
Reverse view of a piece of knitting (made by the author).

unraveling, and being returned into its constituent threads, which may then be transformed into new traces and surfaces. Ingold's work offers a metaphor for the interaction of material, social, cultural and political factors that contribute to the way we make sense of everyday experiences. Returning to its etymological origins, Ingold reminds us that "text" began as "a meshwork of interwoven threads rather than of inscribed traces" (2007, 61). Thinking about meaning-making in this way decenters privileged written "traces," and the marginalization of voices and practices that has resulted from the dominance of the "inscribed." Ingold's perspective also reframes a view of knowledge as linear: just as a piece of knitted work grows, Ingold argues that knowledge is integrated not "from point to point *across* the world"; rather it "builds *up,* from an array of points and the materials collected from them, into an integrated assembly" (2007, 89–90, italics in original). This offers a counter to models of literacy, including those prominent in formal education over recent decades, which decontextualize meanings and assume a one-way intentionality in their making. Because of all this, of course, Ingold's perspective also (re)opens ways of viewing knitting as a significant meaning-making activity in its own right.

In the next strand, I return to the idea of the meanings of knitting operating across separate and opposing spheres (Turney 2009). Using Saito's (2017) work on everyday aesthetics, I focus on the surfaces of a piece of knitting to explore how contemporary knitting practice is constituted by the entwining of differently oriented meanings.

Right and Wrong Sides: Public and Private Meanings of Knitting

Gschwandtner (2012, 417) describes how nineteenth century architect Gottfried Semper "asserted that woven and knitted materials effectively separate inner and outer life to create what we know as 'home'." Although knitting has been part of third wave feminist reclamation of the domestic as a political space,

Semper's position echoes the over-simplified binaries that have shaped perceptions of knitting over time. In this strand, I turn to a common binary that exists within knitting: that of the outward facing side of the work, or "Right Side" (Figure 1) and its converse "Wrong Side," which faces inwards, and is not usually intended for show (Figure 2), to show how the meanings of knitting resist such simple categorization. Dissanayake (2000) reminds us that meanings are made from more than alphabetic code. In the case of knitting, meaning can come from factors which are multimodal (color, texture), haptic (warmth, scratchiness), affective (care, nostalgia) or aesthetic (cuteness, fashion). My focus here will be on the aesthetic meanings of knitting, and how it is viewed and valued.

The field of everyday aesthetics challenges many of the assumptions of its traditional counterpart and sees aesthetics restored to its original meaning of "perception"; that is, "not judgement but description" (Highmore, cited in Saito 2017, 58). The association of aesthetics with (capital A) Art may make it a surprising lens through which to explore amateur craft practice. Dissanayake's definition of art as "making special" (2000, 134) would also seem to preclude the aesthetic analysis of "everyday" practice. However, Leddy points out that "many kinds of 'making special' are important aspects of everyday life" (2012, 76), although certain aesthetic qualities (including those associated with knitting, such as cuteness or cosiness) have been "downgraded in our society for sexist and homophobic [...] adultist and classist reasons" (162). Conceptual binaries between art and craft may also suggest a limit to aesthetic analysis of knitting. Daley (2013, para. 17) points out, however, that knitting "can and does unsettle definitions of art," especially when it is a public act which fosters curiosity and discussion.

Saito defines much of the traditional approach to aesthetics as "spectator-centred": subject to a set of criteria objectively mobilized for the dispassionate judgment of "Art." In contrast, she says:

I locate the core of everyday aesthetics as in the ordinary experienced as ordinary: the quiet, unarticulated aesthetic satisfaction interwoven with the flow of daily life. (124)

Her focus on the "ordinary" includes the aesthetic qualities of wind farms or doing the laundry. These cannot be readily subjected to "spectator-centred" and "judgement-oriented" aesthetic analysis. Although "quiet" and "unarticulated" suggest the dominant, gendered meanings associated with knitting as domestic and utilitarian, Saito's description of everyday aesthetics resonates with the kinds of pleasure many amateur knitters gain from their craft: its associations with mindfulness and well-being, for example (Riley, Corkhill, and Morris 2012) or the haptic pleasures of "soft, warm and fuzzy" yarn (Eidus 2014). Saito argues that the prevalence of such experiences in our everyday lives

suggests the need for another model of aesthetic experience; the kind that is experienced through one's engagement with everyday tasks and that is thoroughly integrated into the mundane. (2017, 124)

Traditionally "hidden" experiences associated with the personal and domestic are important aspects of meaning-making through knitting. This includes the challenging emotions and sensations it can elicit, such as frustration, pain or isolation, and the positives experienced by knitters working individually rather than in the knitting groups widely recognized as beneficial (Mayne 2016; Corkhill et al. 2014). For Saito, "bringing background to the foreground through paying attention" (2017, 24) has significant, "world-making" implications (changing attitudes to environmental issues, for example).

A phenomenological description faithful to our everyday aesthetic life unencumbered by the traditional spectator-centred and judgment-oriented aesthetics reminds us that the aesthetic dimension of our lives is not separate from the other aspects and neither are we a disembodied existence isolated from the world. (59)

Recognition of knitting as an everyday meaning-making activity has similarly far-reaching implications, (re)opening the narrow range of predominantly print-based meaning-making practice privileged within formal education and wider society to different modes, materials, voices and perspectives, and decentering the dominance of reductive models in understanding of how people make and share meanings in their everyday lives.

Much like the two sides of a piece of knitting, an experience-oriented view of knitting is inseparable from its relationship to more outward-facing knitting practice. This is illustrated by craftivism and yarn bombing.

Figure 3
Crocheted post box topper marking Remembrance Day in the UK (photographed by the author, November 2021).

The Craftivism Manifesto illustrates the relationship of craftivism to dominant discourses:

Craft is often seen as a benign, passive and (predominantly female) domestic past time. By taking these stereotypes and subverting them, craftivists are making craft a useful tool of peaceful, proactive and political protest. (Greer n.d.)

The impact of knitting as a communicative resource within craftivism and yarn bombing lies in making the ordinary extraordinary, and in drawing the attention of a wider public audience to what may be more usually regarded as private aesthetic experiences. This is represented by the "gentle protest" advocated by Corbett (2017), whose manifesto focuses on comfort and solidarity and making pieces which are "small and beautiful." The term "yarn bombing" itself represents an interplay of associations, and the subversion of expectations (Williams 2011). Although yarn bombing, featuring both knitting and crochet, is increasingly prominent in many public spaces (including the village post box featured in Figures 3 and 4) the work of "The Knitting Banksy" (Noble 2021) is an example which recently received notable attention in the UK. Across several months, post boxes, benches and fences across a small town were covered in knitted and crocheted work marking public festivals, moments in popular culture, and national acts of remembrance. Public reaction to these displays reflects the hallmarks of yarn bombing, which include humor and whimsy, and the evocation of joy and surprise (McGovern 2019; Mann 2015).

Motivations for knitters using their craft for public facing causes reflects "intersections of personal, community and political logics" (McGovern 2019, 60). Figure 5 shows trees decorated with knitted items to celebrate the National Health Service (NHS). The contribution of publicly funded health care systems and their staff, in the context of long-standing debates over funding and resources, became a prominent theme in the public response to the Covid-19 pandemic in

Figure 4
Crocheted post box topper marking the Platinum Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II in the UK (photographed by the author, June 2022).

the UK and the rainbow became a common visual demonstration of support for the NHS. This was not without controversy due to what was felt by some to be the co-opting—and subsequent overshadowing—of a symbol which has, since the 1970s, been associated with the LGBTQ + Pride movement (Bremner, 2021).

Response to the use of traditional and homely crafts for public acts of expression also demonstrates the enmeshing of public and private meanings. The "beautification," "softening" or "warming up" of a public space evokes the feminized discourse of knitting, and this appears to make the potentially criminal practice of yarn bombing acceptable, often to the very institutions being targeted for protest (McGovern 2019, 79).

However, acceptance of craftivism and yarn bombing based on these qualities is not unproblematic. It illustrates what Hahner and Varda (2014) have termed the "aesthetics of exceptionalism" as it simultaneously evokes the history of vilified urban graffiti culture whilst being accepted publicly and politically, not only because of its material, affective and aesthetic properties, but also because "its privileged style is related to modalities of gender, race, class and capital" (301). Viewing yarn bombing as "street art," as reflected in the moniker assigned to the Knitting Banksy, also assumes a status for certain modes of expression not afforded to the voices and practices appropriated by yarn bombers. This has significant implications for the claims to participation made by the wider craftivist movement (Close 2018).

Craftivism and yarn bombing illustrate the enmeshing of experience-centred aesthetics and domestic knowledges with spectator-oriented approaches that bestow social, cultural and political value and approval. However, the image of two sides of knitted work reminds us that only some of what happens on the hidden side is seen from the front. Validation of only some experiences and knowledges means that consideration of

Figure 5
Trees decorated to celebrate the National Health Service during the Covid-19 pandemic (photographed by the author May 2021).

the intertwining of meanings across the private and public faces of knitting needs to attend to how far it upholds the discursive forces that have historically served to keep some voices and practices hidden.

Conclusions

The meanings of knitting continue to change. Its history shows the mutability of tradition, and how knitting has been used as a creative and subversive resource to make and share meanings. Focus on the process and product of knitting illustrates how its contemporary meanings are an ongoing "meshwork" (Ingold 2007) of historic, social, cultural, political, material, affective and aesthetic factors. Greater attention to the "ordinary" experiences of knitting provides a welcome challenge to long-established discourses which privilege written forms of communication. It can also highlight and disrupt the gendered, racialised and classed dimensions that can shape understanding of knitting as an everyday practice. However, close attention to how knitting makes meaning also illustrates that newer ways of ascribing value, including those discussed in this article, such as yarnbombing and craftivism, do not necessarily sit outside of these dimensions; work remains in order to bring to the foreground the role of knitting in the continued marginalization of some voices and knowledges.

The framing of practice in wider discourse is integral to how the experience of it is shaped. As Haraway says, evoking the 'string figure' as a way of understanding how ideas and experiences are both materially and discursively constituted: "it matters what matters we use to think other matters with [...] it matters what knots knot knots" (2016, 12). We know that reductive models of meaning-making in everyday lives have a detrimental impact on individuals and communities (Jones 2018). Entwined together, the

different perspectives in this article illustrate how knitting is a powerful metaphor for exploring the active and creative practice of everyday meaning-making. These perspectives also demonstrate that looking closely at what knitting means now, including its role as a valuable resource for making and sharing meanings in its own right, offers ways to both challenge and change the systems and stories that shape us.

Acknowledgements
I would like to thank my colleagues Kerryn Dixon, Chris Hall, Holly Henderson and Joanna McIntyre for helpful discussion and comments on early drafts of this article.

Disclosure statement
The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Funding
This work was supported by a Leverhulme Trust Research Fellowship [RF-2021-458].

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