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Knot Your Average Craft: Reading Crochet As A Queer Practice

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Abstract

This article reads crochet as a queer practice through the work of Sara Ahmed and Jack Halberstam. It first turns to the material specificities of the craft, mapping out how the technique and materiality of crochet- and the intimate, haptic interaction taking place between the material and the maker- gives rise to meaning by blurring the boundaries between mind and body. It then turns to the historical context of the practice, and how it has historically been devalued and marginalised from artistic and scholarly contexts for being on the weaker ends of the binaries of art/craft, male/ female, public/ private. By attending to the practice of crochet through Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological perspective and considering its epistemological implications in the context of Jack Halberstam's (2010) work on queerness and failure, this paper argues that reconceptualising crochet as a queer practice would ultimately help restore the agency of the craft and those who have traditionally practiced it by taking it beyond the cisheteronormative binaries that have historically constrained it. The article considers how such a reconceptualisation can have broader implications for academic research practice, identifying avenues for future creative-critical research.

This article begins from the understanding of fibre craft, particularly crochet, as an 'orientation'—a way of inhabiting space, forming social relations and engaging in knowledge production through embodied, affective and haptic practice. The term 'crochet', throughout the discussion, refers to both the crocheted object as well as the process of crocheting. By attending to the practice of crochet through Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological perspective and considering its epistemological implications in the context of Jack Halberstam's (2010) work on queerness and failure, this paper argues that reconceptualising crochet as a queer practice would ultimately help restore the agency of the craft and those who have traditionally practiced it by taking it beyond the cisheteronormative binaries that have historically constrained it. Configuring it as a queer mode of thought, or mode of queer thought, would allow one to rethink notions of domesticity and the private domain as a contested and affectively charged space where normative conceptions of gender, labour and value are both performed and can be potentially disrupted. More broadly, imagining crochet as a way of inhabiting and relating to the material world would open up more expansive, relational and affect

Crochet as a craft has historically been devalued for its association with hegemonic notions of 'femininity' based on the gendered binaries of public/private and art/craft. As a craft positioned at the margins of, or even outside the art canon, queer and feminist theory- also predicated on the notions of non-normativity, otherness and resistance- can be useful in arguing for its place within but beyond the binary. Ahmed's queer phenomenology and Halberstam's theorisation of queerness and failure can enable one to unravel the systems that marginalise or devalue crochet, and then argue in favour of its 'queerness' by showing how even while embedded within heteropatriarchal and capitalist orders, it simultaneously unsettles and exceeds them. Rather than rejecting the stereotypes associated with it or

working to assimilate it within the dominant orientation, it can be productive to examine the structures that denigrate it to begin with, and then reframe its 'failure' to align as a liberatory practice and gateway to creativity and discovery. Rather than claiming that it is "as good as fine art" and inadvertently reinforcing the hierarchization of art and craft, taking this approach brings to light the systems leading to the craft's devaluation.

Introduction

Defining Crochet: Technique, Materiality, and Queerness

To understand crochet as a queer practice, it is essential first to define and explain the technique. The word. 'crochet' comes from the French word 'croche' or 'croc', meaning hook (Karp, 2018, p. 208). The slipknot is placed on the hook- the only tool used in crochet- such that a new 'chain' is created by drawing yarn through it. Stitches can then be worked into these chains. After the foundation chain is made, it may be continued in rows or rounds depending on the maker's choice or the pattern. This is the simplest form of closed work. The basic stitches- chain, slip stitch, single crochet, half double crochet, double and treble crochet- can be worked in varying combinations to create new stitches, designs and patterns. It is structurally different from other similar crafts like knitting as it completes a stitch and then moves on to the next. While knitting has several open stitches at a time, crochet is both vertically and laterally interlooped or connected (Karp, 2018, p. 208)—which means that each stitch is complete in itself. This fundamental specificity means that it lacks inherent linearity or teleology, always being open to interruption, redirection, and reinvention, unlike most other fibre crafts like embroidery, knitting and stitching/sewing. The process of felting that involves manipulating interlocked fibres based on temperature and moisture would be the closest comparison when it comes to locating queerness within the medium, but this

article focuses on crochet inspired by my own practice of it. The materiality of crochet and absence of finality invite improvisation, personalisation and adaptation, and permit one to fail, start over, join yarn and continue from any point on its surface, and experiment with colours, threads, patterns, hook sizes, as well as materials other than yarn. Its ability to extend into any direction or dimension in infinite variations of designs points to its rhizomatic potential, which opens up the space to imagine non-hierarchical forms of making and knowing—therefore implying a shift from linear, mastery-based modes of production towards relational, co-constitutive practices.

Sara Ahmed (2006, p. 46), delving into the idea of 'equipmentality' through queer phenomenology, says that objects gain meaning by what they allow us to do, and in doing so, extend beyond themselves and orientate us towards an action or other objects. Furthermore, a body becomes itself by extending towards this object and performing the action it affords. This idea highlights how meaning is generated mutually between one's hands and the crochet hook wherein the performance of the hook is inextricably tied to the maker's body so much so that the boundaries between them blur. In this "ethno-phenomenological encounter" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 39), there is a reciprocal relationship between the tools/material and the maker where each takes on its qualities by way of interaction with the other. Making, therefore, is not about imposing form from without, but developing it in tandem with the material. British Anthropologist Tim Ingold (2015, p. 24) succinctly articulates the mutual shaping that occurs in the process of making "within a gathering of forces, both tensile and frictional, established through the engagement of the practitioner with materials that have their own inclinations and vitality.". By claiming that meaning is generated in the interaction between the subject and 'object' which has its own life, Ingold reformulates Merleau-Ponty's idea of the subject as origin of meaning. When the hook and the hand holding it collapse into

one in their repetitive performance of knotting, boundaries are disturbed—"what is "over there" [becomes] also "in here", or even what I am "in"" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 163). As this encounter becomes a point of mutual transformation, the crocheted object itself retains traces of this interaction, further queering the process and its product. Attending to how meaning is actively generated through embodied interaction allows for a revaluation of meaning-making practices and conventions within academic research, offering more reparative vocabularies for creative and critical research that emphasise process, care and interdependence rather than mastery or supposed objectivity.

The intimacy of the process achieves three things: first, it imbues the hook with animacy; second, it literally brings a new object to life; and third, it transforms the maker's orientation to the world as well as how the world is oriented towards them. The interaction between the tool and the maker is actively generated, and remains alive and attentive to the world, becoming a process of "thinking with things…letting them in as accessory to her own reflections." (Ingold, 2022, p. 11). Memory is suffused into the material in the process, which continues to retain traces of its interaction with the maker: "if you untie a knotted rope, however much you try to straighten it, the rope will retain kinks and bends and will want, given the chance, to curl up into similar conformations as before." (Ingold, 2015, p. 25). Similarly, two crocheted objects- even as "copies" of the same pattern- will never be the same since the interaction that takes place when the "vitality" of the material entangles with the corporeality of the maker in a given moment in time is entirely unique. As a holistic practice that integrates sensory experience, bodily movement, and intellectual engagement where creativity is not a hierarchically superior mental activity, crochet undoes the Cartesian mind/body binary as the body becomes a site of thinking. Knowledge is 'crafted' not from abstraction but through haptic engagement, giving rise to queer spaces of fluidity and

imagination as meaning is uncovered from within materials and practices that are assumed to be lacking in epistemic or artistic value. Its rhizomatic potential both queers dominant epistemological practices by emphasising intimacy, connection and movement, and offers practitioners an alternative way of inhabiting the material world. As an alternative orientation, it moves from being a material metaphor to a method or way of being and doing which moves away from dominant capitalist modes towards one based in slowness and imperfection, thereby crafting queer spaces of resistance. In addition to this, the movement of the hook, in becoming the performance of the body, also becomes a performance of idealised femininity. Having established how it is an active process of thinking by/and doing, the following section explores the implications of this idea by delving into its historical context and elaborating on how factors framed as its weakness in fact provide grounds for locating within it what Halberstam (2011, p. 10) calls "unbounded forms of speculation, modes of thinking that ally not with rigour and order but with inspiration and unpredictability".

Crochet as Queer Practice: Historical Context and moving beyond Heteronormative Binaries

The historical trajectory of needlework, including crochet, runs parallel to the history of women and underscores deep-rooted associations with female identity and labour. Popularised during the Victorian period as an essential part of a girl's education, crochet and other fibre crafts have been linked to domesticity and idealised femininity. Consequently, they have been marginalised and devalued as merely "women's work" (Parker, 1984). Reliant only on hand production and minimal tools, crochet has been undervalued for its haptic nature and relegation to the domestic space, unlike art which hints at the maker's intellect and supposedly transcends materiality and immediate utility. In *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine,* Rozsika Parker argues that the

subversive potential of embroidery, and by extension other fibre crafts, has been overlooked for being on the weaker ends of the socially constructed binaries of art/craft, male/female, and public/private. She suggests that the 'lowered eyes, bent head, and hunched shoulders' of a craftswoman may indicate a sense of autonomy and self-containment rather than just subjugation. The devaluation of crochet thus arises from gendered power structures that trump ideal objectivity and trivialise knowledge gained from continued subjective interaction with materials. These hierarchies emerge from a broader epistemological dichotomy that aligns objectivity and rationality with masculinity, and subjectivity and sensuality with femininity—rendering the latter as less valuable or valid. This article argues, however, that while crochet is tied to this dominant order- as domestic, feminine, and thus devalued- it can be reimagined beyond these binaries. The notion of 'beyond' both recognises its implication within these structures and that it is "in but not of it" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 11), endowing the craft with agency, vitality, and the possibility of resignification outside the confines of heteropatriarchal value systems. Reliance on queer theory for the demarginalisation of the practice destabilises the hierarchy between intellectual and manual labour, challenges dominant ideas of what counts as legitimate knowledge and who is authorised to produce it.

Halberstam (2011, p. 19), borrowing from Stuart Hall's concept of 'low theory' to read seemingly unserious media ranging from *Finding Nemo* to *SpongeBob SquarePants,* demonstrates how "dominant history teems with the remnants of alternative possibilities, and [that] the job of the subversive intellectual is to trace the lines of the worlds they conjured and left behind." His project of reading failure to align with dominant epistemologies and ontologies as resistance, alongside Ahmed's queer phenomenology, allows us to realise how queer (dis)orientations can "disturb the order of things" by revealing the historical and contingent nature of dominant orientations and rendering the familiar unfamiliar. Going

further, this underscores the fact that these can also have the potential for expressing resistance even as they remain connected to the discourses that work to 'keep them in their place'. While queerness, as an oblique line, inscribes failure to fit in, Ahmed (2006, p. 175)- unlike Halberstam- recognises that "such a "yes" is not available to everyone". It can be a privilege not everyone can afford. While Ahmed uses the term 'orientation' in the spatial sense to explain how bodies inhabit a world which assumes certain viewpoints as normative or standard, Halberstam critiques heteronormative, capitalist conceptions of knowledge production and success that rest on disciplinarity, rationality and linearity, arguing for ways of knowing and being that emphasise "mutuality, collectivity, plasticity, diversity, and adaptability." (Halberstam 2011, p. 10). 'Failure' to fit in or align with dominant orientations can be read as resistance when such acts are deliberate. In the context of crochet, queerness resides in how it destabilises conventional expectations and gestures toward something more expansive. In terms of attending to the queerness of the craft in order to try and conceive of alternative, otherwise possibilities and ways of being, crochet- when conceptualised as a queer 'orientation'- can emerge as a method or way of engaging in knowledge production, as an ethos or lens that emphasises or foregrounds mutuality. Such a perspective opens up multiple avenues for creative craft based research where the knowledge generated through and about craft, and an understanding of our attachment to and interaction with materials could shift how we relate to work, others, and ourselves.

Feminist geographers have highlighted the spatial politics linking crafts such as crochet and knitting to femininity for they have "traditionally been a home-based craft: "as a branch of women's work it was considered essentially domestic, undertaken within the home for the home and of value nowhere else"" (qtd. in Price, 2021, p. 198). Traditionally meant to be a home-based activity taught to girls with the purpose of inculcating 'feminine virtues'

such as docility and submissiveness, it is embedded within discourses that discount its subversive potential. Allowing this history to come alive renders it animate, letting it "dance again with life" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 164). As a medium that has historically been available and accessible to women, they have always imbued their work with an array of meanings. There are various instances- such as during the Irish Potato famine, the crochet lace industry established in Narsapur, Andhra Pradesh, the publication of needlecraft and crochet pattern books and periodicals by women- where women have found a valuable medium of expression, storytelling, as well as economic subsistence in something that was meant to silence them, both literally as they worked on their projects in silence with their heads bent down, and by way of stifling their political voice through their relegation to the supposedly non-political private space. Clearly, it is precisely the characteristics that lead to its marginalisation as a 'feminine' craft- its embodied nature, affectivity, and formal indeterminacy- that also enable it to be a potential site of resistance where practitioners can assert agency and create meaning through haptic engagement in modes of making that subvert dominant logics of productivity, mastery and coherence. Its difference from "tried and true paths of knowledge production" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 6) opens up new and more creative 'queer' ways of being, knowing, and doing. Recognising the creative and intellectual possibilities it offers for *queer worldmaking*- premised on the idea that cis-heteronormativity is only but one possible arrangement of the social world and emphasising "the inhabitation of and living into *otherwise possibilities"* (Zaino, 2021, p. 579)- and its connection to feminist struggles, allows for the restoration of the agency of the women who have practiced it before us today. Crochet, in how it enacts queerness in its materiality and temporality, *crafts* queer spaces of being—alternative ways of understanding the world for those who practice it. Additionally, when employed in ways or contexts that disturb expectations, it also holds the

potential to temporarily queer the experience of space for non-practitioners by being 'out of place', evoking a response, and inviting questions. Portland, Oregon based textile artist Jo Hamilton's work offers a compelling illustration of how crochet can craft queer spaces of being, and queer or de-familiarise the experience of space more generally.

The work of Jo Hamilton: Crafting Queer Spaces of Resistance

Hamilton's exhibition *Transitory Trespass* displayed at Russo Lee Gallery, Portland in 2021 was composed of large-scale crocheted nude male figures, portraits, landscapes and cityscapes. The word 'trespass' carries criminal connotations and signals a transgression of boundaries, or knowingly entering someone else's space. A 'transitory trespass', furthermore, invokes a sense of playfulness—sneakily coming, stirring up the waters, and causing chaos. Her crocheted 'textile paintings' exemplify this spirit of transgression and bridge her professional training in painting and the practice of crochet that she learnt from her grandmother as a child. Describing her creative practice, she talks about how crochet has a language of its own. Her method of construction involves progressing knot by knot, rigorous trial and error, and experimentation with colours and materials to achieve the right expressions and light effects. For her, it is "an alternative to painting, existing independently of fine arts but allowing itself to be used in a similar way to discuss ideas, ask questions, and carry meaning." (Vannier, 2018, p. 204). Her work operates at the intersection of the personal and political, where the act of crocheting becomes both the method and the message. The interplay between form and content extends beyond questions of gender and artistic legitimacy to also encompass broader ecological concerns, highlighting that it is precisely because of its domestic connotations that it can be harnessed as a political tool for climate activism. If it did not come with its patriarchal baggage, it would not draw attention, disorient, and disrupt dominant hierarchies in the same way.

In *The River We Used to Know* (2021), Hamilton uses a mirror to simulate water reflecting the viewer's image, while the surrounding landscape is crocheted from plastic bags and video tape. Channelling climate anxiety into material form, her use of non-typical materials such as old video tapes, cut-up plastic bags (plastic yarn or plarn), and thrifted or donated yarns and fabrics draws attention to urgent climate crises and signals a deliberate move away from overproduction and consumerism. The sharpness of the mirror mixed with reflected white light falling on the black and white plastic 'vegetation' around the river indicates refusal to romanticise nature, instead choosing to confront the viewer with a bleak, altered ecology as a result of human intervention. Her medium of choice is not only 'a turn back to basics' but also a witty reversal of expectations and hierarchies as she utilises it to engage in critical dialogue on pressing concerns—drawing upon preconceived notions of gender identity, genre and medium within Western arts and crafts to challenge those very discourses.

The crocheted nude male figures seem to be her most striking work. Endowed with textured vulnerability in a medium rarely linked with or depicting masculinity, these gigantic crocheted male nudes poignantly highlight the kind of disorientation and resistance that Ahmed and Halberstam theorise, and which I am harnessing to reconceptualise crochet as a practice that defies straightforward categorisation. These figures not only subvert the binary between art and craft, but also the male artist/ reclining female nude dynamic. It is also worth noting that the meaning of a nude figure changes when this dynamic flips. While a portrait of a nude woman often carries the weight and discomfort imposed by the male gaze- though rendered almost banal through its familiarity- a large scale crocheted nude male figure resists that same ease of assimilation. The disorientation effected by these pieces stems less from the nudity itself but more from the softness and textural intimacy of crochet used to depict such

raw masculinity. They unsettle normative expectations of craft and representation, causing a lingering sense of unease.

Hamilton's process involves crocheting from photographs with no preliminary research or sketches. Starting from the eyes and working her way outward- knotting, unravelling, trying different combinations of stitches and colours until she gets the right variation- the process exploits crochet's ability to expand in any direction as outlined previously, and quite literally rests on "unmaking, undoing, unbecoming [and] not knowing" (Halberstam, 2011, p. 2). Even as the portraits capture the subjects' essence in a seemingly static moment in time, their undisciplined and fuzzy fabric teems with life. Each knot not only carries personal meaning as evidence of the lengthy hours and effort it must have taken to create these pieces, but also defies expectations of gender and value. The medium, the materials she uses, as well as the things she does with them; all queer the experience of space. They are anti-disciplinary, incoherent but still have a language of their own, and both implicitly and explicitly challenge late capitalist and neoliberal constructs of time, achievement and productivity. The temporality of the process- its slowness and insistence on trying, failing, and redoing, as well as sustained engagement with the artist, clearly imply intentionality and its own logic of representation. It is evident that Hamilton and her works are not afraid to take up space and question the very terms through which we define artistic value.

The deployment of queer theory to rescue crochet from being pigeonholed as a 'grandma hobby' devoid of value and meaning, does not deny the reality of patriarchal oppression but rather acknowledges the possibility that our 'grandmothers' were more agentic and creative than we would assume when we associate fibre craft with submissiveness and notions of domestic utility. Hamilton's work does precisely this: it

weaponises the grounds on which crochet is devalued to reimagine it and challenge its devaluation. It renders the domestic itself a space of discovery—thereby unsettling normative expectations and recognising the existence of alternatives within the dominant. Moreover, it does not imply the appropriation of 'queerness' as an identity, rather highlights the idea that queerness is expansive; it overflows its bounds and is simply beautiful. The inferiority of fibre craft, then, as Glenn Adamson (2007, p. 4) puts it, "might be the most productive thing about it". Instead of overcoming this marginalisation through assimilation or simply dismissing it as stereotypical without revealing the systems and power structures that rendered it as such, an acknowledgement of its difference allows us to restore its agency and turn the table on its head.

When we consider the way space is shaped by sensory experiences and actions of the body, crochet's hapticality offers a means of reconfiguring familiar spaces. Sara Ahmed's (2006, p. 164) notion of how spaces are "impressed" upon bodies highlights how 'familiarity' is not a static or neutral characteristic but a dynamic effect of inhabitance wherein bodies engage with the world around them and actively shape/reshape it. The act of crocheting not only transforms physical space but also how we relate to it, pushing the boundaries of the domestic and rendering it a site of intellectual and creative possibility. Building on James Scott's concept of 'weapons of the weak' Halberstam (2011, 88) explores how 'failure' can be a form of resistance and refusal to conform by reconfiguring "what looks like passivity…as a form of critique". Additionally, "as a practice, failure recognises that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant." (Halberstam, 2011, p. 88).

In terms of moving away from but still being linked to dominant epistemologies, crochet lends itself well to acts of queer resistance and refusal to acquiesce with well-trodden paths and ways of being. In a neoliberal system that rests on individuality, efficiency, and

ridiculously high expectations of productivity and achievement that leave little space for exploring and expanding one's creative potential, crochet embraces slowness, repetition, and a tactile intimacy that resists heteronormative logics of legibility and coherence. Jo Hamilton's work illustrates this spatial and sensory reconfiguration well, not only through the subject matter of her work, but through her very process. Her technique and creative process which rests on free styling without a fixed pattern or pre-defined outcome resists mastery and embraces uncertainty, idiosyncrasy, and a radical openness and process of becoming. In prioritising process over product and intuition over efficiency, each stitch becomes a moment of negotiating with the material world, reanimating discarded materials and thrifted yarns into complex forms that enact queerness in their unruliness and refusal to be pinned down. The medium's failure to conform and the potential for independent thought, imagination, creativity and discovery that it offers in its materiality realise that while encompassed by or within these dualisms, it goes beyond them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, bringing together Ahmed and Halberstam's work reveals crochet as a queer practice that embodies and challenges dominant cultural, spatial and epistemological binaries; as something that strays away from dominant or comfortable orientations, emphasises non-conformity to well-tested ideas, and offers an alternative way of living, being, thinking and doing in a world that rests on predictability, accumulation and standardisation. In reading crochet as a method of thinking and knowing that materialises queer modes of life, it emerges as an alternative that emphasises connection, mutuality, experimentation, and intellectual and creative possibility. Jo Hamilton's work beautifully demonstrates how crochet can be reinterpreted as a site of agency, rendering the domestic craft inseparable from artistic and political expression. Furthermore, her creative process

highlights how it can also offer alternative ways of inhabiting the world and meaning making. Engagement with tools, the feel of yarn between one's fingers, and the touch of fabric become ways of connecting with the material world and relating to others. Its rhythms are non-linear; its outcomes are often indeterminate; its logic is one of feeling, proximity, and touch rather than distance, mastery, or abstraction; its structural specificity and invitation of experimentation, failure and exploration—all exemplify a queer way of being in a capitalist world. Thus, in foregrounding the theoretical implications of crochet as a practice, this essay reclaims it as an active site where bodies and materials collaboratively generate meaning, and where alternative ways of knowing and being are quite literally crafted.

This article thus turns to queer theory to highlight firstly, how knowledge is actively generated within and through the haptic practice of crochet, and secondly, how such knowledge gives rise to alternative spaces of being that rely on the soft logics of fibre craft practice and resist heteronormative and patriarchal capitalist modes of being. While there is a considerable amount of research on the symbolic significance of fibre crafts, there is not enough attention paid to the operational logics of these crafts that allow for meaning to emerge in the first place. This leaves scope for future research on how the structures, rhythms and gestures involved in crochet- or any other craft practice- interact with the maker within dynamic technical milieus to give rise to complex networks of relations between human and non-human actors.

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