

Making space for the unexpected:
Knitting in formal spaces as disciplinary critique in international relations

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Abstract:

Hand knitting is often associated with the feminine, the private, and the domestic. Yet, by invoking these ideas while confounding them, the act of knitting in formal spaces like meetings and academic conferences can be a subtle and provocative form of critique. Unlike many mainstream forms of academic knowledge production, this indirect form of critique draws attention to the boundaries of formal spaces, and opens space for various actors in those spaces to spontaneously react, respond, or engage in unexpected ways. Using autoethnographic approaches, I explore the potential of knitting in formal spaces to accomplish three main goals: (1) to challenge the characterisation of certain formal spaces as professional, distanced, and masculinised, to the exclusion of the personal, embodied, and feminised, (2) to call into question how stable such distinctions actually are, and (3) to question the role individual actors play in maintaining established institutional and disciplinary norms, and might play in disrupting them. Knitting as disciplinary critique builds on recent developments in international relations scholarship, such as the use of autobiography and fiction, which have examined scholars and their disciplinary institutions as part of, rather than separate from, the relations of power that they study.

I bring knitting needles on a trip to Washington, D.C. The National Museum of the American Indian’s cafeteria is amazingly good, and word has clearly gotten out. A long line of hungry tourists snakes down the great open hall. The security guard stationed by the line has been quiet. I watch him from the corner of my eye as I pull out a sock project. The yarn streams from my hands, disappearing into my purse where the ball sits, snugly, so as not to roll away and entrap unsuspecting museumgoers. The guard, it turns out, is not concerned by my knitting. He asks me what I am making, amused when I tell him that it will be a sock. We talk about killing time in lines. We smile at each other as I finally slip around the corner to the smell of fresh tamales.



Today is unusual. I am sitting on a celebratory train. The Government of Ontario is launching a new commuter rail service between my hometown and Toronto. I am on the ceremonial first ride, working on part of a sock. It does not take me long to notice that the two young boys sitting across from me are transfixed. They are hardly trying to keep it a secret, as their stares quickly become punctuated with excited questions. They spend most of the journey from Waterloo to Guelph and back engaging in an adorable and non-threatening interrogation. They want to know what I am doing and how they can do it themselves. We sit facing each other for an hour; without that sock, perhaps we would not speak to each other at all.



Most interesting, perhaps, are the times when silence is not broken. A bus passenger gives an occasional, subtle glance. Another makes a point not to stare. I will never know what they think; they will never tell me.



One might assume that knitting in public is knitting in public. It is mostly without consequences. It is an invitation to conversation, perhaps. Yet it has few discernable costs, little meaning beyond the immediate context. I will most likely never see those children or the American security guard again. If I do, I will not recognise them, and they will not recognise me. And if they did, so what?

No, it is a different matter entirely to knit in professional spaces. Yet I do not know that yet. It is a summer evening, and I have no grand intentions. I simply have a nephew who is about to turn three, a half-finished red birthday vest, and a meeting. Our regional government is making its decision about a controversial new transit system. I am here to speak in favour, but I get five minutes to make my point. So does everyone else. It will be a long night. When it is not my turn to speak, I sit with my partner and with my thick red yarn and big plastic needles, as quietly and unobtrusively as I can.

I have not noticed the woman sitting behind me in the public gallery. I do not know her. She leans forward and says something I cannot hear. She chuckles, leaning back before I can ask her to clarify. I turn back around, relieved. I always fear a conversation will disrupt the meeting. A surprising number of people have never learned how to whisper.

“What did she say?” I ask my partner, who knows how to whisper.

“I think she said ‘Lafarge,’” he mouths, without tone and with only the slightest consonants. We shrug at each other and return to the meeting, and I to my knitting.

I do not know the significance of her words. I watch the councillors vote to support the project, to my relief and delight. The meeting is adjourned, and many of us in the audience swarm up to the front to congratulate the politicians and each other on our success. One councillor approaches me. She asks if I was the one knitting.

“Yes,” I say. “It’s a vest for my nephew. His birthday is coming up.”

She tells me she had seen me from the horseshoe, and thought immediately of Madame Defarge in *A Tale of Two Cities*. I do not know the book. She explains that Defarge would knit the names of people to be executed into her knitting.

A second councillor, later and across the room, tells me the same thing. Three different people have seen my presence in the same way: to them, I symbolised judgement. Madame Defarge, the ultimate expression of The Terror and the worst dangers of the unrestrained power of the masses.

I try to laugh it off. These women mean me no offence; their attitude seems mostly to be of amusement. Yet I have portrayed a motif I have never considered, using a vocabulary in which I am not conversant. The ground has shifted under me. I have initiated it my actions but without my intention.

We always mean things to others that we do not intend. Mostly, we do not know. But I am a certain kind of disruption tonight. Before tonight, I worried only if my knitting might disrupt the legitimate purpose of the gathering in which I was participating. Now, and hereafter, I cannot avoid considering my participation in a new light. It has very little to do with knitting at all.



I am knitting at a conference. I work on my scarf, a simple pattern not requiring particular attention. Every so often, I let go of the project with my right hand, still holding a needle and the working yarn in my left, to pick up a pen and jot something down. This does not feel awkward; the movement itself is as natural to me as holding a book while opening a door.

By now I am not naïve. I know why I take notes. Yes, I take them because I want them, because I would take them if I were not knitting. But I want to be seen taking them. To not take them would be more threatening than I dare.

I will never know what most of them think about what I am doing. I will not know what they think, but we are here together. I can feel their eyes on the back of my neck, and their judgement on my shoulders. I can feel it, real or imagined, just as I would feel an elbow jostling the armrest or the spray of an inadequately shielded cough on the side of my cheek.

So I take notes. When the talks conclude, when the audience questions begin, I ask one. I feel the others calm around me. She *has* been paying attention. She is playing along, after all.



It is the women who speak to me. It is afterwards, as we hover like vultures over the trays of cookies and sandwiches, scrounging for bad coffee and those dusty little bags of Red Rose tea that one suspects have been left from last year's conference.

I can immediately tell the crafty ones. "What're you working on?" they inevitably ask. They tell me about their projects, about how they wish they'd brought the sweater they haven't had time to finish.

Then there are those who do not knit. They are mostly impressed that I can make such things at all, let alone while doing other things. Some are knitters who haven't yet learned to knit without looking, who can't imagine doing it here, of all places. It's just practice, I tell them, and choosing a simple project. I try not to shape the heel on a sock during the complicated parts.

Almost everyone will ignore my pastime. But it is the women who speak to me after.



Toronto, February 2014. I have been knitting during ISA panels. A discussion of radical proportions becomes a heated one. The subject is story; the audience questions and comments are

flying. When called on, I bounce to my feet with half a sock intentionally visible in my hand. I wish to diffuse tension. I tell them I knit at conferences. I ask about challenging spaces. I have a real point that is worthy. I know that. But my goal is as much to create a conversational breath as to make a point.

As I pack up my sock, I am approached. We talk knitting and craft. This paper is the result.



Today, I present a day on teaching with my new supervisor. He is quickly growing used to me, I think. He is on my side. But I do not know what he will think when I pull out my needles. So I warn him ahead of time. “It’s for a conference,” I say. “I’m writing a paper about it.” He is gracious, as always, and barely reacts at all. Still, I find I do not make much knitting progress when he is talking. From my seat in the limelight, I mostly save my efforts for when my graduate student colleagues are making their contribution. I know I am doing it. I cannot help myself.



Knitting in professional spaces is perhaps not quite as important as not knitting in them. It is deciding not to knit that has taught me the most.



At a Canadian conference, the first session of the day. I present a paper on the use of the concept of privilege in feminist scholarship. Even as a presenter, I do not feel strange pulling out a sock while the other presenter outlines her main points. I am surrounded by a handful of feminist scholars, sympathetic to my causes. It is still a conference, of course, and there was a discussant. I was prepared to be scrutinised. Yet the sock feels natural.

I move to the second session of the day. My dissertation project has shifted to more mainstream aspects of my discipline. I am trying to catch up. I must orient myself.

There aren't many here, and those whose are here are distinguished, older men. They wear suits, and when the professor presenting a controversial paper is finished, they pounce.

My needles stay in my purse.



I have knit at City Council meetings. But I do not knit at my husband's inauguration as a city councillor. I sit in the front, watching my partner take his oath of office. I have been here before: this is not our first election. It is not his first win. Four years ago, at the start of Council's last term, Inauguration Day filled me with elation, along with a certain terror. I knew almost no one. I was at least a decade younger than the other councillors' spouses: a 20-something perpetual student, and a woman, no less. I was on unsteady ground.

Not this time. Now it is others who are new, who are uncertain. I have nothing in particular to prove. One never has a free pass in politics, but this is not my debut, nor my husband's.

It is true that I cannot operate my camera while working on a scarf. Yet it is fear that keeps my needles at home on the couch. But it is more than fear, too.

It is not until my husband's turn to speak that I realise it. He recites his oath to the Queen and I know: it is also reverence.



I decide to knit at a friend's thesis defence. I have thought it over for days. I have decided it can be done without disruption, even in a relatively small group. I have decided he will not mind. I do not take a seat at the main table; I sit off to the side of the room, with my quietest needles.

The audience is far from what the committee members expect: a dozen people have come to watch this defence. I am one of the few academics; most family and friends are new to this peculiar activity.

I sit next to my friend's grandmother. The only time she speaks during these three hours is to ask me what kind of yarn I am using.

Grandmothers. Everywhere and always, grandmothers.

