

Solveigh Goett

## **Can knitting socks be scholarly research? How to Think through the Fabric of Life**

### **Abstract**

Walter Benjamin in his memories of a "Berlin Childhood around 1900" recalls a game he used to play with his socks. Rolled up they looked like little bags with a present hidden inside, but when he tried to pull the present out, the bag mysteriously disappeared and he was left with just one thing, a sock. He recalls not getting enough of this astonishing experiment. It taught him, he says, that form and content are the same and that extracting truth from texts requires the same care and attention as exploring the content of a rolled-up sock.

The ordinary fabrics of everyday life such as socks, jumpers, towels, sheets and curtains surrounding the embodied self throughout life become part of memory and carriers of tacit knowledge. Beyond utility these mundane items seem to have no inherent value, yet their power to evoke feelings and experiences is revealed in the stories of which they are part.

Using narrative as process of meaning making, through text and textiles, multi-sensory propositions and thinking through the hands textile artist and researcher Solveigh Goett explores and suggests spaces of knowledge beyond the word between the domestic and the academic in a practice-based PhD project supported by the AHRC.

In words and images, this paper reflects on the challenges of joining methodologies from the sewing box, tales from behind the curtains and strands of academic discourse through acts of the imagination in search for new meanings.

## **Full Paper**

Title slide  
Knitting patterns

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## **Can knitting socks be scholarly research? How to Think through the Fabric of Life**

Image  
Washing line, family photograph

Quote  
“Tissue, textile and fabric provide excellent models of knowledge, excellent quasi-abstract objects, primal varieties: the world is a mass of laundry.”  
Michel Serres, *The Five Senses* (1998)

In: Connor 2005, p. 323

Working as a textile artist, investigating themes of identity and memory, I have become intrigued by the power of the ordinary, the strong emotions that are evoked and sustained by such humble items as curtains, socks, blankets, towels or pyjamas in people’s life stories.

Image  
Refugees, family photograph

Textiles are an integral part of human existence: essential for survival, they accompany us through the journey of life and are thus intimately linked to lived experience.

Image  
Hyperbolic spaces

Quote  
“He said that for the first time he could visualise a certain type of hyperbolic curve. He had been writing about them all his career, but it was all in his imagination. The difference with the crochet is that you can touch it. You can experience it.”  
The Times, 1 July 2008

An exhibition with the title ‘The Hyperbolic Coral Reef’ took place this summer at London’s South Bank inspired by the crochet models of hyperbolic space by the mathematician Daina Taimina.

Hyperbolic space while common in nature is, the Times says, “so conceptually challenging that for a century mathematicians were unable to visualise what this type of space might actually look like [...] there is no formula that accurately describes hyperbolic space, so computers can’t model it either” (Bellos, 2008)

Yet the solution for this conceptual problem has been sitting all along on the sideboard in the living room.

Image  
Crochet patterns

It took over 100 years for the connection to be made between the familiar textile object and the abstract concept, to see the potential hyperbolic space in the frills of the doily.

Image  
Reel of cotton

Walter Benjamin (2006) in his writing also makes a connection between the mundane fabric of our life and concepts of knowledge in keen observations of the everyday interwoven with flights of the imagination.

In the crisp creaseless sheet on his bed he senses the comfort of a clear conscience; enveloped in the transparent fabric world of the curtain the child becomes a white breeze of wind. In the linen wardrobe fairy tale powers from the past, of weaving and spinning, become palpable in everyday encounters with the fabric of the present.

Image  
Button box

In the fabric of our everyday life, in the bottom of the sewing box with its unravelling threads, fabric scraps, hooks and buttons of strange shapes, Benjamin’s stories suggest, adventures can be found, mysteries discovered and riddles solved.

Image  
Grey sock in box

The rolled-up socks in his bedroom drawer invite his curiosity. They look and feel like little bags with something inside, a present maybe. But when he puts his hand inside to pull out the ‘present’, the ‘bag’ disappears. He can’t get enough of this astonishing experiment. It makes him realize that form and content are the same and that truth needs to be teased out of text as gently and carefully as the child’s hand pulls the sock out of the ‘bag’.

Image  
Triptychs

The domestic textiles at the core of our material experience while in daily use, seem ordinary items of little apparent significance beyond the obvious; yet from the moment we are born and long before we can speak we are in touch with textiles.

### IMAGE

Crying baby in pram  
Family photograph

Quote:

“I can recall the sense of frustration at being unable to pull my left arm away fully from the metal bar of my pushchair. The wool of my sleeve had got caught on something underneath ... I can remember both my hands were enclosed in knitted mittens tucked into knitted sleeves and that I didn't have the manual dexterity to free myself”.

Source: BBC Memory Experience<sup>1</sup>

Our memories are wrapped in cloth. Virginia Woolf's first memory (1989, p.72) is of her mother's dress, not her face. The arrival of a new sibling may be remembered through the blanket the baby is wrapped in, the death of a grandparent through the curtains being closed.

Body and thing, Brian Massumi (2002, p.96) argues, are “two poles of the same connectibility”; they “relay in reciprocal becomings, together they ally in process, [...] are tinged with event.”

Image  
Headless baby

While in theoretical discourse the body appears as a naked concept bereft of its material shell in relation to unspecified objects – in lived experience the body is inseparable from its second skin. In it we can trace knowledge of the self through our senses, link threads of experience to lines of thought.

Image  
Curtain girl  
Curtain fabric  
Quote:

“It is my second day at school, I am three years old, I am wearing a red woolen cardigan and I am sobbing uncontrollably, I remember [...] my cardigan being very wet and glistening with my tears. All the sounds around me are muffled - I feel very miserable and scared.”

Source: BBC Radio 4 Memory Experience

Images of affect, synaesthetic minglings of feelings and sensations, of textures still felt in the head – everyday textiles are physical *manifestations* of connectedness: the tears of pain and happiness, the sweat of anxiety and excitement both part of the self

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/memory/> (29 August 2006)

and absorbed by the cloth, perception and affection, inside and out, body and object inextricably interwoven in memory.

“My body”, Merlau-Ponty (1962, p.234) says, “is the fabric into which all objects are woven” – but some, we might say, more clearly than others.

Image

Doll's jumper

Quote:

“Events must link together like the yarn of a sweater.” Louise Bourgeois

As Judith Attfield (2000, p.126) says, “it hardly needs to be observed that textiles have a particularity which cannot be replaced by say a tractor or a needle.”

### **IMAGE**

Hand knitted cream tank top in cablestitch, family photos

A piece of knitwear kept after the death of a loved one, “a transitional object in reverse” as Attfield calls it (2000, p.149/150), a reminder of permanent absence, and also a material manifestation of time contracted in memory, importing, as Bergson (2004, p.80) says, “the past into the present, contracting into a single intuition many moments of duration.”

My father wore this jumper from before I was born till close to his death.

It is solid and heavy belying what is often described as the ephemeral nature of textiles. What strikes me when I hold it is how small it is and how small my father's role was in my life.

It was knitted by my mother from the wool of a sheep that my father looked after before they got married. While the jumper shrunk with repeated washes, my father expanded as a result of the 'economic miracle' in Germany. My father never got rid of that sheep and my mother never lost her tightly knitted grip over him.

Image

Memory box

The past, Proust writes, is “somewhere beyond the reach of the intellect” but unmistakably present in some material object,” (Benjamin, 1999, p.155) in the sensations it evokes, often unexpectedly, in chance encounters.

### **IMAGE**

Storytelling

Fabric, net, tracing paper, red thread, machine and hand stitching

Quote:

“Human beings are inherently storytellers and it is through the activity of narration that we create meaning in our lives”

Molly Andrews<sup>2</sup>

Textile knowledge, embodied in complex affective relationships, relational, indeterminate and uncertain, slipping through grids of contextualisation and difficult to pin down, emerges in the memories the object evokes, can be traced in the stories we tell and imagine.

Narrative relates the uniqueness of each individual self and life story to the universality of human experience within an intricate web of mutuality. In such stories we can sense what Bachelard (1994, p.6) calls “the solidarity of memory and imagination.”

Image  
Army socks

Textile artist Waltraud Mattern remembers her father through a pair of soldier’s socks that her mother pulled over her boots when she put her to bed, so it would be quicker to take the children to the shelter when there were air raids during the night, From these socks of her father who never returned from the war she made an art object: ‘Memories of a Father I never knew.’

Pondering the lack of socks stories in my own life I came across a disturbing piece of information.

IMAGE  
*Unspeakable memories*  
Puppet, doll’s deckchair and other found objects

During the Nazi regime in Germany, hair taken from concentration camp inmates was used to make socks for submarine crews and footwear for railway workers.<sup>3</sup> As my father served on a submarine during the war and my grandfather worked for the railway, suddenly, in my mind, the lack of the sock story slipped into a much deeper and disturbing narrative gap, the question so many Germans, the children of the silent and abetting majority, have been asking so many times, of what our parents did during the war.

Image  
*History Unravelled* (knitting)

Quote:  
"Pick any strand and snip, and history becomes unravelled. This is how Tony begins one of her more convoluted lectures, the one on the dynamics of spontaneous massacres. The metaphor is of weaving or else of knitting, and of sewing scissors. She likes using it: she likes the faint shock on the faces of her listeners. It's the mix of domestic image and mass bloodshed that does it to them..."

Margaret Atwood, *The Robber Bride*, 1993, p.3

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<sup>2</sup> Molly Andrews 2000, p.77, quoted in Tamboukou, Maria, 'Making cartographies of Narrative Research', keynote address, Symposium on Narrative Research, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia, 26-28 April, 2006

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nizkor.org/ftp.cgi/camps/auschwitz/ftp.py?camps/auschwitz//processing-hair>

Textiles, in many senses, are what Bruno Latour (2004) calls “hairy, networky things”.

The everyday textiles at the heart of my research can be understood as the literal fabric of life in sustaining and supporting the body, narrative as a metaphorical fabric of life creating a sense of self through meaning construction. In conjunction, we might say, they hold body and soul together.

“Narrative understanding”, Mark Freeman (Ruppel et al, 2007, p.32) suggests, “is better achieved through engagement and connection than through disconnection and methodological distance.”

“Narrative inquiry,” he says, “is where science and story, indeed science and art, meet” (ibid, p.33)

Image

*Please touch*

White glove, red thread

In their sensory qualities of contingencies rather than certainties the stories of our life always exceed that which can be said in words. Sensory knowledge is lived and felt, but David Howes (2005) says, “in the “hyperliterate world of academia” (p.1), “it would seem to be the fate of the senses that their astonishing power to reveal and engage should forever be judged and ‘sentenced’ in the court of language.” P.4

Image

*Methodology*

Pencil sharpened both ends with red knitted cover, embroidery hoop with screenprinted fabric

Knowledge beyond the word however has entered academia through practice-based research, a “form of enquiry that”, as Sullivan (2005, p.96) states, “helps understand the uniquely human process of making meaning ,” by engaging with “experience as it is lived, felt, reconstructed, reinterpreted, and understood.”

“Artists, like philosophers,” Massumi (2002, p.249) says, “make connections. But rather than connecting singularity to singularity the artist connects quality of excess to quality of excess.”

Image

*Red shoes*

Quote:

“The cut and the fall of a skirt and good leather shoes can take you across the river and to the other side: the fairy tales tell you that goose-girls can marry kings.” (Steedman 1986, p.15,16)

There is always more in textiles than can be neatly fitted into concepts - slippage, overflow, potential exceeding rationales, transitions unaccounted for in theory, frameworks that can be ignorant, as Carolyn Steedman (1986p. 15/16) notes, of the “material stepping stones of our escape” such as “clothes, shoes, make-up.”

Image

*Weaving*

Making, be that of concepts, text or textiles, is not culture hovering over nature, applying preconceived ideas to materials, says Tim Ingold (2000, p.64 - 66), but a reciprocal process of becoming between maker and material, better understood as weaving which has, he says “a narrative quality [...] - every movement, like every line in a story, grows rhythmically out of the one before and lays the groundwork for the next.”

If making is weaving, we might say, then maybe in some way all artefacts are textiles.

Image

*Folds*

“Sensation is body-substance, the indeterminate matter from which the body and its objects and organs unfold: felt futurity. Resonating, animated body-substance: corporeal unfolding infolded.”

Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 2002, p.107

Theoretical discourse, particularly on matters of memory, movement, affect and narrative, while short on textile references is thick with textile metaphor, of folding and looping, threads and weaves: as our minds are embodied, the concepts we think with and the metaphors we live by are, as Lakoff and Johnson (1999, 2003) point out, based on physical and cultural experience.

For Kerstin Kraft (2004) weaving, done on a loom and limited by its size, is an activity of settled people, of stability, planning and geometrical form, lending itself to mechanization and thus leading to dominance of woven cloth over other fabrics, a dominance also apparent in the interpretation of textiles as linear text and the paradigms of weaving that underpin language and theory of Western civilisations....

Image

Lady knitting

Holiday photograph

While the knitting of continuous yarn is a “dimensional experience [...] an experience of infinity” (ibid, p. 279).

Image

Knitted tie

It is useful to ponder such differences – there is a good reason why suits, shirts, curtains and sheets are usually woven, while jumpers, socks, stockings and vests are made from knitted fabric.

Image

Sheet

Quote

“How big, how enveloping, is an old sheet when we unfold it!” Gaston Bachelard (1994, p.81)

But while the woven sheet fresh from the loom might be a flat plane marked by coordinates, in use, folded in the wardrobe, crumpled on the bed, fluttering on the

washing line, made into protest banner or Halloween costume, torn into strips to bandage wounds, knotted and twisted into ropes to end a life or escape into a new one, the sheet, “laboured cloth” in the words of Janis Jefferies ( 2007, p.203) from beginning to end, just like the knitted sock or jumper is a hybrid on the move, always closely related to the body as centre of experience and activity.

Image

Clock

Quote:

"During these two years in the cellar, his wife very slowly knitted a skirt, which she unravelled as soon as it was finished, only to start again."<sup>4</sup>

Wolfgang Herzberg (1990), *Überleben heisst Erinnern: Lebensgeschichten Deutscher Juden*

Like Penelope’s weaving, knitting is process, movement in time, making and marking of time.

While the binary technologies of weaving have regained a place in the home in the computer on our desk, knitting, portable, low-tech and adaptable to any lifestyle is also moving with the times.

Image

Pink Tank Cozy

Quote:

**knittivism**: *n* **1** a doctrine emphasising vigorous or militant knitting activity, e.g. the use of knitting in mass demonstrations, urban interventions, in controversial, unusual or challenging ways, *esp* political, causes. **2** the systematic use of knitting for political ends. **knittivist** *n* and *adj*

Source:<http://www.glittynittykitty.co.uk/>

Knitting is big news and highly fashionable: from celebrity knitting (Julia Roberts, Sarah Jessica Parker and all the desperate housewives) to mathematical knitting of projected planes, from cyber knitting to Zen knitting, men’s knitting blogs under the motto “man enough to knit, strong enough to purl” to stitch’n bitch and ‘chick knit lit’, from the knitting Bishop Richard Rutt to Revolutionary Knitting Circles and ‘knittivists’ with artists, social scientists, historians and other assorted academics and researchers knitting their own yarns.

Image

Cable stitch knitting pattern, boy’s sweater

Quote:

“I’m a sucker for cables. Almost every piece I’ve knit over the past several years is filled with them. I love the way they wrap among themselves, twisting and roping through the weave of the yarn. I suppose there is a narrative of sorts in this – two sections of stitches that cannot stop playing with each other, that must rough and tumble, twist and gyrate under the needles, caught in the act of love or war as the rows progress.”

Jennifer Vasil, New Orleans, USA, web designer and long time knitter/crocheter

<http://www.webwarpweft.com/>

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<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Herzberg, *Überleben heisst Erinnern: Lebensgeschichten Deutscher Juden*, Berlin, Aufbauverlag 1990, quoted in Leydesdorff, Selma, Passerini, Luisa & Thompson, Paul (eds), *Gender and Memory*, International Yearbook of Oral History, Vol. IV, Oxford University Press 1996, p.204

Using simultaneously mouse and needle, knitting and blogging, new knitting communities act both globally and locally, putting the subversive potential of textiles to new uses as a soft weapon, addressing hard issues in witty and creative ways.

Image

*Hybrids*

pens and reels of sewing thread on linen

Following the narrative threads in the fabric of life, writing is making is weaving or maybe knitting, always a creative process not painting by numbers, requiring as Massumi suggests “affirmative methods [...] which embrace their own inventiveness (Massumi 2002, p.12, 13) in as Jacques Daignault (2005) says, “a double movement: downwards in order to feel more, and upwards, in order to understand better.”

Image

*Control issues*

Pink elastics, buttons, stitching

Elastic for men's & boys underwear

In daily life as in research, we are embodied selves.

In research we often try to keep personal feelings, memories, daydreams and the domestic out of mind as if they were nasty intruders. Maybe it is by welcoming them, by allowing the threads of felt experience to attach themselves to the lines of abstract thoughts, to interfere and interweave that new and richer meanings can be found. Knowledge, Benjamin suggests, does not just sit on library shelves but can also be found in bedroom drawers – if form and contents are the same, researching lived experience needs imaginative and sensory methods from the toolbox of everyday life as much or maybe even more than it needs words.

Image

*The Textile Files*

<http://thetextilefiles.blogspot.com/>

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