

Hands-on Approach to Knitting Culture with a Few Loose Ends
Elisa Kraatari

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Among the many phenomena that the corona pandemic has brought to lime-light is the popularity of knitting in exceptional times. Amidst growing gaps in their stocks, many craft shops announce the arrival of a new lot of popular yarns on their social media accounts, and the knitting fever has been recurrently reported on the news. In the spring of 2021, even municipality branding campaigns started to ride on this trend, calling for designs that would materialise the municipality's character in a woolly form (e.g. Korhonen 2021).

In this regard, Anna Rauhala's dissertation on the skill of knitting in Finland is a very timely publication. With a timeframe stretching from the late 19th century up to the 2010s, the study opens a wide perspective to the chain of decades of knitting. The reader is even informed about the earliest knitted examples from the 14th or 15th centuries in present-day south-western Finland, while the focus is more on the changes in knitting culture in Finland in the past hundred and fifty years.

Rauhala's approach to studying knitting culture puts the skill of knitting at the top, which allows different takes on the topic. This is already apparent in the introductory and methodological chapters of the book. Rauhala takes as point of departure a political satire image from 2003, in which the then president and prime minister, both female, sit each on one side of a large ball of yarn, marked with the Finnish flag, knitting a piece of a woolly scarf. Rauhala analyses this image as the illustrator's interpretation of the women leading the country stitching together the Finnish political agenda, yet she recognises that drawing a parallel between women in political power and knitting is a possibly degrading approach, or at least an attempt of one.

In this way, the author starts with problematising the cultural status of knitting, articulating the activity's everyday connotations with the feminine, the domestic sphere and the subordinate, which clearly position knitting on the feminine side with respect to the opposition between the sexes. Rauhala points out that within the 1970s' feminist movement, textile craftwork such as knitting and embroidery were regarded as mirroring women's societally

inferior, unequal and home-bound roles. Knitting would thus have been an act that materialised all the ill points that were to be questioned and ripped down. Rauhala refers to a quotation by Minna Canth, a pioneer of the women's movement in Finland, according to which 'not all women should do handicrafts', which illustrates how women also joined in underlining craftwork as something that could potentially jeopardise all efforts made to better women's position in society.

Rauhala moves on to point out that while knitting has been considered to be a feminine, domestic everyday activity, it has at the same time been taken for granted, as something that every girl, woman and granny, and even some men, are able to do. This creates a background for articulating the extent of tacit knowledge that craft skills typically involve. Tacit knowledge is an essential part of craft heritage and the transference of skills from one generation to the next.

Focusing on the skill of knitting, thoroughly entangled with tacit knowledge, Rauhala conceptualises her research methodology as an ethnography of skill. This is supported by the fact that the researcher herself is a skilled knitter, which has enabled her to deeply relate to the topic of the study. The author sees her study as linked to autoethnography, but also underlines that she sees herself primarily as a researcher, a vehicle that can translate the skill of knitting into articulated knowledge. Indeed, the researcher's personal possession of tacit knowledge of knitting connects the study with sensory ethnography, which is appropriate and appears rather natural when studying a specific skill.

This conceptual framework interacts well with Rauhala's choice of sources: she combines oral history with a collection of mittens archived at the National Board of Antiquities in Finland. What is particularly interesting is how the author has approached the tacit knowledge contained in the archive of knitted handwear. She has not only knitted replicas of selected mittens, but also considered the conditions of the process of knitting by paying attention to, for example, the amount of light available at the time the original pieces were made. In this part, Rauhala's application of sensory ethnography is at its best and has resulted in observations that otherwise would probably have gone unnoticed. Indeed, the use of the different knitting techniques, in which the yarn is held either in the left or the right hand, defined in Rauhala's study as the Continental and the English/Western style respectively, is hard to recognise in the finished piece of knitting. The process of re-knitting archived mittens revealed that the densely knitted original samples were most likely knitted in the Western or throwing style that was also prevalent in Finland until the early 1900s. Rauhala details how replicating dense knit in the Continental or picking style turned into a painful experience with the yarn chafing the skin

and the needles hurting especially the left hand index finger, both experiences that even practised knitters can easily relate to.

However, Rauhala's approach to the replication also raised some questions. Especially her choice of identifying with a fictional character from the past that she calls 'Alma' is somewhat confusing. While it is understandable that this role play may have helped to explore the past circumstances of knitting, the application of this approach appears rather arbitrary and without solid methodological foundations. Rauhala could well have chosen to take this approach to more nuanced levels. This could also have given the study a more coherent focus, which is now partly missing.

Rauhala's study is well-organised, fluent and pleasant reading (in Finnish) for anyone interested in knitting. Still, while Rauhala takes as point of departure the lower social and cultural ranking of knitting, linked with women's unequal position in society, and then details the wealth of tacit knowledge required for the skill, especially at more advanced levels, the study remains surprisingly conventional, even lax.

What I find most problematic is Rauhala's way of addressing issues of power that she sees related to knitting based on her interpretations of the analysed data and sources. She recognises that the archived collection of mittens represents institutionalised power, which is reflected in the skewed selection of samples that gives an illusion that knitted handwear of the late 19th and early 20th centuries would mostly have been made in the colourful intarsia style, while oral history sources suggest that mittens were mostly of natural tones made with simple structures for everyday use. Rauhala also sees decisive use of power in how the throwing technique was systematically replaced with the picking technique through educational craft teaching (sloyd) in elementary schools.

Power structures have also been apparent in the stigmatisation of men's knitting as effeminate unless done out of dire necessity, in which case it was seen as a heroic struggle, as in the position of a widowed single parent, for example. Chapter nine, titled 'Knitting in exceptional times', concentrates fully on knitting activity at the time of the Winter and Continuation Wars, but turns a blind eye to the time of the Civil War/WWI and does not mention other times of hardship such as the 1930s depression and the difficult years of crop failures in the 1860s, 1890s and early 1900s (1903–04, 1917–18). These events would fall into the timeframe of Rauhala's research and during them, people in need were directly advised to practise cottage industries such as knitting in order to make ends meet (see Kraatari 2016).

Rauhala does admit that the low cultural and social ranking of knitting is linked to its use as a self-supporting livelihood among the landless and wom-

en with low income and social standing, but she fails to recognise the larger power structures woven into craftwork. Therefore, it seems that Rauhala in part follows the path of glorifying women's knitting as assiduous work that served the nation in fighting the White Death, the freezing conditions at the fronts especially during the Winter War.

Rauhala ends her study by concluding that today, the skill of knitting has been liberated and is not under any use of power, 'because those who do not like knitting do not have to knit' (translation my own). Unfortunately, this conclusion omits to mention that the same would have applied especially to the upper social classes throughout the timeframe of her research. Indeed, as Rauhala rightly points out, knitting was a very different thing at the time of the essentially agricultural society that Finland was up to the 1960s than it is today when knitting is increasingly considered a hobby that produces well-being and flow experiences. Considering that the study is positioned as an ethnography of the skill of knitting, the conclusion is rather laconic and as such leaves knitting in the cultural political margins where it has usually been seen. Yet, Rauhala's work opens important pathways to unravel craft culture from within, which is crucial in order to better understand ourselves as primates in the digitised era.

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