“Darn right I’m a feminist...sew what?”

The Politics of Contemporary Home Dressmaking: Sewing, Slow Fashion and Feminism

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Abstract

Home sewing is experiencing a revival in Western countries and alongside this has emerged a vibrant online presence of what I call digital dressmakers. Yet sewing has failed to elicit the same level of scholarly interest as other craft revivals. In light of the historically problematic relationship between domestic cultures and feminism, this paper offers the first empirical exploration of the politics of contemporary sewing, and asks; in what ways can home dressmaking be conceptualised as an intentional engagement with feminism, and how might it contribute to the goals of feminism, without explicit intentionality? The paper draws on an analysis of sewing blogs and argues that within the digital dressmaking community there is evidence that sewists use their blogs to critically consider their craft in a range of ways including its relationship to feminism, as well as undertaking practices that connect with the feminist goals of social justice and community-building.

Keywords

Feminism, sewing, craft, domestic cultures, slow fashion, blogging

“Darn right I’m a feminist...sew what?”

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Old and New Domesticities: Contextualising Contemporary Home Dressmaking

The traditional practice of home dress-making is experiencing something of a revival in Western countries. Across high streets in Britain and the United States, haberdasheries are (re)opening, sales of sewing machines are said to be booming, and sewing circles are starting up again (Dunk, 2009; Burt, 2011; Holson, 2012; Paul, 2013; Pithers, 2013). Popular culture has also seen renewed interest in this domestic craft, with shows like the BBC’s *Great British Sewing Bee* recently completing a third season. Alongside such popular media representations has emerged the development of a vibrant online presence, with substantial numbers of sewing bloggers and tweeters establishing an apparent community which I collectively describe as digital dressmakers.¹

Revivals of formerly ‘lost’ domestic crafts are not uncommon in contemporary popular culture. The last decade saw knitting surge in popularity, as it was reclaimed from its grandmotherly image and transformed into a ‘hip’ funky craft often deployed for political purposes. Third-wave feminist and *Bust* Magazine editor Debbie Stoller is attributed a key role in shaping this punk knitting trend (Pentney, 2008), with the publication of her ‘*Stitch ‘n Bitch*’ knitting manual calling for a new generation of knitters to ‘take back the knit’ (Stoller, 2003). Scholarly attention to knitting has been considerable, and much of this has come from feminist authors.² Scholars have asked a range of questions about knitting practices, from its ‘craftivism’ (Humphreys, 2008; Pentney, 2008; Groenveld, 2009, 2010; Kelly, 2014), to its celebritization (Parkins, 2004), its construction as a form of mediated leisure (Orton-Johnson, 2014) as well as its domestic and gender politics more broadly (Minahan and Cox, 2007; Fisk, 2012).

Yet sewing, and home dressmaking specifically, has failed to elicit the same level of scholarly interest.³ While the two crafts are materially and practically different, they still arguably reflect a wider trend of domestic culture revivals and it is curious that home dressmaking has been so overlooked in academic enquiries. Questions about the significance of this new dressmaking movement need to be asked: Why, at a time when purchasing clothing has never been cheaper or more accessible, are people choosing to return to the costly and time-consuming craft of making their own clothes? What is significant about the

revival of sewing in our current cultural context of (post) austerity? Is it a nostalgic desire to remember a lost skill? Does it tap into a need to make and create instead of just consume? Does it indicate a desire to return to feminine domestic practices and identities? And, since, as Hollows (2008, p. 54) notes, domestic cultures have long been seen as problematic in terms of gender relations and inequalities, how do feminists reconcile their domestic craft practices with their politics?

In light of the historically challenged relationship between domestic cultures and feminism, this paper explores the politics of the revival of sewing and primarily asks; in what ways can the revival of contemporary home dressmaking be conceptualised as an intentional engagement with feminism, and in what ways can home dressmaking contribute to the goals of a larger feminist project, without explicit intentionality? To do this, I draw on Kelly's framework of knitting as a feminist practice (2014) to explore the similarly feminist practices of sewing bloggers, both in terms of explicit articulations of sewing as feminist by bloggers, as well as the implicit practices of these sewists⁴ that may be read as feminist. This is an important distinction, as it highlights that while not all sewing is done from a feminist stance (and nor should sewing be viewed as always engaging with feminism), it is still possible to consider the ways that sewing may at times unconsciously engage with many of the goals of feminist activism (see also: Pentney, 2008). This implicit engagement may be found, for example, within the female networking and collaborative processes that are central to contemporary sewing practices, which are viewed as "...projects used in the spirit of feminist goals of empowerment, social justice, and women's community building" (Pentney, 2008: 1). It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed discussion of the rich and varied history of feminist theory and praxis, but by exploring some of the ways in which feminism is being claimed, expressed and practiced in an online context by digital dressmakers, I hope that this paper may contribute in some way to the ongoing debates about what constitutes feminist practice today.⁵

Knitting has receiving considerable scholarly and popular attention and this can be understood within the context of revivals of domestic cultures more broadly. But while knitting has been conceptualised by scholars as a political practice (for eg: Pentney, 2008; Kelly 2014; Groenveld, 2010; Humphreys, 2008), resurgences of other domestic cultures are instead often conceptualised as postfeminist fixations with regressive pre-feminist performances of domestic femininities, signified by cultural icons like Nigella Lawson's

‘domestic goddess’, in Kirstie Allsopp’s make-do-and-mend ‘downshifting’ lifestyle narratives, and in the widespread popularity of nostalgic television shows like the Great British Bake Off (see for example: Spigel, 2013; Hollows, 2003; Lawson, 2011; Scholes, 2011; Bramall, 2013). As Negra (2008), explains, “Post-feminism offers the pleasure and comfort of (re)claiming an identity uncomplicated by gender politics, postmodernism, or institutional critique” (np). This culture is understood to extend and elaborate ‘backlash’ rhetoric, but as Genz (2009, p. 54) notes, post-feminism is not a full-blown attack on feminism; instead it is a ‘proudly backward’ celebration of the ‘choice’ women have to return home. For Negra (2008), one of the most important narratives of this ‘proudly backward’ culture is that of retreatism. There is an ‘empowering’ appeal, she notes, in returning to the safe, secure, private home in the face of the hostile social environment of the public sphere austerity culture (2008, np). These discourses of domesticity are claimed to be particularly prominent in austerity-era cultures (Negra and Tasker, 2014, p. 6) in which often educated successful women ‘chose’ to opt out of capitalist structures, and instead ‘return’ to a culture of thrift and nostalgic forms of homemaking. Thus, as Bramall has noted, “...these forms of crafting, cultivation and cooking have...come to symbolise ‘ideal responses to austerity’” (2013, p. 112). Within this context, the contemporary proliferation of domestic-sphere crafts – like the apparently feminine craft of home dressmaking – might readily be conceptualised as another example of post-feminist ‘retreatism’.

Yet, much as ‘old’ conceptions of domesticity portraying the home as a site of drudgery and the subjugation of women failed to fully explore the range of meanings that existed within the home (Bratich and Busch, 2011, p.238), and just as second wave feminist constructions of the housewife as anti-feminist were restrictive (Hollows, 2008, pp. 68-9), I argue it is similarly restrictive for revived domestic practices like dressmaking to simply be conceptualised as further examples of a post-feminist culture which fetishizes a retrograde domesticity. Instead, I agree with Hollows and Gillis in their claim that “[w]e need to explore new ways of thinking about the role of domesticity in social, economic and cultural life that neither simply condemn domesticity as a site of oppression and boredom nor simply celebrate domesticity as an expression of feminine virtue” (2009, p. 9). This analysis aims to do just that, and to uncover some of the various meanings that are woven into the fabric of the revival of sewing.

Cultural Histories of Dressmaking and Feminism

While literature on contemporary home-dressmaking is scarce, scholars of social history have paid the craft more attention. Burman's edited volume on gender, consumption and home dressmaking offers a breadth of historical frameworks for theorising the role and place of sewing in Western cultures throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (1999). Hackney's contribution, for example, on the transformational influence of 20th century mass marketing sewing patterns on the post-war generation offers a vision of dressmaking as a democratizing practice which facilitated sewists' production and consumption of an individual style. In this conceptualisation, home dressmaking offered the ability of "dressing to suit oneself" (p. 85). This link between sewing and the formation of individual, cultural and gender identities is also reflected in Buckley's work which explores the historical practice of making and designing clothes within the home. For Buckley (1999), "...dress and dressmaking are cultural sites where identity, place and memory figure prominently. [For] after all, it is an activity in which women learn and teach each other skills which form their feminine identities" (pp. 58-59). Perhaps the implicit link drawn by Buckley between home dressmaking and femininity helps to explain the absence of attention to home dressmaking by contemporary scholars. The very discourse of amateur sewing – a language of dressmaking and seamstresses – is "laden with understandings of femininity" (Gordon, 2004, p. 68), and thus is not one that would appear to readily invite the challenging of gender roles or the subversion of traditional feminine ideals. Yet, as Hackney has noted of the 'modern women' of the 1920s and 1930s, "dressmaking could be experienced as a liberating, even subversive, activity, enabling young women to define their appearance and identity without regard, or in direct opposition, to their mother's opinions" (1999, p. 87). Rachel Moseley's study of six British women's experiences and memories of clothes and clothes-making at home in the 1950s and 1960s supports such a notion and speaks to the empowering quality of making ones' own clothes (2001, p. 477) particularly, she notes, for women who self-identified as working class and who hoped to transcend this status through a carefully managed appearance. Moseley's work also speaks to the immense pleasure that can be gained from participating in the craft of dressmaking, and in the memories of garments made (2001, p. 485-6). The same sentiments may also be true for those participating in the contemporary home sewing landscape, and yet we know almost nothing about their motivations, nor of the personal politics that today's home dressmaking might embody. This paper offers a first step towards filling this void.

As a craft practice that has traditionally been confined to the domestic sphere (Hall and Jayne, 2015, p. 5), sewing was positioned firmly in opposition to gender equality goals by second wave feminists. Exiting the home and leaving behind its seemingly frivolous activities was a fundamental goal for the activists of second wave feminism who viewed such practices as domestic drudgery and sought women's entry into the public sphere (see: Hollows, 2004; Friedan, 1963). Yet for some earlier first-wave feminist activists, dressmaking and similar crafts were bound up in the political goals of their struggle. Hall and Jayne (2006) noted that sewing circles became spaces through which 19th century women were able to strategize and organise efforts on abolition and the civil and gender rights for which they fought (p. 7). Thus, dressmaking must be understood to occupy multiple meanings, and should be viewed as a form of "...fabriculture [which] spans a variety of political forms, from the familiar reform and revolutionary ones, to the cultural politics of every life central to cultural studies research" (Bratich and Busch, 2011, p. 249).

Where literature does refer to contemporary dressmaking, it does so typically in conjunction with other crafts, and it is assumed to be motivated by austerity cultures and a nostalgic drive to (at least symbolically) 'make do and mend' (Hall and Jayne, 2015; Bratich and Busch, 2011). Yet there remains no empirical work to support such assumptions. In an effort to build on the theoretical knowledge of dressmaking, Hall and Jayne draw together crafting cultures' scholarship, noting the potential for theorising the everyday political and economic practices that home dressmaking represents (p. 2). This paper builds on the authors' theoretical framework and aims to address a void in the literature by empirically exploring the politics of contemporary home dressmaking, responding to their call for work which explores the ways in which the practice "can contribute to a range of broader academic debates regarding feminism and craft" (Hall and Jayne, 2015, p. 3).

Knitting a Framework

Owing to the lack of contemporary work on home dressmaking, it is necessary to explore related work for useful theoretical models for exploring the politics of home dressmaking. And although dressmaking has received scant attention from feminist scholars, knitting has been the subject of considerable research. The engagement of knitters in various forms of activism has been the focus of a range of scholars, (including Humphreys (2008), Pentney (2008) Groenveld (2010) and Kelly (2014)). The work of Humphreys (2008) and Groenveld (2010) specifically examines the 'craftivist' practices of knitters like yarn bombing⁶ and

knitathon fundraisers, and the ways in which these activities build crafting communities which can function as sites of resistance to injustice and inequality. Pentney (2008) and Kelly (2014) explore some of these craftivist practices through the lens of feminist activism, considering the ways in which knitting offers opportunities for both the reclaiming of a traditionally devalued feminine pursuit, and its scope for subversions of gender roles. The online world is often positioned as an enabling space for the gender politics that supposedly lie at the foundation of contemporary knitting practices. Minahan and Wolfram Cox's explorative work on cyberfeminism and knitting in particular notes that the digital age has prompted a profound shift in the practice of crafts like knitting; one which offers "a new way of connecting that is based on material production using traditional craft skills and yarns, as well as the optical fibre and twisted pair cable used for telecommunications" (2007, p. 6).

Pentney's study identified a 'spectrum' of feminist politics evident in the various activities and practices of knitters (from the knitting of prosthetic breasts for mastectomy patients, to yarn bombing and other direct forms of activism, to 'gentler' forms like the construction of empowering communities and the challenging or subversion of gender norms). Building on this, Kelly (2014) suggests a binary framework, enabling a reading of both the explicit engagement of knitters with feminist goals, as well as implicit knitting practices which may be read as contributing to wider a feminist project. This is an essential dichotomy because, as Kelly notes, while there are many examples of the mobilization of knitting for activist ends, there are also questions about the meanings of knitting to and for those crafters who may not be motivated by politics. It is similarly important to exercise caution in exploring the meanings of sewing. It is not the intention of this paper to suggest that sewing is somehow inherently feminist, nor that all sewists must be feminist. Instead, and as both Kelly and Pentney have found, I believe the practice of sewing may at times implicitly connect with some of the wider goals of feminism. For Kelly, this implicit engagement included the creation of supportive communities of knitters which mirror the "consciousness raising groups" of second-wave feminism and foster the creation of collective identities, as well as the involvement of men whose participation might be seen to subvert traditional gender norms (2014, p. 135). This framework offers a useful construct for exploring the ways in which craft revivals can function in multiple ways, as "sites of contestation, intentionality, and collective action" (Kelly, 2014, p. 136), but it also offers us the possibility for exploring alternative meanings of what may be considered 'political'. This paper thus extends Kelly's framework to similarly explore the potentially feminist politics underpinning the

contemporary craft of home dressmaking. The paper draws on content from contemporary sewing blogs to do so.

Unpicking the Motivations of Dressmakers: Sewing Blogs as Data

This paper draws on the content of sewing blogs in order to answer the research question: in what ways can the revival of contemporary home dressmaking be conceptualised as an intentional engagement with feminism, and in what ways can home dressmaking contribute to the goals of a larger feminist project, without explicit intentionality? ‘Blogs’ are understood to be websites which contain a series of frequently updated, reverse chronologically ordered posts on a common webpage and which are usually written by a single author (Hookway, 2008, p. 92).

The digital aspects of contemporary dressmaking are considered in this paper to be essential to the craft itself. Blog posts specifically are deemed here to be a valuable resource on digital dressmakers’ motivations and politics, since blogs function as a means of sharing craft and fostering community, but also that blog content typically continues to function in a diary-fashion, providing the space for bloggers to articulate feelings and motives. Blogs are noted in existing research on knitting cultures as playing an integral role in establishing crafting communities (Minahan and Wolfram Cox, 2007), and both Keller (2012; 2013) and Shaw (2012) have written on the ways in which blogs have functioned as a vital alternative space for young feminists to establish communities and find their political ‘voice’. Thus, blogs are argued here to be a key means of gauging the potential politics underpinning the contemporary sewing revival. While there is always some degree of performativity and a discursive practice of image management involved in the act of blogging (as cautioned by Hookway, 2008), still, blogs are understood here as importance spaces in which women are able to articulate their critical voice (Shaw, 2012), and thus this data is considered both practical and valuable for offering a first empirical insight into the practices and politics involved in contemporary dressmaking.

The blogs analysed here were drawn from the Bloglovin’ category of ‘sewing’. Bloglovin’ is a blog aggregator that lets users follow multiple blogs through a single platform feed. It has been running since 2011 and claims to have over 16 million users. The category of ‘sewing’ was added to Bloglovin’ in June 2015 after a request to the platform by sewists was followed hundreds of ‘votes’ in favour by other users.⁷ Blogs selected for inclusion in the sample

needed to have a primary focus on amateur dressmaking (that is, their primary focus had to be on the sewing of *clothing*, not on sewing as a handicraft or for home furnishings), and the blogs had to be current (that is, updated in the month prior to analysis). The first 100 blogs listed on the Bloglovin' results which met these two conditions (the former being the biggest eliminator) were trawled for content relevant to the conceptual framework using a discursive textual analysis approach (outlined below). Only posts from the past 2 years (2013-2015) were included in this process (several of the blogs have posts going back more than 5 years). Hookway (2008) has noted the time required to trawl through blog content as a key challenge for researchers of blog discourse, yet such an approach is arguably the only way to ensure a broad understanding of the content and approach of individual blogs is gained. The Bloglovin' interface does not facilitate random sampling (as a total number of blogs within a category is never made available and instead the user must endlessly scroll the updating results), and as such, to ensure a broad sample and in addition to the criteria above, the sampling strategy involved the inclusion of blogs of different size, scope, age, and location. The blogs included therefore vary in popularity (the most 'followed' currently has over 30,000 followers, while the smallest has around 50), age (most had been established for several years, while some were very new to the sewing blog world), location (UK, US, Australia, Germany and Canada) and all maintain links to other social networking platforms, most commonly Twitter and Instagram. Unintentionally, all the blogs included in the sample are maintained by female bloggers. While male sewing bloggers do exist, they appear to be a small minority. This time-consuming trawling and sampling process led to a sample of 1951 blog posts drawn from 20 blogs. These posts were then analysed using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to explore their explicit or implicit engagement with the themes outlined above.

CDA enables a rich analysis of the ideologies and sentiments underpinning the discourses of sewing blogs (Potter, 1996), because the approach understands discourse as not only constructing representations of a subject, but also, through its interpersonal functions, discourse functions to shape identities and relationships (Fairclough, 1995, p. 17). CDA was therefore chosen to delve below the surface of sewing blog content, to explore its connection to the themes outlined above. There were two primary strands to this analysis. If a blog post specifically mentioned sewing in relation to feminism or gender equality, then it was coded as engaging *explicitly* with feminism. For implicit engagement, the analysis focused on how the blog content connected with concepts outlined by Pentney (2008) as reflective of the

goals of a wider feminist project: community building, social justice and consciousness-raising, and empowerment.

As an active sewist myself, and prior to this study, I personally ‘followed’ a number of the bloggers included in the sample. My position as a participant in the world of digital dressmaking enables me to have insight about long-term trends within the community, and allowed me to be reactive when related material appeared. As such, in the discussion presented below, I have also made occasional use of supplementary material – as for example in the case of the Twitter conversation (discussed below) held between several of the sampled bloggers, and older blog posts that came to my attention via links within newer blogs.

Findings⁸

Explicit Engagement with Feminist Politics

For many contemporary sewing bloggers, positioning themselves as both feminist and a sewist is an important stance to take. Often such testimonials read defensively, as if the bloggers are responding to criticism by other feminists. Riley and Scharff have discussed “the difficulties for women in ‘coming out’ as feminist in a feminist-hostile society and negotiating the expectation that as ‘real’ feminists they should reject heteronormative expectations of femininity” (2012, p. 210). Such sentiments are evident amongst the sewing community:

I’ve been shamed for leaving science for a “womanly” career – as if, because I have “real” career experience it is my duty as a feminist to stay in that career path. As if sewing is easy and designing patterns doesn’t take math, engineering, spatial abilities, and so many other “masculine” skills because it is something traditionally associated with women. As if you can’t like pretty clothes and wear makeup and be a feminist. As if you can’t cook, and clean, and knit, and sew, and run a home, and have a family and be a feminist. I strongly believe that sewing in 2015 is a feminist act. I sew because I choose to sew, not because it is expected of me. I am equal to a man whether I am a sewist or a scientist. I am here right now to stand tall and say: I am a woman. I am a sewist. I am a feminist” (Erin Seamstress Designs)

For others, ‘coming out’ as a feminist sewist reflects a tension experienced between the apparently inherent femininity of dressmaking and their feminism. This can be explained by what Riley and Scharff (2012) describe as the “feminism versus femininity dilemma” in which “women must negotiate the cultural construction which positions feminism and normative femininity in opposition” (pp. 207-208):

I am a feminist who sews frilly, ruffled dresses all the time. I believe wholeheartedly in gender equality and baking cakes from scratch. From a feminist standpoint, I understand the

impulse to eschew the traditional. For so long, we were told our place was in the kitchen, so why hop right back into it, once we're free? Well, because I *like* to. Demonizing the traditionally feminine seems just as wrong as insisting we adhere to it. There is nothing inherently oppressive about traditionally gendered activities, because gender is a social construct. *We* labeled sewing as a "chick thing;" *we* determined men hate romantic storylines. Surely, we can now *unlabel* them? (Idle Fancy)

For others, feminism and sewing seem fundamentally interconnected. For them, feminism is about celebrating the craft and skill of sewing:

It wasn't until five years ago when I discovered the sewing blog scene, that I really began to appreciate the skill and art of sewing...we have feminism to thank for changing our attitudes about sewing (Sew Country Chick).

Munford has noted that for third wave feminists, femininity does not conflict with feminism, but is instead "positioned as central to a politics of agency, confidence and resistance" (2007, cited in Riley and Scharff, 2012, p. 209). We can see evidence of such sentiments in the comments from sewists above in which they celebrate the craft of sewing as a way of resisting hegemonic discourses and celebrating a traditionally female pursuit that in its contemporary form of privileged leisure, is no longer associated with the domestic drudgery of old. While the simple option of 'choosing' certain pursuits certainly does not make them inherently feminist, still the above discussions highlight how sewists are constantly negotiating and questioning the relationship between their craft and feminism.

Discursive Activism

The very language of sewing appears to be undergoing a shift in the contemporary practice, and this may also be considered as an example of the way in which this craft is at times a site of contestation. Shaw (2012, p. 42) has explored the ways in which feminist girl bloggers are engaged in practices of 'discursive activism', which the author defines as "speech or texts that seek to challenge opposing discourses by exposing power relations within [them]" (ibid). While historically those who sewed at home were 'dressmakers' or 'seamstresses', today many bloggers who sew are likely to refer to themselves as 'sewists': a gender neutral term which subverts the traditionally normative assumption that sewing is a feminine pursuit. Several bloggers have had debates with their followers about the labels associated with sewing, and the tracking of some of these through a Twitter conversation (below) highlights the way in which some sewists find the traditionally gendered language of sewing restrictive. Such debates about the very discourses of sewing can arguably be seen as fundamentally

political, as by uncovering the gendered framing of the pursuit, they seek to challenge assumptions about not just who participates in the sewing world, but also its value:

User 1: "Hey #sewcialists – someone on my @GdnLiveBetter post asked why some of us say sewist...what do you think? [2 RT, 2 Favourites]"

User 2: "haha! Yeah, I tend to go for that over seamstress if I can"

User 3: "Because sewer sounds terrible, seamstress is gender-biased, and clothes maker rules out the quilting people"

User 3: "Meanwhile, #sewcialists sew and rant about that on social media. It's also a handy hashtag to reach out to peers"

User 4: "Agree seamstress doesn't sound right. Sewer and sewist both sound strange to me too though!"

User 1: "I think it's an each to their own thing. There's an amazing blogger called the Selfish Seamstress, for example"

User 5: "I agree with [User 3]. Sewist is a bit clumsy sounding but I find that every other descriptive word I use...comes with a preformed expectation of who I am and what I do, especially as a woman [continued in another tweet]. I'm a fervent feminist who sews yet when I tell people I sew, they seem to assume I'm into doilies and kittens"

User 3: "☺ Well said. So are you saying you do curtains too? :-P"

User 5: "I do pretty things while wearing a bow in my hair to make my husband love me (yeah, like fuck I do!)"

User 1: "I miss doing martial arts because I used to wear these pretty homemade dresses while sporting MASSIVE bruises"

User 3: "It makes people think twice about gender norms etc etc. ;-)"

Figure 1: Twitter conversation between bloggers (June, 2014)

A number of additional threads can be teased out in the above examples which offer further evidence of the explicit ways in which the practice of sewing can be seen as contributing to the goals of feminism. Bratich and Busch note that “the typical association is masculinity/digital culture and femininity/fabriculture. The DIY craft culture, however, complicates this gendered binary” (2011, p. 244). And as Sew Country Chick (above) claims, it is important for many sewists to celebrate this once devalued ‘domestic’ craft for the skill and artistry that it requires. A recent newspaper article by Czerski (2013) speaks to this, and makes a call to recognise the technology inherent in sewing:

We don't ever think of women's activities as technology, even when that's exactly what they are...My Polish grandmother had a Singer treadle-powered machine, built into a small wooden table with decorative legs. I loved it because it was mechanical and you could see how it worked...It's ingenious. I know how to sew and I like making things out of fabric. That's ingenious too. It was years before I realised that most of society put loving the mechanics and loving the sewing in different categories. Mechanics involves levers and wheels and gears, and everyone knows that's technical. But sewing is associated with women, and so it mysteriously and quietly slides out from under the umbrella of technology and slinks off into obscurity. Next time you're doing your laundry or tidying your coat rack, have a proper look at how your clothes are made. This is technology in action (Czerski, 2013).

In addition to their challenges to the gendered binary of technology, the above examples also highlight a range of community and identity-building elements to sewing which may be considered as contributing to the wider goals of feminist activism. One sewing blogger posted a ‘think piece’ about the connections between sewing and feminism which sparked a lively discussion amongst readers with over 100 comments. Some commenters agreed, others disagreed, others used it as an opportunity to question the values of second-wave feminism and highlight its limitations in terms of intersectionality and class, as well as its devaluing of ‘the feminine’. In short, what the original blog post facilitated was a nuanced and informed community discussion about the intersection of craft and feminism:

When Debbie published *Stitch ‘n Bitch*, feminism and craft suddenly found themselves holding hands. Now, rather than seeing dressmaking and knitting as oppressive, feminists are *using them as a way to connect*, both to other feminist crafters, and to our creative selves (Sew Betsy. Emphasis added).

Other sewing bloggers similarly refer to the connective and community aspects of contemporary dressmaking as an important motivation for their sewing and blogging about it, but I would argue that we should think of these elements more as the *implicit* types of engagement that Kelly (2014) outlined, since it must be assumed that some sewists enjoy being part of a community without necessarily subscribing to the politics of feminism. Yet, as can be seen below, this does not preclude a reading of their activities as tacitly aligning with some of the goals of feminism.

Implicit Engagement with Feminist Politics

The Digital Dressmaking Community, Empowerment and Identity Building

The community building elements of contemporary sewing may be seen to build both a form of social capital and the desire by sewists to develop and express creativity and social connections (Minahan and Wolfram Cox, 2006, p. 8, citing Bourdieu, 1987). While women dominate the sewing blogosphere, this is not just a young woman’s domain. Sewists of all ages participate. One older engaged sewist lists some of her motivations in blogging about sewing as: “To develop my creativity...and let out my quirk!! (this once confident creature has gotten cooped up at work). Having a blog gives me somewhere to voice my ideas” (Scruffy Badger). These motivations link to Minahan and Wolfram Cox’s argument that “cyberfeminism [has] developed to allow a voice to women who wish to participate in technology on their own terms” (2007, p.9). We might argue that online spaces around

sewing offer a way in which women may overcome aspects of the gendered digital divide (*ibid*). Both the fostering of a public voice and women's learning and participation in/with technology through a craft they feel comfortable with may be seen as implicit engagements with the goals of a wider feminist project. We can see through this activity that sewists, like other crafting communities "...develop values and practices like mentorship, community-building...and gender empowerment" (Bratich and Brush, 2011, p. 247).

I started this blog way back when (ahem, that would be in 2010, after the first ever Me-Made May), *to participate in that lovely growing sewing community*. People were making all those lovely garments, and blogging about them, and starting sew-alongs and challenges, and *I wanted to be part of it...* (Farbenfreude. Emphasis added)

Just over 3 years ago I visited a friend's new house and as she was giving me the grand tour, I noticed a dress form draped with a beautiful handmade dress. With my interest well and truly piqued, I decided to tag along to the Sewing for Pleasure evening classes she was taking...and simultaneously *discovered the wonderfully supportive and encouraging world of online sewing, which I can honestly attribute most of my progress and passion to* (A Stitching Odyssey. Emphasis added)

One of the striking features of the digital dressmaking community appears to be its inclusivity and positivity. This is, in itself, a challenge to the internalised misogyny manifested through oppositional gender relations that are often seen in media representations of female relationships. Women pitted against one another and engaged in 'cattiness' and snarking is a familiar trope of patriarchal societies (Douglas, 2010). Yet the online spaces inhabited by sewists are more commonly positive spaces which may be seen as empowering both for the individuals who occupy them, and for the communities they build. In exploring the feminism of the Women's Institute, Andrews has noted the empowerment opportunities produced by spaces which are supportive of female-friendships (1997, p. 11). Such 'gyn-affection' (*ibid*) is arguably also present in the contemporary digital dressmaking communities.

Challenging Fashion Norms

Critics of post-feminist cultures often centre their challenge on the individualism such neoliberal systems encourage – that through consumption women are empowered. In the case of the sewing community, while a sense of individual empowerment does come for some from their sewing, here it is the ability to challenge hegemonic beauty standards which apparently empowers:

Here's the big, liberating secret about making clothes with a needle and thread: you lose any ability to judge yourself by an accepted set of measurements... The only person you need to please is yourself. Measurements become a tool for work, rather than a value judgment. And

so the world shifts slightly on its axis. My body no longer needs to tick a retailer's box. (Karen (who blogs at Did You Make That?) quoted in *The Guardian*, 30 July 2013)

Body shaming and negativity have no place in the sewing process, nor at the Curvy Sewing Collective [CSC]. Whatever way you choose to personally refer, or not refer, to your body is fine by us... Many plus-sized women, ourselves included, began sewing as a refuge from the exclusionary sizing and unimaginative designs of ready-to-wear fashion... Above all, the CSC is united in the belief that body positivity and personal style are the keys to joyful home sewing. When a woman makes something she loves that fits her body impeccably, self-confidence shines through (Curvy Sewing Collective).

I started to learn [to sew] five years ago, and within a few months I was making skirts and dresses decent enough to leave the house in. I knew I'd end up with some nice clothes from my hobby but I had no idea that it would fundamentally change my body image. It turns out that there are few things as good as sewing for giving you a neutral and objective perspective on bodies and clothes... As I shrugged off set clothes sizes and started making garments that precisely fit my dimensions, the feeling of abnormality and exclusion began to lift. (Jenny (who blogs at Cashmerette) quoted in *The Guardian*, 3 August 2015)

While the women above speak largely to an individual sense of empowerment gained through their participation in sewing, their sharing of that with a wider online network, their creation of blogs specifically to cater for other women experiencing similar fashion and fit problems, and their call to arms for others to join in their rejection of feminine norms reflects a more collective interest. Such bloggers also arguably fit well within the earlier argument about “the dilemmas of women who identify as feminists and who continue to identify, even in a troubled way, with normative femininity” (Riley and Scharff 2012, p. 210). Yet, while normative femininity would typically exclude those who do not fit the slim figure ideal of the fashion world, sewing enables these women to perform their femininity and at the same time reject social norms which dictate that only women of a certain size may be considered feminine. In doing so, they are challenging norms, and contributing to the building of a community of feminist sewists.

Slow Fashion and Social Justice

Knitting and other crafting cultures are at times described in the literature as reactions and resistance to globalization and the global fashion production industry. Minahan and Wolfram Cox (2007) claim this as evidence of a new ‘Arts and Crafts Movement’ (p. 6). I would argue that in the context of contemporary dressmaking, this resistance is better conceptualised as an engagement with ‘slow fashion’ (Fletcher, 2007). In the field of textiles and clothing production, Fletcher has called for a ‘slow fashion’ movement which mirrors the slow food associations that emerged in Italy as a response to a perceived fast food ‘invasion’. In clothing, this is a response to ‘fast fashion’: “mass-produced and standardized. The

unbeatably cheap top, dress or pair of jeans, like the hamburger, is trade in large volumes, is globally ubiquitous and is homogenously served or styled” (Fletcher, 2010, p. 250).

Many sewing bloggers demonstrate an engagement with slow fashion through their desire to critically reflect on their clothing consumption habits as a motivation for sewing their own clothes. As one sewing blogger noted of her sewing:

Like many people, part of the reason I choose to make my own clothing is because fast fashion leaves a bad taste in my mouth. It just feels *wrong* to wear something against my skin when I don't know who made it, I don't know how much they were paid to make it, or whether they were treated fairly and humanely in the process... Maybe there's more we can to contribute to Fashion Revolution Day as makers.⁹ Perhaps we can all make a concerted effort to encourage more people to learn to make their own clothes, in order to foster understanding of the work involved in the production process (it takes ages to make a dress, why oh why does it cost £10 from Primark??), to slow down our collective fashion consumption, and encourage everyone to treasure what's already in their wardrobe (Tilly and the Buttons).

Fast fashion's very real dangers were brought to global attention in 2013 with the collapse of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh which killed 1129 garment industry employees and for several sewing bloggers, this struck a chord. The bad after-taste that Tilly describes getting from fast fashion is mirrored by others, and in the below extract is framed as something which the blogger is personally aiming to raise awareness of, and 'crusade against', in her sewing:

I recently took the Seamless Pledge, and am planning to get through the next year (until August 2015) without buying any RTW [ready to wear] clothes. This started out as a challenge to myself ...but the more I have thought about it, the more it's become a political statement...I started to get a really sour taste in my mouth at the thought of our society's insanely high consumption of 'fast fashion'. I therefore decided to make a personal statement against it and embrace a 'make do and mend' attitude. Expect to read more about my crusade here on my blog. (We the Sewing)

As a concept, slow fashion links to ethical consumption and is still evolving: “as scholars seek to define slow fashion, they examine contributing concepts such as fast fashion, social responsibility, sustainability, and transparency within the fashion system” (Pookulangara and Shepherd, 2013, p. 201). The literature on slow fashion is thus nascent but typically engages with the wider fashion sector and with calls for changes to the garment industry more broadly. For many sewing bloggers, an important motivation for sewing is the engagement with a more sustainable and ethical clothing practice. This seems to reflect both their personal politics, as well as a means by which an individual identity and style can be forged.

I am far more forgiving of the homemade-y looking elements of my clothes because they exhibit the truth that it is possible to avoid mass-manufactured clothing. That badly applied bias binding or concealed zip reminds me that I'm contributing, in some small way, to the debate about our culture's sustainability (So Zo).

I'm realizing now...that having this technical skill also means I can actually control the production process of my clothing, which is truly incredible considering the state of the "fast fashion" industry right now (4 Square Walls)

It's a way to stand out, to be individual, to make a statement against mass production and the homogeneity of fashion and also to be more responsible; reducing landfill, knowing where your clothes came from and who made them and the responsible practices that are associated with that, particularly if you are very selective about where your fabric comes from (Noble and Daughter).

These comments reflect Mendes' (2012) claim that, "[f]ashion...can of course be a political issue, particularly if discussing the political or economic forces behind its production, sales and marketing" (p. 564). As the garment industry which feeds 'fast fashion' is a fundamentally gendered one in which predominantly women manufacture clothing for export in unsafe conditions and for poor pay (Khan, 2002), the slow fashion movement can be seen engage with issues of gender equality. While the current slow fashion movement is primarily aimed at a broad industry-wide change, there is evidence that the concept has been adapted by the contemporary sewing community, and I argue that with its attendant drive for wider recognition of the gender inequalities of the global garment industry, slow fashion as a concept is reflective of the feminist goals of social justice.

Conclusions

At the beginning of this paper, I noted the scarcity of work on contemporary dressmaking cultures, and argued that which does exist presumes the revival to be motivated either by austerity cultures, or a form of nostalgic and regressive conservatism (Wajcman, 2004) that may be understood as post-feminist. Yet, as has been seen, by examining some of the self-produced content of sewists, we can see evidence of a more political underpinning to the current sewing revival and a range of activities that may be read as feminist.

In exploring the world of contemporary sewing, this paper has confirmed and extended both Pentney (2008) and Kelly's (2014) arguments about knitting and feminism and in doing so it makes an important first step in exploring the various meanings attached to sewing and sewing communities. There is also evidence in this analysis of parallels with earlier studies of domestic crafts. As Mosely found in her study of sewing in the 1960s, working class women found the act of making their own clothes to be 'empowering' as it enabled them to transcend (to some extent) their class. For contemporary sewists, the 'empowerment' experienced

appears to offer a way of transcending fashion and gender norms. Similarly, much as British women in the early 20th century participating in the newly formed Women's Institute were able to "experience an alternative female value system which challenged the internalisation of dominant perceptions of skills, status and productivity" (Andrews, 1997, p. 9), arguably the online communities around dressmaking offer a similar space in which a traditionally feminine, devalued domestic craft is celebrated. These online, public spaces perhaps ought to be seen as spaces which facilitate broader conversations about sewing, feminism and its relationship to traditional forms of domesticity. To what extent this might be specific to *digital* dressmaking, and whether we can see evidence of similar in 'offline' activities of sewists remains to be seen.

Yet the findings of this research also challenge Kelly's argument about knitting communities that they embody 'everywhere and nowhere feminism': "Feminism is 'everywhere' in the knitting community in that there are many self-identified feminists in the community and knitting has been described as part of feminist culture... Yet, feminism is also 'nowhere', that is, there is relatively little explicit discussion of feminism and little visible feminist activism in knitting groups" (2014, p. 143). Unlike Kelly's knitters, in the case of sewists there is a great deal of evidence that sewing (and the act of blogging about sewing) encourages participants to critically consider their craft in a range of ways, including (though not limited to) its relationship to feminism. As has been seen above, within the digital dressmaking communities we see explicit discussions of feminism and activism/politics associated with feminism. In particular this is evident in their discursive activism around the hegemonic confines of the traditional language of sewing, and of the restrictive normative standards of the fashion world. The ability for some women sewing bloggers to find a voice and a space online in which they can share this also reflects Minahan and Wolfram Cox's notion of cyberfeminism, and the engagement of many sewists with what I have argued here is a form of slow fashion may also be seen as a way of acknowledging the gendered inequalities of sewing globally.

The findings in this paper also offer a challenge to the assumption that the revival of amateur dressmaking is promoted by a nostalgic notion of austerity. Historically sewing, mending and altering garments were certainly bound up with notions of frugality. Now, that is not the case, at least not for women living in western cultures. As one sewing blogger posted: "Historically, making garments for yourself and your family was viewed as an austerity

measure...These days, however, when you can buy a dress on the high street for £15, sewing your own could be considered the expensive option...Not so much 'make do and mend' as 'make do and spend'" (Tilly and the Buttons). Yet, although contemporary sewists may not be motivated by frugality, in their blogging they do draw attention to the divide between their own form of privileged leisure and the hardships suffered by those who work to mass-produce garments in the developing world. Bratich and Busch (2011) have noted of craft practices more broadly that "craft culture can even be regarded as a direct response to this pervasive and oppressive form of craft work [sweatshop labour]...[through its] emphasis on slow production as opposed to rapid output, on personal expression as opposed to repetitive and specialized tasks" (p. 235). The anchoring of sewing practices with the motivations of slow fashion certainly seems to reflect this argument.

While I have argued above that there is a clear motivation for social justice and gender equality within the slow fashion framework, it is also true that we must allow for the idea that some sewists may engage with this out of a notion of environmental or development politics, rather than a feminist position *per se*. For some sewists, their engagement with feminism may be an incidental feature of a wider activism around issues of sustainability and a politics of ethical consumption. Similarly, it is important to note that sewing does not need to be feminist. Much as it would be overly simplistic for all forms of new domesticity to be viewed as regressive or post-feminist, so too we must exercise caution in casting all forms of contemporary sewing as somehow implicitly feminist. It would be wise, I think, to acknowledge the likelihood that there are many sewists who would not self-identify as feminist, or, as in Kelly's knitting study, that there may be sewists who identify as *anti-feminist*. This emphasises a need to compliment blog analysis with face-to-face enquiries which speak directly to sewists.

Nevertheless, as has been seen in this paper, within the contemporary home dressmaking revival, there is a wide range of activities evident that may be read as 'feminist'. In her work on print news coverage of feminism, Mendes (2012) has discussed how a range of craft-based activities were presented within a feminist framework, but that most such news stories conflated feelings of enjoyment with an assumed and uncritical idea of feminist 'empowerment'. Yet, as Mendes noted, this "ignore[s] the diverse forms of collective feminist activism and, almost universally, the politics behind their actions" (2012, p. 559). The findings discussed in this paper show that, in the varied actions of many contemporary

sewists, a range of collective forms of feminist activism are evident, both explicit and implicit. These findings suggest that home dressmaking deserves to be examined for its politics, and should not be dismissed as a passive or retrograde nostalgia but rather recognised as well-dressed contemporary form of feminist practice.

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¹ Digital Dressmaking is the subject of a wider project by the author on the digital aspects of contemporary sewing, funded by the British Academy. Further papers are forthcoming on the specifically digital elements of this community.

² Although scholarly attention to knitting and other revived domestic crafts is not limited to feminist authors. There is a considerable range of literature exploring the revival of crafts as leisure practice, and as a form of 'craft consumption', as well as the production and commerce possibilities that new digital marketplaces have provided for such crafts. See for example, among many others: Campbell 2005; Jakob, 2012.

³ Of course there is significant work on professional and industrial clothes making, as well as fashion and design. These are very different forms than amateur home dressmaking, however, and thus fall outside the scope of this paper.

⁴ The term 'sewist' is a contemporary one employed by many of the members of the digital dressmaking community. Its use is discussed further in the findings section, below.

⁵ For a detailed discussion of the current debates on feminism and the emergence of a 'Fourth Wave', please see Munro (2013), "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?". Available at: <https://www.psa.ac.uk/insight-plus/feminism-fourth-wave>

⁶ According to Kelly (2014): “Yarn bombing involves stealthily covering objects with yarn in public places...for some it may be a comment on the contemporary cultural and political climate but for others it may be just about aesthetics” (p. 134).

⁷ <http://help.bloglovin.com/forums/81957-feedback-ideas/suggestions/4301705-we-need-a-sewing-category>

⁸ The project was granted approval by the University of Leicester Ethics Committee and was conducted in accordance with its code of practice. Consent to use quotes in the paper was sought from bloggers. Only one blogger requested anonymity and has been quoted using a pseudonym; the rest are quoted using their screen names.

⁹ A day of activism established on the anniversary of the Rana Plaza disaster which drew global attention to the perils of fast fashion. See: <http://fashionrevolution.org/>