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# Doing It Our (Dang) Selves: Making, Experimenting, and Becoming through Craft

**Special Issue Editors: Amber Buck, Megan Condis, Kristin Prins, Marilee Brooks-Gillies, and Martha Webber**



## RHETORICS

Cocktails. Pickles. Crochet. 3D printing. Letterpress. Pinterest. Etsy. From Williamsburg to Austin, the word “craft” gets attached to all kinds of things. This trend only appears to be growing, as craft is closely connected to the DIY (do-it-yourself) movement, a wide-ranging, ever-expanding, and sometimes controversial field of work and play. At its most basic level, craft means creating something by hand, in small batches, by a skilled artisan. But craft—as noun, verb, or adjective—seems to mean something different to everyone. For some, “craft” brings to mind knitting, crocheting, and gluing googly eyes onto walnuts; for others, “craft” translates as woodworking, weaving, and creating art out of everyday objects. It’s just as easily dismissed (messing around with Aleene’s Original Tacky Glue and ridiculous amounts of glitter) as it is admired (exercising finely-honed skills to produce heirloom-quality ceramics).

These practices are also attached to online and offline craft communities and craft engagement in the public sphere—from Betsy Greer’s craftivism (craft + activism) to the JafaGirls and other art activist yarn bombers to Debbie Stoller’s *Stitch ‘n Bitch* (and the knitting circles that took the book’s name) to Faythe Levine’s *Handmade Nation* book and documentary to digital craft communities like Ravelry. Crafters use computers, smartphones, the Internet, and other digital technologies to collaborate and to distributed their work. For example, the Craftivist Collective worked with artist Lise Bjørne Linnert to collect from over 4,500 crafters around the world more than 6,200

hand-embroidered names of Mexican women who have been murdered or have disappeared for the “feministic political embroidery” project *Desconocida – Unknown – Ukjent*. The project might remind you of what is arguably the first contemporary community craft project, the AIDS Memorial Quilt—and craft practitioners in the 2000s and 2010s have continued to use handcrafted items to engage the public and to shape political and cultural conversations. Because, in a digital age of disposable goods, prefabricated furniture, and fast fashion, crafting is as political as it is personal.

As some of the authors in this issue discuss, to craft can be a conscious choice that forms identities and builds communities—whether those include rejecting consumer culture or embracing family traditions. Combining critical analysis with personal reflection, contributors to this issue of *Harlot* consider contemporary craft and what it can tell us about (personal, social, political) persuasion. Defining “craft” as a concept, a social movement, and an activity, these authors come to craft from different perspectives, but they all describe creative and collaborative processes of making things with material objects. While there’s no neat way to organize something so complex as craft (we’re guessing that your sewing room/craft table/basement look about like ours!), we see the following common threads making their way through this issue:

## Process and product

Craft processes often happens on two levels: 1) manipulating materials that result in a made product and 2) thinking, troubleshooting, rethinking, and reflecting within a crafter as s/he works. This second level is a nebulous one, but it is explored in both Josh Adair’s reflection on a year spent crafting and grieving, “The Suicide Survivor’s Guide to Craft,” and Danika Paige Myers’ poems, “All the Lovely Ladies” and “Celestarium.” These pieces provide personal examples of how the process of crafting can produce more than a handmade item, such as a way of viewing the world.

## Challenging norms and experimenting with malfunction

Crafting can be a means of challenging norms. In an increasingly mass-produced world, handmade goods can seem odd or out of place. Four contributors consider where craft intersects with abnormality. For example, Morgan Leckie writes about the siren song of domestic perfectionism in “Undo It Yourself: Challenging Normalizing Discourses of Pinterest? Nailed It!” Stephen Hammer and Aimee Knight investigate how crafters sometimes destroy mass-produced objects in order to create something entirely new and unique in “Crafting Malfunction: Rhetoric and Circuit-Bending.” Maria Novotny proposes that craft can be used to disrupt dominant discourses of the body in “Craft as a Memorializing Rhetoric.” And Elizabeth Chamberlain shows how craft challenges to the status quo can be coopted in “Buy-It-Yourself: How DIY Got Consumerized” by chronicling the rise and fall of DIY fashion blogs.

## Community space and place

Because craft inherently involves working with materials to make things—and often involves multiple people working together to make those things—we have many discussions of craft that focus on the communities of people and practice or the spaces and places where crafts are made and put to use. This can take an explicitly activist approach to craft and community, as Tal Fitzpatrick and Katve-Kaisa Kontturi do in “Craftivism - MAKE the World Better: Rethinking Spaces and Practices of Activism.” Hannah Bellwoar examines how community is built through craft in “The Materiality of Community and Juniata Knitting Club: Connecting Through Craft,” as does Joyce Walker in “Crafting a Music Community: Making Music and Musicians in Concert.” Craft can also open up space to critique of community practice, which Lizzy Bentley and Joanna Sanchez-Avila do in “Under the Mask: Creative Dis/Possessions of Borderlands Remembrance Practices.”

Taking up *Harlot*'s mission to provide critical and creative responses to everyday rhetoric, this special issue explores the rhetorical nature of contemporary craft theory and practice. While the work collected here can't cover all the territory at the intersection of craft and rhetoric, we believe that it contributes to our collective improved understanding of the rhetorical work that craft and DIY can do. The authors show us how the material processes and cultural practices of the handmade can persuade us to do, understand, and make identities, communities, and movements in new ways. And they've got us jonesing for more time to craft.

**Amber Buck** studies the representation of crafting activities in online spaces but prefers edible crafts in practice, specifically vegan cupcakes. She is an assistant professor at the University of Alabama.

**Megan Condis** works on gender and embodiment in video game culture and also loves knitting, cooking, and cosplay. She is an assistant professor at Stephen F. Austin State University. You can find her online [here](#).

**Kristin Prins** is a free-form crocheter who learned to crochet chains as a kid and picked up the rest by watching and re-watching instructional videos on YouTube. She also enjoys wonky sewing projects and experimental baking. Her professional work includes adapting DIY and craft practices to writing and rhetoric classes, which she teaches at Cal Poly Pomona.

**Marilee Brooks-Gillies** crochets to unwind and relax in the evenings. Crochet helps her transition into evening while also allowing her to make something, to be useful. She also made 1,000 felt flowers for her wedding in 2010. Her dissertation, *Crafting Place: Rhetorical Practices of the Everyday*, based on her work with a women's craft group,

developed a theoretical framework that recognizes space and place as rhetorical entities. She is currently an Assistant Professor of English and Director of the University Writing Center at Indiana University Purdue University, Indianapolis (UIPUI), where she also teaches material rhetorics and rhetoric history and theory.

**Martha Webber's** primary craft media include button making, embroidery, and sewing. She cut the fabric for her first independent sewing project so off-grain, the pair of neon orange "raver" pants she made twisted more than her dance moves. Since then, she's learned not to start sewing pants hem-first, earned an AA in fashion design, and co-facilitated embroidery workshops for women in South Africa in 2008 with nonprofit Create Africa South. She is currently Assistant Professor of English at Cal State Fullerton, where she teaches and researches writing and craft practices.