

“You Knit to Save Your Life”: Trauma and Textile in Ann Hood’s *The Knitting Circle* (2006)

“Haces Punto Para Sobrevivir”: Trauma y Tejido en *The Knitting Circle* (2006) de Ann Hood

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Abstract: This paper includes a hermeneutic revision of Ann Hood’s novel *The Knitting Circle* (2006), a text that has been scarcely approached from the perspective of literary theory and criticism. In order to carry out this analysis, particularly focused on its protagonist, the presuppositions of trauma studies are employed, especially the considerations of Laurie Vickroy, as well as the semiotics of the textile in terms of its discursive and collective potential. Through the prism of close reading, it is proposed that the textile activity (and, by extension, the community that is generated around it) fosters a process of psychological recovery that depends not only on the articulation of the traumatic event, but also on the forms of social experiencing established around that episode.

Keywords: Knitting studies; Ann Hood; trauma; community; grief.

Summary: *The Knitting Circle* (2006): Knitting in a contemporary context. The word and the needle: Convergences between the textual and the textile. Trauma traces in *The Knitting Circle* (2006). Recovering the word: Stitch’nBitch as a healing space. A journey from private to public grief. Conclusions.

Resumen: Este trabajo incluye la revisión hermenéutica de la novela *The Knitting Circle* (2006) de Ann Hood, un texto escasamente abordado desde la teoría y crítica literaria. Para llevar a cabo este análisis, en particular enfocado en su protagonista, se emplean los presupuestos de los estudios del trauma, especialmente las consideraciones de Laurie Vickroy, así como las semióticas de lo textil en torno a su potencial discursivo y colectivo. A través del prisma del close reading, se plantea que la actividad costurera (y, por extensión, la comunidad que se genera en torno a ella) propicia un proceso de recuperación psicológica que no solo depende de la articulación del evento

traumático, sino también de las formas experienciales sociales establecidas alrededor de ese hecho.

Palabras clave: Estudios del punto; Ann Hood; trauma; comunidad; duelo.

Sumario: *The Knitting Circle* (2006): Hacer punto en un contexto contemporáneo. La palabra y la aguja: Convergencias entre lo textual y lo textil. Vestigios de trauma en *The Knitting Circle* (2006). Recuperando la palabra: Stitch'nBitch como espacio cicatrizante. Un viaje del duelo privado al público. Conclusiones.

1. *THE KNITTING CIRCLE* (2006): KNITTING IN A CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

In the last years we are witnessing what many cultural studies scholars (Bratich and Brush; Bryan-Wilson; Hackney; Attfield; Bristow) have called fabriculture or craft culture and what I define as an evident resurgence of textile disciplines around practices such as crochet, embroidery, quilting and knitting. Textile floods our lives, transiting through the urban space, passing through the most mainstream entertainment platforms and arriving, of course, in the literary field. As in other moments of revival, this latest renaissance coincides with periods of financial recession in which the social situation has triggered the vindication of the homemade, the handmade and the natural (Parker xi). In the case of the text analysed here, its publication coincides with the economic crisis of the late 2000s. Considering the present, the same pattern can be found in our recent pandemic context, in which, in addition to mirroring the financial factor, situations of isolation have led to a resignification and revaluation of the domestic, causing thousands of people to become interested and involved in the practice.

We have certainly landed in a converging paradigm between traditional design and new media. The advances of technological science have irremediably invaded the knitting world, leading to the conception of new forms and new readings, both artistic and political. Thus, new and innumerable cultural forms emerge that convey the expansion of fabriculture through virtual knitting circles, blogs and textile websites, and cyberfeminist magazines or accounts on social networks thematically oriented to the textile. All these types of meetings, which traditionally took place in settings such as churches, or the headquarters of associations and political groups, are now being transferred to a virtual space. That is, the “new domesticity” migrates to a digital universe (Bratich and Brush).

Another of the particularities that the conditions of the twenty-first century have predisposed is the creation (or rather, the consolidation) of knitting communities. These communities transcend the mere sharing of projects, techniques, patterns, or textile concerns, and include the association of people who take up private and public spaces to knit, no longer just as a leisure or relaxation activity, but as a genuine form of expression or, at the very least, introspection. In this sense, I bring up the case of *Stitch’nBitch*. It consists of a movement, particularly established in Europe, the United States and Australia, which generally brings together women who meet, either virtually or physically (in spaces such as university campuses, bars or private homes), to stitch together, share their creations and, in short, socialise around textile creation. The name is taken from the eponymous title of a book published by Debbie Stoller, editor of the New York feminist magazine *Bust*, in 2003. According to Minahan and Cox, *Stitch’nBitch* could represent a new *Arts and Crafts Movement*,¹ in that it constitutes a new form of community gathering based on material production, traditional techniques and the new opportunities offered by digital technologies (6).

What’s more, the gradual loss of feminine implications is another aspect that permeates contemporary needlework. In this regard, Rosenberg notes: “in the 70s artists who swapped their paint brushes for a needle and thread were making a feminist statement. Today, as both men and women fill galleries with crocheted sculpture and stitched canvas, the gesture isn’t quite so specific” (para. 1). This is due, on the one hand, to the gradual active participation of women in the art world over the last centuries and, on the other hand, to the increasing involvement of men in the textile field. According to Parker, thanks to the Women’s Liberation Movement,² the spectrum of values, aesthetics and roles socially categorised according to gender becomes more flexible, naturalising, and normalising male contributions to the activity. Nevertheless, it is essential to bear in mind

¹ Aesthetic, philosophical, and political movement emerged in Great Britain at the end of the 19th century which is associated with the figure of William Morris. It promotes a revision of medieval crafts and trades involving the revaluation of these disciplines through the search for meticulousness and originality in works, distancing itself from mass-produced industrial products.

² Political alignment of feminist intellectualism in the West from the 1960s to the 1980s, whose influence brought about a major political and cultural transformation throughout the world.

that the entrenchment of feminine, trivial, and domestic implications in the needlework context continue to prevail (xiii).

Even so, as a result of the theorisation and social resonance of the new masculinities,³ especially since the 1990s, the visibility of men who dedicate their time to needlework has become more and more frequent. In this regard, it is worth mentioning the work of Joseph McBrinn who, as a response to Rozsika Parker's foundational text *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (2010), revisits the male participation in textile orbits in his contribution *Queering the Subversive Stitch: men and the culture of needlework* (2021). In terms of activism and digital presence, perhaps one of the most representative cases in the English-speaking context is Jamie Chalmers, whose website (*Mr. X Stitch: Changing the Way You Think about Embroidery*) with a domestic punk aesthetic functions as a space of confluence between international textile artists and as a digital resource for contemporary embroidery:

It's not always easy being a Manbroiderer, people sometimes can't get their head around the fact that I'm six feet tall and yet I like stitching. But I'm not too fazed. I know how much I enjoy it and I just want to help other people share that experience. (xiii)

Likewise, queer realities also inhabit the textile space, with creators such as Sarah Zapata, LJ Roberts and Jesse Harrod, among others, standing out. In this regard, it is highly recommended to consult the work by Julia Bryan-Wilson *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (2017), which dedicates its first chapter, "Queer Handmaking," to the artistic itinerary around textiles during the sixties and seventies, delving into the trajectory of the theatre group The Cockettes and the artist Harmony Hammond. Meanwhile, in *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* (2017), John Chaich and Todd Oldham examine the work of various contemporary artists belonging to the LGTBIQ+ collective.

In short, the magnitude of the textile panorama in the twenty-first century is overwhelming. As has been explained, its new popularisation does not imply a return to its old articulations, but an adaptation to the contemporary theoretical, political, social, economic, and artistic conjuncture. It is not, therefore, a question of rescuing the discipline from

³ Male identity movement articulated as an alternative to hegemonic masculinity. It advocates gender equality and condemns all forms of violence against women.

the past, but of rethinking stitching from the present paradigm with its new devices.

Coinciding with this revival or phenomenon of fabriculture, narrative fiction texts linked to fabric have begun to proliferate in recent decades. Normally the textile dimension of these plots is transferred to the formal idiosyncrasy of the text, which is presented in a fragmentary and sometimes incomplete form, either by its structural arrangement in chapters, epigraphs or passages, by the polyphony of its characters or by the intercalation of styles or genres within the limits of the work itself. In addition, these works are compiled in different volumes forming sagas, and their plots, suspenseful or detective-like in tone, are developed around a crime or mystery that somehow includes the presence of a woman (or, more commonly, women) involved in the resolution of the enigma. Another of the most recurring scenarios revolves around a group of seamstresses, which the protagonist usually joins and from which her recovery process after experiencing a traumatic event is generated. This is exactly the pattern of *The Knitting Circle*, published by the American writer Ann Hood in 2006. The book is divided into ten parts, each containing two chapters, the titles of which alternate between the names of the characters and the title of the novel itself.

The story opens with Mary Baxter’s first visit to Big Alice’s shop (Sit and Knit), where she goes on her mother’s recommendation to join knitting classes. Just five months ago, Mary tragically lost her five-year-old daughter Stella, due to meningitis. The protagonist is deeply affected by the trauma of this premature death and is therefore completely cut off from the world and the people around her. Unable to get past this experience, Mary is plunged into a pervasive depression that makes it impossible for her to restart her life, or even to go through her own mourning process. Naturally, these circumstances prevent the protagonist from returning to her job and imply obstacles in her closest interpersonal relationships: the marital one, which is threatened when their trauma coping mechanisms come into conflict, and the maternal-filial one. Mary’s mother is portrayed as an absent parent who has had problems with alcohol and has not been involved in her daughter’s most important moments in life (such as her own wedding or Stella’s funeral): “Her mother had disappointed her for her entire life. She was not the mother who went to school plays or parents’ nights; she gave praise rarely but never gushed or bragged” (Hood 19).

However, in the Sit and Knit shop, Mary meets six women (Scarlet, Lulu, Beth, Harriet, Ellen and Alice) through whom she embarks on an

introspective process of self-recognition through the bonds she establishes with them. They all share, to a certain extent, a harrowing life story, cut short by some traumatic event: some have been victims of sexual violence, others suffer from terminal illnesses, others have lost family members in terrorist attacks, etc. Therefore, all this shared pain embodies the communal nature of the textile practices that exist in our contemporary world. In addition to these women, it is worth mentioning the intermittent presence of Roger, a male knitter who has suffered the painful death of his partner from AIDS. Although he is not one of the main characters, his name is given to one of the chapters into which the novel is divided. His inclusion in the story is also evidence of the idea expressed in the previous section about the influence that the new masculinities and queer realities have had on needlework in recent decades.

2. THE WORD AND THE NEEDLE: CONVERGENCIES BETWEEN THE TEXTUAL AND THE TEXTILE

According to cultural studies theory, cultural embodiment and its corresponding epistemological dimension is conceived within linguistic and symbolic terms: “thus cultural representations are said to work ‘like a language’. Indeed, it is argued that to understand culture is to explore how meaning is produced symbolically through signifying practices” (Wayland Barber 14). In the case of the concurrence of the textual and the textile, it is traditionally orchestrated at a conceptual level from multiple semiotic prisms. Barber stresses the historical importance of textiles as a primitive mode of transmitting messages that are enunciated in an accessible and effective way, both visually and silently (148). Along the same lines, Sullivan Kruger argues for the inclusion of textile productions in the study of literary and historical texts:

How the texts of textiles function in any specific story tells us about a very important form of communication heretofore ignored. From such an examination we might come to see a connection between the history of woven cloth and our attitudes toward literature; we might further speculate that the older tradition of weaving—one which dates back between nine thousand and twenty-five thousand years—has influenced the newer one of writing. Writing was invented around fifty-five hundred years ago, and has only become a widespread practice in the last four hundred years or so.

Before written texts could record and preserve the stories of a culture, cloth was one of the primary modes for transmitting these social messages. (12)

From the etymological dimension, many scholars have traced routes through numerous words involved in textiles. Barthes links the notions of text and textile, pointing to their shared Latin root through the verb *texere* (to build, to weave) and the Greek *tekhne* (art, craft and technique) (76). On her behalf, Postrel highlights the case of fabric and fabricate, which come from the Latin root *fabrice*, meaning skillfully made. In addition, she mentions the French word *métier* (art or industry) which denotes the meaning of loom. Beyond the European sphere, she also highlights the case of the Quiché language, which shares the root *tz’iba* both for weaving patterns and for hieroglyphic writing, or Sanskrit, with the word *sutra*, which today refers to a literary aphorism, but originally meant thread (15-16).

In the field of feminist criticism, the correlation between textiles and the female discourse is evident. The conceptual link woven between women and the world of weaving is established in the West since Ancient Greece and its corresponding divine representations in relation with the practice (the Moiras, Aracne, and Penelope, among others). With the support of the ideologies of femininity and the categorisation of textiles as craft in opposition to the higher Fine Arts, stitching ends up being associated with the nineteenth-century values of an obedient, patient, delicate and virtuous woman. For this reason, the textile is historically inscribed in the domestic sphere, and it is to be understood as a mere pastime that housewives are authorised to do while they devote themselves to caring for their children.

Even so, it is essential to conceive the metaphorical association between the female word and needlework not as an inherent and transhistorical method of women’s expression, but as a crucial gendered practice that has been transmitted and become a symbol of female messages from a personal, political, spiritual, and artistic dimension (Bost 21). Therefore, I understand the textile as a tool that enhances the possibilities of narrativity of discourses that have been issued from the margins. Consequently, I approach the literary work by applying a knitting semiotics, which configures the whole story according to a textile idiolect that the characters themselves recognise. One of the first times that Mary goes to Sit and Knit, she listens to the instructions Big Alice gives to another of the women present: “It’s like another language, Mary thought,

remembering her idea to learn Italian. . . . Better than complicated rules of grammar” (Hood 26).

Likewise, during the conversation in which Mary discovers her companion Ellen’s life story, Ellen establishes a suggestive correlation: “‘Stories are kind of like knitting, aren’t they? Everything intertwined. Everything connected’” (97). For her part, when Alice recounts her unpleasant first contact with knitting, she reproduces the words of her governess: “‘Every specialty has its own lexicon,’ she said, ‘and knitting is no exception to this rule. There are certain terms we must learn and certain symbols we must recognize’” (142). Thus, we perceive how the text itself offers effective hermeneutic tools in a textile key, inviting us to access the story through a close reading.

3. TRAUMA TRACES IN *THE KNITTING CIRCLE* (2006)

To understand the discipline of trauma studies in the context of literary criticism, the following definition proposed by Mambrol can provide a starting point: “Trauma studies explores the impact of trauma in literature and society by analysing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance” (para. 1). In this regard, it may be useful to link the previously mentioned notion of fabriculture (Bratich and Brush, Bryan-Wilson, Hackney, Attfield, Bristow) to that of traumaculture proposed by Roger Luckhurst in his publication “Traumaculture” (2003) and further developed in works such as *The Trauma Question* (2008). Trauma studies thus are closely linked to the representationality of language and the role of memory in shaping individual and collective identity. From a theoretical breeding ground that draws from psychoanalysis, post-structuralism and post-colonialism, trauma is conceived as “a severely disruptive experience that profoundly impacts the self’s emotional organisation and perception of the external world” (Mambrol para. 1).

The field began to take shape in the 1990s around the work of theorists like Kali Tal, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, and, most importantly, Cathy Caruth and her foundational texts *Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (1996). According to this first model of traditional trauma, which reinterprets Freudian theories, trauma is ineffable, which evidences the problematic between language and experience. The traumatic event produces a profound disruption in consciousness, irrevocably damaging the psyche and preventing a direct and effective linguistic representation. Because of

this inability to properly assimilate the experience and its corresponding impediment to articulate it, “both individual traumatic experiences and collective historical extreme events are ultimately never known directly but only through an interrupted referentiality that points to the meaning of the past only as a type of reproduction or performance” (Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience* 11).

These ideas were soon reconsidered by revisionist methodologies of the traditional model, which proposed overcoming the argument of unnamability and approaching trauma by also considering other factors which may circumscribe it. Among these revisionist contributions, it is worth highlighting the proposals for aesthetic analysis suggested by Alan Gibbs in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (2015), Joshua Pederson in “Speak, Trauma: Toward a Revised Understanding of Literary Trauma Theory” (2014), Laurie Vickroy in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002) or Anne Whitehead in *Trauma Fiction* (2004), in which the authors link prescriptivist aesthetic models to the representation of trauma. Thus, in contrast to the first generation of theorists, it is argued that victims are capable of accessing a traumatic memory and constructing a narrative around that disruptive event, thus looking at the text itself rather than its lapses, opening up “broad new expanses of material for interpretation” (Pederson 338).

Moreover, the post-colonial perspectives of authors such as Gert Buelens, Samuel Durrant, and Robert Eaglestone in their volume *The Future of Trauma Theory: Contemporary Literary and Cultural Criticism* (2014) highlight, in line with Roger Luckhurst in *The Trauma Question* (2008), that the modern notion of trauma has been gestated in a Western context that is assumed to be universal. For this reason, they express the need to link trauma to “other disruptive social forces” (Buelens et al. xiii) by stripping away imperialist logics and thus proposing the “building [of] a non-Eurocentric, fully historicized trauma theory” (Buelens et al. xiii).

As demonstrated in the previous lines, moving away from a universalist vision, the pluralist models reject a structural approach to trauma and reveals “the specificities hiding under the apparently neutral and universal face of this understanding of trauma.” Like this, these current ideas allow us to pay more attention to the variability and complexity of narratological representations of trauma. Having said that, for my approach to *The Knitting Circle* (2006), I especially follow Laurie Vickroy’s considerations in her publication “Voices of Survivors in Contemporary Fiction” regarding cognitive psychology and narrative and

cultural theories. Vickroy argues that the fictionalisation of trauma produces three substantial effects:

The awareness of the multidimensionality of an extreme experience and particularly the social influences that shape the survivor's personality, the textual modeling of the social aspects of the individual's mind, and the ethics of reading that compel a compassionate correspondence between reader and survivor. (Quoted in Balaev 10)

As readers, fiction offers a wide range of dimensions from which to observe the multiplicity of responses we experience as humans to a traumatic event. These responses are embodied in subtle ways through certain behaviours, transitional identities, bodies in awe, and survival tactics. Among the most recurrent signs in survivors are episodes of fragmented memory, panic, physical pain, guilt, blocking, diminished self-perception, shame or fear. Of particular significance is the threat to one's own security and the loss of autonomy and self-sufficiency (Vickroy, "Voices of Survivors" 130–31).

Transferring these reflections to the work, I focus particularly on the life process of the protagonist, as this is the case that allows us to study the text in the most detailed way. Her discourse and plot arc reveal a wide range of traumatic manifestations, and a clear situation of vulnerability and helplessness. Perhaps the most striking symptom, in line with Caruth's ideas, is the impossibility of narrating her pain with the rest of the world, especially with the women she meets in the knitting circle. Already from the beginning, this premise is explicitly reflected: "It is my story, yet I do not have the words to tell it" (Hood 11). Near the end, this passage is repeated, revealing her true sender, Mammie, who circularly closes the story by settling her differences with Mary and strengthening their mother-child bond.

Likewise, in line with the observations made in the section concerning the textual and the textile, it is worth stressing the significance of the protagonist's profession. Mary is a journalist, working for the local newspaper *Eight Days a Week* writing articles and reviews about films, restaurants and books. Hence, her own employment, directly involved with written production, implies metatextuality and another materialisation of the metaphor I have been discussing about the creative female figure in correspondence with her role as a knitter. In this sense, the loss of speech also affects her career, as she is unable to work despite the attempts made

by her boss, who gives her small tasks to keep her distracted: “Words, her livelihood, her refuge, even at times her salvation, were now the most useless things in the world” (35).

Nonetheless, this is not the only metalinguistic reference in the novel; when Dylan proposes a trip to Italy, he tries to convince her by telling her: ““If we’re going to sit and cry all the time, we might as well sit and cry in Italy. Plus, you said something about learning Italian?”” (24). Faced with her proposition, the narrator introduces us to the protagonist’s train of thought, which, once again, reveals her discursive inadequacy: “She couldn’t disappoint him by telling him that even English was hard to manage, that memorizing verb conjugations and vocabulary words would be impossible. The only language she could speak was grief. How could he not know that?” (24).

Following the pluralistic considerations of trauma theorists, it is discovered how, beyond these linguistic deficiencies, Mary’s trauma is evident through many other symptomatologic behaviours. These include her memory loss: “Like everything else, Mary could easily have forgotten the woman’s name. She’d written it on one of the hundreds of Post-its scattered around the house like confetti after a party” (14); spatial disorientation: “Mary stopped and got her bearings. These days this was always necessary, even in familiar places. In her own kitchen she would stop what she was doing and look around, take stock” (14) or inability to show (or even feel) affection: “Instead, she said, ‘I love you.’ She did. She loved him. But even that didn’t feel like anything anymore” (24).

In addition, she exhibits a low self-perception, feels extremely misunderstood (especially in relation to her husband), experiences constant intrusive anticipatory thoughts, feels an acute sense of emptiness and is particularly irritable with her surroundings. Mary feels a compelling need to escape from her own reality: ““I didn’t want to’—she stopped herself before she said the truth: I didn’t want to be home—‘to miss a night’.” This is precisely why she chooses Big Alice’s shop to learn to knit, and not other establishments much closer: “Mary had driven forty miles to this store, even though there was a knitting shop less than a mile from her house” (15).

On the other hand, she is envious of other families who do enjoy the company of their children, followed by a deep sense of guilt in recognising her own resentment. Indeed, she often experiences frustration at the perceived insignificance of her loss in a world that naturally continues to function, despite everything. Her anhedonia and apathy also manifest

clearly: “Other people’s stories held little interest for her” (15), “That sad summer, time passed indifferently. . . . Instead, she was home not knowing what to do with all of the endless hours in each day” (22). Finally, the protagonist shows fear of loneliness, resistance to oblivion and a marked sense of dissociation, which prevents her from even recognising herself in her own reflection.

4. RECOVERING THE WORD: STITCH’NBITCH AS A HEALING SPACE

As discussed above, community is a constitutive property of contemporary knitting, and the pivot around which the protagonist’s healing process begins. Despite her initial reluctance, she soon recognises the benefits that knitting (and, by extension, the knitting circle as Stitch’nBitch) grants her. The most quickly identifiable one is a powerful evading possibility. Thus, Alice’s shop becomes a safe space for her: “Now here she stood in a knitting store, and that same sense of safety, of peace, filled her” (Hood 39).

Mary uses knitting as a strategy to keep her mind occupied in order to avoid the recurring thought of her daughter Stella: “You have to concentrate so hard when you do them that you have no room for anything else” (75). She herself comes to affirm this escapist dimension when she has a conversation with her companion Lulu, who establishes a metaphor by relating the point to the prayer of rosaries: “‘It’s perfect for contemplation’ (76) notes Lulu, to which Mary replies: ‘Or escape’” (76). The soothing power of knitting is also evident for the protagonist in the scene in which she feels tense about her mother’s presence within the circle:

As soon as Mary picked up her needles and began to knit, her anger dissipated. She was calmed by the motion of slipping one needle through a stitch and pulling the yarn onto the other needle, by the feel of wool in her hands, by the sound of everyone’s knitting needles clicking. (238)

In this sense, it is important to underline, on the one hand, the notion of repetition and automatism that emerges from the abstraction of the textile process: “‘There’s something about knitting,’ her mother said. ‘You have to concentrate, but not really. Your hands keep moving and moving and somehow it calms your brain’” (20). Regarding this matter, in line with the symptomatology described in the previous section, reference should be

made to the concept of acting out coined by LaCapra through which he theorises the idea of repetition (sometimes taken to compulsion) present in traumatised subjects who either relive past events or constantly revisit them in the present through flashbacks, nightmares or even by verbalising certain words or phrases. On the other hand, returning to the above quote, the bodily implications of the textile act are noticeable within the text. This corporeality is embodied particularly in the hands, the human instrument that makes the creation of the fabric possible: “Her hands needed to do it. It was as if the movement of the needles coming together and falling apart took away the horrible anxiety that bubbled up in her throughout the day” (Hood 36); “My hands seemed to knit away the noise that had kept me awake, to erase the questions for which there were no answers” (49).

As the story progresses, the bonds of affection between the members of the circle grow stronger and the community consolidates itself. Illustrative of this strengthened bond is the moment when Sit and Knit burns down and they all come together to survey the damage and encourage Alice to restore the shop, or Beth’s funeral, the chapter of which is aptly titled “Common Suffering,” in which the knitters share their grief in confronting the tragic loss of their companion. According to Farrell, Mary’s arc comes to a fittingly circular close when she offers to teach Maggie, a new character who comes to the shop and with whom the protagonist is deeply identified, to knit (30):

Mary recognized something in this woman. A sadness, a grief that was yet too fresh to put into words. ‘I’m going to give you my phone number,’ she said, ‘and when you’ve finished that, call me and I’ll teach you how to purl.’ . . . Mary knew that Maggie would call her soon. Tomorrow, or the next day. She would go home and knit and eventually the knitting would make the endless, painful hours somehow bearable. Mary knew this. (Hood 250)

Stitch’nBitch therefore provides an unavoidable pretext for conveying the healing nature of knitting, as it offers a safe place from which to deal communally with the traumatic experiences of the knitters. As the story progresses, the protagonist conducts through her companions what LaCapra has defined as empathic unsettlement; that is: a process of attentive listening (usually through secondary witnesses to the traumatic event) through which this secondary subject empathises with the story of the traumatised person while being aware of their external location in the event. In LaCapra’s own words, “it involves a kind of virtual experience

through which one puts oneself in the other's position while recognising the difference of that position and hence not taking the other's place" (78). This mechanism constitutes the group as a privileged emotional location from which to ask for advice, to laugh, to express frustration, to commiserate, or simply to share silence.

The fact that the group provides a forum for open expression and the ability to be an active part of organizing something that helps others, evokes feelings of empowerment, thus strengthening an individual's self-perception. . . . Communities are created through compassion, trust and communication. Communication is supported and encouraged via the establishment of a safe space where group members are provided with a place to openly express their thoughts and ideas. (Sharp 122)

Nevertheless, according to Tapia De la Fuente, just as the textile pieces are never arranged in a tight way, allowing the fabric to breathe or move without breaking, so is this knitting community. The relationships between the women in the novel are not always idyllic; indeed, we witness several situations of tension and dispute that form part of the knitting circle as well. However, the dialogic nature of their collectivity allows them to function cooperatively in a stable way and to forge an affective fabric between them all (91–92):

El bordado fortalece el tejido comunitario y promueve el diálogo y cuidado mutuo, nutriendo a la comunidad y facilitando escenarios de encuentro, los que se configuran como constelaciones comunitarias circulares, gestionados por los cuerpos activos ubicados concéntrica y horizontalmente.⁴ (99)

At the end of the novel, the protagonist's journey concludes with a powerfully symbolic episode, which corresponds with the affirmation of her own identity, and the materialisation of the accompaniment and ethics of care that have been developed throughout the story thanks to *Stitch'nBitch*. Finally, once consolidated as a knitter, Mary regains her voice and, therefore, feels ready to narrate to all her companions the heartbreaking experience of her daughter's death: "Mary took a breath.

⁴ Embroidery strengthens the community network and promotes dialogue and mutual care, nurturing the community and facilitating meeting scenarios, which are configured as circular community constellations, managed by active bodies located concentrically and horizontally. (Translated by the author)

She knit one more row. It was time, she knew, and so she began” (Hood 239). After her story, Mary and Mamie share a touching scene of reconciliation, in which they embrace and, putting aside their differences, affectionately recognise each other again: “For the first time in a very long time, Mary let her mother take her in her arms. She let her mother cradle her. At last, the two women held each other and cried” (244). Finally, again drawing on LaCapra, it is plausible to associate this passage with the notion of working through, which refers to the moment of agency in which the traumatised subject is able to take a critical distance from the disruptive event and, recognising the impossibility of detaching it from his or her identity, to integrate it in order to be able to face the present and its contingencies.

In relation to this word recovery, certain techniques of formal representation are observed through the knitting symbol and the trauma narration, such as intertextuality, repetition, or the dispersion of the narrative voice (Whitehead 84). These devices are already evident from the very structure of the text, which is fragmented into chapters by interspersing the names of their protagonists in their respective titles. In turn, this tool suggests the interconnectedness of all the experiences narrated, which are somehow knitted through dialogues throughout the novel. The stories of these women gradually approach Mary as the plot progresses, taking turns between them as narrators. In all these articulations, the level of material detail brought to the conversation, pointing out photographs, dates or specific names, the importance of the spaces and the non-verbal language of their interlocutors, stand out. In addition, it is essential to underline the reflection of Mary’s experience that is outlined in the stories of her companions as they enunciate their traumas, especially in the internal flow of the protagonist’s thought, but also in small conversational brushstrokes in which she briefly suggests the loss of her daughter.

As for Mary’s own individual discourse as narrator, her trauma leaves blank spaces when it comes to articulating itself through absences and incongruities of information or chronologically disordered events. The idea of repetition is also evident at the narrative level through flashbacks and intrusive memories that interrupt the narrative. Finally, consistent with Mary’s lack of control over her life, the narrator also does not govern the development of the plot, rather, the storyline drives her own narrative.

5. A JOURNEY FROM PRIVATE TO PUBLIC GRIEF

Finally, it is worth emphasising that, as with the knitting, which Mary ends up taking with her everywhere she goes, escaping strictly domestic boundaries, the protagonist's trauma also transcends from the private to the public dimension and becomes part of a shared experience of loss (Farrell). In line with Vickroy's ideas ("Voices of Survivors"), I finally propose a reading of *The Knitting Circle* (2006) from theories of trauma that go beyond Freudian models of repetition and muteness in the face of the traumatic episode, emphasising the need to consider the social and cultural factors involved in the particular case in which the disruptive experience has occurred. These contextual conditioning factors determine either the victim's assimilation and corresponding recovery from the trauma, or his or her impediment to this process (Vickroy, "Voices of Survivors" 132):

These attitudes and practices influence notions of expected behavior, responses, and even symptoms. Life roles and emotional management are 'facilitated and ordered' within a culturally prescribed social and community structure where stress, illness, and grief are dealt with on personal and group levels. (De Vries 401)

Thus, having moved into the public sphere, Mary's grief interacts with her immediate social environment, which is mostly represented through her husband, her mother, or her work colleagues. Therefore, examining her interactions with them goes some way to approximating the ways in which loss is socially articulated in Western cultures such as the one presented in the novel. In Dylan's case, it is clear how the protagonist's post-traumatic suffering takes a considerable toll on her marital relationship. Often, during the course of the story, their grief processing mechanisms come into conflict: while Mary isolates herself and experiences, as detailed above, recurrent and varied episodes of alienation, Dylan, on the other hand, exhibits what appears to be a much more integrative position in this regard: he is proactive, proposes trips and plans to keep his mind occupied, quickly returns to his job, etc.

'It might be fun,' Dylan said, but she could tell his heart wasn't into having this argument again. It had become a pattern with them, his frustrated urging for her to go back to work, her anger at him for being able to work at all. A

few times it had grown into full-blown fighting, with Dylan yelling at her, ‘You have to try to help yourself!’ and Mary accusing him of being callous. More often, though, it was this quiet disagreement, this sarcasm and misunderstanding, the hurt feelings that followed. (Hood 34)

When these disagreements occur, they trigger different feelings of frustration, dissatisfaction and, above all, incomprehension in Mary. By way of illustration, the following passage shows Mary’s internal dissatisfaction, as she watches almost resentfully from the window (which could be understood as a metaphor for the invisible portal between the protagonist’s mental framework and the rest of the tangible world) as Dylan rebuilds his life while ignoring her mute cries for help, which in turn provokes a marked sense of abandonment:

From the window, she watched him drive away, a man in a suit going to his office. A man who didn’t have a clue that his wife was getting worse. A man, she thought, who could still go into an office every day and defend clients and write briefs and go to court and even have friendly cocktails with his partners after work. (87)

At other times, it is Dylan who exhibits more hostile behaviour towards his wife: “But Dylan said, ‘I guess I can’t hide from everything like you can,’ and she heard that too-familiar edge in his voice” (62), which awakens in her the guilt of dragging with her a too slow pace of recovery: “‘I’m sorry,’ Mary told him, though she wasn’t certain what she was sorry about: sorry that Stella had died and she couldn’t handle it? Sorry she couldn’t be more like him in the face of this?” (62).

Regarding the rest of her interpersonal relationships, it seems that they all follow an evident pattern of avoidance when dealing with the protagonist’s vulnerability. At first, the dedication that her surroundings show towards her is exposed: “When Stella died, Mary had been overcome by the way people had helped. . . . Friends sat by her side, offered advice, offered shoulders for leaning, for crying” (236). Still, as the weeks go by, the neglect of her social circle increases and with it, her loneliness. In fact, Mary even perceives the sense of discomfort that her presence provokes for people who know her story: “This happened over and over. Women in the supermarket, in the post office, staring at her as if she should not be alive herself” (93). Finally, Mammie never shows the slightest willingness

to accompany her daughter's grief and limits herself, always from a distance, to unwittingly encourage her to stay active:

Mary's mother didn't ask questions. When Mary tried to tell her how much she missed Stella, how long her days had grown, how sad she was, her mother suggested she knit more, travel more, join a book group, take a class. (150)

According to De Vries' theories, the optimal conditions for psychological recovery from a traumatic event have to do with the way in which society turns suffering into a meaningful mode of action and integrates it as part of its own identity (401–2). Thus, I argue that in the context of the novel these circumstances do not occur, so that the protagonist feels unprotected and seeks to adapt through the only way she finds available to deal with her pain: isolation. From this convenient social perspective, it is possible to understand that individual traumatic experiences are closely related to the dynamics of collective treatment that are orchestrated around a given traumatic event. In the case of *The Knitting Circle* (2006), the loss of the child is a taboo, which tends to be avoided due to the unpleasantness of living with such a tragic reality. According to Vickroy, these insidious experiences are read as endemic and detrimental to the functioning of the social structure: "Communities and societies can perpetuate the isolation felt by trauma survivors according to Root because communities want to protect themselves from vulnerability, avoid what survivors have suffered, and prevent survivors from sharing their experience with others" ("Voices of Survivors" 132).

CONCLUSIONS

Having elucidated all these concerns, it is necessary to point out two fundamental and consecutive ideas: firstly, that knitting (fabriculture) is drawn in the text as an operative discursive artefact through which to narrate the trauma (traumaculture) and, in a way, to recover Mary's silenced word and, secondly, that the very process of textile creation in a community context (in this case, the Sit & Knit group as an analogue of the Stitch'nBitch phenomenon) constitutes an effective therapeutic tool through which to heal, or at least mitigate, the suffering caused by the trauma.

Thus, knitting emerges as a rhetorical exercise of expression and writing, both private and public, which tends to make dissident experiences visible. It is, therefore, an ideal space from which to articulate the construction of identity through self-representation and self-affirmation (Tapia De la Fuente 47–49). Farrell notes that “the material nature of these crafts leads to something meaningful and immaterial—the opportunity to matter to others and to oneself” (37). In consequence, it is appropriate to assert that the knitting circle raises affective infrastructures that allow its participants to develop a sense of belonging to the group:

Los espacios de bordado colectivo proponen un lenguaje particular, un modo de comunicación basado en la ética del cuidado y de la responsabilidad colectiva, reivindicando una voz libre, una escucha acogedora y espacios de diálogo interdependientes donde cada persona pueda manifestar sus necesidades; liberando a las mujeres de la imposición patriarcal de cuidar abnegadamente a los demás, para pasar a una propuesta en la que el cuidado sea asunto colectivo.⁵ (Tapia De la Fuente 48)

Regarding the treatment of trauma, it has been proven that it is necessary to follow a pluralistic approach that, far from understanding the phenomenon from structural logics, attends to the contextual particularities of each individual. In this sense, fiction provides valuable prisms through which to observe the potential causes, mechanisms of action, responses, and possibilities for healing according to the singularities of the survivor. In line with Vickroy (“Voices of Survivors”), “the mechanisms of trauma, how it is caused and perpetuated, and the possibilities for healing often depend upon social interconnections, through acts of witnessing or sympathy” (137).

Considering this social circle in particular, it has been found that it does not provide the necessary conditions for the protagonist to properly digest her loss. This unsympathetic environment is represented in a distant, emotionally inaccessible, elusive or impostured way, thus revealing a tendency to avoid experiences of vulnerability such as Mary’s. As a

⁵ Collective embroidery spaces propose a particular language, a mode of communication based on the ethics of care and collective responsibility, claiming a free voice, a welcoming listening, and interdependent spaces for dialogue where each person can express their needs; freeing women from the patriarchal imposition of self-sacrificing care for others, to move towards a proposal in which care is a collective concern. (Translated by the author)

counterpoint and almost antagonist to this hostile social entity is the presence of Sit and Knit. From the implementation of empathic unsettlement, politics of self-enunciation and care, the community accompanies the protagonist in her process of mourning and, through the symbol of knitting, promotes her recovery (or at least stabilisation) both discursively and psychologically: “Big Alice’s Sit and Knit had saved Mary. She was certain of that” (Hood 132).

To conclude, I suggest approaching the work in future research following the concept of empathic unsettlement. In particular, it would be interesting to stress the special situation presented by the characters in the novel who, despite being secondary witnesses to the trauma they accompany, at the same time experience their own trauma (caused by heterogeneous motives) in the first person, which perhaps implies a more complex procedure of listening and recognition at an ontological level. Finally, I stress that the evident emotionality of the text can also incite us to transfer these theoretical questions to the very process of empathic unsettlement that readers themselves experience in relation to the knitters.

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