

The Wedding Dress, a Contemporary Knit: a Community Art Inquiry Into the Wedding  
Dress as a Cultural Symbol in Contemporary Quebec

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This is to certify that the research paper prepared

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## Abstract

### The Wedding Dress, a Contemporary Knit: a Community Art Inquiry of the Wedding Dress as a Cultural Symbol in Contemporary Quebec

Marilène Gaudet

In this art-based inquiry, as an artist, art therapist and research facilitator, I engaged nine participants in a community art project to open a dialogue around the wedding dress and its symbolic meaning in contemporary Quebecois culture. Within a feminist framework, this study examined the plurality of perspectives and the collective construction of meaning by inviting *Québécoises* to a weekly knitting circle over a period of four months. Together we created a wedding dress and installed it as wearable art at a local gallery. We used knitting to explore personal significance the wedding dress holds for each of us through guided conversations, questionnaires and collaborative art making. Participants were encouraged to share personal stories and debate issues pertaining to marriage, family life and the wedding dress. The main themes and values expressed by the group members were commitment and long-lasting love, respect, fidelity, equality and financial independence. We also talked about the multiple roles we play in our daily life and the importance of finding balance between our personal life and our career. The small number of participants places a limitation on the generalizability of the findings, but from all the dialogues this topic has sparked, I think it is fair to conclude that although more and more Québécois choose to live within a common law or civil union rather than get married, the wedding dress retains a powerful symbolic value in this culture's collective unconscious.

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A textile is a text, one of the texts of which our clothing imagery is made: just as the metaphorical weave gives life to text – in the common sense of the word, whether written or oral – so the weave of textile is what gives it a plot, a narrative, which exists thanks to the contact of the textile on the body.  
(Calefato, 2004)

### **Introduction**

In this art-based inquiry, as an artist, art therapist and research facilitator, I engaged nine participants in a community art project to open a dialogue around the wedding dress and its symbolic meaning in contemporary Quebecois culture. Within a feminist perspective, this study examined the plurality of perspectives and the collective construction of meaning by inviting *Québécoises* to a weekly knitting circle during the fall of 2010. Together we created a wedding dress and installed it as wearable art at a local gallery. We used knitting to explore personal significance the wedding dress holds for each of us through guided conversations, questionnaires and collaborative art making. Participants were encouraged to share personal stories and debate issues pertaining to marriage, family life and the wedding dress. This participatory process played on many levels of witnessing. It held a performance quality because the group met in a public environment, a coffee house, to do the art-making. This process lessened the distinction between artist and audience as some community members joined the knitting circle, giving them a sense of agency as proposed by Haedicke and Nellhaus (as cited in Neumark, 2010) in the context of participatory art performance. As a culmination point,

at the art gallery, the audience was invited to serve as witness to the creative synthesis; the dress, photographs and citations from the participants. This project combined art therapy and art-based research methodology to engage a small group of *Québécoises* into meaning making.

The aim of this research was to engage women in the “collaborative process of producing knowledge” (Brandt, 2008) around the meanings of the wedding dress in contemporary Quebecois culture. The assumption was that this theme would branch into not only the symbol of the dress but also its link to such issues as family values, love, relationships, commitment, womanhood, motherhood, gender roles, marriage, traditions and religious beliefs. The purpose was to take the pulse of *Québécoises* on the question of marriage at a moment in history when trends are changing. In Quebec, around sixty percent of the adult population between the age of twenty-five and forty-five live in a common law union and only a third of Quebecois will ever get married (Duchesne, 2003). According to the Régie des Rentes du Québec (2006), over fifty percent of children are now born outside the bonds of marriage. Finally, the divorce rate in the province has risen from 8.8% in 1969 to 51.9% in 2005 (Institut de la statistique Quebec, 2008). These numbers raise questions in a culture once so proud of its faith and family values.

### **Research Question**

My research focused on a primary question: what themes, meanings and values are revealed through the collaborative creation of a hand-knitted wedding dress by a small group of *Québécoises* women?

For this paper, I draw connections between the art-based research method, art therapy, the use of fibres and knitting as therapeutic tools, craftivism, the wedding dress, and feminist theory, piecing together cultural and individual narratives. Through a review of the literature and the community art as research project, I inquire into the symbolic meanings of the wedding dress in contemporary Quebecois culture.

### **Rationale**

The rationale for using community art as research in art therapy is multi-layered. My interest in this project lay in meaning-making and retrospectively, the integration of my own identity as an art therapist and artist. The creative process is used as a tool to prime the participants to engage with the research question in a tangible, embodied way that provides access to their inner experiences, emotions and narratives, both conscious and unconscious (Case & Dalley, 2006). Case suggests that the potency of artworks reside in their capacity to contain multiple layers of meaning and emulate the culture they are created and viewed in. A symbol can also hold multiple meanings and function on more than one level (Rubin, 2005). Through participatory art based research, the group explored a specific symbol, the wedding dress, in a specific social-cultural context, contemporary Quebec. Participants engaged actively with the question, looking for themes, meanings and values attached to this symbol through art-making and discussions. This creative process taps into meaning-making and allows for a plurality of perspectives to be expressed. According to Bruner (1990) meaning-making is the way in which a person understands herself, construes the world and the rapport between them. Culture influences the way one makes sense of the world by providing structure and norms about how one functions in the world and the way life unfolds (Bruner). The participants'

interest in fibre arts and the theme of the wedding dress brought them together on this inquisitive journey. Their shared practice of knitting and hand sewing provided a common ground to start from and bond over for this otherwise eclectic group of Québécoises. The group's collaborative creative process took them further than individual interviews would have by providing, through the weekly gatherings or knitting circles, a sense of community, a sense of agency and the access to a knowledge base that lies beyond language, because art-making draws into the emotive and the evocative (Denzin, 2003; Eisner, 2008; Neumark, 2010). I believe the symbol of the wedding dress lives deeply in our collective unconscious. Art-making can make its meaning available for exploration on many different levels, from intellectual to emotional. I believe the creative process allowed the participants to experience the question on a personal, interpersonal, cultural, intellectual, kinaesthetic and emotional level over an extended period of time. I think verbal interviews would have been conducted within a much shorter timeframe and would not have accessed some of the more unconscious, interpersonal and embodied levels of understanding. Furthermore, the creative process holds implicit healing potential (Case & Dalley, 2006; McNiff, 2004; Moon, 2002; Robbins, 1987). Personally, I experienced growth and positive change by taking part in this creative and collaborative inquiry process. Some participants also said they experience change through the process. I will expand upon these experiences of change and growth in the discussion section.

Denzin (2003), while writing about ethnodrama, proposes that: "Meaning is lodged in performativity [...]. Each performance event becomes an occasion for the imagination of a world where things can be different, a radical utopian space where a

politics of hope can be experienced (p.41).” Although this project was not intended as group art therapy, by exploring the symbol of the wedding dress within contemporary Quebecois culture through art making, my participants and I performed a radical act of hope by symbolically reclaiming the wedding dress and declaring our unfaltering desire for long-lasting love and commitment. It is the performative quality of the public knitting circle, in its gestures and witnessing that enabled a sense of agency (Neumark, 2010). The resulting wedding dress, as an art object, can also be used to project strong emotions. Eisner (2008) suggests that good art elicit an emphatic response in the viewer and open the door for dialogue:

‘If, however, one takes the view that the dominant function of arts in research is not necessarily to provide a precise referent for a specific symbol connected by a conventional interpretant, but rather to provide an evocative image that generates the conditions for new telling questions and for fruitful discussion, if its major function is to deepen and make more complex the conversation or increase the precision through which we vex each other (Peirce, 1998), then the need for consensus on what is signified might be less significant.’(p.9)

This is precisely what I sought with this project, to stir emotions and open a dialogue about the wedding dress as a symbol in Quebecois culture today. My collaborators and I engaged in a creative process and looked into both the positive and the shadow side of this symbol and created renewed, plural meanings and potential for growth and healing.

In the course of this inquiry process, I discovered another important aspect of art-based research in the context of art therapy: its potential for the integration of the identity

of the art therapist as artist. It is an important side-effect of using art-based methodology in research because it allows me, the research facilitator, to answer the question from all three vantage points. For example, the artist relates to the symbol of the wedding dress and the collaborative art-making process on an intuitive, embodied, emotional and aesthetic level. The art therapist looks at the clinical applications of the process and findings and how meaning-making, community involvement and art making relate to healing. The researcher is interested in such things as statistics, methodology, ways in which meaning is constructed and how it relates to theory, etc. The integration of these three identities allows me to access different levels of knowing and understanding the wedding dress as a cultural symbol in contemporary Quebec.

McNiff (2000) supports the union of these roles rather than their disconnection:

The greatest challenge I have faced in realizing the integrated vision is the tendency to compartmentalize, which exists within both art therapy and me. Rather than restrict art therapy to particular clinical sites, I focus it on everything I do. Art therapy is with me always. It is my profession and my way of finding meaning and personal purpose in the world. Art therapy integrates everything I value—artistic expression, personal and social understanding, scholarship, healing, and service to others. (p.47)

McNiff's personal vision resonates with my core values and my emerging sense of professional identity. Robbins (1987) draws parallels between the "therapeutic and the creative process" (p.21). He suggests that "in therapy, patients and therapists alike are engaged in finding the artists within themselves" (p.21). Both

are witness to a common experience which unfolds through verbal and non-verbal means of communication. Robbins (1987) and Moustakas (1990) insist on authenticity and truth as guiding principles in art therapy and research and I strived to follow them throughout this project in order to find meanings that resonate with other people and integrate the plural roles I have taken on as art therapist, artist and research facilitator.

I wish to note that I use the word *Québécoises* throughout this dissertation to designate women of French Canadian descent who share a Catholic heritage. I understand that this definition is exclusive in the rich and diverse cultural landscape that is contemporary Quebec, especially in Montréal where this research was conducted. I choose this definition because my interest lies in exploring a symbol, the wedding dress, within the traditional Quebecois socio-political context which has been in such a state of flux with regards to marriage, family structure and values. Also, I make use of the words participants, collaborators and group members interchangeably.

My basic assumptions when it comes to art-based research are that art is a valid way to know and understand the world. I assumed that recreating a symbol in a concrete, hands on way would be an effective means for my collaborators and me to enter into an intimate dialogue with it and therefore connect to the personal values, meanings and narratives it holds for us. I assumed that we could achieve meaning-making; making sense of the wedding dress in relationship to our self and our self in relationship to the wedding dress and the world in which our identity as women is mediated by relationships, rites of passage and social status, through the act of collaborative art making. I believe anyone can make art and that the creative process holds implicit healing

potential. The community approach was seen as a way to generate cultural knowledge and tap into our collective unconscious to extract themes, meanings and values associated with the wedding dress. I believe that symbols carry multiple layers of meaning that are mediated by personal experience and socio-cultural and religious context. I adopted a feminist perspective which values subjective narratives as objects of inquiry. I believe truth to be a personal construction. Therefore, my research question was designed to explore multiple truths rather than find one generalizable definition for the wedding dress as a symbol in contemporary Quebecois culture.

Also, I make use of the word Quebecois in a traditional way. I have to admit I am not completely at ease with its exclusive implications. The cultural landscape has been changing in Quebec and I value inclusiveness and diversity. I chose the traditional definition only to serve the inquiry question. It is important in research to have a focused and well defined population in order to have a ground line, a common denominator for the research participants. I chose to inquire into my own culture because it has been going through major changes. New meanings, values and customs are replacing old ways. My own bias walking into this research project was that Québécoises do not believe in marriage anymore. I assumed white would be the colour Québécoises would automatically associate with the wedding dress because of its predominance in popular culture. I therefore imposed it as the colour for the dress my collaborators and I pieced together. I assumed the perspective of women would be revealing in itself, but I came to realize that marriage is indeed a partnership and that men have strong opinions about it and wish to also be heard. Their perspective needs to be addressed in future research in order to draw a more complete portrait of the contemporary couple and family in Quebec.

## Literature Review

### Art-based Research

McNiff (2008) defines art-based research as the use of the creative process, the act of art making itself, as the main way of exploring and understanding the research question by the researcher and the participants/witness. *The Wedding Dress, a Contemporary Knit* community art as research project is born out of my desire as an artist, art therapist and research facilitator to enter into a dialogue with other *Québécoises* about the wedding dress and its current meaning through art making. Slodov (1992), in her exploration of the implicit healing power of the creative process, found that art making and the subsequent dialogue between the artwork, the artists and the audience facilitates meaning-making and the integration of past and present. As an art therapist in training, I strongly believe that the process of art making is therapeutic in itself. In choosing this research topic and methodology, I was greatly influenced by Seiden (1988) and McNiff (1998) who insist that it is vital to reclaim the tacit learning potential of art making in the field of qualitative research. I used fibre arts and knitting as my medium because of my familiarity with them. This approach integrates kinaesthetic, performative and intuitive levels of knowing with verbal and intellectual exploration of the wedding dress as a cultural symbol through dressmaking, guided discussions and self-reflective questionnaires.

I invited women of Quebecois heritage to a series of knitting circles because community arts as a research model is collaborative (Brandt, 2008). It is the process of engaging people “in representing their collective identities, histories and aspirations (Brandt, 2008, p.351)” through creative processes. According to Cleveland (2002), the

four purposes of community arts are to educate, mobilize and heal people and communities as well as strengthen them. In such participatory research, the art frame supports a sense of agency (Denzin, 2003; Neumark, 2010).

This project plays on the symbolism of the wedding dress because it is situated between reality and fantasy. This kind of symbolic action fosters resilience in the participants by providing flexibility and agency (Neumark, 2010; Tuber, 2008; Winnicott, 2005). Artistic make-believes have the power to change ‘cognitive patterns and cultural constructions’ (Neumark, 2010, p.78). Neumark suggests that collaboration is essential to healing, particularly in the case of interpersonal wounds such as divorce or separation. My aim with my collaborators was to create stronger community ties through skills' sharing and dialogue about the universal theme of love and human relationships through the hand crafting of a wedding dress. Brant (2008) ascertains that ‘collaboration’, ‘creative artistic practices’, ‘critical social analysis’, and ‘commitment’ (p.354) are the cornerstones of community arts as research. The role of the artist/research facilitator is to establish a framework and then listen. She has to be willing to remain open and share power with her participants. Community art is about engaging people fully to create history (Brandt, 2008). Throughout this project, I listened and shared decision-making power with my collaborators. Together, we brought to light what is important to us when we think of the wedding dress and the commitment and lifestyle it represents.

Approaching research through community art making takes advantage of both the group dynamic and the creative process (Rubin, 2005). Meaning making occurred through group interactions and individual interactions with the art object. Art contains an emotional and evocative quality that is different from the sensitivity of the verbal mind

(Eisner, 2008). This project was an exercise in cooperation. It promoted community building and pro-social skills such as cooperation, skill sharing, and problem solving, through collaborative art making. Through active participation, the group was invited to experience the wedding dress as a symbol in a sensual, tactile way that promoted a sense of agency and fostered resilience (Neumark, 2010). Although the focus of this research group was meaning making, its art therapy context brings me to mention that the wedding dress has a positive, romantic side and a shadow, loss and separation aspect to it. In order to heal the wounds caused by loss and separation which damage one's ability to trust and engage emotionally, collaboration and interaction is vital (Neumark). Following the guidance of McNiff (2008) and Slodov (1992), I believe that this project contains implicit healing qualities found in both the art making and the positive play between the participants and between the group and the audience. The multiple meanings of the wedding dress for the participants came to life through both the performance of art making and the group discussions. The community art approach draws into the verbal, non-verbal and symbolic way of knowing and relating, therefore, it lends richer results.

### **Art Therapy Research and Fibre Arts**

Art therapy and fibre arts are seldom paired in theoretical literature. My project is quite unique in its design and supports the integration of the roles of artist, art therapist and researcher and the investigation of textiles as therapeutic tools. Fronk (1998) writes on the use of quilting bees as group art therapy for women trauma survivors. Her thesis research is two-fold, with a constructive paper and an applied project (Fronk 1996; Fronk, 1998). She uses an art-based, heuristic model within a feminist perspective. She finds some correlation between participation in a quilting group and a deepened sense of well-

being and belonging. Fronk, (1996) puts together a comprehensive review of the historical use of fibre arts and the metaphors associated with them.

In art education, Duval (2006) looks at the meanings and values attached to the *amauti*, a traditional Inuit garment, and its link to teaching philosophy. The *amauti* is a warm jacket mothers wear that includes a hood shaped and tied to be able to carry and protect an infant. Duval uses open-ended interviews with four Inuit women teachers. The main values they express are belonging, sharing and a sense of connectedness. Both Fronk (1996; 1998) and Duval (2006) inquire into the use and meaning of textile in the life of women.

In her art therapy research project, Fox (2000) explores fibre arts and their healing metaphors through an art-based, heuristic, hermeneutic and phenomenological inquiry. She is the sole participant of her study. She engages in papermaking, stitching, beading, drawing and collage. Her literature review of fibre arts covers mythology, feminism, spell-crafting, cultural issues and activism. Her approach is really personal and cannot be generalized. She finds paper making undemanding and a good channel to express and work through emotions. She experiences beadwork as meditative and says she gained insight through sorting and ordering. She finds oil pastel to be a powerful medium to explore strong emotions. She finds drawing with pastels direct and pleasurable. The main metaphors that emerges for her is about the cycles of life. Her study gives a really intimate portrait of a woman using fibre arts as therapeutic tools.

The literature on art therapy offers lots of insight into the metaphors and history of fibres but research into their therapeutic use remains scarce and anecdotal. In psychoanalysis, knitting and clothing are seen as an extension of the self and the body

(Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1974; 1975; Turney, 2009). Textiles can be used as substitutes for the body in art and in rites of passage. Clothes are mediated by social norms and reflect the wearer's adherence to or rejection of them (Bouchard, 1998; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1974; 1975; Turney, 2009). Through their choice of a wedding gown, women express such things as their values, personalities, lifestyles and social status. Today's *Québécoises* have a level of freedom not only in their choice of a gown, but also their choice of union. This freedom is the legacy of the feminist and quiet revolution that breaks with traditional values.

There is a history of storytelling while working on textiles: quilting bees, knitting circles, *cercle des fermières* in rural Québec, family bees (Turney, 2009). There is also a tradition of young women in Quebec collecting handmade or hand-embroidered textiles such as linens and handkerchiefs in preparation for their role as home-makers and wives (Bouchard, 1998). This is called a *trousseau* or hope chest. Working with yarn and thread also calls on the Fates as they spin, measure and cut the fabric of lives (Apollodorus & Hard, 1997). I tapped into these traditions and metaphors associated with clothing with my collaborators through our slow, public, performance of knitting and hand-sewing a wedding gown.

### **Knitting as Therapy**

Symbolism and the issue of materials and media are at the core of the field of art therapy. Turner (2009) defines yarn and clothing as traditional, familiar and ubiquitous media. It is their ties to folklore, traditions and customs that made me choose them as for an inquiry into the wedding dress, a culturally bonded symbolic object used in a rite of passage. Fibre arts have seldom been written about as therapeutic tools, although they can

be powerful metaphors for attachment and filial bonds (Gericke, I., personal communication, January 2010; Lusebrink, 1990; Turney, 2009). As Zoe Williams wrote in *The Guardian*, it “sparks memories of care and attachment, no doubt based on the fact that most people are taught as a child, by a probably female someone of enough involvement and patience to have been important. Everyone who can knit, in other words, has a knitting narrative” (as cited in (Turney, 2009). My research project informs us in a unique way on the use of knitting within the art therapy context. What is marriage if not a ritual, a contract that binds two people together? Knitting becomes a potent medium to explore issues of matrimony.

Knitting has been going through a revival in recent years, with fibre artists like Mandy Greer, Magda Sayeg, Robyn Love, Freddie Robins, Betty Christiansen and Betsy Greer using yarn and knitting to bring people together into community action and dialogue around such issues as racism, ecology, war, peace, and homelessness. Knitting circles are a place of dialogue and this study taps into this model to explore an important cultural symbol: the wedding dress. The dress design itself was inspired by the organic, free crochet work of Mandy Greer and her community art model (Greer, January 13th, 2011)

The evidence pointing to the therapeutic benefits of knitting so far remains anecdotal (Curtis, 2005). The claim is that its rhythmic, repetitive movement induces meditative states and therefore helps lower stress levels (Curtis, 2005). Knitting circles, not unlike quilting bees, bring people, most often women, together in a creative and often intimate setting. Knitting offers opportunities for mastery, which can boost self-esteem (Curtis, 2005). According to Curtis, women have intuitively turned to it in times of loss

and separation. I think knitting circles can create a sense of community and therefore help fight off loneliness and social isolation. Knitting is portable; it can be done at home, in a hospital setting, at work, at a community centre, at a coffee house, at the park, on the bus, even during class.

My interest in knitting within the context of art therapy stems from my own practice and the friendships that I have formed through it. I intuitively turn to knitting at times of loss. Somehow, its mathematical and kinaesthetic nature grounds me. I knit out of pleasure rather than thrift, like most contemporary knitters, in the wake of the ‘do it yourself’ movement (Turney, 2009). It is because of all its metaphors, narratives and bonds that I embraced knitting as the main medium for the wedding dress project.

### **Craftivism**

Craftivism is the marriage between hand-crafting and activism. As one such craft, knitting has been going through a revival in the past fifteen years as part of the do-it-yourself or DIY movement (Levine & Heimerl, 2008). Since Debbie Stroller, the editor of *Bust Magazine*, a feminist magazine for young, urban women, invited knitters to meet at a coffee shop in New York City in 1999, young adults, designers, and celebrities, both male and female, have been going back to the needles, to the slow work of hand-crafting. Stroller brought knitting into the public sphere, making it a performance. Contemporary knitters do not knit for thrift, yarn being expensive, but rather as a form of leisure or art. These knitting circles, so-called “stitch and bitch”, are both continuing and reinventing a tradition that has existed for centuries.

In Quebec, *les cercles des fermières*, a women’s association that can be found throughout the townships, is one example of a powerful place for women to come

together and create not only crafts but also stronger communities and support networks. Such groups have sometimes played subversive and rebellious roles, crafting for social change through both their iconography and intentions (Fronk, 1998). Through her reworking in yarn of antiwar graffiti and slogans, Betsy Greer knits for peace (2008). Others organize around a cause; they knit for loved ones and strangers around the globe: soldiers, premature babies and others in need (Christiansen, 2006). Through knitting, they open a dialogue of hope and social change. I think it is in this perspective that knitting can be conceived of as an instrument for healing individuals and communities. *The Wedding Dress, a Contemporary Knit* is subversive because it deconstructs and re-appropriates a cultural symbol that has been largely abnegated in contemporary Quebec. This symbolic gesture holds budding possibilities for individual and community healing.

### **The Wedding Dress**

The wedding dress is a symbolic object. It contains cultural expectations, family ties, and gender roles (Bouchard, 1998). The wedding dress comes with an array of accessories, following the fashion and the season. In Quebec, in the early twentieth century, the dress was sometimes a suit. It was considered very fashionable and could be worn again on other occasions. The colour and fabric of the garment was chosen according to the season, the age of the bride, her social status, her urban or rural context and the current fashion. The evening dress and the colour white only became standard after the Second World War. White is a symbol of purity, submission, and is often associated with rites of passage (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1974; 1975). With so much meaning associated to it, choosing a wedding dress remains a balancing act between cultural and familial rules, fashion and personality (Bouchard, 1998).

Traditionally, Catholic values of simplicity and modesty also played a role in the dress design (Bouchard, 1998). The shoulders, arms and bosom were to be covered, and by more than just translucent lace, or else the priest could refuse to give communion or even grant access to the church. Contemporary wedding gowns tend to be strapless, an indication that catholic values do not dictate fashion and every day life as it once did.

According to Bouchard (1998), between 1910 and 1960, women living in the city would more often buy their dresses in boutiques or through catalogues, while ones living in rural settings would more often have it hand-made by a female relative or a local seamstress. If the dress was often bought at a store, some accessories and items of the *trousseau*, or hope chest, were traditionally hand-made, in part by the bride, in order to show off her skills. Bouchard (1998) concludes that marriage, as a rite of passage, weaves family, socio-cultural values and socioeconomic context together to mark the passage from single life to married, adult life. The wedding dress is the material manifestation of all these symbolic dimensions. In psychoanalysis, clothes can be regarded as an expression of the self in its identity and its acceptance or rejection of social norms (Turney, 2009). This study aimed at identifying which norms still make sense to *Québécoises* today and which do not.

Marriage, in Jungian analysis, is believed to symbolize the individuation and integration of the self (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1974; 1975). Sacred weddings are present in almost every religious tradition. It is not only the union of two people, but also a symbol of the divine origins of life and, traditionally, precedes procreation. Times have changed. Marriage in Quebec has given way to a preponderance of common-law unions. Religious values do not dictate everyday life and fashion anymore. Parenthood is no

longer automatically paired with marriage. Since the quiet revolution, there has been a general secularization of life, institutions and rites of passage, including marriage. Now is a good time to survey what symbolic meanings and values the wedding dress still holds for *Québécoises*.

### **Feminist Theory**

Feminist research methods validate women's perspectives and experiences, their personal narratives (Reason & Rowan, 1981). My aim with this study was to enter into a dialogue with women who share a similar cultural background and collect their stories in their diversity and complexity. This method, with its interest in the subjective, multiple, perspectives on reality and constructed truth, is situated in opposition to empirical research methods that claim factual objectivity. Pairing community art with a feminist perspective enabled the group to delve into artistic expression and allowed for their stories and unique cultural perspectives to surface. Feminist research cannot be separated from its socio-political context, and neither can symbols and works of art (Burt, 1996; Eisner, 2008; Worell & Remer, 2003). In this perspective, the researcher is encouraged to state her biases and assumptions which I have done in both the introduction and the discussion sections of this paper (Worrel & Remer, 2003).

Worrel and Remer (2003) suggest that feminist research should, in part, use alternative and collaborative methodology, inquire into context and its meaning, strive to empower women and other minorities, deconstruct hierarchies, and work towards social change. The present exploration of a cultural symbol through community art as research in the context of art therapy answers to all these criteria. It uses a qualitative inquiry method, is empowering female participants through their collaboration and it takes into

account the socio-political context of contemporary Quebec. It looks at marriage, which is traditionally hierarchical with clear gender roles and expectations. By reclaiming a cultural symbol and opening a dialogue on the state of marriage at a time when half of them are ending in divorces, as a research facilitator and art therapist, I have in mind the potential for healing inherent in art making and open dialogue (McNiff, 1998; Régie des rentes du Québec, 2006).

## **Methodology**

### **Community Arts as Research**

Community art as research is process-oriented. It taps into the implicit healing qualities of art-making and its potential for storytelling and meaning making (McNiff, 1998; Seiden, 1988; Slodov, 1992). Collaboration is at the heart of community art projects (Brandt, 2008; Cleveland, 2002). This approach aims to engage, teach, heal and move individuals and groups through a shared creative journey (Cleveland, 2002; Denzin, 2003; Neumark, 2010). Within a feminist perspective, it allows for multiple truths to be voiced and integrated into an artwork that redefines, in the present case, the meanings of a cultural symbol. The role of the artist/art therapist/researcher is to remain open and let the process and the participants guide the research itself as it unfolds before synthesizing its themes and conclusions (McNiff, 1998).

For the present study, I began by defining the, the population and the medium of the inquiry. This was a researcher directed approach, with the group being formed around the research question. The participants joined the group based on their interest in the question and in the approach to the inquiry. This creates a bias since their interest in the

wedding dress and knitting had to be strong enough for them to join the group. This research and its results are therefore unique to this particular group of women. It also put me, the research facilitator in a position of authority. Although I strived to share power and decision making with the group, when it came time to assemble the dress and set up the exhibition, the participants instinctively placed me back in charge. In the end, they felt it was my project. As much as I took their input, they had mixed feelings about ownership. Some participants felt really proud and involved, others were satisfied with having made a more punctual contribution. In a clinical context, I would use a more participatory approach, creating a project in consortium with the community in order to meet their needs and therapeutic goals.

The theme of the wedding dress as a symbol in Quebec's contemporary culture emerged from long reflections on the current state or rather states of the couple and family within my own culture. I chose to work with adult women of French-Canadian, Catholic heritage, using dress-making, more specifically knitting, as the means to explore and question our perception of the wedding dress, hoping it would branch out into the broader themes of family life and values. Along with the participants, I explored the meanings and values the wedding dress holds for each of us through a series of weekly knitting circles held at a cafe and a couple of times at my house. I collected data throughout the inquiry process in the form of the pieces of textiles we created, photographs, answers to questionnaires, personal notes on the group process and discussions. I then analyzed it and synthesized it into an art installation presented to an intergenerational, intercultural audience as the culmination of the project. The following sections present each step of the inquiry in more detail.

## **Participants**

The participants, ten including myself, composed an intergenerational group of *Québécoises*. Each came with different experiences and views on the wedding dress. They had diverse marital statuses: three were single at the time of the study, two were engaged, three were living in common law unions, two were married, one was separated and one had been divorced. Their ages ranged from 24 to 56 years old. Three of the collaborators had children. The number of participants is a limitation on the generalizability of the findings. Their skill sets and personal values and interests dictated the results of the art inquiry itself. Their level of interest, generosity and commitment to the process was crucial.

## **Recruitment**

I recruited the participants through word of mouth, posters and flyers at yarn shops around town, online ads on Ravelry, a knitting forum, and emails to local craft groups and fine arts students' associations at major local universities.

## **Description of the Group Framework**

I met with the group for two and a half hours every week for 10 weeks. It was an open group with a core of three committed, returning participants and guest members. The group was not intended as therapeutic, but rather as a community art research group. Yet, the implicit healing qualities of art making and group dynamic were present. We met at a cafe every Saturday for ten weeks. During this time, we also met at my house twice, once in the middle of the project and once at the end, in order for the women to be included in the process of assembling the wedding dress directly on a dress form. Each

week, I would come home with new pieces and place and replace them on the mannequin, slowly and intuitively designing the gown.

The only constraint I imposed on the participants was the use of white or off-white materials. I chose white for the dress so it would be instantly read as a wedding dress by the viewer, white being the culturally accepted colour for wedding gowns in Quebec since the 1940s (Bouchard, 1998; Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1974; 1975). The participants knitted and crocheted but also spun yarn, sewed lace together, beaded and made macramé pieces for the dress. Their level of generosity, talent, enthusiasm and willingness to share their personal experiences and values far exceeded my expectations.

Each meeting started with a meet and greet followed by the knitting circle during which participants worked freely on textile pieces while sharing through guided discussions. I brought topics for discussion such as our identity as woman, marriage as a rite of passage, the sharing of financial resources and chores. I also brought knitting, sewing and didactic material each week and encouraged skills sharing between the participants.

I brought the question of confidentiality to the group and each participant was given the choice to be named or to remain anonymous. The participants all agreed to be named as my collaborators and have their pictures taken, shown and published. It was important for me to give them the full credit they deserve for this beautiful collaborative creation and give them a sense of agency (Neumark, 2010).

The finished wedding dress and the documentation of the process in the form of photographs and citations were shared with the audience as an art installation. It was exhibited at local galleries for a total of seven weeks. I invited art therapists, artists,

educators, counsellors, fellow knitters, members of the clergy, and the general public to the exhibition. The exhibition served as a celebration of the work accomplished by the collective. It was also a way to continue to engage, with the audience, in a dialogue about the wedding dress as a cultural symbol in Quebec, to see if the meanings that spoke true to the group also rang true to the audience. There was no consensus reached on the specific symbolic value of the wedding dress in contemporary Quebec, but everyone involved expressed their unfaltering belief in long-lasting love and companionship.

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

In art-based research, the art itself is the data (Brandt, 2008; McNiff, 1998). In this study, data consisted of the knit, crochet, lace, and macramé pieces, collected over the weeks and sewn together into one wedding dress. Photographs were taken throughout the creative process and at the exhibition to visually document the study. In addition, participants answered questionnaires and I kept personal notes each week on the topics discussed during the knitting circles. I used a descriptive data analysis approach to extract main themes, values and meaning from our questionnaires and my personal notes on our discussions.

### **Discussion**

The initial categories present in my hypothesis were values, meanings, relationships, commitment, womanhood, motherhood, gender roles, marriage, traditions, customs, rituals, religion, the wedding dress, knitting, group dynamic and personal narratives. The final categories reflect the project members' personal associations with the wedding dress and their personal narratives. In this section, I will look at the main

themes present in the questionnaires and group discussions which reveal the meanings, values and qualities the participants associate with the wedding dress as a cultural symbol. I will also consider the symbolic value of the unique dress we created as a collective, the role of the audience as witness and discuss the limitations of the project, my role as art therapist, artist and research facilitator, and the implications for future research.

### **Themes, Values and Meanings**

First of all, I think it is important to state that the group members unanimously expressed their belief in committed, long-lasting loving relationships. Perhaps this is a bias of anyone who would care enough to join such a project as *The Wedding Dress, a Contemporary Knit*. At the start of this project, I was expecting to find a disregard towards commitment but having gone through personal experiences of loss, separation and divorce did not make this group of Quebecois women blasé. Their desire to embrace life-long companionship is still intact, whether it takes the form of common law union, civil union or marriage. Until death do us part, yes, but not at any cost. The women I interviewed have many options available to them and they value their independence. They said they would not stay in unhappy unions or let themselves be '*aspirée dans une domesticité funeste*' (personal communication, December 6<sup>th</sup> 2010). They would not let either a man or motherhood tie them down. They said they aspire to more than mere domesticity. Let us examine how they have defined contemporary relationships and family life through their collaboration in making a wedding dress.

All the participants said they still believe in the traditional values of respect, commitment and fidelity. They also stated equality, financial independence and a balance

between family life and work as fundamental within their union. The Catholic vow of submission to one's husband has been replaced by a desire to be treated as an equal and to share financial, domestic and child-rearing responsibilities. In her questionnaire, one participant (personal communication, November 4th, 2010) wrote '*C'est important pour moi d'être financièrement indépendante, même si je trouve que c'est formidable de partager son argent dans les moments difficiles. Ça doit être un peu de l'orgueil mais dépendre financièrement de quelqu'un, c'est un peu infantilisant*'. Financial independence was the most crucial point for these women. Even though none of them identified with the career woman persona, they did not want to have to financially rely on someone else, even through child-rearing years. They said they want to be allowed to make their own decisions, including how they choose to spend their money. They would find it belittling to have to ask their partner for spending money the way they had to ask their parents as children and teenagers. These women want to be respected as equals, within a committed, monogamous union.

Even though all the participants hold long-term commitment as an ideal, the group was split in thirds when it came to choosing the type of union: marriage, common law or civil. For some, a religious union was still the only moral option. For others, a civil ceremony was enough. Yet, for a few of them, living together was in itself the mark of commitment and they saw marital status as a legal matter rather than a romantic one. They also commented on the consumerist trend they witness in today's relationships.

The group remarked on the increasing consumption of romantic and sexual involvement - people going from relationship to relationship, using each other. They were all saddened by this state of affairs. Being able to face adversity together and grow

stronger through it is a value my collaborators hold dear. Nonetheless, a couple of them clearly stated that they would not stay in a union in which respect was lacking, that commitment is a choice which comes with rights and responsibilities. Women are no longer chained down by marriage. I think this is why my collaborators all said they hold financial independence as a priority, because Quebec being a Catholic society, divorce was not a well regarded option. A few participants shared how they saw older women in their families sacrificing their identities, being trapped in unsatisfactory unions or driven into poverty and social isolation if they chose to leave and take care of their children on their own. The women I worked with would rather avoid both extremes and live in the healthier zone between self-sacrifice for the sake of the relationship and the avoidance of commitment.

They defined themselves as complex individuals. Each said she takes on many roles such as a woman, worker, wife, partner, mother, daughter, and artist. Seven participants felt strongly about keeping their maiden names if they were to marry, which is currently the legal practice in Quebec. Only one of them said she would go the traditional route and take on her husband's name. Since marriage does not necessarily mark the passage into adulthood anymore, I asked them what that moment might have been for them. The three women who have children all agreed that motherhood and its responsibilities marked the turning point in their identity formation as adult women. The others did not have a clear defining moment. These *Québécoises* viewed themselves as playing many roles, with personalities made of multiple fabrics, each like a beautiful patchwork. No matter the form of union they chose to partake in, they all said they wanted love and commitment. They want to be treated with respect as independent and

equal partners. For them, family still comes first and finding a balance between their home life and their career is an everyday preoccupation.

### **The Wedding Dress and its Symbolic Meaning**

When it came to the symbol of the wedding dress itself, three qualities stood out for the participants: white, simple and summery. The more traditional meanings of virginity, sacred union, devotion and once-in-a-lifetime were only mentioned by two of the participants (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1974; 1975). Another two secularized both the ritual and the dress and have worn or would wear just a nice dress without it having to be white, formal or holding any religious symbolism. I think the choice of a secular celebration or to live within a common law union is a conscious negation of Quebec's religious tradition. As such, it does not take away the sanctity associated with religious marriage and the wedding dress; it simply leaves it as a thing of the past, as someone else's meaning. Youth, to my surprise, was only mentioned by an audience member. Its omission makes sense now that a majority of *Québécoises* marry around age thirty (Institut de la statistique Quebec, 2010). Love, joy and beauty were positive meanings associated with the dress while loss of identity and chains were negative ones. Silk and lace were the only two kinds of fabric mentioned by my collaborators even though the dress we made was constituted mostly of spun cotton and wool.

The participants saw the wedding dress as a reflection of the self, not unlike Chevalier's (1974; 1975) definition of clothing. Half of them wish for it to be unique, preferably hand-made by a family member. All of them live in an urban setting. Half of them say they would like to have a dress hand-made by a female relative or someone they know, while the other half would prefer to buy it ready-to-wear at a boutique. Simplicity

was still an important value for the women I interviewed, but modesty was no longer on the list. One of them even said she wanted her dress to be sexy, with a long, open back. All to say that there was no consensus on the significance of the wedding dress, even though it remains a powerful symbol in each of the participants' psyche, with a mix of traditional and contemporary values attached to it. The group did not talk about the wedding industry, with its expansive gowns and glamorous receptions. I think it must be the craft, do-it-yourself aspect of this community art project that made us steer clear of such a topic in spite of the fact that, in popular culture, we are bombarded with images of marriage.

In the current study, I asked my collaborators to share personal stories about the wedding dress. One such narrative came from a woman who raised children with her partner but never married. It was his decision not to get married. She told us that she once bought a wedding dress she really liked from a second-hand store and went to get professional photographs taken. For her, it was a symbolic way to fulfil her bridal fantasy. Another woman has owned a wedding dress since she was eighteen and wears it every chance she gets, mostly as a zombie bride for Halloween and other themed parties. Yet, someone else told us that she got married in a simple summer dress in Costa Rica with only her partner and a local minister present. One collaborator, who was engaged at the time of the study, said she would like to make her own wedding dress by hand with her mother. She would like to use linen and spin it herself. She said the process of dressmaking means more to her than the resulting piece of clothing itself. Other narratives came during the gallery opening. One of the audience members, a man, asked me if he could wear the dress and later commented that it had fulfilled one of his

fantasies. Another man in the audience said the wedding dress is a powerful symbol for men too, because seeing the woman they love, glowing with happiness, beautiful in her wedding gown, burns an image they cherish for the rest of their lives. Most people seem to carry personal narratives around the wedding dress whether they have ever been married or not. Chevalier (1974; 1975) says almost all religion in the world have a rite for the sacred union between a man and a woman.

The wedding dress we made as a collaboration is very much unique. It reflects the hands and minds of ten *Québécoises* who still believe in love and commitment even though they might not need a priest or a lawyer to put an official seal on their union. The dress is composed of more than two pounds of cotton, hand spun alpaca wool, 100 grams of mohair, a few grams of linen, one hundred eighty grams of silk yarn, one meter of silk skin, dozens of meters of lace, five meters of crinoline and a couple handfuls of buttons and pearls. With its do-it-yourself bohemian chic, it speaks of the mending of hearts and families we stand witness to in contemporary Quebec, while hinting at the deeper riches of the sacred union between two loving people.

I met with my collaborators to knit at a local cafe. This gave our creative process a performance quality. I chose to keep it public in order to enter into a dialogue with members of my community. This is how I recruited most of my participants, by knitting in public and answering questions about the work I was doing, slowly gathering collaborators to sit and create with. I wanted to raise questions about this rite of passage my culture has been putting aside. Together, we performed a symbolic act by creating a wedding in a public space. It brought about a sense of agency by provoking discussions, self-reflections and by inspiring some participants to take action in their day to day life to

move forward with wedding plans, make peace with old wounds and redefine their current relationship or expectations for future partnerships. I truly believe that it is the community arts as research approach of this inquiry that allowed the participants to go beyond dialogue, into action and transformation (Clark, 1991; Denzin, 2003; Neumark 2010).

As a community building project, I saw sharing happen and friendships emerge over the weeks. There was a spirit of creativity and generosity present throughout the meetings. A couple of other collaborative knitting projects were born within the four months of this initiative and everyone said they would like to collaborate again on other craftivist endeavours. There was a great sense of camaraderie in the group and a lot of skill sharing took place between the women. I think the knitting circle proved successful at bringing people together into a creative endeavour, having them share personal stories, form bonds and come out changed.

At the end of the project, I practiced McNiff's (1998) technique of engaging with the art object in a first person in an 'imaginative dialogue' (p.147). In his description of art-based research processes, McNiff includes this reflective practice to extract personal meaning and reflect upon the artwork in a way that allows discovery on a deeper, more intimate level than 'interpretations of images according to pre-existing theories' (p.148).

I asked myself what does the wedding dress my collaborators and I created has to say about Quebecois culture. Does it have a name? I called her Beatrice, she who is blessed and brings joy (Swan, 1973). Fragmented and mending are the two words that imposed themselves for me in this dialogue. Beatrice longs to reclaim her sacredness and be held with dignity and respect. It saddens her to reflect upon the abuse and sacrifices

that have been made in her name. She wants to give, to give life, to give joy. She wants to heal the wounds of childhood and nurture resilience, strength, belonging and compassionate love within the new family unit she represents the creation of. If she has been set aside, she has not forgotten what she stands for. Like a swan, she is a graceful symbol of transformation, purity and love (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1974; 1975). Her wings are wounded. She needs nurturing and healing. As a culture, she says, we need to heal our broken hearts, mend our family ties, bridge the gap between men and women, redefine gender roles, the definition the word family to include all the colours of the rainbow of filial bonds. We live in a time of transformation in which each couple, each family is given an array of choices like never before. It can be confusing, but in the end, love and commitment should remain the thread between all the different pieces and layers of the family fabric. This process of engaging directly with the dress brought me deeper into the meaning making journey and revealed core values. Since the feminist and the quiet revolution, my culture has been redefining what it means to be a couple and a family, for better and for worst.

### **The exhibition and the role of the witness**

For the exhibition, I combined the finished dress with visual documentation of the collaborative creative process and quotes from the questionnaires. The resulting art installation was presented to an audience of mixed professional and cultural backgrounds. I aimed to evoke a sense of sacredness and authenticity. As Leavy (2008) suggests, the audience provides a source of credibility by giving feedback on the work and its truthfulness. Art can stimulate dialogue by provoking an emotional response in the viewers hence encouraging them to explore their own inner connections to the

wedding dress (Eisner, 2008; McNiff, 1998). The goal was not to find and support one meaning, one truth, but rather to explore the multiple layers of meanings and plural inner realities and personal experiences linked to the wedding gown within the contemporary Quebecois context. The role of the audience or witness in the present inquiry was to bridge the personal experiences of the group members with the universality of the audience and see if it rang true (Moustakas, 1990). There was no consensus on the meaning of the wedding dress as a symbol in contemporary Quebecois culture, but universal themes of love, relationship, and an aura of sacredness was evoked in both participants and the audience members.

The project was a success at inciting an emotional response in viewers and prompting dialogue and personal sharing as Eisner (2008) suggests is the role of artwork. My role for the exhibition was to set the stage for the display of the group's creative process and the dress. I found the gallery space and organized the display of the work in the space. Also, I created a safe place and atmosphere for dialogue and reflection. Half of the group members attended the exhibition. They shared stories and answered questions from audience members, extending on the dialogue we started during the knitting circles. They reacted with pride and enthusiasm to the installation. The exhibition and the interaction with the audience provided the participants with a sense of their identity as artists, as being the makers of this artwork. For some, it was a reaffirmation. For others, it was a brand new experience. They also had the opportunity to verbalize their experience of the collaboration and share their personal views on the wedding dress, deepening the meaning making experience by naming and storytelling. The finished dress itself evoked a sense of beauty, pride and charm in the participants. It turned out to be impossible to

find one date for all of the collaborators to be present at the gallery opening. The ones who could not attend had either prior engagements or unforeseen health problems. They expressed sadness because they were so proud of our collaboration and wished they could have been there. The role of the audience was to give feedback on the emotional response the dress evoke in them and reflect upon the meanings the group associated with it to see if they rang true. They did this through informal conversations with the collaborators and written comments left in the guestbook. Audience members shared fantasies and cherished memories evoked by the wedding dress. A couple of women reacted strongly to the quote from a participant: ‘*aspirées par une domesticité funeste*’ (personal communication, December 4<sup>th</sup>, 2010). They thought it was a really gloomy perspective on marriage and family life. As a whole, the audience shared mostly joyful stories and reactions to the installation. I think they gave validation to the group’s creative process by being touched and by sharing a sense of beauty and entering into a dialogue about a symbol and its meanings. In the future, I hope to continue to engage in such dialogues as an art therapist, artists and research facilitator.

### **Limitations**

The main limitation of this research project is its number of participants. Ten voices do not define a culture. They only give hints of what the bigger picture might be. My sample is diverse in age and life experience, but it is short of people who are part of same-sex unions and limited to women. Same-sex marriage has been legal in Quebec since 2002. Future inquiries should aim to reflect this reality and also give a voice to our male counterparts. Also, the fact that the group was kept open and that participants did not attend every meeting placed a limitation on the depth of the inquiry. I was able to

collect only fragments of personal meanings and narratives from each of the participants. I strongly recommend forming a strong, committed, closed group for future research projects, unless the goal is to collect individual narratives without the community-building orientation. The findings cannot be generalized, yet they prepare the ground for future studies by opening a dialogue about a cultural symbol. The methodology strives to integrate the roles of art therapy, artist and research facilitator which should also be a goal of future research in the field of creative art therapies.

### **Art Therapist-Artist-Researcher Roles**

As an artist-research facilitator I created a space for *Québécoises* to come together and explore the symbol of the wedding dress through a collaborative art-making project. I gave them a space to let their voices be heard and let them guide the inquiry, although I gave my all when it came time to knit and sew the dress together and set up the art installation at the gallery. In the feedback I received from group members after the exhibition, I realized that we all came out of this experience changed. Clark (1991) writes about the process of shifting perspectives. The author names three levels that can be affected by change; psychological perspectives, convictions or beliefs and behaviours. I believe that all three levels of transformation were present in the group process. For example, one woman was inspired to finally fix the date of her wedding for the following summer. Another realized just how much she values the companionship that long-term commitment offers, although before the inquiry she saw it as a ball and chain. For my part, on the one hand I realized just how much of marriage is a legal act, which made it lose some of the romance I attach to it. On the other hand, I caught myself daydreaming, especially when it came time to plan the exhibition and send out all the invitations for the

gallery opening. It has definitely changed the way I engage with people around me to reflect a renewed belief in the sacredness of love and family ties.

I have always loved textiles and, growing up, I used to dream of becoming a designer. Through this inquiry, I was able to integrate my identities as art therapist, artist and researcher. I really embrace all aspects of these roles and embodied them through the performative gestures of knitting, listening, reading and writing. I learned a lot about the healing qualities of art making, performance and collaboration. This process rooted me deeper in my calling towards studio art practice as therapy. Even though this community art project was not intended as group therapy, I personally experienced healing through the symbolic reappropriation of the wedding dress as a symbol. The making of the wedding turned out to be a process of sublimating loss for me, white also being the colour of mourning (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1974; 1975). I also learned that my primary interest as a clinician lies in group dynamic, studio approach and embodied techniques. It was an act of deconstruction and restructuring. The wedding dress always held a special place in my imagination as the most glamorous, beautiful, meaningful and extravagant gown. It is simply so much more than a dress. I believe that when they make their choice of a wedding gown, women say yes to a life partner, a lifestyle, a family and to a community while expressing their values and personalities. It remains a powerful symbol to this day.

### **Contributions to the field**

This research project adds to the literature on the use of knitting and fibres as an art medium in art therapy. This inquiry encourages art therapists to use the community art model for healing and to strive to integrate their roles and identities as art therapists,

artists and researchers. Community art as research is closely related to the studio approach in art therapy. Moon (2002), writes about the studio approach and say “arts remains central to all facets of the work, including: conceptual understandings; attempts to understand clients; creation of the therapeutic space; development of treatment methods; interaction with clients; and communications that occur in relation to the work (p.22).” Art is also central to community art-based research. The researcher engages in art making along with a group of collaborators as a way to understand and answer the research question. They create new knowledge through the creative process.

Collaborative art-making is the methodology, the central point around which participants interact and enter into dialogue. To partake in either community art as research or studio art therapy is to use the arts as a mean of knowing and interacting with the world.

Collaboration is central to this community art as research project (Brandt, 2008). Working in collaboration on a specific theme helped open and focus the dialogue between the participants. It fostered an atmosphere of sharing. The group came together to engage creatively with a symbol in a cooperative, meaning making exercise. Cleveland (2002) suggests that the four main goals of community art are to teach, mobilize, heal people and build stronger communities. These can translate directly into long-term therapeutic goals. In an art therapy context, the group and its theme can be tailored to meet the specific needs of a community through collaborative art making. This model can bring people together to act symbolically on an issue that has social ramifications such as living with HIV/AIDS, the collective trauma of violent crimes such as a school shooting or the protection of the environment. It can engage participants in a way that promotes social action, inclusion, community building, healing and a broadening of viewpoints that

can bring about more compassion and less rigidity. Knitted art and installations but also quilts and murals are examples of collaborative art therapy projects.

In the present inquiry, knitting allowed for group interactions based on common interest and skill sharing. This promoted community building and positive social interactions that went beyond the formal group meetings. There is little in the therapy literature on knitting and fibres arts. Curtis (2005) gathers anecdotal stories of the use of knitting with patients following strokes, separations or losses. As a therapeutic tool, I think knitting in a group setting can boost self-esteem through mastery of skill and skill sharing. It can improve fine motor skills, reduce anxiety by providing a rhythmic, meditative activity and nurture resilience (Curtis, 2005). The knitting circle as group therapy can be a safe environment to express feelings through both art making and discussions. Knitting does not require one's full attention, therefore conversations can flow while clients engage in art making. It can be used as a non-threatening primer for art therapy in settings such as long term care units, community centres for women or prison. Knitting can be both process and product oriented. It is a slow creative endeavour and therefore it demands an investment that most likely goes beyond the time of the formal sessions. This kind of approach breaks the usual therapeutic frame. It is best suited for settings where the creation and strengthening of long term community bonds is part of the goals. Knitting can become a transitional object that the clients take with them between sessions and a skill they keep with them long after the therapeutic intervention. The art that is hence created can take on many functions.

Knitting, as a creative process, holds implicit healing potential (McNiff, 1998; Moon, 2002; Slodov, 1992). Personally, I have experienced its soothing quality and have

made peace with old wounds through the complex, symbolic act of knitting a wedding dress with a group of women. Knitting and fibres can be used to make symbolic objects that act as container for strong emotions and projections. In clinical settings, it has potential for exploring issues such as attachment wounds. Knitted objects can be abstract, figurative, symbolic, playful or practical. Projects can be individual or collaborative. I think it could be used with mothers who are separated from their children through life circumstances such as prison or addiction treatment. The bond between them and their children, their identity as women and mothers could be explored through the making of knitted or soft fabric objects that are reminiscent of play, childhood, warmth, the body and nurturance. Textiles have a strong potential for storytelling because they are so familiar and evocative of memories (Turner, 2009). It could open the door to their embodied experience of childhood, motherhood, connectedness and separation. Yet, the choice of medium remains a very personal one. Knitting and fibres will be attractive and engaging only to some.

My research collaborators were eager to knit and sew. Their shared interest made it easy to enter into dialogue and form bonds. They came out of the collaborative creative process transformed. Both the group process and the hands on work with fibres contributed to a change in the way they think of the wedding dress and the contemporary couple. Clark (1991) suggests three levels on which transformation operates: psychological perspective, convictions and beliefs and behaviours. Some participants changed their perspective on marriage from a romantic gesture to a legal venture. Others had their convictions confirmed, while others challenged traditional beliefs such as gender roles. Others said they started making plans for their own wedding, or changed

their behaviour towards their partner in ways that reflected a renewed belief in long-term commitment. Yet, for others, it was a symbolic act of hope and optimism and the fulfilment of a fantasy. These shifts happened through engaging with the research question verbally and non-verbally for a sustained period of time, by being exposed to each other points of view and reworking this cultural symbol with one's hands, stitch by stitch. This group process could be used to explore and reclaim other powerful cultural symbols, especially while working with minorities, native populations or cultural wounds. Participatory art promotes a sense of agency and can help empower communities (Denzin, 2003; Neumark, 2010). The use of fibre arts in community projects is a model for creative art therapists that taps into the healing potential of art making, storytelling and group dynamic.

This research project also provides an example of how the roles of art therapists, artists and researcher can be integrated. I agree with McNiff (2000) and his endeavour to unite these roles rather than to see them as separate. I hope to encourage more creative art therapists to continue to make art for themselves in order to reflect, heal, play and grow.

In summary, this inquiry contributes to the literature on the use of knitting and fibre arts as therapeutic tools and the creation of community art projects within the context of art therapy. It also speaks of the search for a way to combine the different roles and demands of being an art therapist, an artist and a researcher. It also opens the door to more research on these three aspects and on the use of cultural symbols for healing and the wedding dress.

## **Implications for Future Research**

Future research could take on many avenues. As I mentioned earlier, the wedding industry and its marketing could be deconstructed to extract values promoted within popular culture. Personally, I would like to collect hundreds of interviews asking women of all cultural backgrounds about their wedding dress and its personal significance - the one they had or dream of having. Future research can explore what men have to say, especially in Quebec, about marriage, love and commitment. It can further the use of fibre arts in the field of art therapy and its potential for sublimation. It can look at the therapeutic potential for using collaborative textile projects such as quilting bees, knitting circles and doll-making as primers for group therapy, because of their great potential for storytelling and community building. There is still much to be written about integrating the roles of art therapist, artist and research facilitator. Such research would be of great interest to art therapist, artists and educators.

## **Conclusion**

*The Wedding Dress, a Contemporary Knit*, as a community art-based inquiry, revealed the meanings and values held by ten *Québécoises* on the topic of the wedding dress and contemporary relationships. The art-based inquiry methodology is open-ended (McNiff, 1998). This realization informed and transformed the end product of this research as my collaborators and I went along and remained open to the influences of the process and to each other. Within a feminist perspective, it made available personal meanings and narratives associated with the wedding dress.

Knitting provided the common thread to make these women come together and sit at a cafe over a period of four months. It proved successful in creating a sense of

belonging and camaraderie. Our different voices came together like the different pieces of the dress to form one cohesive, though not always harmonious whole. Together, through needle work, guided discussions and questionnaires, we explored our sense of identity as women, our beliefs in terms of the wedding dress, and also commitment, love, legal issues, parenthood, money, art making, and the challenges we face in finding a balance between all the roles we take on and the responsibilities attached to them. Having a witness in the audience that came to see the art installation at the gallery and the customers at the café who inquired about our work created a sense of agency in my collaborators, promoted dialogue and gave us insights on the echoing truths we found together.

Through this project, I strived to integrate my roles and identities as art therapist, artist and researcher. I learned that they could be all embodied through participatory art-based research. I experienced first hand the implicit healing potential of art making by part taking into this ritualistic knitting circle and exploring the wedding dress as a cultural symbol and marriage as a rite of passage. I also learned to value the power of rituals within the context of art therapy.

The conclusions I reached with my collaborators can not be generalized to Quebecois culture as a whole, but I think it is fair to conclude that even though customs have changed and fewer people choose to get married in Quebec, the wedding dress remains an enduring symbol of love and commitment in this culture's collective unconscious.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Letter of Introduction

#### Lettre d'information pour le projet de recherche artistique sur la robe de mariée comme symbole culturel dans un Québec contemporain.

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##### BUT DE LA RECHERCHE

Le but de cette recherche est de collaborer pour créer une robe de mariée unique, tricotée à la main. Ce processus de création permettra aux participantes d'explorer les significations symboliques et les valeurs que les Québécoises attachent à une telle robe, et ce dans un contexte contemporain.

##### PROCÉDURES

La recherche se fera dans le cadre d'un cercle de tricot, tenu à Montréal. Les rencontres auront lieu de manière hebdomadaire sur une période de 10 semaines. Chaque rencontre sera de deux heures et demi. Marilène fournira le matériel nécessaire au travail : livres de patrons, aiguilles, fil, etc. Les participantes seront invitées à contribuer du matériel sur une basse volontaire. A la fin de chaque rencontre, il y aura une vingtaine de minutes allouées à un court questionnaire sur le processus de création. Les participantes n'ont pas besoin d'expérience en tricot ou en couture pour participer au groupe, seulement un désir d'apprendre et de partager.

Ce groupe n'est pas un groupe de thérapie mais bien un collaboratif artistique. Il y aura possibilité d'être référée à un service d'écoute si le besoin se fait ressentir.

Le matériel créé pendant les ateliers avec Marilène Gaudet sera photographié et/ou décrit dans sa dissertation. Aussi, les propos et les réponses écrites aux questionnaires pourront être directement utilisés dans sa dissertation.

Le nom des collaboratrices artistique, participantes, sera publié, sauf si ces dernières précises vouloir garder l'anonymat sur leur formulaire de consentement.

##### CONDITIONS DE PARTICIPATION

Les participantes peuvent retirer leur consentement et interrompre leur participation à tout moment, sans conséquences négatives.

Les participantes doivent être des femmes Québécoises, d'origine Canadienne-Française.

La robe de mariée et les matériaux connexes demeurent la propriété de Marilène Gaudet pendant tout le processus de recherche ainsi que par la suite.

Les données de cette étude seront publiées dans la dissertation de Marilène Gaudet et seront présentées en public lors d'une exposition-performance artistique à la fin du processus de création.

Si vous avez des questions concernant le **fonctionnement** de l'étude, S.V.P contacter la responsable du projet : Marilène Gaudet, wildflower987@gmail.com

Si vous avez des questions concernant vos **droits** en tant que participants à l'étude, S.V.P. contactez Brigitte Des Rosier PhD, conseillère en éthique de la recherche, Université Concordia, au 514-848-2424 poste 7481 ou par courriel au bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca

## **Appendix B: Consent Form**

### Formulaire de consentement de participation à une recherche artistique sur la robe de mariée comme symbole culturel dans un Québec contemporain.

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Par la présente, je déclare consentir à participer à un programme de recherche mené par Marilène Gaudet du département de Creative Arts Therapies de l'Université Concordia, 1395 René Lévesque Blvd. O., Montréal, QC, H3G 2M5.

#### **BUT DE LA RECHERCHE**

On m'a informée du but de la recherche, soit de collaborer pour créer une robe de mariée unique, tricotée à la main. Ce processus de création permettra d'explorer les significations symboliques et les valeurs que les Québécoises attachent à cette robe dans un contexte contemporain.

#### **PROCÉDURES**

La recherche se fera dans le cadre d'un cercle de tricot, tenu au centre-ville de Montréal. Les rencontres auront lieu de manière hebdomadaire sur une période de 10 semaines. Chaque rencontre sera de deux heures. Marilène fournira le matériel nécessaire au travail : livres de patrons, aiguilles, fil, etc. Les participantes seront invitées à contribuer du matériel sur une basse volontaire. A la fin de chaque rencontre, il y aura une vingtaine de minutes pour remplir un court questionnaire sur le processus de création. Je comprends que je n'ai pas besoin d'expérience en tricot et en couture pour participer au groupe. Je dois seulement avoir le désir d'apprendre et de partager.

Je comprends que ce groupe n'est pas un groupe de thérapie mais bien un collaboratif artistique. Je comprends que je peut-être référée a un service d'écoute si le besoin se fait ressentir.

Je consens à ce que le matériel créé pendant les ateliers avec Marilène Gaudet soit photographié et/ou décrit dans sa dissertation. Je consens aussi à ce que mes propos et mes réponses écrites aux questionnaires soient utilisés dans sa dissertation.

Je comprends que mon nom sera publié en tant que collaboratrice artistique sauf si je préfère que celui-ci demeure confidentiel.

#### **CONDITIONS DE PARTICIPATION**

- Je comprends que je puis retirer mon consentement et interrompre ma participation à tout moment, sans conséquences négatives.
- Je comprends que la robe de mariée et les matériaux connexes demeurent la propriété de Marilène Gaudet pendant tout le processus de recherche ainsi que par la suite.
- Je comprends que ma participation à cette étude est

NON CONFIDENTIELLE (c.-à-d. mon identité sera révélée avec les résultats de l'étude)

Sauf si j'indique ici que je préfère rester dans l'anonymat

- Je comprends que les données de cette étude puissent être publiées
- Je comprends le but de la présente étude ; je sais qu'elle ne comprend pas de motifs cachés dont je n'aurais pas été informée.

J'AI LU ATTENTIVEMENT CE QUI PRÉCÈDE ET JE COMPRENDS LA NATURE DE L'ENTENTE. JE CONSENS LIBREMENT ET VOLONTAIREMENT À PARTICIPER À CETTE ÉTUDE.

NOM (caractères d'imprimerie) \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

Montréal, le \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE de la responsable \_\_\_\_\_

Si vous avez des questions concernant le **fonctionnement** de l'étude, S.V.P contacter le responsable du projet. Marilène Gaudet, wildflower987@gmail.com

Si vous avez des questions concernant vos **droits** en tant que participants à l'étude, S.V.P. contactez Brigitte Des Rosier PhD, conseillère en éthique de la recherche, Université Concordia, au 514-848-2424 poste 7481 ou par courriel au bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca

## Appendix C : Consent Form for Audio-Visual Documentation

Formulaire de consentement audio-visuel dans le cadre de la recherche artistique sur la robe de mariée comme symbole culturel dans un Québec actuel.

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Par la présente, je déclare consentir à être photographiée et filmée lors de ma participation au programme de recherche mené par Marilène Gaudet du département de Creative Arts Therapies de l'Université Concordia, 1395 René Lévesque Blvd. O., Montréal, QC, H3G 2M5.

Je, \_\_\_\_\_, consens à la documentation des rencontres sur support :

- Photographique
- Vidéo
- Audio seulement

Et ce, pour fins de publication

- Dans le mémoire de maîtrise de Marilène Gaudet
- Lors d'une exposition ou performance artistique en liens avec le projet
- Lors d'une conférence ou un colloque portant sur l'art-thérapie

J'AI LU ATTENTIVEMENT CE QUI PRÉCÈDE ET JE COMPRENDS LA NATURE DE L'ENTENTE. JE CONSENS LIBREMENT ET VOLONTAIREMENT.

Nom (caractères d'imprimerie) : \_\_\_\_\_

Adresse : \_\_\_\_\_

Numéro de téléphone : \_\_\_\_\_

Signature : \_\_\_\_\_

Montréal, le \_\_\_\_\_

Si vous avez des questions concernant le **fonctionnement** de l'étude, S.V.P contacter **Marilène Gaudet, wildflower987@gmail.com ou au 514-303-5728**

Si vous avez des questions concernant vos **droits** en tant que participants à l'étude, S.V.P. contactez Brigitte Des Rosier PhD, conseillère en éthique de la recherche, Université Concordia, au 514-848-2424 poste 7481 ou par courriel au [bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:bdesrosi@alcor.concordia.ca)

## Addendix D : Copy of Poster



### Nouveau groupe de tricot! automne 2010

Project de recherche  
collaboratif en art thérapie sur la  
robe de mariée comme symbole  
culturel au Québec, aujourd'hui.

∞ Ouvert aux femmes d'origines  
canadiennes françaises, de tous  
les âges

∞ débutantes et expertes en  
tricot et en couture sont les  
bienvenues

∞ dans un environnement de  
partage amicale

∞ rencontre hebdomadaire de  
septembre a décembre 2010

∞ animée par une étudiante à la  
maîtrise en art thérapie,  
passionnée par le monde des  
fibres, du tricot et de la haute  
couture.

∞ contactez Marilène Gaudet

## **Appendix E : Questionnaire #1**

### **Questionnaire #1**

**Questions sur votre parcours personnel**

**date** \_\_\_\_\_

Quel est votre âge?

Quelle est votre occupation principale en ce moment?

Etes-vous mariée? Oui ou Non          L'avez-vous déjà été? Oui ou Non

Avez-vous des enfants? Oui ou Non si oui, combien et quel âge ont-ils?

Quelle est votre expérience personnelle avec la robe de mariée?

(par exemple, je n'ai jamais été mariée mais quand j'étais petite, j'aimais aller au grenier pour porter la robe de mariée de ma mère ou j'ai confectionné la robe de ma fille, etc.)

Quels sont les premiers mots qui vous viennent à l'esprit quand vous pensez à une robe de mariée?

Avez-vous de l'expérience avec le tricot, le crochet ou la couture?

Quelles sont vos attentes par rapport au groupe de recherche en création?

## **Appendix F : Questionnaire #2**

### **Questionnaire #2**

Q. Quelles sont, pour vous, les valeurs rattachées à la famille québécoise, traditionnellement et aujourd'hui? Ex : les familles traditionnellement nombreuses, la religion, etc.

Q. Qui considérez-vous comme faisant partie de votre famille? À qui pensez-vous quand je dis le mot famille?

Q. Comment le contexte urbain et les technologies de communications affectent votre concept de la famille et de communauté?

## **Appendix G : Questionnaire #3**

### **Questionnaire #3**

Au Québec, lorsqu'un couple décide d'habiter ensemble, trois options se présentent : le mariage, l'union civile et l'union de fait.

A. Lors de l'échange de consentement dans le mariage catholique, il y est question de fidélité, de soumission de la mariée au mari, des responsabilités en tant que parents et de l'engagement pour la vie.

B. Dans le code civile, l'union civile engage les personnes à 'une obligation mutuelle de respect, de fidélité, de secours et d'assistance. Elles sont tenues de faire vie commune comme les époux. Elles ont également les mêmes droits et les mêmes obligations que les personnes mariées' (Ministère de la justice du Québec, 2010).

C. Dans le code civile, les conjoints de fait n'ont pas les mêmes droits et obligations que les époux, par exemple il n'y a pas de patrimoine familial. Cependant, il est stipulé que 'tous les parents, peu importe la forme de leur union, doivent subvenir aux besoins essentiels de leurs enfants'(Ministère de la justice du Québec, 2010).

Q1. Qu'est-ce qui vous attire ou vous rebute dans ces trois définitions? Laquelle vous attire le plus? Y a-t-il des changements que vous aimeriez y voir apporter?

Q2. Pour vous, est-ce que l'engagement est une question de vivre ensemble, d'être marier ou d'avoir des enfants.

Q3. Qu'est-ce que vous pensez du vœux traditionnel d'être ensemble dans la richesse et la pauvreté, dans la santé et la maladie, jusqu'à ce que la mort vous sépare?

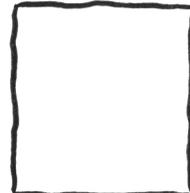
Q4. Vous considérez-vous comme une femme de carrières? Et si vous avez ou auriez des enfants, continueriez-vous à travailler? À temps plein ou à temps partiel?

Est-ce que c'est important pour vous d'être indépendante financièrement?

Appendix H : Copy of Exhibition Invitations



La ROBE de MARIÉE / the WEDDING DRESS  
 UN TRICOT CONTEMPORAIN / A CONTEMPORARY KNIT  
 VERNISSAGE 1h ~ 5h PM EXHIBITION  
 le dimanche 6 février — 2011 — Sunday, February 6<sup>th</sup>  
 @ La Friche, espace 308 (Belgo Bldg.)  
 372 Ste-Catherine O.  
 MONTREAL, QC.



artist/researcher : MARILÈNE GAUDET, MA Art Therapy

collaboratrices : ISABELLE DENIS, KARINE FOURNIER,  
 EMILIE HARLAUX, CARINE JANELLE - THIBODEAU,  
 EMILIE LAPOINTE VILLEMURE, CAMILLE LAROSÉ,  
 ISABELLA LEMAIRE, DANIELLE POIRIER,  
 CHANTAL SNEATH, GAËLLE TROUDE.

postcard by IVAN KLIPSTEIN... inkrythm.com

## Figures



Figure 1. Knitting at the café



Figure 2. Knitting, sewing and beading at the café



Figure 3. The train in progress



Figure 4. The dress in progress



Figure 5. The exhibition: quotes



Figure 6. The exhibition: process and quotes



Figure 7. The dress at gallery La Friche, February 2011



Figure 8. Dress detail