

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Knit 2 Purl 1, Poems To Keep You Warm
(You Wool Love It)

by
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Introduction

As far as nontraditional theses go, I think my project qualifies for that category. Writing poetry, converting the poems to binary, then knitting that binary (0 being a knit stitch and 1 being a purl stitch) into a scarf—that is certainly far from the work I have been doing for my experimental track psychology degree. The idea came from me wanting to find something that wasn't entirely based in my major's academics; I wanted my thesis to be more eclectic, like the honors classes I have taken—Food and Film and the End of the World, Harry Potter and Fashion and Print, A Dark and Stormy Night and Cryptography. The honors program here has helped me expand my interests outside my major in ways that made it really fun to learn.

I always chose honors classes which fostered academic learning, but through my hobbies. When thinking about what I wanted to do to represent myself as an honors student I wanted to do the same, and make two hobbies of mine intellectual: writing poetry and knitting. I have written poetry for years to help me voice feelings and ideas that are difficult to express. Knitting has been a creative stress outlet for me throughout college. The idea to combine knitting, poetry, and binary was planted by an acquaintance of mine, who during my junior year was learning how to illusion knit. Illusion knitting, also called shadow knitting, is similar in concept to lenticular images: when viewed from an angle the knitting shows an image that isn't there when viewed head on. That idea of hidden messages in knitting stuck with me and led me to the idea of knitting poetry.



Image source: Risager Lisa. Shadow knitting viewed from the side. *Wikimedia Commons*, Nov. 2012, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shadow_knit_2.jpg

Poetry

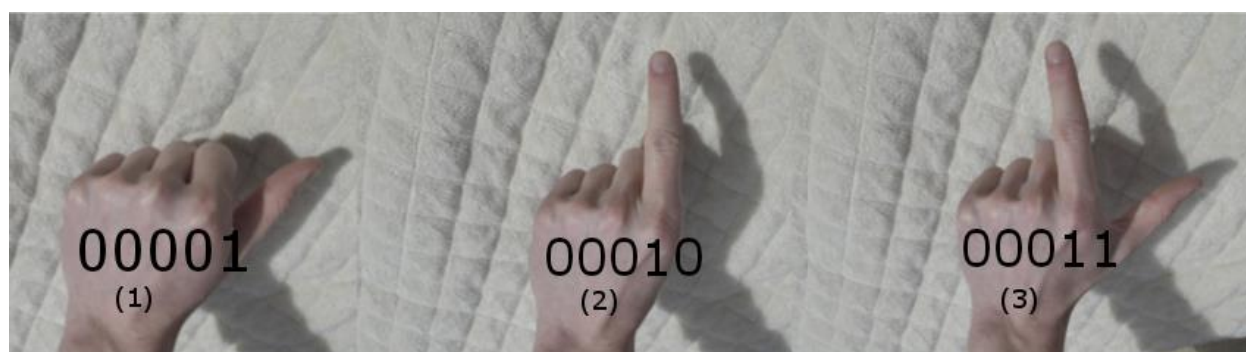
Each of the three poems I wrote for my honors thesis conveys a complicated emotional idea that I wanted to capture in words. I wrote the first poem, *Winter's Warmth*, when I was trying to fall back in love with winter and its less than nine hours of sunlight per-day. My mother and I sometimes call ourselves deciduous trees, meaning that we need to take breaks—take winters—to recuperate. I started to think about how winter is a time of required rest for the world, where Mother Winter tucks in the world, her child, for a long rest.

The second poem was about a moment I had with my then boyfriend; we hadn't spoken for hours but had a connection. With the formatting of the poem I tried to convey how our connection grew: I increased every line by one syllable.

The final poem is actually the oldest of the three. I wrote this poem after an interaction I had with one of my relatives. I love this person, but their use of a slur—half jest, half serious—left me feeling betrayed and angry. I didn't feel comfortable addressing the incident at the time. Instead, I wrote a poem.

Binary

My dad taught me binary when I was younger because of birthday candles. We only had 5 candles, but we needed to represent the age of 30. My dad taught me to count in binary, using his fingers, so we could make sure to not disappoint Mom on her birthday. Without this tactile way of teaching binary counting, I would have struggled to understand. I needed a visual/tactile way of learning this new foreign number system. When he held up his thumb, that was number one (1). To represent number two, he put down his thumb and raised his index finger (10). Number three required both thumb and index finger (11). Number four was just the middle finger (100), and five was the middle and thumb (101). This kept going until thirty, with every finger raised except the thumb (11110).



This simple explanation of binary set the stage for me to better understand the workings of neurons when they came up in my studies here at Alfred. It is hard to

conceptualize that something so important can only be on or off, yet that is basically how our nerves work; they are firing or they're not. It's a very similar concept to how binary works, either the number's place is on (1) or it's off (0), yet that allows us to do so many things, from simple counting to complex calculations; from composing a thesis on my computer to streaming a movie over the internet.

Translation

Translation is complicated. Every language has words that encompass big ideas which another language isn't able to capture within a single word. The formatting of poetry, for me, is an example of a complicated translation. How do you translate a poem's formatting (indentations and line changes, for example) into a scarf while still making it wearable? I could have gone through the process of making the formatting visual in the scarf, but would that have been a more accurate translation than just using the binary codes for the formatting in my knitting? For the sake of making a functional translation—a functional scarf—I decided that using the binary code for the formatting would work better. Something was lost in translation, but no matter what choice I made on the matter, that would have been true.

Although something may have been lost, I do believe that the emotions from my poetry passed through the multiple translations and made it into my scarves. My emotions first passed through my “binary” neurons into written poetry. Then I translated those poems into binary, the “language” of computers. Finally, through the use of medium, I created a new “language” with my scarves. They may not be a particularly intelligible “language,” but I think my scarves do convey my humanity. There is a sense

of humanity brought out despite—or perhaps because of—the translation through binary that happened to make the scarves; it felt very much to me like an added layer of poetry within the project.

When I started the process of my thesis I knew that I would not have the time to convert all the letters in the poetry myself. I used a text to binary converter which sped up the process which can be found here: “Text to Binary Translator.” Text to Binary Converter, RapidTables, www.rapidtables.com/convert/number/ascii-to-binary.html.

Dyeing

I wanted the yarn to be hand dyed to bring an even more personal touch to the whole project. Color is very pivotal to our visual communication (e.g. red for anger and love and stop signs). I thought it was necessary for the color of my scarfs to portray the color of the emotion I was going to be conveying. I wanted “Winter’s Warmth” to look like snow in the early morning when everything is blue. There is also the common connection of water with blue and with that brings a calming connection. Red is a very confusing color when its two most popular meanings, love and anger, are often treated as opposites of each other. I thought this would be fitting for “U.S.Gay”, as both love and anger are pivotal and coexisting in that poem. Purple was my first choice for “My Artichoke”; it has a long history of being associated with wealth due to natural purple dyes being hard to come across, and nothing makes my life feel richer than being loved (More on the history of purple can be found here: <https://www.history.com/news/why-is-purple-considered-the-color-of-royalty>). It was fitting though, when the dye took differently to the yarn, making it mottled with calming blue.

I had only dyed yarn once before this project, so it was a mostly new experience for me and the first batch almost made me rethink dyeing yarn altogether; I completely ruined the yarn I was dying. When I finally got the process to work, I felt that the imperfections and inconsistencies in the dyeing subtly added to the emotional meaning, for nothing human is perfect; something that never could have been accomplished if I had not dyed the yarn myself.

Knitting

Knitting is something I think people don't realize is around them all the time. Most fabrics that are stretchy are, in fact, knit. Machine knitting does look slightly different from hand knitting, because of how smooth and even all the stitches are. Knitting has two baseline stitches, knit and purl. This made knitting easy to translate into machine language, binary, through using punch cards, stiff paper that had data stored on them through the presence or absence of holes in specific positions. Although punch cards are better known for their use in early computers, knitting machines were actually some of the first machines to use punch cards (more information on punch cards can be found here: <https://www.computerhistory.org/storageengine/punched-cards-control-jacquard-loom/>). For my translation, since knit is the default stitch, knit became the 0 (the "off" position) in binary and purl because the 1 (the "on" position). Knitting is a prime medium to carry my poetry; I like the way my ideas can flow through the scarf. Knitting is, after all, just a bunch of loops in one long piece of yarn.

Summary

Knit 2 Purl 1, Poems to keep you warm (you wool love it) was a labor of love. The project was part of my commitment to being a nontraditional Honors student, as is encouraged here at Alfred University. I took two of my hobbies that I didn't have an academic outlet for and transformed them into a project that I could be proud to present to the school. I made poetry tactile through knitting after a process of translation from words to binary to knit and purl stitches and, finally, scarfs

When I started this project, I never expected just how much I would be able to relate the project back to my other academics. As I knit my scarfs, I realized my honors thesis had a number of connections to my psychology degree. Being able to use this project to help explain neurons and computers was a happy accident that help make it even more powerful for myself. A string (or yarn) of fate you might say, showing me how everything is more connected than might seem at first.

Artist's statement

The human brain fascinates me. I don't completely understand how computers turn binary numbers into everything that they do, and we as humans also don't understand how the neurons in our brains—which act like a computer in that they are either “on” or “off”; they are firing or not—translate into what it is to be human. I took inspiration from this mysterious translation process for my project, taking very human emotions, translating them into poetry, from there into binary, and finally knitting

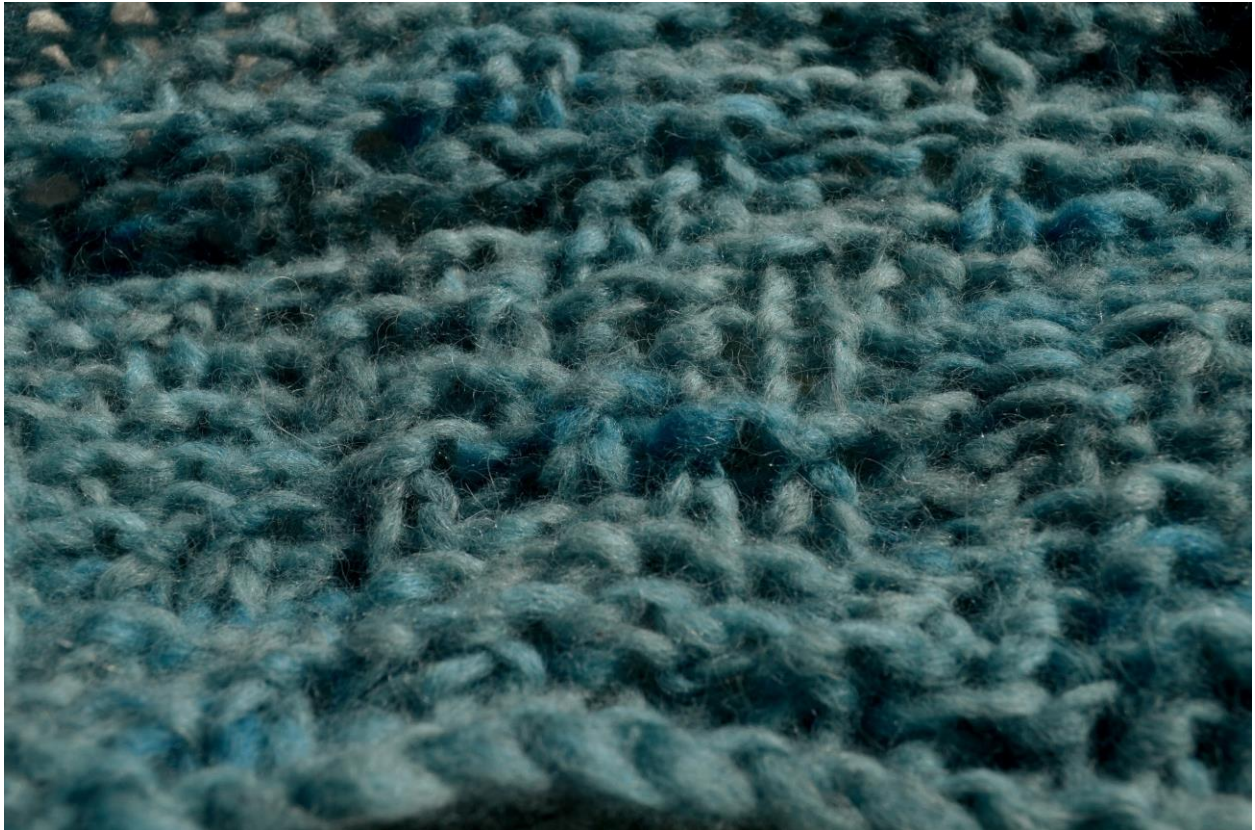
scarves—ending up with something very different but still so very human. As with relating neurons to life, the binary on its own doesn't fully capture either end yet it still holds the information and can send it. I may not understand what goes on in my brain from a technical stand point, but, despite this lack of understanding, I can create something that translates the mystery of my brain into something comprehensible and physical. I hope you *wool*/love it.

Full Poems

Winter's Warmth

Sleep World, Winter whispers
In answer Tree drops leaves
a cloak for the ground
Winter tucks the World in
snowy blanket, windswept lullaby.

With World restored, Winter whispers: Wake.



"Winter's Warmth": close up of scarf.

My Artichoke

Us
You, me
Together
On couch, Sitting
You look beautiful
Your hair two days unwashed
Shh, there is no need to talk
You reveal your layers to me
Holding me, we commune in silence



“My Artichoke”: close up of scarf.

U.S. Gay

Part of the process of living is setting yourself on fire.
Did you know that?
Every time you take a breath you help fuel the fire that keeps you alive.

That's what oxygen does.
Now you, what do you do? What do you do with that little fire of yours?
You use your breath to say how good it is to see me
 then how I should be dead.
You don't know that you are saying that to Me though.
You don't know that I'm queer.
 And yet.

You speak with this fire and don't see how it kills me.
How much I want to ignore that part of you because you're family.
I can't though, not always.
Not when you get so angry at a game I was showing you that you yell Faggot at the screen.
At me.
Not when it hits me that if you knew that you might also want me dead.
Your own blood that you seem to put such importance on.
And yet here we are. On my couch. Still setting ourselves on fire.

I sometimes think maybe I could change how you talk.
Change how you throw fire at people you don't even know. Don't really know.
But can I?
Can I change someone who is so Hell Bent on speaking their own mind they don't see
the blood their words leave behind?
Should I even try?
It is technically your right to send those little aggressions at me every time we meet.
That doesn't make it right though, does it?
Does it?
I want to still love you despite what you say.
What you spit in my face.
And yet.

I sit
and I listen
and I know
that those words
those words might end up killing someone
and it won't. Be. You.



“U.S.Gay”: close up of scarf.

Process Pictures



Yarn from the first dye batch; it was severely felted and became unusable for knitting.



Three skeins of yarn drying after being dyed.



Close up of yarn as it was drying to help show inconsistency in color of hand dyeing.



In progress picture of “U.S.Gay”, including my system of printing out translations and crossing off finished letters as I went.



The yarn that was used for “Winter’s Warmth”. It had not yet been balled after finishing drying.



Yarn that was balled and ready to be used for “My Artichoke”.



One of the balls of yarn used in “U.S.Gay”.



All three scarfs lying flat next to each other (in order from top to bottom: “Winter’s Warmth”, “My Artichoke”, “U.S.Gay”).