

I remember the first time I picked up a crochet hook, and how foreign it felt in my hand. My friend Ryan demonstrated to me how to hold it, but it wasn't until I read how to hold it that it clicked. Just like how a few months earlier I had read about what being trans was. It was through reading that I not only figured out who I was, not just learned not just a hobby, but developed a form of self-care that has lasted me almost six years. Through crochet, I pushed my definition of gender and my understanding of masculinity.

Ryan and I sat together, knowing that we were the only ones who really got each other. We were the only low-income students in the advanced courses, we were the only obviously *different* students. Only yarn was exchanged at first, no words or smiles, we were still awkward having just come out. The cheap yarn from Wal-Mart slipped through our fingers, simultaneously soft and rough, with loose acrylic fibers grabbing our skin but the feeling of holding a single strand of yarn with the goal of turning it into something somehow made the yarn feel more luxurious than it was. The yarn and hook felt foreign in my hand, there was a clumsiness to it, with the yarn slipping off the hook, and my hand unable to find a way to hold the hook without feeling like I had suddenly grown a new limb. There was an anxiety to it, in a body I didn't know how to inhabit, I was trying to learn a new motion, a new way of existing in the world.

Almost six years ago when I first picked up a crochet hook, I was no closer to loving, or even accepting my identity than I was to learning how to turn the yarn into a finished crocheted object. But since then, as I learned to crochet and explore more intricacies of it, I also grew more comfortable in who I was. In fact, my peak interest in crochet nearly perfectly coincided with moving past the "in the wrong body mentality" and into the goal of body neutrality. While body neutrality certainly does not sound like the joy and exuberance of many queer activists, it is the first step in moving beyond the society-taught hatred of trans bodies. It is with crochet that I have been able to push my definition of masculinity and experience my body as something natural and wonderful.

However, society does not view crochet as queer, but instead as a traditionally feminine and domestic craft (Marks 1997). While my immediate crochet community is comprised of queer trans-masculine people, our community is not the majority. Thus I turned to reddit and created a poll. In an independent poll posted on the Sub-Reddit r/crochet, I asked people to provide their gender-identity, with the following options: Female, Male, Female to Male Trans, Male to Female, Nonbinary/Agender, and Other with the specification of commenting their gender. Despite Reddit being predominantly a male-dominated platform (Barthel et al, 2016), over ¾ of participants identified as women, and both of the two "other" responses were "between female and nonbinary/agender". While this poll was very informal, it does provide me with the understanding that just because I have operated in a queer, trans-masculine crochet world, it is most likely not the norm. I've been queering crochet since I started.

In crochet, queer people can tell a story for themselves and disregard the story that people might hear. As Sandy Stone explores the way that Trans Women are forced to exist in a state where they both must lie about who they are to medical professionals but also maintain authenticity in the queer community, crochet serves only personal authenticity. There is freedom in embracing the self-made nature of it, as the guidelines are the number of stitches available, the size of your hook, and the weight of your yarn. But even then, there are limitless combinations of stitches, yarns, and hook sizes that make it so that every piece of crochet could be as unique as the maker desires.

It is in this way, that crochet starts to embody gender more clearly. Unlike knitting, you are not bound by the shape of your hook, but only by your knowledge and desire. However, while you may intend to crochet a shawl, it is possible that society will view that shawl as a scarf. Is it because you did not preform the concept of a shawl "correctly", or is it because we expect shawls and scarves to look a

specific way? Like the women who carefully crafted their stories of gender dysphoria to fit the societal narrative of “woman”, many crocheters follow published patterns to create an exact replica of the first piece.

It is for the same reason that we have rules about what hook size to use with what weight of yarn that we have societal understanding that breasts are for women and beards and for men. Without these rules, performing gender or shawl would be a lot more complex. We would have to accept that whatever someone identified as, or said they crocheted, was the absolute truth. Even within the LGBTQ+ community there are rules on how to be certain identities, about what is gay enough, about what has top or bottom energy, about being butch enough or femme enough, all of which try and assimilate queer bodies into the cisheteronormative hierarchy rather than embracing non-normative identities. Similarly, people will crochet with a smaller weight of yarn, a tight and consistent tension, invisible seams, and high-grade yarn from the same wash so the color is uniform, you suddenly erase all the non-normative aspects of crochet. When buying whatever yarn you want, you get diversity in a piece, when you loosen the tension, you create a more fluid piece, when you make visible seams you are showing that this piece is home-made, and that it doesn't need to look like it came out of a factory.

In *Queer: A Graphic History* the phrase “Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you” which embodies the inherent anti-normative of explicitly identifying as queer rather than gay, but almost subverts the idea of queer joy. Since queer bodies and emotions are so heavily policed, the phrase “Queer joy is an act of resistance” often appears in queer craft communities. But crochet doesn't just bring joy, it brings a gateway to meditation. With this meditation, comes queer joy. Audre Lorde discusses how the erotic is a source of power, and I believe that queer joy is a form of that erotic power. On page 54 of Lorde's piece *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic of Power* she describes how men have turned the erotic into something that is synonymous with porn, rather than the feeling and joy that it embodies. By celebrating the feeling of a hook in your hand, yarn slipping through your fingers, and the gentle *rib-it* of frogging a piece while relishing in your queer body is part of what makes crochet queer.

One important aspect of queering crochet is crochet's ability to not only affirm but enhance and explore one's gender identity. The uniqueness of self-crocheted clothes allows for people to make the garment fit their body in ways that are traditionally feminine or masculine, a mixture of both, or neither. In this way, crochet is a path to embracing and feeling comfort in one's gender identity while society constantly pushes back on trans people and people with non-normative genders ever feeling comfortable in their gender. In fact, on medical forms trans and gender non-conforming people who are receiving medical attention for transitioning, they must agree with having gender-identity issues. Yet crochet extends beyond descriptions of identity, as self-expression and identity can exist entirely within the yarn. There are no rules within crochet dictating who can wear what or what colors can be used. Crochet as a form of representing yourself in exactly the way you chose makes crochet as queer as it can get.

Personally, I started pushing against my internalized transphobia in relation to masculinity and femininity when I first crocheted a shawl. I started without a pattern and instead found different stitches that I felt represented queer history. I lined the shawl with pink triangles, used a stitch that resembled bricks to allude to stonewall, but most importantly, I was crocheting something that I would have never dreamed to wear if it weren't for crochet. The feminine nature of a shawl somehow made me feel like if I wore it, I would be less of a trans-man. Through crochet, I was able to start my journey of fighting against cis-heteronormative ideals of passing. Through crochet, I found joy in things as simple as a skein of yarn. Through crochet, I became more queer, as it wasn't just me who was queering crochet, but crochet that was queering me.



## References

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