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# Something you can actually pick up

## *Scrapbooking as a form and forum of cultural citizenship*

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**ABSTRACT** This article is an ethnographic study of scrapbooking as a community of practice. Through interviews with practitioners of the contemporary craft both in the United States and The Netherlands, as well as by analysing surveys, internet resources and secondary literature, it seeks to describe how scrapbooking is both a form and forum of cultural citizenship.

Cultural citizenship is understood as the way in which members of this interpretive community enjoy privileges and fulfil duties in a communal, capitalist and, above all, gendered society. As an output-oriented practice that values the personal touch as well as a community spirit, scrapbooking offers a spectacular way for women to self-reflect on their identities as cultural citizens.

**KEYWORDS** *community of practice, crafts, crops, cultural citizenship, gender, motherhood, scrapbooking, women*

### **Introduction**

In 1980, the Vermont Knitters and similarly-minded American craftswomen in New England protested against the government's illegalization of homework, stating that it was a violation of their right to work and subsequently, their right to mother and keep house. They viewed the job of knitting ski hats under their own roofs as a way to carry out traditional expectations that society had impressed upon them, while joining the money-making ranks of their husbands. As one homeworker said, 'We want to be productive not just reproductive' (Boris, 1987: 110). By the end of the case in 1985, the Vermont Knitters' homework had been sanctioned, although only after much debate by politicians, feminists, children's advocates and labour activists, all of whom had differing ideas of how to protect human rights and enforce civic duties. Since the quilt that Penelope wove while waiting for Odysseus to return from the Trojan



War, popular culture has presented women and crafts as hand-in-hand. This conflation has been a mutual disservice at times, reducing an historically valuable practice to a ladies' pastime and confining women to modes of production that remain cooped up in the private sector of the home. By introducing the work factor – crafts as a means for subsistence – the Vermont Knitters called attention to what previously had been an invisible, if not seamless, affixation of 'crafts' to 'women'.

As a new practice in the contemporary crafts industry, scrapbooking explores the ways out of a traditional cultural cul-de-sac in which handiwork is regarded as a strictly feminine and often frivolous activity. The practice has yet to be contested publicly, but scrapbooking still may be seen as a social offensive in the long line of cultural negotiations that humans undertake as members of a community. An output-oriented practice that values the personal touch as well as a community spirit, scrapbooking provides a spectacular platform from which practitioners can assert their identities democratically. Scrapbooking's concretely creative modes of production index the uniquely individual self, while its communal aspects cultivate a sense of greater belonging.

In this way, scrapbooking is both a form and forum of cultural citizenship. Now, at a time when 'citizenship is no longer easily based on soil or blood' (Miller, 2001: 4), identity is the passport and civic assertion is made by inhabiting popular identities, such as that of 'scraper' (as practitioners are called colloquially). The assessment here of this subjectivity is based on how and why scrapbooking community members take on particular roles and reiterate certain repertoires. Taking care not to essentialize subjects or fossilize findings, it acknowledges that this ethnography is a record of just one interpretive community delimited by the temporal and spatial interstices that permit a group to process social information with some consensus. In the discourse of citizenship, this consensus comprises material from which a people compose an implicit constitution, thereby founding a community of practice, a 'joint enterprise' that establishes norms, relationships and a 'shared repertoire of communal resources' (Wegner, 2000: 229). In other words, scrapbooking exemplifies how an everyday cultural practice can magnetize and mobilize people through a community of practice. The consequences are all the duties and privileges that member citizenship entails (Hermes and Stello, 2000). Citizenship comes by way of scrapbooking as it offers a very visible form and forum through which scrapers show what and whom they care about, how they live and where they fit into society at large.

### **Background: on scrapbooks**

Scrapbooking is built upon the practice of using an album as a keepsake for photos, captions and daily ephemera commemorating an event, person or theme. It is likely that the earliest form of a scrapbook originated in



17th-century Germany as an autograph book, then began its westward evolution, next appearing in Victorian England as a friendship album in which women preserved writings, pictures and locks of hair. By the turn of the century, American women's magazines promoted scrapbooks as a means to document daily life and preserve household information such as recipes or product labels. By the time of a 1980 genealogy conference in Salt Lake City, UT, featuring the exhibition of family scrapbooks, scrapbooking had begun its growth into the colossal industry that it is today in the US and increasingly throughout the world (Taylor, 2003). Since then, the focus of the books has shifted: from taking inventory within the home to commemorating and, in some cases, idealizing it. As a *Newsweek* article explains, scrapbooking appeals to the 'nesting instincts of baby boomers and even Gen-Xers, [who are] drawn to the simple pleasures of home life' (Johnson and Austin, 2002: 64). A *New York Times* article from January 2005 cites the industry as grossing an annual \$2 billion (Bellafante, 2005). As of January 2006, the web-based encyclopedia Wikipedia has a 'scrapbooking' entry stating: 'The hobby has surpassed golf in popularity: one in four households has someone playing golf; one in three has someone involved in scrapbooking' (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scrapbook>).

Quintessentially, the act of scrapbooking means the artful placement of photos and journal-like narrations of photos in the form of a layout page in a special non-disintegrative bound book. But rarely does a modern-day scrapbook contain only that: pages are elaborated with fancy cardstock and ink, store-bought 'embellishments' and an array of everyday ephemera. Scrapbooking, the industry, goes far beyond being described so summarily. Books, magazines, 'how to' TV programmes, game shows, websites, internet interest groups, stores, direct sales campaigns, classes, competitions and vacation packages have emerged in service of the craft. No doubt such multifaceted representation has been spurred on by the tendency of scrapbooking towards communal crafting. As in the quilting bees or knitting circles of before, scrapbooking practitioners come together in a group called a 'crop', during which each person works on her own book while sharing supplies and swapping stories with fellow scrappers. Named after the technical term for trimming a photo, crops play a major role in the commercial dissemination of the latest products and trends in scrapbooking (see Figure 1).

An acknowledgement must be made here of a conventional wisdom – however tenuous or temporary – that scrapbooking is a predominantly female activity. There are males who scrap (as this author's first-hand research and secondary sources have revealed; personal communication with NJscrappers; Johnson and Austin, 2002; Murphy 2003), but most scrappers are currently women. As a *New York Times* article from December 2003 says: 'About 98 percent of those who make scrapbooks are women' (Murphy, 2003: 4). In addition, this author's own experience has



Figure 1 Scrap of time (Hetty Sanders, Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

proven that the industry almost always has a direct – and sometimes solely – female hand. While this will be touched upon briefly, the subject in the analysis, the rarity of male scrappers, is addressed at present only through the binary inference of why scrappers, the majority of whom are women, do scrapbook.

## Method

### Participants

This study derives its first ‘funds of cultural knowledge, whether they be discourse, repertoire or vocabularies’ (Hermes, 2000: 356), from research conducted during spring 2005. The first half of the research incorporated



living in New Jersey) and a Dutch scrapper in Amsterdam. The first contact was established by emailing members of a New Jersey-based scrapbooking group which was found through Meetup ([www.meetup.com](http://www.meetup.com)), an international online network enabling people with common interests to form groups that meet in person in small-scale, local contexts. Soon thereafter, one of the group's monthly meetings held at a scrapbooking supply store was attended. This initial meeting facilitated connections with other scrappers and provided more information about local activities for field research such as attending a scrapping class, interviewing members of a New York City-based meet-up group, touring a scrapper's home and visiting a number of the numerous crafts stores now indigenous to America's suburbs.

In total, 21 participants were recruited: eight in person, three both in person and questionnaire form (in two of these instances, the questions were discussed as part of the interview) and 10 via questionnaires remitted and returned by email. All 21 scrappers were female, their marital status given as 15 married, two engaged, two in relationships and two unspecified. Of the total, 16 were mothers, 11 of whom each had two children. The group age ranged from 23 to 65 years; more than half were in their thirties.

The second fund of cultural knowledge draws from a textual analysis of literature: scholarly sources, articles from popular media, trade magazines, 'how to' books, websites and one month's worth of messages from the online interest group NJscrappers.<sup>1</sup> The NJscrappers network was formed in December 1998 under the banner of 'A cozy place for all of us in New Jersey to talk about our favorite thing . . . scrapbooking!' As of 6 July 2005, it had 838 members.<sup>2</sup>

The information gathered from the first-hand interactions with scrappers informed the reading of secondary materials; the analysis is the culminated findings of recurring themes and styles of expression. By tracking key terms in the literature, in addition to qualitative analysis of primary sources, scrapper subjectivity came to be identified as inhabiting the identity positions of 'mom', 'fairy godmother' and 'spinster'. The signs of these repertoires are mostly this author's external interpretations made during this research, but some are spoken for also by the scrappers themselves, a community that is perhaps as inwardly reflexive as outwardly perceptive. These repertoires should be viewed palimpsestically as they emerge and ebb, both on an individual basis and for the interpretive community as a whole. As with most subjectivities, scrappers are continually in a process of reproduction – particularly as a community involved in 'the articulation of gender in practices of media consumption' (Hermes and Ang, 1991: 318). For the scope of the present study, scrappers may be seen as a citizenry which obliges itself to various duties within discourses and depictions of the contemporary western woman, while enjoying the popular privileges accompanying modes of



identities that are self-consciously communal, capitalist and, above all, gendered.

## Findings and discussion

### The scrapper-as-mother

Motherhood is often a literal starting-off point for the formation of a scrapper identity. This interpretive community constructed upon the act of mothering is underscored by how many scrappers cite the birth of their child or an early birthday as the catalyst for the craft. In response to the question, 'What prompted you to begin scrapping?', Jenny, a working 31-year-old mother of two from New Jersey, cited: 'The birth of my first daughter.' Isabelle, a 36-year-old housewife from California, said: 'I first started to scrapbook just to show my son's baby pictures and our vacation pictures.' When asked what other activities she enjoyed in addition to scrapbooking, Nikki, a 32-year-old married woman from Maryland responded: 'Not much. Sleeping, eating, what else does a pregnant woman like to do?'

Some scrappers even began record-keeping rituals before birth (see Figures 2 and 3). A *Newsweek* article portrays an especially scrupulous scrapper as having recorded "everything" in the life of her daughter through the age of 2, starting with the ultrasound' (Johnson and Austin, 2002: 64). The same article describes a 37-year-old mother who 'might consider having a second child . . . But not until she's caught up on her scrapbook' (Johnson and Austin, 2002: 64). In a subject thread entitled *Help with a Title Please* (NJs 5271: 14), an NJscrapper consults with fellow members about phrases to accompany sonogram pictures of her 10-week-old niece. 'Life on the Inside' and 'Womb with a View' are suggested and a member (who signs her emails 'Christa, Proud Mom to Haley Jean 3/27/03') passes along a large amount of pregnancy and ultrasound titles from her website database of quotes and poems for layouts (see Figures 4 and 5).

That motherhood is a privilege to be proud of is apparent in the very language that scrappers employ. Scanning the NJscrappers directory gave a good glimpse into the subjectivities influenced by being a mom. At least 84 members used some variant of the word 'mother' in their email address or group user name, e.g. 'mom2peter', 'mommymemories', 'mamakins4', 'uwantdismom'.<sup>3</sup> Nine were a combination of 'mother' and 'scrap', for example, 'scrappingmomoftwo' and 'ScrapMumUK'. In addition, two instances of self-identification as a married woman were found: the email address 'wifepluscats' and the user name 'husbandsrjerks' by a married 25-year-old mother of three, as indicated on her member profile. Indeed, references to family members are so rampant in messages that some NJscrappers use abbreviations to refer to their relatives. An example such as 'S-I-L' for 'sister-in-law' seems obvious as a time-saving acronym, as with other internet shorthand, but the oft-used 'DH' is a cheeky reference

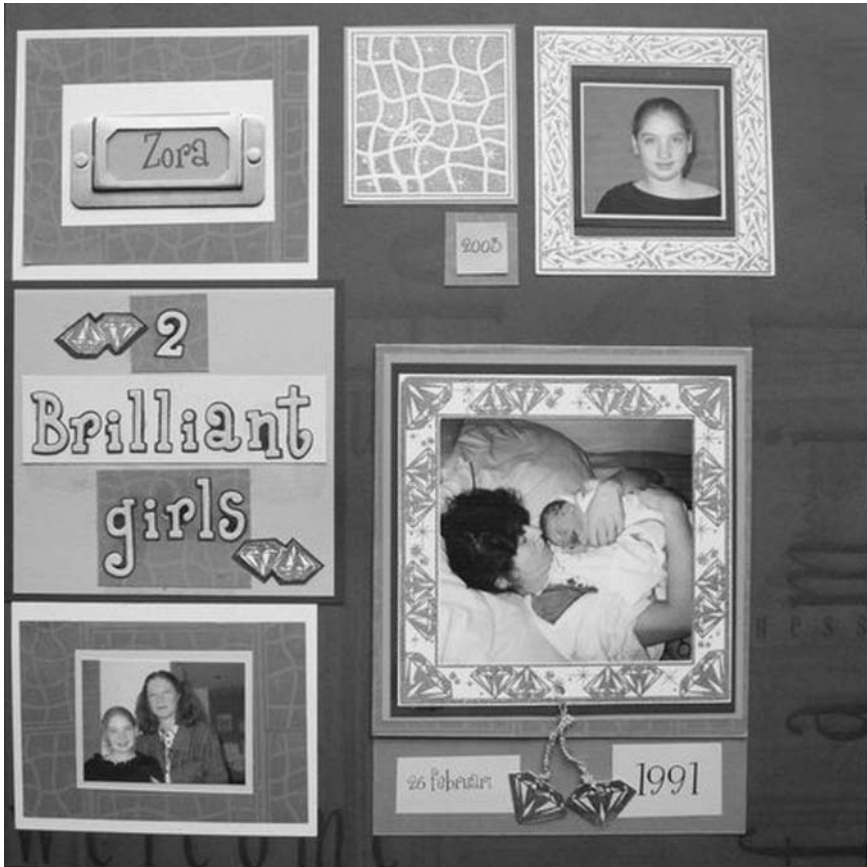


Figure 2 Daughter No. 2 (Hetty Sanders)

to 'dear husband'. According to Tracey, a 28-year-old mother of four living in New Jersey who served as one of the principal participants, 'DH' first started on America Online (AOL) and spawned relatives such as 'DS' for 'dear son' and 'DD' for 'dear daughter'.

Throughout the month of monitoring NJscrapppers' messages, the subject that generated some of the most numerous responses was a thread entitled 'OT: Labor Details'. The meaning of motherhood became clear when this OT (off-topic) thread about childbirth dominated a week's worth of messages. The subject, which piggybacked another OT about changing one's name on marriage, attracted over 20 responses with descriptive details and a sheer length that other messages did not garner. While the first message began as a note of praise – 'Lisa, I think you and all the other moms of the world are heros [sic]. You are willing (sometimes repeatedly) to go through a painful situation to give life' (NJs 5296:





Figure 3 A window in time (Hetty Sanders)

11) – the replies soon developed into personal vignettes describing pregnancy and birthing experiences, as well as those of their friends and mothers. One message described each of a woman's four births in short, fieldwork report-like phrases:

#1 Vincenzo 10 lbs 4 oz in a foreign Country – no drugs – all natural . . . #2 Francesca 7 lbs 6 oz, also in a foreign country. Morphine-based drug [shot] . . . Stupid Dr . . . #3 Gianna 9 lbs. 8 oz, here in the good old USA – DRUGS. Had the epidural from the get-go . . . I survived . . . all was fine. Pain-free birth . . . #4 Biaggio 9 lbs 6 oz, also here in New Jersey. Fab Dr. who said, 'It is never too late for the epidural . . . Drugs . . . Drugs . . . *lots of drugs!* (NJs 5301: 16)



Figure 4 A decade of mother- and daughterhood (Hetty Sanders)

Entries such as these prompted another member to write: ‘You’re like a textbook study on birthing options’ (NJs 5305: 23).

Being both a mother and a scrapper holds optimal prestige in the community of practice, especially because the painstakingly detailed labour of scrapbooking produces a synecdochical extension of its creator – a veritable offspring. As some women admit, it is challenging to find scrapping accessories that do not cater to a maternal point of view. One NJscraper member acknowledged this in a message entitled ‘Re: scrapbookers are the coolest’, which stated that: ‘certain aspects of the hobby are just not embracing to certain groups or the single or childless’ (NJs 5271: 6). Some collectives, such as Scrap for Adults, emphasize alternative layouts, but these groups are still remarkably anomalous. Moreover, the mother–scraper duo is something with which men cannot compete. Of the few self-identified males on the NJscrapers directory, three were



Figure 5 Peeking into the past (Hetty Sanders)

found with user names that identify themselves in paternal terms and, in two of these instances, in crafts terms: ‘mrdwithkds’, ‘scrapdaddy0’ and ‘printdaddy6401’. The examples are too few to investigate whether scrapbooking is permitting men to take on traditionally female roles and/or rewrite versions of contemporary masculinity.<sup>4</sup>

Accompanying the celebration of motherhood is its compulsory flipside, the anxieties that are part of a mother’s duty to worry about her child. Scrapbooking provides an antidote to the maternal angst of losing one’s baby to natural growth, sickness or even death. This became clear during the interview with Roberta, a 65-year-old New Jersey-raised former Girl Scouts leader who has crafted for decades. Although she has yet to complete one, Roberta has multiple scrapbooks in the works dedicated to her husband, two daughters (one of whom is deceased) and three grandchildren. During the meeting, Roberta gave a tour through her scrapping supplies. She showed how she stores her scrapbooks-to-be in plastic bins specific to each family member along with photos, notes and materials that will be included in their layouts. What was notable was that Roberta did not refer to them in the possessive, as in ‘my grandchild’s bin’, but she called each bin by the very names of those relatives whose mementos they held. ‘This is Lizzie. And that’s Tommy,’ she said, indicating her



granddaughter's and grandson's respective collections. The anthropomorphic way of referring to the scrapping materials seemed automatic, if not altogether natural.

An Arizona scrapper featured in *Creating Keepsakes* magazine echoes the desire for such tenability over her baby in a two-page layout entitled 'A Moment to Hold'. A photo of a woman with a toddler on her lap is the focal piece; zig-zagging down the opposite page are smaller photos of the father and mother kissing with their baby cradled in the mother's arms, the father kissing the baby's forehead and the mother feeding the baby. In computerized calligraphy, with certain words enlarged for effect, is written:

I picked you up from your nap today . . . Our *eyes* met and we both smiled at the same time, in the same way. I felt your *warm*, chubby body wriggling vigorously in my arms and for that moment I was thrilled with the peace and contentment that is the *joy* of being your mother. Although I will not be *picking* you up for the rest of your life, my love will live within you, wherever you may *be*. (cited in White, 2004: 173; emphasis in original)

This scrapper captures Corbin, as his name reads in blue glitter ink across both pages, as he is then, an infant that can be picked up and held by apparently vital parents in a seemingly happy relationship. Each time she views her layout, this woman can return effectively to a quintessential image of herself as mother.

Motherhood is manifested as scrappers mother their very books, but the relationship has a corollary. Many of the women whose testimonials were given during the research recognize their own fatality and thus rely on scrapbooks as a way to leave behind tangible pieces of themselves presented coherently and attractively. As Jenny said: 'It is more personal. Gives you something to hand down to your children.' Another scrapper explained: 'I'm creating something so when I'm gone, my kids will have a piece of me to remember' (Murphy, 2003: 4). While they are personifications of her descendents, Roberta's bins are mementos of herself. As she said: 'I have this thing – [to] leave behind. When you leave, leave something behind . . . Everything I make is going to my grandchildren.'

Tracey has 57 scrapbooks to her name since she began scrapping in 1999 and with 10 more in the works as of April 2005, she plans to bequeath all her creations to her children, although only when she dies, a vow she repeated several times. So, while posterity may be the drive behind scrapping, the books also serve a tactile need in real-time to recollect heritage and reinforce relationships. This is the reason that some of the respondents said that they chose to scrap rather than place their photos elsewhere, such as on a website. Tracey, who once worked as a web designer and was disappointed to see, years later, that the corporate websites she built were no longer online, likes the durability of scrapping. As she notes, her



scrapbooks sit on shelves where even her two-and-a-half-year-old can take them out and flick through the pages. Commenting on the tangibility and portability of scrapbooks, Jilian said: 'I like the way they look and you can pick them up, take them places and make them your own.' According to Lisa:

I prefer scrapbooking to a webpage, because not everyone can access a webpage, sites/web hosts can go out of business, there is a limit on creativity and mainly because a web site is not something you can have on your coffee table for friends and family to look through. I like to have something you can actually pick up.

### **The scrapper-as-fairy godmother**

The fairy godmother is the ultimate craftswoman, transforming everyday life into a reified series of 'magnified moments' (Hochschild, 2003: 17). This role stays within a maternal tradition in its ascription to creationism and caretaking, but is distinguished by an element of superhumanity. The scrapper's 'magic wand' comes in the form of her paper trimmer and adhesive dispenser. Indeed, scrappers are at the work of pumpkin-to-carriage metamorphoses as they preserve picture-perfect memories from quotidian life. What is more, control over matter facilitates control over mania, both metaphorically and concretely, as shown in the use of the home itself and household products. Roberta illustrated this when demonstrating her workspace, as she said in an aphoristically, Mary Poppins-like manner, 'And you can see, I like to have a place for everything and everything in its place.'

Playing the part of fairy godmother, scrappers reign sovereign over the subjects about which they scrap, yet stay detached. For scrappers are privileged with an alternate plane – constructed upon paper and glue – in which to deal with emotions. From this comes a justified sense of self-abnegation as they negotiate their own needs in a scrapbook but not in person. This tendency is reflected in the name of a scrapping magazine chapter entitled 'The Healing Power of Scrapbooking: Share How You Made it Past a Painful Experience' (Strine, 2004: 275). Although the majority of layouts focus on memorable celebrations, scrapbooking also documents the more tragic aspects of life. The scrapbooking industry purportedly boomed after 9/11 (Neff, 2003) and a number of personal 9/11 memorials took the form of scrapping layouts (White, 2004). But often, even tragedies are presented in a narrative discourse that has a triumphant, if not happy, ending.

The aestheticization of life's ugliness is manifest in a layout entitled 'Pink Ribbon' (see White, 2004). These two pages document a woman's memories of her three-year-old's struggle with leukemia and chemotherapy. The page is filled mostly by the text of a letter-like journal entry



that the mother has addressed to her daughter recounting the painful experience, as well as sharing admiration for her daughter's 'grace and courage and strength' (White, 2004: 276). The secret to such fortitude, she says, is revealed in the photograph of her smiling daughter with a pink ribbon tied around her bald head. Enhancing the nurturing yet robust tone of the mother's message are the technical components of the layout: pink cardstock for the background, pink ribbons that serve as horizontal borders and photo corners, pink flower stickers, a computer font that mimics a gentle handwritten print and a quote on courage.

Cinderella's midnight curfew notwithstanding, the scrapper-as-fairy godmother has the right to stop the hands of the clock by petrifying time in the most beautiful of forms. Scrapbooking allows women to take on such a role whose title invokes omnipotence and immortality: she is ruler over 'fairy', from the Old French word for 'fate' (*Oxford English Dictionary* online). Thus, rule number one is that scrappers use only non-corrosive products that are adhered to non-disintegrative materials. When asked in the questionnaire whether anything was off-limits for a scrapbook – a question intended to refer to thematic prohibitions – Sandra answered: 'Anything that is not acid-free so the pages will look like new for years to come.' 'Acid- and lignin-free' is a stock phrase in scrappers' language. Almost performatively, its utterance seems to act as a guard, guaranteeing scrappers that their pages and, moreover, their subjects will last forever.

But behind each beautiful, timeless finished product, there is a behind-the-scenes that demands industry and dutiful investment. More than one of the women who were interviewed admitted with chagrin that they had converted their dining rooms into scrapping *ateliers*. Roberta, who already had an entire upstairs room devoted to her first crafting passion, rubber stamping, said she gave away 'the good furniture' to her children and instead got a buffet table that would give her more surface space to scrap. She sits in a rolling desk chair at her table fixed with a magnifying lamp, architectural measuring devices and a special drink holder that suspends cups over the ledge of the table so that there is no risk of spoiling her work. Within easy reach are all Roberta's supplies, and watching from the couch is her small dog. Tracey's dining room has become what she calls a 'scrapbooking disaster zone', thus prompting herself, her husband and four children to eat meals at her neighboring parents' house.

In theory, the majority of objects used to embellish scrapbooks are modest supplies and knick-knacks that could be found lying around the home: paper, pens, stamps, ribbons, buttons, chads, bottle caps (see Figure 6). But many scrappers favor store-bought versions of these items made specifically for crafts. However, supplemental material alongside photos and journal entries is usually mundane ephemera: ticket stubs, playbills, invitations, children's art class drawings. Also, more idiosyncratic mementos are culled from everyday activities. In Pien's Atelier, a scrap-  
ping supply store in Hilversum, The Netherlands, a layout was spotted by

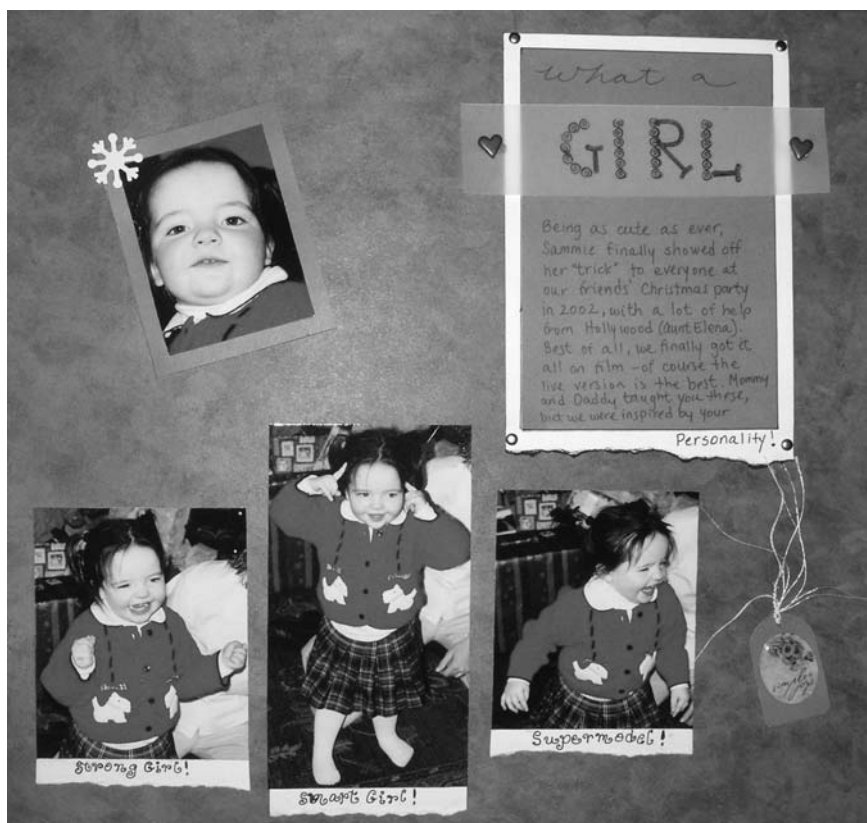


Figure 6 A day in the life of Sammie (Julia Gilroy, Gettysburg, PA, USA)

this author, called *Feestjurk* [‘Party dress’], which showed a small girl and her doll in matching home-made outfits before a cake. Fastened with sewing pins were shards of the pattern and fabric from the dress featured in the layout’s photos. In another book, a layout was found entitled *Zo vader, zo dochter* [‘Like father, like daughter’], which displayed photos of a young girl at a computer. All embedded into a Styrofoam page, the words of the title were spelled with keys from a computer keyboard, the picture was laid in a clear CDRom jewel case and computer chips accented the matting.

Because scrappers are comfortable engaging in capitalist commercial pursuits, the metaphors through which moments are materially magnified frequently derive from American middle-class consumerism. Corporations such as Disney even license their own scrapping products. Commercially logoed embellishments such as M&Ms and Barbie authenticate the process of scrapping about commonplace activities, from a child’s birthday party to a family trip. They also provide contemporary metaphors for layouts



about more personal, particularized themes. For example, featured in a scrapping magazine is a Missouri mom's layout named *Hershey Kissy Eyes*, which parallels her child's eyes to the ubiquitous American chocolate candies. The background on which her son's headshot and journaling are mounted is a photograph-quality layout paper featuring small chocolate bars that say 'Hershey's'. Pasted on the right is a lifesize paper Hershey's candy bar with a bite taken out of its corner, hanging from which are two small tags, a metal Hershey's bar and a velum unwrapped Hershey's Kiss. The text begins with 'Jake, I love your eyes' and concludes with 'That's when I hug you tight, Jake. To make those Hershey Kissy eyes shine again' (cited in White, 2004: 31).

### **The scrapper-as-spinster**

If mothers scrap in order to remember themselves through their progeny and fairy godmothers scrap in order to forget themselves through their projects, spinsters focus on creation of the self and the sisterhood of spinsterhood. Although today's connotation of spinster is commonly negative, looking at the etymology of the word paves a way to explore how crafts and singlehood go hand-in-hand. Here the term 'spinster' is used polysemiously, originally referring to a 1362 citation that reads: 'A woman (or, rarely, a man) who spins, esp. one who practises spinning as a regular occupation', although by the 17th century it came to denote 'a woman still unmarried; esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage, an old maid' (*Oxford English Dictionary* online). Thus, the scrapper-as-spinster resides in a conflation of identities as the artisan and the unattached.

At a crop, scrapping is the concrete premise, but these scrapping gatherings give women the right to individuation (from home) and the right to validation (from work). Above all, the right to have fun is the underlying modus operandi of the 'modern-day quilting bee', as one scrapper called it. The most salient characteristic of this activity is that it necessarily includes fellow scrappers and excludes non-scrappers – or more precisely, partners and offspring – thus conjuring the spinster persona. In the heteronormative space-time of a crop, a woman's romantic and filial relations are suspended by the collective spirit of unaccompanied fellow women with a common, impenetrable passion. A parallel may be seen between the act of scrapbooking and the way that reading is a declaration of independence for female fans of the romance:

Because husband and children are told, 'This is my time, my space, now leave me alone', they are expected to respect the signal of the book and to avoid interrupting her. Book reading allows the woman to free herself from her duties and responsibilities and provides a 'space' or 'time' within which she can attend to her own interests and needs. (Radway, 1985: 352)





Scrapppers are more explicit in their 'now leave me alone' by way of actually leaving the home. With the exception of some mother–daughter or just-for-teens activities, children are rarely brought to crops. At the first Meetup introduction, when asked why there was such a meager turnout by a group with so many online members, the reply came that it is often difficult for women to find time to attend meetings and baby-sitters are not always available. Tracey acknowledges that she is fortunate to live within such easy reach of her parents, grandparents and brother, all of whom take turns to babysit her children when her husband is unavailable and she is busy scrapping. When the New Jersey group was asked if there were any male scrapppers to speak of at crops, two were mentioned with such detailed specificity which, in itself, may have been testimony to the anomaly of male scrapppers: one was a 70-something man who came to crops with his wife and made 'outrageously good' books; the other was 'a father in Bergen County' who scraps with his daughter. Although Marty, a 49-year-old Dutch participant, stated that her husband was not unique in accompanying her to crafting expos in various western European cities, she acknowledged that men were still the odd ones out.

As all-encompassing events, crops may last throughout the day or night as a sleepover, or as is becoming increasingly popular, as extended getaways, such as rural cabin retreats and beachfront hotel weekends. A self-sustaining microcosm on their own, crops offer meals, classes, vending stands, raffles, games, music and even masseuses. Websites specialize in planning scrapping holidays in the US, although scrapping tourism, like all dimensions of the industry, is growing to international proportions. The Netherlands had its first 'scrap cruise' in April 2005, advertised as a '10 AM – 5 PM *monster* of an event for *scrappen, varen, genieten!*' [scrapping, sailing and enjoying!]. Often, crops are coordinated by themes or anticipate an upcoming holiday. Mother's Day was an especially popular occasion for which to make a scrapbook as a gift and a day on which to let mother do what she likes doing best: scrapping at a crop. Charity is another popular motivation to scrap (Lambert, 2004). When attempting to raise money, such as at the 1st Annual Louise Imperiali Ovarian Cancer Fundraiser Crop (NJs 5288: 3), a donation to the cause would be paid in lieu of a modest entrance fee. Creating a sense of friendly competition, some crops include judging participants' layouts and awarding prizes. For example, the Scraparoni Crop promised to crown a 'Queen of The Crop', with prizes including a 'Filet Mignon with all the fixins[,] Free Massage[,] and Chauffeur Driven car service to and from the crop' (NJs 5309: 11). In the public eye, competitive scrapppers have been contestants on *Craft Corner Deathmatch*, the cable TV game show on which two amateur crafters pit themselves against each another before a panel of judges and then against a professional.

378 Inasmuch as scrapbooking provides a forum for social engagement



outside the home, it also serves as an entrance for women into cyberspace, a once highly male-dominated realm. With scrapping as a point of virtual convergence, women run, moderate and contribute to websites that are often exclusively female. Scrappers participate in online networks, scan and post their layouts, build their own homepages, buy and sell scrapping products through eBay, download graphics and fonts, use computer programs to create digital scrapbooks and email regularly with crafting colleagues. In an article about the participation of females in the internet, the concept of spinsterhood arises through Spinsters Ink ([www.spinsters-ink.com](http://www.spinsters-ink.com)), an online feminist publishing company. The company's emblem, recurring on each webpage, is a spinning wheel 'suggesting productivity and reimagining the spinster as a vital member of society . . . who helps stabilize society' (Gerrard, 2002: 304). The scrapper-as-spinster also embodies this persona, weaving together a world wide web of personal memories and cultural contemplations. To the question 'How does the online community impact your scrapbooking?', an NJscrapper member invoked the group as people with whom she shares both familiarity and information. Justine said: 'This is my family that I communicate with and ask many questions for their opinion.' Marty, the only non-US-based scrapper interviewed, relies heavily on the internet because her scrapping circuit is not as expansive or diverse in a country such as The Netherlands. Marty explains how she often has the chance to meet correspondents from abroad when they visit Amsterdam or have a stopover at the local airport. She also takes pride in the friends and celebrities that she has met at an enormous scrapbooking expo in Atlanta, GA. Thanks to her online groups, she says, she has had 'very good contact with certain people' and has found it easy to incarnate her once 'virtual' relationships. But unlike some web-based communities, the online aspect of scrapping is more often a means through which to enable offline activities, such as classes and crops.

Especially for women with full-time jobs, as many of the scrappers encountered hold, crops are sanctified time. However, crops may allow women also to inhabit the realm of pleasure because scrapbooking is elaborated often as a form of work (Reiger, 1999). The observations made of most NJscrapppers reveal that usually, scrapbooking is not an alternative to making a living, yet scrapbooking is approached with vocational professionalism. It is seen as a form of labour: the duty of preserving memories and investing in posterity may permit women to feel more justified in the amount of money, time and energy they spend away from their other more traditional roles as mother, wife and homemaker. As a self-monikered 'pack rat' librarian said about scrapbooking, 'I've dabbled in other hobbies but this feels productive while you're being creative' (Murphy, 2003: 4). Similarly, crafting with a purpose is demonstrated in an ethnographic study of *Star Trek* slash writers, whereby 'women created quilts out of necessity, as a skilled craft. In common with the scribblers of



the 1850s, quilters saw their productivity as work within a community, a profession, not an art' (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 56–7).

However, some scrappers do make their hobby their livelihood. In the wake of Tupperware parties and Avon cosmetics retailing, scrapbooking has become big business for the many women who get involved in the direct-sales business of vending products from home-to-home, at group events and through the internet (Chura, 2005; Lambert, 2004). A *New York Times* article profiling the highest-earning sales representative of one of the largest scrapping supply companies, Creative Memories, described a 42-year-old mother of five who came to earn enough money to permit her husband to quit his job and stay home to help her in the scrapping business. As of January 2005, she was making \$30,000 a month, not including bonus earnings such as a \$7,000 bracelet, trips to Hawaii and other gifts that in some years have amounted to over \$100,000. Of all the scrappers encountered during the research, Tracey came across as the most industrious as well as enthusiastic practitioner in her job both as an 'independent consultant' for the scrapbooking company Top Line Creations and a mobile instructor.

Inasmuch as scrapbooking is treated by some as work, it also comes with its own built-in occupational therapy. In Tracey's case, for example, coupling business with pleasure does not appear to detract from scrapping's fulfillment of her need to do 'something creative' every day. It is also 'a stress release' that is recognized as such by her family. When agitated, she says, her husband will tell her to 'go scrapbook for an hour and then come back'. At the communal level, crops encourage a guild-like bonding through trading scrapping tools and tips. Within the scrapbooking community of practice, there is an unstated duty to share and help fellow members. As Tracey summarized the atmosphere at a crop: 'You ask, "Anybody have a pair of scissors?" and 20 scissors go in the air.' More poignantly, crops foster sorority through the exchange of personal feelings and stories, frequently sparked by a photo. As Elisabeth said in reference to the workshop space in her scrap store, 'I've made several of my best friends in this room.' About crops, one homemaker from Texas said: 'We call it our therapy' (Murphy, 2003: 4). Similar to observations of *Star Trek* fanzines, scrappers

don't gather in each other's homes or in hotels around the country to march on the male heterosexual bastions and demand their rightful place. They come together for mutual healing, for protection from the outside, and to ponder the most pressing questions in their lives – Who am I? What do I really want? Why can't I have it? Why does life hurt so much? (Bacon-Smith, 1992: 207)

This also echoes romance readers who explained the appeal of finding solace in a popular pastime when they said: 'We read books so we won't cry' (Radway, 1987: 98).



### **Crafting with consciousness**

The revolution of scrapbooking is its self-reflexivity. Distinguishing itself from other crafts, scrapbooking as an interpretive community demands the very act of self-crafting. To quote an NJscrapper member's email signature: 'Life is not about finding yourself, Life is about creating yourself' (NJs 5272: 3, *inter alia*). Another example of almost painful self-reflexivity became apparent as the two-hour interview with Roberta came to a close. She showed me the buddings of a scrapbook that her granddaughter had begun. Conjuring up a romantic vision of all three generations of women scrapping side by side, literally and figuratively tying time together, Roberta was asked if her daughter was also into scrapping. 'No,' she quickly replied. 'My daughter's into,' and after pausing, finished, 'life.' Roberta's answer suggests that scrapping and living sometimes may be seen as mutually exclusive activities. As Marty replied in response to the question of why there were no scrapping stores in Amsterdam but a notable number in the suburbs, 'In the big city people work and . . . have their own big things.' In other words, 'big things' – life – prevent time for the little things – the scraps of life. And even the industry winks at itself. A *mise-en-abîme*-like quality of scrapbooking was epitomized by scrapbooking-themed sticker embellishments by the company Paper Bliss encountered during the research. The Lilliputian packet itself was complete with scrapping basics: a scrapbook, multicolored layout pages, two packets of embellishments, a camera and a wheeled tote with the logo of Crop in Style, a company known for its storage products.

Twenty years after the case settlement of the Vermont Knitters, scrappers are crafting as a way to work – although not necessarily in order to make ends meet. What has emerged from this research on this community of practice is that scrapbooking is not merely a cute or simply commercialized craft. Scrapbooking is an output-oriented practice that provides a spectacular platform in which community members can assert their identities democratically. In other words, scrappers are busy at the work of expressing cultural citizenship in contemporary society. While they would not use the same terminology to describe their citizenry, scrappers are highly aware of how their practice provides a form and forum of cultural citizenship in which to assert their rights and duties to parent, to create and improve the quality of life and to seek personal pleasure and development (see Figure 7).

Most of the women encountered in this study recognize a dilemma: in figurative terms, to live and therefore let the scraps of life go by, or to scrap and thereby let life pass by. But scrapbooking allows women to inhabit a more integrated communal realm where they can express emotions, assert skills and indulge desires. By enjoying the rights and fulfilling the duties that are part of cultural citizenship, scrappers are forced to reflect on their lives and how they live them. On a small scale, life can be cropped, embellished and laid out according to available resources, aesthetic preferences

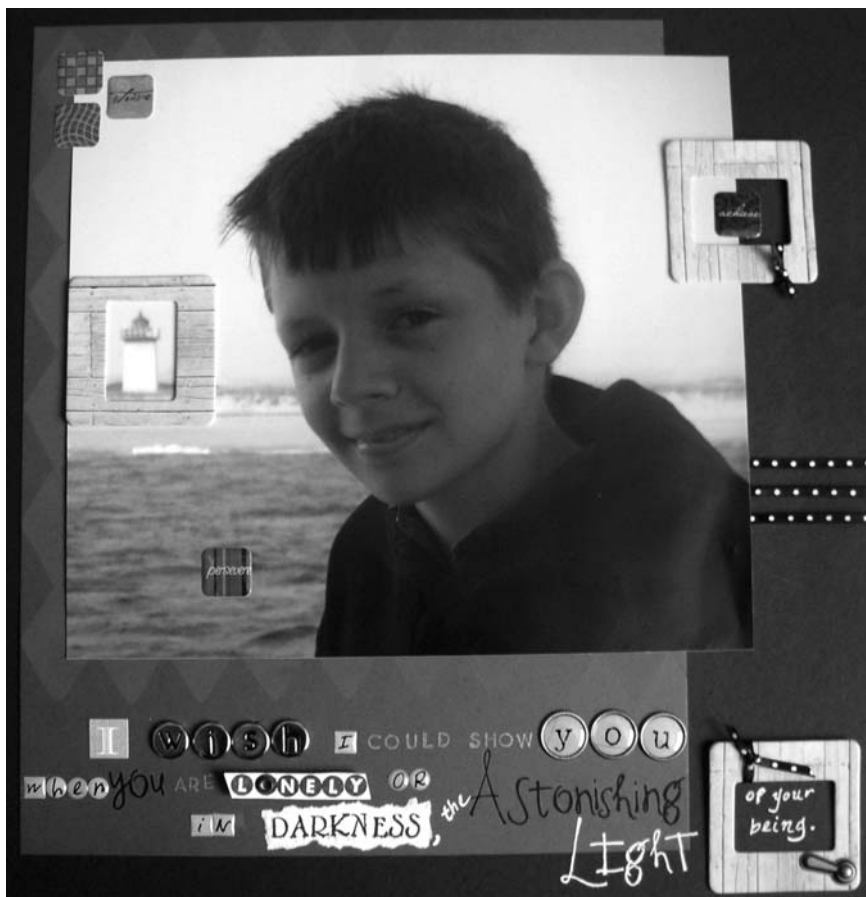


Figure 7 Beacon of Light (Julia Gilroy)

and as contemplations on the past and dreams for the future. Brought to the large scale, this is another step forward on the still-long journey that women have as they work to achieve social, cultural and civic equality. For scrappers, life may never be as eternal, beautiful or pleasurable as their layouts, but this self-knowledge helps them come to terms with both the tragedies and possibilities of existence. As such, scrapbooking is a way for the lives of women to be something you can actually pick up.

### Notes

1. These are daily NJscrapper message digests #5270 – #5329 from 2 April 2005 to 3 May 2005. They are cited in the following format: (NJs [message digest number]: [message number]). For the purposes of confidentiality, I have omitted the name of the online domain through which the group operates.



2. I have indicated transcribed quotations from interviews with quotation marks and quotations from questionnaires and NJscrapper messages with italicization or hanging indentations. I refer to each participant pseudonymously, giving background information where appropriate. The participants' statements have been transcribed as accurately as possible. I apologize for inadvertent misrepresentations that may have occurred in the challenging process of verbal transcriptions and the even trickier process of cultural interpretation.
3. The fields of the NJscrapper directory are inconsistent, as each member can pick and choose what personal information to include. Therefore the examples provided are based only on data made explicit in individual profiles.
4. The theme of masculinity in scrapbooking is a subject that behoves more research.

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### **Biographical note**

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