

Imagining the Feminist Imaginary Through Object-Based Research

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Abstract

Using objects-based research, feminist adult educators and museum curators shared and described artifacts of personal and professional meaning. These objects enabled participants in this feminist study to articulate ways in which we enact power and change, and ways in which we can imagine and create a more feminist world. Through this study we challenge systems of patriarchal colonial oppression, addressing inequities across gender as it connects with class, race and culture and showing how objects reveal alternative ways of seeing and shaping the world. In this paper we take up feminist object-based research as a way to step outside ‘patriarchal logic’ to reimagine the world through four themes: corporeal, including the body and objects worn on the body; communicative, which speak and narrative; protect, representing feminist action and power, and disappearing, referring to that which has been lost or made absent. These show recurring patterns and connections that collectively enable us to imagine a more equitable and just feminist world.

Keywords: Feminist; objects-based research; imaginary; arts; collaborative learning

The imagination is critical because control over it is control over the future.
(Helmore, 2020, n/p)

Introduction

Historical asymmetries of global hetero-patriarchal power that not only continue to maintain but also mobilize gender injustice and oppression are so deeply embedded in all of our institutional structures and social, cultural, and inter-personal practices that it is often difficult to imagine a way out (Bates, 2018; Clover et al., 2023; Green, 2017; Rajan et al., 2019). Yet, the imagination and the practise of imagining are critical because they are how we come to see more clearly this problematic gendered world and to design it as if it could be otherwise (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). Our feminist study asked how we could imagine a way out of what in essence constitutes what Solnit (2014) calls a ‘failure of the imagination’. We chose to use objects to elucidate the feminist imaginary because they are important signs of our cultural identity, objects to “act as powerful metaphors, enabling abstract ideas to be communicated and understood” (Barton & Wilcocks, 2017, p. 231). For Gonzalez (1993), objects are important rhetorical devices that hold and convey meaning, despite not necessarily possessing any specific generalized meaning on their own.

Given the importance of objects in our lives as both materialities and symbols, we designed a feminist object-based study as a space for a group of feminist educators and museum scholars and practitioners to consider how objects could help us to articulate a more feminist world, one that could visualise the challenges and speak to ways in which we enact power and change. More specifically, we engaged in a process of imagining what the feminist imaginary meant to us through meaningful, symbolic self-selected objects. This study builds on our work over the past two decades researching how women are imagined in museum and gallery exhibitions and through their objects, whereby we have drawn attention to objectifications, stereotypes, absences, and devaluations (Sanford et al., 2021). As feminist scholars, we continue to challenge systems of oppression, addressing inequities across gender as it connects with class, race and culture. Focus on objects selected by our participants, we have identified key concepts and themes that bring these feminist principles to the fore.

We begin this article with a discussion of the imagination, its different aspects, critical importance and links to objects. Next, we discuss our methodology of object-based research and then share our findings. We conclude with a discussion of the meaning of the feminist imaginary as

imagined through the objects by the participants and a poem which captures the feminist imagination as a challenge to a world that has for too long honoured that which is destructive, individualistic, and competitive.

The imagination

“The task is to remedy the consequences of gendered oppression [and to] propose new ways to think about our potential” (Olufemi, 2020, p. 5).

Bottici (2019) reminds us that the imagination is a faculty that everyone possesses, and it is perhaps our most powerful faculty because the imagination is how we come to see and to know. Therefore, the imagination is not simply an act of make-believe or fantasy nor is it neutral. The imagination has brought into being beautiful, useful, and valuable things but it has also been wielded as an instrument of power, control, and destruction. One of the primary tools of heteropatriarchal power has been the ability to wield the imagination and to make what has been imagined into reality. In nearly every society across the globe, men have imagined our social structures, organisations and institutions, our inter-personal relations, and they have imagined our understandings and practices of gender (Bates, 2019; Olufemi, 2020).

For Ricoeur (1979), the imagination is a critical cognitive power, a way of thinking. He makes a distinction between what he describes as two types of imagination. One he calls the ‘reproductive’ imagination, which relies on memory and mimesis (representation). Remembering is a critical act because it aids “the organisation of social and cultural life by endowing [it] with meaning, a communicative currency” (Pickering, 2006, p. 176). The second form of imagination is ‘productive’, which Ricoeur (1979) sees as generative. A key component of the productive imagination, as it is configured by Whitton (2018), is the idea of a person having deliberate intentions, interests, and capabilities in shaping reality from their own perspective and experiences. The productive imagination “grasps together and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events” (Ricoeur, 1983/84, p. x) and in so doing, schematizes them into intelligible significations. However, neither the reproductive nor the productive imagination operate outside our social contexts, which can provide spaces to expand but also to constrict. Mills (1959) called the spaces for expansion the ‘sociological imagination’, which he positioned as a means to help those who have traditionally been excluded and oppressed, to enable them to understand history in terms of its meaning for their personal lives and work, and for making conscious and informed choices. Taking a feminist approach, Bell (2000) calls for an imagination that is political, an activist imagination that enables women to see the world as it is but also to imagine the world as if it might be otherwise. The challenge is not that women lack imagination but that they have been excluded as players in imagining the world. Olufemi (2020) asserts that as feminists we must find ways to stimulate the power of the imagination if we are to imagine and bring into being a more “a liberated future for all” (p. 6). However, given centuries of exclusion, Olufemi (2020) asks, “How do we begin to imagine?” (p. 6).

Objects and the imagination

An essential tool of the imagination is the aesthetic – the ability to imagine and/or reimagine and is used by feminist adult educators, curators and practitioners. The aesthetic is related to art and beauty but also to our creative practices which, as Greene (1995) suggests, is what, at the very least, “enables us to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies” (p.123) and “to become more conscious of what common sense, habit, tradition and convention have actually suppressed” (Clover et al., 2022, p. 3). For Clover et al. (2022), the aesthetic is a highly political process because it “encompasses broader dimensions and understandings of experience, knowledge...and the overall conditions in which we live, love, work and play” (p. 3).

Whitton (2018) places an emphasis on using cultural resources such as images, artworks, artefacts, objects, novels, and other texts to encourage the imagination. These stimulate metaphorical meanings by representing memories, events, and sensations, evoking, and creating other possible meanings and interpretations. Cultural and material resources have no meaning in and of themselves

until we bestow upon them with meaning, use them as rhetorical devices to unleash the power to ‘redescribe’ reality, and to envision new realities. Barton and Willcocks (2017) refer to this redescribing as a practice of configuring, reconfiguring, and (re)inventing material items with a specific feminist goal in mind. Material objects, as the production and reproduction of imaginations, introduce cognitive and semantic innovation able to disrupt and dislodge the existing logic of the world, the dynamics that govern our lives, and to bolster what Gramsci once called the ‘optimism of the will’, defined by Olufemi (2020) as “the courage to believe that a more dignified world is possible” (p. 6).

Object-based research

Sandahl (1995) reminds us that objects are important because they are imagined, envisioned, fantasized, talked about -- seen sometimes as mental shapes and constructs long before they find material expression.... Objects fill needs. Objects are projections of our needs and desires. They are material externalizations of our needs and desires. They tie together the material and the immaterial world (p. 97).

Given the importance of objects in our lives to help us to imagine and envision, a number of feminist cultural theorists have taken objects as a form of research. Hooper-Greenhill (2002) argued, “Objects in and as research are powerful...because they can both be and become ‘inscribed signs of cultural identity’” (p. 11). Gough (2020) adds that “objects can be literal or they can be representational of an idea, place, or time” (p. 185). Feminists Barton and Willcocks (2017) have used objects as powerful metaphors that enabled complex abstract ideas “to be communicated and understood” (p. 231). Object-based research combines the identification of objects with biography or storytelling. Stories are told about and through the objects as a means to make sense and meaning of the world. Objects, representing stories and memories forgotten or unspoken, i.e., the reproductive imagination, bring to the fore ideas and elusive feelings through touching, sharing, and describing items of significance – the productive imagination. In object-based research, objects become recognized as signs of both self and social realization and of self and social differentiation. Objects in research also have a way of enabling participants to hold competing ideas and complexities in one space and this was certainly the case in our study (Gough, 2020).

Bartlett and Henderson (2016a) focus on the activist role of objects, specifically in the feminist movement. They found social agency to be a general attribute of objects used in feminist activism, objects that manifested intentionality, but they also found power in how feminists made or remade objects. While their focus is on object-based research as stepping outside ‘capitalist production’, we take up feminist object-based research in our work as stepping outside ‘patriarchal logic’.

Our object-based research method

In 2021 and 2022 we brought together two groups of feminist arts-based adult educators and museum scholars and practitioners who had been working diverse and collaborative ways with community organizations, museums, and galleries, to explore their understandings of the ‘feminist imaginary’ through self-selected meaningful objects. These feminists had been working in museums, galleries, community and academic institutions throughout their careers and were invited to participate in conference focusing on the feminist imaginary. The coming together was online in 2021 due to the pandemic and in person in 2022 in the United Kingdom. The question to which the participants responded was: What is the feminist imaginary? More specifically, we asked: What does this term mean to you? We had thought about the term and were using it as an expression of our feminist collective of arts-based adult educators and museum curators, educators, and practitioners that we have named the Feminist Imaginary Research Network (FIRN). We had no specific definition of the feminist imaginary nor any real intent of developing something concrete. Rather, we wanted both ourselves and the rest of our network to explore its diverse dimensions in their different contexts and lives. In other words, we provided a space to imagine the ‘the feminist imaginary’ into being, giving voice to those owning and selecting objects and enabling heteropatriarchy’s inequities to be addressed through the stories they told through their chosen objects to represent their deep gendered consciousnesses.

We asked the study participants to bring an object from their past, something they had made or found that held meaning to them and could, albeit complexly, describe for them the meaning of the feminist imaginary. We left the description open beyond that invitation and therefore, the objects they selected had been made or found and took many of the following forms: 1) publications (books, magazines, pamphlets), 2) fabrics (scarves, blankets, weavings,), 3) artworks (paintings, poetry, glass objects), and 4) symbolic objects (rocks, tarot cards, hair elastics). The common factor across all selected objects was how they all symbolized the feminist imaginary to the participant, depicting what they saw as central to their vision of the feminist imaginary. It was evident that the objects were chosen by participants because they held meaning and feeling, collectively shaping the feminist imaginary into powerful being. These objects were significant to the owners – they were new, or touched, or felt, or worn. The activity worked powerfully to connect the individual women to each other, both in person and online, and it stimulated our thinking about the role that objects could play in engaging in deeper thinking.

Each of the women shared the object they had selected for this event, some of them ‘vulgar’ or ‘intimate’ and all of them personal and alive with meaning and memory. The feminist meaning of their objects came as much from the selection and purposes for sharing as it did for their historical significance. The meaning was made clear through their descriptions, stories they told, and memories that were evoked. As they shared their objects, the emotion attached to each of these was observable in the ways the women held the objects in their hands, as unfurled pieces of cloth, and how these objects were introduced with love and attention. As we listened to each of the stories that accompanied the objects, we all brought to mind our own stories, connecting fragments of memory and emotion - stories of protest marches, of time spent with caring parents, family stories evoked, books read, and materials created. As the women told their stories, the personal was intertwined with the historical and political, inseparable as details were shared. Weaving between the lines of the stories were meanings ascribed to each object by both the sharer and the listeners, evoking deepened meanings and forgotten memories connecting to each others’ lives and experiences. In the images and descriptions shared below, we could feel the intensity of facial expressions, the pride, confusion or sadness evoked, and the hands that respectfully cradled the objects. Additionally, the telling of the stories, with objects in hand, interwove with the voices of the individuals softening, raising, enunciating, and stumbling over words was shared as the meanings of each object was revealed. The power of voice, rough and unscripted, revealed diverse women’s experiences, their identities, knowledge and strengths, and created a uniquely feminist space through which all voices and all objects were equally valued, seen, heard, respected, and connected. One story became everyone’s story and sharing objects enabled a collective object-sharing circle.

Findings

We turn here to the findings of our object-based study about how this group of feminist adult educators and museum practitioners took up the feminist imaginary. As Bartlett and Henderson (2016a) argue, “there is indeed a system of feminist objects – an underlying logic that defines them as feminist material culture” (p. 162). These feminists recognized patterns and recurrent themes, motifs, and shapes through their analysis of feminist objects, finding that “in place of randomness there is an order, and a set of relations among feminist things that signify the movement’s reach, scope, and foci, as well as the specific qualities of activist objects” (p. 162). Building on Bartlett and Henderson’s work (2016a) we developed key themes that arose from sharing and analyzing the objects. The objects shared by the participants in our study were not random, but represented four key themes. The first we call Corporeal Objects, which includes body parts as well as objects worn on the body. The second is Communicative Objects, which includes things that speak or narrate. The third category is Protest Objects and represent feminist action and power. Our final theme is Disappearing Objects and refer to things that have been lost or made absent. These objects enabled the passion of the sharer, the intensity of their descriptions and explanations, the importance of the sharing and the shared object, and the personal and societal meaning of the objects. The objects are all symbolic and are representative of activism, family connections, work, historical events, naming, and relationships. The collected objects represent “memories and material objects that many will find unacceptable (inferior, too personal, too

intimate)” (Sandahl, 1995, p. 102), that is, “‘improper’ objects: objects that are not part of the ‘official’ identity, either of the individual or of society in general” (p. 102). However, these ‘improper objects’ are part of our beings, our wisdom, our actions, and our communities. The examples of feminist objects included in this paper were shared in a virtual exhibition and an in-person conference in 2022. All the names are the actual women’s names and many of the stories can be viewed at <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/comarts/>.

Corporal objects

Bartlett and Henderson (2016) remind us that women’s bodies have always been central to feminist politics and struggle, and therefore by necessity we must think about issues of control such as how women reclaim the body “as a women’s jurisdiction” (p.163). This idea of the body as presented through corporeal objects was central to how some of the participants imagined the feminist imaginary.

Sandra, from Spain, took this up through an artistic depiction of women’s genitals, specifically the vulva, that she had brought from her museum (Figure 1). She noted that although women have been taught to ignore this part of the body or worse, to feel shame when describing or depicting it, this ‘object’ for her and her museum is used as an expression of women’s creativity, power and right to sexual pleasure. Sandra talked about how the museum she manages uses these types of corporal objects to fight back against the appropriation of women’s bodies by patriarchal norms and as a symbol of freedom from the domination of men by showing women that they have the right to power, firstly over their own bodies, and secondly, to their circumstances in the world.



Figure 1: Knitted Vulva

Coming from Canada, Shauna also chose the body, but in her case she selected an object that depicts another central part of the body. What she selected to bring was a stitched heart as symbolic of the feminist imaginary. For Shauna, it is through the heart --- through love and feelings -- that she imagines a different world. Her small fabric heart (Figure 2) fits into the palm of her hand and is one of the many heart-shaped objects she collects. Shauna describes these heart-shaped objects as both a symbol of caring as well as politics. She contends that the heart, “is a kind of bloodline for not just imagining but, through imagination, acting” on new ways of living in the world.



Figure 2: Heart-shaped Objects

Moving away from body parts, to items worn on the body, were those chosen by Nabila from India and Gaby from Germany. Clothing varies across time and space and has different meanings “depending on who regulates them and fears them and of course, the women who wear them” (Franger & Clover, 2021, p. 285). Figure 3 below is the chosen image by Nabila. She told the story through this object of how her mother raced to put on her headscarf whenever anyone came to the door of her home. The narrative she shared is that ‘covering up’ their bodies with headscarves is a sign of a women’s respect. However, Nabila argues that in fact, this is a socio-political determinant and an intimate story of power. These woven pieces of cloth can be at once beautiful and comforting and they can also represent a women’s choice. In Nabila’s context, scarves are about restricting women, about upholding patriarchal control over womens’ bodies and determining whether they are seen or not seen.



Figure 3: Covering Up

Similarly, the object that represented the feminist imaginary for Gaby was a headscarf, a yellow fabric with colourful flowers around the edges and adorned with hand-made bobbles. Women spend hours and hours using needles to create and attach the flowers to the headscarf. As she was discussing her headscarf, Gaby ran the bobbles through her fingers, sharing that the feel of these fabrics was a significant part of the object. “Why”, she queried, “does such a hatred arise towards the women who just want to wear a headscarf? What is behind it?” Gaby spoke through this object and it became what Barton (2017) called “the focus point for exploring cultural, social [and] disciplinary viewpoints” (p. 232). Gaby, like Nabila, also spoke to the contradictions inherent in these corporeal objects, of notions of religion, but more importantly the power of what women can and cannot do,

what they must and must not do, what they can do, and also what they cannot do (Figure 4). Gaby's object symbolizes both oppression of women and also women's strategies for countering this oppression, hatred, and discrimination.



Figure 4: Beaded Headscarf

Although also using a head covering, Dorothea from Canada shared a very different idea of the feminist imaginary from her upbringing. She brought with her a regalia headpiece (Figure 5) woven by her daughter and carved by her father to wear at a public ceremonial event. This headpiece, woven in the style of Coast Salish peoples and representing artistic works of Indigenous women, is for Dorothea a disruption to the colonial forces that attempted to destroy Indigenous cultures on her island and across Canada. The headpiece symbolizes the feminist imaginary as a form of matriarchy and of thousands of years of Indigenous women's knowledge and wisdom, reminding her of her own responsibility to revitalize and share those teachings with future generations of women.



Figure 5: Indigenous Regalia Headpiece

Communicative objects

The second set of objects, and by far the most prevalent, we call Communicative Objects. These are objects written, embroidered, and stitched. Beverley, a poet and embroiderer from England, brought a needlework artefact embroidered with poppies. To her, this represented her mother, a woman she felt did not have a voice. The needlework for Beverley is symbolic of both the careful embodied cultural work of women and of their voices that were not heard or valued, and in her case made invisible by both gender and class. In addition, Beverley created poetry into her needlework. Poetry is a powerful mode of expressing emotions, connecting with our inner thoughts and with others, reminding us of what we know but have forgotten, and reframing experiences in new ways. Poetry is both world-making and communicative, creating and capturing what we might have otherwise missed. For Leggo (2012), poetry is powerful because it “invites us to experiment with language, to create, to know, to engage creativity and imaginatively with experience” (p. 165). During the workshop, Beverley created an object, a ‘found’ poem, which she later stitched and framed (Figure 6). The piece is made of ideas and words by all the women participants in the 2022 workshop and captures our collective journey with feminist imaginary.



Figure 6: Wandering Women Embroidery

Building on this, Thea's object, a Coast Salish weaving, was also created over the days we met in 2022 and was completed at the gathering. Like Beverley, her object wove together the stories of our work as feminist educators, curators, and researchers that we shared during the workshop. Her weaving also symbolizes material and immaterial feminist ideas (Figure 7), and like Dorothea, thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge and wisdom that has been passed down through matrilineal lines. To weave in her culture is to slow down, to listen, and learn but also to challenge colonial patriarchal control over women's thoughts, actions, and bodies. Through this object, the participants' voices were woven with the voices of the ancestors and living women who kept culture alive.



Figure 7: *Weaving Stories*

Other objects of value to these women took the form of different types of publications. Sinead, an Irish art historian, uses old historical documents to “better understand” where we, as women, have come from and where we need to go. She has created materials that point to the absence of women, and the relegation of women to small private spaces. Information she used in her publication came from, among other sources, a ‘minute book’, found in the toilet of the venue the ‘Ladies Room’. Like Gaby and Shauna, Sinead holds her objects lovingly and close to her heart.

Nicola shared a publication she had created as her chosen object. This publication is a guide to a women’s charity where she works and is a full-sized fold-out guide that has been written and illustrated by many contributors (Figure 8). The guide is intended to support young women survivors of sexual abuse and homelessness, and it is these women who have shaped the guide as a public information comic. This object represents the many hands, including staff from the organization, who use this guide to show women coming together and imagining a better future together.



Figure 8: Publication for Women’s Charity

Emilia’s contribution as an artist, writer, and art curator was a novel she had authored entitled *Arte da Guerra* (Figure 9). It retells the story of Judith, a young Jewish woman portrayed in the Bible who freed the people of Israel from the siege by Nebuchadnezzar’s army. This character captured Emilia’s feminist imagination through artistic portrayals. Emilia is an ordinary woman who was both determined and powerful and this prompted her to write this book.



Figure 9: Arte da Guerra

These created and inherited texts communicate, by women to women, ways in which women's history is written and re-written, capturing previously unknown history and passing knowledge from generation to generation, reframing women's experiences, and knowledges. These texts, created and shared, help us all to read in order to imagine possibilities, recognize subversive potential, and the capacity we all have to 'read against the grain'. Cherished texts, created and collected, help us to pass knowledge from generation to generation, preserving wisdom in many forms and shapes.

Building on these feminist texts was another publication that spoke to the power of women. Dorothea shared a book written by her mentor/role model Robina Thomas (*Protecting the Sacred Circle*). This book describes the need to reintroduce matriarchal ideas and goals through Indigenous ways of understanding women's roles and to empower women from the past to recreate a better future for their grandchildren. Dorothea holds the book up to share the title with the other women (Figure 10). This book describes ways to bring back ways of knowing that existed on the land and she sees it as a way to empower and decolonize all women.



Figure 10: Protecting the Sacred Circle

Two other types of communicative objects by Kathy and Tracey, from Canada, represent the feminist imaginary in complex ways. This feminist imagery symbolizes cherished childhood memories and family relationships, and harkens back to family stories and connections, but also activates thoughts of patriarchal normativity. In the former context, Tracey shared a strand of pearls with the group and using this, created a poem which she titled *Actually, pearls are a girl's best friend* (Figure 11). The meaning of the pearls for Tracey, and why she described them as 'her friend', is that they

were given to her by her grandmother who shared stories with her that were pearls of wisdom. Like Gaby, Tracey warmed the pearls in her hands as she spoke before placing them around her neck.



Figure 11: Actually, pearls are A Girl's Best Friend

Kathy's object of feminist imaginary is represented through two rings that also evoked memories of great-grandmothers, but from two very different worlds (Figure 12). The Eastern Star was her great-grandmother's ring and represents a mid-1800s Masonic-style organization that was uniquely open to women. The star is a symbol representing five different biblical heroines, depicting feminine religious virtues, many of which Kathy resists. The other ring was passed down through her other great-grandmother who did not have time to be devout as she was worked into an early grave through child-bearing and neglect. Kathy wears these rings for courage and remind her of a feminist imaginary that must continually stare down patriarchal barriers and resistance. These patriarchal barriers and resistance also include the struggle of female ancestors who showed immense courage in the face of society that tried to erase them, but their memories and accomplishments have prevailed.



Figure 12: The Eastern Star

Protest objects

Protest is one of the ways we have our voices heard and are able to hear the voices of others who experience injustice, pain, and fear. Objects of protest are symbols used to make something visible in a way that can spark conversation and focus attention to an issue or problem (Barton, 2017). Kathy's protest object is a collage of collected images that represents the voices and artistic creations from a community project by her students (Figure 13). Using a house scheduled for demolition, a group of local artists and secondary school students created a feminist activist installation in response to the climate crisis specifically to put a visual voice to climate anxiety. This installation represents ways in which the feminist imaginary can mobilize and create a work that is collective, able to reach multiple audiences, and demonstrates the power of feminist activist artists to raise their voices in protest and vision. The fifty artists who participated had their voices heard and shared, and this mobilized and created a deeper awareness of global crises through the expression of their hopes and fears.



Figure 13: Wasteland

The *Bear Hunter* (Figure 14) is a media collage object of protest created by Kerry. It is a humorous and playful artwork that incorporates fake fur, vinyl, tulle, and sequins to subvert original 'soft porn' purposes of the materials. Through this work, Kerry creates mischievous feminist mayhem in her quest for gender justice, and it is a piece that has traveled with her over decades and connects her past and present feminist aesthetic selves. As Kerry explains, she sees the feminist imaginary as a connecting thread between aesthetic rupture and the appearance of what was not able to previously exist, re-presenting images originally produced for the male gaze, and now disrupting the privileging of male perspectives through feminist re-presentations.



Figure 14: The Bear Hunter

Objects chosen by some participants were actual pieces from feminist activism that are significant to them. Claudia, from Costa Rica, brought to the workshop a bright green scarf that was worn and was also used as a banner, emblazoned with the words “Campana Nacional Por el Derecho al Aborto Legal, Seguro y Gratuito” (Figure 15). The scarf was created for a demonstration where women in the streets called for legal abortion that promoted abortion in a safe and free way. All of the women who participated in these debates about abortion in Argentina held this ‘pañuelo’ as an emblem as they called for reproductive rights and health, for all women around the world.



Figure 15: The Abortion Rights Campaign

The final protest object was shared by Sarah from England in the form of ArtActivistBarbie (AAB) (Figure 16). AAB is Barbie reimaged and represents a recreated trickster figure that is fearless in her quest to root out patriarchy in museums. AAB turns a cultural icon on its head and becomes a subversive marauding character. Ken and Action Man are often in tow with AAB and aim to educate and activate a critical feminist consciousness. Wearing 'haute couture' or nothing at all, AAB challenges the status quo of art in museums, highlights the absence of women in museums, and identifies the disproportionate representation of males in museums, galleries, and public spaces. Through the use of placards, Sarah uses Barbie to highlight that the National Gallery in London exhibits 2300 works by men but only 21 works by women. Sarah also enters into the 'sacredness' of art by rendering visible the acts of sexualized violence against women and the blatant stereotyping of women.



Figure 16: ArtActivistBarbie

Disappearing objects

In 2021, feminist Criado-Perez spoke to something she calls the absent presence, a liminal space where women exit yet do not exist. Darlene's object takes this up both physically and metaphorically. She brought a painting (Figure 17) by a Mexican artist called Rosy which she photographed in the home of a friend and colleague in Mexico. For Darlene, this representation is complex and brought to mind different questions, which pertain to the feminist imaginary. A number of questions come to mind: 1) Is this woman disappearing of her own volition?, 2) Is it under her own power that melts into the shadows?, 3) Is this woman being disappeared?, and 4) Is she one of the disposable people, like the hundreds of murdered and missing Indigenous women and prostitutes in Canada who simply 'disappeared'? These questions have significance because women do not simply 'disappear', their disappearance is about power.



Figure 17: The (dis)appearing Woman

Building on the idea of disappearing, Nicola, a feminist visual artist, researcher, and community activist from Scotland works with young women survivors of abuse, sexual violence and homelessness. These women are all too often unseen and unheard in society and as a result, disappear from sight, from mind, and from policy. The aim of Nicola's work (Figure 18) is to give these women opportunities to create artworks in celebration and recognition of their identities as survivors and to make them visible through public art exhibitions. Curated at a feminist imaginary space in the Glasgow Women's library, these forgotten women reappeared as not just survivors of violence, but as artists with the kinds of imaginations that contribute meaningfully to the world.



Figure 18: Multiple Identities

The final disappearing object, a rusty old cog, came from Laura from Italy. She found this object hidden in the ruins of a windmill and serves as a mute witness to her grand-grandmother Cati's life (Figure 19). Cati was disappeared from her family history and was therefore a mystery to Laura for most of her life. She was disappeared as the result of a liaison with a Catholic priest resulting in an illegitimate child and her being labelled as 'a sinner' because a "woman should not have children out of marriage", and "a woman should not have sex with a Catholic priest."



Figure 19: Rusty old cog

Like Darlene, Laura questioned issues power. Specifically, she asked: Was it love between the two of them? Or was Cati abused? The priest would have been wealthy and powerful whereas Cati was not. Many questions still persist about her grandmother's story but through her object, Laura brought Cati back into existence.

Discussion and conclusion

Our study asked participants to delve into their imaginations and to share through an object their understandings of the term 'the feminist imaginary'. As previously noted, we had no definition of 'the feminist imagery' and we were not looking for one. The following is what we discovered about the meaning of 'the feminist imaginary' from a group of feminist adult educators and museums practitioners?

Throughout our process of collecting women's significant objects and the stories they shared, we recognized 'the feminist imaginary' as a site of struggle for so many women. As Ahmed (2017) noted, "the struggle can be exhausting, the task is learning to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty" (p. x). The caring of the women's object selections, and the intensity of the ways they shared stories about their objects, revealed the challenges they have faced. In addition, the objects revealed the ways in which these women made sense of their lives through seeking to find meaning in the mundane. Through exploration of the feminist imaginary, we created community, a common understanding, and a value for everyday objects that revealed connection and depth. Wilson (2010) contended that

Exposure to aesthetic experiences can inspire individuals and instill a sense of wonder, encouraging a deeper outlook on life, and the energy and inventiveness to create alternative ways of being and spaces where one can feel at home, a sense of community.

Feminist aesthetic and creative practices actively engage with the complexities of identity, power, and societal structures. By embracing experimentation and unknowability, these practices contribute to a dynamic and inclusive creative space that encourages critical thinking and challenges established norms. What we experience, as we gathered objects and stories, was a complex understanding based in notions of production and reproduction, challenge, and possibility. We conclude this article with a discussion of the four categories of objects and the implications of this type of research as a pedagogical project.

The feminist objects shared in this paper symbolize an imaginary of feminist possibility that we represented through the following four categories: 1) corporal objects (focused on the body and objects worn on the body), 2) communicative objects (narrating or speaking experiences), 3) protest objects (used as activist and disruptive pieces), and 4), disappearing objects (those lost or absent). Objects in each of these categories value the lives, creations, and voices of women and demonstrate them as worthy of recognition and representative of their significant contributions to the world. The world is only partially represented without the inclusion of women's stories, creations, and lives. The valuing of patriarchal objects representing heroic deeds, battles won and discoveries made, and the exclusion of objects representing emotion, connection, and imagination, have created a world that is incomplete and one-sided.

We return to our question, "What is the feminist imaginary?", as we recognize the significance of the objects shared by these women. Both individually and collectively, the objects represent a way of seeing the world that is ignored or devalued. Feminist objects, these mundane, everyday objects, weave together women's stories of past reminiscences, actions, emotions, and memories with imagination, of futures desired and possible. Objects evoke both individual and collective power that draws from historic disruptions and challenges the ways that women have been valued, treated, and ignored. Women's bodies have been systematically denigrated and shamed because they have been represented as symbols of weakness and fragility. Their heads are described as empty, their hearts scorned, and their genitals to be mocked and shamed. However, objects survive to tell their own stories, through needlework, poetry, story, and slogans. Women's art is not hidden away behind glass, in revered gallery halls or libraries, but survives through use. This art survives through marching in the streets, through the reminders of family, through the exhortations to lead good lives, through being worn on heads and hands, and through being read in evenings and in meetings. Feminist objects remind us of our power and capacity for action, to seek equal treatment, voice, and access. Feminist objects are selected by their owners who bestow meaning and evoke memories onto these objects that are both unique and shared. These feminist objects reveal complexities of the world that must complement the patriarchal world that continues to override even as it destroys.

Women's everyday objects continue to create feminist imagination. Our objects are representative of "useful art", which as artist Bruguera (2008) describes, as "useful art [that] is about transforming people's lives, even on a small scale. It is art as activism and activism as art" (n.p.). Viewers are users, users are viewers and admirers, as stories intermingle and create further stories. Power comes in the everyday as well as the glorious and revered, and objects representing women's power deserve attention.

This research project has led us to understand more fully the power of objects to challenge normative patriarchal and colonial stories, to re-view exhibitions and collections of objects to guide future work that is inclusive, representative, and offers engaging stories of everyone. Memory is evoked through objects, more powerfully through those that audiences can engage with, sparking their own remembering and understanding the value of local feminist objects in a way that have not previously been recognized. The past can be reshaped and re-remembered through objects that evoke everyone's experiences, connecting to present and future stories. We connect to people, places, and events that connect to our own realities; if there is no connection, we come to see the world through distorted lenses that neither matter or disrupt normative stories of male heroism and conquest. We come to devalue ourselves and our own stories and contributions, which are natural, evolving and continually producing new memories and new life, preparing for ever-evolving futures. Instead we look to others (men) to lead the way and create objects that glorify past feats of conquest and subjugation. Our future must be informed by memories and actions of relationship, growth and nurturing created by a feminist imaginary.

Offering a broader perspective of 'objects' helps include diverse voices, both public and private views of the way the world is, has been, and should be. Through objects, memories are called up, connected, and the feminist imaginary can be created and recognized. In this paper we recognize and share the cultural and pedagogical possibilities that are enabled using object-based investigation,

broadening research possibilities and stories told. These create a shared feminist imaginary that can bring about fundamental change to the gender imbalance, the skewed understandings of what is to be valued, that can bring about fundamental change to the world in which we inhabit.

Hayward (2022), in her found poem (Figure 20) created through needlepoint, captures ways in which the shared feminist objects individually and collectively represent the feminist imagination and offer ways to challenge a world that has for too long honoured that which is destructive, individualistic and competitive. By re-viewing what objects are valued and re-valuing objects that represent sustainable life, by considering how they are recognized and evoke powerful memories, we create a living feminist imaginary, one that cherishes objects that have been touched, held, and worn. Through a feminist imaginary evoked by these objects we can work to bring balance to a world that is in need of hope, connection, safety, and feminist imagining.

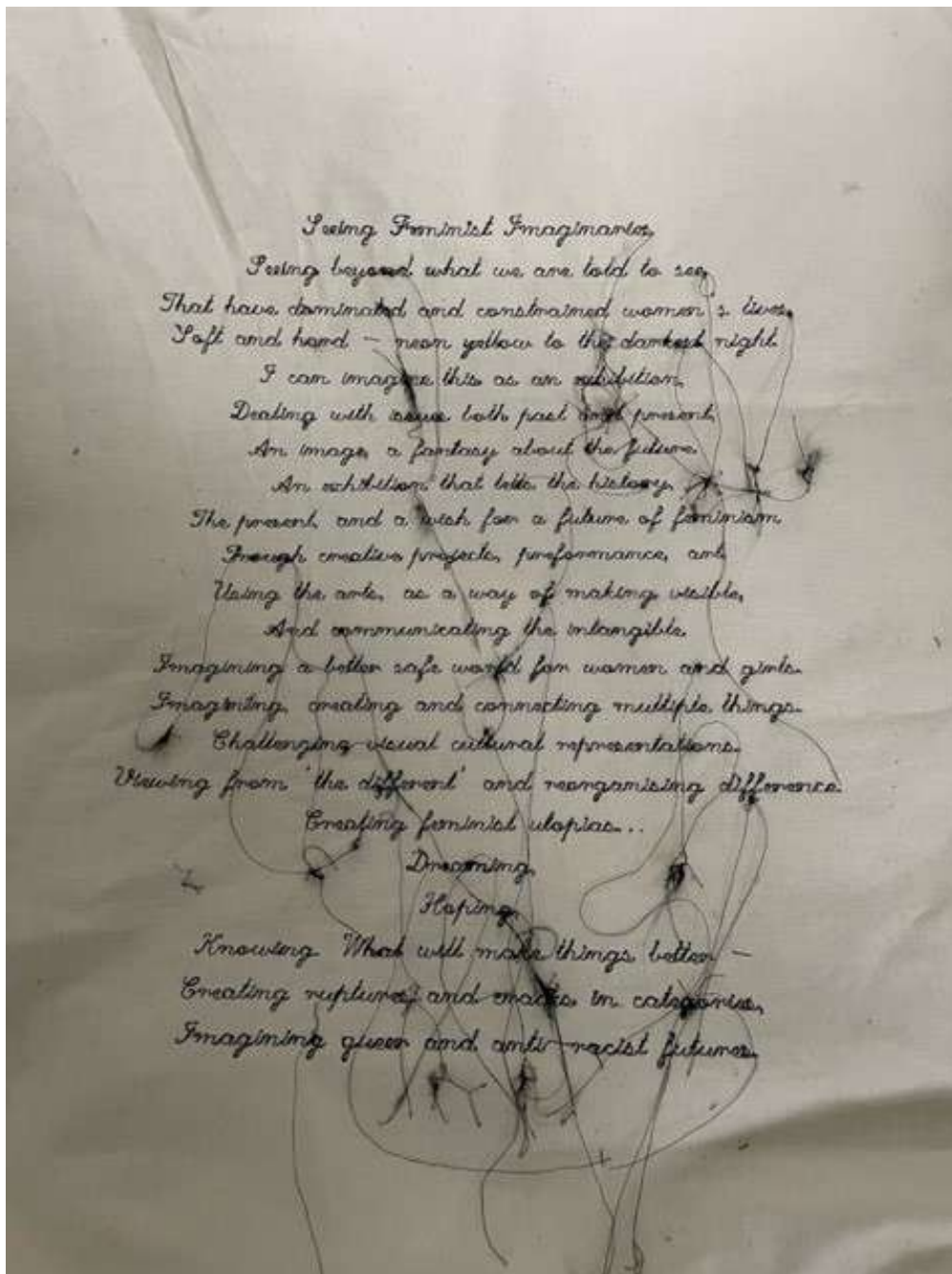


Figure 20: Feminist Imaginary Poem: Seeing Feminist Imagination

**Seeing Feminist Imagination
Beverly Hayward**

Seeing beyond what we are told to see
That have dominated and constrained women's lives
Soft and hard – neon yellow to the darkened night
I can imagine this as an exhibition
Dealing with issues both past and present
An image, a fantasy about the future
An exhibition that tells the history
The present and a wish for a future of feminism
Through creative projection, performance, art
Using the arts as a way of making visible
And communicating the intangible
Imagining a better safe world for women and girls
Imagining, creating and connecting multiple things
Challenging visual cultural representations.
Viewing from 'the different' and reorganizing difference
Creating feminist utopias
Dreaming
Hoping
Knowing what will make things better
Creating ruptures and cracks in categories
Imagining queer and anti-racist futures.

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