Rag Bags:

Textile Crafts in Canadian Fiction since 1980

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ABSTRACT

The very impetus of this study — to examine the representations of craft in literature — defies the functional binaries so long attributed to art and craft. This study examines the literary formulations of textile crafts and their makers in Canadian works of fiction at the turn of the twenty-first century. Included are three Canadian novels published after 1990: Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* (2002) and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995). Through close analysis of these patchwork novels, I suggest ways of reading quilts and other textile crafts as a recontextualization of the forms of the past (through the workings of displacement and parody) in Canadian literature.

Chapter One proposes theoretical reconceptualizations of crafts culminating in the 1990s and establishes three paradigms that structure my analysis in each of the chapters: the relations of textile crafts with (a) narrative, (b) trickery, and (c) a dehierarchical and plural aesthetic. In the subsequent chapters, each one dealing with a single novel, I explore the reassembled quality of the narratives and variations of the spider-weaver archetypes they represent, both of which I consider fundamental to the patchwork novel. In Chapter Two, I posit the patchwork quilt in Atwood's *Alias Grace* as a model for the processes of recollection and

fragmentation involved in historiographic metafiction. Chapter Three establishes the crafted object in Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* as a site of struggle and an embodiment of the collective and composite nature of heritage in the neoslave narrative. Chapter Four focuses on the way the "sordid quiltings" (379) of Mistry's *A Fine Balance* make new out of old and, rather than embodying what has been preserved, often reveal and reflect upon what has been obscured by historical records. I view textile craft as departing from its affiliation with a nostalgic female aesthetic and lineage mystique to be involved here instead, in novels of turn of the twenty-first century, in mutations, making and remaking, and manipulation and invention proper to a postcolonial politics of recycling.

ABRÉGÉ

Cette étude contribue à remettre en question la célèbre dichotomie entre l'art et l'artisanat en se penchant sur les représentations de l'artisanat dans la littérature. Plus spécifiquement, cette étude vise à explorer les représentations de l'artisanat textile et de la figure de l'artisan dans le roman canadien au tournant du vingt-et-unième siècle, à travers trois romans publiés après 1990 : *Alias Grace* (1996) de Margaret Atwood, *The Polished Hoe* (2002) d'Austin Clarke et *A Fine Balance* (1995) de Rohinton Mistry. Une analyse de ces trois romans-patchwork et du rapiéçage qui en informe leur structure et leur contenu nous révèle une nouvelle façon de conceptualiser l'artisanat tout en remettant en contexte des formes traditionnelles du passé (tels que tissage, tressage, couture) dans la littérature canadienne contemporaine.

Le premier chapitre, explorant les théories transdisciplinaires autour de l'artisanat apparues vers 1970 et atteignant leur apogée dans les années 1990, propose trois paradigmes structurant mon analyse dans chacun des chapitres, à savoir, les relations entre l'artisanat textile et (a) le récit, (b) la ruse, et (c) la transformation et la pluralité. Chacun des chapitres suivants explore les récits rapiécés et les variations autour de la figure mythique du (de la) fileur(euse) rusé(e) (la figure du « trickster »

dans le mythe nord-américain) qui constituent un ensemble caractéristique du roman patchwork. Le deuxième chapitre propose le patchwork présent dans *Alias Grace* comme un modèle de processus de récupération et de fragmentation propre au roman historique (ou ce que Linda Hutcheon nomme « historiographic metafiction »). Le chapitre trois analyse l'objet textile « fait main » dans *The Polished Hoe* de Clarke comme un site où s'inscrivent la résistance et la nature collective et composite de la notion de patrimoine dans le nouveau récit d'esclavage, ou le « neoslave narrative ». Le quatrième et dernier chapitre, portant sur *A Fine Balance* de Mistry, attire l'attention sur les rapiéçages « sordides » (379) dans le roman, qui signifient ce que l'Histoire a obscurci plutôt que ce qu'elle a préservé. L'artisanat textile se défait donc ici de son affiliation traditionnelle à l'esthétique féminine nostalgique et généalogique pour s'associer plutôt, dans le roman canadien des années post-1990, a des processus de mutation, de récupération, de manipulation, et d'invention propres à une politique postcoloniale du recyclage.

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Introduction: “Rag Bags”

This study focuses on representations of textile crafts – such as spinning and weaving, sewing and quilting – in novels written in Canada since 1990. My approach is both cross-cultural and inter-disciplinary. I investigate novels written during the last two decades by some of the diverse cultural groups that make up the Canadian mosaic – English-Canadian, Caribbean-Canadian, and Indo-Canadian – and enter into critical dialogue with recent craft theorists from the diverse fields of museology, art history, visual arts, and cultural studies. The first chapter of this study addresses evolving definitions of crafts from before the Arts and Crafts movement (of the 1850s) to the theoretical reconceptualizations and redefinitions of craft and textile craft during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century — what craft critic Paul Greenhalgh has termed “a radical new phase” in the culture of craft (*The Persistence of Craft* 16). The subsequent three chapters of the dissertation analyse literary representations of “new craft paradigms” (Bachmann) in three Canadian novels written at the turn of the twenty-first century. I approach the texts through an intentionally symptomatic and close reading, and in the context of postcolonial criticism, looking for the signs of textile crafts marked by a condition of incompleteness, uselessness, displacement, or

erosion to provide commentary on the authors' reconceptualizations of a literary trope within the genre of historiographic metafiction. Furthermore, I am enacting a literary scholarship of recuperation by composing a series of articulations and linkages with the works of different theorists and critics that I deem useful for the purposes of my argument. This self-conscious critical impulse follows Roland Barthes' conception of the text as a "tissue of quotations" ("The Death of the Author" 146) and consists of a critical procedure that is in keeping with the notion of recycling and "salvage craft" that I am analysing (Stewart 139).[1]

A number of characters who are involved in craft have appeared in Canadian fiction since the 90s. Characters such as Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* (1996), Isobel Gunn in the novel of the same name (1999), Mary Gertrude Mathilda in *The Polished Hoe* (2002), Elizete in *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), the "traveller" in *Looking for Livingstone* (1991), and Omprakash, Ishvar, and Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance* (1995) all work in the textile trades involving the ancient crafts of sewing and weaving –

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1 I use the term "salvage craft" (a term Susan Stewart employs in her work *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*) to denote a traditional, domestic, hand-made, usually female activity linked with the skilful recuperation of something that would otherwise have been discarded. Salvage crafts are particularly revealing in spaces of cultural betweenness, in hyphenated cultures consisting of two or more heritages, confronted with issues of loss of tradition, language, or lineage.

quilting, knitting, cobbling, or tailoring. Both Grace Marks and Isobel Gunn are nineteenth-century women seamstress figures who are far from embodying "quaint anachronisms," those patronizing depictions of craftspersons in the historical past (N.C.M. Brown 17).[2] These fictionalised renditions of historical characters resist the conditions of women's lives that in the nineteenth century forced them into exploitation as piece-workers and seamstresses. Mary Gertrude Mathilda is a former field-worker and domestic who becomes the main mistress of a plantation. Elizete, an illegal immigrant in Toronto's sweatshops, or Omprakash and Ishvar, both former Untouchables-turned-tailors struggling for survival on the streets of Bombay from 1975 to 1984, keep the continued oppressive reality of textile work, for large numbers of women and children, but also men, steadily in mind. I will avoid romanticizing and sentimentalizing women's domestic culture and particularly their textile work by focusing on these figures — both male and female — who can be counted among the craftspersons that N.C.M. Brown claims have been disenfranchised by "the epistemological snobbery that has alienated the crafts": "the women, the tradesmen and, in some cases, the children, many of whom continue

2 Within Western theory of knowledge, claims Brown, "[c]raftpersons have been variously dismissed as producers of commodities without fetish, and of capital without symbol. They have been pitied as owners of neither and, with some noteworthy exceptions, patronized as quaint anachronisms" (17).

to be employed as tied labour worldwide” (17). For the purposes of this study, I limit my analysis to three novels, Margaret Atwood’s *Alias Grace*, Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe*, and Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*. In a seeming saturation of interconnection, textile craft in these novels functions simultaneously as the structure-generating pattern, the central formal metaphor threaded throughout, and the paradigmatic motif that generates both characterization and the books’ webs of meaning. These three novels illustrate contemporary redefinitions of craft and the interactions of textile craft with body and story, tricksterism, and a plural, dehierarchized, provisional aesthetics.

The time frame I have chosen for this study covers the 1980s, the 1990s, and the first decade of the twenty-first century, which I will heretofore refer to as the “contemporary” moment both in craft culture and Canadian literature. This period is most suitable for my study as it covers (1) the reconfigurations and redefinitions of craft, (2) the global era of Canadian literature, and (3) the Canadian developments in the postcolonial, postmodern, and historical novels, all of which began in the 1980s and gained momentum in the 1990s.

In the North American context of the 1980s, crafts escape their original affiliation with traditional anachronistic models (domestic and

private) and with a women's unified culture, to inhabit new regional and contemporary configurations. Although a renewed interest in crafts was already being expressed through feminist discourse in the 1970s, crafts began to be theoretically redefined and reconfigured radically in Canada in the 1990s by such craft theorists as Ingrid Bachmann and Paul Greenhalgh.[3] The new culture of crafts in which I position this study, and which I further describe in Chapter One, integrates the public and political manifestations of craft occurring during and after the 1980s and that led to the radical reconfigurations of crafts in the 1990s: the increased preoccupation with heritage and other modes of retrieval (Lowenthal 4), the art-craft debate (rendering the boundaries between art and craft, particularly in textiles, unusually fluid), the *AIDS* quilt (initiated in 1987), and the political appropriation of the "quilt of unity" as a symbol of

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3 The renewed interest in crafts can be traced back to 1971 when Jonathan Holstein broke through the art / craft barrier by organizing an exhibition on "Abstract Design and American Quilts" at the Whitney Museum in New York. The 70s and 80s saw a radical wave of activity in craft, with a renewed interest in women's traditional arts, with the founding of a number of official craft institutions, courses, and publications, and the emergence of new wave feminist artists of textile crafts and quilts. The period of the 90s marks further developments in craft theory and culture, when the development of eclecticism in craft reached its pitch, with an integrationalist, dehierarchical, and interdisciplinary approach that is central to this study.

American democracy (Jackson 18) and Canadian multiculturalism.[4] Indeed, Canada's national myth of the cultural mosaic makes it an exemplary space for a comparative insight that sustains diversity.

Furthermore, the period surrounding the 1980s and 1990s is most interesting for the purposes of this study in terms of literary criticism as it is not only one marked by Canadian multiculturalism but also by postmodernism and postcolonialism as well as attempts to characterise these discourses in relation to each other, and to chart their intersecting and diverging trajectories.[5] Linda Hutcheon's discussion of the overlap between the postcolonial and the postmodern in her article "Circling the Downspout of Empire" (1995) has been influential in this study. Moreover, I place this study within what Sneja Gunew calls "postcolonial multiculturalism," a critical framework that lies at the intersections of

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4 The bilingual-bicultural policies of the 60s established by Pierre Elliott Trudeau (Canada's Prime Minister from 1968 to 1979 and again from 1980 to 1984) and his introduction of the first Multicultural Policy in 1971 reflected a demographic and cultural reality and a political will that became the basis for the multiculturalism of the late 1980s, codified into the Multiculturalism Act of 1988. The policy of multiculturalism was an acknowledgement of the cultural and ethnic diversity of Canadians: its aboriginal peoples, the Anglophone and Francophone heritage groups, the influx of other European immigrants since the middle of the nineteenth century, and the more recent arrivals of the 'visible minority' immigrants from non-European, mostly Asian, countries.

5 For a full discussion of the overlap between the postcolonial and the postmodern, see Linda Hutcheon's views in her article "Circling the Downspout of Empire" (1995). For a detailed portrait of what Sneja Gunew implies by "postcolonial multiculturalism," see *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalism* (2004).

postcolonialism and multiculturalism and ties multiculturalism with the results of a history of colonialism. This study constitutes a response to Gunew's remark that:

> Multiculturalism has always been, in some ways, seen as a poor cousin of postcolonialism since multiculturalism was not perceived in academic debates as having the same sort of complexity and interest as postcolonialism. Multiculturalism, in a sense, is often associated with old histories and "folk" artistic productions, while postcolonialism tends to be associated with cosmopolitanism and high culture. I think this perception needs to be questioned. (qtd. in Leung 143)

This period of the 80s and 90s is also marked by the growing commentary surrounding what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, and the development of the field of working-class studies (Rimstead, Zandy) that resonates in these stories of domestics, seamstresses, peddlers, tanners, and tailors.

In keeping with the quilt's structure as a collection of patches, this study emphasises the correspondences between representations of textile crafts from several cultures, by 'multicultural' and 'metropolitan' writers. I am employing the metaphor of the patchwork quilt here to translate the phenomena of shifting, multiple, heterogeneous borders where different

histories, experiences, perspectives, ethnicities[6] and voices intermingle. All three texts by Atwood, Clarke, and Mistry evoke cultures of contact and histories of displacement: Grace Marks is an Irish immigrant to Canada; the plantation society of Clarke's novel is the product of "a history of migrants" (Nettleford 78) (European, African, and Asian); and the Parsi community to which Mistry's protagonist, Dina Dalal, belongs implies a South Asian, Persian and European inheritance. Two of the writers studied here assume between-world positions in their statuses as Caribbean-Canadian and Indo-Canadian: both Austin Clarke and Rohinton Mistry immigrated to Canada in their early twenties. Cultural differences are included here in a portrait of complex cultural interrelationships to show the tensions and conflicts inherent in a multicultural society and to study cultural production in the light of a heritage of contact and hybridization. I engage with what David Palumbo-Liu calls a "critical

6 Ethnicity, as Michael Fischer reminds us, is an inherently relational property, a "process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions" (201). Similarly, Arnold Krupat's notion of "ethnocriticism" is posited as a "frontier condition of betweenness" (27). Krupat defines this perspective in the following terms: "On the pedagogical or curricular level, the ethnocritical perspective manifests itself in the form of multiculturalism, a term I take to refer to that particular organization of cultural studies which engages otherness and difference in such a way as to provoke an interrogation of and a challenge to what we ordinarily take as familiar and our own. On the level of what I will call cognitive ethics, the ethnocritical perspective is consistent with a recognition and legitimation of heterogeneity (rather than homogeneity) as the social and cultural norm" (3).

multiculturalism," which "explores the fissures, tensions, and sometimes contradictory demands of multiple cultures, rather than (only) celebrating the plurality of cultures by passing through them appreciatively" (5).

The tradition of employing needlework as a model for female aesthetic began with Jane Barker's *A Patchwork Screen for the Ladies* (1723) and continued in the nineteenth century with writings by Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Adrienne Rich's feminist poetry also uses textile craft as a signifier of a "common language," of female aesthetic and authorship. Other landmark texts stressing a connection between textile crafts and a female aesthetic of community, wholeness, identity, and writing include Whitney Otto's *How to Make an American Quilt* and Alice Walker's "Everyday Use." Women's textile work became further linked to community and lineage with African-American literature. The quilt appears in novels published in the 1980s by Alice Walker (*The Color Purple*), Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), and Gloria Naylor (*Mama Day*), for example, as a metaphor for an African-American woman's aesthetic stressing community, beautification, and wholeness.

The crafted textile objects under scrutiny in this study recur as flawed, frayed, different, incomplete or unravelling, and depart from the earlier representations of quilts as celebratory feminist signifiers of

identity, lineage, tradition, wholeness, and community. The patchwork quilts in *Alias Grace* and *A Fine Balance* remain incomplete, and consist of “strange keepsakes” (*Alias Grace* 534)[7] and work a “strange magic” (*A Fine Balance* 75)[8]. Their uses are displaced as they become souvenirs of death or padding on the platform of a deformed beggar instead of a decorative counterpane or wedding gift. Quilted garments are deemed “too fine,” and stored in boxes, or deliberately torn and tattered to befit a beggar. Seamstresses engage in a “dangerous pastime,” to borrow Austin Clarke’s phrase (*Pigtails ‘n Breadfruit* 149); crafted clothes are used as nooses or gags, while lashes of a whip are “sewn” into the flesh of rebellious plantation labourers in *The Polished Hoe*.[9] The quilt as metaphor for aesthetic wholeness, tradition, filiation, and women’s community, therefore undergoes parody as defined by Linda Hutcheon – not a ridiculing imitation but a repetition with a critical distance that “allows ironic signalling of difference at the very heart of similarity” (*A Poetics of Postmodernism* 26). The resulting weave – patchwork – is, to quote Atwood, “ragged and threadbare, patched together by worthless leftovers” (*Robber Bride* 536). Consequently, in this study, I suggest oppositional

7 Hereafter cited as *AG*.

8 Hereafter cited as *FB*.

9 Hereafter cited as *PH*.

ways of reading quilts and other textile crafts as a recontextualized echoing of the forms of the past (through the workings of displacement and parody) in Canadian literature.

Theoretically, this study is located at the intersection of postmodernism and postcolonialism. Despite its prevalence and popularity today, craft has not been studied and theorized in a postcolonial or postmodern literary context (besides isolated articles, limited mainly to representations of the quilt as a metaphor for the postmodern and for history [Chouard; Michael]). Furthermore, textile crafts such as the patchwork quilt have not been an object of inquiry in Canadian texts, with the exception of *Alias Grace*. There has not yet been the kind of investigation undertaken here: one that employs the insights of postcolonial comparative theories and postmodern narrative techniques captured in weft and weave, alongside new craft paradigms (body and narrative, hybridity, dehierarchization) to interrogate literary formulations of textile craft in Canada at the turn of the twenty-first century. My aim here is to posit textile craft as an appropriate, effective, and original model for approaching historiographic metafiction and the postcolonial text.

The three novels I have chosen as representations of a culture of craft are situated on the margins of consumer culture, and have to do with

ex-centric forces of cultural change, transformation, and transition. *Alias Grace* takes place in nineteenth-century Canada at the dawn of industrial production precisely when artisanal culture is said to have been lost (Stewart 144). In this context of technological innovations that altered life in the nineteenth century (the advent of the railroads, the revolution of the textile industry with factory-made clothing, new textile dyes, the popularization of the sewing machine, all of which are apparent in *Alias Grace*), Atwood reconstructs the story of a historical figure, an Irish immigrant domestic (a particularly disadvantaged social category at the time) who is sentenced to life imprisonment for the murder of her employer. Although *The Polished Hoe* takes place in the 1960s Caribbean, it contemplates the past of slavery and its aftermath on the island of Bimshire (a fictive Barbados), linking contemporary forms of exploitation to past forms of exploitation proper to slavery and colonization. *A Fine Balance* also examines contemporary forms of exploitation linked to a colonial past, a global economy, and a caste system by depicting the trials faced by textile workers for the purposes of the export industry. The backdrop of the novel is a Bombay-like city under the Emergency Rule of Indira Ghandi of 1975-77, with excerpts set in

villages and towns before, during, and after the Partition that portioned out territory between India and Pakistan.

Margaret Atwood, speaking for writers of her generation, claims that "[t]he lure of the Canadian past . . . has been partly the lure of the unmentionable – the mysterious, the buried, the forgotten, the discarded, the taboo" ("In Search of Alias Grace" 19). It is with the telling of scandalous secrets hidden, forgotten, or misrepresented within history that these authors are concerned. The project of contemporary historiography as carried out by the contemporary Canadian writers presented here has been to give a voice to the "subaltern"[10] who had been written out of the record by conventional historical accounts: the immigrant domestic/murderess Grace Marks; the plantation owner's domestic/mistress (also a murderess) Mary Gertrude Mathilda in the Caribbean plantocracy; and the Untouchable labourers Omprakash and Ishvar, or the seamstress/widow Dina in Bombay. These characters have in common their desire to record the events of their lives, to 'set the

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10 I am using the term subaltern to refer to a subject in a subordinate position. The term was used by the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci to refer to the working masses that needed to be organized into a politically self-conscious force (Habib 165). The term as Gayatri Spivak uses it in her book *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999) refers to peoples in subordinate, colonized positions, and implies the "Subaltern Studies Group" in India, a radical group that attempted to articulate and give voice to the struggles of the oppressed peasants of the Indian subcontinent (266).

records straight.' Grace Marks and Mary Gertrude Mathilda both attempt to reveal themselves and their histories in the form of their respective testimonies, or depositions, while Omprakash and Ishvar recount the stories of their lives to Dina and their acquaintances at the Vishram restaurant. The recording of these stories — taking down the testimony or deposition in writing (as is attempted in *Alias Grace* and *The Polished Hoe*), or integrating these 'bits and pieces' of histories into a patchwork quilt (as in *Alias Grace* and *A Fine Balance*) — is always problematized here.

I regard these novels as historiographic metafiction, as they represent the histories of suppressed peoples, as well as the provisionality and problematization of 'truth' and 'reality.' Linda Hutcheon refers to historiographic metafiction, in her article titled "The Canadian Postmodern," as a theoretically self-conscious form of fiction that is paradigmatic of the paradoxes that characterise the postmodern. Historiographic metafiction, according to Hutcheon, is "fiction that is intensely self-reflexive but also clearly grounded in historical, social, and political realities" (25). These novels can be described as historiographic metafictions, then, both in their appeal to historical, social, and political realities as well as in their contestation of the boundaries between art and

theory and between fiction and history. Furthermore, these novels self-consciously point to the mechanisms of historical and literary fiction making, as well as storytelling, as a process of selecting, ordering, and constructing. The paradoxical process of assembling and unravelling in textile crafts such as sewing and quilting mirrors the provisional process of historiographic metafiction.

In their problematization of historical recording, their efforts to revise the histories of the subaltern subject, and their heterogeneous reconstructions of the past, *Alias Grace*, *The Polished Hoe*, and *A Fine Balance* partake of both historiographic metafiction and postcolonial fiction. I define these works as postcolonial inasmuch as they are written by authors living in postcolonial times and are about colonialism and the power struggles of the colonial condition. These novels are informed in particular by three aspects crucial to postcolonial inquiry and to the trope of textile craft as introduced here: (1) interrogations of the possibility of recording history; (2) composite figures of mutability or hybridity;[11] and (3) multiple and heterogeneous reconstructions of the past.

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11 I do not use the term hybridity as predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions but rather alongside what I consider the synonymous term of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *creole*: predicated upon the idea of the continual and mutual development of independent cultural traditions ("Creolization in Jamaica" 202).

Firstly, all three novels are concerned with testimonies – attempts at inscribing, writing down, recording – that are problematized by the inherent multiplicity and malleability of oral histories. Like the body, crafted fabrics, which involve scarring physical labour, become the literal site on which resistance and oppression may be inscribed and read most efficiently.

Secondly, the craft lens I employ here reveals new categories of character not commonly associated with quilts or textile crafts. In contrast with the wise, gentle, and aging, maternal and domestic crone figure of Ernest Buckler's modernist *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), who retrieves lost memory and reinserts wholeness and unity in her completed rug pattern at the end of the novel, the subaltern subjects and their textile crafts depicted here are, to borrow Gayatri Spivak's words, "irretrievably heterogeneous" (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 270). The crafts in these texts are confected by characters attempting to escape the confinement of the institutions of the prison, plantation, and class or caste systems. They consist of tricksters, scavengers, labourers defined by transformation: the domestic-*cum*-murderess, the peddler-*cum*-mesmeriser, the Untouchable tanner-*cum*-tailor. The revisionary process of crafts is embodied in these composite or hybrid figures, contemporary variations of tricksters, and

traditional weaver figures of mutability. Postcolonial literature is interested in establishing identity in terms of shifting alliances and a continuous redefinition of boundaries,[12] or what Henri Giroux calls "border identity":

> Cultural workers need to construct a notion of border identity that challenges any essentialized notion of subjectivity while simultaneously demonstrating that the self as a historical and cultural formation is shaped in complex, related, and multiple ways through its interaction with numerous communities. (38)

Textile workers embody these notions of cultural crossings, constructs, and movement and, as such, can be characterised as postcolonial figures.

Thirdly and finally, the reconstructions of the past in these three narratives, like the model of the patchwork quilt, is not fixed, closed, unified, or universal, but rather contingent, local, multiple, discontinuous. Crafts, and particularly textile crafts, are here "assemble[d] in heterogeneity" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 24) and connote a process of putting back together that does not however, I argue, entail "smooth"

12 The critical terminology surrounding postcolonial literatures is increasingly concerned with the idea of border and border-crossing, spatial metaphors applied to transcultural contact, such as the multiple or conceptual "frontier" (Arnold Krupat, Louis Owens), "border/land" (Gloria Anzaldua), environmental literature's "edge effect," and Hertha Sweet Wong's "boundary culture" (167).

wholeness, but a “striated” mix-matching, to borrow the terms of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (*A Thousand Plateaus* 485).

The novelty of my analysis of textile crafts and their makers in contemporary Canadian texts is not only its attention to such oppositional readings of crafts, but also its focus on three dimensions of textile craft as exposed in the contemporary theoretical reconceptualizations that will serve to structure each of my chapters in ways further outlined below: (1) implications of the body and storytelling and narrative in textile crafts; (2) applications of the original sense of ‘craftiness’ to textile crafts, with the hybrid qualities of the trickster figure; and (3) a plural, dehierarchized, provisional aesthetics including notions of recollection, recycling, and rehabilitation proper to textile crafts. This three-fold analytical focus enables me to question the subordinate and obsolete status of crafts by resisting their relegation to both an exclusively female aesthetic and a distinct nostalgic past. In other words, it is through their association with notions of revision, re-use, and recycling that crafts may recover their contemporaneity. By understanding craft as part of an on-going commerce of recycling rather than as “quaint” or “outdated,” it gains value and timely relevance and offers fresh insights on the contemporary moment.

(1) Body and Story

Textile crafts find their way into this fiction in myriad ways: not only in the characters' occupations, but also in the patterns of the narratives, in the characters' storytelling, even imprinting on the characters' bodies, as well as in the pages of the narratives themselves. For example, in *Alias Grace*, the chapters are named after quilting patterns, and are accompanied by an illustration of the pattern; in *A Fine Balance*, the double lines at the end of each section resemble a double stitch, which appears to mend the disparate parts of the tale together. Crafts leave ineradicable traces of personal or cultural history on the bodies of fictional characters: in *A Fine Balance*, tannery permanently marks the skin of the *chamaars* – or Untouchables of the shoemaker profession – Omprakash and Ishvar with smell and scar; and in *The Polished Hoe*, the intricately crafted bull-pistle scars the back of Mary Gertrude Mathilda's mother, "as if the two lashes were sewn into her flesh" (429). Sewing, quilting, and knitting leave the bodies of the seamstresses and tailors in these novels permanently marked, causing the loss of one of the senses: sight or hearing.

Like the craftsperson, the storyteller recuperates and pieces together the fragments of the past, as Manny, in *The Polished Hoe*, explains: "I am trying to piece together and reconstruct certain strains, certain strands, to

see what I come up with, in regards to my understanding how mankind does-act [sic]" (76). Among the material objects that carry stories in the texts I set out to analyse here are, for example, the quilts assembled by Atwood's Grace and Mistry's Dina, Mary Gertrude Mathilda's wishbone, hoe, or doilies in *The Polished Hoe*, and the scrapbook albums of the governor's wife and daughters in *Alias Grace*.[13] These collections of objects, images, texts, and textiles mirror the authors' literary practice of "retrieving or salvaging from the past whatever is relevant for now" (Bannerji 47). Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, in particular, has been, to borrow Atwood's terms, "pieced together" from disparate historical, legal, and literary sources, her historical character resulting in a "patchwork sel[f]" ("Hair Jewellery" 106) and her tale in what I will call a 'patchwork novel.' In the patchwork novels studied here, the collective past is reassembled from disparate patches, and readers become quiltmakers in the process of interpreting the narratives: we have to reassemble the multiple, interconnected stories of the texts, and sew them together into a heterogeneous (and inherently incomplete or frayed) pattern. These are some of the ways in which body and story, implied in contemporary

13 The quilt of the unnamed traveller in Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone*, and Verlia's historical scrapbook in Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*, are further examples.

redefinitions of textile craft, inform my analyses of textile crafts in these texts.

(2) "Craftiness": The Hybrid and Dehierarchical Qualities of the Trickster

The term "craft," further defined in Chapter One, refers to manual art or trade, but was also used to signify fraud, cunning, and artifice, and carries the potential to subvert the natural order (Dormer 22; Brown 12).[14] Characters in these novels – Grace Marks and Jeremiah Pontelli in *Alias Grace* (1996), Mary Gertrude Mathilda in *The Polished Hoe* (2003), and Omprakash, Ishvar, and Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance* – are craftspersons who each don "crafty" characteristics. As variations of the universal spider weaver archetype,[15] they are described in the novels as featuring spider-like characteristics; they are "tricky" and "objects of fear" (*Alias Grace* 22; *The Polished Hoe* 344). Like the spider-weaver archetype, these

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14 The Greeks believed that craftsmen had inherited from Prometheus "the foresight, trickery and sly thoughts, a bi-product of the secrets of technical control, the poiesis, which craftsmen learnt to exert over ends in their trade" (Brown 12).

15 In some East Indian cultures, the spider is a positive paradigm of transformation and the eternal weaver of the veil of illusion because of its constant activity of weaving and unweaving its own web (Cirlot 77). In the Caribbean context, "Brer Ananci the spider man, the trickster" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 78) from Akan folklore, is also wrought with ambiguity (see also Wilson Harris's *The Womb of Space* [1983] for a discussion of Ananci.)

characters are ambiguous, characterised by trickery, change and transformation, crossing borders and residing in an in-between space: Grace Marks possibly suffers from a split-identity, and her mentor, Jeremiah the peddler, is the trickster figure *par excellence*; Mary Gertrude Mathilda is neither black nor white; and Omprakash and Ishvar are chamaars-turned-tailors. When Grace Marks admits, at the end of Atwood's novel, to "changing the pattern a little to suit [her] own ideas" (550), she steps outside of her role as a craft-maker to become creative, an "ethical dysfunction" according to Plato (Brown 12). Dina Dalal, in Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, decides towards the end of the book to lock her quilt away in the wardrobe, "frightened by the strange magic it worked on her mind, frightened of where its terrain was leading her. She did not want to cross that border permanently" (750).[16] This usage of the term craft – as potentially subversive artifice – is important to bear in mind when thinking of the characters in these texts: craft-workers who are embodiments of the universal spider-weaver and trickster figures, composite figures, survivors and shape-shifters, embodying change, resilience, and creation. By

16 Stephen Inglis asserts that craft-makers in most societies are considered by others to be "practicing mysteries." Their work will always be carried out "somewhat on the side, somewhat at odds" and their skill, "always somewhat threatening to those that don't possess it," will always be "both fascinating and disturbing to others" (23-4).

focusing on craftspeople in these texts by Atwood, Clarke, and Mistry, I explore the common portrayal of the contemporary embodiments of such archetypal weavers and their textile crafts not as a celebratory return to traditional origins but instead as a syncretic[17] creation combining new and old, in which traditional structures are modified to fit postmodern and multicultural existences.

(3) A Plural Aesthetics: Recollection, Recycling, and Rehabilitation

This repositioning of craft in the contemporary moment points to its capacity as a paradigm for the de-hierarchical and interstitial, permitting border-crossing analysis. At once tradespeople, artificers, and tricksters, these characters transgress boundaries set up by the systems of the prison, the plantation, the caste, often by their expert use of the very tools and trades designed by the systems themselves to subordinate their subjects. Craft-making, here, is often the means by which craft-makers disrupt established hierarchies and situate themselves in what Homi Bhabha calls "the interstitial passage in-between fixed identifications

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17 Syncretism is the process by which previously distinct linguistic categories and, by extension, cultural formations merge into a single new form, which calls attention to its heterogeneous formation. Postcolonial critics such as Homi Bhabha, Wilson Harris, Edward Said, Mary-Louise Pratt, and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and HelenTiffin have called for more syncretic models for postcolonialism.

[which] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without hierarchy, . . . transform[ing] the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment" ("Beyond the Pale" 24-25). Grace Marks' skill and position as seamstress for the governor's family enables her to disrupt established hierarchies, for example, by escaping her position as convict to sit in the sewing room for her meetings with Dr. Jordan and eventually reintegrate into society at the end of the novel. In *A Fine Balance*, Omprakash and Ishvar escape their position as chamaars or shoemakers by training and becoming tailors. Through Dina Dalal's tailoring business, lower and upper caste characters interact and share lives. In *The Polished Hoe*, becoming a seamstress or hair dresser is one of the means of achieving independence and escaping fieldwork for women on the plantation.[18] Characters in these books are in-between figures, whose identity, ethnicity, gender, class, and legal statuses are unclear: Mary Gertrude Mathilda's status oscillates between black and white, upper and lower class; the culpability of the "murderesses" Grace Marks and Mary Gertrude Mathilda is ambiguous; Omprakash and Ishvar are, in the course of the novel, Untouchables,

18 Similarly, working as a seamstress in a sweatshop or as housemaid and living as an illegal black immigrant in 1970s Toronto is a means of escaping plantation work on the island in *In Another Place, Not Here*.

respected tailors, and shunned beggars; Jeremiah-the-peddler in *Alias Grace* disguises his identity by passing for a celebrated medium. These characters make up what Homi Bhabha calls the "demography of the new internationalism": "the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of political and economic refugees" ("Beyond the Pale" 25).

The gesture common to the authors I examine here is one of escaping the commodity and nostalgia positions of crafts for an emphasis on the revisionary processes of history, memory, and national or individual identity. I begin this study by proposing contemporary redefinitions and theoretical representations of crafts in "a radical new phase" (*Persistence* 16), as exposed by Canadian craft critics in the 1990s. The subsequent three sections of literary analysis mirror the three layers that make up a quilt: "two layers of fabric stitched together, often with a filler in-between" (Deleuze and Guattari 477). [19] As patchwork quilts open and close this study, from *Alias Grace* to *A Fine Balance*, they are the corner stone of my reflections on textile crafts. First, I posit textile craft as a model for the process and construction involved in historiographic metafiction. Second, I

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19 Quilts consist of three layers: a top, a middle layer of batting, and a backing.

establish the crafted object as a site of struggle and an embodiment of the collective and composite nature of memory and storytelling in the neo-slave narrative. Third, I focus on the way textile crafts make the new out of the old and, in their literary representation, rather than embodying what has been preserved, often reflect what has been left out, obscured by historical records, thus commenting on the impossibility of recovering an original narrative of history or tradition. That is, these texts represent textile crafts that formally and figuratively engage in unravelling and reassembling with an impetus towards decentring and pluralism.

The first chapter of this study notes the ubiquity of craft in the contemporary context, addressing the place craft occupies in art history, in museums, its development alongside political movements (feminist and civil rights movements), and its influence in literature (most importantly as participating in a female aesthetic, in mythic retellings, and in the construction of compound identities). These transformations and reconceptualizations of craft participate in closing the gap between high and low art, and between history and heritage. The chapter provides insights to explain this phenomenon of renewed interest in craft since the 1970s by exploring the interest in a handmade and work-intensive aesthetic. I address the paradoxical link of craft with a sentimentalized

nostalgic past and its subsequent subordination to art, as well as with more radical contemporary issues of revision, rewriting, rehabilitation and diversity, as exposed by Canadian craft critics in the 1990s. I establish three main paradigms of textile craft that together serve as the basis of my textual analysis in the three subsequent chapters: the relations of textile crafts with (1) body and narrative, (2) trickery, and (3) a dehierarchical and plural aesthetic. This three-pronged simultaneous approach allows me to analyse the elements of body, narrative, trickery, and dehierarchization and pluralism that I deem central to all three texts. For this reason, I have chosen to organize this study around the three texts under scrutiny rather than around a sequential analytical model. Yet, at the same time, each chapter reaches particular conclusions about one of the three main paradigms.

In Chapter Two, I apply this three-fold analytical approach to Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996). I posit textile craft, particularly the patchwork quilt, as a model for the process and construction involved in historiographic metafiction, and the transgression, fragmentation, and dispersal of the postmodern subject as figured by the maidservant/murderess Grace Marks and her mentor, the peddler/mesmeriser Jeremiah Pontelli. *Alias Grace* is a work of

historiographic metafiction in which the quilting and sewing metaphors participate in the postmodern structures representing alternative narrative versions of the past. In a number of Margaret Atwood's works, sewing, knitting, and other forms of handcrafting activities come to be associated with the representation of history, both as a concept and as a narrative account of the past. Atwood interrogates the metaphorical possibilities of the patchwork quilt, which comes to represent the determining paradox of the novel and of historiographic metafiction: that of making present meaning from 'bits and pieces' of the past. Atwood has reconstructed her narrative of the life of Grace Marks, a renowned murderess who worked as a seamstress for the governor's family while serving time in the Kingston penitentiary, from disparate accounts in the form of letters, newspaper entries, journal entries, and many other bits and pieces with recorded third-person accounts of the famous woman by doctors, clergymen, literary personalities, to the effect that the narrative feels as though it were not written but reassembled, its style supplying a subtext for the novel, which is really about collecting and reassembling – collecting in the usual sense, and also in the sense that history is about collecting.[20]

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20 Audrey Thomas' *Isobel Gunn* contains a number of similarities with *Alias Grace*: both protagonists are inspired by historical nineteenth-century women, immigrants from Ireland and Scotland, who were relegated to

Austin Clarke's novel *The Polished Hoe* (2002) brings us further into the lives of murderous maidservants and seamstresses. Like Atwood's Grace, Clarke's Mary Gertrude Mathilda is also a murderess, a former maid servant whose confession is being recorded by an official. In this third chapter I examine the metaphorical implications of textile crafts in the neo-slave narrative, that is, novels that retell the stories of slavery in narratives marked by postmodern formal innovations, which draw on conventions and narrative strategies developed by the antebellum slave narrators in order to represent recent history (McCallum). Clarke is concerned here with the representation of the profoundly-rooted physical and psychological effects of slavery as they persist in contemporary forms of exploitative labour practices endemic to the process of capitalist globalization.[21] Clarke layers a distant past, often omitted in recorded

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doing traditional women's work; and Isobel Gunn was the first female adventurer working for the Hudson's Bay Company by passing as a man, until her identity was discovered, and she became a washerwoman and stocking- and mitten-maker. A comparative study of the two novels would be a very interesting undertaking, yet for the purposes of this thesis I restrict myself to only Atwood's novel, because of the prominence of the model of the patchwork quilt and the reconstructive impulse it involves.

21 Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here*, and Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone* are novels that also address some of these same issues. Dionne Brand's Elizete and Clarke's Mary Gertrude Mathilda are bound to abusive men, and both experience the backbreaking and scarring work of cutting and harvesting sugar cane, as well as that of housekeeper, before they "decide to take matters into [their] own two hands" (*PH* 67). After arriving in Canada as an illegal immigrant, Elizete works in sweatshops in different

history, onto a more recent past to produce a sense of overlapping stories and interlinked histories.[22] The metaphor of the textile craft mirrors the collective and composite nature of Caribbean history, of oral narrative, and of memory. Emphasizing the hybrid and trickster identities of Creole women, and the degree of inter-culturation and interrelation in the plantation society, the meandering orality and the traditional textile work involved in Clarke's novel succeed in asserting memory over the silent gaps in recorded history. I posit the crafted/textile object as a record of struggle and an embodiment of the collective, composite, and recycled nature of memory, storytelling, and heritage (re)construction in a postcolonial and specifically Caribbean context.

The fourth chapter proposes a response to Reverend Verringer's exclamation in Atwood's *Alias Grace*: "We cannot be mere patchworks!" (486). In Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), craft lends itself to the

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factories in Toronto, then works as a housekeeper (another work with distant connections to plantation slavery) in an attempt to escape the physically exhausting and psychologically damaging work of the sewing factory (which causes the loss of her hearing). Both novels, in their representation of work, link contemporary forms to past forms of exploitation.

22 According to Austin Clarke, "[t]here has never been a story told about this system... the plantation system in Barbados certainly, perhaps also in America, in which an ordinary woman who works in the fields was given the opportunity to narrate what her life was like. And I felt that to have the story told by a woman in particular would add to the irony and the effectiveness of the story" (qtd. in Jeffrey Brown).

art of storytelling and the articulation of new questions for those no longer positioned within cultural certainties and so-called cultural authenticities. Mistry's novel appears in the final section of this study as a paradigmatically postcolonial text. I focus on the way textile crafts, recycling, scavenging, and making-do in *A Fine Balance* are suggestive of continuity and change, transformation and border crossing. Rather than embodying what has been preserved, the "sordid quiltings" (379) of Mistry's text, which I establish within a politics of recycling, often reflect what has been left out, obscured by historical records, and thus comment on the impossibility of recovering an original narrative of history or tradition. In his alternative narrative of Indian national history, Mistry uncovers the daily narrative of struggle and affliction of characters from all levels of society, primarily the lower classes – Dina Dalal, who sews dresses on contract to export businesses, and her tailors, Omprakash and Ishvar. The traditional trope of sewing and quilting comes to signify transgression of boundaries, going against tradition, adapting to change. These characters inhabit multiple selves, believing that the "the secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt" (230-1). They collect and recycle objects (from buttons to snippets of fabric to human hair), following Aunty Shirin's advice to "waste nothing – remember, there is a purpose for

everything. These scraps can be very useful" (64). Used at first for making a lumpy sanitary pad, these scraps are transformed into a collective patchwork, a symbol of disparate histories and experiences. Left unfinished, as in *Alias Grace*, the quilt in Mistry's novel becomes a narrative construction of national identity: never complete, always in process, living "with and through, not despite, difference" (Hall 402).

A reconsideration of the products of the spindle, shuttle, and needle, as well as the processes of re-construction and re-use involved, serve to: (a) refute the modernist attribution of marginality to craft; and (b) shed light on the symbolic implications of craft in the fabrication of composite Canadian identities, the preservation of memories, and the representation of what Smaro Kamboureli calls "hidden histories" (*Making a Difference* 8). Furthermore, I show that textile crafts, as "rediscovered" literary trope, (c) entail qualities of process (recycling, recording, change and transformation) that are central to Canadian historiographic metafictions.

This study seeks to address the following interrogation: Do the processes of re-use, recycling, reconstruction established here constitute a postcolonial response to postmodern waste, disavowal, dispersal? Through these narratives, where buttons are obsessions and worn scraps

of prison garments become “strange keepsakes” (*AG* 534) to be integrated into “sordid quiltings” (*FB* 379), I suggest that the postcolonial Canadian writer conceives of the novel itself as a “rag bag” (*AG* 424) in a bid to collect and piece together the obscured and omitted existences and histories of the past.

Chapter 1 Craft

That Crooked Wisdome, which is called Craft.

(Hobbes, Leviathan *I viii 34)*

1.1 Crafts in the Contemporary Context

According to the Craft and Hobby Association (CHA), the craft market was worth 29 billion dollars in 2005, and four million people discover crafts every year (Gillaspey).[23] In other words, crafts at the turn of the twenty-first century are ubiquitous. Since the 1970s, craftspeople, artists, academics, historians, and museologists alike have been calling attention to a renewed interest in crafts in the United States and Canada. Margaret Visser, in 1994, noted the "substantial interest in the crafts in modern society" (13); Rosalyn Morrison, executive director of the Institute for Contemporary Canadian Craft, has remarked on the "spectacular growth in the production of craft" in Canada since 1970, and claimed that the handmade object has become "a recognizable phenomenon of late-twentieth-century Canadian culture" (8). Sue Rowley, a major craft

23 Beginning in 2000, there has been an explosion of craft-related magazines, books, websites and television shows on cable stations like HGTV (Home and Garden Television), its sister station DIY (Do-It-Yourself Network), local PBS stations and even the Style Network. Two such popular examples are "Crafters Coast to Coast" and "Craft Corner Deathmatch" (Gillaspey).

theorist, also noted that since the 90s, crafts have increasingly been placed at the centre of a range of ongoing interdisciplinary investigations of contemporary culture (xxvi). Nor is this renewed interest restricted to North America. News and academic articles have recently shown men and women in ethnic communities in developing countries across the world increasingly resorting to craft-making in organized cooperatives as a means towards not only cultural but also economic survival (Simon; Hutchison and Kakar). Industrializing regions, however, locate craft in the arena of production, development, and social change (Kaino ix), whereas in western countries craft has become strictly speaking unnecessary, and is ornamental and symbolic rather than utilitarian. This positioning of crafts at the turn of the twenty-first century in western industrialized countries prompts us to reconsider the attribution of marginality to crafts, and their assimilation to folkloric exoticism or their dismissal as dead cultural artefacts of the past. Craft culture at the turn of the twenty-first century insists on the processes rather than the products of craft making – implying revision, transformation, decentring, and pluralism.

The renewed interest in textile crafts, particularly the production and exhibition of quilts, has resulted in a profusion of quilt exhibits, quilt films, quilt books, and quilting activities and programs throughout the

United States and Canada since the 1970s, which some critics have termed a “renaissance” (Turner Oshins 5). New quilting techniques, new patterns, and new motivations have, at the turn of the twenty-first century, inspired quilters to employ fabric in paintings, to digitalize fabric, or adapt older quilting traditions to contemporary personal purposes – such as Katharine Brainard’s *Divorce* quilt (Torsney and Elsley 4-5), or Faith Ringgold’s *Tar Beach* quilt (Torsney and Elsley 4-5) – to commemorative purposes – such as the *AIDS* quilt (1987)[24] or the *Ground Zero* quilt[25] – and to purposes of cultural commentary – such as *Invitation: The Quilt of*

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24 In 1987, the San Francisco gay activist Cleve Jones initiated the Names Project, which gave way to a quilt usually called the *Aids* quilt, made of panels received by grieving friends of those who had died of AIDS, and which would become a national monument to the holocaust of AIDS. By 1989 it weighed 13 tons and at present can no longer be shown in its entirety. The AIDS quilt was referred to as “an appropriation and commodification of traditional quilting forms” (Hillard 120), transformed to meet present needs of commodification and consumption, a “democratizing text that offers possibilities for plural readings” (Torsney and Elsley 8). For Simon Watney, an AIDS expert, this new type of patchwork quilt assumed a metaphoric dimension, to be understood in its own terms: “I was sceptical about it before I saw it. Falling back on a rationalist perspective, I thought: Oh, God, this is so sentimental. But when I finally saw it, . . . it was a completely overwhelming experience. To have this social map of America. To have Liberace alongside Baby Doe, to have Michel Foucault alongside five gay cops. In many ways it’s a more accurate map of America than any other I’ve ever seen” (qtd. in Showalter, *Sister’s Choice* 174).

25 The *Ground Zero* quilt was conceived by Lois Jarvis in the days following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack. Jarvis used 700 pictures printed on fabric of people who perished at the site of the World Trade Centre.

Belonging (2005), [26] a commentary on Canadian multiculturalism. In Lisa Turner Oshins' words, quilts are "one of America's finest flowerings in the realm of folk art" (5), or to quote the title of Patricia Mainardi's book, "the great American art." Quilts have transcended their craft status to enter the realm of art.

1.1.1 Crafts in Art

Western-defined canonical barriers have insisted on the separation of "Art" and "craft," the former classified as "high," Fine Art, as in painting and sculpture, and the latter as a practical, functional activity: "low," as in folk art, commercial art, hobbies, and crafts such as weaving, basketry and pottery (Guillermo 36-37; Lippard 33).[27] The implication here, which can be linked back to Plato, is that craft equates with the hands and

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26 *Invitation: The Quilt of Belonging* is a collaboratively made 37-metre-long quilt that includes a textile art piece from 263 main nationalities found within Canada. The materials used include beads, a piece of 200-year-old German linen, and the shirt off the back of a new immigrant (Mason 46).

27 For the historical reasons for separating craft and design from art history, see Paul Greenhalgh's chapter "The History of Craft" in Peter Dormer's *The Culture of Craft*. Judy Chicago reflects on the western-defined canonical barriers between arts and crafts and the ways in which they influenced her work as a woman artist in the following words: "Needlework in all its forms was 'women's work,' and as long as I was compelled to deny my identity as a woman in my life and in my work, I never considered it as a medium for art-making. It would have been humiliating to me if a male artist or dealer discovered me sewing a button on my artist husband's shirt or sitting at the embroidery machine or a loom. It would have confirmed the already taken-for-granted idea that my place in life was either supporting my husband's aspirations or working in the 'minor arts'" (Chicago).

therefore excludes the mind (the exclusive realm of Art).[28] The late 90s, however, were a moment of debate when the boundaries between art and craft, particularly in textiles, seemed unusually fluid. For example, in 1995, the recipients of the annual heritage fellowships of the United States National Endowment for the Arts included a basket weaver, a quiltmaker, and a blacksmith (Lowenthal 21). This permeability between arts and crafts[29] that textile crafts particularly encourage can be traced back to 1971 when Jonathan Holstein broke through the art/craft barrier by organizing the exhibition “Abstract Designs in American Quilts” at the Whitney Museum in New York. This and subsequent similar quilt exhibitions that were held in fine art museums in the seventies and 80s broke attendance records and ensured a place in art history for antique quilts (Robinson 11; Lippard 33). Such exhibitions marked a renewed interest in women’s traditional arts, following the aesthetic revival of the Women’s and Civil Rights Movements, and paved the way for the emergence of new-wave feminist artists like Judy Chicago and Miriam

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28 This distinction between art and craft has been traced back to Plato’s dialogue “Ion,” as noted philosopher and art critic Arthur C. Danto explains: “Plato made a distinction between artists and craftpersons, claiming that the artist’s achievements stem essentially from inspiration rather than reason, while the craftperson’s accomplishments depended on his knowledge and skill” (323).

29 In order to escape the hierarchizing effects implicit in the capitalization of the Arts, I will from here on adopt lower-case style for the terms arts and crafts.

Schapiro, as well as art critic Lucy Lippard. Schapiro wrote in 1983 that "Although quilts have their own special domain in the history of folk art and have constituted a universal form of needlework since before 1750, only now is their significance as an indigenous American art form . . . beginning to be recognised" ("Geometry and Flowers" 26). Textile artists had worked hard to reach the point where their creative output was recognised as fine art but their work in the 90s was still grouped in a small enclave under the banner 'fibre art.' Pamela Johnson, writing in *Crafts* in 1997, stated that art made from cloth was growing in importance and concluded that it was time to consider work in textiles within the whole range of visual art practice. This new-found respect for the inherent qualities of cloth and making had an interesting impact on the textile craft community.

Many contemporary artists from this period incorporated fibre into their art. One of the first artists to consciously select fibre art as a conveyor of feminist meaning was Judy Chicago, who views the use of textile art by women as a politically charged, feminist art form. Her elaborate tapestry banners and table runners in *The Dinner Party* (1974-79),[30] and her most recent work in *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* (1994-

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30 *The Dinner Party*, Chicago's most well-known work, was executed between 1974 and 1979 with the participation of hundreds of volunteers working on the ceramics and textiles. This monumental multimedia

2000)[31] offer historical analogs to women's experience, and often involve a recasting of myths, images or art historical themes in a multicultural and contemporary perspective. In the United Kingdom, *Boys Who Sew* was a touring exhibition of the Crafts Council (the national organization for the promotion of contemporary crafts), which took place in 2004. As the title implies, it was both a challenge to preconceptions and a play on the presentation of masculinity in textiles, a so-called feminine craft. Contemporary expressions of fibre art not only explore questions of gender, however, but there has also been resurgence, in the past three

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project, a symbolic history of women in Western Civilization, has been seen by more than one million viewers during its 16 exhibitions held at venues spanning six countries. However, it remained controversial in the worlds of art and academia, and lacked an on-going institutional framework until the turn of the twenty-first century. In March 2007, *The Dinner Party* was permanently installed at the Brooklyn Museum as the central work in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art (for a full description of the work, see http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/home.php, accessed March 4, 2008).

31 *Resolutions: A Stitch in Time* was Judy Chicago's last collaborative project. Begun in 1994 with skilled needleworkers with whom she had worked for many years, *Resolutions* combines painting and needlework to put forth a playful contemporary vision of old-fashioned ideas, reinterpreting traditional adages and proverbs by casting them in a multicultural and contemporary perspective. The exhibition opened in June 2000 at the Museum of Art and Design, New York, NY, and toured seven venues around the United States and Canada. The techniques of embroidery, appliqué, quilting, beading, macramé, smocking, needlework, and petitpoint, merged with Judy Chicago's painting, push the boundaries between art and craft – between high art and hobby techniques (for a full description, see http://www.lewallencontemporary.com/judychicago/projects/resolutions, accessed March 4, 2008).

years, of exhibitions exploring narrative themes in craft,[32] and themes of compound identities (Leonard). Montreal-based artist Andrea Van Der Kooij's performance in the streets of downtown Montreal in April 2005, titled *Efflorescence*, featured the artist seated for ten days in shop windows painstakingly embroidering a dress for herself in a floral mehndi pattern derived from Jacobean Blackwork designs, featured in Illustration 1 below.

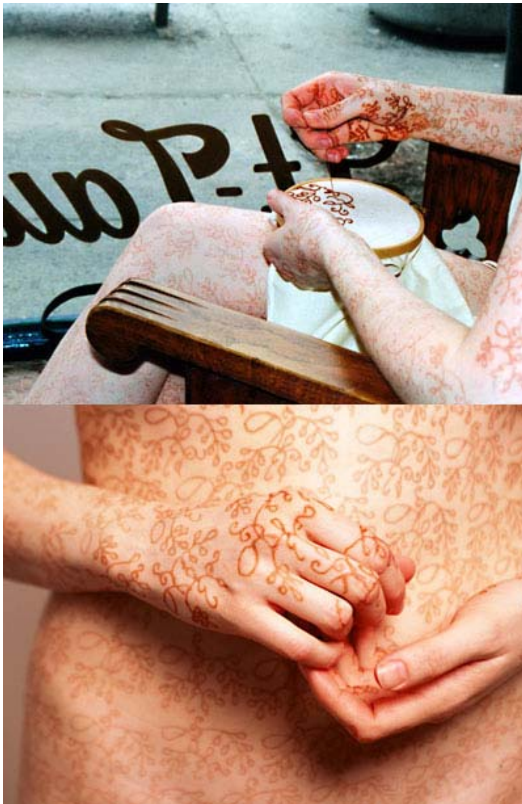

Illustration 1. *Efflorescence,* April 2005, Montreal, by Andrea Van Der Kooij

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32 Exhibitions such as *Tell Tale* at the Shipley Art Gallery 19 September - 2 November 2003 and *Story Telling: Aspects of Narrative in Contemporary Art Textiles* in Wales shown at the Eisteddfod in August 2003 explore this theme of narrative in craft.

The embroidery mirrored similar designs previously applied with henna by professional henna-artist Luma R. Brieuc, onto Van Der Kooij's own body. The performance, combining body marking techniques such as tattoo and henna with the motifs and history of embroidery, investigated questions of the permeability of body and textile, and of cultural notions of beauty. In contemporary fibre art today, the two very different approaches to textiles – traditional and experimental – merge to create a sometimes uncomfortable tension. Van Der Kooij won the International Emerging Artist Award for a piece presented at Fiberart International 2004, an exhibition of contemporary fibre art featuring the words *mieren neuker* embroidered in traditional blackwork down the middle of the 4-foot-long banner. The work undermines its homey usefulness when the viewer discovers that the Dutch *mieren neuker* translates literally as "ant fucker" – more appropriately, "nit picker" (Schneider). As renowned British art writer Edward Lucie-Smith argues in his book *Judy Chicago: An American Vision*, in 2000,

> the barriers between the world of high art and that of the applied arts and crafts have become extremely permeable. Fewer and fewer so-called craft objects are actually made for practical use and, in terms of context and function, they often seem to be competitors of things which are classified as art. (31)

1.1.2 Crafts in Literature: Text and Textile

Not only have textile crafts merged with the realm of fine art, but they have also entertained close associations with literature. In its usage as a verb, *craft* has, since the Middle English period, referred specifically to the artful construction of a text or discourse. Benjamin's term "craft" (*Handwerk*), closely relates "telling" to "making." Benjamin particularly identifies traditional storytelling with the preserver of local traditions, rooted in his narrative place, as well as the traveller, who returns from his wanderings with something to tell. In the Middle Ages, these two types of storytelling interpenetrated because of the craft structure, whereby the resident master craftsman and the travelling journeyman came together in the workplace. Benjamin writes: "If peasants and seamen were the old masters of storytelling, the artisan class was its university" (85). In recent years, *crafted,* the past participle of *craft,* has enjoyed a vogue as a participle applied to literary works and well-wrought writing, as in the phrase "*beautifully crafted prose*." "Peace-weaver" figures (a common metaphor in Anglo-Saxon poetry such as *Beowulf*) abound in literature, from Homer's Penelope, Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, Dickens' Madame Defarge or Virginia Woolf's Mrs. Ramsay. Many women writers have used

needlework to symbolize the rich intersections of female voice, women's work, and feminine art. This established tradition includes Jane Barker's novel *A Patchwork Screen for the Ladies* (1723), which, only recently rediscovered, noted what has become today the privileged relationship between needlework and novel writing. Barker's novel, one of the earliest examples of a female aesthetics, established needlework as an acceptable model for female authorship (Bilger 32). Barbara Hill Rigney argues that "in all literatures, particularly those written by women and particularly those written by Atwood, the image of the woman as fabricator, seamstress, weaver, spider, becomes one with the image of the tale-teller, writer" (158).[33] Many renowned twentieth-century authors have acknowledged textile crafts as a metaphor for the narrative structure of their novels. Marcel Proust claimed that his book *A la recherche du temps perdu* had been structured "not as a cathedral but as a dress" (318). Eudora Welty related the way she wrote to the process of patchwork, as

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33 The novel-as-patchwork metaphor is not new, as Margaret Rogerson explains: "The association of the art of patchwork with the output of women novelists has had a long history. . . . Women writers, in particular, have adapted the discourse of patchwork to the discourse of the written text and patchwork has found a place as a metaphor for the process of writing. The symbolic equivalence of the activities of assembling a patchwork and writing a literary text is virtually self-evident: a patchworker selects small pieces of fabric and sews them together to make a whole; and a writer begins with ideas or images and eventually produces a finished text" (13).

she would cut up her texts into pieces before putting them back together using pins: “I [end] up with strips – paragraphs here, a section of dialogue, and so on. I pin them together and then when I want to cut something, I cut it with scissors. . . . You can move it, you can transpose. It’s wonderful. It gives you a feeling of great moveability” (Prenshaw 272-73).[34]

Women writers in the second half of the twentieth century have increasingly made use of this multifaceted analogy either by employing textile craft as a narrative process, or weaving textile images into their texts directly. Such examples include the feminist poetry of Adrienne Rich and Robin Morgan; landmark novels that employ crazy quilts as a feminist aesthetic and biographical transcription, as in Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” (1973) or Whitney Otto’s *How to Make an American Quilt* (1991); and novels that feature wise crones immersed in their weaving and piecing, as in Ernest Buckler’s *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1989), or Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987). Other literary works portray modern revisions of mythological weaver figures, such as Jane Urquhart’s *The Whirlpool* (1989), Aretha Van Herk’s *No Fixed Address* (1987), or, more recently, Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad* (2005).

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34 Haute couture designer Sonia Rykiel’s explanation of the design moment also suggests implications between sewing and the creative process: “You stitch, you unstitch, you shape, you unshape, you reshape, you create. To build, construct, invent and destroy, put into place, a moment, a gown, a page, a line” (107).

From fictionalized historical retellings of the making of a famed tapestry in Tracy Chevalier's *The Lady and the Unicorn* (2004) or the life of a famed seamstress-murderess in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), to the digital collage-narrative of Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995), cloth – whether embroidered, woven, quilted, or knitted – remains a powerful metaphor. The question I wish to address in the subsequent paragraphs is: Why?

1.1.3 Explaining the Renewed Interest in Crafts

We may attribute the publishing and art industries' infatuation with textile crafts at the turn of the twenty-first century to what Polly Leonard, writer and editor of *Selvedge* magazine (a magazine on textiles, designer fabrics and interior decorating), calls a cultural shift towards a work intensive aesthetic reverberating in the 90s through art schools and the fashion industry in the United Kingdom and across the world. This created a shift in the attitude towards the evidence of the handmade, and was, in Leonard's terms, "an antidote to the slick, global commodity aesthetic of the 1980s." The provenance for this reversal can be found in the 1970s, as Leonard explains: "For the hippie generation embroidery was symbolic of the rejection of materialism, and men wore embroidered clothing as an act of rebellion. A decade or two later we moved from unyielding chrome

to clay and cotton, fingerprints were no longer wiped swiftly away and the hand of the maker gained strength" (Leonard).

We may further attribute the post-1980s excitement with textile crafts to a taste for the past, but also to their capacity as compelling metaphors for contemporary issues of diversity, memory, and identity, and their connection to the contemporary processes of revision, recycling, and rehabilitation. I situate 90s representations of textile crafts between return (nostalgia, the past as a linear and chronological concept) and revision (rehabilitation, hybridity, recollection, history perceived as participating in the Foucaultian web[35]). Although this position appears paradoxical, to relegate crafts either to a distinct past (where the use and sentimental values of the quilt are prime) or to a contemporary commentary of purely aesthetic value (where the quilt would only find its place on the museum wall) would be reductive and unproductive, and out of sync with interests in the past, memory, heritage, or postmodern historical commentary expressed at the turn of the twenty-first century. Marjorie Halpin, professor of anthropology and curator of ethnology at the University of British Columbia's Museum of Anthropology, also insists on the ambivalent

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35 This refers to Foucault's notion that "history cannot be mastered or understood for it consists of a web, a matrix, a network of intertexts and discourses" (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 72).

nature of the renewed interest in crafts when she claims that in the twenty-first century, "when realities are becoming virtual, texts are replacing action, and bodies are signs, to think 'craft' is an act of either a radical or a sentimental consciousness" (168). The following paragraphs will attempt to shed light on both sides of the pendulum between sentimentalism and radicalism expressed in the post-1980s interest in crafts.

Often associated with some past era, crafts become vehicles for nostalgia, gaining value if they are considered traditional and have a long historical lineage. In their search to authenticate history, antiquarians are, as Susan Stewart remarks, "nostalgic for use value, for objects that characterised the preindustrial village economy" (144). Historian David Lowenthal and literary and cultural critic Andreas Huyssen have attributed the contemporary obsession with memory and the past and "postmodern manias for period styles" to "dismay at massive change . . . in a throwaway society where everything is ephemeral" (Lowenthal 6), and to the incommensurable excesses of the "information revolution" (Huyssen, *Twilight Memories* 7). Lowenthal, in his book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (1998), claims that "in reenacting the past, peasants and artisans now get pride of place," noting today's taste for "the humdrum over the exquisite, the ordinary in place of the unusual, the popular rather

than the patrician" (14). The renewed contemporary interest in textile processes marks our "ever more magnified attachments to heritage," our "current obsessions with the past, above all what we enjoy or endure as our patrimonial legacies" (Lowenthal ix). Marxist critic Jean Baudrillard, in *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign* (1981), attributes the late twentieth-century fascination with quilting, particularly patchwork, to what he calls "the 'taste' for the bygone" (43), manifested in "the refusal (or ashamed affiliation) of economic status and of the social dimension, a will [of the intellectual elite] to situate themselves outside all classes and in order to do so, a digging about in the stockpile of a past prior to industrial production" (44). As Gerald Pocius points out in his article "Craft and Cultural Meaning," "we romanticize earlier epochs . . . as a time when what we consider as craft was an integral part of daily life" (127). Craft "coheres amorphously outside linear time" (Roces 70), and seems "'out of kilter' with the contemporary world" (Rowley xxi). The "reified otherness, marginality, pastness" of craft is accompanied by "an appeal to the edenic, wild condition outside of history" (Roces 70). Commonly viewed as a "return trope" possibly characterised by what Neil Bissoondath calls "an obsessively backward gaze" (111), textile crafts have invoked notions of past, preservation, nostalgia, the pastoral, and the domestic.

This association of crafts with the past and nostalgia has participated in subordinating the crafts to its "higher" counterpart, art. As Jane Hutchison and Tajwar Kakar remind us, craft practices in the West have "largely been replaced by mechanized production or have passed into the realm of leisure as 'hobbies'" (57). As such, in post-industrial societies, craft-making is often considered trivial, obsolete, and subordinate. The return to crafts constitutes in this sense a "salvage paradigm" (Clifford 121) that unfavourably denotes authenticity, retro/nostalgic preservation, and pre-colonial recuperation. As Trinh Minh-Ha explains, the salvage paradigm recalls the early twentieth-century "salvage anthropology" of Franz Boas' generation, and implies a "notion of tradition reduced to the past and . . . a rejection of, or a nostalgia for, so-called lost values" (Minh-Ha, "Discussion" 140), and "notions of accumulation and preservation peculiar to western culture-collecting" (140). However, the problematic surrounding the salvage paradigm finds response in its not being consigned to a past that is rich but safely removed from the present, but rather "reconceived as hybrid" (Clifford 126), part of a "modern recollection" (127) and in a "continual to-and-fro movement" (Minh-Ha, "Of Other Peoples" 148) between past and present, old and new, as figured in the contemporary redefinitions and

representations of crafts. Through their association with notions of revision, re-use, and recycling, crafts may recover their contemporaneity.

The “radicalism” that Halpin claims is expressed in the contemporary interest in crafts comes from their association, since the 80s, with issues of diversity, memory, and identity, and with processes of rewriting, revision, border-crossing, and rehabilitation proper to postmodern aesthetics. As Cheryl Torsney and Judy Elsley suggest, the pieced quilt “has been appropriated as the metaphor *par excellence* of diversity and political correctness precisely because it stands outside social class” (4). Lucy Lippard, in the 1980s, claimed that rehabilitation, once the domain of the frugality of the homemaker and the economically deprived, had become a fashion: “Today in affluent Western societies, even outside the counterculture, expensive new clothes are made to look rehabilitated, and the quilt itself is as often found on the wall as on the bed – a victim of gentrification” (39).[36] At the end of the twentieth century,

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36 Lucy Lippard, who expresses an interest in “the hybrids that happen in the interstices, the art that rejects or avoids these narrow lanes [of art and craft]” (33), noted in 1983 the paradoxical development of quilting, along with crocheting, rug-hooking, and needlepoint, that “came back into middle-class and upper-class fashion in the 1970s, in part on the apron-strings of feminism. What was once women’s work has been transformed into a pastime for the well-off and has become a ‘minor art’ or ‘high craft’” (33). Paradoxically, the crazy quilt – the most pedestrian of traditional quilting styles, using every available scrap for warmth – was made only in the finest satins, velvets, and silks when it became a fad at the end of the [twentieth] century” (Lippard 33). As such,

crafts, and particularly quilts, defied the hierarchical organisations of the art/craft and elite/popular classifications.[37] According to Paul Mathieu, an internationally-exhibited Montreal potter, in 1994, “craft is the activity where dehierarchization, the crossing of borders and categories, and differences between the races and sexes are explored the most thoroughly today, as well as historically. Craft has always been inherently political, open to change, and aware of contemporaneity; it still is” (28). In order to further refute, as Mathieu does, the presumed trivial, obsolete, and subordinate nature of crafts, and explore in depth the contemporary literary expressions of craft, one must turn to definitions and to the explorations of key theorists of the dehierarchical and transdisciplinary qualities of craft.

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she claims, the quilt incorporates “Spider Woman’s web, political networking, and the collage aesthetic” (Lippard 32).

37 Sheila de Bretteville refers to quilts as “an essentially non-hierarchical organization”: “assemblages of fragments generated whenever there is time, which are in their method of creation as well as in their aesthetic form, visually organised into many centers. The quilting bee, as well as the quilt itself, is an example of an essentially non-hierarchical organization” (qtd. in Lippard 33).

1.2 Defining and Theorizing the Crafts

1.2.1 Defining Craft

While crafted objects remain fashionable and the profile of makers has risen, the term "craft" still resists definition today, and craft itself is still often identified as a hobby, and in opposition to fine art. As Leonard concedes, the promise of the late 90s has not been fully realized, and instead of the hoped for integration, the ongoing debate about shifting definitions of craft continues, highlighted by the exhibition "What is Craft?" at the Hub in Sleaford, Linconshire, 2004 (Leonard). Since Hobbes' 1651 reference to craft as the "Crooked Wisdome," craft has continued to be qualified as "tricky" (Metcalf 13), "messy" (Greenhalgh, *Persistence* 1), and notoriously undefinable. Bruce Metcalf, a metalsmith/jeweller and craft theorist, claims that "craft is a tricky word, with no precise definition" (13). As Paul Greenhalgh, a noted Canadian historian and theoretician of contemporary culture, president of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and past head of research at London's Victoria and Albert Museum writes, "[c]raft has always been a supremely messy word. . . . There have been so many worthy agendas and maundering laments that we barely know what it is anymore and a lot of very sensible people no longer care" (*The Persistence of Craft* 1). Paula Gustafson, editor of

Artichoke: Writings about the Visual Arts and a regular contributor to arts publications in Canada and abroad, continues:

> Even defining craft by what it is not is a futile exercise. For example, craft is not naïve peasant art, although it can be. Craft is not a radical activity, although it can be. Craft is not mass production of objects, although it can be. . . . [Crafts] cannot be generalized, subsectioned, or autopsied. (15-16)

One reason for the difficulties with defining crafts in the twenty-first century is that crafts comprise a whole host of activities and hobbies that are related to making things with one's hands and with skill. These can be sub-divided into handicrafts, traditional crafts, or folk crafts, on the one hand, and with elite-, art-, or high-crafts, on the other. Handicrafts require a combination of skill and talent but can also be learnt on a more basic level by virtually anyone (in community centres and schools, for example). Traditional or folk crafts are made by ordinary people without formal training in crafts and intended for use by ordinary people. But crafts also refer to the products of artistic creation made by academically-trained professional artists; art- or high- crafts require a certain degree of tacit knowledge, are highly technical, require specialized equipment and/or facilities to produce, and are produced within a specific community of practice.

Another of the challenges to defining crafts is that craft is “a cultural construction, not some independent fact” (Metcalf 13), “a fluid set of practices, propositions and positions that shift and develop, sometimes rapidly” (Greenhalgh, *Persistence* 1). In order to take into account the changes and fluidity of the term, I will present evolving definitions of craft based essentially on Metcalf’s most useful geo-historical distinctions as established in his article, “Contemporary Crafts: A Brief Overview,” beginning with a definition of crafts (1) before the Arts and Crafts movement. I will then further define modern craft through its two reinventions: (2) in England starting in the 1850s; and (3) in Europe and North America after the Second World War. I will also pursue this historical distinction in my definition of craft by looking at (4) the status and evolution of crafts since the 1970s and their contribution to postmodern discourse.

1.2.1.1 Before the Arts and Crafts Movement

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines “craft” as power, force; craft as skill, intellectual power, ingenuity in constructing; as contrivance, deceit, artifice; as occult art, magic; craft as scholarship, a branch of learning, knowledge, or science; and craft as a trade or profession. Craft is commonly defined in terms of functionality, skilfulness, repetition,

anonymity, materiality, technique, tactility, domesticity, and temporality (Boden 289; Rowley xiv-xv, xix). Before the Arts and Crafts movement, that is, before the 1850s, craft had several implications, all of which survive today. (1) Craft referred to skilled work (this sense brings us back to the implication of mystery and magic, a form of secret knowledge, as in *witchcraft*). (2) Another sense of the word associated craft with the decorative arts, handmade luxury goods for use and display inside buildings or on the human body. (3) A third sense of the word implied trade and folkways (*OED*). This last sense referred to the long tradition of the pre-industrial production of handmade objects. As Susan Stewart explains, "Crafts are contiguous to preindustrial modes of production, and thus use value lies at the core of their aesthetic forms" (165). Some of the trades became professionalized, organized into guilds and unions, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, some adapted to industrialization. Folkways took place in and around the home, and were eroded by the availability of mass-produced consumer goods, but various folk traditions have continued in pockets, particularly on the margins of consumer culture. They have survived mainly in industrializing countries where mass-production has not fully penetrated the market place (Metcalf 13). Industrialization changed the nature of craft, as the handmade object

was no longer necessary or useful. This gradually reduced or eliminated many of the roles professional craftspeople played.

1.2.1.2 Modern Crafts after 1850

The adaptation of craft to such change is what prompts craft theorists to refer to “modern” craft as a “recent invention” (Metcalf 14). The four main characteristics of “modern craft” emerged over the 40 years of the Arts and Crafts movement, initiated by William Morris:[38]

1. Crafts were theorized, and became the product and subject of discourse;
2. Morris practiced handwork (which had been previously reserved for the lower classes) and gave handwork a classlessness that survives today;
3. Morris, an embroidery enthusiast, put women’s work on equal footing with men’s. The stitched object became an important staple of the Arts and Crafts movement, and an important icon of reform.

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38 Craft theorists attribute the invention of “modern” craft to William Morris when, in 1856, he decided to refurnish his apartment on Red Lion Square and, along with friends, had a collection of pseudo-medieval furniture made up, which they painted with scenes of chivalry and legend. This created a new category of objects which were not only luxury interior décor nor only products of trade (Metcalf 14-15). For a more detailed account of the influence of William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement, see Peter Stansky’s *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts*.

4. The practice of craft tied aesthetics to social awareness. In its original form, the Arts and Crafts movement was a reaction against the dominant culture and capitalism. According to Metcalf, craft still stands against the anonymity of mass production and for the personalized object; against capitalism and for small-scale entrepreneurship; against corporate labour and for individual self-determination; and for "the rich potential of the human body at work and against disembodiment in all its forms" (15-16).

Between the two world wars, in Europe and the United States, the particular visual style of the Arts and Crafts movement had become passé. This is what prompted Walter Benjamin's claim, in 1936, that with modernity, storytelling and artisanal work were all but lost, "because there [was] no more weaving and spinning to go on while [stories were] being listened to" (91).

1.2.1.3 Modern Crafts after the Second World War

However, there followed a re-alignment of modernity and handwork, which produced the second reinvention of craft, particularly in the United States. This reinvention gave way to two paradigms that "remain the two most influential models in North American craft today": that of the "craftsman-businessman" and that of the "craftsman-artist"

(Metcalf 19). This coincided with the end of the Second World War when United States servicemen and women returned to civilian life in the late 40s and the passage of the “GI Bill.”[39] Stimulated by the ferment in postwar artistic culture, suspicious of the regimented life in the armed services, and in search of a vocation that would enable them to be relatively independent, many of these ex-soldiers went into craft work and became what Metcalf calls “craftsmen-businessmen” (19). The development of the “artist-craftsman” came later, with many craftspeople embracing the abstract-expressionism of the 50s. Two particular schisms continue to plague the craft mediums: that between art-oriented craftspeople who contend that arts and crafts are identical, and between production-oriented craftspeople, who claim that arts and crafts are different. Those who argue that crafts differ from the arts generally claim that a craft object must be made substantially by hand; that craft depends on the respective mediums, techniques, formats, and histories that are traditionally associated with its disciplines (Metcalf 21). Yet craft theorists have, in their re-examinations of contemporary definitions of craft since

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39 The “GI Bill” was a United-States legislation that provided any ex-soldier who wanted it a free college education. One result of this legislation was an exponential growth in craft education at the college level in the United States (Metcalf 18). Similar developments occurred under the Veterans Rehabilitation Act in Canada (Neary and Granatstein).

the 1970s, begun to interrogate the construction of discipline and skill-based practice that underlines the belief in the uniqueness and sanctity of the hand of the individual maker, and that focuses on materials.

1.2.1.4 Crafts since the 1970s

Paul Greenhalgh has been most influential for the purposes of this thesis in his explorations of craft and modernity. In *The Persistence of Craft*, he notes the way craft has unfolded and the most important issues craft has faced since the 1970s, when there was a radical wave of activity in crafts, linked to an avant-garde emerging in most media. The 1970s also witnessed the founding of a number of official craft institutions, the development of courses in leading colleges of art and design, and a rise in the number of publications on craft (Greenhalgh, *Persistence* 16). Much of this activity was continued in the 80s, which also marked a decade of consumption and postmodern discourse. The number of art galleries selling crafts, often integrated with fine arts, developed, along with an interest in histories of design, craft, and decorative art among historians and practitioners. This development of eclecticism in the craft world reached an extraordinary pitch in the 90s.

At this time, the classification debate shifted from an anxiety about the status of crafts in relation to fine arts to an integrationalist and

interdisciplinary spirit, a desire to set an intellectual agenda that crossed boundaries, which has been a key feature of the humanities generally (*Persistence* 2-3). In “Craft and Modernity,” Greenhalgh explores the position of craft in the 90s with regard to four characteristics: interdisciplinarity, globality, pan-technicology, and eclecticism, arguing that the crafts have been and will continue to be influenced by all four. In her article, “New Craft Paradigms” (2002), Ingrid Bachmann, an interdisciplinary installation artist, writer, and curator, presently graduate program director of the MFA studio Arts at Concordia University, also argues in favour of the transdisciplinarity of craft practice at the turn of the twenty-first century. Bachmann claims that “traditional binaries in art and craft theory – high art/low art, functional/non-functional . . . – are no longer viable” (45). In Greenhalgh’s words, “the 90s have witnessed the beginnings of a promising fusion of craft with everything else” (*Persistence* 3). Over Greenhalgh’s interdisciplinarity, I favour Bachmann’s notion of the *trans*disciplinarity of craft in my association of craft with contemporary literature – an approach that does not dictate a blending of differences, as suggested in the notion of *inter*disciplinarity, but “maintains, supports and promotes distinctions, allowing for fertile crossovers and new allegiances” (Bachmann 47).

1.2.2 Defining Textile Crafts

The textile media[40] particularly operate in the context of such transdisciplinarity, in the space between fine art and craft. As Leonard writes, “Textiles cut across cultures, class, gender and history.” A textile craft is a craft involving textile material, such as banner-making, crocheting, dress-making, embroidery, knitting, lace-making, macramé, millinery, needlepoint, patchwork, quilting, rug-making, sewing, spinning, tapestry, tatting, and weaving. Textile crafts have commonly evoked collaborative women’s work (Flood, Elsley, Hedges). They often involved secrecy and were used to further the advancement of society that excluded women’s participation.[41] Definitions of the quilt, which I will use as an exemplary textile craft, originally involve notions of female networks, beautification, skill, domesticity, but also range in status from functional bedcover to fine art:

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40 Craft media include textiles; wood, metal or clay; paper or canvas; plants; and other media such as bead work, egg decoration, etching, and stained glass (*OED*).

41 Some examples include the medieval workshops where women stitched together for the advancement of the church; the all-female Renaissance guilds where women embellished royal robes; and the nineteenth-century quilting bees where women included coded secrets into their quilts, and which involved women in politics as they accompanied the suffragette movement, the temperance movement, etc.

> The quilt in its long history has provided an excuse for social gathering and the reinforcement of female support networks; it was an outlet for the impulse to beautify, exhibit skill, and exercise domestic economy. It has acted as a conveyor of affection and friendship, as a memento of distant friends and homeplace, as a functional bedcover, an object conveying pride of ownership and conferring status, a treasured family heirloom, a collectable, a historical artefact, an exemplar of late nineteenth-century traditional textile craft, as folk art, and as fine art. (Flood, "The Lives of Objects" 102)

Among the intrinsic qualities of textile craft, Leonard cites skill, engagement with material, and "the rich seam of associations with the history of women's lives": "From suffragette banners to domestic quilts, women have inscribed textiles with the stories of their lives, as a source of pleasure and as a weapon against constraint" (Leonard). As Elaine Hedges explains, "From being expressions of women's private lives, testaments to their domestic allegiance, quilts had also become in the course of the century political emblems and acts that helped women to expand their world and thus to negotiate their transition into modern times" (*Hearts and Hands* 11). Seminal texts on textile crafts and the history of women include Charlotte Robinson's *The Artist and the Quilt* (1983); Marsha MacDowell's *Women, Quiltmaking and Social Change in America* (1989); Patricia Mainardi's *Quilts: The Great American Art* (1978); and

Elaine Hedges, Pat Ferrero, and Julie Silber's *Hearts and Hands: Women, Quilts, and American Society* (1995) – which explores the quilt as a representation of class and gender relations, aesthetic theories, and readings of democracy in the feminist discourse of the 80s and 90s.

1.2.3 "A radical new phase": Demarginalisation and Transdisciplinarity in Contemporary Craft

A large number of articles and volumes on craft theory and history have been written, several of which have proved invaluable for this study in terms of redefining and theorizing crafts, as well as through their application of contemporary perspectives specifically to craft in Canada and abroad. Five seminal texts published since the 1990s have been particularly useful in their explorations of new paradigms of contemporary craft, focusing on issues of the body, narrative, the sense of trickery, the dehierarchical quality of contemporary crafts, and their transdisciplinarity. These include Gloria Hickey's *Making and Metaphor: A Discussion of Meaning in Contemporary Craft* (1994); Peter Dormer's *The Culture of Craft: Status and Future* (1997); Sue Rowley's *Craft and Contemporary Theory* (1997); Jean Johnson's *Exploring Contemporary Craft: History, Theory, and Critical Writing* (2002); and Paul Greenhalgh's *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today* (2003). Along with Hickey,

Greenhalgh, and Johnson, Paula Gustafson's *Craft, Perception and Practice: A Canadian Discourse* (2002) and Sandra Flood's research on Canadian craft activity in *Canadian Craft and Museum Practice 1900-1950* (2001) offer a uniquely Canadian perspective on crafts by makers and museologists. These critics dispute the representation of crafts as mere nostalgia, an echo of the pre-modern, or an invitation to "collapse back" (Smith 27). Like them, Bachmann urges "against succumbing to the increasingly dominant reactionary trends . . . as well as to the nostalgia and romanticism that continue[s] to surround so many craft practices" (46).[42] By redefining crafts, Bachmann and Greenhalgh underline craft's potential as a vital form of cultural production and social engagement, characterised by tactility, mobility, and the ability to function in multiple registers of human experience. From these critical texts, the body – or

42 See, for example, a quote from Michael Shanks: "the term 'crafts' . . . invites caricature: comfortable middle-class people in fisherman's smocks expressing themselves in activities that were once the livelihood of the working class. . . . Arty pretence, complacent, conservative, safe . . .. It has undertones of regressive ruralism – getting back to the securities of pre-industrial village life . . .. Overtones of utopian nostalgia" (107). Also, consider this description of craft, by Virginia Wright: "Traditional and safe, homely and affirmative, craftwork is not challenging, critical, subversive avant-garde art appearing in public gallery and discussed in the media. Art is intellectual and singular; craft is practical and everyday" (79).

what Margaret Boden calls an “enactive theory of perception” (301)[43] – and storytelling or narrative have proven integral to a contemporary theory of craft (Boden; Brown; Vollmer).[44] Craft critics have also looked back to the original sense of “craftiness” or trickery in craft as a response to the

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43 Margaret Boden suggests that craft’s main intent is “to prompt us to bodily action, to produce a functional object for some everyday practical intent” (298). Boden argues that the distinctive aesthetic of craftwork relies on its “enactive” (non-indicative) aspect: “The craft status of an artifact relies largely on widely shared bodily responses to its physical aspects. . . . an enactive theory of perception shows why a prime aesthetic attraction of the crafts is their close engagement with the possibilities of bodily action” (301). Similarly, according to N.C.M. Brown, in “Theorizing the Crafts: New Tricks of the Trades,” the craftwork is not a passive but an active agent of communication, its making involves a “cognitive transaction,” and its appreciation and consumption “is about a dialogue with something substantial, with the work as another body.” A craftwork, he explains, negotiates its meaning in bodily terms: it touches, gets lost, belongs, is made, worn, gets destroyed, loses its value, gains value, as part of what it means as a material body (16). John Vollmer, a museum consultant and curator, explains that “behind any consideration of fibre is the paradigm embodying a relationship of fibre to human existence. It is omnipresent, tactile, and immediate” (156). Expanding on this paradigm, he cites the manipulation by the hand of various fibres that can produce a thread or cord that forms an extension of the hand, becoming flexible tools that extend human reach (for example, strings, cords, and ropes that become fish lines, nets, baskets, bags, or tumplines). Vollmer further notes the manipulation of threads or matting fibres to produce fabrics that become clothes, shelters, or tools like sails that extend the human body and expand the biosphere in which it exists. These can be functional, ornamental, or charged with notions of identity, status, or affiliation. Finally, fibre can insulate, cushion, and nurture the human condition as bedding, draperies, and upholstery that enliven, comfort, and adorn private and public environments (157).

44 As Elaine Hedges reminds us, quilting in the nineteenth century “was a vehicle for initiating conversation” (“Quilts and Women’s Culture” 117). John Vollmer claims that crafts engage an audience in the intimacy of storytelling. Particularly in fibre, he explains, “we observe several elements of narrative on several key levels: story and text, memory, association, imagination, projection, fantasy” (154).

epistemological snobbery in western theory of knowledge that has alienated the crafts and disenfranchised its main practitioners (Brown; Inglis; Dormer; Visser; Halpin; Pocius).[45] The implications of body, narrative, and "craftiness" in craft, as reconfigured by craft theory since the 90s, are central to my analysis of textile crafts and their makers in literature. I agree with Greenhalgh and Bachman that the most interesting objects in the craft world at the turn of the twenty-first century are hybrids: they take characteristics of both craft and art (Metcalf 21; Leonard; Greenhalgh, *Persistence* 3; Bachman 45; Lippard 33). The very impetus of this study, to examine the implications of craft in literature, defies the traditional functional binaries so long attributed to art and craft. A transdisciplinary approach of the kind taken by craft theorists since the 90s allows me to posit craft, and textile craft in particular, as a signifier of provisionality and dehierarchization that emphasises notions of

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45 Margaret Visser reflects on the original usage of the word "craft" and its derivation, "crafty": "a craft – embroidery for example, or woodwork, or weaving – was also a cunning power: a specific area of expertise. . . . Expertise, however, can be used for good or for ill, and people who had mastered a craft, a thing of great power, could be experienced not only as necessary and admirable, but also as threatening and dangerous. . . . And 'crafty,' of course, is 'clever,' with a special deviousness and malignancy" (13). Halpin attributes this to the "patriarchal culture that fears and feminizes the crafts as expressions of the delight and sensuality of working with the material world" (169). As Gerald Pocius explains, this element of mystery attached to crafts, and particularly to textile (mainly female) crafts, may also be attributed to the fact that they were ephemeral and "left no visible mark on our craft lineage" (128).

recollection, revision, and recycling. Focusing on representations of textile crafts in literature, rather than on the textile crafts themselves, my own study brings postmodern, postcolonial, pluralistic Canadian perspectives to the topic. The literary representations of crafts and craftpersons constructed through a postcolonial, postmodern, pluralistic Canadian perspective contribute to what Greenhalgh calls the "persistence of craft" within a "radical new phase" (*Persistence* 16), as I will demonstrate in the following and final section of this chapter.

1.3 Crafts in Literature

1.3.1 Text and Textile

Like crafts in general, textile crafts have also gone through a period of re-examination. According to literary and cultural critic Sneja Gunew, we now need to question our perception of what we discard as the "quaint preservation of anachronistic social rituals, ranging from embroidery to marriage customs" (*Framing* 111-112). This re-examination of textile crafts, like the re-examination of crafts in general, dates from the late 1960s and the insurgence of the Women's Liberation Movement. Whereas needlework was, before the 1960s, considered the least important expression of artistic creation (Grudin 8), from the 70s on, textile crafts have moved away from their connection to women's subjection to the

needle. The reinscription of the quilt in academic culture began in the late 1960s with the arrival of the Women's Movement to college campuses (with courses in women's studies and feminist criticism) and with the art world's interest in quilting. Historians such as Nancy Cott in 1977 began to reevaluate the "bonds of womanhood" seen in acts like quilting, that simultaneously united women socially and politically and restricted their access to other forms of power (*The Bonds of Womanhood*). Feminist critiques of craft have explicitly investigated the modernist denigration of craft, arguing that the marginalization of craft and of women was mutually constitutive (Rowley xix; Lippard 36).[46] In the late 70s and throughout the 80s, feminist literary theorists and critics such as Susan Gubar, Nancy Miller, Jane Marcus, Elaine Showalter, Paula Gunn Allen, and Alice Walker focused on the tropology of women's textile work as what Adrienne Rich called a new 'common language' (*The Dream of a Common Language*). Quilting became a metaphor for the multiplicity of female selves, as expressed in Margaret Atwood's "patchwork self" ("Hair Jewellery" 106).

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46 As Lippard explains, "distinctions between high and low culture . . . are usually used to exclude minorities, the lower classes, and women from full creative participation" (36).

Following Miriam Schapiro's "femmage" and Walker's "womanism," the patchwork quilt in the 80s became a "prime visual metaphor for women's lives, for women's culture" (Lippard 32). Elaine Hedges, an early scholar of quilt culture whose seminal books date from 1980, showed how needlework, and patchwork in particular, which were originally symbols of domesticity tied to the notion of patience and duty, and to the tradition of female industry, became the means for personal discovery and self-assertion, taking shape in the form of original designs:

> The rediscovery and celebration of women's traditional textile – the domestic arts of spinning and weaving, sewing and quilting – constitutes by now a widespread and peculiarly interesting development in contemporary feminist thinking. In the past two decades [since 1980], visual artists and art historians, social historians, folklorists, poets and novelists, and most recently literary critics and theorists have discovered in the processes and products of the spindle, the shuttle, and needle a major source for understanding women of the past, and, as well, a source of subject matter and of images and metaphors for new creative work. ("The Needle or the Pen" 338)

In the 80s women and feminist literary critics began to recognise the relationship of quilting to women's writing, and the use of the quilt as a metaphor for textuality. Elaine Showalter noted in 1986 that "the strongly marked American women's tradition of piecing, patchwork, and quilting

has consequences for the structures, genres, themes, and meanings of American women's writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" ("Piecing and Writing" 223). Showalter takes the "the pieced quilt" as the main trope for the domain of women, "one of the most central images of the new feminist art lexicon" (*Sister's Choice* 161).

By the end of the 1980s, however, textile crafts went through an important shift from signifying the domestic (feminine, private, and traditional) to signifying the public and political (universal and contemporary), as exposed in Judy Elsley and Cheryl Torsney's *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern* (1994). The quilt metaphor, originally associated with a woman's private culture, transformed into new configurations to become "the symbol of American identity at the *fin-de-siècle*" (Showalter, "Common Threads" 197-8). This transformation can be attributed to several landmark events and currents of the 80s: the art-craft debate of the 80s, the *AIDS* quilt initiated in 1987, Jesse Jackson's praise of the "American quilt" in 1984 or the democratic "quilt of unity" in 1988,[47]

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47 This refers to Jesse Jackson's speeches before the Democratic National Conventions in San Francisco, in July 1984 when he described the diverse population of the United States as a quilt, and in Atlanta in July 1988, when he called for a democratic "quilt of unity," thus expressing the potential of the patchwork as radical political symbolism: "America is not a blanket woven from one thread, one color, one cloth. When I was a child growing up in Greenville, South Carolina, and [G]randmomma could not afford a blanket, . . . she took pieces of old

and the “modern preoccupation with heritage and other modes of retrieval” (such as history, tradition, memory, myth, or memoir) dating back from about 1980 (Lowenthal 4). Diana Wood Conroy’s *An Archaeology of Tapestry: Contexts, Signs and Histories of Contemporary Practice* (1995) notes “the characteristic insistence of the crafts on the materiality, techniques, structures and processes of making can be central to interpreting material culture, theorizing representation and inferring meaning” (7). Textiles have remained in the vanguard of feminist art practice and criticism for the last 30 years as the post feminist doctrine has expanded to include issues around postcolonialism and homosexuality. Although postcolonial perspectives on textile crafts are rare, two notable exceptions are Diana Wood Conroy’s collaboratively published article with Ellen and Tom Trevorrow, “Both ways: Yolngu and Ngarrindjeri weaving in Australian arts practice,” in Rowley’s *Craft and Contemporary Theory*, and Lorna Kaino’s *The Necessity of Craft* (1995), featuring writing by postcolonial scholars and critics, such as Marian Pastor Roces and Alice G. Guillermo. These articles address the denigration of craft by Western scholarship and art, and look at the social

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cloth-patches—wool, silk, gabardeen, crockersack—only patches, barely good enough to wipe off your shoes with. But they didn’t stay that way very long. With sturdy hands and strong cord, she sewed them together into a quilt, a thing of beauty and power and culture. Now, Democrats, we must build such a quilt” (18).

function of textile crafts in development and change in women's communities in the Asian-Pacific and Australian regions. Van E. Hillard, in his article "Census, Consensus, and the Commodification of Form: The NAMES Project quilt" sees the quilt as a "provocative instance of postmodern cultural politics" when associated to the pandemic of AIDS (115).

Craft as metaphor also drew interest from psychoanalytical, deconstructive, material culture, and such Marxist theorists as Nora Ruth Roberts.[48] As Gunew explains, "Crafts now escape their original affiliation with traditional anachronistic models, with the mix of people in migrations and diasporas and after two World Wars and many other conflicts" ("Postcolonialism and Multiculturalism" 138). American quilt-making, in Showalter's terms, "crossed racial, regional, and class boundaries, and its immense aesthetic vitality came from its fertilization by other design traditions," namely African-American, Native American, Amish, Mennonite, and Japanese ("Common Threads" 197-8). As Jean Baudrillard sees in the patchwork quilt a literal transcription of America's space, so do textile crafts carry the potential of further internalizing the "model of the mosaic"

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48 See, in particular, Roberts' "Quilt Value and the Marxist Theory of Value" (1994).

of Canada (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 36), as evidenced in the *Invitation* quilt project described above.

Images of the web, the patchwork quilt, the stake and thread, warp and woof, have led to the construction of theoretical literary notions that will be central to this study. Among these are Roland Barthes' "hyphology" and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "rhizomatic trajectories." Roland Barthes has established a link between weaving and writing in *S/Z* (1970) and *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975), by developing the notion of writing as "hyphology," "hypho" meaning both "tissue" and "spiderweb," a kind of narrative that works on the idea of text as tissue, "but whereas hitherto we have always taken this tissue as a product, a ready-made veil, behind which lies, more or less hidden, meaning (truth), we are now emphasizing, in the tissue, the generative idea that the text is made, is worked out in a perpetual interweaving" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 64). Hyphology conceives of a text/tissue/texture in which the subject "unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (64). Further equating text with textile and braiding – "*text*, *fabric*, *braid*: the same thing" (*S/Z* [Trans.] 160) – Barthes analyses Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine* as a narrative process similar to that of lace-making, a narrative progressively invested with meaning:

> The grouping of codes, as they enter into the work, into the movement of the reading, constitute a braid (*text*, *fabric*, *braid*: the same thing); each thread, each code, is a voice; these braided—or braiding—voices form the writing: when it is alone, the voice does no labor, transforms nothing: it expresses; but as soon as the hand intervenes to gather and intertwine the inert threads, there is labor, there is transformation. (*S/Z* [Trans.] 160)

Whereas Marxist critic Jean Baudrillard situates quilting outside social class (44), contemporary European philosophers and psychoanalysts Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari take patchwork to represent their theories on the rhizome and nomadism. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari qualify patchwork as a space made of “a set of vicinities” (485) that give rise to effects of “symmetry” (594) but that remains open, informal, rhizomatic (mobile, multiple, non-generative) and “defined solely by a circulation of states” (25). Illustrating this theoretical approach is the crazy patchwork, a pattern whose characteristic is to “fit together pieces of varying size, shape, color,” and to “[play] on the texture of fabrics” (476). Patchwork is “an amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways” (476): not homogeneous, but “an amorphous, nonformal space prefiguring op art” (477). Patchwork,

in conformity with migration and nomadism, ‘represents’ trajectories, “becomes inseparable from speed or movement in an open space” (477).

Umberto Eco attributes the revival of craft in literature and the arts at the turn of the twenty-first century to “the social change, the continuous rise of new behavioral standards, the dissolution of tradition” (Sic) in a contemporary industrial society that requires “a narrative based upon redundancy” (“Innovation and Repetition” 192).[49] As Eco makes clear, the “pleasurable repetition of an already known pattern was considered, by modern theories of art, typical of Crafts - not of Art - and of industry” (191). Crafts, therefore, according to Eco, are (like mass media), characterised by “repetition, iteration, obedience to a preestablished schema, and redundancy” (192), which he attributes to postmodern aesthetics. Repetition and redundancy, nomadism and rhizomatic patterns, and hyphology, are theoretical notions that will be central to my exploration of primary texts.

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49 Umberto Eco opposes contemporary industrial society’s taste for redundancy to “the triumph of information” in the eighteenth century, that “represented the preferred fare of a society that lived in the midst of messages loaded with redundancy; the sense of tradition, the norms of social life, moral principles, the rules of proper comportment in the framework of a bourgeois society designed a system of foreseeable messages that the social system provided for its members, and which allowed life to flow smoothly without unexpected jolts” (“Innovation and Repetition” 192).

Several studies on the representations of crafts in literature have been published to date. Rozsika Parker's book *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984) spearheaded the academic study of textile crafts in literature, as evidenced by the subsequent publication of several key texts: Florence Howe's *Traditions and the Talents of Women* (1991), Elaine Showalter's *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (1991), Barbara Christian's *"Everyday Use": Alice Walker* (1994), Judy Elsley's *Quilts as Text[iles]: The Semiotics of Quilting* (1996), and Kathryn Sullivan Kruger's *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (2001). Writing on American literature in particular, Showalter points out that "piecing and patchwork" act as "[b]oth theme and form in women's writing" and are "metaphors for a female aesthetic, for sisterhood, and for a politics of feminist survival" (*Sister's Choice* 146). Judy Elsley's study, *Quilts as Text(iles): The Semiotics of Quilting*, proposes an "inseparable" connection between texts and quilts, which she represents with the term "text(ile)" (1). These texts focus on the literary rediscovery of women's textile work, the metaphor of weaving and textual production, and quilting as a model for writing. A glance at this list reveals one key limitation, however. Scholarship on the representation of crafts in

literature often is feminist and celebratory, focusing exclusively on the quilt as a metaphor for women's writing, with a tendency to romanticize or sentimentalize women's domestic culture and particularly their textile work, focusing on quilting as an essentially comforting feminine communal practice. Elaine Hedges, however, in her article "The Needle or the Pen: The Literary Rediscovery of Women's Textile Work" collected in Florence Howe's *Tradition and the Talents of Women* (1991), is an exception as one of the first scholars to have revealed the oppression and ambivalence of nineteenth-century quilters. Two other notable exceptions who have gone beyond reading the quilt as a commonplace and sentimentalised metaphor for women's writing are Torsney and Elsley's *Quilt Culture* and the articles of literary criticism collected in Sue Rowley's *Craft and Contemporary Theory*.

1.3.1.1 American Literature

The rise of 'quilt criticism' coincided with the renaissance in African American and Native American literatures. Alice Walker includes quilts in her texts in some of the ways that Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe, to name but a few, had done in the nineteenth century as a premise for larger social commentary. Walker provides the contemporary critic, in Torsney and Elsley's words, with the "Ur-text of quilt criticism" (2)

in her story “Everyday Use” (1973). Criticism on African American women’s writing, particularly on Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), and Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1989), has focused on the quilt metaphor as an African American aesthetic (Elsley; Kelley; Falling-Rain; Peppers; Baker and Pierce-Baker), a polyrhythmic, assymetrical, non-linear structure stressing community. Textile crafts other than patchwork have also been central to the notion of community and cultural mediation in the study of contemporary Native American writers. The basket imagery in Marilou Awiakta’s *Selu: Seeking the Corn Mother’s Wisdom* (1993) provides commentary on the purpose and process of storytelling, while exemplifying “the complications of both circular form and the critical/creative dynamic in Native literature” (Blaeser 268).

However, uncollected articles of criticism since the 90s have increasingly begun to re-examine textile crafts in relation to the postmodern, decentred, and non-hierarchic, and applied to multicultural and multi-faceted identities. Pomo basket weaving in Greg Sarris’ *Grand Avenue: A Novel in Stories* (1994) is one of the book’s heteroglossic elements that “engages in a form of . . . cultural mediation” (Burnham 19). The bead imagery in Louise Erdrich’s *The Antelope Wife* (1998) demonstrates the “remarkable interpenetration of colors” (209) as cultures,

individuals, epistemologies, and myths interact, overlap, and become part of a "vast kaleidoscopic synthesis" which includes cultural difference and injustices "in a portrait of complex cultural interrelationships to show the tensions and conflicts inherent in a multicultural society" (Little 500-501). The underside of the image of the quilt has been explored by contemporary American poets Sandra McPherson (1988) and Kathleen Spivack (1987) as a revisionist metaphor. As Anne L. Bower suggests, they "rip the quilt off the bed and the body, daring us to read the naked forms within our metaphors; they can undo all the quilters' careful seams, disclaiming the comfort of the past communities, domesticity, and the illusion of a neatly patterned happiness" (35). Critics have applied revisions of the quilt metaphor – the "cliché of the familiar, traditional and domestic American artefact" (Dworkin 59) – as a theoretical framework for the fractured, reassembled nature of contemporary writing such as Lyn Hejinian's experimental poetry, *My Life* (1980), or Shelley Jackson's hypertext "Patchwork Girl" (1995)[50] (Dworkin and Landow, respectively);

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50 Shelley Jackson's hypertext "Patchwork Girl" is a digital collage-narrative that assembles Jackson's (and Mary Shelley's and Victor Frankenstein's) female monster, "forming a hypertext Everywoman who embodies assemblage, concatenation, juxtapositions, and blurred, recreated identities – one of many digital fulfillments of twentieth-century literary and pictorial collages" (Landow, http://www.altx.com/ebr/reviews/rev3/landow.htm, accessed May 20, 2008).

and as a paradigmatic motif for the multiple, polymorphous, and variegated American domain in Whitney Otto's landmark novel, *How to Make an American Quilt* (1991) (Chouard 53). I situate this study within this perspective of the quilt as "the ultimate metaphor for the postmodern, de-centred and non-hierarchic, breaking systematized principles and orderly structures" (Chouard 63), "primarily a matter of making the new out of the old" (59).

1.3.1.2 Canadian Literature

The two most famous weavers in Canadian literature are David Canaan's grandmother Ellen in Ernest Buckler's *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952), whose rag rug frames the novel, and Grace Marks in Atwood's *Alias Grace* (1996), who describes in detail at the end of the novel the *Tree of Paradise* quilt she is making. Within the Canadian context, however, there has been very little critical commentary on textile craft. There are a few uncollected articles, mostly focusing on Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, and two doctoral dissertations dealing more exclusively with textile as dress: Kathleen McConnell's *Textile Tropes in* The Afterlife of George Cartwright (1996) and Cynthia G. Kuhn's *Style and Textile: The Performance of Dress in Margaret Atwood's Fiction* (2001). Yet the postmodern, postcolonial, and pluralistic Canadian novelistic

perspective has enabled critics, though sporadically, to employ textile crafts as metaphors for the revisionary processes of history, myth or memory, and national or personal identity. Although very few articles of criticism have centred on the grandmother's rug-hooking in *The Mountain and the Valley*, Sheila Davis Kusalik (1992) makes the somewhat limited claim that it is an important form and symbol in the novel, linked to family history and memory. Feminist critics have focused on the revisionary approaches to the mythological weaver figures of Arachne or Penelope in novels such as Aretha Van Herk's *No Fixed Address* (1987), Jane Urquhart's *The Whirlpool* (1986), and more recently, Atwood's *The Penelopiad* (2005), to rework essentialist notions of femininity (MacLaren; Schaub; Darias-Beautell; and Hancu). Other critics (Gabriel; Sarbadhikary) have looked to multicultural Canadian works such as Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995) or Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone* (1991) to understand the patchwork quilt as both a unifying and pluralistic metaphor for disparate histories and experiences and personal or national constructions of identity, "a model of a society where there could be a 'harmony of opposites' and space for overlapping difference" (Sarbadhikary 116). Yet it is only with regard to *Alias Grace* that the patchwork quilt occupies a central focus in the criticism

(Rogerson; Vevaina; Gopalan; Michael). Even here, however, only Magali Cornier Michael goes beyond an application of the quilt metaphor as a medium through which to read the central character and examines *Alias Grace*'s patchwork structure as offering an alternative means of accessing and representing the past and, thus, as participating in the contemporary re-conceptualization of history.

The specifically Canadian context of the primary works in this study provides a rare opportunity for me to more fully re-examine textile crafts in relation to the postmodern, decentred, and non-hierarchic, and as applied to multicultural and multi-faceted identities. The dehierarchized and interstitial character of the quilt makes it an apt "paradigm of the history of political and cultural affairs in Canada," as well as of multicultural Canadian literature, resisting the binary structure of "centre" and "margins" that "has for so long informed discussions of Canadian literature" (Kamboureli, *Making a Difference* 3). This study therefore examines texts published after the official and explicit recognition of a "multicultural stage" in Canadian cultural politics.[51] As Smaro Kamboureli states, "Canadian

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51 The two major events defining this stage include the 1971 policy of multiculturalism, introduced by Pierre Trudeau, and later Bill C-93, the "Act for the preservation and enhancement of multiculturalism in Canada" legislated in 1988.

multicultural literature tugs at the seams of the fabric that is Canadian culture" (*Making a Difference* 12).

Chapter 2 Assembling and Unravelling: Reconstructing the Patchwork Quilt in Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*

"Pick any strand and snip, and history comes unravelled."

*(*The Robber Bride *3)*

Margaret Atwood has been described as "One of the most important literary chroniclers of our time" (Nischik, "Flagpoles" 1). Her ninth novel, *Alias Grace,* received the 1996 Giller Prize and instantly became an international bestseller. *Alias Grace* was critically acclaimed for its postmodern interrogation of historical recovery and its fragmented reconstruction of the murderess (Howells; Lovelady; Mantel; March; Niederhoff; Palumbo; Rigney; Rogerson; Siddall; Van Herk). Atwood's attention to textile has not gone unnoticed, needlework being a recurring motif in *Alias Grace* in particular, but also in several of her other works, namely *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Robber Bride*, and more recently, *The Penelopiad* and *Moral Disorder*. Although some scholars have commented on dress in her oeuvre, particularly as costume or uniform, and a doctoral thesis has been written on her use of clothing, textile craft has not figured largely in Atwood

criticism to date. While articles of criticism on *Alias Grace* recognise the metaphorical possibilities of the patchwork quilt, criticism surrounding the quilt in *Alias Grace* tends to focus on the image of the quilt as aesthetic whole, "unifying metaphor" (Murray), and "private discursive mode accessible only to women in the novel" (Siddall 95). Critics have mainly analysed the quilt, "a marker of female identity in the Victorian ideology of gender" (Siddall 96), as a means of reading the enigmatic main character, Grace Marks (Delord; Howells; Murray; Rogerson; Siddall; Vevaina). Yet an examination of needlework in *Alias Grace* contributes to a further understanding of some of the key critical elements in Atwood's work, such as borders and boundaries, the figure of the escape artist, storytelling, protean identities, duplicity, survival, the unknowable truth, and the reconstructed nature of history. Each of these critical elements is multiply informed by analysing *Alias Grace* through a craft lens.

The patchwork motif of Atwood's narrative technique provides a response to the questions of indeterminacy and authenticity[52] that have

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52 The notion of authenticity as I will employ it here demands clarification. It has been linked to the salvage paradigm, a geopolitical, historical paradigm that has organized western practices of accumulation and preservation peculiar to "art- and culture-collecting" (Clifford, "Of Other Peoples" 121). The term authenticity has been used as an opposing force to destructive historical change, and as such functioned within a retro/nostalgic imaginary redemption. However, my use of the term follows what James Clifford calls "new definitions of

remained a main point of contention among critics. Looking at needlework in the novel in the context of "new craft paradigms" of the 90s enables us to respond to and go beyond such questions as "Is it true?" or "Who is Grace?" that seek to establish a determinate and authentic value to the quilt metaphor and to the character of Grace. My analysis of *Alias Grace* steers away from considerations of the quilt as unifying metaphor, private discursive mode, and marker of female identity. I examine the quilt within the context of recent theories of craft that allow us to refute the nostalgia, authenticity, and obsolescence often associated with crafts, which are inappropriate to this novel. Indeed, the ex-centric forces involved in crafts (both the craftspeople in the text – Grace Marks and Jeremiah Pontelli – and the craft culture they represent) in *Alias Grace* defy craft's affiliation with traditional anachronistic models (domestic and private) and with a unified woman's culture or celebratory feminist signifier of identity. I focus on three dimensions of textile craft – its implications with narrative, with the original sense of 'craftiness,' and with dehierarchization – as exposed in contemporary theoretical reconceptualizations of craft. I posit textile

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authenticity (cultural, personal, artistic) that are making themselves felt, and that are no longer centered on a salvaged past." Rather, as Clifford claims, authenticity is "reconceived as a hybrid, creative activity in a local present-becoming-future" (126) when the encounter with the object is part of a modern re-collection and is not replaced in its original context (127).

craft, particularly the quilt, as a narrative device stressing the reconstructed nature of narrative, and as an apt metaphor for the process and construction involved in historiographic metafiction. My analysis of textile crafts and craftmakers in *Alias Grace* denies the exclusively female, domestic, and subordinate considerations of textile crafts, and of quilts. Particularly taken in its primary and original sense of 'craftiness,' craft here partakes of the transgression and power play of female and male variations of the trickster figure, thus offering a more prominent place in the criticism to male characters, particularly Grace's mentor Jeremiah. Finally, far from representing the aesthetic whole most critics claim it does, the quilt, in Atwood's *Alias Grace*, is associated instead with the fragmented, dehierarchical, and plural aesthetic of the postmodern text and its orpheic subject. By approaching *Alias Grace* through the lens of textile craft, I build on Siddall's notion of the quilt as "oppositional model" (95) and reveal the perpetual movement in the narrative between assembly and unravelling, preservation (authenticity) and circulation (indeterminacy); a pendular movement that forces us to look at the quilt not so much as a product, a whole, a metaphor, but instead as a process, a metonymic collection of patches. As such, I argue, the patchwork quilt is

situated within contemporary reconceptualizations of craft as an ideal model for historiographic metafiction.

2.1 A "textual quilt": Narrative, Storytelling, and the Patchwork Quilt

Craft theorists claim that narrative is integral to a contemporary theory of craft (Rowley; Brown; Vollmer). Particularly in fibre, museum consultant and curator John Vollmer explains, "we observe several elements of narrative on several key levels: story and text, memory, association, imagination, projection, fantasy" (154).[53] In *Alias Grace*, the quilt, as textile in general, figures largely in the processes of memory, association, imagination, projection, and fantasy at work in the characters. Also, Vollmer claims that crafts engage an audience in the intimacy of storytelling, just as Simon Jordan hopes that his sitting in the sewing room with Grace will encourage her to reveal important information about the

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53 Vollmer discusses three broad considerations of narrative:

(1) A kind of narrative is implicit in the fibre object itself. Materials and techniques reveal the maker's mark—the result of hands controlling and shaping a sequence of actions and processes.

(2) Subject matter that is part of the content of the piece or that is part of contextual images and ideas implied by a title can suggest an actual story. In other words, the maker gives us an object with a text that can be read, literally or figuratively. In a museological sense these objects carry their own interpretative labels.

(3) Narrative also occurs by association. By stimulating the memory of our personal and collective experiences, objects involve viewers in story making. Objects may arouse the imagination, leading to narratives based on projection and fantasy. In contrast to other narratives, these are personal and subjective and are not controlled directly by the maker (154).

murders, as the “small details of life often hide a great significance” (187). The patchwork quilt is further linked to narrative in its function as souvenir, which, according to Susan Stewart, is “to generate narrative” (147). We must bear this in mind when analysing the patchwork quilt and its power as narrative device and structural motif, and the contribution of needlework to narrative and storytelling in *Alias Grace*.

The framework of a narrative, and its reproduction in the sewing room of the Governor’s wife with Grace and Simon, includes a teller, a tale, and a person to whom the tale is told. Benjamin likens the practice or framework in question to the term “craft” (*Handwerk*), thereby closely relating telling and making. Quilting is intricately connected with storytelling, both in its functions as a “kinesic coded message” (Georges) in a storytelling event and as a “salvage craft” (Stewart 139). In a storytelling event, as initially defined by theorist Robert Georges in 1969, messages “are not communicated by spoken language alone; instead, they are multiply coded” (323). The codes used to encode the message of every storytelling event are linguistic, paralinguistic, and *kinesic* (317). Quilting, which accompanies the telling of stories (itself popularly described as an “oral *craft*”), is therefore a kinesic code in a storytelling event. Such craft involves a movement of selection and arrangement into

a pattern, which accompanies and in many ways mirrors both the characters' storytelling and the author's writing.

As Elaine Hedges reminds us, the quilt in the nineteenth century "was a vehicle for initiating conversation" ("Quilts and Women's Culture" 117). Textile crafts accompany and figure as metaphors for the process of storytelling. In the novel as in recent craft theory, they encourage discourse and are thus intimately linked to narrative. Because traditional quilts are generally made of the used and discarded fabrics of the maker's family and friends, they are intricately linked to life stories. The traditional quilt is composed of fabrics from pants, blouses, dresses worn in the past and associated with daily events, either random or significant (such as weddings, births, and funerals) that come together to form a specific pattern. As Wilson reveals, "Fragments are ordered into a whole; bits of the past become useful parts of the present, available to provide warmth and comfort in illness and in daily life and to remind the users of their personal, familial, communal, ethnic, racial, and even national pasts" (125). Quilts, therefore, tell multiple stories. In addition, quilting has usually been a social activity, and a "vehicle for breaking silence and speaking" that "helped establish and maintain a separate women's culture with its own codes of language and manners prevalent in both the U.S. and

Canada in the nineteenth century" (Wilson 125). Quilting is an appropriate vehicle for retelling a nineteenth-century woman's story. In fact, as a "vehicle for breaking silence and speaking" (Wilson 125), quilting in *Alias Grace* is a framework for retelling the stories of ex-centric figures, whether women or men.

Quilts are an overpowering presence in *Alias Grace*, to the extent that one critic, Marie Delord, terms the novel a "textual quilt," taking the 'text as textile' metaphor one step further. Critics have dwelt on the relation between the patchwork quilt and narrative in *Alias Grace* (Delord; Michael; Wilson), yet they have done so without referring to the interconnection of narrative and textile in recent theories of craft. By contrast, I inform the interconnection between narrative and craft with references to recent theories of craft, and by approaching the quilt not as product and metaphor (Showalter), but rather as process and metonym. In doing so, I am able to demonstrate the provisional and dehierarchical quality of the quilt and of textile crafts and their makers, and affirm the contemporaneity of crafts and their relation to processes of assembly and unravelling proper to narratives of historiographic metafiction. The quilt made of unfinished pieces or scraps thus accompanies and provides a metonym for narrative construction. It has been particularly analysed by

critics as a metaphor of contrived telling, tale-telling, with implications of fabrication and fabulation (Wilson). Yet I contend that Atwood's narrative, at the centre of which lies the patchwork quilt, oscillates paradoxically between verbal fabrication suggestive of falsehood and fabulation, on the one hand, and the authenticating mode of testimony, on the other. Atwood herself calls attention to this paradox of the novel: "*Alias Grace* is a work of fiction, although it is based on reality" (553).

2.1.1 The Reassembled Narrative

The narrative is constructed as a patchwork quilt, divided into 15 sections titled after specific quilt patterns, with the designs reproduced on each title page. These sections, as Sharon Wilson suggests, are "metaquilts" that highlight the metafictionality of *Alias Grace* (123).[54] The text further reflects the patchwork motif by opening each section with epigraphs taken from disparate historical, legal, journalistic, and literary sources in the form of letters, poems, aphorisms, newspaper and journal entries, institutional daybooks, as well as photographs. The narrative technique Atwood employs also evokes the textual quilt in its variety, consisting at once of first-person monologues, poetry, epistolary

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54 For detailed analysis of the 15 quilt patterns of Atwood's section titles and their relevance to the text, see Rogerson and Wilson.

narratives, and third-person narratives. In Margaret Rogerson's words, the quilt metaphor reflects variety "in that it suggests differences in colour and texture and differences between the patterns of the individual blocks" (14).

The reconstructed and reassembled quality of the narrative also derives from the fact that it is based on a widely publicized historical account of a double murder that occurred in nineteenth-century Canada. The bodies of Thomas Kinnear, who had been shot, and of his maid, Nancy Montgomery, who had been hit with an axe and strangled to death, were discovered in July 1843, in Kinnear's house in Richmond Hill, Ontario. Officials soon found James McDermott, one of Kinnear's servants, with Grace Marks, a 16-year-old Irish immigrant who had also been working as a maid in his service, in upstate New York. The media immediately promoted the idea that the two were lovers. McDermott was charged with the murder of Thomas Kinnear, and Grace Marks was tried as an accessory to the murder. Both were sentenced to death, making the trial for the murder of Nancy Montgomery unnecessary. McDermott was hanged, and Marks's sentence was commuted to life imprisonment as a result of the efforts of her lawyer Kenneth MacKenzie and a group of petitioners who pleaded "her youth, the weakness of her sex, and her supposed witlessness" (Atwood, "Author's Afterword" 553). She was

imprisonned in the Kingston Penitentiary in 1843, also spending time in the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto and working in a Governor's home until her pardon and release in 1872. After her release, she was accompanied by the warden and his daughter to New York State, to a home provided for her by an unknown source, and after this date, "all trace of her vanishes" (Atwood, "Author's Afterword" 555). The events created a media frenzy in America and Britain as well as in Canada:

> She continued to be written about over the course of the century, and she continued to polarize opinion. Attitudes towards her reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women: was the real murderer of Nancy Montgomery, or was she an unwilling victim, forced to keep silent by McDermott's threats and by fear for her own life? It was no help that she herself gave three different versions of the Montgomery murder, while James McDermott gave two. (Atwood, "Author's Afterword" 554)

In addition to including disparate sources from historical, journalistic, and literary accounts of the murders, Atwood also enacts a literary recycling[55] by citing excerpts from a number of literary texts of the time through intertextual reference. In addition to Susanna Moodie's *Life in*

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55 This notion of narrative recycling is further explained and developed in the subsequent chapter. In the context in which it is used here, literary recycling refers to the re-writing of or intertextual reference to previous literary works and genres.

the Clearings Versus the Bush (1853), Atwood also draws on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852). As Cynthia Kuhn argues, "the character of Grace not only revisits and revitalizes the tantalizing riddle of Hawthorne's Veiled Lady but also seems to be a corrective to Priscilla in significant ways" (190). Kuhn and Elaine Showalter further remark on the similarities between Grace's Keepsake Album project and "The Patchwork Quilt," an anonymous short story published in 1845, in which the narrator describes quilt pieces made of meaningful clothing fragments that create "a record of the female life cycle" decipherable only to an initiated audience who understands it as a "textile scrapbook" (Showalter 151). Atwood also recycles genres in *Alias Grace*, as numerous critics have noted the detective story elements in the novel, as well as elements of domestic crime or sensation novels (Hill Rigney; Niederhoff; Staels; and Kuhn) and the nineteenth century style of Gothic fiction, epistolary form, comedy of manners, and ballad (Wilson 121-2; Stein 103).[56] Atwood has also embedded folklore, and other popular

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56 Textile crafts have an important place in the tradition of detective fiction, sensation novels, or novels dealing with domestic crime, as they are often key features in the resolution of the trial or controversy. In the case of *Alias Grace*, McDermott's shirts he had on the day of the murder, Nancy's clothes Grace escapes with and which she wears at the trial, causing a "great outcry in the courtroom" (360), and Mary's kerchief found around Nancy's throat all act as convicting evidence.

culture intertexts into her novel, such as fairy-tale, myth, biblical stories, and popular songs. Such literary recycling of texts, styles, and genres participates in Barthes's notion of the text as fabric or "tissue." As Barthes insists, every text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" ("The Death of the Author" 146).

2.1.2 Multiple Versions: "Accommodating all possibilities"

The Kinnear/Montgomery murder case has suscitated multiple retellings. Atwood claims to have first encountered the story of Grace Marks through Susanna Moodie, who had visited Grace in the penitentiary and in the violent ward of the Lunatic Asylum in Toronto "to look at the celebrated murderess" and related the visit in her book *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush* (195). Moodie's retelling of the murders identifies Grace Marks as "the prime mover, driven by love for Thomas Kinnear and jealousy of Nancy, and using the promise of sexual favours to egg McDermott on" (Atwood, "Author's Afterword" 554). *Alias Grace* is not Atwood's only retelling of the story of Grace Marks, as she had revisited the Kinnear/Montgomery murder by focusing on the character of Grace Marks prior to writing the novel. Grace Marks appears in Atwood's "Visit to

Toronto, With Companions" in her book of poetry, *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* (1970), when the speaker describes the Lunatic Asylum with "women sitting, sewing" who "answered questions" (108). Atwood follows Moodie's version of the events in *The Servant Girl*, a screenplay she was invited to write on the topic, that was directed by George Jonas and broadcast by the CBC in 1974, as well as a stage play, "Grace" (1979), which was never produced. In the acknowledgement section of *Alias Grace*, Atwood explains that the Moodie version "cannot now be taken as definitive" (561), and the only version she now endorses is the novel's. The multiple versions of Grace's story include Moodie's, lawyer MacKenzie's, the press', Simon's, and Grace's own.

However, rather than a version of the murders, *Alias Grace* is instead an interrogation of these many different versions, a juxtaposition of various sources and, as such, acts as an interrogation of reconstructed history, a revealing example of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction" (*Canadian Postmodern* 61). Historiographic metafiction upholds the tenet that History,[57] like the presentation of historical events and characters in fiction, is construction, made by the historian / writer through a process of selecting, ordering, and narrating, not to be

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57 I use capitalisation here to distinguish the scholarly study of history, in the sense of historiography.

misconstrued as an ordered and neatly closed-off narrative (26). Atwood may be seen as doing piece-work, accumulating, selecting, ordering, and narrating the different versions of this historical event and its characters. Atwood describes her method for working with existing historical documents as follows:

> I have not changed any known facts, although the written accounts are so contradictory that few facts emerge as unequivocally 'known.' . . . When in doubt, I have tried to choose the most likely possibility, while accommodating all possibilities wherever feasible. Where mere hints and outright gaps exist in the records, I have felt free to invent. ("Author's Afterword" 465)

Grace's own testimony as she agrees to tell it to Doctor Simon Jordan also contains multiple versions, outright gaps and free inventions. Atwood's *Alias Grace* focuses on the conversations held between Grace Marks, as she sits sewing blocks for the Governor's wife's quilts and doing other needlework in the sewing room, and Simon Jordan, a young American "alienist" who has been engaged by a group of social reformers in Kingston to examine Grace by using different theories on the mechanisms of the mind in order to cure her amnesia and determine her part in the murders. Grace's testimony is problematic for Simon and the reader because of her supposed amnesia, but also because hers is but

one version among many contesting versions or counter versions. When Simon asks Grace to relate her story, she replies: "You should ask the lawyers and the judges, and the newspaper men, they seem to know my story better than I do myself" (45). At the historical trial, Grace Marks is said to have given three different accounts of the Montgomery murder and James McDermott is said to have given two (Atwood, "Author's Afterword" 554). Likewise, the fictional Grace's versions of her story differ according to whom she is relating the story: lawyer MacKenzie, the court, the press, Jeremiah, Simon, and later Jamie Walsh. Grace reflects on the many different versions of her testimony: "I can remember what I said when arrested, and what Mr. MacKenzie the lawyer said I should say, and what I did not say even to him; and what I said at the trial, and what I said afterwards, which was different as well" (351). Grace is shown time and time again that her story is not valid unless it meets the expectations of her listeners. She is surprised when Simon asks her what she "can actually remember": "Nobody has cared about that before, Sir. . . They told me I must be lying" (307). However, just as she plans the border on her own *Tree of Paradise* quilt to be "different" (110), she also consciously plans what she says to Simon as a counter-version: "what I say to him is different" (111). What Grace tells Simon is indeed different, as it is in her

own voice, of her own will, and she is free to withhold information she deems inappropriate. The telling has a liberating and defining effect on Grace, as she later acknowledges in writing: it makes her "feel [she were] of some use in this world" (548). The main "differences" implied in Atwood's version of Grace's telling to Simon (as opposed to what she says to the authorities) are that Grace's own voice includes "a snake or two" as well as the ambiguous presence of Mary Whitney. Describing her *Tree of Paradise* quilt at the end of the novel, she claims that "without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing" (551); and relating her friendship with Mary, earlier on in the text, she explains that "without her, it would have been a different story entirely" (115). Grace is therefore not only an expert seamstress, but also an expert storyteller, as she attempts to satisfy everyone's taste for a tale, just as she dons the mask of propriety expected of women and domestics at the time. Grace's tale answers the expectations of her audience, hence the novel's interrogation of many different versions, none of them presented as an authoritative determinate version of the truth. Instead of proposing any single authoritative version, Atwood is shown here as "accommodating all possibilities" around the story of Grace Marks.

2.1.3 Verbal Fabrications

In Simon's interviews with Grace, both protagonists carefully design or craft their conversations.[58] Simon and Grace's exchanges consist of verbal fabrications. Grace's story, both as related by Atwood, and metatextually related by the character Grace Marks, follows a method of selecting the pieces, making narrative blocks, and then rearranging them into an overall design. Grace tells her story to Simon while working on different blocks of quilts for the Governor's wife – one block is completed at almost every sitting with him. Grace shapes the story for Simon as though she were fabricating a quilt, and consciously uses quilting as a simile for storytelling: "Some of it is all jumbled in my mind, but I could pick out this or that for him, some bits of whole cloth you might say, as when you go through the rag bag looking for something that will do, to supply a touch of colour" (424). Again, Grace associates quilting with storytelling when she explains: "I tell over the pieces" (352-3).

Grace tells her story to Simon by simultaneously disclosing and withholding information. Grace tells the implied auditor information that

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58 For a fuller discussion of the implications of strategic discourse in Atwood's fiction, see Glenn Deer's analysis of complex rhetorical strategies in *The Handmaid's Tale*.

60 Atwood also uses 'to embroider' in this sense, applied to Moodie's version of events ("Power and Non-power").

she then censors from Simon. She “narrates a cover-up story, a surface narrative pattern or design, underneath which another story, a hidden layer of meaning, lies concealed” (Staels, “Intertexts” 436). Grace’s tripartite narrative – the cover-up story, the surface narrative, and the hidden layer – evokes the triple layers of a quilt: the top, the backing, and the middle layer of batting, which remains concealed. As Marie Delord notes, “Grace’s narrative is as precise and controlled as her stitching” (121). Simon is frustrated by her testimony: “The trouble is that the more she remembers, the more she relates, the more difficulty he himself is having. He can’t seem to keep track of the pieces. It’s as if she’s drawing his energy out of him – using his own mental forces to materialize the figures in her story, as the mediums are said to do during their trances” (346). As Simon reflects, “he has an uneasy sense that the very plenitude of her recollections may be a sort of distraction, a way of drawing the mind away from some hidden but essential fact, like the dainty flowers planted over a grave” (215). Yet the quilt is not used for aesthetic purposes, but, rather, as a model for the processes of assembly or association and unravelling related to the process of storytelling.

During Grace and Simon’s interviews in the sewing room, Dr. Jordan uses thought association and dream analysis to access Grace’s

unconscious in the hope of discovering her true nature and her part in the murders. Although Grace understands the associations he is after, she resists providing them and pretends not to know what he means, just as she resists recounting her dreams to him. Simon relies on his presenting a series of fruits and vegetables to Grace with the hope that they will create some association in her mind to the murders. For example, Simon offers Grace an apple, symbol of sin and the loss of innocence, or root vegetables, hoping, as the reader is left to interpret, that she will make a relation with the underground, the cellar, and death. However, Grace's memory or thoughts unfold more often in the presence of objects related to textile craft. Grace's story unravels in present-time observations, flashbacks, or dreams associated mostly with textile objects, to which only the reader has access. At times the reader seems to have full access to her dreams and thought-processes and thought-associations, as in the following example, where the flowers on a Turkey carpet lead Grace, by association, to the strangling:

> I sit with my rough hands folded, eyes down, staring at the flowers in the Turkey carpet. Or they are supposed to be flowers. They have petals the shape of the diamonds on a playing card; like the cards spread out on the table at Mr. Kinnear's, after the gentlemen had been playing the night before. Hard and angular. But red, a deep thick red. Thick strangled tongues. (29)

The information pertaining to the murders is partly revealed in Grace’s inner thoughts – the “batting” of her metaphorical quilt – which the reader is left to interpret associatively, but to which Simon has no access.

Narrative manipulation and falsehood become associated with sewing and the story-as-quilt for the (male) characters in the novel, but also for Atwood’s readers and critics. Simon uses the metaphor of quiltmaking when he refers to her narrative manipulation: “Anyone in her position would select and rearrange, to give a positive impression” (452). Reverend Verringer warns Simon against the “inclination” of women to fabricate their narratives, producing inaccurate and sensational tales in his opinion, using the metaphor of embroidery: “ ‘Mrs Moodie . . . is subject to influences. . . . Mrs. Moodie is a literary lady, and like all such, and indeed like the sex in general, she is inclined to —’ ‘Embroider,’ says Simon” (222-3).[60] Rogerson also claims that because Grace understands the cultural nuances of needlework “we can never be certain to what extent she, as well as the author, is manipulating the language of the craft to her advantage. The equivalence of the skills of the needle and the possibility of twisting words into what may be falsehood is related to both female and literary voices in this novel” (Rogerson 8).

The authenticity of Grace's narrative and her intentions are always questioned by the other characters, just as the reader and critic are led to question Grace's reliability. The character of Grace Marks remains indeed ambiguous throughout the novel: she is either "an amnesiac who has forgotten the key to a compelling mystery, a victim of possession who cannot know, or a charlatan who knows all and will not tell" (Lovelady 36). These multiple contesting attitudes towards Grace "reflected contemporary ambiguity about the nature of women" (Atwood, "Author's Afterword" 554). As Reverend Verringer puts it in the novel, "we are caught between the notion of a possibly innocent woman, whom many believe to be guilty, and a possibly guilty woman, whom some believe to be innocent" (80). There are as many different versions of Grace Marks as there are of the Kinnear-Montgomery murders. She is arguably the most fluid and protean of all of Atwood's characters, with some critics, such as Barbara Hill Rigney, declaring her the "most duplicitous of all of Atwood's female protagonists" ("Alias Atwood" 157). Atwood herself has mentioned that she feels no more certain about Grace Marks' guilt or innocence than she did in the beginning ("Power" 21), and claims that "the true character of Grace Marks remains an enigma" ("Author's Afterword" 556). As Nathalie Cooke remarks, "All of Atwood's fictional narrators disorient their

readers. They draw attention either to their own unreliability . . . the unreliability of their memory . . . or their mythic or ambiguous status . . . within the world of experience" ("Ventriloquism" 219). However, as Cooke adds, "the more Atwood's narrators admit their unreliability, the more reliable they seem to become" (208), thus touching upon the polarizing capacity that characterises much of Atwood's writing. Steering away from this association between craft and falsehood that encourages us to view Grace as an unreliable narrator, or as a "domestic intruder"[61] whose intentions are suspect, I examine the narrative, with its associations to craft and storytelling, as shifting between authentication and indeterminacy, disclosure and withdrawal.

2.1.4 Did Sheherazade Lie?: "Telling it slant"

Many objects in Atwood's oeuvre have a polarizing capacity, often pointing to the paradoxical pulls between authenticity and indeterminacy, as well as disclosure and withholding. Atwood establishes this polarizing capacity of objects related to textile early on in her œuvre, as in her poem published in her 1971 collection *Power Politics*:

> you fit into me
> like a hook into an eye

61 For a full discussion of Grace as "domestic intruder" see Rimstead.

a fish hook
an open eye (1)

Here, the hook and eye of textile craft can either represent unity and wholeness or rupture and violence. Like Pandora's box (the title of section 13), the bone button Jeremiah offers Grace anonymously is interpreted by Grace as a message "for keeping things closed up, or else for opening them" (512). The seam and thread also work in a double-edged way, representative of either joining or separation. The quilt is also an ambiguous metaphor involved simultaneously in weaving or assembling and unravelling, unity and multiplicity (as quilting involves cutting up scraps of cloth, and reassembling them into a pattern). Similarly, the quilt, an assembly of textile scraps from the past, can also represent both preservation and loss. Grace's description of the *Attic Windows* quilt at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's is metaphorical of the multiple interpretations assumed by both the text and by Grace's character: "it had a great many pieces, and if you looked at it one way it was closed boxes, and when you looked at it another way the boxes were open . . . and that is the same with all quilts, you can see them in two different ways, by looking at the dark pieces, or else the light" (188). Just as the quilt can appear dark or light, so too can Grace appear guilty or innocent. The metaphor is

deliberately paradoxical. Grace's story-as-quilt is therefore ambiguous: caught between authenticity and indeterminacy, and disclosure and withholding. It is at once fabrication and, particularly in its status as souvenir, authenticating testimony.

The textile scrapbook or memory quilt are apt metaphors for testimony and biography. As Susan Stewart has established, the quilt as souvenir is "a personal memento that carries connections to biography," the notion of "individual life," and becomes "emblematic of that life's worth" (139). As Stewart explains, the quilt is a "souvenir of individual experience":

> The souvenir [of individual experience] is intimately mapped against the life history of an individual; it tends to be found in connection with rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage, death) as the material sign of an abstract referent: transformation of status. Such souvenirs are rarely kept singly; instead, they form a compendium which is an autobiography. Scrapbooks, memory quilts, photo albums, and baby books all serve as examples. (139)[62]

In constructing her testimony as she would a memory quilt, Grace is authenticating her past experience. The souvenir functions to "create a

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62 Stewart opposes "souvenirs of individual experience," which are most often samples and are not available as general consumer goods, to "souvenirs of exterior sights," which are most often representations, and are purchasable (138).

continuous and personal narrative of the past" (140). The double function of the souvenir, as Stewart reveals, is to authenticate a past and at the same time, discredit the present: "The present is either too impersonal, too looming, or too alienating compared to the intimate and direct experience of contact which the souvenir has as its referent. This referent is authenticity" (139). The souvenir, as Stewart states, is "by definition always incomplete" (136) – thus indeterminate – and authenticating, like Grace's quilt, story, and self, and like Atwood's fictional reconstruction of the story of Grace Marks.

In his role as psychoanalyst / detective, Simon attempts to discover the "truth" of Grace's part in the murders by "following a thread" or "several threads" in her testimony (291, 188). The metaphor of needlework is applied to the search for an impossible "truth" and closure both here and in other Atwood novels as well. In *The Robber Bride*, for example, one of the main characters longs to pull a loose thread for the story to come undone: "If Tony could just find a loose end and pull, a great deal would come free, for everyone involved, and for herself as well" (4), echoing an excerpt of one of her university lectures: "*Pick any strand and snip, and history comes unravelled*" (3). Historical approximation, according to this metaphor, lies not in the finished quilt or in textile construction, assembly,

and unity, but is instead related to the unravelling and pulling apart carried out by the archetypal Penelope.

Grace tells her story, like Penelope and Sheherazade before her, through a perpetual assembling and unravelling that permeates the entire novel, which oscillates, like the quilt and like the souvenir, between authenticity and indeterminacy, salvage and circulation. Like the classical heroine, Penelope, who assembles and unravels her tapestry to delay its completion and stave off her suitors,[63] and like Sheherazade whose continual storytelling is her method of survival, Grace's story, and her quilt, are multiple and continuous, and linked to her survival. Lawyer MacKenzie remarks on Grace's Sheherazade-like powers when he claims: "Perhaps Grace Marks has merely been telling you what she needs to tell, in order to accomplish the desired end. . . . To keep the Sultan amused. . . . To keep the blow from falling. To make you forestall your departure and make you stay in the room with her as long as possible" (452). Yet, instead of a means of keeping Simon interested out of infatuation, as her lawyer

63 Atwood's fascination with Penelope is evident in her most recent publication, *The Penelopiad* (2006), a revisiting of *The Odyssey* from the point of view of Penelope and her maids. Besides their being experts at textile crafts, Penelope and Grace have other common traits: they both use their crafts to their advantage, Penelope to stave off her suitors and Grace simply to be able to tell her own story (telling her story to Simon makes her "feel [she were] of some use in this world" [548]). Also, like Penelope, Grace resides in Ithaca at the end of the novel.

claims, I suggest that Grace's storytelling directed at Simon as listener is, quite self-consciously, a means of survival. Narrative theorists have drawn on the archetypes of Sheherazade and Penelope to demonstrate the sustaining capacities of storytelling. Peter Brooks draws on the example of *The Thousand and One Nights* to claim that Sheherazade knows perfectly well that narrating is never innocent, that telling a story can change a life. In his article, "What is an Author," Michel Foucault notes the role of the spoken or written narrative as a protection against death, the creation of immortality. He illustrates this point mentioning the Greek narratives or epics as guaranteeing the immortality of the hero and the Arabian Nights as a portrayal of the storyteller's power to forestall death and delay silence. Walter Benjamin also assigns a primordial role to death as the authority of narrative. Therefore, whether Grace's story – or Atwood's retelling – is true or false is beside the point. As lawyer MacKenzie insists, her stories, like Atwood's fiction, stand outside the categories of truth and falsehood: "Did Sheherazade lie? Not in her own eyes; indeed, the stories she told ought never to be subjected to the harsh categories of truth and falsehood. They belong in another realm altogether" (452). This claim parallels Benjamin's notion that narrative belongs to the world of a communication that is authentic because it concerns the transmission and

knowledge of experience. Roland Barthes defines the nature of modern narrative as a contract; Benjamin rather proposes the notion of narrative as gift. Therefore, instead of regarding Grace's stories as manipulation and falsehood, I relate her storytelling to the transmission of experience and testimonial. As such, they take on the role of souvenirs, gifts, patches of a quilt in process that serve to authenticate her past.

According to Margaret Rogerson, the reader must, like Simon, "keep track of the pieces" (346) and becomes a quiltmaker in the process of reading and interpreting the novel:

> Atwood's extensive use of the quilt metaphor suggests that the reading of the novel is equivalent to the making up and assembly of the fifteen patterns presented in the book. The reader becomes a quiltmaker in the process of interpreting the novel, and, as with the transformation of the block patterns into a finished quilt, readings will vary according to the individual responses to the materials that have been provided. (9)

Yet Grace's quilt is never finished in the course of the narrative. At the end of the novel, Grace is still planning her quilt but has not accomplished the task. Nor does the reader reach any final *resolution* as to the part Grace has played in the murders. Like Grace's quilt, the story remains incomplete. As the reader comes to the close of the novel, Grace's part in

the murders, her assumed split personality, and her pregnancy – which "might as easily be a tumour" (550) – remain entirely unresolved. As Kuhn writes, Grace's testimony is "one thread in a complex web of texts woven out of myriad voices. . . . The fragmentary quality of reconstructed evidence, rich in polyphonic biases, problematizes closure for the reader of *Alias Grace*" (154-55). Kuhn is not alone in remarking on the indeterminacy of the novel and its open ending in particular, which have baffled critics. Several readings of critics have attempted to resolve this indeterminacy, which has remained their main point of contention. However, I confer that instead of a process of assembly, the process of interpreting the novel, like the process of its narration, oscillates ambiguously between assembly and unravelling. Our attempts at assembling the patches in order to find a final finished quilt and a decisive *resolution* necessarily fail, and we are instead left with a multiplicity of unravelling patches "all jumbled" in a "rag bag" (424).

The "truth" and the story, like Grace's memory, and like the nature of memory in general, and the quilt and the souvenir in particular, are indeterminate, multiple, and arrived at only partially and through association and unravelling. Like memory and its gaps, the story can only evoke and resonate with the past and "truth," which it can never entirely

recuperate. Atwood writes, “(w)e con-artists do tell the truth, in a way, but as Emily Dickinson said, we tell it slant” (“Spotty-Handed Villainesses” par. 11). Grace’s quilting and telling are determined by a conscious effort at reconstructing an authenticating version of her past with her own voice, while simultaneously self-reflexively pointing to the impossibility of recuperating the past, the whole story. “In my fiction,” Atwood explains, “Grace too – whatever else she is – is a storyteller, with strong motives to withhold; the only power left to her as a convicted and imprisoned criminal comes from a *blend* of these two motives” ([emphasis mine] *In Search* 36). Therefore, as Atwood herself intimates, I will view Grace here mainly as a storyteller, whose attempts at truth-telling are, because of the nature of the act of storytelling and recollection and their association with craft, always necessarily *slant*.

Analysing Atwood’s narrative and Grace’s storytelling through the lens of textile craft therefore provides a response to the questions of indeterminacy and authenticity in the novel, which have remained the main point of contention among critics. The reconstruction and multiplicity involved in the story-as-quilt are not suggestive of falsehood and fabulation; nor do they ultimately result in the creation of a whole narrative quilt. They are instead intricately tied to craft and the modes of piecing

and, by extension, of historical retelling and testimony. The stories Atwood and (metatextually) Grace relate are, as the unfinished quilt of the text, multiple, made up of several layers. Knowledge is found through association and accretion (rather than within a unilateral, determinate and objective truth) and through the constructive process of piece work (rather than through the product of the finished cover). Thus, the form of the novel itself is a commentary on the reconstructed nature of narrative and storytelling, which is “pieced together” (Atwood, “Hair Jewellery” 106) as a scrapbook, a keepsake album, a patchwork quilt, an “album quilt,” all of them souvenirs with paradoxical implications with questions of authenticity and indeterminacy. This proximity between storytelling and the quilt encourages us to look at the role of the object, particularly the textile object, and its contribution to the questions of assembly and unravelling, preservation (withholding; the closed private sphere) and circulation (disclosure and the open public sphere), which lie at the heart of the novel.

2.2 Atwood’s “catalogue of household objects” : The Collection, the Souvenir, the Fetish

Household objects and textile objects are of prime importance in the novel. Simon’s description of Grace’s testimony can be applied to the text: it is “a catalogue of household objects” (160) in which even “common

and unregarded objects can have a meaning" (512). Clothing is instrumental in the murder case and used as incriminating evidence (as are, for example, Nancy's clothes worn by Grace at the trial, MacDermott's shirts bought from Jeremiah the peddler – one blood-covered, another found on Kinnear at the scene of the murder [320] – or Grace's scarf used to strangle Nancy).[64]

Grace tells her story and her story is understood through objects. At the heart of Grace's telling is her need for "something of [her] own to take away with [her]" (534), to create belongings to paliate her life of losses. In addition to having lost her mother, her siblings, Mary, her "vanished memory" (96), and her freedom, Grace also suffers a number of material losses: throughout the course of the novel, she loses the sheets which were to constitute her dowry (using them to wrap her dead mother's body before it is thrown overboard during the family's crossing to Canada), Aunt Pauline's teapot, a pair of shoes, and her clothes, which deteriorate in storage during her incarceration. She longs for dresses, gloves, jewelery, and a quilt of her own. Analysing the importance of textile objects that are both lost and longed for in the novel sheds light on the characters and their relation with the collection, the souvenir, as well as the fetish. The

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64 For a full discussion of the importance of clothing in the novel, see Cynthia Kuhn.

characters' relations with the collection, the souvenir, and the fetish enable us to interpret notions of recollection and recycling and of preservation and circulation that lie at the heart of the novel.

2.2.1 Needlework: Domestic Harmony and Social Rehabilitation?

Scrapbooks, keepsake albums, patchwork quilts, and "album quilts"[65] are all evocative of nineteenth-century material culture, and figure prominently in *Alias Grace*. Needlework for nineteenth-century women represented social harmony and a happy home, as is evident in Isabella Beeton's *The Book of Household Management* (1861), which Atwood lists as one of her many sources. In the cultural context of the nineteenth century, needlework, and particularly quilting – the activity of piecing together scraps of fabric to make aesthetically harmonious and useful objects – were recognised in the area of social rehabilitation. In her work to improve the lot of female prisoners in Newgate in the early nineteenth century, Elizabeth Fry introduced needlework and knotting as a way to encourage habits of industry among the women, providing them with skills and a means of earning money to save while they were incarcerated and

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65 Album quilts were highly fashionable in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. As Margaret Rogerson explains, "Such quilts were collections of blocks centred on a theme and were often a gift from a friend or group of friends who had contributed to their making" (10).

to make a living with upon their release. After the first project, a patchwork quilt, Mrs. Fry noted in her journal that "from being like wild beasts, the prisoners appear harmless and kind" (Rolfe 19). Simon's mother also regards needlework as an occupational therapy when she recommends "some light needlework . . . to occupy one's thoughts" (421). She adheres to the notion of needlework as a means of social rehabilitation when she insists that "a Sewing Machine would relieve as much human suffering as a hundred Lunatic Asylums, and possibly a good deal more" (56). Occupying herself with needlework for the Governor's wife and daughters is therefore part of Grace's therapy. However, this nineteenth-century notion of needlework as encouraging social harmony and women's docility is reversed in this twentieth-century re-collection. Instead of keeping her thoughts at bay, Grace's needlework instead is simultaneous to the unfolding of her thoughts and memories of the murders: "So now I am knitting. . . . And as I knit I think" (459). Although it is meant in this context as a means towards social harmony, the quilt here also consists of a record or inscription of domestic violence.[66] Associated with Grace Marks, one of the most notorious criminals in Canadian history, and Jeremiah

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66 The trope of the quilt as coded recording of female domestic violence also appears in earlier texts, such as "A Jury of Her Peers" by Susan Glaspell.

Pontelli, a peddler-*cum*-mesmeriser, expert in the art of disguise, the quilt becomes a marker of social unrest, transformation, and circulation instead of a means towards social harmony.

2.2.2 Characters and their Crafts: Seduction, Survival, and the Second-hand

The characters Grace Marks, Jeremiah-the-peddler, Simon Jordan and to a lesser extent, Constance Jordan, Faith Cartwright, Nancy Montgomery, and Mary Whitney, are all involved in some way in the textile trades implying the ancient craft of sewing and weaving.[67] Simon's father was a textile mill owner in Loomisville, Massachusetts (76), the name of the city itself evocative of textile crafts. Simon's mother, Constance Jordan, encourages Simon to court Faith Cartwright[68] – an extraordinarily gifted seamstress and promising wife material by his mother's accounts – and urges him to invest in the manufactury business rather than in Lunatic Asylums:

> There is talk of a new Sewing Machine for use in the home, which would do exceedingly well if it might be cheaply produced; for every woman would wish to own such an item, which would save many

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67 These include quilting, dressmaking, tailoring, knitting, crocheting, cross-stitch, or rug-making.

68 The playful naming of the fictitious characters Faith and Constance is revealing. Faithfulness and constancy, along with grace, were qualities of ideal womanhood expected of the "angel of the house" in Victorian society.

> hours of monotonous toil and unceasing drudgery, and would also be of great assistance to the poor seamstresses. . . . I am certain that a Sewing Machine would relieve as much human suffering as a hundred Lunatic Asylums, and possibly a good deal more. (56)

When it comes to Faith Cartwright, Simon finds needlework “infernal” and “tedious” and ridiculous in its abundance (348). Grace’s needlework, however, is “unbearably intimate” and erotic, as when he watches Grace moisten the thread in her mouth and feels “as if he were watching her undress, through a chink in the wall” (104), or when he imagines her “in the parlour, sewing, the lamplight falling on the side of her face” (388). In both instances, needlework is considered potentially dangerous to Simon, who has visions of himself “married to Faith Cartwright and imprisoned in an armchair by the fire, frozen in a kind of paralyzed stupor, with his dear wife winding him up gradually in coloured silk threads like a cocoon, or like a fly snarled in the web of a spider” (348-9). This echoes the playful verse Grace remembers from when she was a child, in an earlier scene: “Needles and pins, needles and pins / When a man marries his trouble begins” (117), further relating the dreariness of a man’s married life to that of his wife’s needlework. The pun relates to (a) a wife’s ability to “needle” a husband, and (b) pins and needles as a discomforting physical condition. Grace’s “web” of stories in effect ensnares him on several levels

and he indeed ends up “like a fly snarled in the web of a spider” with both his mother and fiancée Faith Cartwright at his side.

Jeremiah Pontelli is another character associated with textiles. His lineage is also involved in textile work, but from the position of the working class, as his father was an Italian who had come to Massachusetts to work in the mills (178). Jeremiah’s trade is related to textile crafts as he sells sewing material: buttons, shirts, ribbons, thread, cloth, laces, collars, cuffs, etc. Jeremiah’s relation with textile crafts has therefore to do with labour, process, and multiplicity rather than the aesthetic finished product.

Grace, the main character, is surrounded by textile crafts. Her aunt and uncle owned a shop in Ireland that “sold dress materials and pieces of lace, and some linens from Belfast” (117). Grace’s mother and aunt both “had an education and could embroider” (117), but Grace’s mother’s marriage leaves her destitute. Grace, along with her mother and her sister Katey, would earn money for the family by “shirt sewing,” making up for the father’s failure as provider (124). Their “Aunt Pauline” donated “leftover pieces of cloth from the shop, out of which our own clothes were made” (124). Grace learns her seamstress skills out of necessity – for her it is primarily a question of subsistence rather than of securing a good husband. Textile craft in Grace’s family, as in Jeremiah’s, concerns

process, making-do, and recycling, rather than the aesthetic product linked to domestic leisure associated with the Governor's wife and daughters. Grace, moreover, is skilled at sewing and "could sew in [her] sleep" (66), or "with [her] eyes closed" (75). Many recognise her superior abilities as needleworker. The Governor's wife tells her acquaintances: "she is a wonderful seamstress, quite deft and accomplished, she is a great help in that way especially with the girls' frocks, she has an eye for trimmings, and under happier circumstances she could have made an excellent milliner's assistant" (24). Lydia confides to Simon that she has "remarkable abilities," which he first takes to mean paranormal or supernatural abilities, until Lydia clarifies: "as a dressmaker" (98). Grace is therefore creator and protector of various textiles: she constantly observes, sews, mends, and cleans clothing, linens, laces, and quilts. Her work, particularly implying thrift, repair, trimmings, and recycling reinforces her characterization with notions of the past, waste, and the second-hand. She is intriguing to Simon because of her past, which she relates throughout the novel; after 28 years of her life locked away in the Penitentiary, she claims that hers is a "wasted life" and advises Simon that he should "not waste paper" relating it (511). Also, as Mary maintains, Grace "was wasted as a servant, and ought to set up as a dressmaker"

(177). Grace therefore derives from needlework a means to counter such waste. As she sits in the sewing room making a different block every day she meets with Simon (287), she reconstructs the story of her past just as she recuperates the scraps of significant materials from her past with the intention of sewing them into her own quilt towards the end of the novel.

2.2.3 "A strange keepsake": The Textile Object as Souvenir, Collection, and Fetish

Grace's very sensory experience of the past is authenticated by the souvenirs and textile objects she has accumulated. Grace's memory quilt (her projected *Tree of Paradise* quilt), the scrapbooks of the Governor's wife and daughters, and the various gifts and souvenirs that are exchanged or inherited in the course of the narrative – a pair of knitted gloves, a bone button, a needlecase – are all examples of what Susan Stewart calls "souvenirs of individual experience." In her study *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Stewart defines "souvenirs of individual experience" as samples that are not purchasable, are not available as consumer goods (139), are part of the "domestic sphere of the individual and the interior" (145), and are concerned with "remembering, or at least the invention of memory" (152). As Stewart explains, "The point of the souvenir is

remembering . . . the point of the collection is forgetting. This difference in purpose is why the scrapbook and the memory quilt must properly be seen as souvenir rather than as collections" (152). In apprehending souvenirs, the whole dissolves into parts, each of which refers metonymically to a context of origin or acquisition. Grace's projected patchwork quilt, for instance, assembles pieces of cloth that she had worn while in the Penitentiary, and others that had belonged to Mary and Nancy. Grace's *Tree of Paradise* quilt is therefore, as Stewart suggests of the souvenir, an object connected to biography, and "its accute sensation – its perception by hand taking precedence over its perception by eye – promises, and yet does not keep the promise of, *reunion*" (139). Grace indeed plans her quilt "so that we will all be together" (552). A collection, on the other hand, erases its context of origin, claims Stewart, and involves "starting again in such a way that a finite number of elements create, by virtue of their combination, an infinite reverie" (152). Whereas the souvenir involves "nostalgia of origin" and presence and functions to restore and validate the culture of ground, the collection "removes the object from context and places it within the play of signifiers that characterise an exchange economy" (153).

Distinct notions of the collection and the souvenir are central to the novel. Both the Governor's wife and his daughters are collectors. As Grace reflects, "they are all collecting things these days" (27). The daughters collect "little scraps of cloth from their dresses, little snippets of ribbon, pictures cut from magazines" (25) and expressions of friendship, as was common in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The Governor's wife's scrapbook, "not violets or a picnic" (27), is instead filled with newspaper cuttings of the notorious criminals of the penitentiary, to "horrify her acquaintances" (26) in much the same way as Atwood herself has collected cuttings of the affair and pasted them in her text. As Rogerson explains, the quilt Grace designs for herself at the end of the novel is also an album: "The *Tree of Paradise* quilt, like the Governor's daughters' albums, contains 'little scraps of cloth' from the clothes of the maker and her dead friends, and like the wife's collection, it is a record of the career of a 'celebrated murderess'" (11). Grace's friend Jeremiah-the-peddler, who visits her while she works at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's, collects objects in order to resell them, and later collects hidden identities. Atwood herself admits to "collect[ing] con-artist stories" ("Power" 22), and Roxanne Fand compares Atwood to "an archaeologist cataloging the junk of a culture" (162). Reverend Verringer has collected books in his library

(86). Finally, when Grace first meets Simon Jordan, she believes he is another official visiting her to satisfy a curiosity for the uncanny, “a collector”:

> He thinks all he has to do is give me an apple, and then he can collect me. Perhaps he is from a newspaper. Or else he is a travelling man, making a tour. They come in and they stare, and when they look at you, you feel as small as an ant, and they pick you up between finger and thumb and turn you around. And then they set you down and go away. (45)

The implications of the souvenir and collection at work in the novel inform our readings of the characters. Whereas Reverend Verringer and the Governor’s wife inhabit the domain of the collection, Grace, Jeremiah, and Mary inhabit the domain of the souvenir, and Simon Jordan, that of the fetish (although Grace takes him for a collector in their initial encounter). Simon is a fetishist in his associations of maids and textiles with eroticism. He recounts his erotic dreams and his childhood fantasies with the maids, which often involve textiles. In one such dream, for example, “sheets and linens move in the wind, as if worn by invisible swelling hip; as if alive. As he watches – he must be a boy, he’s short enough to be looking upwards – a scarf or veil of white muslin is blown from the line” (194); he chases the material and comes to an erotic

embrace with an “unseen woman” whose hair winds around his neck (194-5). He recounts his attraction, as a child, to the maids who resided in the upper levels of his childhood home. Simon’s infatuation with body parts (the hip, the hair of the “unseen woman”) and textiles follows the structure of Freud’s description of the genesis of the fetish: “a part of the body is substituted for the whole, or an object is substituted for the part, until finally, and inversely, the whole body can become object, substituting for the whole” (153-155). Just as the collection is concerned with classification and display, as is the case for example with Reverend Verringer’s library, the fetish is concerned with accumulation and secrecy (Stewart 163). Simon, as I will assert in the following section on tricksters, is indeed characterised by such accumulation and secrecy.

Contrasting with the souvenir that is tied to the space of the body (Stewart 156), the collection “relies upon the box, the cabinet, the cupboard, the seriality of shelves. It is determined on these boundaries, just as the self is invited to expand within the confines of bourgeois domestic space” (157). Characters such as Reverend Verringer and the Governor’s wife, with their exhibited books and album, respectively, inhabit this bourgeois domestic space, while Grace, Jeremiah, and Simon attempt to escape its confines. Simon’s fantasy to destroy Reverend

Verringer's book collection, which becomes "so self-consciously the right sort of library that he has an urge to set fire to it" (86), may be interpreted as an act of rebellion against the boundaries of bourgeois domestic space to which he is ultimately confined. The Governor's wife's collection of clippings of notorious criminals is motivated by preservation, classification, and display. Hers is a curio-collection, or what Stewart calls a "souvenir of the exotic," which is both a specimen and a trophy, "marked as exterior and foreign, but at the same time marked as arising directly out of an immediate experience of its possessor" (Stewart 147). As the wife of the Governor, she is the "keeper" of the criminals' records.

Grace becomes associated with the souvenir, not only in her involvement with quilts and textile crafts, but also in her proximity to notions of salvage and preservation, as well as memory and the past (she suffers from amnesia). As a nineteenth-century historic figure who had been imprisoned for 28 years, Grace Marks embodies preservation and salvage. Because of her incarceration, she has not witnessed the changes brought about by the industrial revolution – the train (537), the transformation of the textile industry, with the advent of the sewing machine (533) and new chemical dyes. Grace remains foreign to such changes, which she does not enthusiastically embrace, preferring, for

example, to “do the finer sewing by hand” (545) when she is released. Atwood depicts her as preoccupied with thrift, always saving whatever can be useful – namely, scraps of cloth, souvenirs in the form of a lock of hair or old clothes. She always looks younger than her age, and her work itself implies preservation and the second hand (repairing tears in the quilts, assembling old scraps into blocks for new quilts, mending clothes). Furthermore, Grace, both in her role as domestic and in her dreamscapes, inhabits the locales of the cellar or attic, evocative of the past, preservation, and the souvenir: “the attic and the cellar are tied to the temporality of the past, and they scramble the past into a simultaneous order which memory is invited to rearrange: . . . decay and preservation” (Stewart 150-1). Grace embodies what Stewart calls the “suffusion of the worn” (139), proper to the realm of the souvenir. Upon her release, Grace refers to her life as “an old worn out story” (527).

In Atwood’s novel, however, Grace escapes being reduced to waste, and life imprisonment, when she is released. Grace, whose body is made object and thus takes place in “the abstract and infinite cycle of exchange” (Stewart 133),[69] moves to Ithaca (New York), and marries Jamie Walsh, thereby effecting a social mobility into the middle class, and

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69 The jail keepers, Simon, the doctors, Kinnear, and MacDermott would all lay claim to Grace’s body.

resuming a state of circulation: she takes the train, buys second-hand household objects, and circulates on sidewalks. Moreover, textile objects such as buttons, quilts and rugs (which Grace buys second-hand), and Nancy's dresses, Mary's petticoat, Kinnear's and McDermott's shirts are in circulation – borrowed, lended, offered, inherited, stolen, as well as bought. The quilt, a "folk art . . . subject to periodic promotions" is particularly situated within such traffic, as it can both be used on a daily basis for warmth, or displayed on the walls of the museum (Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture" 100). Just as objects circulate within zones of traffic in the text, so too do the characters of Grace and Jeremiah – who, as a peddler, is involved in the circulation of objects himself.

Establishing the quilt within the discourse of souvenir as defined by Susan Stewart, my analysis of textile craft in the novel emphasises the way in which the text, like its central figures of the quilt and Grace-as-needleworker, oscillates between authenticity and indeterminacy, assembling and unravelling, as well as salvage and circulation. Quilting here is either "just a hobby, something to do on a dull day. Or else an act of defiance" (*Robber Bride* 536). This presumably quaint occupation recommended to encourage social harmony here becomes associated with violence, secrecy, and transgression, lending a postmodern twist to

the traditional image of nineteenth-century domestic needlework. Both Grace and Jeremiah, in their association with the souvenir, escape collection and its confines by dispersing into states of transition and circulation, hence their protean, “crafty” or trickster qualities.

2.3 Craftiness: The Spider-weaver Figure

The character of Grace, whom critics have analysed as a domestic intruder (Rimstead), or an enigma (Lovelady), is, like the quilt, ridden with ambiguity, and is multiple, difficult to classify, oscillating between indeterminacy and authenticity, salvage and circulation. She is one of the the trickster and hybrid characters associated here with textile crafts. Textile crafts in the novel are not merely reserved for the domestic housewife, the nineteenth-century “angel of the house” (such as Faith Cartwright) but also involve the inmate / seamstress Grace, the con-artist or trickster / mesmeriser Jeremiah, and the fetishist / psychiatrist Simon. I will therefore look deeper into the characters of Jeremiah and Simon, who have received little critical attention to date, but whom I position here as central trickster characters intimately involved in Grace’s codes of secrecy and craft.

Both the con-artist Jeremiah and Grace, so ambiguous in her narration of the events of her story, are posited here as tricksters,

particularly in their relationship to textile craft. The involvement of Grace and Jeremiah (and to a lesser extent Simon) with textile crafts emphasises their "crafty" or trickster quality, and renders them ambiguous characters and variations of the universal spider weaver archetype, characterised by change and transformation, border crossing, and in-betweenness. The domestic-*cum*-convict-*cum*-lady (Grace marries Jamie and integrates into the middle class) and the peddler-*cum*-mesmeriser are composite or hybrid figures, survivors and shape-shifters, embodying change, resilience, and creation.

The term "craft" refers to manual art or trade, but was also used to signify fraud, cunning, and artifice, and carries the potential to subvert the natural order (Dormer 22; Brown 12). In Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* (1773), craft was mostly "fraud, cunning, artifice, full of artifices, fraudulent, sly," and the word derived from it meant "to play tricks, to practice artifice" (Dormer 22). Also, as Peter Dormer explains, "its use by the Freemasons, preserved probably from the language of the guilds, combined trade with politics to imply power. . . . Craft as ungovernable power is also the implication of witchcraft" (23). N.C.M. Brown traces this usage back to the Greeks, who believed that craft-workers had inherited from Prometheus "the foresight, trickery and sly

thoughts, a bi-product of the secrets of technical control, the *poiesis*, which craftsmen learnt to exert over ends in their trade. The *technai* (the craftsmen) were thus crafty and potentially liable to subvert the natural order" (Brown 12). For Plato, an ethical dysfunction occurs when the craft-worker becomes creative: "The craftsman who stepped outside of the scope of his norms was seen as engaging in an excessive form of behavior, and was treated as a political marginal, or as some kind of 'other'" (Brown 12). Therefore, when Grace Marks admits, at the end of Atwood's novel, to "changing the pattern a little to suit [her] own ideas" (550) she is engaging in just such "excessive behavior." Stephen Inglis, director of the research branch at the Canadian Museum of Civilization claims that "some of the intrinsic qualities of craftsmanship rest in things that are difficult to express in concrete or conventional terms": makers and critics constantly refer to the "ambiguity," "subtlety," and "illusion" of a work and even appeal to the unconscious (24). These are also terms that apply to Grace's craft. This usage of the term, an issue never before raised in Atwood criticism, is important to bear in mind when thinking of the characters in these texts, specifically: (1) craft-workers who are embodiments of the universal spider-weaver and trickster figures. This sense of "craftiness" is also useful in order to understand (2) the relation

between textile craft and secrecy or transgression, as well as illusion and the unconscious.

2.3.1 Trickster and Spider-weaver Figures

Grace is associated with the spider weaver archetype early in the novel, as the Governor's wife's acquaintances view her as "an object of fear, like a spider" (22). Simon refers to Grace as having animal characteristics on several occasions. He wonders whether she is "fish or flesh or good red herring?" (114) and associates her with animals that are commonly described as cunning and sly: the cat and the fox. Watching her thread the needle at one of their encounters, it is "as if she was washing herself with her tongue, like a cat" (104). He also reflects at one point that "He is in the presence of a female animal; something fox-like and alert" (103). Simon, as others, also refers to Grace's "tricks." In a letter to Dr. Edward Murchie, he writes: "Her voice is low and melodious, and more cultivated than is usual in a servant – a trick she has learned no doubt through her long service in the house of her social superiors" (152). When she comes to after screaming and fainting at the sight of the doctor who, we are led to assume, had abused her when she was in the Lunatic Asylum, the Matron of the Penitentiary warns her: "That's enough of your tricks, Grace" (32). Simon also remarks on "that conscious even cunning

look in the corner of her eye" (362). Dr. Bannerling describes Grace as an "accomplished actress and most practiced liar" (80). Yet, her attention to role-playing and appearances is a necessary and effective survival strategy, also part of her duties both as a nineteenth-century woman and as a servant – as she well knows, "you are paid to smile, and it does well to remember it" (256). Required behaviour forces her to perform. When the Governor's wife shows her the scrapbook, she explains: "I've learnt how to keep my face still, I made my eyes wide and flat, like an owl's in torchlight, and I said I had repented in bitter tears, and was now a changed person" (26). When she first meets Simon, she is impassive: "I look at him stupidly. I have a good stupid look which I have practiced" (42). Upon hearing about her release, she reacts carefully: "I could see that she felt some tears were in order, and I shed several. . . . I have been rescued, and now I must act like someone who has been rescued. . . . It calls for a different arrangement of the face" (442-3). Atwood herself assumes the role of trickster by creating a mystery in the character of Grace, who reminds us of the impossibility of fully knowing the past.

Grace goes by several aliases in the course of the novel, as the title suggests, first taking on Mary Whitney's namesake when forced to attempt escape to the United States with McDermott, and later, upon her release

and establishment as Mrs. Walsh in New York with Jamie Walsh. When Grace is mesmerised by Jeremiah, alias Dr. Dupont, Mary Whitney's voice takes over to claim that she was but a "flesh dress" for Mary. As Kuhn reveals, "Grace's body as a flesh dress, as well as the veil she wears during her trance scene, become meaningful emblems of border crossing" (176). The novel examines boundaries between the material and the spiritual worlds as Grace becomes, through the possibility of possession, a reminder of the fragile, permeable state of being that characterises the human body. Sewing becomes an apt metaphor for the relationship between body and soul. Simon Jordan admires "how cunningly spirit and body are knit together" (186), despite Reverrend Verringer's horror at the implications: "We cannot be mere patchworks!" (406).

Grace's mentor, Jeremiah Pontelli, also collects aliases. Also known throughout the novel as Dr. Dupont, Mr. Gerald Bridges (456), or "Signor Geraldo Ponti, master of neuro-hypnotism, ventriloquist, and mind-reader extraordinaire" (425), he is the trickster figure *par excellence*; as his aliases suggest, he is a bridge,[70] and moves between classes and borders effortlessly, teaching Grace, as she remembers while crossing over to the United States, "about borders and how easy it was to cross

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70 Both surnames Dupont and Ponti play up on the French word *pont*, meaning bridge.

them" (410). He takes the subtlety, ambiguity, illusion, and trickery related to craft to an extreme by becoming a con-artist, a master at revealing and concealing, truth and illusion, and fortune-telling and performing conjuring tricks, imitations, and predictions. It is significant that Jeremiah becomes a medium – residing "in the middle" – and practices Mesmerism, which in the mid-nineteenth century became a popular form of entertainment offering a fluid boundary, and interrogating the limits of perception, knowledge, faith, science, and authority (Parssinen 87-89). Jeremiah's predictions turn out to be true in Grace's case. After peering into her hand and warning her of the "sharp rocks" ahead (180), he tells her: "You are one of us" (180). Grace initially takes this to mean that she is, like Jeremiah, a homeless wanderer; but we may interpret this as meaning that she is, like Jeremiah, a trickster. Like Jeremiah, she disguises her identity, and, as the novel plays with the pun on her last name, "all trace of her vanishes" (Atwood, "Author's Afterword" 555) after her release from the Penitentiary, or, as she imagines after her escape with McDermott, "no trace of me remains" (412).

The mobile and transitory natures of Grace and of Jeremiah stem not only from their trickster qualities, but also from their situation as nineteenth-century lower class immigrants. (Before becoming a famed

mesmeriser, Jeremiah worked as a peddler.) As Claudette Lacelle describes in her social history of domestics in nineteenth-century Upper and Lower Canada, the urban poor, and particularly domestics, were a "mobile and transitory" population ([translation mine] 10).[71] Domestics were a particularly mobile and transitory population as the high turnover rate in domestic staff meant that servants changed their place of employment four or five times a year in this period (Lacelle). As the son and daughter of Italian and Irish immigrants respectively, Jeremiah and Grace are both socially marginalized and segregated.[72] They are both displaced, mobile, and transitory persons and, as such, bear particular relations to "things." As Lowenthal claims, "migration . . . sharpens nostalgia" and objects are salvaged "to requite displacement" (9): "The more people are on the move, the more they will grasp at tangible memorials of their collective past" (9).

Jeremiah also shares with Grace the idiolect of the needleworker. During her final year in the Penitentiary, Jeremiah sends Grace a

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71 Upward mobility was a common goal for women domestics in this period, as it is for Grace Marks (Rimstead).

72 In 1871, servants from Ireland and Scotland constituted nearly 70 per cent of the live-in servant population in the well-to-do sections of Montreal; in Quebec City, 59 percent were French-Canadian women and 33 percent were Irish. Society tended to look down on immigrant women (Clio Collective 157).

message in the form of a bone button, of the same pattern he gave her at their first encounter “for luck” after she bought four from him at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson’s. An expert seamstress, Grace can interpret the message, which, she reflects, must have been an ambivalent suggestion for “keeping things closed up, or else for opening them” and a piece of advice “to keep silent, about certain things” (512). This bone button and the message it carries is representative of preservation and circulation, one of the polarizing ambiguities of the novel. Both characters embody preservation and circulation, and are part of both a disappearing past (pre-industrial modes of production contiguous to crafts [Stewart 165]) and a transitory future of commodity culture at the turn of the century. Craft, the handmade, and peddlers are part of a disappearing past of artisan culture at the turn of the century. As George Eliot puts it in *Adam Bede* (1859), “Leisure is gone – gone where the spinning wheels are gone, and the pack-horses, and the slow wagons, and the peddlers, who brought bargains to the door on sunny afternoons” (145). Yet Grace and Jeremiah both transit from an involvement in production (Jeremiah in his role as peddler, and Grace in her role as seamstress) towards consumption (Jeremiah moves towards the field of spectacle and Grace becomes Jamie Walsh’s wife and leaves her position as domestic through class

mobility, buying instead of making the rugs and quilts she needs to decorate her new home). However, both characters are never entirely either one or the other, but rather hybrids inhabiting a middle ground. Grace has an education and manner beyond that of a domestic, and when she becomes Mrs. Jamie Walsh, she buys her things second hand. Both characters' true identities are concealed. Grace's history remains secret in Ithaca, and Jeremiah assumes the mask of a famed mesmeriser.

2.3.2 Secrecy and Transgression

In *Alias Grace*, secrecy and disclosure as well as transgression are central notions that are associated with textile crafts. As Elaine Hedges, Pat Ferrero, and Julie Silber remind us, nineteenth-century women "described their quilts as 'bound volumes of hieroglyphics' or as their 'albums' and 'di'ries'" (*Hearts and Hands* 11). Grace's "quilter's idiolect" allows her "to express her secrets" yet "continue to conceal them" simultaneously (Rogerson 6). As Simon realizes, "she knows she's concealing something from him. As she stitches away at her sewing, outwardly calm as a marble Madonna, she is all the while exerting her passive stubborn strength against him" (362). This idiolect enables Grace and Jeremiah to communicate secretly, as through the message carried by the anonymous gift of the button. Despite Rogerson's claim that Simon

“lacks an understanding of women’s culture and the discourse of needlecraft” (Rogerson 6), I contend that he shares this idiolect with Jeremiah and Grace, two characters he avowedly appreciates. Although his understanding of Grace’s character is limited, he senses the importance of her discourse on quilts, writing down excitedly what she says about them, and is even aroused by her sewing. Like Jeremiah and Grace, he partakes in the secrecy of textiles, particularly in his fetishistic fantasies, marking him as “one of [them]” (180). In his fantasies, he crosses “corridors” and “passageways” to sneak into their “secret world” (159)[73] and in one instance, he recalls, is caught “fondling one of [the] shifts” in the drawer of a housemaid whom he kisses when she surprises him. Simon’s profession as surgeon and psychoanalyst, his affair with his widowed landlady, and his unfolding desire for Grace, all depend upon secrecy.

Just as Jeremiah’s talent as a con-artist enables him to transgress class boundaries and become as respected a mesmeriser as Dr. Dupont, both Grace and Simon also transgress boundaries through their functions as seamstress and surgeon respectively. Maids and servants in the novel

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73 The invisibility and secrecy surrounding domestics was also ensured in nineteenth-century houses by the physical and social barriers demarcating servants and families, such as separate staircases and separate places at mealtime (Clio Collective 157).

are associated with intimacy, secrecy, and transgression.[74] Through their positions, the servants gain access into the secrets of the upper classes, as Mary insists: “In the end, . . . we had the better of them, because we washed their dirty linen and therefore we knew a good deal about them; but they did not wash ours, and knew nothing about us at all. There were few secrets they could keep from the servants” (183). Maids and servants were also closely associated with spiritualism in the nineteenth century, as Brian McCusky explains in his recent essay “Not at Home: Servants, Scholars, and the Uncanny”; and many were attracted to spiritualism for the social and economic opportunities that were denied them otherwise, but also because the séance circle was frequently extended to include the household staff, and as such, mediumistic staff were often an appreciated addition to a spiritualist’s home. Transgression is also an issue with Nancy Montgomery, who worked as a servant for Kinnear, and whom he took as a secret mistress, defying class decorum.[75]

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74 For a full discussion of Grace Marks and the nineteenth-century female domestic as “intruder,” see Rimstead.

75 Kinnear’s move to the country can be explained by the fact that in rural homes separate spaces for domestics were less evident than in urban homes. In rural homes, the help – often daughters of neighbouring families – tended to eat with the family, shun uniforms, share sleeping quarters with family members, and regard their work as temporary, not lifelong service (Lacelle). In a rural environment, Kinnear and Nancy could more freely transgress class boundaries.

Through his training as a surgeon, Simon is an expert at transgression, as he is overly familiar with female bodies, which he has "opened up and peered inside" (82). In a letter to Dr. Edward Murchie, Simon confesses his frustration with Grace, "trying in vain to open her up like an oyster" (150). She is indeed being "looked into" as Mrs. Quennell points out: "You are looking into our Grace, we are told. From the spiritual point of view" (84). However, such pulling apart is also enacted metaphorically in the process of quilting. Simon reflects on the pulling apart and "patching together" of surgery using a quilter's terminology, thereby linking quilting and medicine in a transgressive manner:

> A slip of the knife and you create an idiot. If this is so, why not the reverse? Could you sew and snip, and patch together a genius? What mysteries remain to be revealed in the nervous system, that web of structures both material and ethereal, that network of threads that runs throughout the body, composed of a thousand Ariadne's clues, all leading to the brain, that shadowy central den where the human bones lie scattered and the monsters lurk. (217)

In the cultural context of the nineteenth century, needlework and medicine were indeed related, as the activity of piecing together scraps of fabric to make aesthetically harmonious and useful products was recognised in the areas of medical and social rehabilitation. When associated with Grace

Marks, however, needlework takes on a more deviant nature. Rather than a therapeutic activity in her encounters with Simon, needlework is a means for Grace to cover up, to uphold appearances, as she does not converse freely, but consciously and carefully selects which "pieces" of her tale to uncover for Simon, and with which pieces to "embroider" her story. Only quilters of the deviant kind, such as Grace Marks, rather than the domestic and tame Faith Cartwright, have the power to arouse Simon. The paradoxical association of deviance or violence with an image of tame domesticity and respectablity is what excites Simon in the character of Grace Marks. Faith Cartwright serves as a foil to Grace, coming to Simon highly recommended as a wife primarily on the grounds of her needlework and crochet – both merely respectable pastimes.

The activity of sewing, as understood by and pertaining to Grace, is not the commonly-considered tame domestic activity, but rather becomes a potentially subversive one. Sewing scissors are out of bounds for the potentially dangerous Grace, who must ask permission when she needs them.[76] Grace's meditation on the meaning of quilts, which, hung on the

76 Similarly, sewing scissors, as well as garden shears, knitting needles, and needlework altogether (337) are prohibited for Offred, the protagonist of Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, due to the potentially violent use she could put them to in order to escape confinement. Here again, what is commonly considered a tame domestic activity is turned into a potentially subversive one.

line, look “like flags, hung out by an army as it goes to war,” contrasts with the peaceful, domestic, private quilt of the nineteenth century. The quilt is associated here instead with violence, conflict, and the political. In Grace’s mind, quilts are not associated with ‘peaceful things,’ but with ‘dangerous things.’ They are associated with flags and, as such, act as warnings:

> And since that time I have thought, why is it that women have chosen to sew such flags, and then lay them on the tops of beds? For they make the bed the most noticeable thing in a room. And then I have thought, it’s for a warning. Because you may think a bed is a peaceful thing, Sir, and to you it may mean rest and comfort and a good night’s sleep. But it isn’t so for everyone; and there are many dangerous things that may take place in a bed. (186)

In her novel *The Robber Bride*, Atwood similarly reflects on the use of textile craft as a flag and thus as a metaphor for history. Here again, the private domestic image is mixed with public violence. In *The Robber Bride*, Tony, a history professor, “weaves together [scraps of facts] arranging them in the patterns she thinks they must once have made” (536). These “ragged and threadbare” histories, “patched together from worthless leftovers” are, to Tony, “also flags, hoisted with a certain jaunty insolence, waving bravely though inconsequently, glimpsed here and there through the trees, on the mountain roads, among the ruins, on the long march into

chaos" (536-7). Tony uses the metaphor of weaving, knitting, or of sewing scissors in her lectures on the history of war: "She likes using it: she likes the faint shock on the faces of her listeners. It's the mix of domestic image and mass bloodshed that does it to them" (3). As Barthes puts it, the domestic tranquility involved alongside acts of violence emphasises the horror of the act: "*La voie sûre de l'horreur . . . qui s'approfondit d'une sorte de tranquillité ménagère*" [the sure path of horror . . . which is emphasised by a domestic tranquility] (173 [translation mine]). History, then, for Tony, as quilting for Grace, is "just a hobby, something to do on a dull day. Or else an act of defiance" (536).

Grace's defiance can be traced in her *Tree of Paradise* quilt, which she designs at the end of the novel, as well as in her dressing subversions. She wears Mary's clothes after her death, and Nancy's clothes when she escapes with McDermott. Jamie Walsh recognises Nancy's clothes on Grace at the trial, causing commotion in the court room, and participating in her condemnation. Grace defiantly reinterprets the Bible's Tree of Paradise, to make it closer to "the way life is," and claims to be "aware it is not the approved reading" (551). She resolves to

change the pattern[77] of her own *Tree of Paradise* quilt at the end of the novel:

> On my Tree of Paradise, I intend to put a border of snakes entwined; they will look like vines or just a cable pattern to others, as I will make the eyes very small, but they will be snakes to me; as without a snake or two, the main part of the story would be missing. Some who use this pattern make several trees . . . but I am making just one large tree, on a background of white. The Tree itself is of triangles, in two colours . . . . But three of the triangles in my Tree will be different. One will be white, from the petticoat I still have that was Mary Whitney's; one will be faded yellowish, from the prison nightdress I begged as a keepsake when I left there. And the third will be a pale cotton, a pink and white floral, cut from the dress of Nancy's that she had on the first day I was at Mr. Kinnear's, and that I wore on the ferry to Lewiston, when I was running away. I will embroider around each one of them with red feather-stitching, to blend them in as a part of the pattern. And so we will all be together. (551-2)

Her dressing subversion and persistence on "changing the pattern" (550) of the quilt demonstrate some of the ways in which Grace Marks "threatens the social order" (Kendall 114) and embodies "a contradictory female nature" (Kuhn 153). It also demonstrates Atwood's own "practice of

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77 Atwood herself admits to giving a unique twist to her own clothes in high school. The daughter of an entomologist, she made her own clothes, decorating them with "reptiles" and "trilobites" while other girls wore flowered patterns (*Two Sollicitudes* 30-31).

ambiguity, of (con)fusion" (Dvorak 79). More importantly, however, Grace's reflections on quilts and quilting and her implication with needlework and textiles indeed 'change the pattern' of textile craft.

Grace's quilt lends a postmodern twist to the traditional image of nineteenth-century domestic needlework. The scraps Grace plans to save for her own quilt are far from the quaint souvenirs from the marking events of life preserved by Ernest Buckler's Ellen in *The Mountain and the Valley* (1952): scraps of Joseph's work shirt, Martha's apron (9), the grandmother's dress, Chris's stocking cap (10), Anna's pink hair ribbon (10), a tablecloth (11), or David and Anna's blue baby blanket (274). As Grace reflects: "what should a Keepsake album be? Should it be only the good things in your life, or should it be all of the things?" She resolves to keep "all of the things" including the bad: "A piece of coarse cotton" from her Penitentiary nightdress; a "square of bloodstained petticoat" that Mary had died in; and "a strip of kerchief, white with blue flowers. Love-in-a-mist" that had served to strangle Nancy (459).[78] These pieces of cloth that

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78 Although in *Alias Grace* and *The Mountain and the Valley*, Grace's *Tree of Paradise* quilt and Ellen's rag rug act as narrative frames to the novels, and symbols of fragmented memory, two important differences should be explored in a fuller comparison of the two works: Atwood's Grace is a trickster, a "celebrated murderess" whose innocence the reader remains uncertain of, whereas Ellen is an old crone figure, a gentle, wise, and aging

Grace intends to assemble into her quilt at the end of the novel are what Stewart calls “souvenirs of death,” physical relics, the material remains of what had possessed human significance. While the function of the souvenir proper is “to create a continuous and personal narrative of the past,” the function of the souvenir of death is “to disrupt and disclaim that continuity” (140). As Stewart explains, “souvenirs of death are at the same time most intensely potential souvenirs and most potent antisouvenirs. Through her souvenirs of death, Grace demonstrates her will to “leave no marks” and, as the orpheic subject, to disperse into a fragmented anonymity.

2.4 Fragmentation

Like Jeremiah-the-peddler, whose relation with textile crafts involves only scraps and pieces (sewing material such as buttons, ribbons, etc.), the quilting carried out by Grace Marks also implies fragmentation: she does not partake in the assemblage but only sews the different patches, or blocks that will be subsequently integrated into the final design of the quilt by other women. Being a convict, she is excluded from the sewing bees, the Governor’s wife’s “parties” (110) during which

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maternal figure. Furthermore, the state of the final quilt and rug differ: in *Alias Grace*, the quilt remains unfinished, whereas in Buckler’s novel, the rug pattern is completed at the end.

the ladies assemble and sew together the patches. Grace is defined by fragments, relegated to working only with fragments, pieces, scraps, or loose ends. As she explains:

> They don't use me for the quilting, only for the blocks because it is such fine work, and the Governor's wife said I was thrown away on the plain sewing such as they do at the Penitentiary, the postbags and uniforms and so forth; but in any case the quilting is in the evening, and it is a party, and I am not invited to parties. (110)

The only completed quilts she comes across at Mrs. Alderman Parkinson's are kept locked away in chests, and require regular care so as to prevent their deterioration – a constant threat. When Grace is released and sets up her own home with Jamie Walsh, she buys second-hand quilts from a bankrupt couple. The only quilt she intends to assemble herself is the *Tree of Paradise* quilt that remains a project until the end of the novel. The quilting we are presented with in the novel, then, is limited to the sewing of patches or blocks, or the repairing of used quilts. Thus the component of harmonious women's social gatherings and aesthetic wholeness often associated with quilting is lacking here, where the unfinished quilt is associated instead with fragmentation, piecework, and recycling. The scraps Grace preserves from the past, in their status as souvenirs, are necessarily incomplete, fragmentary, mere metonymic

samples. As Stewart explains, “in apprehending such objects [as souvenirs, such as the scrapbook and memory quilt], we find that the whole dissolves into parts, each of which refers metonymically to a context of origin or acquisition” (152). They consist of what Umberto Eco calls “homomaterial replicas” or “partial doubles” (*A Theory of Semiotics* 227). The images of dismemberment and fragmentation linked to the quilt that I will develop in this final section subvert what Grace herself calls “the approved reading” (551) and characterise the fragmented, dehierarchical, and plural aesthetics of the quilt, of textile crafts and of the souvenir. I apply the notions of dismemberment and fragmentation to the three dimensions of the body, memory, and identity in order to demonstrate the polarized notions of preservation and dispersal at work in the novel, as represented by the central trope of textile crafts.

2.4.1 Body: Dismemberment and Amputation

In the dream scene that opens the novel and is also recounted at intervals during the narrative, Nancy “came apart into patches of colour, she scattered, a drift of red and white cloth petals across the stones” (375). Nancy’s body in the dream is made of patches of colour and cloth, just as bodies in the text are often assimilated to textile. Grace, for example, thinks of herself at the trial as the wooden doll of a magician,

“made of cloth, and stuffed, with a china head” (351). Grace’s body, according to Mary Whitney’s spirit who speaks through Grace in the trance scene, is but a “fleshly garment” for Mary. After the murders, Grace takes Nancy’s dresses believing that “the dead have no use for such things” (354) and burns her own, which she compares to “dirtied and cast-off skin” (333). The bone button Jeremiah offers Grace is also significant here as it joins body (bone) and textile craft. Just as the image of the button signifies both opening and closing, the bone button also signifies the outside garment and the bone underlying flesh. Grace and Janet open Grace’s box that had been in storage and that contains her belongings (Nancy’s and Mary’s clothes) in order “to see what could be saved” (531). In this instance the assimilation of Grace with the textiles is evident: “Any piece of cloth needs a good airing every once in a while and these had been given none. . . . Janet herself was taken aback, she was too young to have realized what the effects of 29 years shut up in a box might be” (531-2). As Warwick and Cavallaro point out, the assimilation of clothing and body may be one of the most deeply entrenched “incarnations of the fusion of the natural and the constructed” (5).

Nancy’s “coming apart” in the dream scene discussed above prefigures the cutting to pieces of Nancy’s body. McDermott confesses to

Kenneth MacKenzie: “I then cut the body in four pieces” (qtd. in Moodie, *Life in the Clearings* 340). As Grace admits, her “worst fear” is to be “cut up into pieces, and bits and fragments, as they say the doctors did to you if you were hanged” (430). This is indeed what happens to McDermott’s body after he is hanged:

> [T]hey made a plaster cast of his head. . . . Also his body was dissected. When I first read that I did not know what *dissected* was, but I found it out soon enough. It was done by the doctors. They cut him to pieces like a pig to be salted down, he might as well have been bacon as far as they were concerned. (29)

Grace’s “fear of doctors . . . of being cut open by them” (32) is well-founded, as she is at the mercy of what Simon calls the “dark trio – the doctor, the judge, the executioner” (93). This ‘dark trio,’ Simon claims, share the “powers of life and death”: “To be rendered unconscious; to lie exposed, without shame, at the mercy of others; to be touched, incised, plundered, remade” (93). Simon longs to have access to Grace’s inner thoughts. He admits that “Grace . . . will be a very hard nut to crack” (60). This “coming apart” is linked to the work of unravelling, cutting up and sewing together of quilting. The image of bodily or psychic fragmentation also accompanies textile craft in the excerpt of Emily Dickinson’s poem cited in *Alias Grace*:

> I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –
> As if my Brain had split –
> I tried to match it – Seam by Seam –
> But could not make it fit. (c. 1860)

This discourse of “coming apart,” of “dissection,” of “being cut open” or “cut to pieces” is replicated by Grace who refers to the day of the murders as “the breaking day” (351), which induces her assumed dissociation and multiple personality disorders, and her fragmented flashbacks.

Beheading and amputation are recurrent images associated with textile in *Alias Grace*. Grace sees in the laundry hanging out to dry several visions of beheaded angels: “the nightgowns flapping in the breeze on a sunny day were like large white birds, or angels rejoicing, although without any heads” (159); and while sleepwalking at Kinnear’s, Grace sees “angels whose white robes were washed in blood” with “no heads” (334), only to realize in the morning, that the laundry had been “blown into the trees” and “did indeed look like angels without heads; and it was as if our clothing was sitting in judgement upon us” (335). During a trip as a young girl to the cemetary, the sight of gravestones decorated with angel heads confuses Grace: “I did not see how a head could fly around without a body attached” (106). Young Grace envisions her mother’s pregnancy as “an enormous mouth, on a head like the flying angel heads on the

gravestones, but with teeth and all, eating away at my mother from the inside" (107). In several dream scenes, and in the trance scene, hands are also sectioned. In a dream she recounts to the reader, Grace is at Kinnear's and is visited by a peddler selling "ribbons and buttons and combs and pieces of cloth" and also "one of [her] hands" or as she comes to realize, the hand of "some other woman" (113). The morning before the murders, Grace feels as though her hand is "only a husk or skin, with inside it another hand growing" (317). Indeed, as Mary Whitney declares, through Grace's "fleshly garment" in the trance scene, Grace's hands were not responsible, as the "kerchief killed her. Hands held it" (184). Kuhn argues that "Atwood's images of dismemberment and amputation are often cited by feminist critics as characterising the splitting of self in a patriarchal world, and Grace's decapitated angel/dress imagery highlights the situation of Victorian women" (211). By approaching the novel through the angle of material culture, I further analyse these images of decapitation and amputation within the oppositional model of the quilt, in which bodies, like textiles, are unravelled, cut into patches, and assembled into "strange keepsakes." In this way, my study extends the critical dialogue surrounding the novel by focusing on the fragmentary and indeterminate quality of the quilt and the metonymic capacity of its

patches, instead of the unifying capacity of the whole (metaphorical) quilt that from the nineteenth century tended to evoke domestic harmony.

2.4.2 Memory: “Telling over the pieces”

Recollected objects have the power to sustain memory, as is evident in the scene of Simon’s dream of his father:

> Past him, just out of reach, various objects are floating: a silver tray; a pair of candlesticks; a mirror; an engraved snuffbox; a gold watch . . . . Things that were his father’s once, but sold after his death. They’re rising up from the depths like bubbles, more and more of them; . . . . He watches in horror, because now they’re gathering, twining together, re-forming. . . . His father, in the sinuous process of coming back to life. . . . Lost memories lie down there like sunken treasure, to be retrieved piecemeal, if at all. (160-1)

Simon’s father’s objects are reassembling, like a patchwork quilt. The scraps and pieces from the past recreate a sort of Frankenstein version of Simon’s father, in much the same way as Grace imagines the old scraps of Nancy’s and Mary’s clothes and strands of Mary’s hair in the box containing her belongings, which she opens upon her release, to recompose her old acquaintances in the flesh: “The room seemed to darken and I could almost see Nancy and Mary beginning to take shape again inside their clothes, only it was not a pleasant notion, as by now

they themselves would be in much the same dilapidated state" (532). Grace refers to her memories as scraps or pieces: "I don't recall the place very well, as I was a child when I left it; only in scraps, like a plate that's been broken. There are always some pieces that would seem to belong to another plate altogether; and then there are the empty spaces, where you cannot fit anything in" (116). When Grace is trying to remember the events of the murder, in order to recount them to Simon on his last visit, she finds that her memory of Kinnear has faded "like a dress washed over and over" and all that is left of him is "A faint pattern. A button or two" (352), a series of objects: "I tell over the pieces, counting. The gold snuff-box, the telescope, the pocket-compass, the pen-knife; the gold watch, the silver spoons that I polished, the candlesticks with the family crest. *I Live In Hope*. The tartan vest. I don't know where they have gone" (353). According to Jeremiah-alias-Dupont's theory, "we are what we remember," to which Simon adds "we are also – preponderantly – what we forget" (486). Similarly, Atwood herself has claimed elsewhere that "we are not so much the sum of what we [can] remember as the sum of what we [have] forgotten" ("In Search of *Alias Grace*" 201). Walter Benjamin, in his essay titled "The Image of Proust," likens the work of the "remembering author" to the "Penelope work of recollection": "the important thing for the

remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection” (*Illuminations* 204); or, as he goes on to amend, “should one call it, rather, the Penelope work of forgetting?” Hence Grace’s obsession with “strange keepsakes” (534): snippets of fabric from the dresses she used to wear long ago, and of her prison nightdress, claiming that she “needed something of [her] own to take away with [her]” (534). This notion of the material quality of the object in response to fading memory has been analysed by Pierre Nora as particular to “the fragmenting and memory-denying twentieth century” to borrow Atwood’s words (“In Search of *Alias Grace*” 202): “As traditional memory fades, we feel obliged religiously to accumulate the testimonies, documents, images, and visible signs of what was . . . . Hence the inhibition against destroying, the retention of everything” (xxv-xxviii). As Andreas Huyssen explains, “Whether paradox or dialectic, the spread of amnesia in our culture is matched by a fascination with memory and the past (“Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age” 254). Testimony as the accumulation of discarded objects in response to amnesia – quite literally the “multilayered sedimentations” of Huyssen (257) – is therefore Atwood’s comment on what Huyssen calls the “expansive historicism of our contemporary culture,” with memoir writing, confessional literature,

and “the artistic practice of quoting, citing, and recycling” (253), which, as I have insisted above, is persistent in *Alias Grace* in the trope of the quilt and textile craft. This ambiguous presence in the text of dismemberment and reassembly can be linked here with the ambivalent compulsions to remember and forget proper to contemporary culture. As Huyssen explained in his 1993 article, “culture today is fraught with a fundamental ambiguity. Obsessed with memory and the past, it is also caught in a destructive dynamics of forgetting” (260).

2.4.3 Identity: The “dark trio”

Linda Hutcheon writes that Atwood’s characters have “subjectivities that are much less easily defined in traditional terms, that are fragmented and even multiple” (*Canadian Postmodern* 145). Most of the characters in the novel project their own narratives upon Grace, hence the title, “*Alias* Grace”: the Governor’s daughters see her as a romantic literary heroine; Simon Jordan sees her as the subject of his experimentation in the field of mental illness, as well as the only woman he could ever consider marrying; Jamie Walsh, upon Grace’s release, thinks of her as an erotic victim to be saved; the asylum warden views her as a degenerate female murderess; and Susanna Moodie, who is “subject to influences” as Reverrend Verringer argues (222), writes of her in metaphors borrowed by

Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. Grace herself lists the many personalities that others have made her into:

> I think of all of the things that have been written about me – that I am an inhuman female demon, that I am an innocent victim of a blackguard forced against my will and in danger of my own life, that I was too ignorant to know how to act and that to hang me would be judicial murder, that I am fond of animals, that I am very handsome with a brillant complexion, that I have blue eyes, that I have green eyes, that I have auburn and also brown hair, that I am tall and also not above average height, that am well and decently dressed, that I robbed a dead woman to appear so, that I am brisk and smart about my work, that I am . . . cunning and devious, that I am soft in the head and little better than an idiot. And I wonder, *how can I be all of these different things at once*? ([emphasis added] 23)

Furthermore, critics have referred to Mary Whitney as Grace's alter ego, or secondary personality (Knelman 683; Morra 126-7; Niederhoff 78; Staels 437). Grace is Mary's "flesh dress," an apt paradigm, as clothes and the borrowing of clothing are involved in identity construction, as initially depicted in Atwood's short story "Hair Jewellery" (1977):

> That's my technique, I resurrect myself through clothes. In fact it's impossible for me to remember what I did, what happened to me, unless I can remember what I was wearing, and every time I discard a sweater or a dress I am discarding a part of my life. I shed identities like a snake, leaving them pale and shrivelled behind me, a

> trail of them, and if I want any memories at all I have to collect, one by one, those cotton and wool fragments, piece them together, achieving at last a patchwork self, no defence anyway against the cold. (*Dancing Girls and Other Stories* 105)

As the character sheds identities like a snake, so do Grace's clothes become "dirtied and cast-off skin" (333) when she burns them, after the murders, to wear Nancy's. Grace's "patchwork self" is achieved throughout the book, well before she details their assembly in the *Tree of Paradise* quilt, by borrowing and wearing Nancy's and Mary's clothes: on her birthday, she goes for a walk in the woods with Nancy's hat and Mary's kerchief (259). The borrowing intensifies immediately after the murders, when Jamie accuses Grace of wearing Nancy's stockings (320).

Grace, Mary, and Nancy themselves compose a triangle, a variation of Simon's "dark trio" or "Trinity" (486), a triple voice composing a "violent triangle" of sorts, to build on Atwood's notion of "double voice" and "violent duality" she expresses in *The Journals of Susanna Moodie*. The *Tree of Paradise* quilt Grace plans to complete at the end of the novel includes triangles cut from Nancy's flowered dress, Mary's petticoat, and Grace's prison nightdress so they will "all be together" (552). Rogerson points out the ambiguity of Grace's Tree of Paradise design: "The question remains as to whether the fabrics and the snakes represent an abject and

terrified admission of guilt, an innocent desire to create a memorial to the only female friendship that she had ever experienced, or a brazen celebration of a crime for which she feels no remorse" (21). Rogerson maintains that this question remains unresolved as the reader cannot discriminate between Grace's guilt, innocence or celebration, or her roles in the narrative as killer, victim, or seducer.

Many critics, like Rogerson, have remained puzzled over "the question mark" Grace's name suggests (Lovelady 36). Whether or not Grace helps kill Thomas Kinnear and Nancy Montgomery, whether she really suffers from amnesia or a double personality, whether she has sex with Thomas Kinnear or James McDermott, whether she has feelings for Simon Jordan, and whether she is pregnant at the end of the novel, all remain unanswered. As Sharon Wilson, who takes a similar stance, has claimed, these are "either / ors that overlook the pluralism of both identity and truth" (133). In considering these tensions in Atwood's writing Linda Hutcheon affirms that "the complex relationship between these [paradoxal] elements is not one of simple opposition so much as fruitful confrontation" (*Canadian Postmodern* 157). My analysis of *Alias Grace* goes beyond these questions as well. I suggest that the indeterminacy of Grace's character and of the historical events that have baffled critics is reflective

of the plurality and circulation involved in revisiting the quilt, and perceiving it to be not a unifying model (or product) but rather an oppositional model (or process). Grace remains multiple and fragmented, just as her quilt remains incomplete. The process of piece work, selecting pieces in the “jumbled” rag bag (424) involved in quilting, lies in simultaneous opposition with the finished product, the assembled unified cover. Just as the quilt may be seen as an object of unity in spite of fragmentation or as an object of division in spite of assembly, I employ the patchwork quilt as a lens through which to view the perpetual weaving or assembling / unravelling that permeates the entire novel, which oscillates, like the quilt and like the souvenir, between authenticity and indeterminacy, salvage and circulation. Beyond representing the warring forces at work in much of Atwood’s writing, I propose the metaphor of the quilt as representative of the processes of perpetual assembling and unravelling resulting in the postmodern indeterminacy, circulation, and dispersal at work both in the characters and, by extension, in the text of historiographic metafiction. Analysed through the lens of the quilt, Grace, Jeremiah, and to a lesser extent, Simon (who at the end of the novel is also displaced and disperses in a state of amnesia), are hybrid figures, crafters / tricksters, variations of the orpheic postmodern subject. Grace

Marks's name thus refers not only to “the question mark” (Lovelady) but also and predominantly to the mark, the trace, she attempts to erase. Like Jeremiah, Grace has “left no marks” (412), which “is almost the same as being innocent” (412).

Chapter 3 A Story to Pass On: Recording, Recycling and Textile Crafts in Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*

"making

with their

rhythms some-

thing torn

and new"

(Edward Kamau Brathwaite The Arrivants*, 270)*

Like Margaret Atwood, Austin Clarke is one of the most prolific writers living in Canada today. He has published 16 books of fiction and autobiography since 1964. He is known to most African Canadian writers as the dean of Black writing in Canada (Thomas 239). Criticism on Clarke's oeuvre almost exclusively focuses on the complexities of Caribbean migration – issues of immigrant displacement, racial prejudice, and the migrant characters' ambivalent relations to homeland and host land (Brown, Algoo-Baksh, Ramraj, Goddard, Brbalsingh, Henry). Although he is better known for his explorations of the difficult lives of Caribbean immigrants in Toronto in his short stories, Austin Clarke's most accomplished writing to date is his most recent novel *The Polished Hoe*

(2002), set in fictive Barbados. This novel breaks with the concern for issues surrounding Caribbean migration to focus instead on the issue of the burden of genealogy, ancestry, and history. The novel deals with the transmission, or "passing on"[79] of personal histories that is a prime concern in postcolonial literature, in the context of subalternity, secrecy, and silence. Criticism on *The Polished Hoe* is still sparse, and has mainly approached the issue of family structures, secrets, and silences (Misrahi-Barak). Like *Alias Grace*, Clarke's novel, *The Polished Hoe*, questions "the approved reading" (*Alias Grace* 551) of the past by providing an alternative version of history, through a counterstory told primarily in the voice of its main character, also a (former) maidservant and murderess, Mary Gertrude Mathilda Paul. As Nigel Thomas claims, "this novel lays bare . . . the lies that have muddied West Indian history" by showing that virulent forms of post-slavery behaviour were not confined to the United States and South Africa, but were also very much present throughout the Caribbean (18).

The Polished Hoe brings us further into the testimonies of murderous maidservants and seamstresses, and is thus an appropriate sequence to Atwood's *Alias Grace*. Just as Simon attempts to collect

79 Toni Morrison's *Beloved* begins with the cautionary assertion that "this is not a story to pass on."

Grace Marks' testimony of the event of the murder of her former employer, Mr. Kinnear, Clarke's novel revolves around the statement his main character, Mary Gertrude Mathilda, delivers to Sargeant Percy Stuart. Percy reluctantly takes Mary-Mathilda's statement until the final pages of the novel, when she leads him through the plantation's secret underground tunnel, dating back to slavery, to the "evidence." This evidence is a weapon – the titular hoe – that she has used to murder Mr. Bellfeels, who is the owner of the island's plantation, the father of her son, and, as the reader gradually understands at the end of her circuitous and digressive statement, her own father as well. In *Alias Grace* and *The Polished Hoe*, the protagonists' accounts of the pivotal events of the novels – the murders of Mr. Kinnear and of Mr. Bellfeels – verge on the confessional mode and are circuitous, interspersed with digressions into their personal histories, fantasies, dreams, and inner thoughts, as well as those of their interlocutors, Simon and Percy. Furthermore, the relationships between the tellers/confessants and listeners/confessors are ambiguous. Indeed, just as Grace comes to represent more than the subject of a psychoanalytical experiment for Simon, who becomes infatuated with her, Percy, who has remained a long-time admirer of Mary-Mathilda's, treats her as much more than a prime suspect. The attempts of

Simon and Percy to collect the women's oral accounts in written form fail, and thus act as a commentary on the elusive and reconstructed nature of memory, history, and narrative, as well as on the impossibility of recovering history and of recording or transcribing oral history. Both accounts have major destabilizing impacts on the men whose role it is to collect and write down the "truth": Grace's coded telling ends up psychologically unbalancing Simon, and Sarge is too overwhelmed by Mary's information to take down her statement.

Beyond the numerous similarities between the two texts, however, I am particularly interested in this study in the implications of textile and crafts in both novels. Both main characters are expert seamstresses, and both are dedicated labourers whose main tasks include textile work carried out for the upper classes. Both women are confined in their roles as maidservants: Grace is permitted to be a maidservant while serving her sentence of life imprisonment; before becoming Mr. Bellfeels' mistress, Mary's work – as field-hand on the plantation, then as house servant – comes close to forced labour with connections to plantation slavery. She also faces the prospect of imprisonment with the completion of her statement.

This statement of a former maidservant or seamstress / murderess allows me to further investigate the links between storytelling and craft, as well as the metaphorical possibilities of the spider weaver figure and of textile and the crafted object as they relate to historical representation. Just as the previous chapter proposed textile craft as a metaphor for historiographic metafiction, and linked textile craft to notions of transgression and fragmentation as related to the postmodern subject, this chapter will lead us to examine the metaphorical implications of textile crafts in the neoslave narrative, and to posit the crafted / textile object as a record of secrecy, struggle, and an embodiment of the collective and composite nature of memory, storytelling, and heritage construction in a postcolonial and specifically Caribbean context.

3.1 The Reconstructed Narrative: "The story itself is the thing"

Clarke's narrative technique in *The Polished Hoe*, like Atwood's technique in *Alias Grace*, evokes the textual quilt in its range and variety, consisting at once of direct speech, reported speech, free indirect speech, stream of consciousness, disparate discursive modes of legal and judiciary (Mary-Mathilda is delivering a statement) and intimate (it is also a

confession directed at Percy and at Bimshire's working class[80]), the personal and collective ("I am giving you this history of my personal life, and the history of this Island of Bimshire, altogether, wrap-up in one" [20]). Like *Alias Grace*, this novel, in its form, is therefore an implicit commentary on the reconstructed nature of narrative, memory, and history.[81] In Ihsan Taylor's words, Clarke has "spun an entire history" with this novel.

The oral tradition Clarke employs is, like "spinning," likened to a learning, accretive, or reconstructive process. Clarke establishes storytelling as a sort of inheritance and, as historian David Lowenthal claims of legacy, storytelling is "a composite accretion" (Lowenthal 247).

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80 It is significant that both Grace's testimony and Mary's statement start out in the confessional mode, as both women are outsiders in the community seeking self-realization. As Terrence Doody writes, in *Confession and Community in the Novel*, "A confession is the deliberate, self-conscious attempt of an individual to explain his nature to the audience who represents the kind of community he needs to exist in and to confirm him. Confession is always an act of community, and the speaker's intention to realize himself in community is the formal purpose that distinguishes confession from other modes of autobiography or self-expression" (4-5).

81 We can draw on the poststructuralist theories of New Historicism to grasp the connection between history and storytelling or narration, and the ways in which stories of the past may serve to redefine or rewrite alternative historical versions. New Historicism relies on three major principles: 1) there are two meanings of the word 'history': (a) 'the events of the past' and (b) 'telling a story about the events of the past.' According to poststructuralist thought, the first sense is untenable, as it is clear that history is always 'narrated.' 2) There is no single 'history,' only discontinuous and contradictory 'histories'; and 3) 'History' is always a matter of telling a story about the past, while using other texts as our intertexts (Selden 105).

Storytelling is an active and circular process connecting the tale with the teller, the teller with the audience, and the audience with the tale.[82] The teller/narrator, story/text, and listener/reader are interconnected and subject to various transformations during the storytelling event, as is the case in *The Polished Hoe*. The narrative, then, is not just a literary form or mode, but an 'epistemological category.' That is, reality may be found in the story itself. As Mary explains:

> It could be that I was relating a story I read in a book. It don't matter if I remember actually going to Miami-Florida. If I was actually on that train going north. It is not those facts that I claiming to be true. The story itself is the thing. That experience of living through the story. (210)[83]

We traditionally think of narrative as a storytelling event in which a narrator simply recounts a set of happenings. Peter Brooks, however, reminds us that narrative as storytelling is "remembering, repeating and working

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82 Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, in their seminal work *The Nature of Narrative*, define narrative as a literary work distinguished by the presence of a story and a storyteller. Narrative is a complex process involving four interconnected elements: (1) the story/text; (2) the storyteller/narrator; (3) the audience/reader; (4) and the act of telling the story/narrating. These four elements are interconnected, interactive, and interdependent; or, as Gerard Genette argues in *Narrative Discourse*, they are interrelated in narrative discourse.

83 Because of the colloquial language used throughout *The Polished Hoe*, I will not indicate unconventional spelling and syntax in colloquial citations.

through" (iii). Furthermore, Roy Schafer's essay on the psychoanalytic dialogue informs us that what is recounted is not a static record but the "present version of the past" in which clarification comes "through the circular and coordinated study of past and present" (32-33). As Mary explains to Sarge, "There is a time when your past takes over you, and takes over your present" (59). Just as Simon, in *Alias Grace*, describes his work with Grace as "following a "thread" or "several threads" in her testimony (291, 188), Sarge similarly perceives Mary-Mathilda's statement as "following a path that is more fixed than his own dream" (61). In his novel, Clarke is, like his character Manny, "trying to piece together and reconstruct certain strains, certain strands" (76).

3.1.1 The Neoslave Narrative

The narrative reconstruction involved in Atwood's fictional retelling of the story of Grace Marks is also present here, as Clarke's novel brings us to reconsider a part of our historical past. Whereas *Alias Grace* shed new light on the lives of Irish immigrant domestics in the nineteenth century, the past Clarke reconsiders, through the eyes of a former domestic, is that of slavery in the Caribbean, the "ugly aspect of Caribbean reality which many of us have been unwilling to examine"

(Thomas 18).[84] The backdrop of Clarke's novel is slavery and the plantation system even though it is staged in the 1960s Caribbean, on the fictitious island of Bimshire, fashioned after Clarke's native Barbados.[85] The description that Mary-Mathilda makes of the estate where she lives as the "kept mistress" of Mr. Bellfeels renders the history of slavery and its legacy omnipresent:

> Now, where we are in this Great House is the extremity of the Plantation Houses, meaning the furtherest away from the Main House, with six other houses, intervening. These consist of the house the Bookkeeper occupies; one for the Overseer . . . ; one for the Assistant Manager, a Englishman, which is the third biggest after the Main House; and then there is a lil hut for the watchman, Watchie; and there is this Great House where we are. The Main House have three floors, to look over the entire estate of the Plantation, like a tower in a castle. To spy on everybody. (4)

The hierarchical system of slavery persists in 1960s Bimshire and is embodied by Mr. Bellfeels whose overwhelming presence permeates

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84 It is significant that Austin Clarke, a Caribbean-Canadian writer, examines this past of slavery in the Caribbean that has been obscured from official records. In the Canadian context as well, slavery existed and survived in parts of the country for 71 years. Contrary to popular belief, the first Underground Railroad between the United States and Canada was south-bound to free slaves held on Canadian territory between 1788 and 1792. This past of slavery, like that of the Caribbean, is not commonly acknowledged (Morel 65).

85 Bimshire is one of the names affectionately given to Barbados; Little England is another (Nigel Thomas, e-mail to the author, 10 Sept. 2007).

the plantation village and wields repressive power over its inhabitants. Percy is largely unaware of the reality of the island's slave history, since it was never mentioned in the school books. Mary-Mathilda's proximity to the plantation's Main House as servant and mistress, and her son Wilberforce's[86] education, however, afford her insights into and first-hand experience of the reality of the plantation's past of slavery, colonialism, and sexual exploitation. The historical past of slavery, which has taken its toll on several generations of villagers, has been erased from official historical records and lies both literally and metaphorically underground. As Mary reveals to Percy this censured past, she also leads him towards the buried hoe, and into the secret underground tunnel (327; 329) used during slavery but also in more recent times by the powerful men on the plantation to exact violent retribution of any labourer threatening revolt. As Judith Misrahi-Barak explains, "The novel shows forcefully how relationships inherited from slavery times have endured well into the twentieth century, shaping family structure and permeating all the physical and verbal exchanges" ("Skeletons in Caribbean Closets" 57). Clarke's

86 Wilberforce is named after William Wilberforce, one of the leading British abolitionists, instrumental in the Slave Trade Act in 1807 and the Slavery Abolition Act in 1833. He is considered both a liberator and a racist, so the name carries certain ambiguity in this novel intended, as Thomas reminds us, "to correct much of the romanticized history of the Caribbean" ("Unpleasant Truths" 18).

narrative initially appears as Mary-Mathilda's confession of her crime of murdering Mr. Bellfeels, but turns out instead to be an indictment of Mr. Bellfeels and of the plantocracy he represents, by Mary-Mathilda and Sarge. For this reason, instead of establishing Mary's narrative within a confessional mode, as does Misrahi-Barak, I contend that the narrative may begin as a confession but rapidly becomes a testimony instead, a text of authority rather than one propelled by humility. Mary's recollection does not focus on her culpability (which the notion of confession implies) but rather on the culpability of Bellfeels and the plantation system for which he stands.

Differing from slave narratives, that is, the autobiographical accounts written by or transcribed from the oral accounts of slaves or former slaves, neoslave narratives are primarily a "post-sixties phenomenon" (McDowell 144), concerned with recycling such narratives. They retell the stories of slavery while enacting postmodern formal innovations that draw on conventions and narratorial strategies developed by the antebellum slave narrators in order to represent recent history (McCallum and Olbey 161).[87] Although Ashraf Rushdy defines neoslave

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87 Established examples of neoslave narratives are Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966), Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976), or Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Some of these texts deploy postmodern narrative

narratives as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first person voice of the ante-bellum slave narrative" (3), I would open up this definition to include multiple voices and points of view. The contemporary neoslave narrative seeks to contest dominant historical representations and interpretations of slavery, hence the importance of considering the presence of multiple voices.

Clarke's *The Polished Hoe*, as well as Dionne Brand's *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996), or Marlene Nourbese Philip's *Looking for Livingstone* (1991) are concerned with the representation of the profoundly rooted physical and psychological effects of slavery as they persist in the contemporary forms of exploitative labour practices of capitalist "globalization." These authors layer a distant past, often omitted in recorded history, onto a more recent past to produce a sense of overlapping stories and interlinked histories. The representation of labour in these novels (cutting and harvesting sugarcane, the work of maidservant and seamstress) links contemporary forms of exploitation (Bimshire or Barbados in the 1960s or 70s, or Toronto's sweatshops in the 70s) to past forms of exploitation proper to slavery and colonization. I

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techniques to collapse temporal and spatial boundaries (Reed's slave narrator, Raven Quickskill, for example, travels to Canada aboard an Air Canada jet; and Morrison's character, Beloved, is a ghost of a sacrificed daughter representing the painful past of slavery who returns in the flesh to haunt her mother).

approach the neoslave narrative through a craft lens that emphasises notions of recycling and labour that I consider central to the neoslave narrative in general and to Clarke's novel in particular.

3.1.2 Narrative Recycling and the Second-hand Aesthetic

The notion of the recycled and reconstructed narrative is emphasised in the text through the aesthetic of the second-hand and of "passing on" as applied to narrative. Knowledge is often achieved here second-hand, through anecdote, gossip, overheard utterance, or rumour. Sarge considers his knowledge of Mary-Mathilda to be "second-hand through rumour and gossip, and glimpses of her over the years" (411). In the same way, Mary-Mathilda's knowledge of the unofficial and obscured history of the island comes from gathering whatever she overhears from Mr. Bellfeels and his friends, or as a child "by listening behind the cloth curtain in her house to the stories Ma and Gran told about the women on the Plantation" (360); or "through the narratives of her mother's life, and the tales handed down from her great-great-gran's life from a time even before that" (359). These forms of communal knowledge participate in reconstructions of personal histories through manipulation and invention that parallel the "creative contrivance of heritage" and that contrast sharply with history, understood as verifiable, archival truth (Lowenthal 143). As

such, narrative is heritage, and stories are passed on, as Mary-Mathilda explains in the following passage, as 'inheritances of the poor':

> I was telling you of a narrative told to me by Ma, which she heard from her mother, Gran, who I am sure, heard it told by my great-great-gran, and finally handed down to me. These narratives are the only inheritances that poor people can hand down to their offsprings. The rich people and the Plantation-people have land and trees, pigs and cows, money in Barclays Bank, Dominion, Colonial Overseas, and money hidden in wells all over this Island, on this very Plantation and throughout the Village, to lavish-way on their inheritancies. But all that we possess to hand-down is love. And bitterness. And blood. And anger. And all four, wrap-up in one narrative. Stories I would hear at night, in kerosene oil light, with mosquitoes coming and going, like commas and punctuation marks, and I under my crocus-bag blanket, shivering from the cold and from the blackness in the stories. (355)

Mary-Mathilda intends her own statement to be a sort of inheritance, "something to leave behind" to her son and the people of the village:

> I still have to tell the story. . . . I still have to leave the history for Wilberforce, and one to be left back to the people of this Village, and people coming after me so they would know what happened. And I still have to save my soul. . . . A legacy of words behind me so people will know. Not that it was wrong. Or was right. I don't want people to see my act in such a simple way. In such black-and-

> whiteness. But if I don't leave something behind, anybody, anytime . . . will know only what happened from word of mouth, and from the Bimshire Daily Herald; and the words from the lips of Village gossip. There won't be nobody to tell the pure history of my act. (100-1)

Her history, however, which she intends to pass on as inheritance, will remain oral, not written, as Sarge fails to transcribe Mary-Mathilda's statement on paper. His writing down of her statement in his "small black notebook" is continuously postponed and delayed. At several instances he takes out his notebook and "is poised now. To take down her statement" (450), but he never writes. Mary-Mathilda also notices that, "Sargeant is not writing down any of this. It is too much for him" (460). The novel itself follows this frame of narrative legacy and of "passing on" proper to the genre of the neoslave narrative, and its attempts to transform painful history into fiction, or rather, to transform heritage into narrative. Clarke's narrative technique therefore mirrors heritage as a "jumbled, malleable amalgam ever reshaped" by personal histories (Lowenthal 147).

Clarke also enacts a literary recycling by creating a "jumbled, malleable amalgam" of a multiplicity of genres in his novel, as in Atwood's *Alias Grace*. Clarke employs elements of the detective genre, riddles, pieces extracted from calypsos, children's songs, and songs by Ella Fitzgerald or Paul Robeson. Like Atwood's novel, *The Polished Hoe*

includes excerpts from or references to a number of literary, educational or religious texts, such as *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (393), Mary's elite intellectual son Wilberforce's books that he leaves around the house, *Nelson's West Indian Reader, Book Three* (Percy's textbook in Standard Three), and the Bible. The metafictional references in the text are revisited to inscribe alternative histories.[88] Mary-Mathilda, for example, offers Percy a different version of the story of David and Bathsheba:

> The Holy Bible says that it was David who was peeping at Bathsheba bathing, spying on the poor woman's nakedness, without her knowledge. But I have a different version, giving the interpretation that says that it was Bathsheba, knowing her husband was away at the front in the Wars of Ammon and Rabbah, fighting battles and . . . she, Bathsheba . . . got her maid to move the basin with the water . . . more closer to the window where King David could see her more clearer. (380)

Clarke's oblique references to George Lamming's seminal novel *In the Castle of my Skin* (1953), in his description of the Main House "like a

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88 Alternative versions of the same story abound in the text. For example, there are three different versions of Clotelle's death, deriving from village gossip, from Mary-Mathilda, or from Sarge. Mary-Mathilda's version of Clotelle having hanged herself (14) contrasts with Sarge's different versions: "when the rope faltered, she could not hang herself, could not take her own life, could not die clean as she had wanted to do. The butcher knife told the story" (44); and "The crime was not suicide. It was murder" (48). These are followed by another version deriving from village gossip according to which Clotelle had been abandoned in a well (322).

tower in a castle" (4) and in the spatial description of the hierarchical organisation of the plantation, are further examples of literary recycling. Clarke, however, as Judith Misrahi-Barak remarks, "invert[s] the gaze perspective" from Lamming's version, where "[f]rom any point of the land one could see on a clear day the large brick house hoisted on the hill" (17), to Clarke's description of the Main House with its "three floors, to look over the entire estate of the Plantation, like a tower in a castle. To spy on everybody" (4). Clarke here, like Mary-Mathilda in her story of David and Bathsheba, appropriates an official or recognised version of a story by voicing it from the point of view of the subaltern – the chastised woman, Bathsheba, or the colonial subject.

Mary-Mathilda's comments on *The Confessions of Nat Turner* also consist of literary recycling. This passage of *The Confessions* helps to establish *The Polished Hoe* as a neoslave narrative, which contests the dominant historical representations and interpretations of slavery:

> The authorities sent a Mr. Thomas R. Gray, a authority, to take Mr. Nat Turner Statement, but Mr. Gray had no understanding of the way Nat Turner speak; and Mr. Gray didn't care, since he was a authority, cause it didn't take no skin offa his teet, so he take-down Nat Turner words without understanding the language Nat was talking to him in; but being a authority, he put his own words in Nat Turner mouth; and in so doing, produced a authentic confession, not paying no mind

> that he altered Nat's sweet, nice Southern Negro twang, . . . into a Statement he call *The Confessions of Nat Turner, the leader of the late Insurrection in Southampton, Virginia, as fully and voluntarily made to.* And had it printed, and published in 1831. (393)

This comment on *The Confessions* makes it clear to readers that we are reading a different, unofficial version of the same story. Instead of a third-person altered recording of the story of a male slave who led a historical insurrection, Clarke gives us a first-person rendition by a woman who made her way from plantation labourer and maidservant to being the "kept woman" of one of the most powerful men of the Island of Bimshire, the plantation owner, whom she murders.

3.1.3 Clarke's Patterns of Repetition: Writing the "follow-pattern way"

Clarke's reconstructed, recycled narrative employs techniques of repetition, regression /digression, circularity, and emphasises the notion of pattern -- all elements proper to the construction of the textual quilt. The notion of "pattern" is repeated in several instances, to describe women's work: the "follow-pattern way" (58) that some women on the island accomplish their needlework and hairdressing techniques, and the patterns that Mary uses for her knitting or crocheting (409; 431). The text itself follows a meandering pattern of repetition and regression. Certain past events are repeated several times throughout the novel, such as

different versions of the story of Clotelle's death (14; 44; 48; 322) or the repetitive mention of Mary-Mathilda's first encounter with Mr. Bellfeels, a determining moment in her life, "that Sunday morning" (9; 10; 11; 12; 461) when he passes his riding crop over her body as if to claim possession of it. The repetition, in the first and last pages, of this scene, which Mary-Mathilda refers to as the "Motive" of her act, brings the text full circle, and answers the central question of the narrative, explaining, in Mary's words, "why I did what I did." (39). Clarke, as Mary-Mathilda in her statement, amplifies tedious detail through repetition. Certain objects also continuously reappear throughout the text, as a leitmotif, such as Mary-Mathilda's hoe, her wishbone, or the doilies that decorate her house. The doily is an apt symbol of Clarke's narrative process, which, as Roland Barthes claims of Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine*, is similar to that of lace-making, a narrative progressively invested with meaning (*S/Z* 165-66). Barthes' notion of hyphology, which conceives of a text/tissue/texture in which the subject "unmakes himself, like a spider dissolving in the constructive secretions of its web" (*The Pleasure of the Text* 64) may thus be applied to Clarke's text and to Mary's intertext, both "made, [are] worked out in a perpetual interweaving" (64). Like Penelope, who continuously delays the completion of her tapestry, and like Sheherazade

whose continual storytelling is her method of survival, Mary-Mathilda constantly delays the object of her statement, the revelation of her murdering Mr. Bellfeels, providing hints throughout the four hundred pages of the narrative, but only describing her act in the final pages.

The text defers the murder scene by employing such techniques as analepsis, repetition and leitmotiv, as well as digression, which mirror the intricacies of oral narrative (also present in the creolized English of the dialogue), and of Jazz, Blues, and Calypsos[89] present throughout the text (15, 47, 79, 137, 150, 226). This pattern of repetition in the text can also be related to the trauma of abuse and slavery experienced and witnessed by Mary-Mathilda and the inhabitants of Bimshire. As Cathy Caruth makes clear, trauma is defined as “the response to an unexpected or overwhelmingly violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena” (91). Clarke’s reliance on repetition and regression also corresponds to a postmodern aesthetics as described by Umberto

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89 Clarke himself has claimed Jazz, Blues and Calypsos as central to his writing. In an interview with H. Nigel Thomas, Clarke explains that in his work, the role of music is “fundamental” (16) and that narrative “is related to music”: “blues, jazz-variation, variation on variation, call and response – I feel that these are . . . vital and dynamic elements in the construction of the novel and of narrative” (31). Also, this musical dimension of the text, through the notion of rhapsody, implies textile craft, as the origin of the word rhapsody, from the Greek *rhaptein* means ‘to sew together.’

Eco. According to Eco, “repetition, iteration, obedience to a preestablished schema, and redundancy” (2) are factors of the “social change” and “the dissolution of tradition” proper to contemporary industrial society and postmodern aesthetics.[90] Furthermore, this “narrative based upon redundancy” (3), to borrow Eco’s words, is typical of a craft and labour aesthetic: “the pleasurable repetition of an already known pattern was considered, by modern theories of art, typical of Crafts—not of Art—and of industry” (1). The rhetoric of craft and of what has been established here as the textual quilt, involving repetition and pattern, forms an integral part of what Sarge discovers is the “winding, if not circuitous” history of Mary-Mathilda, of the Island of Bimshire, and by extension, of the Caribbean. The alternative recycled versions of the histories related here illustrate Evelyn O’Callaghan’s point in her keynote address delivered at the Jean Rhys Conference and Festival in Dominica in 2004 that “No one version tells the whole story: the ‘truth’ of Caribbean history is a composite.”

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90 Umberto Eco opposes contemporary industrial society’s taste for redundancy to “the triumph of information” in the eighteenth century, that “represented the preferred fare of a society that lived in the midst of messages loaded with redundancy; the sense of tradition, the norms of social life, moral principles, the rules of proper comportment in the framework of a bourgeois society designed a system of foreseeable messages that the social system provided for its members, and which allowed life to flow smoothly without unexpected jolts” (“Innovation and Repetition” 3).

3.2 "Polyrhythm" and Creole Craft

3.2.1 A "braid of histories"

The complex syncretism involved in textile craft (weaving, quilting, crocheting, knitting) characterises Caribbean cultural expression, its "supersyncretism" or "polyrhythm"[91] (Benitez-Rojo 12), or the classical plural paradigm in the works of Caribbean writers such as Edward Brathwaite (Càliz-Montoro 56), rising out of the collision of European, African, and Asian components within the plantation.[92] The aesthetic experience of Caribbean culture is, like textile craft, based on the dynamics of "performance and rhythm" (Benitez-Rojo 16), in terms of the execution of a ritual (11) of a "collective, ahistorical, and improvisatory nature" (22). The notion of a plural Caribbean culture clashes with the

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91 In "Contesting a Model Blackness," George Elliott Clarke attributes a "polyconsciousness" (279) to African Canadians who, he claims, espouse by nature a principle of diversity, as a consequence of having been exposed to contradictory essentializing pressures from all sides. Clarke draws on W.E.B. Du Bois' idea of the "double consciousness" of hyphenated identity (40) and Edouard Glissant's "Antillanité," which is for Clarke a "condition that involves a constant self-questioning of the grounds of identity" (48).

92 The history of the Caribbean is the history of migrants from (a) old and modern Europe, (b) from West Africa, which supplied the labour needed for the labour-intensive cultivation of such crops as sugar and cotton, and (c) from Asia, especially the Deccan Plateau of India and the Hakka-speaking region of Southern China, who came in as indentured labourers to carry on what the Africans stopped doing after Slave Emancipation in 1838 in the Anglophone Caribbean, and (d) more recently from Lebanon with 'Syrians' fleeing anti-Christian hostility in the Levant (Nettleford 78-79).

considerations of such Africanists as Molefi Kete Asante who claims that "one can only have one heritage" and insists that "we inherit a unified field of culture, not [useless] bits and pieces" (139-140). In *Éloge de la Créolité*, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant claim that the people of the Caribbean are neither Europeans, nor Africans, nor Asians, but Creoles. *Créolité*, or "Creoleness," as defined by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant consists of an aggregate of Caribbean, European, African, Asian, and Levantine cultural elements, united on the same soil by the yoke of history, or what they term "a braid of histories" (27). Edouard Glissant's "rhizome analogy" springs from the Caribbean consciousness, "spreading sideways and outward in a movement signifying its relationship and interaction with other multiracial New World cultures" (2). This plural aesthetic and the notion that Creole[93] history is essentially collective and composite, as established by such writers and critics as Brathwaite, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, enable me to apply the trope of textile craft to Clarke's text as a culturally-appropriate formal pattern in, and at the level of, the text.

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93 As used here, the term Creole denotes a person of mixed blood, also a language created in contact zones like the Caribbean.

Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido, in their book on Caribbean women writers, suggest that the "quilted narrative, braided or woven as is Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* (1986), alters the language and mode of fictional narrative discourse" (6) and is "born of the special character of Caribbean life, its unity-in-diversity" (15). Representations of the composite nature of Caribbean aesthetics through weaving, patching, or quilting are quite common in Caribbean literature, in the works, for example, of such authors as Wilson Harris, Edwidge Danticat, Marlene Nourbese Philip, or Cristina Garcia. In Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*, Emilie's pursuit involves an attempt to remember her lost mother by fulfilling one of her mother's dreams; she declares: "I am going to sew [the small pieces of cloth] onto that purple blanket. . . . All her life, my mother wanted to sew some old things together into that piece of purple cloth . . . Purple . . . was my Mama's favorite color" (114). The resulting quilt, however, is flawed: "loosely sewn, . . . the pieces coming apart" (122).[94] In Wilson Harris' *The Four Banks of the River of Space*, the knitted garment "never quite fits," there's "always a sleeve of element or a fluid stitch that's out of joint" (54). Cristina Garcia's Reina, in *The Aguero Sisters*, has a

94 This closely echoes some of Alice Walker's statements in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* as they apply to her novel *The Color Purple*.

patchwork skin recomposed for her out of skin grafts, after which she can no longer recognise her own skin odour. The incidences involving textile crafts in these texts, particularly the image of patchwork, portray both the aggregate nature of a Caribbean aesthetic, and the tensions involved in a multicultural society built upon a history of slavery.

3.2.2 "Something torn and new"

Representations of the aggregate and composite nature of patching, quilting, and knitting, and of the second-hand (which implies the patching-up of torn garments) have a particular resonance both in the aggregate culture of the Caribbean, and in a former slave society such as that of Clarke's novel. As Jacqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard have argued in their book *Hidden in Plain View*, quilts may have been used as a code, a covert means of communication in the Underground Railroad. Alongside her revelations of the covered secrets of the past of slavery on the island, and the unspoken acts of violence and cruelty that have been perpetrated on the islanders, Mary also relates the personal stories of some of the needleworkers and other craft workers on the island, who are intricately linked to this past of violence. Mary is symbolically digging these stories out from under the ground, just as she leads Sargeant through the secret underground tunnel to the location where she buried the hoe, and

digs it up to present as “evidence” in the final pages. Mary has gathered and assembled bits and pieces of the village history she relates to Percy through conversations she has overheard while working for and living alongside Mr. Bellfeels. The stories she brings to this history had hitherto been relegated to silence and destined to be discarded. As she explains,

> I heard this, not from Ma. But from Mr. Bellfeels, after he got me pregnant the first time, with William Henry. Since then, pieces of this history, this pageantry of blood, have leaked-out through various cracks and crevices in conversations at the dinner table. (342)

These are the stories she intends to hand down as an inheritance of sorts, to Percy, to her son Wilberforce, and to the villagers. Mary is, to borrow Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s words, “making / with [her] / rhythms some- / thing torn / and new” (*The Arrivants*, 270).

The village Clarke depicts is permeated by the culture of thrift. Like Mary reassembling pieces of discarded history, the villagers reassemble and re-use worn-out, second-hand textiles and material objects that tell part of the village’s past. Mary-Mathilda, as a girl, would wear clothes and shoes handed-down from Mr. Bellfeels’s two daughters, Miss Euralie and Miss Emonie (360): “hand-me-downs. Not through inheritance; but castaways” (10). Sargeant’s clothing as a boy also expresses this culture

of thrift: “his khaki short pants patched in the seat in so many places with different colours and materials, so that it was difficult to know which colour or which material was the original the pants were made from, by the Village tailor” (261); or his sliders “made from the coarse white cloth of a flour bag in which flour comes from Canada, made by the Village needleworker, and before that by his own mother” (325). Most of the commodities on the island are “from Canada” (325) or “Made in Englund” (453). When Percy remarks that the hoe is “made in Englund. . . . Mannifactured up in Englund!” (453), Mary replies: “What isn’t . . . What isn’t?” (434). Through inventiveness and craft, the people of the island appropriate and transform the ubiquitous colonial commodities of the island into objects reflective of a culture of thrift, making-do, resilience. Sargeant’s police uniform has been modified by the village tailor to accommodate a secret pocket holding his bull-pistle, an object symbolic of power denied him by the authorities. Other examples of imported commodities accommodated and transformed by the villagers include the utensils in Sarge’s home, “made of tin”:

> The tinsmith rivets a handle onto the empty ‘tot’ that contained condensed milk, imported from Englund. And on other ‘tots’ that once held green pigeon-peas, Canadian pears, Canadian apricots, Canadian plums . . . with ‘Halifax’ and ‘The Argentyne’ marked on

> them, before they got into the hands of the tinsmith. These utensils are the 'crystals' of the Villagers. (61)

Salvage crafts such as these are particularly revealing in spaces of cultural betweenness, consisting of two or more heritages, confronted with issues of loss of tradition, language, or lineage, of which the Caribbean, a contact zone *par excellence*, is a prime example. As opposed to the "notions of accumulation and preservation peculiar to western culture-collecting" (Minh-ha 140), the novel proposes the notion of re-use and transformation proper to a Caribbean aesthetics, locating subjectivity in the object and employing it as an axis between the past and the present, here (the Caribbean) and there (Great Britain, the United States, or Canada).

3.2.3 Anancy, the Spider-weaver Archetype

Some of the characters of Clarke's text challenge dominant hegemonic ideologies and embrace the Caribbean aesthetic of plurality as they inhabit multiple, alternative, "patchwork selves." Mary-Mathilda represents the same fluid, protean and spider-like qualities as Atwood's character Grace Marks. The indeterminacy of Clarke's main character is firstly visible through the many different names she assumes, "depending on who you speak to" (3). She begins her statement with "My name is

Mary" (3), a variation of the way former slaves would begin their autobiographies, "I was born…". However, the text goes on to emphasise the instability and plurality of Mary-Mathilda's identity. Mary Gertrude Mathilda Paul is the name she was born with, but she does not use Gertrude as it is the name of her maid; she is "Tilda" for people in the village when she is a girl, or Mary-girl for her mother. As Mr. Bellfeels's "kept mistress" she goes by Miss Bellfeels. As Sergeant puts it, she is "Miss Mary-Mathilda, alias Miss Mary Paul, a.k.a. Miss Paul; also known as Miss Bellfeels" (412). Mary-Mathilda's indeterminate nature stems from the fact that she is of mixed descent, part Barbadian, part mixed-race / white.[95] As such, she assumes a plural identity, what she calls an "in-between" status:[96]

> They [her mother and grandmother] were keeping me far from people like you and Clotelle, Sis, Gertrude, Pounce, and them-so, deliberately. Ma, and even Gran, wanted to bring me up different from you, and closer to the Plantation way, different from the Village. So, I was left *half-fashioned as a person*; *in-between*. ([emphasis mine] 315)

95 Mr. Bellfeels is a white Barbadian, culturally. Racially, he is mixed-race passing for white.

96 Hybridity in the present is constantly struggling to free itself from a past which stressed ancestry, and which valued the "pure" over its threatening opposite, the "composite" (Ashcroft et. al., *The Empire Writes Back* 35-36). Louis Owens stresses this, in *Mixedblood Messages*, when he refers to the space of liminality or between-ness evoked by ethnic identity as the "particular trauma of the colonial mind" (25).

Simon in *Alias Grace* wonders whether Grace is "fish or flesh or good red herring?" (114); Mary-Mathilda describes herself as "Not fish and not fowl. Not white and not black. A half woman. Half a person" (315). Both characters are described as "fishy," suspicious, not one thing nor the other, but somewhere in-between such fixed characteristics. While leading Sarge through the underground secret tunnel at the end of the novel, Mary imagines herself "reeling in the middle of two waves" (445). The pluralist, multidimensional, or multifaceted identity of Mary-Mathilda contributes to both the Creole hybrid ideal and its process of self-invention, and the concept of ethnicity as a "social ethos of pluralism," in Michael Fischer's words (196). As Fischer remarks in "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," "ethnicity is a process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions" (201). He goes on to claim that "It is the inter-references, the interweaving of cultural threads from different arenas, that give ethnicity its phoenix-like capacities for reinvigoration and reinspiration" (230).

Mary-Mathilda's plural and indeterminate identity, like that of Grace Marks, is associated with the spider-weaver or trickster archetype – in the Caribbean context, "Brer Ananci the spider man, the trickster" (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 78) from Akan folklore – characterised by change and

transformation, border crossing, and inhabiting an in-between space. Furthermore, as Cecil Foster remarks in an interview, Anancy is “totally grounded in history” (Thomas 110), as Mary-Mathilda intends her story to be. Mary is associated with the spider trickster in several instances: her words are described by Sarge as “tricky as a spider’s web” (126); Sargeant “feels he is a fly in her hands” as he remembers the words: “Come in to my parlour, / Said the Spider to the Fly” (344).[97] Mary-Mathilda is, like Grace Marks, apt at tricks and role-playing. She is playful with the Constable who claims to love riddles, declaring the hoe as the key to this ‘murder mystery’:

> A riddle, a riddle, a-ree,
> No one can solve this riddle but me!
> What is long and tough and shiny
> And have a smell, and a sharp
> Shiny thing at the end, and ….” (62)

Towards the end of the novel, she entices Sarge to join her in role-playing in a mock-court judgement. Mary is again portrayed as playfully performing tricks when she shows Sarge her spying glass she uses to observe the village people; Mary is “performing magic”:

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97 Mary, like Grace Marks, is also associated with cats, animals that are commonly described as cunning and sly: “Her face is smiling again. Her brown eyes are bright. Frisky as a cat’s. . . . But beneath the beautifulness of the smile, there is a sneer” (276).

> "Let me show you this," she says. She takes a red cloth tied with black string, from a chair. Slowly she unties it; slowly, and seductively, and dramatically, looking at him as she does this. He does not know what is contained in the velour folds of the cloth which she peels back like the skin of a banana. Then, he sees it. It is a box. Slowly, for she is performing magic now, she lifts the cover of the box, and shows him a second, smaller velour bag. This contains an instrument. And when she unknots the silk tassel from the bag, she pulls from the cloth a spying glass. (306)

Trinh Minh-ha explains that historically dominated and marginalized people have been socialized to see always more than their own point of view. In the complex reality of postcoloniality, claims Minh-ha, it is therefore vital to assume one's radical "impurity" and to recognise the necessity of "speaking from a hybrid place," hence of saying at least two, three things at a time (*Framer* 140).[98] Mary Mathilda's in-between or hybrid position reinforces her multifocality (emphasised by her use of the spying glass), or what Mary Louise Pratt calls "contact perspective" (7). From her privileged position in the Main House overlooking the village, she can see the entire village, and even spy on its inhabitants with her spying glass; but as a black woman in the white community, as well as in her former position as maidservant, Mary gains insight into and knowledge

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98 African Americans have institutionalized this in pithy folk saying: "Got one mind for white folks to see and another for what I know is me" (Thomas, e-mail to the author 10 September 2007).

of the white community and of the island's obscured past of slavery by overhearing Mr. Bellfeels and his guests. Her position as Bellfeels' maidservant make her "a (sic) ignored eyewitness and listener" (119), another common trickster feature she shares with Atwood's Grace. As Mary reveals to Percy:

> I have washed their clothes, yes. I have washed their drawers, their shifts and their panties, their underwears and their monthly-rags, and I have seen their stains, and blots and blood; . . . I have cleaned their rooms. Their bathrooms, their bedrooms, their beds, under their beds, seen the stuffing of their mattress, where I have come face-to-face with their true colours: the things they have left, the mess and the messages. And I have closed my two eyes against all temptation to broadcast they evidence. . . . But I always knew the day would come. I lived always with the hope that my day would come. When my knowledge of that evidence was seen by me, I knew then that my knowledge of their ways, their behaviour, and their secrets, would be my education and my deliverance. (117)

Not only does this subordinate position paradoxically provide the maids insight into the secret lives of the upper classes through laundering, but it also enables them to gain power over their employers of the upper class, as Mary Whitney claims in *Alias Grace*, "In the end, . . . we had the better of them" (183). In *The Polished Hoe*, before enacting her "deliverance" and emasculating and murdering Mr. Bellfeels, Mary-Mathilda exposes his

“white homemade sliders, his underwears” and reflects, “Ma used to wash them, years ago” (460). Mary’s trickster or “crafty” quality is therefore emphasised by her involvement in crafts: she was supposed to have become a seamstress, but instead became Bellfeels’ domestic and mistress, and in her spare time she is involved in the textile crafts of knitting, embroidery, or crocheting.

3.3 Textile and the Crafted Object as a Site of Secrecy and Struggle

3.3.1 Clarke’s Labour Aesthetic

A labour aesthetic is present in Clarke’s novel, through the multiple references to handiwork in his portrayal of the island, peopled with “[t]he labourers. The maids. The cooks. . . . Cane cutters” (116). As Mary-Mathilda reveals to Sarge: “We, to them, are all labourers, Percy. All o’we. Common, low-class workers. Discardable, Percy. They talk about how to keep you and me in our place” (117). A multitude of craft professions are mentioned in the text, such as “the Joiner and Cabinetmaker,” the “blacksmith” (54), the “tinsmith” (61), as well as “the instruments they use daily to make a living with” (55). The final words of the novel emphasise this labour aesthetic: “The Plantation bell has just banged two times, to herald the start of a new, long day of toil, and labour in the broiling fields, just as the short-lived storm has come to its end” (462). Anthony Trollope’s

essentializing views saw in the hybrid Creole “a race fitted . . . for tropical labour” (75) resulting from a mix of “northern energy” and “African physical powers” (64). The notion of labour lies at the heart of Caribbean hybridity, as racial mixing came as a response to economic and social need in the plantocracy of the colonial Caribbean (Lowenthal 214).[99]

This insistence on labour in the novel not only recalls the past of slavery on the island and the economic and social requirements of the institution of slavery, but also serves to represent the resiliency and survival skills of the people, for whom hard work is a subversive code of conduct. Mary uses the concept “Head. Heart. Hand” as a “code” to “guide the footsteps of [her] life” (102). This code resonates with another such “code” that Mary gathers from Wilberforce, who teaches her words inspired by Winston Churchill: “‘Give we the tools, and we will do the rest,’ Wilberforce said those words were really a code. . . . the code about the tools applies to everyday life. Yes” (55; 57).

Mary’s strong and skilful hands are the object of precise recurring description in the narrative, and represent the labour aesthetic through the

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99 Between the planters and slaves in the Caribbean emerged the “freed colored”: freed slaves, in the first instance planters’ own offspring (such as Bellfeels). In the absence of white yeomen, the “free colored occupied a vital niche as artisans and tradesmen” (Lowenthal 215). Whites in the planter class needed a mixed element – attached to them by family and by free but not equal status – to control the mass of black slaves.

omnipresence of handiwork. Sarge describes Mary's hands in several instances, not only as reflective of her hard work as field hand on the plantation, but also and more importantly as a rising and powerful female figure embodying the resiliency and hybridity linked to handicrafts. In one such instance, for example,

> her hands are strong. Veins criss-cross the smooth dark brown plains of her hands, travelling between her fingers, between the webs of her fingers. Her hands are soft. They do not reflect the hard work she endured in the North Field for years, years ago. And her fingers are long. (276)

Like the characters in Edwidge Danticat's or Toni Morrison's writing, the village women here are constantly "do[ing] something with [their] hands" (Morrison, *Beloved* 61), "always us[ing their] ten fingers" (Danticat, *Krik? Krak!* 219) or again, "tak[ing] matters into their own two hands" (*PH* 67).

Handiwork involving textiles – such as laundering, crocheting, knitting, and sewing – is first a means of survival, of making-do, as one of the few options for women to make a living: many "take in washing for the big houses, and . . . 'try their hand' on the side, 'doing a lil picking' at needlework" (153). Needlework is not only one of the rare means of subsistence for the women on the island, but also a means of social uplift and resilience. Before becoming Mr. Bellfeels' mistress, Mary's future was

supposed to be linked to textile craft. Her mother's ambitions for Mary were to buy her a Singer sewing machine so she could become a seamstress: "Ma thought I would have a better chance in life, working in one of those small cloth stores that sells dress-lengths" (241). Sargeant remembers a conversation between Mary's mother and Mr. Biscombe, the butcher: "She wants to take up needlework. And I promise her that I will try-my-best to buy a Singer sewing machine for her, 'pon time. Before I dead" (260). This reflects as well a hierarchy of occupations among the downtrodden. As Nigel Thomas explains,

> Working in the fields, in dirt, was (still is) at the bottom of the hierarchy. "Seamstressing" was several cuts above, and was associated with mixed-race people and those women-girls who received better schooling. A woman who excelled at needlework had a much better chance of landing a husband from the lower middle class, especially if that woman was brown-skinned. In fact many of the church schools taught needlework strictly for social uplift. (Thomas)

However, Mary's options are few due to her mother's poverty, and she must resolve to find other ways of subsisting, that is, by becoming Mr. Bellfeels's maid / mistress, as her mother explains:

> You are a pretty girl. With a lovely complexion. Nice hair. If I was the woman o' means that I wish I was, you would have your own

> hairdressing place. Or a dressmaking place. Or even be a teacher. But this is our lot. I can’t even buy a second-hand, or a t’ird-hand Singer sewing machine for you! (428)

These were the options available to the women on the island, as Mary reveals to Sarge:

> Women were relegated. Women were allowed to be schoolteachers sometimes. A few that you could count on one hand made it to headmistress. A few more became nurses in the Bimshire General Hospital. But the vast-majority spent their lives as field hands, maids, cooks, and nursemaids. The enterprising few was the group that left and went Away, overseas to Amurca, Englund and the Panama Canal Zone. (58)

Needlework, however, is a means of subsistence that may also enable women to gain a sense of community. The mothers in the village assemble in the Mothers Union and “knit these scenes of religious history, and turn them into altar cloths, and religious banners for Festival processions” (155). Needlework for the women in Bimshire also represents a means to reclaim a sense of selfhood:

> Some who got their hands on Amurcan magazines, from places like the South and Brooklyn, start looking in those magazines at Technicolor pictures of coloured women, these women tried their hands in a follow-pattern way, at imitating black Amurcan women, at

> fixing hairdos, at hairdressing; and needlework. The most ambitious put up shingles and announce themselves as SEAMSTRESS WITHIN. (58)

As a kept mistress, however, Mary-Mathilda continues to do textile work for leisure, not for subsistence. Her home is full of doilies, and brocade tablecloths (9; 37; 223; 421). The four tables in her living room “Each [have] the same while crocheted doily on [them]” (37). The doilies she crochets are symbols of the British colonial culture she has integrated and the life of leisure she lives as a byproduct of being Mr. Bellfeels’ mistress. She explains to Sarge that she has had no other option but to embrace this culture, as an in-between or hybrid, but that she has remained secretively and silently defiant: “We couldn’t act like this modern generation of dark skin women I see walking ‘bout this Village, in dresses of African print; and wearing their hair natural; uncomb. But the plot of defiant words and Africa was already hatching inside our heads” (60). Her doilies, which she has learned to make in a “follow-pattern way” (58), having “mastered . . . most patterns she had taken from Ladies’ Home Journal, the English edition” (431), contrast with the African prints associated to the civil rights movement she admires on younger women, that have been copied from “Amurcan magazines, from places like the South and Brooklyn” (58). Unlike the pieced quilt, which, as Jean

Baudrillard, as well as Cheryl Torsney and Judy Elsley suggest, stands outside social class (Baudrillard 44; Torsney and Elsley 4), the white doily stands within the social hierarchical system of colonialism. In her life of ease as the mistress of Mr. Bellfeels, she keeps herself busy by "thinking of things to do, like making doilies for the furnitures, or preparing great-cakes for festivals and bank holidays" (54), and eventually "sharpening and polishing [her hoe] in preparation for the right use to put [her] hoe to" (58). She explains how she began her obsession with her hoe when her eyesight was no longer good enough to continue doing textile work:

> When I was carrying Wilberforce, . . . it suddenly hit me that I needed something to preoccupy myself with. . . Wilberforce was growing-away from me. Will married and move-out, someday. The crocheting was making my two eyes burn, and my eyesight bad. And three months ago, almost to the day, I took the hoe from its resting place under my bed, and start sharpening and polishing it. (58)

Crafts or domestic work related to textile are in many instances, in the corpus of Black women's literature, portrayed as a means of keeping memory at bay. Sethe, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, for example, keeps bad memories at bay by "do[ing] something with her hands" and "fold[ing], refold[ing] and double-fold[ing]" the sheets: "she had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten

she knew" (61). Paradoxically, it keeps memory at bay at the same time as it accompanies the act of what Sethe, Toni Morrison's protagonist in *Beloved*, calls 'rememory.' A further illustration of this can be found in Danticat's *Krik? Krak!*, in which the narrator of "Night Women" claims:

> I know that there are women who sit up through the night and undo patches of cloth that they have spent the whole day weaving. These women, they destroy their toil so that they will always have more to do. And as long as there's work, they will not have to lie next to the lifeless soul of a man whose scent still lingers in another woman's bed. (85)

This obsession with "things to do" stems from the need to re(-)member the past and from what Marlene Nourbese Philip calls the "kinetic quality" of memory that impels to action (*Frontiers* 29).

3.3.2 The Crafted Object as a Record of the Past

Crafted objects in general have a particular resonance here in a novel in which commodities are recycled, reused, revisited in peculiar ways. Some objects become obsessions, like Mary-Mathilda's hoe or her wishbone that she pins to her underclothes. Mary claims to have "an obsession about that hoe" and an "identical one with the wishbone" (58). She polishes and sharpens this hoe for three months, while subconsciously premeditating Bellfeels' murder. It is significant that this

object comes to represent Mary, as it is suggestive of labour, and, in Mary's own words, "I was a damn good labourer. . . . Damn good in the fields, and damn good in trash heaps" (103). Mary-Mathilda describes her hoe in the following words while role-playing a pretend court trial with Percy:

> An agricultural instrument, implement with the sacred and indigenous oral and cultural history, like a scythe, in local parlance, a sickle, the instrument that is used in all the religious and historical portraits and portraitures, by who I am made to understand is the Renaissance artists of the European school of painters, symbolically to suggest industry, to suggest bounty and to suggest honest labour. (399)

The hoe, like the doilies, represents subordination, and the history of slavery on the island, but the hoe also paradoxically represents the strength and resilience of Mary-Mathilda and the generations of women before her, as well as their capacity to revolt and reclaim their selfhood.[100] As Mary reveals, the handle of her hoe was made from the strong resistant wood of the "clammy-cherry tree": "Things made from clammy-cherry last for generations. Tough and durable and rugged things" (53).

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100 By taking up polishing and sharpening her hoe, Mary reveals her indeterminate and trickster quality as she crosses the gender border. When she asks Mr Waldrond, the woodworker, for oil to polish hoe with, "he told me how strange it was for me, a woman, to be interested in his profession, as if I was invading his sacred territory, it made me think of the place of woman on this Island" (58).

Mary explains her obsession with the hoe as “something you couldn’t part with” like a “taw-ee. A nail. Piece of lead-pencil. A button. Anything. Like it was a, a kind of . . . obsession you had. Like something religious” (26). Mary has “a identical [obsession] with the wishbone” (58) from a pullet she had once feasted on with her mother, after it was hit by a truck in front of their house, and her mother pressed her to retrieve it. As she explains to Sarge:

> I carry that wishbone for years; . . . pin-to-my-dress; everywhere. . . . I made a wish on that wishbone; a wish never-ever to forget Mr. Bellfeels; and how he moved the riding-crop over my entire body, as if he was taking off my clothes, and then taking off my skin. And every time my hand touch that wishbone I take a oath to myself to never to forget to give him back. (21-22)

Mary’s wishbone becomes “an ornament” (27), a talisman that serves as a repository of her grief, and she likens it to the secret burden her mother carries about the identity of Mary’s father, Mr. Bellfeels: “she carried that burden like I carried my wishbone, in secrecy, like a skeleton; speechless, and with no utterance. A stain on a white dress, in the wrong place. . . . A obsession, just like I walked with my wish-bone” (37). Her wishbone and hoe act as mementoes for Mary, whose mother insists, on her deathbed, that she never forget her personal history: “*Mary-girl, you*

must never forget that Sunday afternoon in the Church Yard! And bear witness to how my mouth was stricken" (60). The hoe passed down to Mary-Mathilda from her great-grandmother, and which she uses to murder Mr. Bellfeels, as well as the wishbone she carries as a talisman as a child are examples of what Susan Stewart calls "souvenir[s] of individual experience" (as distinct from souvenirs of exterior sites) (138), or "personal memento[es]" with what she calls "a capacity for narrative" (142). The personal memento, Stewart establishes, is

> intimately mapped against the life history of an individual; it tends to be found in connection with rites of passage (birth, initiation, marriage and death) as the material sign of an abstract referent: transformation of status. . . . [T]he function of the souvenir is to create a continuous and personal narrative of the past. . . . The souvenir is used most often to evoke a voluntary memory of childhood, . . . of the individual life history . . . or in the larger antiquarian theme of the childhood of the nation/race. (138-145)

Objects therefore tell stories here, as Sargeant puts it when he remembers his investigation of Clotelle's death, the "butcher knife told the story" (44). Mary's hoe is the one thing – besides stories – that has been passed down through two generations of women before her: "Ma herself used the hoe she inherited from her mother, my gran. . . . This is the same hoe I inherited from Ma" (53). As such, the hoe acts as a repository for

Mary's history, and her obsessive polishing of the hoe emphasises her need to remember her personal and familial history as well as the historical realities of the island.[101] As Trinh Minh-ha notes, the "world's earliest archives or libraries were the memories of women, patiently transmitted from mouth to ear, body to body, hand to hand" (121).

Other crafted objects made of fabric or involving tanning and needlework, such as Sarge's bull-pistle or Bellfeels' riding crop, are also associated with a history of violence, struggle, and secrecy. Sargeant carries a bull-pistle "privately, and secretly" hidden in a long narrow side pocket custom-made into his trousers" (41), as the authorities would not permit him to be otherwise armed. His bull-pistle, "a whip made from the cured penis of a Zeebu bull, soaked in water and linseed oil" (41), is a means for him to defy the position of subservience in which the authorities hold him, and reclaim his masculinity; but it also takes on a sexual significance in Mary's fetishistic fantasy, her sexuality having been forged on the concepts of domination and violence (384). His association with the instrument, however, also signifies the paradox of Sargeant Percy: he is at once Mary's secret lover, a descendant of slaves, a 'labourer,' wishing,

101 The text stresses the importance and elusive nature of memory from the first pages. As she begins to give her "statement", Mary continuously remarks upon her failing memory: "My memory is fading" (4) "Have I told you . . . yet?" (4) "I told you that, didn't I?" (5).

and perhaps willing to close his eyes on Mary's killing of Mr. Bellfeels; yet it is his duty to enforce the law and indict Mary by taking down her statement in written form, and he remains therefore complicit with the plantation system, although not of his own volition. The laws he enforces were constructed by plantocrats, to serve their own interests. Sarge, therefore, is trapped. Like Mary-Mathilda, he is in an in-between position, "in the middle of two waves" (445).

The significance of Mr. Bellfeels' riding crop in Mary-Mathilda's tale far surpasses that of a riding instrument and instrument of power used by the slave drivers during slavery. It carries metaphorical resonance for Mary-Mathilda who uses it in a series of comparisons: "*as if* he was drawing something," "*as if* it was his hand," "*as if* the riding crop was Mr. Bellfeels finger," "*Like* the smell of new leather" ([emphasis mine] 11-12). When she relates her first encounter with Bellfeels, that Sunday when "it all began," the riding crop assumes a prominent position:

> Mr. Bellfeels put his riding crop under my chin, and raise my face to meet his face, using the riding crop; and when his eyes and my eyes made four, he passed the riding-crop down my neck, right down the front of my dress, until it reach my waist. And then he move the riding crop right back up again, as if he was drawing something on my body. . . . I could smell the rich, strong smell of the leather, ... Like the smell of new leather rising in my nose, when I stand in the

> shoemaker's galvanized shack, and watch him stitch-round the sole, with his awl, making a pair of boots. That smell. That smell of leather. And the feel of leather of the riding-crop, passing over my dress, all over my body, as if it was his hand crawling over my body; and I was naked. . . . [Her mother was] voiceless, as if the riding-crop was Mr. Bellfeels finger clasped to her lips, clamped to her mouth to strike her dumb to keep her silence, to keep her peace. From that Sunday morning, the meaning of poverty was driven into my head. The sickening power of poverty. Like the smell of leather, disintegrating from animal skin into raw leather, curing in water; soaking in clean water that becomes mildew, before it is tanned and turn into leather, when it is nothing more than pure, dead, rotten, stinking skin. From a animal. (11-12)

The riding crop is associated here with violence and sexual abuse, as it figures as an extension of Mr. Bellfeels' penis in the way he employs it erotically over Mary's body.[102] Later in the text it is associated with needlework, further linking needlework to violence, when Mary-Mathilda's mother approaches Bellfeels to reveal that he is Mary's biological father in the hope that he will provide for her:

> Ma had hardly got the words with which she wanted to negotiate out of her mouth when she felt the searing, tearing, biting tongue of the riding-crop across her back, *whap!-whap!* It was as if the two lashes

102 In the Caribbean the penis is referred to as the "rod of correction." Both Derek Walcott and H. Nigel Thomas use this term in their writing.

> were *sewn into her flesh, like the two strings of cloth which served as braces that kept her skirt in place*. ([emphasis mine] 429)

The riding crop thus serves to silence the workers of the plantation, to enforce a social hierarchy, and to exert power within the decaying colonial system of the island. Yet, if the instruments of power (the hoe, the bull-pistle) are recuperated subversively by the people they are meant to keep in place, the remnants of the system of colonialism in the island, like the leather of the riding crop, become "nothing more than pure, dead, rotten, stinking skin" (12).

These instruments or remnants of the colonial system – the bull-pistle, the riding crop, the hoe – carry symbolic power and become valuable objects of memorialisation, a means of "keeping record" replacing the written word and photographs that Mary explains were used by the slave owners:

> Just as these people keep photographs and snapshots of their life, and write-down every damn thing that happen to them in a book, good and bad, keeping records, and writing journals day-by-day, it is for the same reason they write letters and send signals to one another, all over the world where they keep slaves. (354)

These uncommon material objects thus stand in as a replacement for the more habitual objects of inheritance, such as letters, journals,

photographs, or family jewellery, in former slave societies marked by silence and the absence of lineage or heritage. Andrea O'Reilly Herrera writes that "at the center of contemporary postmodern Caribbean aesthetics is the impulse . . . to reclaim a 'collective memory' and a cultural past which was denied in the official records of Western colonial powers" (69). These objects accompany the reclaiming of individual and collective memory and act as a kind of unofficial recording of the past, a form of memorializing, of "History return[ing]" not "in the flesh" (Doyle 206), but 'in the object or textile.'

3.3.3 A "dangerous pastime": Textile Craft as a Site of Secrecy and Struggle

The work of the seamstresses on the island is linked to resilience, but also to secrecy, struggle, and violence. Indeed, many of the stories Mary tells Sarge in her meandering statement involve secrets surrounding the lives of seamstresses in the village. These stories denounce the conditions of women and workers in Bimshire, and offer examples of the resilience of the spider-weaver figure. One such story Mary tells is of Patel, the owner of a cloth store/sweatshop in Trinidad, with which Sarge is familiar as he was sent to investigate the case. A woman who was having sex with Patel in exchange for a weekly parcel (containing zippers,

snaps, and dress-lengths) of piecework commits suicide in the store: "[she] put a dress-length round her neck and attempted to suffocate herself" (247). Sargeant's account of the investigation obliquely condemns the exploitative labour practices of sewing factories on the island:

> We bound in this cloth store, pushing-pass the women that blocking the door, . . . till we get to the back o' the store. As I had never went in one o' these cloth stores before, . . . it amaze me that the place was so blasted dark, as a place of employment. No lights to speak of. And it was midday. (246-7)

Another story Mary tells Sarge is that of Mistress Rosa Mary Antoinette Brannford, "*One* woman, in the whole of Bimshire, with big-enough balls to confront a certain gentleman, who shall remain nameless . . . Yes. She poisoned him" (60). Mistress Rosa was one of the women in the village who would "take in washing for the big houses, and who 'try their hand' on the side, 'doing a lil picking' at needlework" (153). For years, she maintains an affair with the Governor, who imposes humiliating conditions on her husband. Out of jealousy, her husband kills her just before the Governor dies, only to discover that it was his wife who slowly

poisoned the Governor with the pudding-and-souse[103] she was serving him for years, as the autopsy declared: *"'Slow poisoning, using the agent of glass-bottle ground fine as flour and administer with the Bimshire cultural delicacy, to wit, 'black pudding-and-souse"* (126).[104] Sarge admits to having overheard a story about the woman who poisoned a Governor of the island, but he thought this gossip was "a myth, like a 'nancy story" (121). These two stories involving seamstresses and murder/suicide were covered up by the police, out of convenience. Seamstresses and maidservants here, as in *Alias Grace*, engage in a "dangerous pastime" (Clarke, *Pigtails 'n Breadfruit* 149) involving secrecy, struggle, and resilience, as well as tricksterism.

Textiles themselves are also associated with violence, struggle, and secrecy and take on symbolic meaning in the text. Crocus bags or uniforms are repeatedly mentioned throughout the text, thus contributing to the labour aesthetic mentioned above, as well as participating in the

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103 "Pudding and souse," as Clarke explains in his culinary memoir *Pigtails 'n Breadfruit*, is the national dish of Barbados (149); it is also a "dangerous pastime." Usually eaten in a rum shop, and accompanied by political conversation, "it is a case o' night following the day that, whilst sucking on a pig foot, you might be hearing about the Barbadian budget, the latest political scandal in Barbados, . . . or if a certain prime minister o' Barbados dead from drugs or from poisoning, or if a woman kill he, in truth" (149-150).

104 Ground-glass poisoning is part of the slave narrative heritage. It appears in Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (1966) and Edward P. Jones' *The Known World* (2004).

thematic field of a history of colonialism. Sargeant's uniform signifies his allegiance to and compliance with the British: "Instinctively, he passes two fingers of his right hand over the silver embroidery of the three stripes edged in red on his shoulder; and the two fingers linger for a further moment, on the large Imperial Crown that sits above the stripes" (47). As Sargeant, he enforces British law on the island, although he is only a puppet, as Mary makes clear: "Discardable, Percy. They talk about how to keep you and me in our place" (117). His tunic, like the laws he is meant to enforce, is not adapted to the climate. The uniforms are remnants of the colonial system on the island, and literally and metaphorically suffocate Percy and his colleague Naiman: "The heaviness of the air and the fit of the tunic are making it difficult for him to breathe" (50); and Naiman, "in his workman's uniform of blue denim short-sleeved shirt and matching short pants, gasping instead of breathing, as if humidity was about to choke him to death" (50). Crocus bags are also frequently mentioned in the text, and are, like the hoe, "Tough and durable and rugged" (53), and linked to labour. Mary's mother wears a crocus bag apron as a uniform in her position as maidservant, and when she steals potatoes from the plantation to bring home she "hide[s] them in a crocus bag" (13). However, just as it serves to hide what meagre benefits the workers can reap from their work,

the crocus bag is repeatedly used in the text as a means of silencing, and is linked to violence. At Sargeant's first crime scene, for example, Watchie, the night watchman, covers Clotelle's body with a brown crocus bag (44). Furthermore, when she describes the death of the "insurrectionaries," Mary tells Sarge:

> they were going to stuff crocus bags in their mouth, to prevent alarms and pleas, and then tie-up their mouths with pieces of their very-own clothes, those that was not shredded from the lashes, and stuff the 'bastards' in the crocus bags, pour the ready-mix cement, the mortar into each bag, tie the end in a reef knot, and without waiting for the cement to dry, push each body overboard. (347)

In this and other stories of death or torture in the novel, clothes become instruments of violence as they are used as gags or nooses. This is again reminiscent of Atwood's *Alias Grace*, in which "a strip of kerchief, white with blue flowers. Love-in-a-mist" is used to strangle the maidservant Nancy Montgomery, and, like Mary's hoe, figures as evidence in the crime. One story Mary relates of Clotelle's murder/suicide tells "how Clotelle had use pieces of cloth that she rip-off from her own dress, with all the blood and all the man's semen staining it; and how Clotelle make a rope outta her own dress, and wrap it-round the highest branch she could reach in the tamarind tree" (14). Similarly, in the story of Patel, the

sweatshop owner, one of his sexually exploited needleworkers "put a dress-length round her neck and attempted to suffocate herself" (247). The torn pieces of cloth that are used as gags or nooses act as metaphors for the "pieces of this history, this pageantry of blood" (342) that Mary is relating in her "statement."

Stains on cloth fabrics also carry metaphorical resonance in the text. The pieces of cloth that Clotelle had ripped out of her dress to use as a noose are stained by semen and blood (14). Also, as a maidservant, Mary has gained access to the dark secrets of her upper class employers by washing their clothes, soiled with "stains, and blots and blood" (117). Mary likens the stained cloth to the burden of a past of violence when she claims, of her mother's secret of the identity of Mary's father, that "she carried that burden like I carried my wishbone, in secrecy, like a skeleton; speechless, and with no utterance. *A stain on a white dress*, in the wrong place. . . . A obsession, just like I walked with my wish-bone" ([emphasis mine] 37). As she remarks, "that kind o' spot will never come out" (113). Mary represents rape and incest as "a stain on a white dress" or as a "mark":

> like the first swelling on the arm that you watch after rubbing it with your hand, hoping it will disappear, . . . ; but whether it is healed in three days after its bursting out, it leaves a scar. A little smooth

> roundish skin, darker and smoother than your normal skin, and for life, perhaps . . . you walk about with this mark. This mark. This is the mark that Mary-Mathilda would see when she walked up the stairs from the front-house, when she had sat in her favourite chair, reading the Bible, or letting her hands guide the bone needles, absent-mindedly, or "just studying" – for she had now mastered most patterns she had taken from Ladies' Home Journal, the English edition – . . . Mary-Mathilda would see . . . the obvious fact of patrimony . . . . But when she looked at all three together, this is when the thought of a mark, of a silent sin, first entered her mind. (431)

The stain or mark can be related to what Katherine Stern calls "marks of brokenness or missingness" when referring to the disfigurements and deformities of Morrison's characters. As Stern explains, "the unsightly stands in for the invisible in Morrison's aesthetic because the experience of slavery can never be recollected whole . . . . What Morrison can make vivid are the signs that are left" (89). The stained, or "marked" textile fabric, like skin, or clothes torn into rags and used as gags or nooses, act as coded signs of familial and cultural rupture in the aftermath of slavery,[105] constituting a textile record of violence, and providing tropes for

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105 Familial rupture here is represented by incest, patricide, and by the absence of genealogical information: like Mary and Wilberforce, initially, Mary's mother, May, "didn't know who her father was. Could be anybody. He could be dead, anyhow, before she born. That was the Plantation life" (433); also, as Mary claims, "I do not know my great-gran's African name" (38).

the entrance of what Caroline Rody calls “bad history” (7) into women’s lives, in particular rape and incest (or what Mary calls “silent sin” [431]), common during slavery, and the ensuing familial rupture (symbolized here in the act of emasculation and patricide) and secrecy surrounding filiation.[106]

Clothes and textile objects, as well as other crafted objects in the text, not only take part in the work aesthetic of the novel as signifiers of labour, of resistance, resilience, and recycling, but they also take part in the recording of a history of violence and concealment in the contact zone. The metaphor of the textile craft mirrors the collective and composite nature of Caribbean history, of oral narrative, and of cultural memory. Emphasizing the hybrid identities of Creole women, and the degree of inter-culturation and interrelation in the plantation society, the meandering orality and the textile work involved in Clarke’s novel succeed in asserting memory over the silent gaps in recorded history. Here I posit craft and textiles as tropes for the tensions and conflicts inherent within the “contact zone” of a postcolonial culture.

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106 Family secrets are an important theme in Caribbean literature, recurring in a number of contemporary novels, such as Denise Harris’s *A Web of Secrets* (1996), Shani Mootoo’s *Cereus Blooms at Night* (1996), or Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994).

Continuing the process of unravelling the metaphorical quilt and its metonymic patches initiated in the previous chapter, I focus here on the rags and labour that make up the patch. In an attempt to propose recycling as a innovative formal, theoretical, and thematic device in postcolonial fiction, particularly the neoslave narrative, this chapter focuses on the recycling of the worn into something new (but always inherently calling attention to the worn). I position *The Polished Hoe* within the genre of the neoslave narrative that proposes not only the clarification of an obscured past of slavery, but also a response to the challenge of writing history "in a cultural moment of postmodernity marked by features such as extreme relativism, undecidability, and profound scepticism regarding the possibility of material referentiality, let alone the desirability or even possibility of social transformation" (McCallum and Olbey 165). Whereas in *Alias Grace* I approached textile craft as a trope for fragmentation and the dispersal of the postmodern subject, crafts in the Caribbean context of Austin Clarke's *The Polished Hoe* represent the distortions, omissions, and fabrications central to heritage reconstruction.[107]

107 I employ heritage as defined by Lowenthal, as "a fluid social artifice" (223) that is not fixed nor disguised as

Chapter 4 "Sordid quiltings": Textile Crafts and the Politics of Recycling in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

"I believe that the yarn we spin is capable of mending the broken warp and woof of our life" (Gandhi, Mind of Mahatma Gandhi *405)*

Rohinton Mistry's second novel, *A Fine Balance* (1995), offers an apt conclusion to this dissertation as it encompasses much of the thinking on crafts that has been expressed in the previous chapters. The fragmented testimonies of textile workers, the collecting and recycling of objects, the transient, universal spider-weaver archetypes, and the textile metaphors and their use as structural paradigms that have by now been established as the landmarks of these "quilted texts" are all major components of Mistry's novel. In Mistry's novel craft, and particularly the patchwork quilt, returns as a trope of secrecy and encoded meaning in historiographic metafiction, as in *Alias Grace*. Mistry's novel also allows us to revisit the crafted object as a site of resistance and an embodiment of the collective and composite nature of storytelling and family history, as in

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authentic, but that changes in response to our own needs, lending itself to manipulation, mutation, remaking and invention (223; 250).

the neoslave narrative of the previous chapter. However, *A Fine Balance* also appears in the final section of this dissertation as a paradigmatically postcolonial text with an epic scope, thereby establishing the primary qualities of textile crafts within the Shahrazadic tradition, in the debate between cultural continuity and change, formally and figuratively enacting a recomposition that implies decentring and pluralism. Particularly, I focus on the way textile crafts, as well as the notions of making-do and recycling, make the new out of the old. In their literary representation, these crafts, rather than embodying what has been preserved, reflect what has been left out, obscured by historical records. The worn, frayed, and incomplete status of the textile crafts in Mistry's novel provides commentary on the impossibility of recovering an original narrative of history or tradition. Crafts embody "a cross-cultural exploration of the discourses of hybridity" (Heble 60). The "sordid quiltings" (379) represented in *A Fine Balance* ground the narrative in a historical perspective that includes appropriation of physical resources, exploitation of human labour, and institutional repression. This perspective, Benita Perry has recently claimed, "ha[s] receded from view" and is badly needed in postcolonial inquiry today (3).

4.1 Scavenging Acts: Towards a Politics of Recycling

In *A Fine Balance*, recycling is present in the multiple references to discarded materials such as textiles that are recuperated by the characters and made into something new – clothes or quilts pieced together from scraps of discarded material. Yet the recycling impulse is not limited to material objects, but also extends to history and narrative. Mistry, here, can be seen as recuperating bits and pieces of both an obscured national past, of heterogeneous identities, and of recognisable narrative genres and styles. This historical and narrative reconstruction mirrors the reconstitutive processes of the central image of the patchwork quilt.

4.1.1 Mistry's Patchwork Narrative

Mistry's novel consists of a textual quilt characterised by a heterogeneous assembly of times, spaces, and characters. The urban fabric of Mistry's setting is an unspecified Bombay-like city under the Emergency Rule of Indira Ghandi of 1975-77, [108] with excerpts in villages

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108 The Emergency period began in 1975 after Indira Gandhi was discovered guilty of electoral malpractices in relation to the 1971 General Election by the High Court, and immediately instructed the President of India to announce a State of Emergency. As a result, opposition leaders were interned, the right to trial was suspended, public meetings were banned, newspapers were subject to strict controls, and constitutional amendments were introduced conferring on Indira Gandhi retrospective immunity from prosecution in respect of past or future

and towns before, during, and after the Partition that portioned out territory between India and Pakistan. The Emergency period is described here as a period of chaos: “everything is upside-down. Black can be made into white, day turned into night” (362). Mistry’s main characters include two middle-class Parsis[109] and two Hindu “Untouchables,” brought together by displacement. Mistry’s minor characters include what John Clement Ball calls:

> a superabundant social spectrum of Muslim rent-collectors and tailors, Sikh cabbies, wily beggars, disillusioned lawyers, murderous strongmen, corrupt slumlords, profiteering police, radical students, and – in a cameo no less unflattering than her appearances in *Midnight’s Children* and *Such a Long Journey* – Indira Ghandi herself. (“Taking the Measure” 83-4)

The characters evolve in different yet interconnected worlds: Maneck Kohlah’s Himalayan childhood home; Omprakash and Ishvar Mochi’s childhood village and the slum colony in the city; Ashraf Chacha’s

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criminal offences. The most sinister elements of the Emergency, however, were initiated by Indira’s son and heir, Sanjay, who, without any electoral mandate, was responsible for instituting the process of slum clearance and family planning (Morey 99-100).

109 The Parsis are a community composed of the descendants of a group of Zoroastians who left Iran some time between the eighth and tenth centuries of the Christian era, after its conquest by Muslim Arab invaders and the fall of the Sassanian dynasty (Morey 9). For contextual commentary on the Parsi community, see Peter Morey’s *Rohinton Mistry* (2004).

workshop where Omprakash and Ishvar learn their trade as tailors; the Au Revoir Export company, which makes important profits from the labour of the tailors, where Dina Dalal, as an intermediary, picks up and returns sewing orders; and the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel, where the tailors share tea and tell their stories. The novel focuses on lower-caste Hindus, Untouchables, Muslims, and Parsis: "what one might call a cast list of the marginalized and dispossessed who find themselves at the mercy of the Brahminical and pseudo-secular elites shaping India in the 1970s" (Morey 95).

The novel abounds with occupational metaphors and includes a multiple and heterogeneous collection of characters, who are not coincidentally almost all related to the dominating principle of handicrafts in the novel. Ishvar Mochi and his nephew Omprakash are two former Hindu *chamaars* – or tanners – who have trained to become tailors and therefore escaped their position as Untouchables in the hierarchical social chain. Their family's violation of the time-honoured stasis of the caste system has led them to become the sole survivors of their family, however, and they flee their village to seek work and improvement in the city. On the train, they meet Maneck Kohlah, a fellow migrant Parsi who left his hometown in the mountains to complete his education at a

technical college, reluctantly following his parents' will. All are bound for the same destination: the home of Dina Dalal, where the tailors will find employment and Maneck, room and board for the remainder of his studies. Dina is a lonely Parsi widow who insists on remaining independent and refuses either to remarry or to live with her brother, Nusswan. All four main characters have a connection to textile work. As Hindu cobblers, Ishvar, his brother, Narayan, and Narayan's son Om were meant to learn their trade: to "ski[n] the carcass, [eat] the meat, and ta[n] the hide, which was turned into sandals, whips, harnesses, and waterskins" (122). When Ishvar and Narayan came of age, however, their father resisted their trade and status and sent them to live with their father's Muslim friend, Ashraf Chacha, who trained them in the tailoring trade at Muzaffar Tailoring Company. Dina herself learned to sew and knit from her sister-in-law Ruby, then from Shirin Aunty, who serves as a role model and teaches her to make an independent living by tailoring, knitting, and embroidering. When her failing eyesight threatens to end her tailoring career and the independence it provides, she refashions herself as an entrepreneurial middle person for a large textile company, Au Revoir Exports, and employs Om and Ishvar to do piecework in her backroom. She admits after they begin to work for her that they sew "like angels"

(96), despite Om’s “careless stitches” (106) and “crooked seams” (109). Dina’s financial difficulties force her to upset her solitary life by accepting a boarder, Maneck. Maneck is also connected to textile crafts, as his best friend and neighbour, Avinash, whom he befriended at the student hostel before arriving at Dina’s, has a father who is “employed in a textile mill” (310). In Avinash’s words, “He operates the machinery. He’s been running a fucking loom for thirty years . . . . I have no more interesting story than this . . . just a father who has given his years to the mill, and got TB in exchange” (310). Maneck eventually loses interest in his engineering studies and devotes his time first to helping Dina with a late order when the tailors are absent, and then as a hobby to help her with the quilt. Gradually, all four main characters grow close ties while they begin to live as a surrogate family and work together on a patchwork quilt made of leftover fabric from the textile company. As they grow closer, their separate histories come unravelled for the reader. Mistry’s collection of lives constitutes a metaphorical patchwork quilt stressing the heterogeneity of lived experience and its itineraries and trajectories. However, as the patchwork narrative crosses the dividing lines of caste and class, country and city, it also brings together many different genres and styles.

The epigraph of the novel, excerpted from Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* – "This tragedy is not a fiction. All is true" – blurs distinctions between the novel and non-fiction. Indeed, Mistry's book oscillates between the genres of the realist novel, the epic, the saga, the historical novel, and of postcolonial writing. The question of whether Mistry's writing – and particularly *A Fine Balance* – should be viewed as realist or something else has captured much critical interest, with some critics viewing the work as unproblematically realist (Chaudhuri; Kermode; Iyer; Nair; Mantel), others identifying the presence of practices that disturb and disrupt the surface realism (Williams; Bharucha; Mukherjee; Morey), or describing the novel's tone as more theatrical than novelistic (Diamond 37). This multiple and indeterminate aggregate of narrative styles, genres, and practices is, I argue, precisely the point in *A Fine Balance*. This novel consists, to borrow Peter Morey's term, of a "generic patchwork" (121), thus mirroring the central metaphor of Dina's patchwork quilt. I view the novel as a paradigmatically postcolonial novel oscillating between the Persian epic storytelling tradition and historiographic metafiction of the western tradition.

4.1.2 The Historical Writer as “indiscriminate scavenger”

Recycled narratives abound in *A Fine Balance*. Among the intertextual allusions that form part of this narrative recycling are echoes of Indian writers such as R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Nayantara Sahgal, as well as nods in the direction of Mistry’s Modernist European influences such as W.B. Yeats, and of nineteenth and twentieth-century Russian literature by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, or Solzhenitsyn (Morey 98). The hybrid nature of the narrative as well as the many intertextual allusions punctuating the narrative enforce the idea of recycling and the patchwork narrative that lie in close proximity to “the deliberate multi-styled and hetero-voiced nature” of what Bakhtin calls “carnivalesque literature” (*Rabelais and his World*). Fragmentary and plural narratives, as in *Alias Grace*, emphasise the textuality and plurality of history, and the contingency of truth. In this sense, Mistry’s is a work of historiographic metafiction. Because of its broad historical sweep and wide social spectrum, *A Fine Balance* has been called “a true epic” (Malieckal 224), “the Great Indian novel” (Iyer 91), perhaps symptomatic of what Salem Sinai, in Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, calls “an Indian

disease, this urge to encapsulate the whole of reality" (84).[110] Recounting a historic period of a nation such as India – "the land of diversities par excellence" (Ram xi) – may necessarily entail epic grandeur, for how could an author otherwise attempt to write about India, in N. Ram's words, a land of

> "unity in diversity" (the Nehruvian, freedom-movement term of art), opposites, continuities, harmonies, inconsistencies, contradictions. It is multiethnic, multilingual, multireligious, multicultural, multipolitical. It is a confluence of streams of humanity in a sense and on a scale that are matched by few nation-states of the contemporary world. It has been described as a rich country with poor people. Its contemporary experience as a democracy is a combination of light and shade, the inspiring and the dispiriting, the upbeat and the downbeat, in a truly challenging and wondrous sense. (xi)

As Maneck declares of Dina's patchwork quilt, there are "Too many different colours and designs . . . it's going to be difficult to match them properly" (360).

Handicraft has a particular resonance in this novel as it is intimately involved in India's culture, history and politics. Textile crafts formed the

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110 *A Fine Balance* has often been compared to *Midnight's Children*, "that other great novel of the Emergency" (Iyer 91), for their treatments of the Emergency, their social and historical comprehensiveness, their use of motifs of mutilation and severance as the bodily inscriptions of history (namely of Partition and Emergency), and for their use of the grotesque, the shocking, and the ironic.

great industrial enterprise of pre-British India, which remained the world's leading producer and exporter of textiles until 1800. One of the oldest forms of the spinning wheel, the *charkha*, was central to Mahatma Gandhi's teachings. Gandhi used the charkha as a tool and a symbol of the Indian Independence Movement and was featured in early versions of the flag of India, illustrated below, where it symbolised the economic regeneration of India and the industriousness of its people.

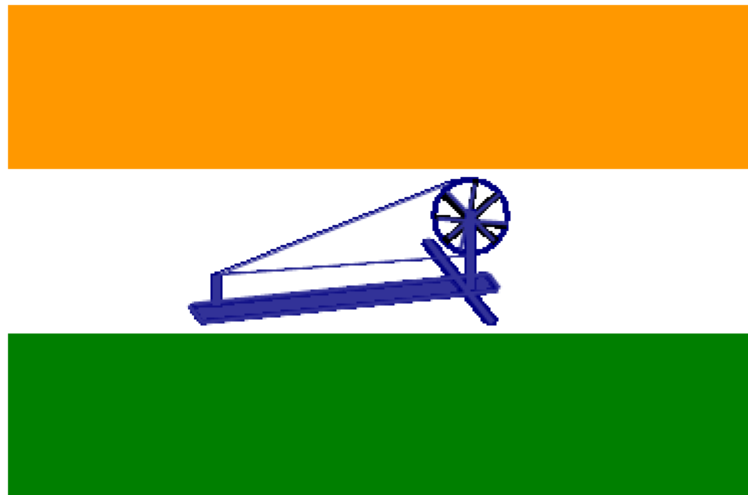

Figure 2. 1931 Flag of the Indian Independence Movement

Gandhi pioneered a nation-wide revival of the country's withering textile crafts sector by promoting the use of the *charkha*[111] as a practice of

111 The symbol of the *charkha* (the spinning wheel) of pre-independence versions of the flag was replaced by the *Ashoka chakra*, a depiction of the *dharmachakra*, the wheel of dharma, meaning wheel, figured by a wheel with 24 spokes, which appears at the centre of the National flag of the Republic of India. *Chakra* is a Sanskrit word meaning cycle or self repeating process. The process it signifies is the cycle of time as how the world

meditation, and as a means of reviving village weaving, of achieving self-sufficiency from Indian dependence on cotton cloth imports from England (Jaitly; Shiva). Today the handicrafts sector is the largest employer of people after agriculture (Jaitly).

In Mistry's text, the patchwork quilt comes to stand as a metaphor for Indian history, particularly reflecting the Partition of India. In one instance, Maneck's family, the Kohlahs, and their neighbours, Brigadier and Mrs. Grewal, "anatomised the Partition, recited the chronology of events, and mourned the senseless slaughter"[112] all the while employing and politicising the metaphor of the patchwork quilt: "Brigadier Grewal wondered if the sundered parts would some day be sewn together again. Mr. Kohlah fingered his patch and said anything was possible" (271). Left unfinished with a "gap" in one corner, which Dina resolves not to complete, as "there was nothing further to add" (749), the quilt becomes, beyond a narrative construction of personal experience, a narrative construction of national identity: never complete, always in process, and

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changes with time. This is important to bear in mind when thinking of the relations between textile crafts and politics, and of the significance of textile crafts and Mistry's notions of cycle and change in *A Fine Balance*.

112 Dina does the same, anatomising her days shared with the tailors and Maneck, mourning their loss, and even takes to reciting the chronology of events while she stays at her brother Nusswan's house, at the end of the novel (740-50).

part of a heterogeneity of lived experience working, as Stuart Hall would argue, “with and through, not despite, difference” (Hall 402).

With its connections to the past, memory, and heritage, the patchwork quilt may be considered a “document or relic of the past” of the kind R.G. Collingwood stated was needed for the historian to write an historical account (282-3). The patchwork quilt that is a recognizable metaphor for women’s writing appears here instead as a metaphor for historical writing, which, according to David Cowart in *History and the Contemporary Novel* (1989), “involves the selection of detail, the determination of emphasis, [and] a narrational shaping” (17).[113]

The process of recycling involved in handicrafts also resonates in the Indian socio-cultural context. The recycling of materials that is ubiquitous in the novel has remained part of an in-built wisdom of the rural people in India to promote sustainable use of natural resources by reusing either discarded, old items of utility or waste material generated by other activities.[114] Mistry’s attention to the recuperation of used or discarded

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113 For a discussion of history and fiction and history as fiction, see R.G. Collingwood, and Hayden White.

114 Some examples of Indian textile crafts where recycling of materials is in evidence include the Kantha embroidery of Bengal in which women embroidered discarded silk sarees together to make a multicoloured quilt; Gubbas, the common man's carpet, which is made from old blankets, washed and milled, and dyed;

materials in the text, his narrative technique and historical impulse participate in what I call a politics of recycling, with close connections to Vassanji's scavenging principle in *The Book of Secrets* (1994). These scavenging acts take on a particular resonance in postcolonial texts. Mistry's recuperative and referential project in this novel can be likened to Dina's struggle with the quilt since Mistry, as the author of the novel and Dina, as artist/craftsperson within the novel, take on a role resembling that of M.G. Vassanji's "indiscriminate scavenger" in *The Book of Secrets* (154). In Vassanji's novel, the British officer Maynard becomes an information gatherer in a spy ring during the Great War, assisting British intelligence. The scraps of paper, photographs, sketches, maps, "all crumpled, stained, and smelly," become the materials by which Maynard, as "indiscriminate scavenger," would "piece together a truth, a story" (154). The kittens abandoned by their mother in Dina's kitchen become "plucky embodiments of the scavenging principle also necessary in human society as depicted here" (Morey 109). In similar ways, Dina and Mistry collect scraps of textile and bits of lived experiences in order to piece together a patchwork quilt, as well as a quilted personal and national

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Namdhas in Kashmir, which are made from the waste wool from carpets; and leftovers of sarees that are woven into multicoloured durries in Assam and Karnataka (Jaitly).

narrative. Notions of rehabilitation, reuse, and collection proper to textile crafts are present in this novel in which waste, scraps, and remnants carry much importance. From Dina's collection of snippets of fabric to Rajaram's collection of human hair, "People collect and sell all kinds of things. Rags, paper, plastic, glass. Even bones" (583), in Om's words. Dina's assembly of the different scraps she collects is mirrored by Ishvar's selecting and matching the remnants of fabric for the customers' orders, in order to make clothes for their parents (156). Ishvar's mother finds the garments far too fine for use, and she stores them away. According to Mistry,

> there is a great difference between remembering the past which is creative and life enhancing and trying to preserve it which is detrimental and debilitating. I am thinking of Sohrab's collection of butterflies (*Such a Long Journey*), Jehangir's stamp collection (*Tales from Firozsha Baag*) and Rustom's violin (*A Fine Balance*). All these things become useless through lack of use and loving attention, which after all is what memory is. And also it is sometimes very difficult not to be compelled to preserve the past, especially when the present is so painful. Dina draws great comfort from her memories of her dead husband Rustom and following his death carries on a kind of secret ritual, and that way madness lies. (qtd. in McLay 17)

Dina's collection of scraps of textile is first intended to serve a useful purpose, as she follows Aunty Shirin's advice to "waste nothing – remember, there is a purpose for everything. These scraps can be very

useful" (64). She uses the smaller scraps for making lumpy sanitary pads, but the finer scraps of recuperated textile – as the "scraps" of these marginal characters' lives – are transformed into a collective patchwork, a symbol of disparate histories, experiences, and identities. The patchwork is first intended as "a nice counterpane" for Dina's bed (359), then as a wedding gift for Om. But it actually ends up in Dina's closet, before being spotted by Maneck as he passes the tailors-turned-beggars on the street, "dirty and fraying, folded to the size of a cushion" for Ishvar's deformed body on his platform. The patchwork quilt is thus reconfigured from a representation of unity, wholeness, domestic harmony, and comfort (as represented in the unifying metaphor of the completed quilt) into a textile record of plurality, difference, violence and struggle (as represented in the quilt's metonymic frayed and disassembled patches).

4.1.3 Recycling and Textile Crafts as Inscriptions of Secrecy and Struggle

These scavenging acts are also linked to the digging up and disclosure of secrets, which critics have recognised as a function of narrative and element of the detective story (Macherey; Benjamin). There are both unsolved murders and delayed disclosure of secrets in *A Fine Balance*: the tailors do not disclose their origins to Dina, who discovers

their story only through Maneck; Rajaram the hair-collector also has a secret which he ends up disclosing to the tailors about his part in the "Hair-Hungry Homicide" (744); there is also a secret behind the story of Worm/Shankar and his mother Nosey, and Beggarmaster. As McLay notes, "The Vishram, the jhopadpatti, Dina's apartment, and the student's hostel are all sites where secrets are hidden or divulged" (18). Mistry himself claims that:

> Dina's quilt is also a secret in a way because it is coded. Someone says, Ishvar, I think, that they should take it to the Vishram Hotel because the waiter would enjoy it because all their stories are there and Omprakash points out that he wouldn't understand the quilt because it is in their own secret language and only they know what the patches and scraps mean. (qtd. in McLay 18)

The spaces where textile craft is carried out are often secretive, or transgressive. When Ashraf Chacha's tailoring workshop is threatened to be burned down along with its inhabitants by local authorities on account of its being a Muslim shop, Ishvar and Narayan change the sign of the shop from Muzzafar Tailoring Company to Krishna Tailors, and redecorate the interior with Hindu deities, and must even agree to drop their pants to show the men their foreskins are intact (168-9). Dina also resists having to live with her brother as a servant and give up her independence by

starting a sewing company in the backroom of her apartment, a secretive activity she withholds from her landlord, who would certainly expulse her. Narayan going back to his village, where he was born a chamaar, to open up a tailoring shop, is also an act of resistance. Thus, scavenging acts are acts of resistance, however covert, that come as a response to such critics as Tabish Khair or Vinita Dhondiyal Bhatnagar, who claim that "the text highlights the elements of despair at the cost of presenting an accurate description of the forces of resistance" (102). These scavenging acts consist of modes of resistance situated in the content and context of the novel, while Peter Morey situates resistance in the form of the novel: "I consider the resistance in *A Fine Balance* to take place on the level of form, in the polyphonic and multilayered contestation of hegemonic and canonical discourses" (159). The parallel between the scavenging activity of the quiltmaker / tailor and that of the narrator or storyteller is made clear, as scraps of cloth become metonymic representations of the characters' experiences and stories, and of the work of the historical writer to disclose secrets and offer patterns of resistance.

4.2 The "great story factory": Storytelling and the "oral quilt"

A Parsi writer, Mistry uses conventions of oral storytelling common to the Persian and South Asian narrative traditions.[115] Om and Ishvar, as well as Vassantro Valmik, are the main storytellers in the narrative, through whom Mistry calls attention to the nature of his own work, as his characters all reflect on the craft of story making. They refer to their disparate tales as fragments, pieces or scraps of cloth of "many different colours and designs" which must be "match[ed] . . . properly" with "taste and skill" in order to be included in the metaphorical quilt: "what to select, what to leave out, and which goes next to which" (360). Mistry is the author, telling his tale in novel form, while the tailors are craftpersons, whose tales are lived and contextualised. I will first analyse Mistry's use of some of the salient features of storytelling in his narrative, before looking at the characters' use of textile imagery and the quilting process as a metaphor for storytelling.

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115 According to Walter Ong, narrative functions crucially in two ways for oral cultures: "to store, organize, and communicate much of what they know" and "to bond a great deal of lore in relatively substantial, lengthy forms that are reasonably durable and repeatable" (*Orality and Literacy* 140-1). The most famous of the Persian and South Asian narrative traditions are the Sanskrit epic *The Ramayana* and the medieval Persian literary epic *One Thousand and One Nights*, which draw on the story-telling resources of classical Indian myth and epic.

4.2.1 Digression, Circularity, and Repetition

According to Amin Malak, the salient features of storytelling are: a sense of audience; a sense of heritage and values; reliable reporting in private and collective memory; blending modes and moods; and digression (124). Mistry develops each of these in *A Fine Balance*. He develops a sense of audience from the beginning with an epigraph excerpted from Balzac's *Le Père Goriot,* which directly addresses the reader. Mistry's sense of heritage and of private and collective memory are supported by the fact that he claims to be a "traditional writer" (in Malieckal 224), and that he finds inspiration in his memories of his life in India before immigrating to Canada. He writes in a storytelling mode, his digressions defying linearity and rigid narrative chronology or cohesion.[116] Tzvetan Todorov explains the process of digression, or what he labels *enchâssement* "embedding," in his analysis of the narrative technique of

116 As Salman Rushdie explains, digressions are a very important component of his narrative, and are linked to the idea of multitude as an Indian concept: "The digressions are almost the point of the book, in which the idea of multitude is a central notion. When I started writing, I just tried to explain one life, and it struck me more and more that, in order to explain this life, you had to explain a vast amount of material which surrounded it, both in space and time. In a country like India, you are basically never alone. The idea of solitude is a luxury which only the rich people enjoy. For most Indians, the idea of privacy is very remote. When people perform their natural functions in public, you don't have the same idea of privacy" ("Interview" 22).

Alf Laylah wa-Laylah: 1001 Nights, in which the appearance of any new character necessitates inserting a new story within the preceding one:

> *L'apparition d'un nouveau personnage entraîne immanquablement l'interruption de l'histoire précédente, pour qu'une nouvelle histoire, celle qui explique le 'je suis ici maintenant' du nouveau personnage, nous soit racontée. Une histoire seconde est englobée dans la première; ce procédé s'appelle enchâssement*. (82)

> The appearance of a new character necessarily interrupts the story, in order to tell a new story, which explains the "here and now" of the new character. A second story is therefore included in the first. This process is called embedding. (translation mine)

Following the circular process of storytelling, the end of the narrative – when Maneck commits suicide by jumping in front of a train – circles back to the beginning, when the train carrying him, as well as Om and Ishvar, is stalled because there is a body on the tracks. The story circles back on Maneck's suicide in another way as well since Avinash's murdered body was also thrown on the railway lines, a fate reserved to many other opposition leaders. Other examples of the circular narrative include both Dina and Om who, at different instances in the novel, put their feet through a rotten plank of wood in the same spot (68; 153). Also, bicycle collisions recur, first with Dina's doomed husband, Rustom, who

dies of a collision, as does Shankar/Worm, crushed on his platform by a bus, and Om who is also involved in a less serious accident on a bicycle. The cyclical structure of the novel, and its use of repetition, is confirmed when Om and Ishvar, returning to the city as beggars, come to replace Shankar, in a chapter significantly titled "The Circle is Completed." Repetition, which Umberto Eco attributes to postmodern aesthetics ("Innovation and Repetition" 2), and which is also considered typical of crafts, is an important component of this novel, particularly as the main storytellers repeat their stories several times to a different audience throughout the novel. Mistry's technique here is also reminiscent of E.M. Forster's Modernist "repetition plus variation," which Forster recommends in his chapter on "Pattern and Rhythm" in *Aspects of the Novel*. Symbols do not stand for a single set of correspondences, but shift, evolve, and their meanings are sometimes even inverted, as is the case in incremental repetition.

4.2.2 Spinning and Storytelling

The city is a main player in the storytelling. When the cashier-waiter at the Vishram Vegetarian Hotel marvels at the abundance of their stories, Om replies: "It's not us, it's this city . . . . A story factory, that's what it is, a spinning mill" (501). The tailors' stories are not only told at the Vishram,

however, but are also spread in Dina's home. The tailors' "chronicle" (503) in Dina's words, is "like her quilt": as she "add[s] the pieces" it "gradually gather[s] shape" (503), as Maneck repeats to her what he knows of their life, and she discovers further information. Once she gains their trust and they gradually become friends, she reflects: "they were trusting her with bits of their past, she realized, and nothing could be more precious. More pieces, to join to the growing story of the tailors" (525). The common saying in Baghdad, the city of *Alf Laylah-wa-Laylah*, in times of trouble – "It shall pass and become one more story to tell" (Todorov 45) – becomes a leitmotif in the novel, as it is repeated by the waiter at the Vishram, and also by Dina: "One phase of life was concluding, another beginning. Time for the latest instalment, she thought. A new patch in the quilt" (740). When the tailors return to Dina's after their detainment at the work camp, they try their best to relate the events to Dina: "The thread of events eluded their grasp, Ishvar picking up a piece of it here, Om grabbing something there. Then they lost track of the narrative altogether" (498). The validity of the patchwork quilt as a metaphor for storytelling is made clear here. The expert-storyteller, however, is Mr. Valmik, who also stands as the novelist figure, and who Maneck, Dina, and the tailors each encounter at different moments in the tale. As Dina describes,

> She realized that although Mr. Valmik depicted life as a sequence of accidents, there was nothing accidental about his expert narration. His sentences poured out like perfect seams, holding the garment of his story together without calling attention to the stitches. Was he aware of ordering the events for her? Perhaps not – perhaps the very act of telling created a natural design. Perhaps it was a knack that humans had, for cleaning up their untidy existences – a hidden survival weapon, like antibodies in the bloodstream. (737)

After Dina's encounter with Valmik she makes an explicit comparison between the process of storytelling and her quilt and refers to the story as an "oral quilt": "The lawyer's tale reminded her of her languishing patchwork quilt. Om's wedding gift. And Mr. Valmik had his own fragments to fashion his oral quilt, which he was now reciting for her benefit. Like a conjuror pulling an endless chain of silk scarves from his mouth" (738). The quilt becomes a most definite register and repository of the experiences of the four characters. It eventually takes on a particular power and volition, in Dina's eyes, forcing her to tell the tales it composes:

> At night in bed, she covered herself with the quilt and took to recounting the abundance of events in the tightly knit family of patches, the fragments that she had fashioned with needle, thread, and affection. If she stumbled along the way, the quilt nudged her forward. The streetlight through the open window was just bright enough to identify the motley of its making. Her bedtime story. . . . Dina knew she had slipped from a silent recitation into reading aloud.

> . . . In her room, Dina folded up the quilt. The patchwork had transformed her silence into unbidden words; it had to be locked away now in the wardrobe. She was frightened of the strange magic it worked on her mind, frightened of where its terrain was leading her. She did not want to cross that border permanently. (749-50)

Encouraging Dina to “cross that border,” the patchwork quilt and the trope of sewing come to signify transgression of boundaries, going against tradition, and adapting to change through transformation to achieve a sense of balance and pattern.

4.3 “Representing trajectories”: Change, Transformation, and “crossing the lines”

The traditional association of the patchwork quilt with domestic comfort is subverted in *A Fine Balance*, as in *Alias Grace*. Here instead, the patchwork quilt calls attention to a past of struggle and violence. Dina’s quilt embodies narratives of transgression, change, adaptation, and in-betweenness, made in the company of plural identities – of different sexes, religions, and classes. The patchwork garment that the tailors and Dina make for Worm/Shankar must be torn and tattered so that he may continue to attract pity from the passers-by. The patchwork garments Ishvar and his brother Narayan offer their destitute parents are stored in a box; the garments are too fine to wear. Similarly, the patchwork quilt Dina

constructs with the tailors and Maneck is stored in a closet, and finally used as a cushion for Ishvar's mutilated body, instead of being used as a counterpane for Dina's bed, or offered as a wedding gift for Om, as initially intended. The quilt does not reflect wholeness and domestic nostalgia, in other words, but the obscured and omitted histories and marginal and mutilated identities that come together in the novel's urban spaces. The patchwork quilt thus represents cultural syncretism, hybridity, or what Kwame Anthony Appiah calls the "contaminated" identities of postcoloniality (354). It also acts as a recording of a national past of violence and struggle.

4.3.1 "Sordid quiltings": The Postcolonial Quilt

Mistry grounds his novel in the minority subcommunities of the Indian nation. Maneck and Dina are part of the Parsi community, an in-between group often regarded as a comprador group that forces us to reconsider the Manichean binary of the Indian/white opposition,[117] and a group that Mistry has been largely responsible for ushering into the realm of historical fiction. Mistry also includes Untouchables and the homeless in his narrative, who are largely ignored in histories and literary histories of

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117 This ethnic and religious minority group historically favoured the British and adopted British cultural values in the days of the Raj (Morey 5).

the region. Mistry blurs the boundaries that delimit these groups, as the Untouchables become tailors, and tailors become homeless, and the leader of the homeless is a wealthy businessman. Here craft lends itself to the articulation of new shifting identities.

The patchwork quilt and its implications, as textile craft, with the body (made clear in the first chapter of this study) is tainted with Mistry's use of irony and the grotesque. The patchwork quilt and the quilting process are particularly associated with disfigured, sectioned, or fragmented bodies, thereby signifying the bodily inscriptions of history, and proposing a response to Reverend Verringer's exclamation in Atwood's *Alias Grace*: "We cannot be mere patchworks!" (486). Patchwork garments and quilts become associated with disfigured bodies (Shankar's and Ishvar's). Dina draws a parallel between the patterns of the clothes she must produce for the textile company and her own imagined dismembered body should she fail to meet the company's deadlines: "[she] could not help feeling, while sorting through the brown-paper sections of bodice and sleeve and collar, that her own torso and arms and neck were at stake" (245). Beggarmaster uses the term "professional alterations," which usually applies to textile crafts, to refer to the mutilations he enforces on the bodies of his beggars so that they will elicit

pity and obtain more alms. Avinash's father develops tuberculosis from his life-long exacting work in the textile mills, and his daughters commit suicide by hanging themselves with their saris. In a postcolonial context, these bodily inscriptions of textile crafts provide commentary on a historical past of violence and struggle, and in this case of colonisation and its aftermath, as well as the State of Emergency in India.

Furthermore, the mutilated bodies that abound in this novel – Worm/Shankar's severed legs, his mother's severed nose, Om's emasculation (castrated on a whim of the *Thakur*), Ishvar's disfigured left cheek and amputated legs following the *nasabandi* process (forced sterilization by vasectomy) – mirror the sectioned hair which is also a motif in the narrative. Rajaram's hair-collecting enterprise involves secretly sectioning the hair from beggars and passers-by in order to collect, sort, and sell the hair to exporting companies. Dina's mother also loses her hair to sickness, and Dina, as a young girl, with the help of her aspiring-hairdresser friend, Zenobia, cuts off her own plaits, which her brother Nusswan, as punishment, forces her to fasten back to her head with electrical tape so "it felt like dead rats were hanging from her head" (113). The maimed body and severed hair is suggestive of the violence of the colonialist past, of the Partition, and of the State-of-Emergency. The bodily

mutilation of the characters, and its association to patchwork, is also mirrored in the city they inhabit, and the body politic more generally, with its "sordid quiltings of plastic and cardboard and paper and sackcloth, like scabs and blisters creeping in a dermatological nightmare across the rotting body of the metropolis" (379). The city and its "sordid quiltings" is another instance of the patchwork quilt gone awry.

4.3.2 "Inhibiting line drawing": The Transience and Adaptability of the Patchwork Quilt

The settings of the novel include border crossings between rural and urban India of the 1970s and 80s, and Dubai. In his novels and short stories, McLay claims, Rohinton Mistry is interested in the theme of choosing between two opposing sides, and in the movement between east and west, India and Canada (18). Here, however, Mistry seems to move beyond binarism to signify a more complex system of plurality and hybridity as figured in the central tropes of the quilt and of textile craft. Maneck and the tailors are migrants, who move to the city from rural environments for work or training. Their affiliation with patchwork

reinforces their connection to migration and border crossing.[118] The city in which these characters operate inhibits line drawing and encourages movement, change, adaptation, and transience. As Mistry explains, “In the city everything can become everything else: homes, hostels, workplaces, prisons, doorways, streets, whatever. In this sense the city helps to inhibit line drawing” (qtd. in McLay 17). As the wise proof-reader Valmik explains to Maneck while they are on the train, “You see, you cannot draw lines and compartments and refuse to budge beyond them” (301). The main characters in the novel all cross lines. Dina crosses the line of propriety and tradition by insisting on her own independence from her family, and choosing to live alone upon her husband’s death whereas she was expected to live with her brother. On the verge of economic ruin, of loosing her fragile independence, she sets up a sewing company in her own home, thus breaking the rules set up by her landlord. In addition, although she tries to maintain a strict division between herself as an employer and Parsi and the tailors as her employees and Untouchables, she also crosses the lines of convention by inviting them to live with her and by developing a friendship with them. The tailors cross the lines of caste by

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118 Deleuze and Guattari have rendered explicit this connection between patchwork and nomadism and migration in *A Thousand Plateaux* (477).

escaping their position as Untouchables and becoming tailors; Maneck's defiance of convention comes from his "uprooting [which] never seemed to end" (764), going away "so far that it seemed impossible to return" (773). As Mistry claims, "all such lines are artificial and there are stronger forces at work and if such a line is made to persist it will lead to chaos or lead to even more problems. Partition was just such a line and history has amply shown this" (qtd. in McLay 17).

At once tradespeople and tricksters, characters such as Valmik and Rajaram (both satirical and allegorical characters) and the tailors cross lines and transgress boundaries. As such, they are partisans of change, transformation, and reconstruction. All four characters change occupations several times. Valmik, who was initially a proof-reader for *The Times of India* after an abortive career in law, becomes a *morcha* man, hiring himself out to different parties and producing slogans to be shouted at political rallies. When his voice becomes hoarse, he returns to law and eventually ends up in charge of Bal Baba's mail-order business. Valmik is a fervent believer in change, claiming that "the secret of survival is to embrace change, and to adapt" (301). Quoting Yeats, he both claims and seems to believe: "All things fall and are built again, and those that build them again are gay" (301). Rajaram, the ultimate trickster, is a hair-

collector, a Motivator for the Family Planning Centre, a hair-thief, and eventually becomes Bal Baba, a miracle-working *sanyasi*, an occupation Om describes as 'fakeology.' Narayan and Ishvar, who were born Hindu cobblers, Untouchables, and were sent to live with their father's Muslim friend and train in his tailoring company, "had done the unthinkable: abandoned leather for cloth" (172), even changing their names. Before they leave, their father warns them: "[I]f someone asks your name, don't say Ishvar Mochi or Narayan Mochi. From now on you are Ishvar Darji and Narayan Darji" (148). Om and Ishvar's tailoring occupation implies transformation: "bolts of cloth were transformed into sleeves, collars, fronts, backs…" (96). As in *Alias Grace*, craft-making here is a means to disrupt established hierarchies: just as Grace Marks escapes her position as convict by sitting in the Governor's wife's sewing room for her meetings with Dr. Jordan in *Alias Grace*, so do Om and Ishvar, by becoming tailors, escape their position as Untouchables, and end up sharing lives with Dina and Maneck, both middle-class Parsis. After Rajaram, echoing Valmik's words of advice to Maneck, tells the tailors "Don't be afraid to change" (412), encouraging them to become motivators themselves, Ishvar reacts by retorting to his nephew, "Telling us we are afraid to change. What does he know? Would we have left our native place and come all the way here

if we were afraid to change?” To which the nightwatchman, who allows them to sleep in the doorway he watches over nightly, replies, “In any case, no human being has a choice in that matter. Everything changes, whether we like it or not” (413).

4.3.3 “A pattern in things”: Recycling as Reconstructive Impulse

The notion of crafting is emphasised in the text by the central metaphor of the pattern. As Morey explains, “Mistry’s novel is very much about the quest for pattern and the double-edged search for order in flux, in personal and social experience and on the national stage” (163). Lives are crafted, as Dina reflects, “A lifetime had to be crafted, just like anything else; she thought, it had to be moulded and beaten and burnished in order to get the most out of it” (55). When they begin their training as tailors with Ashraf Chacha in the city, Narayan and Ishvar are “reassured that it was not all madness and noise, there was a pattern in things” (150). They “weave their plans and dream the future into favourable patterns” (233). Dina also sees a pattern in the chaos at the courthouse while speaking with Valmik, and associates life’s pattern to the process of dress-making as well: “she began to see a pattern emerge from the turmoil and disorder. Just like working with a new dress, she thought. Paper patterns also seemed haphazard, till they were systematically pieced together” (730).

Earlier on in the novel, she associates the lives being lived around her in the contiguous apartments to sewing:

> While her eyes and fingers were immersed in the sewing, she acquired a heightened awareness of noises from the flats around her. She collected the sounds, sorted them, replayed them, and created a picture of the lives being lived by her neighbours, the way she transformed measurements into clothes. (73)

When Dina agrees to allow the tailors to live with her, the days take on a pattern like that of “a well-cut dress”:

> The pattern of each day, thought Dina at the end of the first week, was like the pattern of a well-cut dress, the four of them fitting together without having to tug or pull to make the edges meet. The seams were straight and neat. . . . Now Ishvar and Om were wrapping her in the mantle of kindness and generosity. Deceit, hypocrisy, manipulation were more the fabrics of her garment, she thought. (507)

However, once the tailors and Maneck leave and she again finds herself alone in the apartment, “the passing hours had a strangeness to them, loose and unstructured, as though the stitches were broken, the tent of time sagging one moment, billowing the next” (637). Maneck, however, believes that a pattern “is impossible to see” in his own variation of Nietzsche’s well-known dictum, “God is dead”:

> Now I prefer to think that God is a giant quiltmaker. With an infinite variety of designs. And the quilt is grown so big and confusing, the pattern is impossible to see, the squares and diamonds and triangles don't fit well together anymore, it's all become meaningless. So He has abandoned it'. (444)

The loosening patch on the quilt at the end of the novel coincides with Maneck's suicide (802), as the characters are each a patch in the quilt, and are thus integrated into the "pattern." While the tailors are away, the quilt "cease[s] to grow" (466). And when Dina must resort to living with her brother, and the tailors become homeless beggars, she "decide[s] there was nothing further to add" to the quilt (749).

The reconstructed ties that abound in the novel participate in the notion of patterning and crafting provisional relationships – Maneck is like a son to Dina, and the tailors also become part of her family; Beggarmaster is like a father to Worm/Shankar (and is actually his biological brother, as the reader later discovers); Ashraf Chacha is "like [a] brother" to Ishvar's father Dukhi. When the tailors become permanent residents in Dina's apartment, the tailors, Maneck, and Dina become an ad hoc family, as the tailors' scent, which Dina found repulsive before, becomes "unobtrusive now because it was the same for everyone. They were all eating the same food, drinking the same water. Sailing under one

flag" (522). The characters' turning to what appears initially as traditional patchwork quilting (communal, domestic, and of use value) must be seen as an attempt to make connections to a reconstructed community (that goes beyond traditional structures of family, nation, religion, and gender) in the face of destruction of families and lineage in the historical context of forced evictions and sterilizations during the Emergency. The patchwork quilt is therefore an important provisional reconstructive element when the characters reach out across 'the lines,' particularly in this narrative stressing rupture of family lineage: Dina, Om, and Ishvar have all lost their parents, and Maneck loses his father and becomes estranged from his mother. Furthermore, neither of these characters has children, as Dina loses her husband, Maneck dies young, Om is emasculated and Ishvar vasectomied. If, as Fischer claims, "cultural heritage is often figured in paternal or maternal imagery" (203), then familial rupture points to cultural rupture. Braids, like quilts, can be interpreted as signifiers of tradition and of lineage. Like the metaphor of the sectioned braids (which Rajaram stores in the tailors' trunk), the image of the patchwork falling apart and fraying on Worm/Shankar's or under Ishvar's mutilated bodies provides a trope for the entrance of what Caroline Rody calls "bad history" (7)[119] –

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119 Caroline Rody applies the term particularly to black women's lives in the United States or the Caribbean,

uprootedness, familial rupture, and historical destruction of lineage. If the completed patchwork quilt as bedcover is a sign of “normative” (family) history, then instances of the incomplete, frayed, and unused or displaced patchwork quilt coming apart becomes a trope for authorial inheritance of a traumatic past, and the tensions and conflicts inherent in a multicultural postcolonial society. But it also signifies the promise of reconstruction, provisionality, and heterogeneity of postcolonial urban communities. Furthermore, such “sordid quiltings” are also linked to what Bharucha identifies as the diasporic elements of Parsi writing: a sense of loss, nostalgia, and problems in identifying with the new home (“Reflections” 34). Mistry claims to be “a traditional writer” (in Malieckal 224). While Malieckal positions Mistry’s writing as oscillating between east and west (117), I examine *A Fine Balance* as escaping this binary and embodying, through its central image of the quilt, new ties and contingencies proper to the between-world subject.[120] In *A Fine Balance*, the patchwork quilt decries the link between textile crafts and a traditional lineage mystique. I

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but I borrow the term to apply it more loosely to the lives of minority subcommunities.

120 Mistry can be said to embody the plurality of the between-world subject in his position as a member of the Parsi community, which bestows on him a South Asian, Persian and European inheritance. The Parsis are a displaced community, originally forced into exile by the Arab invasion of their homeland. Mistry’s between-world position also arises from his status as Indo-Canadian.

view the patchwork quilt instead as involved in mutations, making and remaking, and manipulation and invention proper to a postcolonial politics of recycling.

Conclusion: Patchwork Novels

At the turn of the twenty-first century, crafts connote the local, the slow, the plural and the repetitive in the face of mass culture and global information, the fast, and the homogenizing impulse of the consumer society of late capitalism. Likewise, these texts each stress the local, their authors transforming their places of origin into vivid locales (Atwood transforms Ontario, Clarke Barbados, and Mistry Bombay). The slow and the repetitive may be seen to characterise the pace of these texts. Atwood's lengthy novel centres around scenes of exchange between Grace Marks and Simon Jordan in the sewing room, while Grace works on patch after patch of a quilt. Clarke's novel takes place within the duration of Mary Gertrude Mathilda's statement, but follows a meandering pattern of digression that amplifies detail through repetition. In Mistry's novel, the action centres around the endless and repetitive tribulations of the novel's primary characters who return to the city to recount their tales. These novels marking the passage of time and aging of the characters contain generic elements of the saga.[121] Finally, the three novels studied here

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121 The saga, as Umberto Eco explains in his article "Innovation & Repetition: Between Modern & Postmodern Aesthetics," "differs from the series insofar as it concerns the story of a family and is interested in the 'historical' lapse of time. It is genealogical. In the saga, the actors do age; the saga is a history of the aging of individuals, families, people, groups. . . . The saga is a series in disguise. It differs from the series in that the characters

consist of “generic patchworks” (121) to borrow Peter Morey’s term, in their amalgamation of many different genres – such as the historical, confessional, or detective novel, and theatre or story – and in what I call their ‘narrative recycling’ of different texts including riddles and songs, as well as excerpts from literary, journalistic, legal, educational or religious works. In their emphasis on local geographies, their slow narrative pace, their integration of a plurality of genres and texts, and their use of repetition, these three novels illustrate and foreground a culture of craft at the turn of the twenty-first century.

Women writers, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, have increasingly made use of this multifaceted analogy between craft (specifically needlework) and text either by employing needlework as a narrative vehicle or by weaving textile images directly into their texts. Literary critics have previously noted the metaphorical possibilities of textile craft in women’s writing, from the “common language” (Rich) of the feminist poetry of Adrienne Rich and Robin Morgan to an American (and particularly a Black) female aesthetic stressing community with Whitney Otto, Sherley Anne Williams, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, and Toni

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change (they change also because the actors age). But in reality the saga repeats, in spite of its historicized form, celebrating in appearance the passage of time, the same story” (193).

Morrison. “Quilt criticism” (Torsney and Elsley 2) has given rise to such terms as “quilted narrative” (Davies and Fido 6) and “textual quilt” (Delord). My own notion of “patchwork novels” breaks with the critical tradition of interpreting textile craft as a signifier of a female aesthetic stressing community and presents a redefined and reconfigured culture of craft culminating in the 90s and finding expression in Canadian novels of the period. In my analysis of the trope of textile craft, I describe a move from a female aesthetic to a labour aesthetic, and from communities based on racial or ethnic inheritance to compound identities and provisional, heterogeneous networks that move beyond the lineage mystique[122] heretofore signified in textile craft. By recasting textile crafts such that they are perceived by the reader through a specifically postcolonial ideological lens in these novels, Atwood, Clarke, and Mistry explore questions of historiography and genre, but also issues of reconstructed narrative and of compound identities.

The narratives analysed here emphasise the material quality of the object – the quilt, the gift, the souvenir – in response to fading memory. Atwood, Clarke, and Mistry can be seen as “accumulating the testimonies,

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122 Historian David Lowenthal employs the phrase “lineage mystique” in his book *The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* to refer to “legacies linked to birth and breeding,” and “ heritage defined by ancestry” (201).

documents, images, and visible signs of what was," in the context of the fading of communal memory (Nora xxv-xxviii). As Andreas Huyssen explains, "[w]hether paradox or dialectic, the spread of amnesia in our culture is matched by a fascination with memory and the past" ("Monument and Memory in a Postmodern Age" 254). Testimony as the accumulation of discarded objects in response to amnesia – quite literally the "multilayered sedimentations" of Huyssen (257) – is therefore these writers' response to what he calls the "expansive historicism of our contemporary culture" (257).

The texts of Atwood, Clarke, and Mistry come together here as reinterpretations of history: Grace is a fictional rendition of the historical Grace Marks who had figured in the journals of a Canadian literary ancestor, Susanna Moodie; Mary Gertrude Mathilda corrects Percy's (and the reader's) historical knowledge of the Caribbean by telling the obscured history of slavery on the island; and Mistry picks up the bits and pieces of an obscured national past in his portrayal of a Bombay-like city under the Emergency Rule of Indira Ghandi. As such, these three novels emphasise the textuality and plurality of history, as well as the contingency of truth, and are established as works of historiographic metafiction. Furthermore, as "generic patchworks," *Alias Grace*, *The Polished Hoe*, and *A Fine*

Balance recycle genres and reinscribe some of the predominant narratives of the past. *Alias Grace* recycles the domestic crime novel or sensation novel genre, as well as the figure of the subversive criminal quilter of Susan Glaspell's "A Jury of her Peers" (1917), in which crime is inscribed in a coded quilt. This time, however, the culpability of the murderess remains unresolved, and the quilter vanishes anonymously into the crowd (like the criminal of the typical detective novel); and instead of sharing her secret with a community of women, she shares it with a single man, a peddler-*cum*-mesmeriser. *The Polished Hoe* recycles the confessional genre and rewrites the slave narrative *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967) by William Styron, this time through the eyes of a woman plantation labourer who is not killed or captured but rather rises in status as the "kept woman" of the plantation owner, whom she kills. *A Fine Balance* recycles the epic genre and raises to a more prominent position a postcolonial Penelope, Dina Dalal, who quilts and sews to stave off her brother, landlord, and his *goondas* (or hired thugs) in the absence of her (this time deceased) husband. In recycling narratives of the past, these postcolonial writers approach the 'problem' of history and engage in rhetoric, described by Hayden White as an awareness of the variety of ways of configuring a past that itself can only exist as a chaos of forms ("The Politics of

Historical Interpretation"120). In their works of historiographic metafiction, Atwood, Clarke and Mistry engage in what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin call "the post-colonial task" (*The Post-colonial Reader* 356). They not only contest the message of history, which "has so often relegated individual post-colonial societies to footnotes to the march of progress" (356), but also use the narrative medium to reassert the heterogeneity of historical representation (White).

This study provides several theoretical frameworks for understanding the expressive function of textile crafts in these texts as, and alongside, narrative and story. In particular, my analysis has focused on three narrative paradigms that apply to textile craft's (particularly the quilt's) relationship to story and narrative. I see the technique of narrative and the mode of storytelling in these three texts as informed by (1) the function of the "souvenir" as defined by Susan Stewart; (2) the function of "heritage" as understood by David Lowenthal; and (3) the process of recycling.

(1) Narrative as Souvenir

The patchwork quilt, as represented in *Alias Grace* but also in *A Fine Balance*, is what Susan Stewart calls "a personal memento that carries connections to biography" (139) or a "souvenir of individual

experience."[123] According to Susan Stewart, the function of the souvenir is "to generate narrative" (147) and to authenticate the past. This theoretical framework is crucial to my argument that the quilt generates narrative in these texts on several levels. In constructing their narratives as patches assembled into novel form, the three authors studied here appear as what Walter Benjamin has termed "remembering authors." They carry out the "Penelope work of recollection" (*Illuminations* 204) by reporting in private and collective memory. Atwood, for example, finds her inspiration for *Alias Grace* within the collective memory of a historical figure; Clarke and Mistry find inspiration in their memories of their fomer lives in the Caribbean and in India, respectively. Quilts in the novels are intimately mapped against the life histories of the characters, forming "a compendium which is an autobiography" (Stewart 139) for Grace Marks, Dina Dalal and the tailors. Material objects in these texts (predominantly quilts in *Alias Grace* and *A Fine Balance*, and textiles as well as the wishbone and the hoe in *The Polished Hoe*) tell stories. Futher, in their status as souvenirs, they serve to authenticate the characters' pasts. Yet their stories, like the souvenir that is "by definition always incomplete"

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123 Stewart opposes "souvenirs of individual experience," which are most often samples and are not available as general consumer goods, to "souvenirs of exterior sights," which are most often representations, and are purchasable (138).

(136), can only evoke and resonate with their pasts, can never “entirely recoup” (136) the past. The souvenir, as Stewart claims, signifies the “suffusion of the worn” (139). Grace Marks’ story, as her unfinished quilt, is a “keepsake,” which she qualifies as “strange” (534) because it lies in a state of incompletion and dilapidation and calls attention to *not* “only the good things” (459).

(2) Narrative as Heritage

The ‘multilayered sedimentations’ of Huyssen resemble the “composite accretions” that historian David Lowenthal attributes to legacy (247). Storytelling, in its reconstructive process of nurturing personal histories through manipulation and invention, parallels what Lowenthal calls the “creative contrivance of heritage” as opposed to history as verifiable, archival truth (143). What distinguishes heritage from history, in Lowenthal’s words, is that mutations are innate to heritage. Heritage “lends itself to manipulation and invention” (223) and “is not fixed but changes in response to our own needs” (250). The digressive and accretive processes of storytelling at work in these novels defy the linearity and rigid narrative chronology or cohesion attributed to history and, instead, mirror heritage as a “jumbled, malleable amalgam ever reshaped” by personal histories (Lowenthal 147). Such a concept of story

as legacy and heritage informs the texts studied here, and in particular *The Polished Hoe*, in which clothes, like instruments of labour (the hoe) and like stories, are passed down as a “legacy of words” (100) and as “inheritances” (355).

(3) Narrative as Recycling

The notion of the recycled and reconstructed narrative is emphasised in the text through the aesthetic of ‘passing on’ and of the second-hand. Knowledge is often achieved here second-hand, through anecdote, gossip, overhearing, or rumour. The recycled narrative understood this way is informed by Peter Brooks’ notion that narrative is “remembering, repeating and working through” (iii). Instead of a static record or the simple recounting of a set of happenings, storytelling shares the mutations and inventions proper to heritage, and consists of remaking the present with bits and pieces of the past. Such a reshaping of the past is consistent with Roy Schafer’s notion of the “present version of the past” in which clarification comes “through the circular and coordinated study of past and present” (32-33). The recuperative gesture of these authors, as they recycle the narratives of the past, consists of a narrative strategy that mirrors the recuperative process of the patchwork quilt made of “useful scraps” (*FB* 64).

What craft critics have called a work-intensive aesthetic of the 90s demonstrates a shift in attitude towards evidence of the handmade (Leonard). Accordingly, the reconfigured quilt of the 90s no longer represents an essentially communal female leisure aesthetic, but rather a labour aesthetic. Not coincidentally, textile crafts in contemporary representations (such as those examined by this study) no longer denote a state of completion and unification (marked by nostalgia and the home), but are recontextualized and perceived to be in a state of incompletion, displacement, erosion (marked by border-crossing and trajectories). The female and male protagonists of the artisan class in these texts do not primarily resort to textile crafts as a form of domestic leisure, but more persistently are tied to textile labour as domestics, inmates, and labourers through exploitative labour practices. Paradoxically, they resist the exploitative systems of the prison, the plantation, the caste, and the export company by their expert use of their craft. Both the craft workers in the texts and the craft culture they represent call attention to alternative histories and heterogeneous ex-centric forces involved in crafts.

I see the authors examined here as craft-makers themselves: Atwood as trickster, Clarke as labourer, and Mistry as scavenger. In the crafted identities they depict, their insurgent act of cultural reiteration and

renewing of the past, these authors appear as what Homi Bhabha calls "borderline artist[s]" ("Beyond the Pale" 23). Settings of these texts include many border crossings, between nineteenth-century Canada, the United States, and Ireland (*Alias Grace*); between the Barbadian plantation after the Second World War and the United States and Canada (*The Polished Hoe*); and between rural and urban India of the 1970s and 80s, and Dubai (*A Fine Balance*). These contemporary novels written by Canadian authors oscillate between past and present, east and west, urban and rural, pre-and post-industrial societies. By crossing borders and portraying displaced interstitial characters bent on survival in and despite their fragmented narratives, Atwood, Clarke, and Mistry are examples of what Henri Giroux calls "border intellectuals"[124] and what Homi Bhabha calls the "borderline artist":

> The borderline artist performs a poetics of the open-border between cultures. She displays the 'interstices', the overlappings and interleavings, the hither and thither that is part of the history of those peoples whose identities are crafted from the experience of social displacement. Slaves, indentured labourers, economic minorities,

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124 In his essay on cultural workers, Henri Giroux writes of "border intellectuals" who "function in the space between high and popular culture, between the institution and the street, between the public and the private" (*Border Crossings* 5).

> political refugees, sexual or ethnic minorities must neither be homogenised into an ‘ontology of the oppressed’, nor celebrated as the mutinous ‘margins’ of the metropolitan experience. Their specificity lies in an ethics of cultural survival: their minority positions provide a tracery of the transnational world where links between cultures and communities are made through the struggle against cultural marginalisation, with the will to empowerment, rather than the vainglorious conceits of social centrality and political hegemony. Borderline artists may have fragmented narratives, archives that are empty, memories that are potent yet powerless; but their experience of survival gives them a special insight into the constructed, artefactual, strategic, and contingent nature of those events that are memorialized, by the powerful, as being the ‘facts’ of life, or the reportage of historical record. (“Beyond the Pale” 23)

In addition to questioning the obsolete, exclusively female and domestic qualities commonly attributed to textile crafts, as well as the aesthetic whole commonly associated with the quilt, my three-fold emphasis on narrative recollection, craftiness, and fragmentation has enabled me to posit textile craft as an apt metaphor for historiographic metafiction, and the transgression and fragmentation of the postmodern subject in Atwood’s *Alias Grace*. By viewing the forces involved in the assembly of the quilt as necessarily calling attention to its very unravelling, my analysis proposes a formal response to the paradoxes of the novel and, arguably, to Atwood’s writing in general – the pendular movement

between assembling and disassembling or unravelling, salvage and dispersal.

Continuing to unravel the metaphorical quilt and its metonymic patches, a process initiated in my analysis of *Alias Grace*, I focus on the rags and labour that make up the patch in *The Polished Hoe*. Whereas Atwood presented us with textile craft (the quilt) as “keepsake” (534) in a state of dilapidation Clarke aligns textile craft with “inheritances” (355) that are characterised by “manipulation and invention” (Lowenthal 223). I position *The Polished Hoe* within the genre of the neoslave narrative that proposes not only the clarification of an obscured past of slavery, but also a response to the challenge of writing history in what Pamela McCallum and Christian Olbey call “a cultural moment of postmodernity marked by features such as extreme relativism, undecidability, and profound scepticism regarding the possibility of material referentiality, let alone the desirability or even possibility of social transformation” (165). Whereas in *Alias Grace* I approached textile craft as a trope for fragmentation and the dispersal of the postmodern subject, crafts in the Caribbean context of Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe* represent and re-present or present again the distortions, omissions, and fabrications central to heritage reconstruction.

Alias Grace and *The Polished Hoe* both end with the main characters – the seamstresses / murderesses of the texts – coming to the end of their unravelling of their stories, and sinking into the menace of oblivion and dispersal. Although reinstated into society, Grace's hands are covered in gloves in the final chapter and she disperses within the crowd leaving "no marks" (412), only recognised by Jeremiah, who is also drifting incognito, by an imperceptible nod of the head. Mary Gertrude Mathilda finishes delivering her untranscribed statement to Percy with the knowledge that she will possibly be incarcerated for the murder of Bellfeels. Although her history, and that of the island, will be passed on by the villagers as inheritance, she becomes only a lingering scent for Percy (462). Dina, in *A Fine Balance*, finally ends up living with her brother's family and assuming the role of their domestic despite all her efforts to remain independent. In the final scene, however, the tailors-*cum*-beggars visit her regularly and on one occasion ask her to repair the fraying quilt that serves as a cushion for Ishvar. In *A Fine Balance*, recycling and repair thus constitute a (re)constructive response to the dispersal of the subject. I focus on the recycling of the worn into something new (but always inherently calling attention to the worn), in an attempt to propose recycling as an innovative formal, theoretical, and thematic device in postcolonial fiction. If the

completed patchwork quilt as bedcover is a sign of ‘normative’ (family) history, then the incomplete, frayed, and unused or displaced patchwork quilt coming apart (as in *Alias Grace* and *A Fine Balance*) becomes a trope for authorial inheritance of a traumatic past, and the tensions and conflicts inherent in a multicultural postcolonial society. However, in its incomplete, frayed, or displaced state, the patchwork quilt also signifies the promise of reconstruction, provisionality, and heterogeneity of postcolonial urban communities (that go beyond traditional structures of family, nation, religion, and gender). In *Alias Grace*, *The Polished Hoe*, and *A Fine Balance*, the “strange keepsakes” (*AG* 534), “hand-me-downs” (*PH* 10), and the “sordid quiltings” (*FB* 379) of the texts decry the link between textile crafts and a mystique of traditional lineage. These authors portray textile crafts instead as involved in mutations, making and remaking, as well as manipulation and invention proper to a postcolonial politics of recycling.

This study has by now established fragmented testimonies of textile workers, collecting and recycling of objects, transient, universal spider-weaver archetypes, and textile metaphors and their use as structural paradigms as landmarks of ‘patchwork novels’ of the 90s in Canada. Atwood, Clarke, and Mistry portray their crafty characters as not so much

involved with assembling the scraps of the patchwork quilt, but rather as groping around in the "rag bag" to provide "a touch of colour" with the intention of questioning "the approved reading" (*AG* 551) of the past. I establish textile crafts as characterised by the provisional paradox of assembly and unravelling, by concepts of recycling, and by a labour aesthetic. The patchwork quilt, recycled textiles, and the experiences of labour of the seamstresses and tailors involved are presented as multiple, heterogeneous, and provisional. As such, these representations reveal the craft-making tendencies of historiography and constitute a syncretic postcolonial model.

The cultural syncretism of the quilt, however, does not signify the aligning of reconciliation with remembrance, but rather joins remembrance of the past with a critique of the contemporary condition. My notion of revisionary crafts exposed here resonates with notions of "wounded artifacts" (*objets blessés*) or "repair work" (*objets réparés*) that have only recently appeared in western museum studies although they have been fundamental activities for centuries in Africa. An exhibition at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2007 approached this previously unexplored theme of object repair by local populations in Africa by featuring repaired or wounded objects that have been re-stitched, consolidated, re-sealed,

not with the intention of restoring them to their original appearance, but rather of re-composing a fragile and provisional balance for the continuation of their respective uses. Repairs are intentionally visible as they are an integral part of each recreated object. The “repaired” or “wounded” object insists on the poetics of repair and recycling that counters the ephemeral nature of objects and inscribes the object within a process of mutation, making and remaking, as well as manipulation and invention. I am intrigued by this notion of the wounded artefact and its similarities with my own vision of the flawed or frayed quilt, and intend to investigate this idea as a possible area of further research.

This study, finally, constitutes a response to Benita Parry’s call that “we need to recall the long histories of injustice, to remember the obstacles in the way of building a just society and always to hold in view the prospect of a future” (193). The “sordid quiltings” (379) of the three texts studied here ground the narratives in a historical perspective that includes appropriation of physical resources, exploitation of human labour and institutional repression. This perspective, Benita Perry has claimed, “ha[s] receded from view” and is badly needed in postcolonial inquiry today (3).

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