

STITCHES, BITCHES, AND BODIES:
TEXTILES AND THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY
'FEMALE' BODY

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Abstract

Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies explores the gendered and material politics of bodies and textiles in performance. It looks at how knitting, weaving, embroidery, and cloth perform the gendered body as a site of political upheaval, creation, and destruction. Here, I analyse how twenty-first century western artists and activists use textiles to explore the politics of bodies in space. Focusing predominately on western, feminist, queer, racialized, and activist artists, this project asks what threads these artists pick up, and why. It contextualizes itself within and across feminism, performance studies, and material culture studies, bringing all three together to develop theories of feminism and identity politics that queer the body, embrace dialectics, and explode binary concepts around gender and sexuality. It asks, can we use the traditional method of knitting, sewing, and weaving, to stage the body in startlingly new ways? How do we contextualize craft in contemporary protest and performance alongside feminist conversations and politics? Can we find the ghost of the seamstress in our own affective and phenomenological discourse with the world around us, our oppression, and our privilege? *Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies* demonstrates how seemingly passive textile works can illuminate structures of intolerance and oppression in contemporary art and politics. It unpacks contemporary politics at the intersection between objects and bodies, and between textiles and gender/sexuality/race. Seeing the stage, the body, and the street as contemporary sites with political stakes, *Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies* aims to uncover a practice of knitting, weaving, and embroidery found behind picket lines and in/on skin.

Dedication

To my mother, Ruth Gordon.

Who told me I could do whatever I wanted.

So long as I got a PhD.

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Introduction

You know, it's kind of impressive when people curse in needlepoint. There's something laborious about it.

-“SANTA’S SECRET STUFF”, GILMORE GIRLS

In his introduction to *Mechanick Exercises*, one of the earliest books about craft, Joseph Moxon discusses his hesitation to use the word “handy-craft” to describe what his book is about, “because *Hand-Craft* signifies *Cunning*, or *Sleight* or *Craft* of the Hand, which cannot be taught by Words, but is only gained by *Practice* and *Exercise*” (9 sic, italics in original). As such, to avoid some supposed homonymic slippage, he opts for the term “Exercises.” Glenn Adamson, in his own introduction to *The Craft Reader*, widely considered to be an indispensable text within craft studies, ruminates on this sentence: “Moxon argues that craft is something beyond words: something learned with the body rather than the mind” (1). What does it mean, he asks, to write discourse on something fundamentally nondiscursive: “The idea that making is its own particular sort of thinking is an appealing one. But it also constitutes a major challenge for anyone who wants to do justice to making through the seemingly inadequate tools of words and ideas” (1). It seems cheekily suitable, that I should, in turn, fixate on Adamson’s fixation, and its subsequent interpretations. I could discuss the binary thinking here—the Cartesian mind/body split, and what such an approach might reveal of Adamson, Moxon, and craft studies itself. I might linger on the delicious combination of making/thinking, and how Adamson is interested in putting the Hand back into Craft; reuniting and encouraging the slippage that Moxon is wary of. However, where I would like to focus is on the supposedly synonymic relationship between craft and exercise. What Adamson seems to gloss over in his appreciation of how we write craft, is that craft is necessarily performed.

This dissertation explores the performance of craft. It looks at how textiles—knitting, weaving, embroidery, and cloth—perform the gendered body as a site of political upheaval, creation, and destruction. I analyse how twenty-first century western artists and activists use textiles to explore the politics of bodies in space. It will focus predominately on North American, feminist, queer, racialized, and activist artists, asking what threads these artists pick up, and why. *Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies* demonstrates how seemingly passive tactile works can illuminate structures of intolerance and oppression in contemporary art and politics. Seeing the stage, the body, and the street as contemporary sites with political stakes, *Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies* aims to uncover a practice of knitting, weaving, and embroidery behind picket lines and in/on skin. It unpacks contemporary politics at the intersection between objects and bodies, and between textiles and gender/sexuality/race. This project analyses under-recognized female, trans, and queer artists who have taken up textiles in order to explode identities, bodies, genders, and sexuality.

This project contextualizes itself within and across feminism, performance studies, and material culture studies. It brings all three together to develop theories of feminism and identity politics that queer the body, that embrace difference and dialectics, and that explode binary concepts around gender and sexuality. I ask, how are textiles being used in theatre, performance, and activism? In this goal, it joins ongoing scholarship on performance and textiles that explores trends in feminist performance art and unpacks the representation of gendered bodies in contemporary space. Julie Hollenbach's Master's thesis, "Comfort/Discomfort: Allyson Mitchell's Queer Re-Crafting of the Home, the Museum and the Nation" (2013), analyses Mitchell's craft installations, suggesting they queer space through playful acts of resistance. Ariel Osterweis's exploration of performance artist Narcissister in "Public Pubic: Narcissister's

Performance of Race, Disavowal, and Aspiration” (2015), looks at mixed-race, queer performance artist Narcissister’s work as a complex and layered performance of objecthood and subjectivity across the gendered, racialized body. Artist and academic Helene Vosters explores embroidery as both a communal remembering and a personal memorialization in her works *Shot at Dawn* (2013) and *Flag of Tears* (2015), making powerful claims on the politics of memorialization and in Canadian history. Laura Stevens’s “‘Sometimes Uncomfortable, Sometimes Arousing’: The Slow Dramaturgy of Casey Jenkins’s Craftivist Performances” (2016), unpacks the feminism and activism in performance artist Jenkins’s vaginal knitting, putting it into an ecological and feminist context, as we watch the slow, menstruating body. All these texts bring performance and textiles together across bodies to explore the activist potential of the textile object on the body as stage. They use textiles to illustrate politics that surround the body and the space it occupies.

While these texts mark interdisciplinary interventions through analyses of performance and textiles, none of them explore the concept of textiles themselves as performers. My project takes a new materialist approach, putting textiles into conversation with performing bodies to explore the material of the body and the performance of the material in tandem. Drawing on new materialism, I “[take] seriously the idea that all matter is agential and that agency is distributed across and among materials in relation. As such, matter engages with matter as well as with (or without) humans, who are also matter” (Schneider, “New Materialisms” 7). This dissertation investigates my daily interaction with the material world, analyses dialectic performances between things and gendered bodies, and attempts to surmise what these discussions reveal about gendered performance and identity. Or, as William Connolly expresses, this dissertation joins many other new materialists in “rethink[ing] subjectivity by playing up the role of inhuman

forces within the human, emphasiz[ing] the self-organizing powers of several nonhuman processes, explor[ing] dissonant relations between those processes and cultural practice, rethink[ing] the sources of ethics, and commend[ing] the need to fold a planetary dimension more actively and regularly into studies of global, interstate and state politics” (399).

Additionally, most of the texts mentioned above engage with concepts of the body and textiles that reinforce stereotypical ‘natural’ connections between textiles and domesticity, and the female body and femininity. Some, including “Comfort/Discomfort” and “Public Pubic” investigate the rupture between textiles and bodies, moving beyond an essentialist, heteronormative reading of a woman knitting. However, much of the readings here do not disrupt the ‘traditional’ uses of textile or their associations in the larger patriarchal culture. Textiles in these texts, if analysed at all, are typically read as markers of community building (sewing circles), indicative of the female-body-as-goddess (vaginal knitting), or rejected as passive domesticity. My project is not interested in these kinds of analyses, which have been much discussed, lamented, or celebrated across different feminist theories. Instead, my project aligns itself with the Third Wave ‘bad girl’ feminists who were central in exploring and exploding ongoing debates on sex in art, and on the distinction between art and porn. What if we catch ‘bad’ feminists knitting, like their first-wave grandmothers might have? What if the ‘bad’ knitters are ‘bad’ at knitting? How can we disrupt questions of skill, value, and aesthetics that surround not only textile art, but the female body? Here the feminine is not rejected, so much as the bitch is embraced. And with it, sloppy crafts meet leaky bodies (Grosz), to-be-looked-at bodies (Mulvey), cyborgs (Haraway), disappearing bodies (Phelan), and explicit bodies (Schneider).

Through new materialism, stitches, bitches, and bodies are knotted together across this dissertation, and explored through theatrical examples (chapter one), performance art (chapter two), protest knits (chapter three), and in agentic material artworks (chapter four). Ultimately, *Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies* is a performance studies dissertation; I analyse textiles and performance in western art and activism in the 21st century, with a focus on works that foreground the gendered body and its material politics. Throughout this dissertation, I invoke the metaphor of knots as both a material, metaphorical, and methodological concept. Typically, knots are made to keep things together. However, sometimes, a knot—like the bitch—is a bump in the road that stalls patriarchal, hegemonic ‘progress’.¹ The knot is also an object, a thing-like tangle that seems self-made, discovered too late in your box of yarn. Some knots are dialectical: the coming together of separate ideas, (un)productively in conflict. Others seem like separate threads, but are just the same string looped in and over on itself. At times, knots appear like failures; other times, the yarn may seem knotted until we are able to reposition ourselves, and identify the patterns of mess and bodily affect. While I do not look at any literal or specific knots in this dissertation (save one in chapter four), the material stitches explored across this dissertation come together in knot-like assemblages typically called tangles. I approach material culture and craft studies as a performance studies scholar interested not in making or even unmaking, but rather in the performance of picking up and unpicking knots.

At the risk of immediately betraying my central metaphor, this introductory chapter aims to progress quite linearly (although we may meet a tangle on the way). I look first at stitches (craft

¹ I use hegemony to specifically reference the theoretical interventions of Antonio Gramsci, who identified hegemony as the domination of power by the bourgeoisie under capitalism. Hegemony specifically refers to the process by which the ruling class establish and maintain financial and political control over the lower classes through a series of dominant ideologies that become normalized. Gramsci’s formative theory reveals that ideologies are social constructs, created by and for the ruling classes. This theory has had great influence across the humanities; hegemonic assumptions and structures can be uncovered within theories on class, gender, culture, and politics, to name only a few (Gramsci, 189-221).

studies), then bitches (contemporary feminism), and then bodies (material performance studies) in order to situate this project at the intersection of these fields. For each section, I offer a brief theoretical literary review and outline the project's theoretical lens and critical interventions. My ultimate goal is to uncover a performance strategy of textile art at the intersection of performance studies and material culture, investigating what feminist interventions might be found at these crossroads.

Stitches: Craft studies

While I primarily investigate new materialism in the context of performance studies and identity politics, much of my approach is additionally influenced by emerging trends of performance in craft studies. In what follows, I outline how craft studies has informed my material approach, with the goal of embracing new materialism as a methodology that “casts light on the dissonant relations between the drives of neoliberal capitalism and boomerang effects from nonhuman forces” (Connolly 399).

While origin stories vary, the history of craft studies is often tied to the Arts and Crafts Movement in the nineteenth century. Founded in part by William Morris, and connected to his essay “The Revival of Handicraft,” the Arts and Crafts Movement elevated craft to the level of art, and in doing so, rejected an art/craft binary. It was also a political movement; Morris argues that a rejection of manufacturing and machinery, and a return to the hand-made, hand-crafted object, will enable a larger Marxist and socialist project. Looking back on fourteenth and fifteenth century craftsmanship, and in conversation with Marxist writings on the means of production, Morris's return to craft is more than an artistic goal, it's a way of life (Cooke 227). It was meant as a political project to better a local community, and reveal the “economical

conditions under which the mass of the people live;” by connecting humans back to the work and labour they can do with their hands, they can take back the means of production (Morris 147).

Almost all goods are made apart from the life of those who use them; we are not responsible for them, our will has had no part in their production, except so far as we form part of the market on which they can be forces for the profit of capitalist whose money is employed in producing them... The result is that in this direction our boasted individuality is a sham; and persons who wish for anything that deviates ever so little from the beaten path have either to wear away their lives in a wearisome and most futile contest with a stupendous organization which disregards their wishes, or to allow those wishes to be crushed out for the sake of a quiet life. (148)

Morris reveals that “the public needs are subordinated to the interest of the capitalist masters of the market,” with prohibitive pricing put on any methods of knowing how to combat the capitalists, means of production, or even acquire good quality objects to make day-to-day life more functional. By returning to the hand-made, and taking over the means of production through individual labour, Morris argues for a socialist way of life that will enable the working class individual to a path of financial autonomy, free, in concept anyways, from the domination of a capitalist superstructure. If successful, the revival of handicraft is meant to be a “protest against intellectual tyranny, and a token of the change which is transforming civilization into socialism” (155).

Morris’s “Revival” is a delicious read, and his writing is prophetic across many contemporary intercultural concerns that relate to craft, including fast fashion and global labour economies (Adamson *Craft Reader* 146). What is still so relevant to craft studies, and indeed this dissertation, is that Morris, and others within the Arts and Craft Movement, “suggest ways

forward by looking backwards” (Adamson 139).² Yet, as Adamson explores as editor to *The Craft Reader*, while often connected with the Arts and Crafts movement, the history of craft is much more expansive and applicable across disciplines. Reframing craft history away from the Arts and Crafts Movement invites other important origin stories. Notably, feminist theory has a huge influence on the evolution of craft studies and its connection with the DIY movement.

The repoliticization of craft that occurred in the 1970s—an infusion of urgency and ideas that has little to do with the Arts and Crafts lineage—is the greatest single influence on the contemporary DIY or ‘crafter’ scene, which combines the expression of subculture identities with an attempt to create anti-corporate commercial opportunities. Equally, Feminist theory has been important in its contention that craft is best seen as a pervasive, ‘everyday’ activity, implicated in the contingent flux of modern life. For many practitioners today, craft need not be seen as a subgenre of fine art, nor as necessarily rooted in tradition. (Adamson 4)³

This is the genealogy I would most like to align my project with. While Morris has the best of intentions, as Lucy Lippard discusses, regardless of intentions, the aesthetics surrounding a return to handicraft lead to conversations of taste. Questions of taste are necessarily questions of class. “Artists and craftspeople, from William Morris to de Stijl and the Russian Constructivists, have dreamed of a socialist Utopias where everyone’s life is improved by cheap and beautiful

² “For Morris, we should learn from history and use it as a template for reform and restructuring. History is the supreme teacher that would guide and inspire those living in the present” (Cooke 228).

³ There are larger historical connections between the feminist and political movements and textile communities. As Elaine Hedges explores, “Susan B. Anthony’s first talk on equal rights for women was at a quilting bee, and she and Elizabeth Cady Stanton frequently used such gatherings to advocate political action and change. Earlier, Sarah Grimke advised women to embroider anti-slavery slogans and images on domestic artifacts, urging, ‘May the point of our needles prick the slave-owner’s conscience.’ And there is the delightful story of the subversive wife who had her husband sleep under a quilt that bore, unknown to him, a pattern named after the political party he opposed” (10).

objects and environments. Yet the path of the Museum of Modern Arts's design department, also paved with good intentions, indicated the destination of such dreams in a capitalist consumer society" (Lippard 483).⁴

Adamson illustrates this point well in a discussion around craft idealism in the *Craft Reader*. Offering the example of Brazilian peasants who have recently moved from the countryside to suburban and urban homes, he discusses their preference for artificial—manufactured—plastic flowers that remind them of their homes. He discusses the questions of idealism, class, and aesthetics, as they relate to larger assumptions around mass-produced plastic. Adamson observes what different methodologies would make of the flowers, looking at them from a postmodern, Marxist, material culture, anthropological, and aesthetic lens. He concludes that there is no one way to observe this cultural trend, but rather, that “craft is a means of navigating all these issues,” with crafts inviting “a complexity of their own right.” (137). “They can send mixed messages,” Adamson tells us, “[t]hey can be either self-conscious or pointedly reformist. They are, in themselves, cultural texts that require decoding” (137). Embracing a craft studies approach invites a complexity, a tangle, a dialectical knot of discursive, and multiple methodological potential. The goal here is not to delineate, categorize, or rebinarize craft, but rather to use craft to reveal and better understand the complexities of everyday life. Following this suggestion, I am inclined not to frame craft studies through the Arts and Crafts Movement, but rather through the goals of a larger cultural project. This dissertation explores craft not as a

⁴ Within the Arts and Craft Movement, questions of deskilling, labour, and idealism are tied together through a socialist project, but one ironically dependant on a high price tag. As Adamson suggests, Morris himself was “in some senses, and in his own estimation, a failure... Despite his commitment to making art for the masses, his clients were almost invariably well-to-do people sympathetic with his aims” (146). He continues, “what all craft idealism seems to have in common however is a fundamental disconnection with the capitalist marketplace. No Arts and Crafts project was financially viable for long, unless it transgressed the principals of the movement by resorting to cheap labour or mass production” (135). In his own words, Morris suggested, “we have already got in all branches of culture rather more geniuses than we can comfortably bear, and that we lack, so to say, audiences rather than preachers” (qtd. in Adamsom 146).

socialist antidote to capitalism, or as opposition to either art or machinery, but rather as a set of cultural texts, or in this case, cultural performances.

One of the most significant cultural performances of textiles within feminist theory is the quilt. Viewing the quilt as a metaphor to discuss the ways in which nineteenth century female authors adopt piecing as a formal approach, Elaine Showalter identifies feminism in the Victorian quilters. “[T]he repertoire of the Victorian lady who could knit, knot, and tat, has become that of the feminist critic, in whose theoretical writing metaphors of text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web, abound. The Spinster who spins stories, Ariadne and her labyrinth thread, Penelope who weaves and unweaves her theoretical tapestry in the halls of Ithaca or New Haven, are feminist culture heroines of the critical age” (224). Locating the practice of quilting among white, Black, abolitionist, and Indigenous women of the nineteenth century, Showalter suggests that quilting is a diverse embodied female language, an archive of female experience: “The woman artist survives to record this history through the hieroglyphics of the quilt” (232).⁵ Elaine Hedges also see quilt discourse and analysis as necessarily connected to history; divorcing quilts from their historical context is to view them through a patriarchal lens, and in doing so, risks obliterating the cultural specificity they bring to the room as woman’s work.⁶ This is a question, not just of gender, but of class.

⁵ “Quilting was an art that crossed racial, regional and class boundaries,” Showalter writes, “produced by slave women in the south as well as by pioneer housewives on the track west and by New England matrons in their homes” (224). For more on Black women and abolitionist quilts, see Hedges at 9-10.

⁶ As Hedges states, to read a quilt as if it were a painting, is “to see quilts through categories not intrinsically their own, categories that try to force them to be something else. Such categories isolate quilts, as the products of working women, from the social, economic and political context out of which they evolved and to which they must be returned for their full validation and meaning. We run the risk of doing to quilts what the new criticism has done to much literature: establishing works as timeless universals, divorced from their historical context, to be judged by some presumably “objective” standards which, we now realize, surreptitiously embody a white male perspective, and which may therefore distort, or obviate the possibility of our discovering, the nature of artistic meaning in work by women” (7).

To talk about quilts, then, as part of an interest in rediscovering working-class culture and working class art, must mean returning the quilt to its origins. These origins are not in a "working class" as distinct from a "middle class," but are origins quite specifically in women's work of sewing, which, as has been said, cut across class lines. All women sewed; it was an experience they shared, and it could create common bonds. (7-8)

Yet Hedges, who mostly celebrates the quilts impact on female creativity, is also not ignorant of the other side of the coin, inviting us to see quilts as “rooted in both meaningful work and in cultural oppression... [with] a combination of admiration and awe at limitations overcome and of sorrow and anger at limitations imposed” (10). These innovative theorists, and their ability to focus on quilts and female creativity, and draw those conclusions across history and literature, are foundational to my approach in discussing female bodies and textiles.

Showalter equally identifies some of the pitfalls of feminist textiles theorists; namely a tendency to over-romanticize the relationship between women and textiles. “In order to understand the relationship between piecing and American women’s writing, we much also deromanticize the art of the quilt, situate it in its historical contexts, and discard many of the sentimental stereotypes of an idealized, sisterly and non-hierarchical woman’s culture that cling to it. We must consider nineteenth-century woman’s writing with a similar detachment, avoiding a binary system in which we contrast women’s art to male “high art” in an alternative vocabulary of anonymity, artlessness, privacy, and collaboration” (227). This romanticization (similar to Morris’s idealism) is an important point to foreground; craft is not the greener grass. Craft, its community, and its implications on performance and gendered identity, is not immune to the binary thinking that reinforces patriarchal hegemonies, class hierarchies, and white supremacy.

Lippard identifies some of these binaries in her essay, “Making Something From Nothing.” She suggests that the art/craft divide, and the ‘good’ taste that delineates ‘fine’ arts from ‘hobby’ arts, is deeply connected to politics of gender and class. As Lippard discusses, “[m]uch has been made of the need to erase the false distinction between art and *craft*, “fine” art and the “minor” arts, “high” and “low” art—distinctions that particularly affect women’s art” (483). In more recent craft studies, Adamson invites conversations away from questions of art entirely, suggesting that “[d]escribing craft as an art form, or even as a fixed set of disciplines, disguises the otherwise obvious fact that craft is involved in an enormous range of cultural practices that have nothing to do with aesthetics or museums. It also blinds us to the potential radicality of crafts nonart status” (*Craft Reader* 2). Even within craft studies themselves, there are hierarchies of aesthetics and taste that take their cue from class division. “[T]here are also “high” crafts and “low” ones,” Lippard discusses “and although women wield more power in the crafts world than in the fine art world, the same problem plague both. The crafts need only one more step up the aesthetic and financially respectability ladder and they will be headed for the craft museum rather than for people’s homes” (484). Exploring the binaries between art and craft, and within them, this dissertation firmly plants itself between the two ends of the pendulum. It is maybe the swing itself—a fluctuation, or modulation between the categories of art vs. craft, professional vs. amateur, working class vs. upper/middle class, public vs. private, and domestic vs. civic/political.

Adamson actively embraces this dialectic approach to craft.⁷ His foundational work in craft studies invites us to move away from this constantly oscillating binary of “arts and crafts”. He

⁷ The creative potential of breaking down the binary in contemporary art and craft has been explored in a variety of ways in Maria Elena Buszek edited collection of essays, *Extra/Ordinary: Craft and Contemporary Art* (2011), Glenn Adamson in *Thinking Through Craft* (2007), and Howard Risatti in *A Theory of Craft: Function and*

invites us to consider the condition of “post-disciplinary” within craft studies.⁸ Adamson suggests that today’s crafters want their work to exist beyond definition. The art/craft divide that was foundational to many of the previous conversations around crafting and its politics, now seems unimportant. Crafts are highly aware of what they are doing, and can adjust depending on their context: “Craft becomes something of a free radical within the different categories and art designation. Here, craft becomes more of a methodology or skill that can be picked up within a studio, different arts industry, etc.” (“Glenn Adamson on Craft”). Reading craft as a malleable methodology invites us to read not only craft through the lens of performance, but performance through the lens of craft.

Ultimately, I am looking at craft through the lens of performance. Performance and craft have been linked together throughout art history, and within foundational work on craft studies (Adamson). In her book *Crafted: Objects in Flux*, Emily Zilber identifies the link between performance and craft when she talks about possible different categories that we might apply to craft works. She points to the performance of craft as a major category, where the making of the thing is more central to the artwork than the thing itself. By embracing both performance and craft, performance illuminates the life of the object, and the object illuminates the performance of the everyday:

There is, for example, a sense of theatre in the making of objects in any number of craft media, including weaving, wheel throwing, and glass blowing. Furthermore, the

Aesthetic Expression (2007). These publications are representative of an early twenty-first century paradigm shift in both the craft and art worlds concerning practice and theory.

⁸ Adamson questions his own use of “post-disciplinary”. He asks, who gets to wear the title of ‘post-disciplinary’; “artists can freely define and redefine themselves at will, most institutions are not so lucky” (Adamson 586). I could also read this moment not as “post-disciplinary” but queer. As Jill Dolan suggests “if queer means anything at all... it means multiplicity” (“Introduction: Building a Theatrical Vernacular” 1). By adopting a queer lens, we might more readily accept redefinition as an embrace of definitions in flux rather than an rejection of disciplinary lines.

functional nature of many crafted objects—cups, vases, chairs, jewelry—is tied specifically to the bodily enactment of events, rituals, gestures, and behaviors of everyday life. Physicality and materiality are at the core of these kinds of performative moments, which comprise of an active engagement of the labour involved in an object's making and of the object itself as an artifact of that process. (Zilber 87)

The performance of craft is Pollock-like; the artwork is the act of the artist creating.⁹ Zilber also points how the finished object, either in its function or its artistry, still references its own creation—the artist's performance. Zilber's reminder reflects the performative turn within craft studies, with an increasing focus on how craft objects are created/performed, the performance of finished craft product, and the relationship between the two. There is much to be gained by combining performance studies and craft studies.

Performance plays an especially interesting role in the discipline specific movement of “sloppy craft”. Coined in 2007 by Art Institute of Chicago artist and educator Anne Wilson, “sloppy craft” is a term first used to describe the messy, political, and intentional work of Josh Faught. Faught's textile installation *Nobody Knows I'm a Lesbian* (2006), covers and entire wall of the gallery, an explosive textile collage. In what Faught describes as “calculated sloppiness,” yarn drips like paint (qtd. in Adamson “When Craft Gets Sloppy”, 38). It's frayed, knotted, and tied together. And yet, with hues of gold, orange, and yellow, it is warm. It sparkles, glistens, and invites. The messy tapestry shows more than it tells, opening up the queer space of sloppy craft. *Nobody Knows I'm a Lesbian* demonstrates the queer potential in making a mess.¹⁰

⁹ For more on this, see Amelia Jones's chapter, “The ‘Pollockian Performative’ and the Revision of the Modernist Subject,” in *Body Art*.

¹⁰ For more on queerness and Faught's textile work, see Lutz, Kunimatsu, Auther, and Linden.



Figure 1: Josh Faught, *Nobody Knows I'm a Lesbian*, 2006.

Yet the embrace of ‘sloppy craft’ within craft studies has not been wholehearted. Adamson hints at some of this tension in his discussion of the trend: “[i]t’s a scene that repeats itself over and over again in art schools these days. The eminent professor of a craft-based department, visiting a student’s studio, inspects the work in progress. What she sees is expressive. It’s got personality. It is work that’s clearly going somewhere. There’s only one problem. It’s really badly made” (“When Craft Gets Sloppy” 36). Sloppy craft demonstrates a shift in craft studies to embrace ‘craft’ “as a verb—a series of actions or performances, rather than a noun—an object”. Sloppy craft exemplifies and celebrates the process of making, be it amateur or otherwise (Paterson 2). The aesthetics of skilled making are contested. Utilizing craft as a verb (and not only a noun) outlines the performance of craft, but also points to the messiness of making, and the physical and bodily performer behind the object. By highlighting the action of craft, sloppy craft speaks to theories of failure in craft and questions cultural assumptions of craft aesthetics, artistic value, and success:

Sloppy craft is perceived as an accessible term to most readers interested in craft, evoking images of perhaps unsuccessful experiments with materials and processes.... it has also

recently assumed the role of social critic, and in doing so has illuminated shared concerns of the art and craft worlds, while posing questions that elicit disagreement among these worlds. Behind these concerns are the concepts of postdisciplinarity, skill, and hybridity. (Paterson 1)

When we choose to deconstruct the binary and hierarchy of art vs. craft, we necessarily open up questions of aesthetics, skill, and ‘success’; sloppy craft offers not an antidote, or a call for conceptual approach over an aesthetic one, but rather embraces a phenomenological affect reminiscent of the performing body.

Sloppy craft intentionally points to methodology in craft practices and studies, positioning craft as performance methodology. It is a process of embracing queerness, gendered labour, and reskilling, within the larger conversations around craft, art, success, and aesthetics. Here, “the emphasis [is] placed squarely on the actions of the makers rather than the material outcomes of their processes. In this way the objects [are] markers of time rather than space” (Paterson 3).¹¹ Yet, interestingly, as sloppy craft marks a move towards performance, authors Paterson and Surette frame this explicitly as a process of dematerialization: “[t]he *dematerialization* of the craft object accompanies many current considerations of craft and, while not new, has been used recently to position craft as a methodology, as a form of knowledge, as a performance” (9). Here, performance is introduced into craft studies as a feminist and queer strategy: “it is worth noting how second-wave feminist art strategies may be read as informing much contemporary “performative craft” showcased in exhibitions such as *Gestures of Resistance* and *Hand+Made*” (9). Performance and craft come together as an expression of feminine and feminist labour—one that focuses on the inviable action of making, rather than the skill, value, or conventional

¹¹ Paterson and Surette are discussing the Museum of Contemporary Craft guest curators, Shannon Stratton and Judith Leemann, and their approach to “performative craft” in the 2010 exhibition *Gestures of Resistance*.

aesthetics of the object created. More than that, the very sloppiness of the thing, the very mess of the final product (along with the mess of making) is seen as beautiful. This is not necessarily an aesthetic beauty (although I personally believe it is), but a beauty that lives in the act of performance, in the labour, the failure, the pain, the struggle, the politics of making and material. And yet, what I reject in my adoption of sloppy craft is the question of dematerialization; what these analyses seem to forget is that performance, too, is material.

Bitches: ‘Bad’ Feminists

Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies analyses ‘aggressive’ or ‘radicalized’ performances of femininity. As the *Gilmore Girls* character Rory Gilmore states in the epigraph to this chapter, I am interested in people who curse with textiles, and the labour therein. We might call these people bitches. The ‘bitch’ as a character, a concept, and a theory enters stage left. She rejects a performance of appropriate femininity, and in her rejection, critiques the very aesthetics of ‘appropriateness’. Assumptions around female whiteness, domesticity, and delicacy are placed in conversation with/against textile performances of tangles, knots, needles, and scissors. The bitch showcases the inelegant, the undomesticated, the messy performances of femininity. The bitch has refused the role that was offered her in the patriarchal script, and in that rejection, is labelled as such: a bitch. I am interested in this kind of rejection, and yet, refuse to read that rejection as reduction. Rather, I aim to find utopic and hopeful joy in refusing the patriarchal script. Here, negation takes on the metaphorical resonance of no-means-no. “No” in this context is not anti-utopic or ‘negative,’ but rather the act of being heard, being believed, being taken seriously. The case studies I discuss say no. They reject a simple, beautiful, or ‘appropriate’ response to hegemonic scripts. They are bitches, in all their laborious, glorious bitching. In inviting the bitch

to centre stage, I showcase contemporary performances that critique and unpack textiles, bodies, and feminism, in their gendered and racialized categorizations.

I use “bitch” as playwright Susanna Fournier does in *Four Sisters*, part three of her theatrical epic, *The Empire Trilogy*. In the climatic end of the first half (and into intermission), as the pace of the show escalates towards a political and emotional fever pitch, the character Sarah gives a rage-filled speech about being labelled a bitch:

When I refused to leave my home they called me a stubborn bitch. When I would not do as my mother asked she called me a selfish bitch. When my clients were angry with my rules—pushy bitch. The men on the street when I ignored them—frigid bitch. When I disagreed—ignorant bitch, when I was young—pretty bitch, when I wasn’t—old bitch, when I insisted—uppity bitch, when I was angry—crazy bitch, when I was minding my own business—too-good bitch, dumb bitch, fat bitch, skinny bitch, slut bitch, ugly bitch, whiny bitch, (*actor can insert other scenarios in which she’s been called bitch*) selfish stupid bitch— (Fournier, np)

The repetition of the label “bitch” is an onomatopoeic slap in the face (again and again). When I saw the premier at the Theatre Centre in Toronto, June 11, 2019—sitting next to my queer crush—the scene was by far the most moving. The repetition both emphasizes the ubiquity of the word and simultaneously makes it meaningless. As I listened, the painful, jaded, rage-fuelled reclamation of this gendered slur felt like walking on hot sand: sharp, painful, but strangely satisfying. It hurts, to pick up this word, to hear it, to take it back. Later in the scene, when Fournier’s character turns violent, she seems to hurl the word at the audience: “A PACK OF STRAY FUCKING BITCHES RIGHT – RIGHT??” (np). The women in the show are radicalized by the word bitch; what was meant to strip them of their identity has given them

power.

This moment in Fournier's play, and indeed many of her aesthetic choices, speak to the aesthetic performance strategies discussed in Sarah Gorman, Geraldine Harris, and Jen Harvie's special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* on contemporary feminist performance. In an attempt to recontextualize contemporary performance in a post #MeToo, post Women's March moment of justified anger and exhaustion, this issue explores the connection between popular feminism, and popular feminist movements, and their influence on contemporary performance and feminist aesthetic strategies. As Gorman, Harris, and Harvie prompt in their introduction, feminism is back—and yet, it needs to consciously align itself with the contemporary political moment:

Feminism needs sustained, sincere commitment to intersectionalism and to honouring differences. It needs revived commitment to the socialism dedicated to dismantling the socio-economic inequalities which sustain women's oppression, while it also needs to defend against the myopia risked by dominant socialism as much as dominant feminisms. It needs to pay more attention to the profound significations of bodies, not least to recognize and respect embodied differences as well as different traditions, conventions, and commitments of signification. It needs to attend scrupulously to important articulations of feelings, especially, as seen here, legitimate anger and rage, even as it seeks joy (283).

For these scholars, contemporary feminist performance is necessarily involved in a network of politics, bodies, and feelings. This renewed, intentional, intersectional, and socially conscious feminism invites performance aesthetics and strategies from across a varying spectrum of form

and content. The question is not what you're performing, but why you're performing it (and why now), making the "what" of performance that much more diverse. For the purposes of this project, I'm interested in contemporary aesthetics of feminist performance that bring together both myopic and utopic practices—both personal and political methodologies—to reject ongoing violence against women, and criticize hegemonies of neoliberal capitalism and of white supremacy. These are the performance aesthetics and strategies of the bitch.

The bitch not only reclaims patriarchal systems/figures, but invites onlookers to investigate those same patriarchal hegemonic structures within performance and feminism. She acknowledges feminism's historical occlusions, specifically questions of race and class, while simultaneously focusing on the future. What is most interesting to me about the bitch's performance strategy is the invitation that legitimate anger and rage may coexist with a utopic, future-focused, or joy-seeking project.¹² It is within this pendulum swing that I firmly situate my project, case studies, and theoretical approach. These bitches are angry, hurt, and fed up, but still hopeful, joyful, and utopic enough to believe that change is possible.

Of course, the bitch, and the kind of performance strategy I outline above, is not a new phenomenon. Is the bitch just a reworking (or relative) of the "bad girl" of the 1990s performance/art scene, and her aesthetics of aggressive sexuality, body-centric artwork, and

¹² I use 'utopic' here in the same way that José Muñoz does in his exploration of queer utopias. Drawing on Ernest Bloch's exploration of the "concrete utopia," Muñoz suggests a utopia that is not based on optimism, but rather "educated hope" (Muñoz 3,7). Muñoz reads hope as queer affect and methodology, seeing the possibility for a queer future as another form of resistance (4). Here, the ability to dream of queer utopia is not naïve, but rather key to revolutionary process. Similarly, Jill Dolan explores utopia specifically in the context of performance in her book *Utopia in Performance*. Set in a post-9-11 political landscape, Dolan asks what performance can *do* in these circumstances. Choosing to reject the cynical view on the left that there is nothing to be done, Dolan sees in performance a blueprint for the future. Embracing utopia as something active, and reading potential utopian performatives as the feelings, dreams, and hopes we may have for a better future, Dolan reads utopia as process-driven, active, and embedded in the artistic and political world (6-7). It is with both texts in mind that I bring in utopia in this introductory chapter, and indeed across the dissertation, (explored specifically with my reading of Jaimes Mayhew's work in chapter two). My use of utopia invites *jouissance*, hope, and futurity to the critical and political conversation of textiles in/and performance.

sexual positivity (Buszek 355-356)? Is she cousin to the more popular approaches to feminism, where authors like Roxanne Gay intentionally label themselves as “difficult”, “nasty”, and “bad”? Is she simply the embodiment of Sara Ahmed’s ‘feminist killjoy’ (2010), who points to affective discourses of happiness that seek to obscure the violence of patriarchal society?

Lingering on the killjoy, Ahmed finds something of the bitch in all feminism, as she rejects the patriarchal discourse wherein only some find happiness and success. The feminist killjoy is the scapegoat for all that is wrong with the world simply because she will not be interpellated into the patriarchal, ‘happy’ hail. “Feminists, by declaring themselves feminists, are already read as destroying something that is thought of by others not only as being good but as the cause of happiness [...] the feminist killjoy spoils the happiness of others [and is] thus attributed as the origin of bad feelings” (“Killing Joy”, 581). Rejecting the normalized violence within patriarchal ‘joy’ is the bitch’s bread and butter. Following Ahmed, Gay, and Buszek, the artists here labelled “bitch” are artists who do not apologize, characters who reject the patriarchal script they’re given, activists who call out white feminism, and illustrations of my own rage, exhaustion, and ‘hysteria’.

A critique of white feminism is a central killjoy aesthetic, and can be found at the intersection of femininity, feminism, craft, and bodies. Gorman, Harris, and Harvie call for an intersectional approach as essential to a feminist strategy, and Ahmed argues that the angry Black woman can be labelled a “kill feminist joy” for “pointing out forms of racism within feminist politics” (“Feminist Killjoys,” 67). These concerns are prevalent in my analysis, as previous feminist approaches to craft, art, femininity, and performance have historically omitted or ignored women

of colour.¹³ A critique of white feminism and femininity underscores my analysis across this dissertation, as questions of whiteness and ‘appropriate’ femininity are often erroneously portrayed as synonymous. The historical erasure of women of colour in the performance of craft, feminism, and femininity is central; I am interested in both showcasing artists of colour, while simultaneously putting ‘whiteness’ in my case studies under review. As a white scholar, the latter approach is most often investigated, as I aim to position myself ethically within a scholarship of critical race studies.

Ultimately, I deconstruct and investigate the assumed whiteness of feminine or gendered textile performances, through the artwork and bodies of both white and non-white performers, attempting to read these performances through an intersectional lens. As a white scholar, I am conscious to engage with intersectionality ethically; my instinct here is to specifically discuss whiteness and critique performances of whiteness. And yet this instinct may be more about self-protection than it is about productively engaging the questions I raise. In my continuous efforts to practicing allyship—specifically in the context of academia—I have in the past questioned the instinct to position oneself within racialized scholarship, without actually engaging with that positionality. I do, across this dissertation, engage with my positionality. And yet, my omissions perhaps speak louder than my intentions: there is more potential to weave the history of Black quiltmaking and abolitionist practices in chapter one; there is more work to be done in chapter two in critically engaging with race and queerness, bringing in Uri McMillan (and other Black scholars) into this analysis; I can further complicate the history of the pussyhat, and position my

¹³ One example of the erasure of Black women in feminist art is Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*. For more on women of colour in art and feminism, see, bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984), and *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992).

perspective on the hat as mine alone, in chapter three; and examples of Indigenous textiles—and sovereignty—are strangely segmented in chapter four. While there are a number of racialized assumptions that I successfully unpack, there are also some that I replicate. I mention this not to discount the analysis I offer, but rather to acknowledge that future iterations of this project could and should go deeper.¹⁴

To be direct: The performance of the bitch is different for white women than it is for non-white women. Does it change our reading of Fournier's Sarah, discussed above, if I mention that the actor is latinx? There is privilege in (re)claiming a 'negative' or 'killjoy' rhetoric. Deconstructing this privilege is prevalent throughout this dissertation (and discussed in detail in chapter three). Saidiya Hartman's writing on waywardness provides an interesting lens through which I analyse the bitch and radical reclamatory feminism approaches. In her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Hartman identifies queerness as practices of waywardness. The social crisis of Blackness, she argues, is a failure to perform white heteronormativity:

Wayward, related to the family of words: errant, fugitive, recalcitrant, anarchic, willful, reckless, troublesome, riotous, tumultuous, rebellious and wild. To inhabit the world in ways inimical to those deemed proper and respectable, to be deeply aware of the gulf between where you stayed and how you might live.... Waywardness articulates the

¹⁴ I remember hearing a lecture many years ago (unfortunately, I can no longer find online): a Black scholar reflected on white artist Dana Schutz's *Open Casket*. *Open Casket* is a 2016 painting in the Whitney Biennial which features Emmett Till, the teenager who was lynched by two white men in Mississippi in 1955. The painting was protested by African-American artist Parker Bright, who in 2017 stood in front of the painting, engaging museum visitors in discussion, while wearing a T-shirt with the words "Black Death Spectacle" printed on the back. The critique from many non-white protesters and artists was that the piece was discussing a subject matter that did not belong to the white painter. In the lecture that I saw on Youtube—by a theorist that ironically I can no longer track down—they were asked in passing to comment on the Schutz 'controversy' which was trending on Twitter. The theorist replied simply, "it just doesn't go deep enough". Referring to *Open Casket*, this theorist points to how the superficiality of the painting, despite the painter's intention, does more harm. A "deep" engagement with Black lives is the only ethical engagement. I am concerned that despite my intentions, that I do not go deep enough in discussing Black art and textiles across this dissertation. For perspectives on *Open Casket*, see D'Souza and Cohen, et al.

paradox of cramped creation, the entanglement of escape and confinement, flight and captivity. Wayward: to wander, to be unmoored, adrift, rambling, roving, cruising, strolling, and seeking. To claim the right to opacity. To strike, to riot, to refuse. To love what is not loved. To be lost to the world. It is the practice of the social otherwise, the insurgent ground that enables new possibilities and new vocabularies; it is the lived experience of enclosure and segregation, assembling and huddling together. It is the directionless search for a free territory; it is a practice of making and relation that enfolds within the policed boundaries of the dark ghetto; it is the mutual aid offered in the open-air prison. It is a queer resource of black survival. It is a beautiful experiment in how-to-live. (Hartman *Wayward* 227)

Hartman's writing productively discusses how waywardness, in the context of Black queerness, storytelling, and experience—along with questions of class and marginalization—is not a choice, but rather survival. We can reframe the bitch with a similar energy: the bitch invites us to reimagine patriarchal, heteronormative 'failure' as radical strength, success, and power. For some, the choice of reclaiming slurs, such as bitch, is a powerful performance of self-identifying and situating within (or against) a larger political discourse. For others, it is the only way to live. I am interested in both kinds of performances across this dissertation, as I attempt to navigate the push and pull of privilege within intersectional, Third Wave feminism.

Like the killjoy, the bitch allows the personal to become not only political, but something of a riot. Some of the artists discussed here are wayward. Some are bitches. Some are 'bad girls', 'bad' feminists, or 'killjoys'. All of them queer the performances of gendered bodies as a critically utopic practice. All are using textiles in a way that rejects an easy reading of their work, and encourages further questions. All of them encourage us to get tied up in knots.

Bodies: Material Performance Studies

It is here that I might trip on that tangle I warned you about. When is she going to talk about new materialism, you might ask. Something of a knot between craft studies, feminism, and performance studies, and indeed a method used across these disciplines, new materialism is a key player in this dissertation. But I'll admit that as a new material scholar (or a New Material scholar) I've always been a little sloppy, preferring the 'old' materialists and being quite suspect of the 'new' branding.¹⁵ I can't explain why; I can only guess it is either a general mistrust of claims of novelty by (often) white scholars (like myself) dusting off Walter Benjamin, and other arcade walkers—who find dialectical materialism among the eroticized, exoticized trash and trinkets—and reselling it as “new”. Wasn't this what Bertolt Brecht was talking about, when he wrote about the desire to yell contradictory things in a valley, and have the echo of his own voice argue back with him, meeting in the middle in a performance of material dialectics (Brecht 191)? Or perhaps it's true, as other new materialists have noted, that gazing at objects sometimes has the same effect as gazing at one's navel.¹⁶ And yet, while I can't claim that my navel is novel, does/is it still matter?

Material culture studies has been described as a method underneath the larger humanities umbrella (Prown); this is a method of cultural analysis through treating objects like primary data.¹⁷ Today, new materialism positions itself as a horse of a different colour within

¹⁵ In their book, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Coole and Frost acknowledge that they could also have framed the return to the material as “renewed” to mark new materialism's connection with its materialist heritage. At the same time, Coole and Frost are interested in exploring the “unprecedented things currently being done with and to matter, nature, life, production, and reproduction” (4). As such, there is an interest in pushing materialist traditions toward novel, experimental, and innovative contemporary places; the titular pluralization of materialisms indicates the many ways these theories could be contemporized and encourages multiple meetings of materialism and discourse across contemporary society.

¹⁶ For more on ‘navel-gazing’ material culture theorists (my words, not his) see Miller at 9.

¹⁷ While material culture studies is a methodology, viewing it as *only* a method/methodology ignores the contribution of twentieth century philosophers on material culture studies, as well as how *things* have influenced larger humanist discussion of life, theory, and discourse.

performance studies and material culture studies, intentionally showcasing larger object/thing/human hierarchies, and in doing so, deconstructing them. New materialism is framed as a return or renewal of material approaches, which were eclipsed by the cultural turn of the 1970s, which focused on language, discourse, culture, and other constructivist approaches (Coole and Frost, 3-7). A *new* materialist approach aims to focus on the material, not alongside or instead of discourse, but rather with material *as* discourse (Schneider “New Materialism” 7). In their book, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost suggest that if a reprisal of the material is to be successful, it must be truly radical:

This means returning to the most fundamental questions about the nature of matter and the place of embodied humans in the material world; it means taking heed of the developments in the natural sciences as well as to attending to transformations in the ways we currently produce, reproduce, and consume our material environment. It entails sensitivity to contemporary shifts in the bio- and eco-spheres, as well as to changes in the global economic structures and technologies. It also demands detailed analysis of our daily interactions with material object and the natural environment. (3-4)

With a new material approach, the nonhuman, the everyday object, the lively assemblages that typically occupy the backdrop of human-centric narrative are given long overdue attention. In turning the spotlight their way, subsequent structures, ideologies, and politics, that in turn influence contemporary culture, are revealed and deconstructed.

The choice of the everyday object is important and intentional; it speaks to the rejection of the human-nonhuman hierarchy. The textiles I analyse here are everyday objects; in the context of this interdisciplinary project, everyday objects often face the same curatorial confusion as performance work in the gallery. In an informal conversation between contemporary craft-artists

Sabrina Gschwandtner, Liz Collins, and Allison Smith, the artists bond over the institutional confusion of their work. As artists who engage in participatory, collaborative work, they often encounter misunderstanding on how such participatory work should occupy space between the gallery walls. Smith tells the story of her work *Notion Nanny*, being exhibited at the Berkeley Art Museum in 2007:

[Allison Smith]: There were a lot of interesting moments in trying to install *Notion Nanny*, because boxes kept arriving from my studio and from a lot of different locations. Some of them had objects I had made. Some of them had objects that people had given to me. Some of them had pencil and paper and art supplies for the audience to use. When the boxes came in there was a registrar with a clipboard—

[Liz Collins]: She must have been going crazy.

AS: She was like, “What’s this ball of string? What’s this pencil?” And when I got everything back at the end of it, things like pencils were wrapped in bubble wrap, preciously packaged as if they were artworks. (“The Politics of Craft: A Roundtable,” 622-623)

This anecdote illustrates the assumptions which inspire my own reading of textiles as performers: the art/craft divide mirrors an object/art divide as we attempt to parse through which everyday performances are worthy of analysis and which ones are not. How funny, Smith seems to suggest, to wrap up pencils in bubble wrap, when they are just everyday objects! How funny to confuse them with art objects! All the while their own art work sits at the intersection of performance and craft— often intentionally encouraging this slippage.¹⁸ The butt of the joke here

¹⁸ Alison Smith’s sculptural textile artwork enacts both monumental or object-like performances through photographs and exhibitions that explore nationalism and reconciliation (among other things). Her participatory project, *Piece Work* (2011), involves the creation of a communal braided rug, alongside conversation on folk art,

is the bubble-wrapped pencil, mistaken for an art object. And yet is there something sacred in the everyday object, as it appears in the gallery. The textiles I analyse across this dissertation are everyday objects: the embroidery thread, a shoe, a belt. Dancing dangerously with idealism and navel-gazing, I attempt to find in them something sacred. Wrapping them, along with the gendered body, in bubble wrap, I want treat them all as material performers worthy of scholarly attention.

Performance studies and material culture have been increasingly used in tandem to explore the complexities of race, gender, and identity politics. As Rebecca Schneider states in the winter 2015 issue of *The Drama Review (TDR)*, *New Materialism and Performance Studies*, “performance becomes materialization” (9). Performance terms, such as “scriptive” (Bernstein “Dances With Things,” 68), “choreographic” (Schweitzer *Performing Objects* 36), or “live” (Chen *Animacies* 11), demonstrate how “performance trades promiscuously in animacy” (Schneider *New Materialism* 9). Animacy, performance, and new materialism have many discursive connections. At the risk of falling again into idealism and romanticism, performance can offer a bridge between humans and things (and between culture and materiality) that rejects anthropocentrism. This rejection is key to the interventions of new materialism. Furthermore, new materialism has much to offer performance. In Mel Chen’s *Animacies*, they effort to “remap live and dead zones away from these very terms, leveraging animacy towards a consideration of affect in its queered and raced formations,” providing interesting interventions to foundational definitions of “liveness” within performance studies (Chen 11).¹⁹ Schneider echoes this

craft, and issues and experiences of war. The goal of this participatory exhibition was to, “collapse those distinctions between artists, artworks, viewers, sites, and everyday life, engaging art audiences in participation, collaboration, co-authorship, and co-creation, so that they are producing, manifesting, and even in some cases, constituting the work of art” (Abrams, “Alison Smith”). Liz Collins creates similar participatory and performative textile works, such as *Knitting Nation* (2005-2016).

¹⁹ Some important texts on liveness include Schechner, Roach, and Auslander.

intervention with her insistence that performance, like material, remains (*Performing Remains* 99). This project joins these conversations by analysing textiles as a thing that is both performance material and ontological absence. How does material, which—like theatre, like the body—erodes and disappears over time, remain? What discursive interventions might be found at the intersection of agentic textiles that remain, and ephemeral threads which, like flesh, disappear?

This project is also interested in the body. When employing a body-focused feminist lens, however, one must recognise the essentialism that surrounds much of these theories. Across this dissertation I aim to analyse gender as bodily difference and performance, and not as female ‘essence’ or ‘authenticity’. And yet, even in asserting this goal, the ghost of essentialism—and indeed the re-binarizing of gender difference—lingers. It is not my goal to take the gender binary for granted in my analysis. And yet, I find this binary (and binary thinking) sometimes hard to quit. How does one talk about gendered bodies, including femme, trans and cis female bodies, without drawing on some of the more essentialist feminist theorists? As Amelia Jones has herself asserted in “Essentialism, Feminism, and Art: Spaces Where Woman ‘Oozes Away’”:

Theories of feminism are *always* courting essentialism; they cannot *not* court essentialism, given their goal of mapping how we identify ourselves in heteronormative regimes of sexual difference, not to mention our continual return to our bodies and others’ bodies as sites of gender/ sex identification, as well as sites of theorizing or making art. (159)

And yet, while I employ methods of identifying sexual difference, along with foregrounding the body as a prime stage to explore these complications, I am equally careful to avoid drawing

static conclusion on the performances of bodies. Rather, I hope that these pages will be yet another stage for gender performance. Indeed, I follow the oft-quoted feminist mantra that “[g]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 519). My primary focus across this dissertation is on the femme body—or bodies that perform the script of ‘female’. The bodies I discuss are mostly cis-gendered women, with transmasculine artist Jaimes Mayhew being a notable exception. My goal is to look at the normalized assumptions that surround women’s bodies, and how these performances are (or are not) reinforced through the performance of textiles.

In short, I look at the body in order to queer the body. As such, some of the artists I discuss are drawing on feminist theories around the body. These theorists may re-binarize the body, but equally, they offer language and terminology to talk about the body’s gendered performance. They also provide evidence of historical understandings and conceptions of the body, and how those ideas have changed over time. The body—wherever it falls on the gender spectrum—is social constructed within a binary-driven, heterosexist society. So, while I am anxious not to re-binarize or essentialize the body across this dissertation, what I analyse are gendered performances *with* (not of) binaries and essences. This may be what makes them queer. As Spivak suggests, “[e]ssences, it seems to me, are just a kind of content. All content is not essence” (173). The artists I look at across this dissertation, and indeed my own theorization, use essence as content (not as method), in order to better understand and situate the body’s performance. In what follows I discuss some of the canonical (and at times essentialist) feminist scholar with whom I am in conversation. Regardless of how these theorists enter the conversation, I aim to continuously argue that gender is constructed and fluid, and not authentic,

static or biologically determined. In analysing different representations of the body, I reassert the queer theory that femaleness (or any gender performance) can never be “fully knowable or liveable or visible in any secure way” (Jones 170).

In many ways, essentialist theories linger around textiles as well. Bulgarian artist Radka Donnell-Vogt, who Showalter calls the Julia Kristeva of quilts, suggests that quilt patterns are archetypes for representations of the female body. She sees “quilts as the bliss and the threat of the womb made visible, spread out as a separate object shaped by the imaginative wealth of women’s work and body experience” (qtd. in Showalter 226). Without diverting too far toward feminist psychoanalysis, this invites quilts into conversation with the many feminist performance theorists who explore the visibility and invisibility of the female body in the representation. In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray attempts to unpack Freudian analysis of the female body, desire, and sexuality, by suggesting that her sexuality is not “lack,” “atrophy” or “envy,” but multiple, plural, and “not one” (23;26;28). Combating systems of oppression, where the female body represents a rupture within the phallogentric order, Irigaray reveals how this psychoanalytic baggage affects her representation, marking her as a passive object within the representational field: “[H]er sexual organ represents *the horror of nothing to see*. A defect in this systematics of representation and desire. A “hole” in its scopophilic lens. It is already evident in Greek statuary that this nothing-to-see has to be excluded, rejected, from such a scene of representation. Woman’s genitals are simply absent, masked, sewn back up inside their crack” (26).²⁰ Paradoxically a visual object of desire, and the horror of “nothing to see,” the vagina-as-lack foregrounds many theoretical discussions on representation of the female body. Female ‘lack’ is

²⁰ In Freudian terms, the female body is the fear of castration; in Lacanian terms, she *is* the phallus (Irigaray 38-39, 62).

literalized through visual representation; female desire and subjecthood is rejected or ignored. Irigaray attempts, like *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, to go “behind the screen of representation” to a place where the female body might have a presence and a plurality, one where she is more than commodity or passive object of desire (9). In her final chapter, “When our Lips Speak Together,” Irigaray offers a poetic and impassioned alternative to psychoanalysis. Instead of language being a metaphorical instrument for masculine autoeroticism, Irigaray’s lips speak together, they touch, they kiss (24). And in doing so, they reject reductive representations of the female body: “We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plenitude, fulfillment from the other. By our lips we are women: this does not mean that we are focused on consuming, consummation, fulfillment” (209). “Others may make fetishes of us to separate us,” she continues, “that’s their business. Let’s not immobilize ourselves in these borrowed notions” (217). And so, Irigaray offers an alternative to female sexuality and representation that is not lack, desire, fetish, or passivity. Rather, the female body moves, kisses, desires; it is not one, none, or two, but “luminous” and multiple (207). This body touches other bodies and in doing so lives beyond mirages, images, and mirrors— frames used to reduce women within a phallic order (216). Irigaray dives into psychoanalysis to explore alternatives. In discovering female body and sexuality as lack, castration, and envy, she offers instead a touching, moving, desiring body: a sex which is not one.

Continuing, in Elizabeth Grosz’s *Volatile Bodies*, she undertakes the mammoth task of locating the female body within the texts of canonical philosophers and theorists. In doing so, she examines the epistemological and theoretical gaps and inconsistencies that surround female bodies. In imagining the body as subjectivity, and subjectivity as non-dualistic, Grosz intends to historicize the body, to see the body as sexed, as lived, as social. In bringing the body centre

stage analytically, “so that it can be understood as the very ‘stuff’ of subjectivity,” Grosz explores “phallogentric presumptions which have hidden the culture and intellectual effacement of women” (ix). As such, “[her] project hovers close to many patriarchal conceptions of the body that have served to establish an identity for women in essentialist, ahistorical, or universal terms. But [Grosz] believe[s] it does so in order to contest these terms, to wrest a concept of the body away from these perils” (xiv). Grosz, much like Irigaray, dives into a patriarchal understanding of the body in order to deconstruct it, and asks what existing terms, theories, and thoughts might be of use to feminists in forming an ontological understanding of the female, sexed, body. In her conclusion, Grosz offers her own theory on the body, asking specifically about the abject. “Abjection” she tells us, “links the lived experience of the body with the social, culturally specific meaning of the body, the cultural investment in selectively marking the body, the privileging of some parts and functions while resolutely minimizing or leaving un- or under represented other parts and functions” (192). In connecting the concepts of the socially marked body with the abject, she reframes sexual difference as a form of abjection itself. What do we privilege and mark, and what remains unmarked? She answers this by turning to bodily fluids, and our different societal reactions to period blood versus sperm, stating tentatively her hypothesis: “women not as lack, but as leaking;” “women’s corporeality is inscribed as a mode of seepage” (203). While not specifically speaking about ‘visibility,’ Grosz is engaging with the politics of representation, and her theory of the body as seepage has potential for shifting thinking about visibility versus invisibility. Seepage as a mode of marking the body does not simply advocate for further visibility, for instance. Rather it points to an active corporeality. Grosz suggests that we mark female body, that we ask what is underrepresented, and place it in the visual field— ‘seepage’ hints to a political need for representation that will not be stopped. The leaky (sloppy?)

body cannot contain its corporeality; how might feminists and theorists represent this volatile visibility in their work?

Amelia Jones similarly points to the corporeality as a source of agency and power in representation. Jones describes the Pollockian performative as a “subject that is potentially engaged, dispersed, dislocated and open to spectral engagement” (55). In a nod to the seminal (slippage intended) work of Jackson Pollock, the Pollockian performative suggests that the *performance* of the artwork— the drips, flings, and drops of paint that come from the artists’ body— are what constitute the artist as author. Further, in the articulation of artist as author, the Pollockian performative embraces a postmodern subject— one that is a messy and fragmented, as the works of Pollock are themselves. Body artists engaged with the Pollockian performative “*perform*, rather than *suppress* the dislocation of the subject” (58). Body artists who pick up this performativity (or rather, throw it down), are active in the performance of the body as fragmentary, as dislocated, as radically postmodern.²¹

Peggy Phelan’s *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* offers other ways of conceptualizing the female body in representation. She suggests that absence, invisibility in performance, can operate as a political power. As opposed to Grosz’s attempts to mark the body as female, challenging her label of lack, Phelan complicates the very terrain of visibility. Phelan

²¹ A good example of the Pollockian performative is *Vagina Painting*, Shigeko Kubota paints from a paint bush attached to her underwear, making visible the phallic rendering of the female body, and literalizing the metaphor of paintbrush as phallus. As such, Kubota makes her own body a paintbrush, foregrounding the site of female ‘lack’: “Kubota activates the site of the vagina itself— the paradoxical locale of “lack” that is supposedly dooms women forever to an alienated state of objecthood— as the originary point of the meaningful painterly gesture” (99). This feminized version of the performative ‘author function’— the presence of the female body as both as author, as paintbrush, and as act of painting— performs the body as visible, as leaking and not lacking. It reframes the female body away from psychoanalytic terms that hollow out female subjecthood through processes of objectification and fetishization, or through modernist subject/object binaries. What results is complex politics of visibility: the vagina as site of lack, becomes instead the stage for paint that drips down the paint bush as phallus. Kubota as dislocated subject performs this complexity.

attempts to analyse and deconstruct the ideological framework of visual culture by diving into the invisible. As opposed to calling for greater visibility of female bodies and subjects, or exposing the present systems of representation as oppressive, Phelan aims to build theory in what is not represented, in the very space of absence itself. By “exposing blind spots within the theoretical frame itself, it may be possible to construct a way of knowing which does not take surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim” (1-2). Thus, for Phelan, the female body in representation should reject the dualism of the representational field, and instead embrace her disappearance as an “*active vanishing*” (19).

Rebecca Schneider invites a similar play between visible and invisible in her exploration of “secret(e)ing.” With Schneider’s concept of the “secret(e)” the female body, and its politics of making visible and/or invisible, always arrive hand-in-hand. In the commodity culture of representation, even the promise of visibility is insatiable. Alternatively, the veiled, disappearing body, trying to reject patriarchal representation, makes itself visible as absence. Framed within capitalist commodity culture, the ‘secret’ of female body is only secret because it is performed as secret in visual culture: because it is secreted. It’s not a secret without the promise that this secret will one day be made visible. It’s not a secretion without a gesture towards the female body as abject, as material, messy negation.

This survey illustrates the theories around the body that have influence my approach, and invites a view on the body in performance as material and corporeal. These theorists ask how the body is performing: as disappearing, vanishing, leaking, or seeping. The female body occupies this space between visible to invisible, between secret to secrete. Or, as Grosz suggests, the female body is like a Möbius strip, a continual figure eight that dips in and out of

representational politics, dipping below the skin, out of the frame, through the body as invisible presence or visible absence.

It is through the politics of feminist representation that this project demonstrates its political stakes. Briefly, a history of feminist performance art follows the history of feminism itself. Following Jill Dolan's second edition of *Feminist Spectator as Critic*, this project aligns itself with Dolan's materialist feminism and her discussion of queer theory. In her introduction to the second edition in 2012, Dolan revisits her breakdown of feminist practice, suggesting that she used the term "materialist feminism" before queer theory was active in academic dialogue. Now, she wonders if the latter does much of the work she had hoped materialist feminism would take up (xvii-xxiii). Following Dolan, I see much in common between materialist feminism and queer theory. As the word 'queer' continues to shift in definition, popularity, and application, I use it here to intentionally signal a material feminism, along with a rejection of patriarchal, heteronormative hierarchies. This is a queer project: indeed stitches, bitches, and bodies meet at their local queer pub nightly, to cross-stitch and swear, to make jokes and revolution, to bask in the mutual (dis)identification, mid-feminist rant, while simultaneously daring to dream of a utopic and queer future.

Chapter Breakdown

The structure of my project moves outwards, from page, to stage, to body, to street. The first chapter analyses weaving as a textual metaphor in play texts. Through text analysis and close reading, I look at the Ovid's Arachne, and her implication on Beaumont & Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy*, Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, and Erin Shields's *If We Were Birds*. Putting the plays together across time, all the plays speak to the different ways that women have used textiles as a form of self-authorship. Through the lens of Arachne, these different examples speak specifically

to how women have used textiles to respond to, or combat, violence against women, specifically sexual assault. The characters use their stitches in order to reject, combat, and intervene in the patriarchal systems that oppress them. This chapter closes with some thoughts on Arachne as a spider—a mascot of sorts for the radical reclamation at work through textiles.

Chapter two moves from the stage to the body, with a look at contemporary performance artists and their use of textiles. Through the lenses of queer theory, critical race theory, and new materialist approaches, this chapter attempts to turn the body inside out by unpacking a series of alternative performance pieces. The works of Eliza Bennet, who embroiders her skin; Narcissister, who pulls clothes out of her orifices; and Jaimes Mayhew, who re-performs Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* across his trans body, will be analysed. These case studies interrupt an easy analysis of bodies and textiles. They complicate the body. Bringing together the scars of gendered labour, layers of Black identity and experience, and cuttings of trans (re)performance, these performers point to the ways that the body is queered through textile performances.

Chapter three pushes these politics offstage and onto the street to explore craftivism—activism through craft. Looking at the pink pussyhat, the main emblem of the Women's March, this chapter analyses the performance of yarn bombing, knit graffiti, and other “soft” forms of activism, asking who is using these forms of activism, and why. Contextualizing the pussyhat within the larger critiques of craftivism as classist and an example of white feminism, this chapter aims to locate the popular pussyhat as a scriptive, citational object that out-performs its feminist wearers.

Finally, chapter four looks at textiles as performers that help to animate/make visible absented bodies. Specifically, dead bodies. Here, I explore the performance work of Helene Vosters and explore the productive ‘failure’ that reveals itself when we invite ghosts to the stage.

Her participatory unravelling and stitching is explored in tandem with questions on how and who we grieve. Here, I employ performative writing and reflexivity to analyse my own positionality as a queer, manic body, and my connection to concepts of touching toxic textiles. I engage this as a position of radical queerness that attempts to reclaim/foreground madness as a critical position. Deeply inspired by Mel Chen and their theories of animacy, this chapter is the most personal, and follows theories around contemporary feminist performance, leaky with feeling. Here I perform the bitch, my anger, my sadness, my fear, through my queer desire to disobey, to break the rules, to touch something toxic, to work against this life. Here, my grandmother's sweater and my father's illness all speak to my inconsolable rage at being right where I am. If this chapter were a song, it might be somewhere between Alanis Morissette's *Jagged Little Pill* and Lorde's *Melodrama*. And I think that if you were to scream it out loud while dancing to Carly Rae Jepsen's *Cut To The Feeling*, with the girl you have a crush on (but can't be with) at a final night of a national theatre conference, you would get close to the intentions, thoughts, and feelings I had in writing it. It aims to find the queer, utopic, radical potential in my textile performances of longing—be they hopeful, fleeting, painful, or too much information.

The project in its entirety weaves together theatre and the social to develop an understanding of textile not as one or the other, but both: textiles as performance. I have chosen these case studies in a similar way to Julia Bryan-Wilson in her book *Fray*. In part, her curation of case studies is episodic and autobiographical, and yet, she equally picks her case studies based on “their capacity to be pulled, stressed and withstand tension, sometimes to their breaking point”, metaphorically speaking to her titular concept, *Fray* (5). So too, I curate my examples based on their ability to speak to my own metaphoric and literal musings on knots. All the examples discussed here reflect moments of tension that might be difficult to unpick, that seem

nonlinear or contradictory, disruptive or counter-productive. In this dissertation, knots appear as failures. They come up as unintentional obstructions to the ‘progress’ of textile creation.

Methodology

This project is influenced by a number of central research questions: Can we use the traditional method of knitting, sewing, and weaving, to stage the body in new and startling ways? How do we contextualize craft in contemporary protest alongside conversations within feminism, craft, and protest, as performances of white privilege? Can we find something of the ghost of the seamstress in our own affective and phenomenological discourse with the world around us, our oppression, and our privilege? And so what? Who cares about knitting? Who cares about the meeting of craft, queerness, and performance; what does this combination reveal about our world and ourselves?

I answer these questions through a series of case studies that employ multiple theoretical frameworks, but mainly a critical feminist lens influenced by new materialism. It’s worth acknowledging that performance studies is a discipline that particularly enjoys experimenting with methodology. Performance studies as a multi-disciplinary discipline allows not only for mixed methods, but for improvisation about the way we conduct research. Here, I aim not to be facetious, but expansive: I am inspired by studies in English literature, and their enthusiastic embrace of the close reading; I am inspired by anthropology and its use of auto-ethnography and thick description; I am inspired by new materialism, and methods such as Actor Network Theory (ANT) and moves to follow the object; and while this project is not a pure historiography, I engage with textile and feminist history, and how that past effects makers and artists today.

As such, I employ a range of methodologies. I attempt case studies of live events and performance analysis employing thick description and reflexive spectatorship. Here, I follow much of Jill Dolan's approach: her spirit of critical generosity (*Feminist Spectator as Critic*) and her theory on utopian performative (*Utopia in Performance*), have influenced not only what plays and performance pieces I have chosen to discuss, but the way I discuss them, focusing on the positive to enact a utopian performative through thick description. I also engage in moments of performative writing. I am inspired by the performative writing of Rebecca Schneider (*Explicit Body in Performance* and *Performing Remains*), and the reflexivity of Mel Chen (*Animacies*), and their ability to weave theory and personal narrative to develop startlingly moving discourse. I employ some close reading, both expected and seemingly strange, and bring theoretical analysis together with poetry and song lyrics, attempting to make the phenomenological experience of materiality present for the reader. In these moments, I look to Jack Halberstam (*Queer Art of Failure*) and their ability to bring pop culture references, alongside their own positionality, to reflect on larger questions of queerness and the social. I ground my dissertation in historical analysis, attempting to put contemporary case studies in conversation with canonical textiles and theatrical example. Here, I am encouraged by Anne Anlin Cheng (*Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*) and Marlis Schweitzer (*Transatlantic Broadway, From Broadway to Runway*, and *Bloody Tyrants*), for their incredible ability to use archival and historical examples to draw attention to materials and networks that speak to gender and race. While my own project is a contemporary one, I am in awe of the breadth of their historical deep-dives, and attempt some of mine own in this dissertation. Finally, I am inspired by the methodological mixing of both Uri McMillan's *Embodied Avatars*, Harvey

Young's *Embodying Black Experience*, and the way they draw examples across different disciplines in order to make strong and persuasive claims about performance.

These methodological approaches offer a comprehensive way of addressing my major research questions and goals. In looking at how textiles script bodies throughout history, these methodologies attempt to examine the political performance of textiles from multiple angles: through a close reading of the stage history of textiles, and by interviewing and analysing artists knitting, weaving, and unravelling today. I am also inspired to make a mess of my methodology. I am reminded of what Michelle Murphey writes in her book, *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty*:

[T]here is a contradiction buried deep in my methods: I was trying to explain a tangle clearly. In trying to be clear, I fear my narratives are too rigid and simple, leaving out much of the messiness. In trying to diagram the overwhelming histories about buildings and chemical exposures, I have stressed the structure over the confusion. Despite this limitation, I hope that the reader will be able imagine how these other words, objects, and subjects could also be exploded into multiplicities and how they, too, are contentiously rematerialized. (Murphy 15)

Like Murphy, I am trying to explain a tangle. Yes, clearly, but also without leaving out the messiness.

I achieve this through a subjective and auto-ethnographic approach to the case studies. Inspired by my career as a performance artist and theatre maker, my primary instinct is to foreground my personal experience with the materials discussed. This is something of a

“scholarship of risk” (Buszek).²² This concept is inspired by David Pye’s “workmanship of risk,” which is defined as “workmanship using any kind of technique or apparatus, in which the quality of the result is not predetermined, but depends on the judgment, dexterity, and care which the maker exercises as he works” (20). As opposed to a process of creation that minimizes risk, such as mass production, the workmanship of risk invites risk as part of the creation process.

Workmanship of risk embraces elements of its making. It articulates the performance of its own creation in every inconsistency, every nuance, every singularity. Inspired by Maria Elena Buszek’s application of this theory to scholarship itself, I attempt to weave the historical, personal and theoretical together. This is a crucial aspect to my analysis; it is what brings life to objects, and brings objects to life. My personal engagement—including moments of onstage and everyday performance—is foregrounded across this dissertation to invite the reader to see themselves, too, alive in the case studies. As such, I embrace the lived body throughout this work, both mine and yours. As Bryan-Wilson mentions in her book *Fray: Art & Textile Politics*, any discussion of textiles “demands alternative methodologies, ones that extend from shared bodily knowledge” (6). Herein, queer, material, feminist, and performance methodologies tangle together on the body as stage, in a messy mix of the personal and political, helping each other when they can, and failing to stay out of each other’s way.

As such, methodologically, this dissertation is a mess. I combine material culture studies, performance studies, critical race theory, and feminism to analyse knots within contemporary craft and performance. Each of these methodological approaches is explored through the culminating case studies. There are many different ways these threads could be traced; each chapter has gone through different iterations - it is hard to know if I am dealing with the same

²² While Buszek has not yet published on this topic, she conducted a lecture on the topic at Santa Monica College in April, 2012. [Is there a URL? Or did she share it with you? Have you added it to your bib?]

material I started with. The methodologies I bring in are malleable. They have been defined in some contexts as ‘turns’, in others as ‘studies’ or ‘lenses’, and in more still as ‘disciplines’. They are all interdisciplinary approaches, and as such, there is a meeting here of many different disciplines, from gender studies, performance studies, anthropology, and more. My goal here is not to parse through these different approaches, but to encourage their tangle.

Ultimately, I believe this approach adopts a queer methodology. Speaking of the slippage of terminology in *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider discusses her approach:

The objection may be raised that terms like mimesis, theatricality, imitation, simulation, the copy, the double, and the fake cross and confuse each other across these pages. One term (say, theatricality) cannot simply slip and morph into another term (say, imitation). That objection however, would miss the point: *slippage* is in facet part and parcel of the very words, all related in some way to the mimetic double, that I interweave.... There is something, too, of *queerness* in this slip and slide. (18)

I attempt to engage in something of a slip and slide across this dissertation; one that gets stuck, gets caught, needs attention, is tense and strained against itself. One that makes a mess.

Conclusion: Queer Failure

If we were to name the pub I mentioned earlier, where we stitched and swore, it might be called “The Wrong Side,” or “Feminist Failure”. Maybe Jack Halberstam co-owns it along with Sara Ahmed, and some other angry, hopeful killjoys. Because there is something hopeful in political anger. I see this especially in the powerful words of Egyptian-American writer Mona Eltahawy. In October 2019, Eltahawy had just made a public upset by being too outspoken on the popular debate show *Q & A*, on Australian Broadcasting Company (“Q & A”). On a diverse panel of “outspoken feminists”, queer women of colour debate topics such as violence against

women, racism, and feminism and protests today. The conversation was riveting, unbridled, and provocative. Eltahawy, especially, did not hold back. In response to Barack Obama's criticism of call out culture²³, she was vitriolic:

I go online exactly to tell people to fuck off when they attack me, and I'm very well-known for it.... You know, this idea of respectability, this idea of civility, this idea of unity, all of these words, decorum, who invented those words? Those words were invented by white men for the benefit of other white men in systems and institutions that were always designed to be for white men.... I also disagree with [Barack Obama's] wife [Michelle Obama] when she says, "When they go low, we go high." No I fucking don't. If you go low, I'm going to come for you. So, no, I do not have the luxury or the privilege to sit there and be civil with people who do not acknowledge my full humanity. I refuse...I want patriarchy to fear feminism...how long must we wait for men and boys to stop murdering us, to stop beating us and to stop raping us? How many rapists must we kill until men stop raping us? ("Q &A")

Amid strong backlash, ABC pulled the episode on November 8th. The profanity was mentioned in particular as being inappropriate. ABC's Managing Director, David Anderson "felt the audience was not sufficiently warned about the content" (Meade). Further, the *Daily Mail* called for host Fran Kelly's resignation. Even *The Guardian*, a respected news platform, suggested that they "got a little over-excited and weren't suitably wrangled on the program" (Meade). Would they say that about a panel of men, I wonder? Much of Eltahawy's comments echo her chapter on Profanity in her book, *The Seven Necessary Sins for Women and Girls*. Here, she outlined the use of profanity as a protest strategy:

²³ For more on Obama's comments in October, 2019, see Rued and Taylor.

We must recognize that the ubiquitous ways patriarchy has socialized women to shrink themselves—physically and intellectually—extend also into language, into what we can and cannot say. It is not just a fight for airtime. It is not just a policing of women’s egos. It polices women’s very language.... Who does civility serve?

Racism is not civil. Racism is not polite. And yet here were all those people lined up to insist that we be civil when talking about Trump and his supporters. Those people lined up to insist on civility were, of course, white. For white Americans who have no experience of racism, it is a concept, a theory, an idea to be debated, and not a lived reality to be endured or survived. Fuck that.... I refuse to be civil with someone who refuses to acknowledge my humanity fully. (57-58)

In a world where racist thoughts, language, and actions are active on multiple platforms, both institutional and informal, ABC pulling the episode is nothing less than an act of censorship. It is not only disheartening to hear that a group of intelligent and prolific feminists need to be “wrangled” because they are deemed “over-excited”. It is fucking patronizing, to say the least.

I quote Eltahawy at length with the hopes that it makes you as angry as it makes me. With the hopes that this anger is also inspirational; that it instigates. I hope we see through Eltahawy something political and discursive in her profanity. I also bring it in, to circle back around to my opening epigraph: “It’s kind of impressive when people curse in needlepoint,” Rory Gilmore tells us, “there’s something laborious about it” (*Gilmore Girls* “Santa’s Secret Stuff”).²⁴ It is laborious, as a woman, to curse. It is laborious to stitch and bitch. More than this, it is deemed dangerous. It is silenced, censored, and erased. *Stitches, Bitches, and Bodies* is also the story of

²⁴ If we were to make a satirical TV show about white feminism today, it would look a lot like *Gilmore Girls*. I bring in Rory Gilmore not to showcase yet another white feminist, but rather to point to an example where needlepoint occupies popular feminist rhetoric. Much of my deconstruction of white feminism and whimsy could and should be applied to *Gilmore Girls*. But that is a dissertation for another day.

fed-up feminists, of resistance, profanity, and labour. All are tied together across this dissertation in alternative ways, illustrating the ways that craft/femme labour has been historically erased or ignored.

To bring in Ahmed one more time, the feminist killjoy, the bitch, “disturb[s] the very fantasy that happiness can be found in certain places.... It is not just that feminists might not be happily affected by the objects that are supposed to cause happiness but that their failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others” (*Promise of Happiness* 66). The bitch, by not laughing at the sexist/racist joke, ruins the joke for everyone, by not joining that happy hail of the joke. The bitch’s body showcases the failure of patriarchal happiness in all its affective performances. As such, failure too, lingers as a position of discursive and political strength. This project focuses on the ‘wrong’ side. By this, I mean two things. First, that failure is critical terrain that is not actually about achieving success, but instead reframing questions of process away from the binary of success/failure. I read failure, as Halberstam does, as a critical alternative to hegemonic patriarchal life. Second, there is a background, or a backstage, to a piece of knitting or embroidery. This is called the ‘wrong-side’. The ‘wrong side’ is the side typically hidden from view. When a sweater is turned inside out, when an embroidery hoop is turned ‘wrong-side’ out, when we treat the seemingly two-dimensional textile art like a three-dimensional object with a backend—this is known as the ‘wrong side’ of the artwork. Erving Goffman’s chapter, “Front and Back Regions of Everyday Life” in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, explores the concept of the front stage and backstage as applied to the everyday. Front stage space refers to anything public-facing. Back stage space is more private. Front and back stage spaces have associated behaviours: “[W]hen one’s activity occurs in the presence of other persons, some aspects of the activity are expressively accentuated and other aspects which

might discredit the fostered impression, are suppressed” (Goffman 69). I think it is both interesting and revealing that the wrong side is where you can see the work or process of the finished object. The wrong side is like a script of how the thing was made. The wrong side is the labour. Thus, labour and failure come together through textiles and bodies inside out, as this dissertation attempts to perform the laborious act of cursing through needle-point.

There is a lot owed specifically to Sara Ahmed in this dissertation. Her feminist killjoys, her explorations of queer phenomenology, her new work on willfulness and living a feminist life, are arresting and inspiring. I also owe much to Rebecca Schneider and Mel Chen, as their performative writing dances playfully with their commitment to performance theory and deep, developed theorizing. I try my own hand at some of that, maybe as a practice or exercise. Reading these works has not only been influential to this project, but to my life. They are, for me, a feminist snap. For Ahmed, a feminist snap is “the start of something, a transformation...a reaction” to a pressure bearing down on us (*Living a Feminist Life*, 188-189). It is a coming to feminism, to oneself within structures of oppression, and seeing clearly those structures and your place in them for the first time. In my most idealist, naïve, ego-driven, or hopeful moments, I hope that this dissertation will be something of a feminist snap, and that it may, even in a small part, join the text, performances, and works that are trying to make this world a better place.

Chapter One: Making and Metamorphosis

all you spirits of abusèd ladies

Help me in this performance

-MAID'S TRAGEDY, 4.1.169–70.

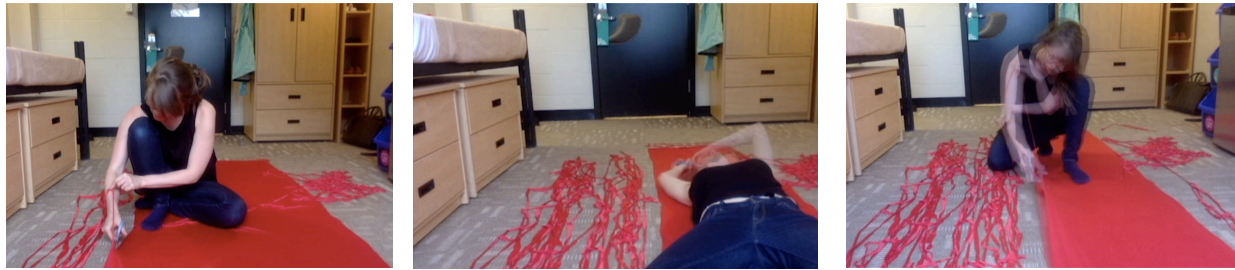


Figure 2: Thea Fitz-James, *Fingers & Belly*, video stills, 2019.

I am bent over, on the floor, cutting. I am making thread out of the polyester-cotton fabric I purchased. My body aches. The ground is hard, my legs and back all scream to stop. I keep cutting. I am preparing the materials for my performance piece, *Fingers & Belly*, a contemporary retelling of Ovid's Arachne myth. I am reminded of the last time I did this performance, in 2016. At that time, I was buying t-shirts from Value Village, and cutting them in a spiral in order to get the kind of thread I wanted. I wanted something like cotton jersey: soft, familiar, and comforting. I wanted a fabric with a little bit of stretch, a bit of give. No one sees this part: the making of the making. But it is an integral aspect. With the thread I made, I built a web. Participants in *Fingers & Belly* are asked to complete an individual task: wind up the ball of yarn. However, each ball is at one end of a complex web. As such, completing that task necessarily involves navigating not only the web and the yarn of others, but also their bodies. Untangling the web is a process of untangling the body from other bodies. The result is quite fun and playful—and it is meant to be. The body becomes material, and the material, a kind of body—one that oscillates playfully between community goals and independent pursuits, as we navigate over and around one another.

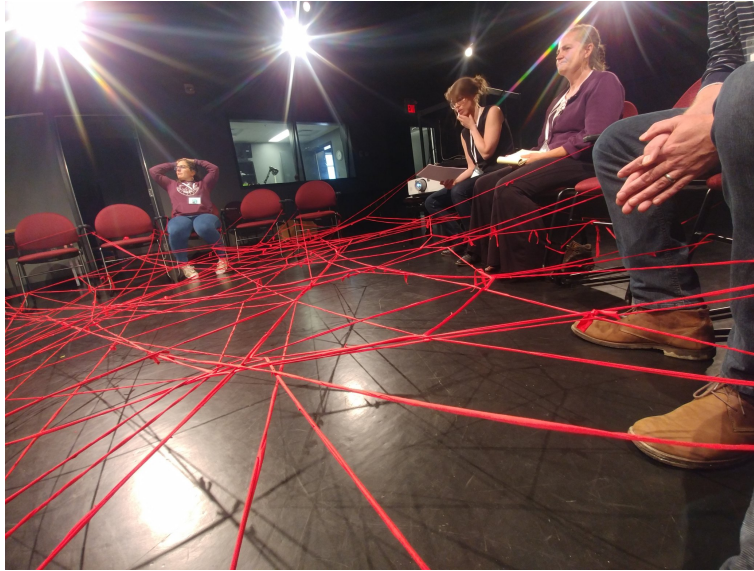


Figure 3: Thea Fitz-James, *Fingers & Belly*, PSi Calgary, 2019.

When I originally created the piece, it involved another aspect: I sat in the centre of the web—where all the yarn ends—naked, cocooning myself in a white sheet. Attempting to embody and contemporize Arachne’s metamorphosis, I was wordlessly telling the story of the female body in the wake of violence or sexual assault. Bringing in the image of both fly and spider, devoured and devourer, individual action and community engagement, and intimacy and isolation, *Fingers & Belly* speaks to how the body can transform after sexual abuse or trauma. The process of metamorphosis, the act of cocooning, the making of the web, and the communal act of untangling, became ways to stage the dialectic between the larger systemic issues around misogyny and the individual experience of sexual violence. They staged the personal and the political.

In many ways, *Fingers & Belly* and this chapter are both a retelling of Ovid’s Arachne Myth, in *Metamorphoses*. *Metamorphoses* is a compilation of 15 books, which tell a total of 250 myths. While the overarching themes vary from “mutability, love, violence, artistry, and power,” the unifying theme is titular (Wheeler 40). As described in the opening lines, Ovid “speak[s] of forms changed into new entities” (Swanson 201). In book six, Ovid tells the story of Arachne,

the talented weaver who challenges the goddess Athena to a weaving competition. Athena weaves a tapestry that celebrates the gods; Arachne weaves 18 images of male gods assaulting mortal women through metamorphosis. For insulting the gods, Athena transforms Arachne into a spider, from which, her “slender fingers clung to her side as legs; the rest was belly” (Miller 299).

Arachne’s tapestry is, even in the most moderate of readings, a fuck you to the gods. Depicting Europa, Medusa, Leda, and other women who were raped by gods disguised as a bull, dolphin, swan, and other things both animal and mineral (Zeus impregnates Danae as a golden shower), Arachne’s tapestry is an intentional rejection of the god-human hierarchy. In her book *Weaving the Word*, Kathryn Kruger suggests it is the magnitude of scenes depicted that is the affront to Athena. While the stories that Arachne weaves were common to tapestry, when all 18 of them are put together, the larger trend is revealed:

[H]ad Arachne depicted only one or two scenes wherein gods assault and impregnate women, she could merely have been illustrating a famous lineage, or the activities of one god. On the other hand, by weaving eighteen scenes portraying the infidelities of Jove, Neptune, Phoebus, Bacchus, and Saturn, or, in turn, Zeus, Poseidon, Apollo and Mars, Arachne seems to be commenting on the gods’ transgressions, how they abuse mortals, particularly mortal women.... Her illustrations challenge the patriarchy by representing a popular group of myths— the gods entering the human world by impregnating mortal women—and then undermines the myths’ explicit meaning: by depicting eighteen myths of this kind, she emphasizes not the birth of a hero, but the scene of rape. (67-68)

Arachne's transgression rejects the patriarchy and hegemony of the gods. Athena's tapestry, along with her original insistence that Arachne's skill is thanks to the gods, sits in stark contrast with Arachne's protest piece.

The Arachne myth has been widely theorized. It is most often lauded for its early use of Ekphrasis, or for its meta-elements: Arachne's metamorphosis is ignited by a critique of the metamorphoses of the gods (Vincent 361; Manchev 22). Contemporary readings of Arachne are more complex. Rather than reading the story of Arachne as a cautionary tale against offending the gods, contemporary readers see Arachne as an artist. In "The Spinner and the Poet," Byron Harries reads Arachne's defiance as the "proud independence of spirit and artistic integrity" (72). He goes so far as to compare Arachne to Ovid himself, reading her transformation as a prototype for his exile as a poet (65). In "The New Arachne: Towards a Poetics of Dynamic Forms," Boyan Manchev argues her tapestry "reduces the incommensurable bodies [of the gods] to bodies, placing their form within limits and, therefore, limiting their desires" (21). Arachne's artistic intervention is a material one, that bring the 'inanimate' textiles to life, and in doing, bring 'god' down to earth; inviting them to the material world, into material bodies, to face material consequences. In what follows, I attempt my own tapestry of canonical theatre texts that involve textiles. I knot together different texts in order to reveal larger trends with the performance of textiles on stage, as they relate to the performing female body.

I am struck by my desire to represent 18 case studies, like Arachne, so that the reader might be similarly overwhelmed by the number of texts that speak to weaving as a metaphor of feminine language, the body, and transformation. These are canonical theatre texts, as well as bits of visual and literary culture. In no particular order, these would be: (1) Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879), and the description of Mrs. Linde's knitting versus Nora's embroidery; (2)

Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619), and Aspatia's expression of grief through re-stitching embroidered myths; (3) Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916), and Mrs. Wright's expression of anger through her knotted quilt; (4) Aristophanes's *Lysistrata* (411 BC), and the metaphoric implication of weaving as a female alternative to the male-dominated civic process; (5) Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2007), and weaving as a crafty way to stall or stop time, as well as a dance movement piece; (6) Erin Shields's *If We Were Birds* (2010), and weaving as both a metaphor for shared female language and an artistic representation of rape, as well as scenic design; (7) contemporary Indigenous performance collective Spiderwoman Theatre (founded in 1976), and their use of weaving as performance methodology and the related Indigenous storytelling around Grandmother Spider; (8) Louise Bourgeois's *Maman* (1999), the giant spider installation that acts both as a tribute to her mother and a reflection on motherhood; (9) Bea Camacho and her cocooning projects (2005; 2008; 2010), where she discusses the dialectic of comfort and loneliness that is artistic work; (10) Anna Malla's web-based performance, *Play Dead* (2019); (11) my aforementioned weaving project, *Fingers & Belly* (2019), where I ask the audience to unravel a web while I simultaneously cocoon myself; all the other weaving gods, including: (12) the Greek Moirai, who weave, measure and cut the thread of life, (13) Anansi, the African spider god, storyteller and trickster, and (14) Ariadne, who helps Jason out of the minotaur's maze with a ball of yarn; (15) Diego Velazquez's painting *Las Hilanderas*, or *The Spinners* (1655), which shows the background of the Arachne myth—the women spinning behind the scenes; (16) the Lady of Shallot who turns away from her weaving and is cursed; (17) literature's Miss Marple, Madame Defarge, and other crafty characters who knit and are underestimated; (18) and, of course, Arachne herself, transformed into a spider.

It is okay if you find this overwhelming. I do. It seems impossible, or foolish, to try to weave all these different images together. There are probably too many to avoid getting things knotted. However, here and throughout this dissertation, I attempt to bring knots into my analysis, as both a metaphorical, material, and methodological approach. I am interested in what happens when I get caught in a moment of tension within my own logic, or within a political moment. A dialectical, embodied, or queer approach is sometimes dismissed as nothing more than mess. I encourage us to get tied in knots, and then, from a knotted perspective, to embrace a ‘messy’ way of reading the world. While I certainly do not attempt to do 18 full case studies in this chapter, I find the idea of knotting them together tempting. As such, I encourage the reader to think of cutting the thread of life, of unweaving a shroud in the middle of the night, or remembering the forgotten labour of spinners across all these case studies. Occasionally, I might take an aside, so that I may I think of them too. While we might not initially see the connection between a giant spider sculpture and Philomela’s rape tapestry, the themes of motherhood, wombs, and gut female instinct come productively into conversation with feminist body reclamation, transformation, and expression. All these different stories speak to the ways that women use knitting, embroidery, or weaving as a mode of bodily expression that is uniquely gendered. In almost all of these examples, textiles perform the female body as metamorphosis. The body is performed through weaving as a specifically gendered form of resistance, self-authorship, female expression, and transformation.

This chapter is interested in making and metamorphosis as a form of performative resistance. I draw conclusions about the metaphoric legacy of textiles and weaving in/and performance and on/in the body. This chapter traces the symbol of weaving back to the Greek and Roman myths, particularly the Arachne myth in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and explores

echoes in textile performance across time. I suggest that the metaphor of textiles in storytelling and theatre is about specifically female experience, body, and ontology. It is a metaphor of embodied trauma and gendered labour. In unpacking the metaphorical and semiotic resonance of textiles on stage, there are some common threads. I suggest, (1) that Arachne's tapestry acts as a metaphor for gendered communication, specifically communication surrounding the truth of the female body, female oppression, and gendered violence; and (2) that her metamorphosis into a spider illustrates the complex matrix of female artistry and labour. Specifically, I am interested in the times that textiles tell the story of rape and violence against women. I illustrate this by looking at the images of the quilt, tapestry, and embroidery through a number of canonical theatrical case studies: I discuss Beaumont and Fletcher's *The Maid's Tragedy* (1619), Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916), and Erin Shields's *If We Were Birds* (2010). Spanning four centuries, these plays specifically speak the language of embodied emotion, trauma, and labour. They use textiles as methods of self-performance, self-authorship, and critical creative truth-telling. This truth-telling specifically addresses conversations around sexual assault and sexual violence. All three are in conversation with the patriarchy; in them, textile objects and embodied weaving labour are framed as essential to communicating the story of sexual violence. Certainly, there are other notable textiles in stories, plays, and myths that are in conversation with the patriarchy as well; notable examples include Penelope's Shroud, Lysistrata's metaphoric weaving, Nora and Mrs. Linde's embroidery/knitting, and Madame Deafarge's revolutionary and caustic knitting, to name only a few. These textiles represent and communicate the revolutionary possibility of female embodiment and female labour, yet none of them speak so directly to sexual violence, assault, and rape as *The Maid's Tragedy*, *Trifles*, and *If We Were Birds*. While many case studies may be taken up to discuss gendered labour, these three also discuss emotional labour; while

many may situate the female body in relation to the patriarchy, these three situate her within a complex web of trauma, gendered violence, and agency. In these three case studies, textiles become a metaphor for the body when the body is lost to trauma. I put these three plays into conversation across time—weaving from one to another, not chronologically, but rather as one might make a braid, starting in the middle, with *Trifles*. This order builds my exploration of mythic metaphoric embodied weaving from a simple, symbolic example to one more expressionist, more oblique. While my examples are not explored chronologically, they are linear in a different way; I present a logical transition from the symbolic (*Trifles*), to the metaphoric (*The Maid's Tragedy*), and then the expressionistic (*If We Were Birds*).

At times in these case studies, the fact of trauma is overwhelming and exhaustive; one does not know what to do with the body after sexual assault and rape, and so the body is transposed on to something else—on to textiles. So, too, is the working through of violence and trauma done through the labour of textile creation. Here, emotional self-care and emotional labour *is* synonymous with textile creation, labour, and production. Yet across this dissertation, sexual violence is not a weight, but an instigator. This dissertation explores the web of female experience, where there exists the capacity for both embodied trauma and revolution, exhaustive emotions and overwhelming rage, instigating action and deep debilitating pain. Textile creation becomes more than a working through. It's a waking up. While violence and trauma are a major theme in this chapter, my dissertation speaks beyond this, to the revolutionary potential of rediscovering the body after sexual assault. However, the painful process of finding the body after sexual assault and rape is one place to start. In this chapter, I start here: by acknowledging how textiles have been instrumental in resituating the body after sexual assault, as well as doing the work of naming the sexual assault as real. This chapter explores textile creation as a way to

speak to embodied female experience, in all its complexity. Through the lens of the Arachne myth, and these case studies, I explore textiles as performers for the truth of sexual assault and rape.

This chapter will end with a close reading of Arachne's transformation into a spider. Here, her metamorphosis is not read as a punishment, but as a radical feminist body performance. While I do a close reading of her reduction to "fingers" and "belly", I read Arachne's transformation alongside contemporary web-based performances. I argue that Arachne's web is a unique feminist and political performance. Evocative as opposed to exhaustive, the concluding few pages of this chapter look at the spider herself. Here, the concept of mothers, the womb, the gut, and female intuition become tied together through a complex web of web and spider performances. I argue for a contemporary Arachne; I read the contemporary feminist body artist as someone turned into a spider. As such, this chapter analyses two different sections of the Arachne myth: the tapestry that Arachne makes and her transformation into a spider. This chapter expands what these two different moments in the classic myth reveal about the performing female body as artist.

Arachne becomes a metaphor within which to frame the case studies, examples, and close readings throughout this chapter; she demonstrates how textiles perform the realities of gendered violence, and following this, her own resistance and protest within a hegemonic patriarchal system. Her punishment is only a punishment if we choose to limit our reading of what protests can be, and what kind of performances are worthy of discourse within a patriarchal society. Reading Arachne and her tapestry as not only a powerful protest piece, but the knotted web itself as an alternative methodology or knowledge, allows us to reclaim historical readings of textiles and women as passive and domestic. I use my reading of Arachne to inform the readings of other

body performances discussed across this dissertation. Ultimately, I'm interested in looking at how the metaphor of textiles performs in plays and mythic storytelling, in order to illustrate what metaphoric baggage textiles bring with them when they come on stage. Here, textiles are performers that speak to the embodied trauma of rape, sexual assault, and violence against women. This is a performance of verisimilitude, self-authorship, truth-telling, and speaking the unspeakable. Weaving becomes a way of saying more than words could say. Weaving articulates and communicates events and experience beyond language, locating female being-in-the-world through textiles and in the body.

Knot 1: The Tapestry

Trifles

Susan Glaspell got the idea for *Trifles* from a murder case she covered as a young reporter in Iowa (Gainor 38). A sixty year-old farmer named John Hossack was murdered with an axe on December 2, 1900, while his wife slept next to him (Ben-Zvi "Murder She Wrote," 143). Inspired by Glaspell's experience of visiting the Hossacks's farmhouse, *Trifles* premiered at the Wharf Theater in Provincetown, Massachusetts, in 1916. In the play, two wives—Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters—are left alone in the home of the murdered John Wright. With the Sheriff, County Attorney, and neighbouring farmer looking around the farmhouse for a motive to the murder, the two women are left in the kitchen to pick up some things for the suspect—John's wife, Mrs. Minnie Wright. While at first, everything seems normal, the women tidying the kitchen soon discover moments of incongruity. Looking at a quilt Mrs. Wright was making, Mrs. Hale is shocked:

Mrs Hale: (*examining another block*) Mrs. Peters, look at this one. Here, this is the one she was working on, and look at that sewing! All the rest of it has been so nice and even.

And look at this! It's all over the place! Why it looks as if she didn't know what she was about! (1017)

Discovering the disorderly quilt block, Mrs. Hale decides to unpick the threads and re-stitches it. They soon uncover other details around the kitchen that point to the emotional turmoil of Mrs. Wright. When they find Mrs. Wright's dead bird hidden among her quilted blocks, presumably killed by the late Mr. Wright, the women are given a choice: to share their discovery with the police, or to hide the potential motive from the authorities. In the penultimate moments of the play, they decide to conceal the dead bird. The final lines call back to a previous conversation that the women were mocked for, when Mrs. Hale wondered whether Mrs. Wright was planning on quilting or knotting her quilt.

COUNTY ATTORNEY: (*facetiously.*) Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to—what is it you call it, ladies?

MRS. HALE: (*Her hand against her pocket*): We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson. (1019)

As she answers Mr. Henderson, Mrs. Hale simultaneously hides the dead bird in her pocket—the missing bit of information the men seek that would clearly connect Mrs. Wright to the crime.

There is significant feminist scholarship on *Trifles*. June Sochen, writing on feminism in Greenwich Village from 1910-1920, sees Glaspell as showcasing “frustrated woman in American culture... who could find no legitimate means of self-expression” (43). Sharon Friedman suggests that this is a play about exactly that female frustration, signalled by the character's identification with Mrs. Wright, a character who, ironically, is never seen on stage. Mrs. Wright's isolation and seemingly invisible repression forms a deep identification with the women waiting in the kitchen, and this sparks a shift in morality, framed alongside their own subordination to the men around them, amid “condescension and patronizing postures” (74).

Phyllis Mael discusses the piece through feminist development psychology to demonstrate how “Minnie's trifles raise the consciousness of both women, especially Mrs. Peters, moving them from awareness to anger to action” (282). Many feminist scholars point to the play as an exploration of feminist and female selfhood, as well as an exploration of morality and law: is justice still justice if it is dependent on an oppressive patriarchal system? Or as Mrs. Hale replies in the original short story, *A Jury of her Peers*, “the law is the law—a bad stove is a bad stove” (6). There is a need to re-examine the context within which the law is applied, the people who law, morality, and justice protects, and what forms of violence these ‘bad’ or ‘broken’ systems ignore. By the end of the play, it is “married to the law” Mrs. Peter who attempts to hide the box with the evidence of the dead bird (1019).²⁵

The final lines of the play, “We call it—knot it, Mr. Henderson,” can be read in multiple ways. First, there is the materiality of the quilt, and the literal process of quilting or knotting. Quilting or knotting describes how the different blocks of the quilt will come together, as well as the different layers of the quilt: the top layer, the middle layer (batting), and the bottom layer (backing). Quilting or knotting are two different methods of finishing a quilt. On the one hand, knotting is a simpler, quicker way of connecting the three layers of the quilt, where the knots are made visible. Quilting, on the other hand, is slightly more decorative and time consuming, with more elaborate designs connecting the layers of the quilt. A material, face-value reading of this final line tells us that the women suspect that Mrs. Wright was planning on joining the quilt in a simpler way—one that showed the process, the knots, of her work.

²⁵ For further feminist readings on feminism and *Trifles*, see Chung, Angel, Gainor, and Ben-Zvi.

Second, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters see the quilt left behind by Mrs. Wright as a sign of her internal and external emotional distress. The “queer” stitches, and the bird buried in the quilting blocks, are clues to Mrs. Wright’s motive, clues underestimated by the men searching the farmhouse (1018). The quilt, for the men, is a trifle: something insignificant. The stitches are dismissed seemingly both for their size and their association with female labour. Continuing this line of thought, a strong correlation is made between Mrs. Wright and the dead bird. She too, used to sing before she was married. “No, Wright wouldn’t like the bird,” Mrs. Hale tells us, “a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too” (1019). Mrs. Hale suggests that Mrs. Wright’s artistic expression was suppressed at the hands of Mr. Wright. The implication of violence is important and intentional: whether figurative or literal violence, the suggestion is that Mr. Wright killed something in Mrs. Wright long before she knotted the noose around his neck. In hiding the bird among the quilting blocks, Mrs. Wright’s artistry is also hidden. The canary, dead among the quilt pieces, asks what else has died within Mrs. Wright, and if Minnie Foster, who used to sing in the choir, is dead now too.

There is also larger cultural significance to knotting. As Showalter discusses in her analysis of the short story, knotting was something that a person could do by themselves, whereas quilting was typically done with a larger community at quilting bees: “[I]t would have been knotted, as she knotted the rope around her husband’s neck, because knotting can be done alone; the solitary Minnie has no sisterhood of friends to join her in quilting” (242). As such, the decision to quilt or knot is one that reflect metaphorically the community that Mrs. Wright lacked. Mrs. Hale reflects on this in the final moments of the play, when she asks what responsibility she has in the presumed violence Minnie’s endured alone: “I know how things can be—for women. I tell you, it’s queer, Mrs. Peters. We live close together and we live far apart.

We all go through the same things—it's all just a different kind of same thing" (1019). Her appreciation of the complexity of the situation invites the knotted condition of women's work, female experience, violence against women, and communities of accountability.

Finally, the concluding lines also speak to the knot of the noose that killed Mr. Wright, suggesting that Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters know that Mrs. Wright killed her husband, but prefer to follow their own form of justice; this reading is further evidenced by the title of the short story adaptation of *Trifles*, "A Jury of Her Peers." The suggestion is that while the women know Mrs. Wright is guilty of the crime, they recognize that the patriarchal judicial systems would not bring her justice. Further wordplay points to the alternative knowledge the women share; Mrs. Peters describes the murder as "crafty," pointing homonymically to the quilt, and other feminine handicrafts (1017). The word play of 'knot' and 'craft', and the potential alternative meanings of both words points to a how the women may speak in code, or hide their knowledge in plain sight. I am reminded of the many times in literary history when female knowledge of textiles and making has been synonymous for craftiness, sneakiness, or deception, or a secret language, including: Madame Defarge, in Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, who writes the names of those aristocrats she wants executed into her knitting; Odysseus's Penelope, who stalls the suitors by weaving a shroud for her father-in-law, only to unweave it every night; and Philomela (whom I discuss below), who communicates the story of her rape secretly to her sister through a tapestry. As Showalter reminds us textiles can be something of a system of signs, hieroglyphics, that are legible through the gendered experience of women's work, history, and experience (232). Here again in *Trifles* not only do the female characters see clues and signs in the quilt that point to Mrs. Wright's guilt, but they also communicate secretly about these clues, and their intervention within the patriarchal justice system, through textile terminology.

In *Trifles*, the quilt becomes many things: a means of literal artistic expression in the home; a shared, secret language that the women can use to hide in plain sight; a hint or clue that is only understood by the women, and simultaneously dismissed by the men as unimportant; a metaphor for Mrs. Wright's (lost) agency in response to the violence—both figurative and literal—at the hands of her husband; and safe site to hide the thing (the dead bird) that connects her to the crime. The thing she's quilting—a log cabin pattern—is also important given that the play is situated in her home.²⁶ The items deemed 'trifles' are all things connected to the home and domesticity. Looking at the log cabin as a home within a home, and the bird as a textual metaphor for Mrs. Wright herself, the quilt points to how the farmhouse is a cage for Mrs. Wright.

The subject of quilts is important in unpacking the metaphor implicit in female textile creation and secrecy on stage. Beyond Mrs. Wright's domestic duties to "make a home," she also quilts a home through her tapestry, one that metaphorically speaks to her own tenuous place within the farmhouse. Reading Mrs. Wright's quilt as a reflection of her state of mind, and a metaphor for her experience, reflects a larger tendency to read textiles as a form for female self-authorship. Writing about embroidery from early modern to Victorian England, Roszika Parker discusses how women often selected their embroidered subjects from Ovid or stories from the Bible, to reflect things that they were feeling, and to rework these stories in their image. Themes were usually female-centric, with common subjects such as Penelope, Dido, Philomela, Diana,

²⁶ The log pattern is not pictorial, but rather geometric: "The basic Log Cabin pattern begins with a central square, often in red, which is sewn on to a larger clock of fabric. 'A narrow strip, or log, is then pieced to the edge of the center square. Subsequent strips are added, each perpendicular to the previous strip, until the center square is entirely boarded by log' (Bishop et al 74). The compositional principal of the Log Cabin quilt is the contrast between light and dark fabric. Each block is divided into two triangular sections, one section executed in light colored fabrics, the other in dark. When the blocks are pieced together to make a quilt, dramatic visual effects and variations can be created depending on the placement of the dark sections" (Showalter 234).

The Queen of Sheba, and Esther (Parker 65; Jones and Stallybrass 158, 162). The embroiderer gets to choose who or what they represented, and what figure they chose reflects the power of self-expression through identification, as well as a woman's familiarity with these stories, and thus her education.²⁷ Women could even embroider scenes of violence and female eroticism through biblical or mythical heroines; embroidery allowed them access to themes normally thought to be inappropriate for women (Frye 118). And even the act of embroidery itself was a sign of "quick understanding and aesthetic intelligence" (Jones and Stallybrass 145). Embroidery helped establish female education by associating it with respectable femininity. Further, it provided a reason to read seminal texts of the era, and a venue to explore, respond, and even criticize their themes. In this next section, I want to read textile creation on stage as a literal expression of female self-authorship, through the example of Aspatia's embroidery in *The Maid's Tragedy*.

The Maid's Tragedy

Written by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Maid's Tragedy* was published in England in 1619, though it is imagined to have premiered earlier, between 1608 and 1611 at the Blackfriars Playhouse. The canonical play tells the story of Evadne, who after her marriage to Armintor, reveals that she has been sleeping with the King and that their marriage is a sham. This hasty marriage greatly upsets Aspatia, who was romantically involved with Armintor before the marriage. After Evadne's brother finds out about her indiscretion, he shames Evadne, and in turn, she decides to kill the King. Meanwhile, Aspatia disguises as a man, and pretending to be her own brother, confronts Armintor on her own behalf, and after a physical confrontation,

²⁷ A notable example of this is Elizabeth I's gift to Katherine Parr when she was 11: an embroidered cover for the book *The Miroir or Glasse of The Synnefull Soul*. This represented her dedication to reading and her skills at embroidery—thus reflecting a prestigious education (Parker 73).

Armintor stabs her. At that same moment Evadne enters and reveals that she's killed the King, and then kills herself when Armintor rejects her. Dying, Aspatia reveals her identity, and undone, Armintor kills himself. The brother, and other supporting characters enter, to find all three dead. As is the habit of early modern English revenge tragedies, "all are punished" (Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, V.iii.311).

As with *Trifles*, there is a wealth of feminist and queer scholarship on *The Maid's Tragedy*. Many scholars contextualize the play within Jacobean pamphlet debates, which discussed questions of female morality and appropriate femininity. Adrienne L. Eastwood suggests that Beaumont and Fletcher put themselves in conversation with these contemporary debates, but avoided aligning with one side or another. Depicting both Evadne and Aspatia as characters reminiscent of the 'virgin/whore' trope, Eastwood argues "during the course of the play, the lines distinguishing these categories become blurred: Aspatia assumes some traits which disrupt established categories of both chastity and of femininity, and Evadne challenges the stereotype of the whore by behaving according to her own code of honor" ("Controversy" 12). Troubling the female stereotypes works to subtly and effectively disrupt the early modern concept of the 'single woman'. Eastwood continues, "the single woman on the stage slides between social ranks and genders; she eludes containment (at least temporarily), expanding agency and redefining femininity through performances of social rank, gender, and sexuality" (Eastwood "Controversy" 9). Through these reimaginings of femininity, singleness, and morality, *The Maid's Tragedy* invites "various and conflicting ways of understanding gender" (15).

Cristina Leon Alfar similarly places the Evadne/Aspatia dichotomy in conversation with the pamphlet debate on female virtue. She, however, focuses on Evadne, looking to reconfigure her desire as masochistic within a sexist commodity culture. Alfar argues that the process of

commodifying the female body makes female desire, in turn ‘evil’: “[W]omen are presented in the theater as capable of making choices that are irrevocably masochistic because, as non-agents, as merchandise, women fulfill only the desire of an other. In Evadne's case, we will see that her desire to be a valuable commodity is stronger than her need to live; in this sense, her desire, as a result of her commodified subjectivity, is a drive for self-annihilation” (Alfar 2). In representing desire as sadomasochistic, Alfar argues that the play “unmasks the patrilineal economy's construction of... desire as masochistic” (1). To offer some juxtaposition to this negative reading, Katherine M. Graham offers an excellent overview of Evadne's agentic revenge, and how Evadne's agency and power might rise through the sexist commodification. As she surmises, Evadne's “behaviour belies an investment in undoing, disrupting, and rebelling against given gender hierarchies as a locus for her agency and power” (108).²⁸ She continues to argue that this is in fact a queer agency. Putting her argument in conversation with Eve Sedgwick's definition of queer, which sees queer as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning,” Graham returns to the body, reminding us that Evadne would be performed by a “boy player,” presenting a queering moment of undress, desire, and female revenge (qtd. in Graham 109, 110). Here, the fictional body of Evadne and the real body of the boy performer rub shoulders, as we navigate questions of appropriate femininity, female desire, and the body as commodity.

Interestingly, Eastwood locates one of Evadne's disruptions in her honesty. “Whenever Evadne upholds her honesty,” she tells us, “she revises the category of ‘whore’” (13). Lying and truth-telling are divided along gendered line in *A Maid's Tragedy*. Who gets to lie and who is believed are embedded in complex and gendered contradictions. For example, each of the three

²⁸ For more scholarship on Evadne's agency, see Tassi, McLuskie, Clark, and Berek.

times Evadne reveals the truth, she is immediately disbelieved with a verbal and outright rejection of what she just said.²⁹ These three moments are noteworthy, especially given the themes of deceit across the text, including the fake marriage, lies about sexual interactions, the variation on the bed trick, and gendered disguises.³⁰ The concept that deceit and honesty are gendered is further evidenced during the opening masque. In the play, the marriage between Evadne and Amintor is celebrated with a masque telling the myth of Endymion and Selena (here Cynthia), where the Moon Goddess falls in love with the mortal man. In this telling, Endymion is replaced with other celestial figures and gods, including Cynthia (Moon Goddess), Night, Neptune (God of Sea), and Aeolus (God of Wind). In the masque, the Night claims Cynthia is Endymion's lover. This is true to the mythology, and yet, when given the chance, Cynthia denies it:

That fair boy was not mine,
Nor went I down to kiss him. Ease and wine
Have bred these bold tales; poets when they rage
Turn gods to men, and make an hour an age. (II.ii.164-167)

Here, representational modes of theatre or poetry are defined as lies; and not ones that are particularly innocent, but rather, ones that are built on the backs and reputations of women.

In this case study, I discuss Aspatia, and her radical self-authorship and truth-telling through embroidery. While Evadne struggles to be believed by men, and is continually

²⁹ These include: "*Evad.* Why 'tis the King/ *Amint.* The King! / *Evad.* What will you do now? / *Amint.* 'Tis not the King" (II.ii.304-305); "*Evad.* He lyes. / *King.* He does not" (III.i.80-82); and "*Evad.* I am come to kill thee. / *King.* No." (V.i.83-84).

³⁰A 'bed trick' is a theatrical plot device typical in Elizabethan and Jacobean performance where a character is meant to have sex with another character, but there is some kind of trickery, partner swapping, or concealment. Much like a sexual shell-game, the darkened stage moment involves someone having sexual relations with someone they were not expecting. In her study on the topic, *The Bed-Trick in English Renaissance Drama: Explorations in Gender, Sexuality, and Power*, Mariliss C. Desens defines the bed trick as a sexual encounter in which "at least one partner [does] not have informed consent" (17).

manipulated and pushed around by her husband, brother, and her lover, Aspatia's obstinate confidence in the truth of her story is reminiscent of Cynthia, as described above. In what follows, I unpack the embroidery scene in *The Maid's Tragedy* as an example of self-performance, self-authorship, and critical creative truth-telling.

In act two, scene two, Aspatia and Antiphila discuss the mythic character Ariadne, whom Aspatia has chosen as an embroidery subject. In her discussion, Aspatia critiques mythic discourse, and rewrites Ariadne's story in her own image, rejecting the typical representation of grief and loss, and instead opting for her own performance of grief. These interventions, through a performance of self, work towards her larger goals of navigating the boundaries of femininity through embroidery. For early modern women in England, the embroidered image situated the maker within the community: "In embroidery, English women represented themselves through patterns and pictures that can be read as locations of identity lived within a network of household and community connections" (Frye 162). Aspatia aligns herself with many mythical mourners in this scene, but only embroiders Ariadne abandoned on the beach, pointing to her own fate at being abandoned by Armintor.³¹ Not only that, but she changes the myth, to better reflect her own experience. When she finds out that Theseus's boat did not hit a rock after he left Ariadne on the beach, Aspatia is upset:

Aspatia: It should ha' been so. Could the gods know this,

And not, of all their number, raise a storm?

But they are all as ill. This false smile

³¹ She invokes Dido and Oenone, both of whom were abandoned by their lovers. She also alludes to Niobe, whose story ends with her turned into a statue by her grief. Beyond this scene, the play at large makes mention of Penelope and Philomela and Procne. All of these allusions intensify themes of chastity (Dido and Penelope), as well as female revenge (Philomela and Procne). It also contains themes of female camaraderie and competition (Philomela and Procne, Oenone and Helen, Arachne and Athena), and, of course, female ingenuity and creativity through weaving or spinning (Penelope, Philomela, Helen, Arachne, Ariadne).

Was well expressed; just such another caught me. –

You shall not go so. –

Antiphila, in this place work a quick-sand,

And over it a shallow smiling water

And his ship ploughing it, and then a Fear:

Do that Fear to the life, wench.

Antiphila. 'Twill wrong the story.

Aspatia. 'Twill make the story, wronged by wanton poets,

Live long and be believed.” (II.ii. 49-59)

Aspatia's asks her handmaid to stitch hidden quicksand, so that as Theseus sails away from Ariadne, he gets what is coming to him. Since the gods did not step in, she makes herself a god; re-stitching the outcome of the myth reflects a desire to sew some justice into her own story. By “mak[ing] the story,” Aspatia makes herself the author of not only her own story, but mythic stories where women are wronged. The editors of the Manchester University Press edition suggest that the “fear” in the passage is not represented on the face of Theseus, but rather, that the scene should imbue “a personification embodying frightfulness” (Craik 100). In other words, in Aspatia's version of the myth, Theseus has something to be afraid of: there will be retribution for his actions against Ariadne. Like Arachne's depiction of the rape of women by the gods, Aspatia's embroidery re-stitches the story “wronged by wanton poets,” reimagining the patriarchal narrative to offer a more feminist and just ending.

Aspatia continues to re-write this myth in her own image through re-stitching the image of Ariadne herself. Her re-stitching is a re-stitching of the self; she chooses what identity she represents, and in doing so, authors her own representation. Here, embroidery provides the

“chance to portray alternative selves, springing from divinely approved narratives” (Frye 145).

Aspatia memorializes Ariadne through her own identification with the character. In doing so, she memorializes herself. In looking at the face of Ariadne, she states, “[t]hese colours are not dull and pale enough/ To show a soul so full of misery/ As this sad lady’s was” (II.ii.63-65). Again, she is pointing out how the representation pales in comparison to her reality:

Do it by me;
 Do it again me, the lost Aspatia,
 And you shall find all true but the wild island.
 And think I stand upon the sea-beach now,
 Mine arms thus, and mine hair blown in the wind,
 Wild as that desert, and let all about me
 Tell that I am forsaken. Do my face
 (If thou hadst ever feeling of sorrow)
 Thus, thus, Antiphilia: strive to make me look
 Like sorrow’s monument, and the trees about me,
 Let them be dry and leafless; let the rocks
 Groan with continual surges; and behind me
 Make all desolation. Look, look, wenches,
 A miserable life of this poor picture!
 (II.ii. 65-78.)

Aspatia is performing her grief through her embroidery. First, she claims to perform ‘real’ grief, bringing a different aspect of truth to her performance. For Aspatia, the appearance or representation of grief is not enough; it must reflect the reality of grief, down to the minute hues.

Second, she makes herself an exemplar of that truth. She embodies the truth of grief, on her face and through her body. Finally, she is memorializing herself through her grief—she wishes to be made a monument, like Niobe, and even gives herself a title: “[T]he lost Aspatia” (II.ii. 66). It is through memorializing that she performs self-authorship, dislodging the discourse of grieving women from the hands of male poets. It is through her critique of the embroidered subject that she creates a new subject, one that reflects herself and that extends beyond the patriarchal image of feminine mourning. This moment is reminiscent of Cynthia’s description of poets from the masque quoted earlier, and echoes Arachne’s claim that she is a better weaver than the gods. Through her grief and memorializing, Aspatia does not attempt to “turn gods into men,” but rather, to turn herself into a god.

I argue that embroidery is a feminist form of self-definition and expression, exploration and performance. Aspatia deconstructs femininity, and in doing, she is able to deconstruct herself, and thus create and perform a new, true self. Aspatia deconstructs contemporary norms of female expression and self-performance through her re-stitching of the Ariadne scene. Embroidery is the stage for this critique and creation. It is how she is literally memorialized in the world of the play, and how she is metaphorically exploring her own grief and being, through thread. Here her stitching becomes a meaningful way of writing herself, her body, her history. By writing her history, she re-writes. She not only critiques and deconstructs, but literally unstitches what is already done. In unstitching history, she changes the past to hold her place in time.

If We Were Birds

There is another tapestry in the same book as the Arachne myth in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: the myth of Philomela, Procne, and Theseus. As the story goes, Procne and Philomela are sisters.

Theseus marries Procne and takes her away from Athens to live with him in his home of Thrace. But Procne longs for her sister. At her insistence, Theseus returns to Athens to invite Philomela to Thrace for a visit. When he sees his sister-in-law, he is overcome by her beauty. He convinces her to come to Thrace, where he locks her in a cabin in the woods, rapes her, and cuts out her tongue so that she can't tell anyone what happened. He then tells Procne that her sister died on the journey over. Without speech, Philomela weaves a tapestry depicting the story of what happened to her, and has it secretly delivered to her sister. Upon seeing it, Procne immediately understands the meaning of the tapestry. She rescues Philomela, and the pair exact their revenge by killing the couple's son Ityr, baking him into a pie, and feeding it to Theseus. When all is revealed, the gods turn the three of them into birds.

This gruesome story has several contemporary adaptations, including Timberlake Wertenbaker's *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988) and Erin Shields's *If We Were Birds* (2010), and is said to have inspired Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (Mabillard).³² *If We Were Birds* won the 2011 Governor General's Literary Award for Drama and two 2010 Dora Mavor Moore Awards for the production directed by Alan Dilworth at Tarragon Theatre.³³ In discussing the origins of the play, Shields connects it directly to violence and rape:

If We Were Birds was initially inspired by reading that I was doing about the mid-90s conflict in the former Yugoslavia. I heard a newscast about rape used as a weapon of war in that conflict and that led me to a book entitled *Mass Rape: the war against women in Bosnia-Herzegovina* edited by Alexandra Stiglmayer. This collection of essays and testimonials of Bosnian women enraged me to the core and I widened my research. Book after book, conflict after conflict, I discovered that rape has been used as a weapon of war

³² Shakespeare references Ovid's text directly in Act IV, Scene I, lines 42-61.

³³ This production of *If We Were Birds* was also nominated for a Dora Award for Outstanding New Play.

from the beginning of time. I wanted to write a play that explored the personal viciousness of sexual violence and spoke to the tragic history of perpetual rape as a weapon. I needed a large container. Greek Tragedy is about the largest theatrical container there is. (qtd. in Ue 98)

Shields's specific intervention highlights how rape has been used systemically and tactically across time. She brings a chorus of women raped during wartime together with the Greek myth to discuss how violence against women is used as a tool within a patriarchal and nationalist system.

The event that incites the violence at the end of the play is Philomela's rape, which she communicates to her sister through a tapestry she weaves.³⁴ In *If We Were Birds*, the tapestry is a shadow scene:

PROCNE and the SERVANT stretch out the tapestry. Lighting shift: the sheet is lit from behind.

Movement piece: silhouetted tableaux of the rape and dismemberment are projected onto the tapestry. PROCNE understands every image.

[SERVANT]: Some excellent needlework. A bit gory for the boy's rooms, maybe, but I suppose it's a little cathartic. (65-66)

In an interview on the play, Shields breaks down why the shadow technique was utilized:

The tapestry Philomela weaves to tell her sister about the rape is central to the story.

Weaving is a small, intricate art form. Theatre must be large. The silhouettes were a way for us to make the small, large. When the servant enters, she carries a long white sheet: the tapestry. (qtd. in Ue 102-103)

³⁴ Wertenbaker's adaptation switches the tapestry out for large dolls that Philomela makes, and then pantomimes her rape as a kind of play-within-a-play (55-56).

Here, the tapestry becomes a stage or frame to tell the story of rape and violence against women, one that is immediately recognizable to Procne but not to the servant. The servant's response is revealing—for her, the tapestry is merely representative—a fiction. It is too gory for the boy (who is, ironically, encouraged to become a soldier), but is “I suppose...a little cathartic” (66).³⁵

According to Aristotle, catharsis is an essential theatrical device within Greek tragedies. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle provides a how-to guide for an effective tragedy. “Tragedy is a representation of an action of a superior kind—grand, and complete in itself—presented in embellished language, in distinct forms in different parts, performed by actors rather than told by a narrator, effecting, through pity and fear, the purification of such emotions” (134). For Aristotle, catharsis, or the “purification” of pity and fear, is essential to any good tragedy. It is even, in this descriptive list, tragedy's *raison d'être*, the “so what” of theatre. While Aristotle himself offers no clear definition of catharsis, translator and scholar Anthony Kenny provides some context: “The Greek word is a verbal noun related to the adjective *katharos*, which means pure and undefiled. ‘Purification’ is therefore the most obvious translation, and having considered several others—‘purging’, ‘cleansing’, ‘refining’—I concluded that it is also the most appropriate” (xxv). Kenny discusses this at length in his introduction to *Poetics*, suggesting that catharsis is “the pleasure that we take in feeling these normally depressing emotions” (xxvi). He continues, “the very comparison between myself and the tragic hero serves to calibrate the emotions of pity and fear when felt in real life. Watching tragedy helps us to put our own sorrows and worries into proportion, when we observe the catastrophes that have overtaken people who were far superior to the likes of ourselves” (xxvi). For Kenny, catharsis is about

³⁵ Interestingly, the son is also performed by a white sheet.

better understanding, or ‘purifying’ one’s own negative emotions through the suffering of another.

However, this is only one reading of catharsis of many. My own thoughts on catharsis are better aligned with Brechtian criticism. In her article *Brecht’s Criticisms of Aristotle’s Aesthetics of Tragedy* Angela Curran describes how “Brecht attacks Aristotelian catharsis as a kind of ‘opium for the masses’, arguing that empathizing with characters prevents viewers from reflecting critically on the social causes of human suffering” (167). Brecht argues that in providing a kind of emotional closure for the audience, Aristotelian tragedies overlook the audience’s opportunity to reflect critically on the tragedy; to simply accept the purification of emotions that catharsis offers is to reduce theatre to pleasure for pleasure’s sake. And while there is nothing wrong with pleasure, Brecht reminds us, theatre can create complex engagements with pleasure. Brechtian pleasures “attain their climaxes as cohabitation does through love: they are more intricate, richer in communication, more contradictory and more productive of results” (Brecht 181). For Brecht, Aristotelian catharsis is to epic theatre as a one night stand is to love. Aristotelian theatre is one for pleasure, and not education or elucidation. Cynthia Freeland complicates the either/or approach we might be inclined to attribute to catharsis, suggesting that catharsis itself is peculiarly gendered. She frames this through mimesis:

Pleasure must be taken in the play as mimesis. While I agree... that the audience does respond to tragedy as to life—because in life there would be no pleasure in the relevant observations—I also think that the audience does not respond to tragedy as real, because otherwise it would not feel the pity and fear through which catharsis occurs at the depicted events (“Plot Imitates Action” 124).

She suggests that if we are to understand the pleasure to be found in catharsis, then we are ignoring certain ‘real’ aspects of human life; aspects that are already ignored in Aristotle’s “fundamentally optimistic view of human activity” (124). “The emotivism account cannot explain how we would get a catharsis from watching someone crying like Hecuba in *The Trojan Women*,” she explains. This, she continues, “results in a limitation... it fails to explain how catharsis is provided by certain tragedies like *The Trojan Women*. This could indicate that it is flawed as a proposal of what Aristotle had in mind by catharsis; but alternatively, and more plausibly I believe, it shows that Aristotle’s own account is not intended to encompass a play such as this, simply because he regarded it as an inferior example of its kind” (Freeland, “Plot Imitates Action” 125). Essentially, Freeland suggests that because Aristotle believed female characters and their stories were not as valuable as male ‘good’ characters, he does not explore their tragedy as having the potential for catharsis.

I don’t believe that the invocation of catharsis in this moment of *If We Were Birds* is ignorant of how Aristotle’s catharsis, tragedy, and the characters are intentionally gendered. The tapestry comes forward as an alternative text and an alternative performance device. Like a play, or tragedy, the tapestry is mimetic. In bringing in mimesis, I invite another tangle, another knot of theorists, philosophy, and discourse. Elin Diamond discusses two possible ways that mimesis can be used:

One, mimesis as representation, with its many doublings and unravellings of model, subject, identity (Irigaray, Derrida). Two, mimesis as a mode of reading that transforms an object into a *gestus* or dialectical image (Brecht, Benjamin). In both senses an unseen bears on the scene. But the first depends on the truth of the model and its creative revisions, the second on truths produced in engaged interpretation. (ii)

The second model is the most productive for this analysis. The object of the sheet mimetically tells the story of the rape, thereby “transforming [the sheet] into a *gestus* or dialectic image”. This approach invites us to “situate [our] material truths within, not anterior to, mimetic practice. Given the reifications of human and commodity relations under capitalism, mimetic truth must be pried open through interpretive labor. Mimesis is labor: a sensuous, critical receptivity to, and transformation of, the object” (Diamond ix). Through Diamond’s *Unmaking Mimesis* she puts forward a “mimesis without a true referent: mimesis without truth” (xi).

This is certainly what is at work within the gestic moment described in the stage directions: “*PROCNE understands every image.*” In the moment performed here, the shadow tapestry is mimetic of a ‘real’ tapestry, which is mimetic of the ‘real’ rape, which is the central plot point for this theatre piece, which is itself mimetic of both the ‘original’ Ovid poem, and the historical use of rape as a weapon for war. If we search back through this chain of iteration, from mimesis to mimesis, what is the ‘original’; what is *true*? This question/goal is criticized by Rebecca Schneider in her exploration of historical re-enactment, and the rich slippage it offers between mimesis and history.

Here the tired and mutual exclusivity knit into the binary distinction between the error-ridden theatrical on the one hand and the somehow actual or pure real on the other comes undone, and we can be done with nostalgic proclamations that the map has somehow replaced the “more real” category of the territory, producing everything as “mere” simulacra. There’s nothing mere about the theatrical, and moreover, theatricality, like interpretation, is not a matter of the *loss* of some prior, purer *actual*. Rather, in line with Aristotle’s rejoinder to Plato, mimesis is what we *do*. To ask how to do things with

mimesis might be to ask how to engage with historical process—with history—with the antecedent and subsequent real at/on any given stage of time. (*Performing Remains* 18)

It is mimesis itself, then, and not the original, not the ‘truth’ that we should focus on.

Yet, to ask “what is true” in a play about rape, is not, today, a neutral question. While I am speaking about this question both diagetically and non-diagetically, we can also answer the question, “what is true” with the answer: the rape and mutilation of Philomela. Across all the areas of mimesis discussed above, women are still raped. While mimesis never contains an original truth, it can perform truths. In the world of the play, the question is not about mimesis, but interpretation. For the servant, the tapestry is a ‘gory’ fiction, one that expels the potential pity and fear— desire and titillation—that surrounds rape and violence against women. For Procne, who “understands every image,” there is no hope for Aristotelian catharsis. Rather this knowledge leads to the same “gory” end that the servant deems too much for her child. While this gestic moment is achieved through mimesis, the ‘truth’ of sexual assault and rape haunts the scene, and indeed the play, through the chorus of women.

This interplay between ‘true’ mimesis and performing the lived truth of women is exemplified in Schneider’s *Explicit Body in Performance*, and her example of counter-mimicry in Spiderwoman’s *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City*. In the play, the Indigenous performance group reperform ugly racist stereotype of the “Injun,” before switching to a searing critique of these performances, along with stories from their lives and experiences. “People are laughing. Then – POW!” they tell us, “we get them with the real stuff” (qtd. in Schneider 171). This mimetic moment invites a shift from one thing to another:

The seemingly endless concatenation of resembles and counter-resemblances, in which mimesis repeats again and again and aging, is interrupted by Spiderwoman by something

they insist on as “real”. Here, the re-doubling of representation does not erect a Baudrillardian hall of mirrors in which other mimics others mimicking others till the Different supposedly collapses with the Same under the label “representation is all.” Instead Spiderwoman insists upon an interruption: “POW! – we get them with the real stuff.” The punch of the literal in the face of the symbolic. (171).

Upon then asking, “[w]hat is the real stuff” Schneider explains:

They’re telling a story about real effects on real lives and they have an agenda pitched towards change. They are ‘going back into the before to use for the future.’ Their double back in fact bears a double meaning. On the one hand, it is a repetition of the technique of mimesis upon the dominant culture that has mimicked them (as if to say, you’ve doubled me, now I’ll double you back). But, on the other hand, it is a significant historical counter-analysis, a double back as in a retracing of steps to expose something secreted, erased, silenced along the way. (171-172)

This, I argue, is at work in the moment that Procne “understands every image”. She sees in the tapestry not just the story of her sister, but the story of the chorus of women, whose bodies were given nonconsensually as a tactic of war. Sheild’s turns back to the story of Procne and Philomela, not to enter a “Baudrillardian hall of mirrors” but to go “back into the before to use for the future”. This is an investigation of mimesis as the container through which to enact social change; to reflect the material realities of rape and sexual assault from the past, alive, in the current, lived, and mimetic, moment.

It is also worth considering, as Schneider does, that the relationship between the audience and the mimesis of the play is a sensuous one. “The viewed and the viewer are entangled in a sensuous contact, sensuously complicit in the scene—bodies are engaged” (*Explicit Body* 89).

The kind of “physiognomic tactility” inherent in the mimesis of rape is a dissertation for another day; however, is this tactility a potential form of catharsis (89)? I think it’s worth acknowledging that while the tapestry is not cathartic for Procene (though it is “a little” for the servant), it is not cathartic for the audience either (although it is the moment things get ‘real’). Rather, if we are hell-bent on finding a (feminist) catharsis in *If We Were Birds*, I think it is instead in the final moment of metamorphosis.

“All Scream Until They Run Out Of Breath. They are suspended. They breathe.

PHILOMELA: At that moment, we were all three suspended.

In our terror,
in our grief,
in our pain,
in our longing,
in our guilt;
stretched out in anguish until...
until...
until...

ALL: We were birds.

[....]

PIOUS: But it wasn’t the escape we had dreamed.

PREGANT: Our thoughts fly above the earth,

YOUNG: But we never reach the sky,

DWINDLING: Because we’re always reliving the pain

BLEEDING: Human reason trapped in animal body.

TEREUS: Ever hunting,

PROCENE: Ever hunted,

CHORUS: Always hungry.

PHILOMELA: And it's awful.

It's brutish and painful and gory

And the memories are forever wedged in our thoughts.

There's no escape or release.

I will always be living in the horror

of what has been done,

what I have done,

but still

I continue to fly.

Still we continue to fly. (76-77).

Here, Shields does not offer, as in the final moments of some Greek plays, a purge of emotions. She does not offer what earlier lines of the play seem to promise, that "[i]f we were birds we could fly up / Away from this wrenching pain, / Away from the shame and the blood and the terror, / Away from what will be left of ourselves when he's done" (55). Instead, the metamorphosis is another mimesis of the rape, a distilling of the pain; not relief but rather responsibility. Philomela gets her tongue back, to tell the story, to "speak it, speak it, speak it, speak it" (3). Speak the story that happened to her; and so, she speaks it. Again and again, night after night. And the mimesis continues.

The exploration of the lived reality of rape through mimesis is present in Arachne's tapestry as well. While certainly Athena's quilt reeks of verisimilitude, Arachne's is so real that it almost extends beyond the frame of the piece itself:

Arachne shows Europa tricked by Jove
in the semblance of a bull upon the sea
and done so naturally you would have thought
the bull and the waves he breasted were both real. (Ovid, in Martin 193)

In depicting the rape of mortal women at the hand of the gods, Arachne's tapestry is potent, is more 'real-like', because it illustrates the real events and real struggles of mortal (real) women. It speaks beyond the representational to the real because it *is* real. As Kathryn Kruger suggests, "Arachne's verisimilitude is uncanny. Too good, too real, it goes beyond mere representation" (69). The tapestry that Arachne makes, like the one that Procne receives, extends beyond mimesis because it is telling a critical truth, and in doing so, reflects a brutal reality. Again, we are reminded of Aspatia, who is embroidering her grief not artistically, but truthfully, in order to better reflect her own experience. The same is true for Procne in *If We Were Birds*. Procne cannot let her negative emotions be purged or purified through fictions. Instead she recognizes the tapestry for what it is: a damning truth. This is further evidenced by the chorus, who are made up of five women who represent real cases of women raped during twentieth century wars.³⁶ This chorus seems to spit in the face of verisimilitude. Following Brecht's criticism of Aristotelian drama, they reject the closure that catharsis provides, instigating instead a critical stance that uses mimesis to reflect reality.

This is a feminist mimesis. As Diamond suggests,

³⁶ While the play keeps these conflicts culturally ambiguous, the conflicts that Shield researched are: Nanking (1937), Berlin (1945), Bangladesh (1971), Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995), and Rwanda (1994).

[a] feminist mimesis, if there is such a thing, would take the relation to the real as productive, not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same. It would explore the tendency to tyrannically modeling (subjective/ideological projections masquerading as universal truths), even in its own operations. Finally, it would clarify the humanist sedi-mentation in the concept as a means of releasing the historical particularity and transgressive corporeality of the *mimos*, who, in mimesis, is always more and different than she seems. (xvi)

In this way, all the texts analysed here offer a form of feminist mimesis through textiles. They criticize patriarchal ideologies offered as truth, and choose instead to author/offer their own mimetic performance. The textiles in *Trifles*, *The Maid's Tragedy*, and *If We Were Birds* perform the atrocities of rape, and the embodied female experience, in order to build a better future. More than that, they perform what the bodies of survivors cannot perform. This language or text is in part unique to women because it is dismissed by men, as in the case of *Trifles*. For Arachne, while it is not dismissed, her skill is deemed to be a gift from the gods, and not a reflection of Arachne's own artistry. With Aspatia, Philomela, and Mrs. Wright, I argue that embroidery, weaving, and quilting become ways of speaking about gendered experiences with rape and violence. Textiles become ways to tell lived truths—not essential truths— as a form of self-authorship and world-making. They become ways to communicate a specialized gendered language about/with the body, and following that, the bodily practice of making. This is what Arachne does with her tapestry, why it is so good, and why she is punished for it. There is something unspeakable about acts of rape, sexual assault, and gendered violence. This is what textiles wordlessly perform.

Arachne, and the other characters, all speak the unspeakable through their textiles. They speak a text that rejects and intervenes within the hegemonic patriarchal system, and acts as an expression of their rage and grief. Kruger sums this up beautifully: “[The Arachne and Philomela] myths propose that if women were allowed to speak, she would say the unspeakable, or if a woman were to create texts, she would create a dangerous one” (71). In speaking the unspeakable, and writing dangerous texts, these women create their own language. A tapestry language. Words that are only understood through weaving and by gendered, marginalized bodies. This is a language that accounts for the female body, and embodied gendered experience. This is a language that was built on and around the embodied gendered experience of rape, violence, abuse, and loss. But this does not mean these stories, or this language, is not utopic. As Shields states, in writing *If We Were Birds*, she “imagined women lying on their backs whilst being raped, looking up at the sky, longing to fly up with the birds. Then after the act, having been transformed by the trauma they had endured, actually flying above reality as birds above the earth. Trauma does transform. A part of the self will always fly above” (qtd. in Ue 100). Rape is a kind of metamorphosis too; “[t]rauma does transform.” The mute Philomela, remember, is turned into a nightingale at the end. So that she can sing.

Knot 2: Arachne’s Metamorphosis

Athena turns Arachne into a spider because she tells a truth that Athena does not want to hear or acknowledge.³⁷ Ironically, the punishment for her protest tapestry turns her into the

³⁷ Thinking more broadly about gender and spiders, there are significant cultural connections between feminized bodies and spider. Little Miss Muffet is frightened of a spider, in a performance of youth and femininity. In *Lord of the Rings*, the giant spider Shalob traps the heroes in her womb-like cave, in a display of vicious female monstrosity and voracity. In *Charlotte’s Web*, an intelligent female spider does all the work and then dies after giving birth, but not before a male pig takes all the credit. Female spiders seem to take on elements of gendered stereotypes, be they positive or negative.

ultimate weaver. If Arachne speaks in tapestry language, I argue that she continues to tell those truths as a spider. The tragedy becomes, then, that she is not understood, that the imagery of the web is meaningless to humans. And yet, if the patriarchal system dismisses textiles as ‘trifles’, what really has changed for the contemporary Arachnes of the world? I attempt to answer this question through a close reading of Arachne’s transformation into a spider. From this, I look at spiders and webs, asking, if all these different plays perform the tapestry of Arachne, what of her transformation? What is the fallout from the tapestries that each of the aforementioned characters encounter? Here, I aim to read Arachne through contemporary performance art that utilizes spider imagery, and ask what benefit there is to talking back to gods, and what power still might be found in the ‘illegible’ spider web.

Reading Arachne’s transformation across several different translations results in a very similar description of Arachne-into-spider. It goes something like this: her hair falls off, then her nose, and ears. Her head shrinks, and then her whole body. “Slender” or “slim” fingers become her legs, “and the rest is belly” (Ines 138; Melville 125). Finally, as a spider, Arachne continues to weave. While all these translations call her a spider, her actions as a spider differ. For Frank Justus Miller, she “exercises her old-time weaver-art”, for Mary Innes she “is busy with her webs as of old”, for A.D. Melville, she “pursues her former skill”, and for Charles Martin she “carries on the art of weaving as she used to do” (299; 138; 195). I want to note the shift from “weaver-art”, to “web”, to “skill” and back to “art of weaving”. If we go with the Miller and Martin translation, we can read Arachne as an artist, even after her transformation. Whereas Melville acknowledges that she maintains her skill, and Innes only suggests that what she does is a web. Here, I follow both Martin and Miller and suggest that the spider becomes a figure for female artistry.

Manchev suggests that Arachne's transformation is itself a form of political resistance; while her body is changed, she does not lose her skill or craft (26). As such, a contemporary re-framing (or re-forming, or trans-forming, as Manchev puts it) of the Arachne myth, allows not only a reading of Arachne that is empowering, but a reading of metamorphosis itself that is not passive, but rather active, political, and of the body. Reading the transformation, he makes one important distinction from previous readings:

All of her other parts, entangled, knotted in one knot, disappeared inside her womb; hundreds of tiny fingers-legs rose from the sides of the spider womb, whence she vented a fine thread. All this happened at once. And ever since the spider, arakhne [sic] with no capital 'a', weaves her web: her organs growing or decaying in the womb are emerging from the orifice as the finest thread, and the thread is woven into a web – a home, an arm, a fate. (22)

Manchev reads Arachne not as transformed, so much as she is imploded. She does not lose her body, but becomes all body, a knot of bodies. As a walking womb, she gives birth to herself as art—her body as material, as thread, is both born and decaying.

Dwelling on the fingers and belly that make up Arachne's spider body, I further argue that fingers and bellies are key aspects to Arachne's materiality. We might read the reduction as just that: Arachne is reduced to something that creates delicate embroidery, and of course, gives birth to children. It's a patriarchal, almost Victorian, feminine ideal: silent, brainless, reproductive, and 'working'. Within a patriarchal/reproductive logic, what else is a woman but fingers to embroider social standing and a belly to bear children? But what of other uses of bellies: gut instinct, food, or bellies that cannot conceive? What of other moments for fingers: creating,

picking apart, touching? In what follows, I look at fingers and bellies through the image of the spider, attempting to read something queer in Arachne's transformation.



Figure 4: Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, National Gallery Of Canada, 1999.

The word spider comes from the old English *spinan*, meaning “to spin”. Even outside the Arachne myth, spiders and weaving are intrinsically tied together through etymology. Looking at Louise Bourgeois’s monumental *Maman*, this penultimate section seeks to complicate our concept of the spider both in the original myth, and as an artistic and feminist figure. Bourgeois’s sculpture *Maman* is a multifaceted, beautiful tribute to her mother. It is both horrific and striking, standing over passersby, “inciting a mixture of fear and curiosity” (National Gallery of Canada). In its scale alone, *Maman* moves viewers—affecting perhaps an ontological, or indeed a phenomenological experience due to its vast presence. Beyond this, the title alone is enough to make us look again. Bourgeois had a complex relationship with her mother, who died when the artist was 21. Further, standing beneath the spider, we may notice it is a soon-to-be a mother, its belly filled with white marble eggs. *Maman* symbolizes birth and new life, even as the memory of Bourgeois’s dead mother lingers at its skeletal legs. And while the piece speaks to the

personal life of Bourgeois, it involves the presence, space, and participation of its surroundings. Describing the original installation in the Tate Modern Turbine Hall, Bourgeois says, “the spectator is no longer merely a viewer if he is able to move from the stage of viewing to the stage of collaborating” (Bourgeois 105).

In what follows I look at the image of Arachne through some short snapshots of performances and artworks. Images of spiders, mothers, and wombs are present in Anna Malla’s piece *Play Dead*. Created as part of the Feminist Art Conference’s 2019 Artist residency, performer Anna Malla weaves a web. With the audience seated in a circle around her, listening to a soundscape of bustling city, and Malla’s own musing on her restlessness, her body, and her mother, we watch her move between the pillars in the room, pulling fabric from her gut, and twisting it over itself. A kind of cotton/jersey, similar to the fabric used for a t-shirt, the thread Malla uses is grey and stretchy. As she weaves the web, moving in and out of the thick thread, and weaving between four posts, the story becomes more complex, as she reflects on her identity, heritage, and intuition.



Figure 5: Anna Malla, *Play Dead*, Feminist Art Conference Residency, Toronto, 2019. Photo credit: Stephanie Moynagh.

While her voice is present throughout the soundscape, Malla speaks as if she is talking to herself, walking as she talks. The noise of her footsteps and the shifting of her clothes is

occasionally audible. It feels at once both confessional and rambling. I have the sense of seeing an intimate side of Malla in her monologue, which is contrasted to her live web-making, as she ignores the audience, clearly withdrawn, focused on her own work. Her words have the tone of a phone call from an old friend, and she struggles to find the right words to describe what she is feeling. This mixes with street music and noise from India, and with her own performance, to create a surprisingly simple, yet evocative offering. Near the end, we meet Malla mid-sentence:

—like trauma, but—but... like experiences, I guess, or like, violence that has happened and then and then. What does your entire self do to compensate for that? Like is it, just. Is it just that—you lose your capacities or do you... I don't know I don't think so, I really don't think so. I really think that with everything I've experienced. Like everything I've experienced gave me chronic pain. Everything I've experienced made me, like, not very good at remembering things. My mom really taught me about intuition and listening to your gut. And like—if you meet a man and you're like, he's bad news, never ever *ever* question it. Because at the end of the day, it doesn't really matter if you're wrong, but it sure as hell matters if you're right. Um. (*clears throat*) And. The amount of time that women spend navigating danger, and like navigating what feels like danger.... Yeah, how much learning did I miss out on, but then what else did I, but then there's other stuff that I gained, I guess. And I don't think that this is just like a silver lining thing. Like silver linings to me, like seeing the bright side, or silver linings are, like, it's really boring. Like I kind of hate the idea of optimism. Which doesn't mean not having hope. But the idea of optimism makes me wanna gag, really. And. I guess I think of optimism like, when I think of optimism I think of like, white women telling me to like cheer up.

Or like, not assume the worst. And I'm like, yeah, but you don't— but— we don't— it's not the same. It's just not the same. Woah, can you hear that?

[the soundscape cuts to muffled music, off in the distance. Then, the street festival music abruptly comes back. It crescendos. In the seemingly final moments, in the swell of the finale, the music is cut off]

My mom really taught me about intuition and listening to your gut. (Malla)

I found myself tearing up during the final lines. Malla's piece wove the concepts of race, family, trauma, and the body together beautifully, but intentionally un-seamlessly. She wants to show the work, the labour of her making, and the difficulty of finding the words, through words, to describe her experience. Her labour is both a literal labour and embodied labour—the work she does in making the web is knotted with the work of contending with her history, her trauma, her experience that crashed like waves within in her body— as she weaves her insides as outsides, as she dances through the gut feeling associated with trauma and uncertainty, alongside the labour of making, of moving, of working through. In starting, stopping, and starting again, she struggles against the language given to her within the soundscape, opting, in the performance, for a body-centric language. Here, she communicates something of the violence that she's experienced, as a female body of colour. Using her body, she tests the strength of the web here and there. She gets tangled in it. She weaves with her body, through her body, as if she is a spider. The grey thread comes from/becomes her guts, as the closing line makes explicit. Here, female intuition, body, race, gender, are woven together. In making a web, Malla doesn't pick a direction or a thought process, but instead gets caught in the mess of her trauma, her body, and her thoughts. As a listener, I trip over the same concepts, get tied in the knots of her web, of her instinct, and herein,

we are all connected. Here, through the web, she shows the labour of her body as productively and artistically in process.

Malla's piece also points to the occlusions within the case studies in this chapter. Interestingly, the whiteness of textiles within these western canonical traditions is somewhat ubiquitous. In the chapters that follow, I unpack further how both white and non-white artists address the whiteness and femininity of textile creation and performance. Also, while each of the examples mentioned above involve two women struggling against and within patriarchal systems, and often familial systems, there is no sense of a mother in these stories. When I think too of fairy tales, or Disney movies, I am often struck by the lack of mothers. There are a lot of women becoming mothers—as *Maman* makes explicit, the belly that Arachne becomes is still a womb. And yet, there is something in Malla's reminder of her mother that marks her absence in the previous examples. Malla's work also points to other important moments I've omitted: with the exception of perhaps *Trifles*, all the women in my case studies are upper class. In *The Maid's Tragedy* it is not Asapatia herself who unstitches, but rather Antiphilia, her maid, who does it for her. This is more explicit in *If We Were Birds*, where Philomela does not believe her chorus of maids/survivors until she is raped herself. The class and racial divide is intentionally explicit. With Malla's piece, we see the body transformed into a web—one of race, class, guts, body, labour, and trauma.

Bracha Ettinger, a contemporary Israeli artist, psychoanalyst, and feminist theorist describes the web as “differentiation-in-togetherness” (87). Ettinger's is a psychoanalytic web, indeed a trans-psychic web that finds knots in the phallic psychological order, and therefore puts forward a matrixial, metramorphic approach to the psychic paradigm. “Metramorphic” is a feminist theoretical paradigm introduced by Ettinger that offers a feminist restructuring of

exchange relations, viewing them as grounded in difference as opposed to sameness. A substitution for the terms metamorphosis and metonymy, this matrixial model uses the idea of the web to expand a dialectic approach to ethics and exchange relations. In psychoanalysis, Ettinger's web is one that measures the "difference between the Thing and the Object, but also the Thing and the link, and between the Thing and the subject" (87). As such the trans-psycho web is one of in-betweens and border crossings, of navigating and wit(h)nessing. It is not just a web; it is a matrix. For her, the body of the female artist is matrixial, metramorphic, border-crossing, and indeed, outside the phallic order. She writes: "If linking between I and non-I opens a measure of differentiation in/of/from the feminine, then the initial occurrence confronts me not with how to meet you and share with you, but with how impossible it is to not-share with you, and how we are to give meaning to our difference-in-jointness that precedes and coincides with my being One-self" (89). Malla's piece explores such difference-in-jointness, and the matrixial border of the female artist, textile art, and the female body. It places these dialectics at odds, in productive tension—where and when I move, they move. When someone at one end of the web moves, that movement is felt through the whole web. When they move, they move me. And we operate our individuality together as we navigate this web of the body, as we both unravel and weave together. We are left with the concept of the body as thread. The body as art. "The old body produces the necessary technique for its transformation into a new body" (Manchev 27). All this happens through performance—through metamorphosis.

I think of my own web-making performance. The opposite in form to Malla's, in *Fingers & Belly* we undo the web together. And yet there are many similarities. I think, too, of the mess of the making that I didn't show. It's the labour—that's what we show when we talk about knots, when we get caught in webs. I find that I repeat myself, and I am curious about these stories that

we tell and retell, over and over. Aspatia in her retelling of Ariadne. It speaks to Penelope, who I didn't talk about, weaving and unweaving her web. It speaks to the many retellings and adaptations of the Philomela and Procne myth. It speaks to Glaspell's own reworking of a murder trial into a play, and then afterwards, adapting it again into a short story. It speaks to my own desire to retell the Arachne myth. It has to do with trauma and gender-based violence. Shields sums it up nicely: "I believe the only thing that can make trauma bearable is to tell the story. Again, and again, and again. The framework of the play is therefore Philomela's retelling of her trauma. For me this makes a play which is mostly about revenge also about reconciliation. It also gestures to the importance of theatre as a vehicle of storytelling" (qtd in Ue 102). During my own process of making *Fingers & Belly*, I filmed myself. Through editing, I sped it up, and watched 5 hours of cutting become 30 seconds—a day became an hour. And here I was crawling all over the floor, my arms and legs pulling at this and that as I spun, measured, and cut. I look like a spider, I thought, as I cut the fabric again, and again, and again.

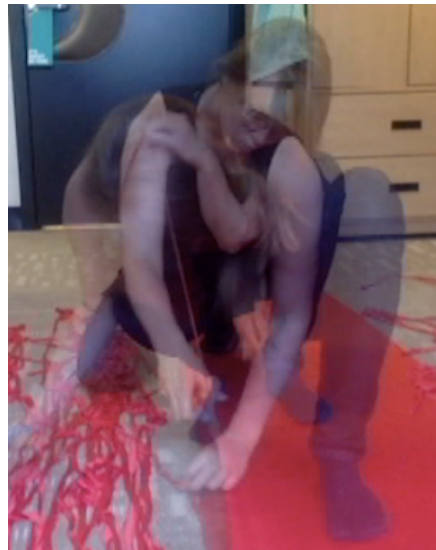


Figure 6: *Fingers & Belly* (detail)

Chapter Two: Dancing with the Binary, and Other Queer Objects

Theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin.

-SARA AHMED

It's April, 2019, and I am at the St. Lawrence Centre for the Arts in Toronto with 900 other people, screaming and cheering at the top of my lungs. We are watching queer, Indigenous, neo-burlesque troupe, Hot Brown Honey. Writer-director-choreographer Lisa Fa'alafi sits with her bare back to the audience, displaying her long black flowing hair, as Elvis's *Blue Hawaii* plays. As she sits, her arms are dancing the hula, flowing slowly like waves. She pulls one hand high, making elegant ballet-like lines with her body, as if pulling at a thread. She is sewing, making something we cannot see. Without warning, she bends over double, making, making, making, her fevered and erratic movements in stark contrast to the elegant mime of moments before. This is what making looks like. The audience laughs—we know, we get it. Sewing sucks sometimes. That's exactly what I look like, bent over a sewing machine. Just as suddenly, she pulls out a shoe, made of grass. She bends over again, furiously making. Another shoe. She puts them on her feet and stands up—the beat drops. She dances. She is topless, with leafy pasties, and a long flowing grass skirt. In the 5-minute neo-burlesque piece that followed, I couldn't track how many times the costume changed. First, a grass skirt became a train, then a bustle, then Fa'alafi flipped the skirt up, making a carnival style samba backpack, or regal supportasse. Accessories seemed to come out of nowhere from inside the skirt, a necklace became a headband, her collar became a bra, and then a top. In the final image, the grass skirt is completely gone, the costume has transformed into a broad-shouldered, almost militaristic outfit. The beat drops, she pulls out sunglasses made of grass. Another beat, she takes the Black power pose, her hand in the air. The room erupts in cheers; we couldn't contain ourselves. The garment had danced around her body like a flock of birds, like it was alive. Now part of Hot Brown

Honey, Fa'alafi's dance number was originally a burlesque piece titled 'Weave'. Fa'alafi uses costume, dance, and the neo-burlesque 'reveal' to unpack stereotypes around Indigenous women in the South Pacific. This is what a Hawaiian woman looks like—not a topless basket weaver, but a badass at work.



Figure 7: Lisa Fa'alafi, *Weave*, Hot Brown Honey, 2019.

This chapter is interested in the queering of textiles and bodies. Like Fa'alafi, the performers I analyse here combine textiles, performance, gender, and race to address stereotypes that surround marginalized bodies. Chapter one explored the performative punch that knitting, weaving, and embroidery pack in prose and plays. The mythic stories from the previous chapter inform the performance artists of this one. The contemporary artists analysed here perform disobeying bodies; they are artists who use textiles to queer the body. Reframing the symbiotic relationship between textiles and body, these artists have an interest in blurring the seemingly solid boundary between interior and exterior. Here, textiles dip, like a needle, in, through, and out of the body. It is no longer clear where the textiles begin and skin ends. All the performers discussed exemplify what Rebecca Schneider terms explicit body performers. In her book, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), Schneider explores performers who use the body to

literalize, complicate, and historicize the female body. Explicit (along with explicate), Schneider reminds us, comes from the Latin *explicare*, meaning, “to unfold” (*Explicit Body* 2). And so, explicit body artists are interested in “unfolding the body, as if pulling back velvet curtains to expose a stage”; they “peel back layers of signification that surround their bodies like ghosts at a grave” (2). While not every artist discussed here uses nudity in their artwork, they are all interested in using textiles to peel back layers of signification and ideology that clothe sometimes invisible bodies. In doing so, they deconstruct, reconstruct, and perform raced and gendered identity like a costume; the materiality of identity politics is pricked, stripped, and cut away to then deconstruct essentialist and stereotypical approaches to gendered and racialized identity categories.

First, we will look at the hand embroidery of artist Eliza Bennett. I will analyse her evocative piece, *A Woman's Work is Never Done* (2012), through Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, and investigate the performance of needle in/on skin. Bennett's needle performs ‘women's work’— a forgotten, invisible, and intimate labour— on Bennett's delicate hand, pointing to the historical subjugation of feminine bodies through needlework and embroidery. Next, I will look at textile objects in orifices, through artist Narcissister's reverse striptease, *Every Woman* (2009). The explicit mixed-race body is a matryoshka doll of Black materiality. Narcissister's performance reveals how Black female materiality is a constant dance with objecthood and objectification. Here, we turn to Uri McMillan's *Embodied Avatars* (2015), Diana Fuss's *Inside/Out* (1991), and theories on Black materiality. How does the ultra-visibility of Narcissister's Black female body/flesh complicate the in/out of the heteronormative visual culture of desire? Finally, we will complicate the homonormativity of queer theory through questions around trans performance, exemplified by Jaimes Mayhew's trans (re)performance of

Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (2016). The politics of (re)performance are tied up with the (un)knowability of the trans body. As the trans body is cut away in performance, the categories of *being* and *doing* are reconfigured. Mayhew's body remaps the category of trans experience—the being of the trans body—towards utopic terrain. All these pieces involve the literal and metaphorical weaving of flesh and material; the boundaries of the body are questioned, positioning the queer, raced, and tactile body as a body that matters. These case studies collectively perform textiles across the body, asking onlookers to rethink the heteronormative and racist boundaries that have been placed on the skin.

Unfolding the body, in all its ghosting and signification, is not always a simple task. This chapter—and indeed the entire dissertation—sees concepts, methodologies, and bodies knotted together. The goal is not to undo these knots. It is not to unfold, refold, and store these artists and their concepts neatly in the linen drawer. Rather, like a spider, I navigate the web of these concepts as a road to some other corner, connection, or tension. This chapter is a bit of a knot: images and ideas are tied together, to reveal some larger concept or pattern. Performance studies, critical race theory, and queer theory are tied together. Queer phenomenology, Black materiality, and trans (re)performance are tangled across this chapter. All these case studies explore what happens when bodies and objects come together. As we follow these tensions and tangles, we may find ourselves right where we started: at the needle, the insides, the 'wrong' sides. I aim to echo fashion scholar Elizabeth Wilson's suggestion that "dress in general seems then to fulfill a number of social, aesthetic and psychological functions; indeed, it knots them together, and can express all simultaneously" (3). My goal is to knot together material, body, and theory. Not to untangle, but to tease tangles: from queerness to transness; from feminine hands to utopian bodies; from white feminism to intersectionality. While this teasing might make a mess, in

tracing these webs, they are revealed to be part of the same string: the politics of the gendered body in performance. In unpacking/unpicking ideology that sits on, in, through contemporary bodies, the body is queered—gender ideologies are found on the ‘wrong’ side of samplers when they are turned around. Upon turning textiles (and our bodies) inside out.

Knot 1: *Woman’s Work* and Queer Phenomenology

In her project, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*, Eliza Bennett offers an explicit critique of the performance of the feminized hand, white female body, and historical embroidery (Frye 164). A photograph created in 2012, and a film made in 2014, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done* is an evocative, painful, and historically rich meeting of object and body. Using her hand as canvas, Bennett embroiders into her skin. The hand is the understudy for the sampler and thread for the veins. While Bennett claims that these projects do not hurt, certainly there is something painful in the images (20). Red, irritated skin stands in contrast with even stitches. The imagined delicate hand of the feminine embroiderer is at odds with Bennett’s worn, weathered, laboured/labouring hand. Stitches trace their way along the life lines, along the natural creases of Bennett’s unique palm. Purple, red, pink, and green threads detail the hand like a bruise; we may feel an empathetic itch in our own hands, a desire to delineate between threads and veins, between object and experience. This piece invokes a phenomenological experience, not only between Bennett and her object, but between the image of Bennett’s hand and our own. Bennett’s piece “challenge[s] the pre-conceived notion that 'women's work' is light and easy”. She aims to represent “the effects of hard work arising from employment in low paid 'ancillary' jobs, such as cleaning, caring and catering, all traditionally considered to be ‘women's work’” (Bennett “Needle and Thread” 20). All these tensions meet at/in the moment the needle meets the hand, and in piercing, evokes the pain of women’s work, of historical embroidery, and the subjugated

feminized body.



Figure 8: Eliza Bennett, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*, 2012.

The fact that embroidery was considered “women’s work” is key to understanding its historical and political importance. From early modern English women across upper and lower classes, to Victorian colonialists in England and across Europe, embroidery was essential in female education, as well as in the construction and maintenance of respectable femininity. Rozsika Parker discusses the importance of embroidery, suggesting that seventeenth century enlightened educationalists added it to curriculum for tactical reasons, as it gave an “acceptable face” to female education (7). During this time, embroidery became a way to “inculcate femininity” for young girls— fundamental to the “maintenance and creation of the feminine ideal” (Parker 11). A century later, this performance of femininity would take on a classist aspect, as embroidery began to signify a “leisured aristocratic life style – not working was becoming a hallmark of femininity” (sic, 11). By the nineteenth century, the distinction between femininity and embroidery was invisible; “[w]omen embroidered because they were naturally feminine and were feminine because they naturally embroidered” (11). As Parker outlines throughout her book, from the Renaissance to today, embroidery was a key to the construction of

ideal femininity and the patriarchal ideologies that surround it.

Writing about sewing in early modern England, English literature and culture scholar Susan Frye suggests that social status and education aside, women embroidered because there were few alternative acceptable forms of work. With the stereotype that all ‘working women’ were prostitutes, and that idle women were prone to temptations of the flesh, embroidery was a safe way to keep women ‘working’ (Frye 127). The image of a sexually volatile female body, always only moments away from succumbing to temptation, is exemplified by printer William Barley in 1596, who suggested that women must “keep cleane their samplers” as their “white cloth,” like female virtue, is “readily soiled” (qtd. in Frey 164). The ‘work’ that women do through embroidery is at the center of a complex performance of female virtue, sexual availability, and idealized femininity.

Despite centuries when embroidery was a significant female pastime, a form of female labour, and an ideological performance around class and gender, needlework is often relegated to the background compared to other art forms. Within the art/craft hierarchy—especially before the Art and Craft Movement of 1860s England—embroidered couches, cushions, purses, and gloves, were the literal and symbolic ‘background’ of paintings or sculpture in galleries or museums.³⁸ Even recent scholarship that focuses on embroidery approaches it from a particular direction. For instance, where ‘reading’ or analysing an embroidered image, scholars most commonly encounter the embroidered object from the ‘right side’, where the embroidered image

³⁸ The seventeenth century marked the division between art and craft, where art was seen as superior to domestic crafts. This coincided with the development of the female ideal (Parker 5). Embroidery, associated with women and an expression of ideal femininity, was considered a ‘craft,’ prostrate to the more highly regarded ‘art’ of painting and sculpture. This gendered and cultural divide carried with it social and economic assumption: namely that the practice of embroidery was done by female amateurs within the domestic sphere: “Embroidery, by the time of the art/craft divide, was made in the domestic sphere, usually by women, and for ‘love’. Painting was produced predominantly, though not only, by men, in the public sphere, for money” (Parker 5).

is, analysing the embroidery as if it were a painting.³⁹ This approach is not out of place. Early modernists assumed that a woman “sewed her mind”; the embroidered image was directly reflective of her thoughts and emotions (Frye 119). The subjects and themes of embroidered work was read as a direct form of self-authorship. This approach focuses on the finished embroidered product. Yet, if one were to simply turn the embroidered pieces around, revealing the backwork—the ‘wrong side’—we would orient ourselves towards that object in a different way. The wrong side might reveal where and how the work was started, the type of stitches made, whether the embroiderer knotted or left a tail.⁴⁰ It reveals the process of the piece. Besides being simply a change of perspective, turning the work reflects a desire to locate, or map, the now invisible needle.

What does an orientation to the front, or “right” side of the embroidered piece, ignore? Ahmed’s understanding of queer phenomenology provides a powerful response to this question. Queer phenomenology is not a phenomenology of sexual difference.⁴¹ “Instead,” Ahmed writes, “by showing how phenomenology faces a certain direction, which depends on the relegation of other ‘things’ to the background, I consider how phenomenology may be gendered as a form of

³⁹ The ‘right side’ and ‘wrong side’ are terms used in knitting to describe the way your work is facing. For instance, when knitting the heel on a sock, you need to ‘turn’ your work so that you are knitting with the wrong or right side facing you. These terms help orient you when following knitting patterns. The ‘right’ side is the part of the work that is visible, or public, when the project is finished—the outside of a sweater for instance. The wrong side is hidden—the inside of a sock, sweater, etc. The wrong side is where the seams and work of the pattern are visible.

⁴⁰ A knot is when you knot the end, as you might expect in any sewing project. When you leave a tail it means there is no knot—instead you weave the ‘tail’ of the embroidery thread through the previous loops until it is secure. Weaving in the tail gives a ‘cleaner’ finished looks, and knots are colloquially understood to be a less desirable, or ‘messy’ look. There are even ways to create temporary knots that you can cut away or untie and weave in when you are finishing the embroidery project.

⁴¹ Phenomenology is the experience of the body in relation to, and in communication with, an object in space. Merleau-Ponty describes experience as the thing that happens between the subject and the object—that encounter is experienced in and through the body: “The thickness of the flesh between the seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer for her corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is a means of communication” (4).

occupation” (27). “What would it mean,” Ahmed Asks, “if we were to pose the question of ‘the orientation’ of ‘sexual orientation’ as a phenomenological question?” (1). Ahmed explores not just how our bodies orient us in space, but additionally, how that orientation further effects questions of proximity and distance between bodies. What we encounter, the way we encounter it, and the embodied experience of that encounter, result in an experience of the body in space and time that is gendered. “Gender could thus be described as a bodily orientation, a way in which bodies get directed by their actions over time” (60). Ahmed outlines her queer phenomenology by suggesting that we encounter objects with a certain perspective, and thus a certain orientation. To have one orientation is to not have another, or, an object “takes me in some direction rather than others” (27). A queer phenomenology invites different objects into conversation with bodies, it “redirects our attention towards different objects, those that are ‘less proximate’ or even those that deviate or are deviant” (3). So when I put my hand on a table, as Merleau-Ponty might have, and theorize my bodily experience with that table, and use that to reflect on my understanding of all my experiences, indeed my experience with the world, I am actually orienting myself to that table. What Ahmed points out is that in turning to the table, I turn my back on what is in the ‘background’. In turning towards the wood, feel, or physicality of the table, I turn away not only from what is behind me, but also the domestic labour that went into cleaning it, the invisible labour that went into building it, and maybe even the cosmetic labour of my manicured hand (29-31). Orienting ourselves to objects in this way can be another form of phenomenology. In facing something, we must ask what that orientation ignores; we must ask what we do not face. Analysing an embroidered piece as if it were a two-dimensional painting ignores the process of embroidery, the functionality of the embroidered object, and the “work” of embroidery and its related politics. The way we face our world, our objects in space,

becomes a way that our bodies are gendered.

Connections between gendered spatial orientation and performance are further explored in Laura Levin's *Performing Ground*. Here, Levin brings performance, feminism, and critical geography together to explore the relationship between gendered bodies and the space around them. She puts camouflage forward as a "performative strategy," one that provides a "theoretical frame for analyzing contemporary performance practices and the performance of self in everyday life" (5). Aligning herself with Peggy Phelan's theories on visibility and performance, she suggests that camouflage is more than a tactic of self-preservation, but can be used "as a political critique on structures of visibility; as mischievous tactics of infiltration; as an empathetic response to the other; as a form of eco-activism" (15). In building her theory she discusses the politics of the (back) ground, pointing out how theories of gender have been absent from performance analyses of space. Quoting Luce Irigaray, she suggests, "'woman has not yet taken (a) place' ... [s]he is denied '(a) place' from which to speak", because "she has been made synonymous with 'the place' itself" (17). In her investigation of who makes up the 'background' of spatial analysis, Levin analyses the bodies that "constitute the invisible 'ground' of performance practice" while simultaneously "recongniz[ing] moment[s] in performance when this positioning *as ground* models a productive and permeable relation between self and world and reveals unexpected power in the 'not yet' of placelessness" (25). Levin's 'background' is both a deconstruction of what theorists and concepts are foregrounded in performance studies and spatial analysis, and a demonstration of how the background, as background, is political. While some might account for occlusions within discourse by bringing the background to the foreground, we might instead see the power already inherent in the positionality of background.

Reading the background of embroidery and embroidery as background invites a change in

focus from product to process. It is an encounter with a different object: the needle. What else is embroidery but a needle in motion; the performance of the needle? What is our orientation to the needle? How are we moved by the needle, and our encounter with it? Following Ahmed, how does the needle “arrive” to the phenomenological encounter—what is its literal and metaphorical background—and once arrived, what does it do? Using a queer phenomenological perspective on the needle, I ask how does the Eliza Bennett’s needle meet her hand, disrupting the perceived ontology of the hand, and with it, perceptions of embroidery and female labouring bodies, or ‘women’s work’?

Bennett’s use of needle on hand rejects the ways that embroidery has been historically placed in gendered, racialized hands. As William Barley stated in a poetic forward to a Venetian pattern book in 1596, “in their milke white hand the needle finer fits/ with silke as gold to prove their pregnant wits” (Frye 164). This comment reveals not only the racial assumptions of idealized femininity, but also the sexualization of women’s bodies within an economy of reproduction. Barley describes the needle as something ‘natural’ to the female body, a more natural ‘fit’ and form of expression than the pen or the sword. While historically both men and women sewed across Europe and the UK, still, the needle is gendered.⁴² For instance, a 1911 book on sewing objects in English history, suggests that pins and needles were used ritualistically in witchcraft, or in love spells, both of which have a long and complex association with the construction of femininity (Longman 30-37). Specialty needles and needle cases were

⁴² Mary C. Beaudry discusses how this assumption has influenced the field of archeology. Needles on an archeological site are indicative of the presence of women. However, as Beaudry uncovers, “textile production and sewing of some sort have been tangled up with aspects of culture—technological, social, economic, ritual—since early in human history. As a result, the products of weaving and needlework, and the tools used in those products... were enmeshed in a system of symbols with multiple meanings” (5). Thus, while the association of needles with women has “more than just a grain of truth,” to look no further than this indicative relationship is to drastically reduce the symbolic and literal uses of the needle (5). Needles were used for more than just sewing, and sewing was not only done by women.

symbols of status and wealth, but they were only sported by women (Beaudry 71, 85). Even looking at men who sewed, we see a complex gendered binary between professionalism and home sewing. The tailor was a male dominated professional job, with a guild, whereas the seamstress, and the making of dresses and domestic sewing, is relegated to the feminine domain.⁴³ Even sewing had a glass ceiling which men “guarded closely” (Beaudry 175). This is pervasive in literature and myth as well. Simply looking at the fairy tales associated with needles is evidence of this. In the classic German fairy tale, *The Valiant Little Tailor*, as published by the Brothers Grimm in 1812, our titular hero employs crafty tricks to outsmart giants, capture a unicorn, and win the hand of a princess. Turning to Italian poet Giambattista Basile’s 1634 version of *Sleeping Beauty*, we see a woman prick her finger, fall asleep, get raped by a prince, and wake up to give birth.⁴⁴ Contrasting these two tales demonstrates the gendered divide within needle narratives: men are active, cunning, and out in the public world, wearing their achievements quite literally on their belts; women are silent, still, sexual objects, asleep in private rooms, and vulnerable to multiple forms of penetration.

⁴³ While Louis XIV established the Parisian seamstresses’s guild in March 1675, with much protest from the tailor’s guild, seamstresses were still not allowed to make men’s clothing. This would be the first all-female guild, and this would eventually influence the professionalism of seamstresses in England and the US. Even when women did attempt professionalism through sewing as seamstresses, they were attached with sexual stigma. Historically, seamstresses were linked in the public mind with prostitution, as the income was not enough to supplement the cost of living (Beaudry 173). Beaudry tells of the forced emigration of prostitutes from England to Australia in 1849, where one official referred to the prostitutes as ‘needle women.’ While Beaudry suggests that this claim is unfounded, as records show that only a fraction of the women sent to Australia were seamstresses, she also points to the number of needles and other sewing materials found on the archeological sites of brothels. The needle is, as many symbols of femininity, one that represents both extremes of female stereotypes—the virgin and the whore. Even with its diverse history, symbolism and usage, the needle is intrinsically connected to women in social and public consciousness. For more, see Beaudry and Crowston.

⁴⁴ This is from the Italian fairy tale, “Sun, Moon, and Talia,” by Giambattista Basile from his 1634 book *Pentamerone*. Charles Perrault retold the story as *Sleeping Beauty* in 1697, and The Brothers Grimm told it as *Little Briar Rose* in 1812. In all the versions after Basile, the rape is turned into a kiss, which wakes *Sleeping Beauty*. From the ‘original’ text: “Crying aloud, he beheld her charms and felt his blood course hotly through his veins. He lifted her in his arms, and carried her to a bed, where he gathered the first fruits of love. Leaving her on the bed, he returned to his own kingdom, where, in the pressing business of his realm, he for a time thought no more about this incident” (Basile).



Figure 9: Eliza Bennett, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*, 2012.

Returning to *Woman's Work*, Bennett reclaims the act of penetration by piercing her own hand. Using her hand as the stage of centuries of feminine performance, she flips the script, criticizing the hand, and its association with femininity, through/with her own hand. This self-inflicted, sadomasochistic piercing allows Bennett to wield the power of the penetrative phallic object, reveal the damage it does, and simultaneously make her body art/work. The performance of the hand is an important aspect of embroidery. Historically, great attention was paid to *how* women sew: Victorian etiquette books detailed how to hold a needle gracefully, advising to “sew with a long point—that is to push the needle nearly its whole length through each stitch, instead of pulling it out, so to speak, by the nose” (qtd. in Beaudry 45). Sewing is a form of bodily display. “Holding needles properly, perhaps evocatively, [would show] off their hands as well as their skill” (Beaudry 45). The performance of the needle in/on hand can be read as a performance of the feminine body. With Bennett’s piece, the hand performs both as creator and as stage. It occupies both foreground and background. In this meeting of hand and needle (and needle and hand), the brutality of ‘women’s work’ comes to the surface like a splinter, sitting in juxtaposition to the elegance of the needlework. At times meandering, stitches ripple down

Bennett's hand like liquid. Or sometimes they sit stubborn in the lines of the hand, deepening that ditch of etched movement and experience. Here again, they trace spirals on the mounds at the base of the fingers. The lines come together with the elegance and chaos of a spider web, like a topographical map or palmistry diagram. The embroidery floss mimics the lines of the palm, in sometimes obvious, sometimes obscure ways. Ways that map, or remap, the body's experience, the hand's/needle's performance.



Figure 10: Eliza Bennett, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*, 2012.

There are two bodies implicit in the needle's performance: the body of the person holding the needle, and the body of the person watching the person holding the needle. While embroidery and sewing were most often done by women in private, there is also a cultural and personal importance to be *seen* sewing. To be seen embroidering or sewing is to perform proper femininity, display status, and dispel idleness. Drawing on Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," we can discuss the male gaze implicit in being seen sewing. In her classic essay, Mulvey discusses film theory, suggesting that the spectator's perspective is a male gaze—the bearer-of-the-look—while the female body is always an object of the gaze, she is given-to-be-seen. The male is normalized, to the point that even the camera, and the way a film is framed,

is the perspective of the male gaze. We see a similar dance of gazes with the visual representation of sewing in art history. *In Love* (1888), by Marcus Stone, depicts the three gazes discussed in Mulvey's essay (fig. 11). A young man gazes adoringly at a woman absorbed in her embroidery. He can look without hesitation, as head bowed, she is presumably unaware of his gaze. The spectator, the implied viewer of the art piece, sits outside: a presumed objective observer, looking at both the woman and the man *In Love*.



Figure 11: Marcus Stone, *In Love*, 1888.

The spectator's gaze is complicated somewhat with *Young Girl Sewing* (1887) by Vilhelm Hammershøi (fig. 12). Here, the audience takes up the gaze of the young man, staring unabashedly at the young woman sewing. The spectator's gaze and the male gaze are one and the same.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ I am particularly inspired here by analyses of Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere* where the man in reflected in the mirror behind the bar is meant to be the face of the spectator. For more on this, see Duve and Holmes.



Figure 12: Vilhelm Hammershøi, *Young Girl Sewing*, 1887.

While the body of the woman sewing is seeming sexually submissive, and available to the male gaze, the needle as embodied knowledge eludes the gaze. This complicates the performance of the needle and the body using it. It is a performance of visibility and invisibility, a performance of both subjugation and agency. “As an epistemic tool that exceeds the limits of an ocular focus,” the needle becomes a powerful tool of secrecy and agency simply because its knowledge is embodied, and thus invisible (Goggin 4). This ability to avoid the gaze changes the embodied experience of the viewer. While watching a woman with a needle is to watch a woman in the position of submission—head down, silent, and focused—there is something else going on as well:

If a woman sits silently sewing she is silently asking for the silence to be broken. The stereotype denies that there is anything subversive in her silence by asserting that it is maintained for men. Yet the way the intimacies of autonomy are so resolutely quashed by the stereotype suggests that here is something disturbing in the image of the embroiderer deep in her work. (Parker 10)

Parker suggests here that there is something unattainable in the silent woman sewing. There is something secret in the silence that a woman keeps. What is secret about the embodied experience of the needle, and thus disturbing for the viewer, may be the needle itself. In the artistic images of embroiderers above, the needle is invisible by the nature of its size. Not only is there something hidden in the privacy and agency of the embroiderer's silence, and maybe even in the specialized knowledge of stitches and sewing techniques, but there is something literally hidden in the embroidery: the needle.

This visual trend is mirrored in the film of Bennett's piece. In the video of *A Women's Work is Never Done*, we first see Bennett from far away. The camera watches her through the doorway. It cuts closer, so that we are watching over her shoulder, and then closer still, at the embroidering/ed hand. We are first positioned as the voyeur, happening upon a private moment of creation, and coming in for a closer look. Like the images described above, we are invited to gaze at a 'private' moment intended for public consumption. Yet, as we lean in, we go too far, the camera cuts too close, and we find ourselves witness to the piercing of Bennett's skin. In trying to 'see', the viewer is shown too much and cannot look away. In objectifying the female body with the male gaze, that gaze reveals an object of creation and destruction. Scopophilia turns to terror, as the scripted performance of the female body, of the needle, is flipped, is queered, is rendered visible through the needle's path along the lines of the hand. This reveals, in turn, women's work through the hand as sampler. The body as commodity, as-given-to-be-seen, is made literal as we move from doorway to needle, from macro to micro, from black and white to full colour, from idealized femininity to the reality of women's work. What is revealed is not the delicate needlework of the domesticated female, but the piercing pain of invisible labour

made visible. Contrary to an embodied experience of sewing, which involves silence, patience, kinaesthetic knowledge, and agency, *Women's Work* scrutinizes the performance of femininity.

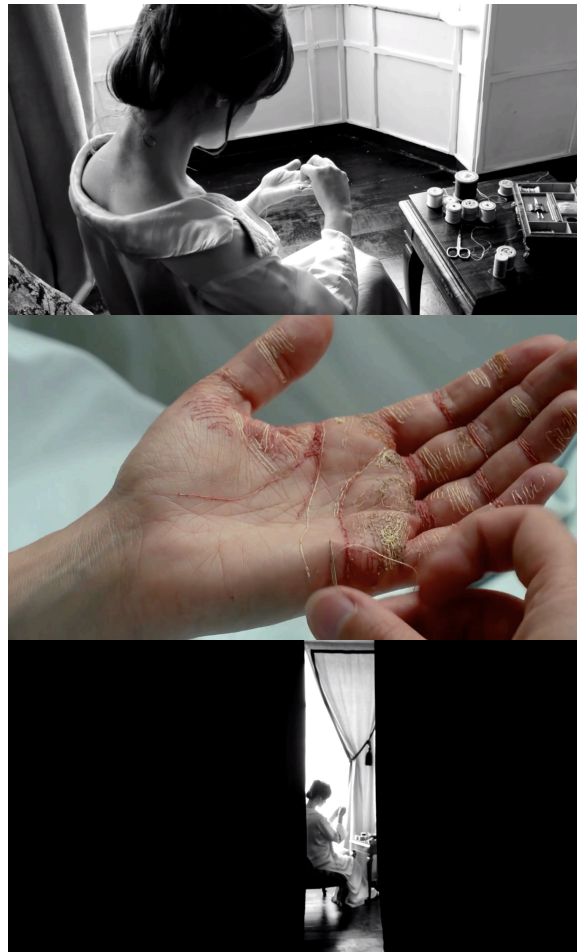


Figure 13: Eliza Bennett, *A Woman's Work is Never Done*, video stills, 2014.

As Ahmed states, phenomenology “shows how objects and others have already left their impressions on the skin surface” (*Queer Phenomenology* 54). What impression has the needle left on this body? On Bennett’s hand as sampler? Her needle makes visible the invisible labour of ‘women’s work’, already ghosted as ontology on Bennett’s “milke white hand”. This speaks both to the historical subjugation of feminine bodies and also to the agency they found through needlework and embroidery. Her needle performs on our bodies, as we watch from a doorway; a phantom needle pierces our own palm, as we too are bent over now, reading. The body and the

needle perform a centuries-old phenomenological encounter—one that may strain our eyes and prick our fingers, but that ultimately allows us to create something individual and private. Following Ahmed’s analysis, the way a woman holds her needle is a form of bodily orientation, and thus an expression of gender. Through the needle, we see the multiplicity of the female identity and experience. We see it as something active, dialectic, and contextual. In this way, the needle continues to be an encounter that embodies action, process, and creation. When Bennett picks up the needle, she does so with defiance. She invokes the ghosts of seamstresses, and through her sadomasochistic action, points to the sadomasochisms already at work within the terrain of feminine performance and the labour of embroidery. Bennett uses the needle and historical embroidery to queer the femininity of her body, and the history of embroidery or ‘women’s work’. She performs the process or background of embroidery, literalizing the needle not as a “final discovery” but as a performance object and a method of becoming. She maps the scopophilic desire to see, and the female body as given-to-be-seen, and replays that history across a body both subjugated and defiant. *A Woman’s Work is Never Done* maps the boundaries of the female body—pierces the hand as sampler—as a method of queering the history of normative femininity, and its related performances.

Knot 2: Narcissister, Inside/Out, and the Reverse Strip Tease

Eliza Bennett performs an idealized and expected version of the embroidery, until we lean in to see the terror of ‘women’s work’ on the delicate “milke white hand.” Piercing her own skin, she complicates her objectification through a kind of material performance with needle in/on hand. Bennett performs skin-as-cloth and cloth-as-skin. As both artist and object, both medium and message, she performs her objecthood *as* agency. This next knot complicates the performance of objecthood by staging it on the explicit Black female body. Here, the objecthood

is reclaimed as agency, but in a way that complicates the seeming stasis of these categories. Cloth-as-skin is complicated through theories of Black materiality and Black flesh/body. Through her piece *Every Woman*, Narcissister inverts the traditional strip tease. She teases between the interiority and exteriority of the body, the in/out of queer theory, and the categories of objecthood/agency.

In *Every Woman*, mixed-race performer Narcissister enters naked, wearing only a mask, an oversized afro, and a merkin.⁴⁶ Throughout the piece she removes articles of clothing from her mouth, afro, vagina, and anus, and puts them on, while dancing to Chaka Khan's 1977 classic, "I'm Every Woman." A sparkly gold belt emerges from her mouth; gloves, stockings, a tube top, and skirt, from her vagina and anus; and purse and pumps emerge from her wig. While the performance has gone through different iterations—Katie Cercone mentions a version where a matryoshka doll is one of the objects—in every instance, the artist starts naked and ends clothed. This is a performance device Narcissister calls the 'reverse striptease'. This reverse striptease transgresses the boundaries of the body, bringing the literal objects from her inside, out, while simultaneously playing with the politics of visibility. While Narcissister is naked, her 'real' face and vagina are masked; her body is both given-to-be-seen and rejects a simple, all-seeing (male) gaze. Bringing material surface, female objectification, and perspectivalism together, Narcissister reconfigures the striptease and the politics it brings with it.⁴⁷ As such, the Black female body on display is queered—cloth becomes skin, insides become outsides, and the naked, historically erased Black female body becomes 'every woman.'

⁴⁶ A merkin is a pubic wig.

⁴⁷ Perspectivalism is the theory and methodology that perception and experience are derived by one's relative visual perspective and viewpoint (Sattig).



Figure 14: *Narcissister, Every Woman*, Whitney Houston Biennial, Brooklyn, 2014. Photo Credit: Nick Rowan.

This is certainly not the first time that an explicit body artist has removed things from bodily orifices. Performance artists have been pulling things out of their vaginas in the name of feminism since the 1950s. Carolee Schneeman's *Interior Scroll* and Annie Sprinkle's *Public Cervix Announcement* are examples of pieces that dance across the barriers of the skin, specifically working with nudity and the vaginal orifice as a spaces of performance and potential. And yet, while this is in some ways well-trodden performance art terrain, many of the performance artists who employ this tactic are white.⁴⁸ Many feminist art historians discuss how it is no coincidence that many of the foundational explicit body artists were white (Broude and

⁴⁸ And of course, there are many non-white performers who use the performance strategy of nudity in their work, including, Shigeko Kubota, Yoko Ono, and Yayoi Kusama, Robbie McCauley, Rebecca Bellmore, Adrian Piper, and many more.

Garrard); the ability to perform with the script of objectification, recasting agency and the body under scopophilia, is a privilege that most white performance artists wield unconsciously. And yet, the dialectics of visibility and commodification are especially provocative ground for the Black explicit body artists, as this body is already socially and historically linked to objecthood.

In *Embodied Avatars*, Uri McMillan explores historical figures who perform with their objecthood in provocative ways. Given the historic and embodied trauma of slavery, where Black people were sold as commodities— and Black female objectification was particularly sexualized— the ways that contemporary performers explore Black female commodification have deep historical roots. These roots are not ‘ancient history’ but rather still inform the lived reality of many people of colour; these histories resonate through the body and are still alive today through sexualized and racialized stereotypes, and experiences of subjective, objective, and systemic racism. However, that does not mean that Black female objecthood cannot be reclaimed. McMillan writes:

I argue for rescrambling the dichotomy between objectified bodies or embodied subjects by reimagining objecthood as a performance-based method that disrupts presumptive knowledges of black subjectivity. What happens, I ask, if we reimagine black objecthood as a way toward agency rather than its antithesis, as a strategy rather than simply a primal site of injury? ... [O]bjecthood is a concept that offers us a powerful lens to think through art, performance, and black female embodiment. (8-9)

McMillan’s provocative “rescrambling” of objecthood asks us to reorient ourselves to Narcissister’s work. Here, Narcissister brings together props, masks, objects, and body to suggest a provocative slippage between body and object. As such, like the Black female performers that

McMillan discusses, “[w]ielding their bodies as pliable matter,” Narcisister is active in “*performing objecthood*” (7).

Performing objecthood is a somewhat utopic reworking of Hortense Spillers’s distinction between the body and the flesh. As Spillers writes:

I would make a distinction in this case between "body" and "flesh" and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the "body" there is the "flesh," that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies—some of them female—out of West African communities in concert with the African "middleman," we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the flesh, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the "flesh" as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard. (67)

Spillers suggests a radical reclamation of flesh as freedom; a body can be owned, but flesh, as flesh, as ultimate objectification, as radical reclamation in all its horrific historicization, cannot. The flesh bypasses the social limits of the body. McMillan suggests that for Spillers, the ‘flesh’ in its ultimate objectification, simultaneously rejects the social objectification of the Black body under slavery (McMillan 10). In investigating flesh *as* body—by giving a subject position or discourse to Black bodies made free *as* object—Spillers critical work extends readings of the Black gendered body within performance studies and material culture, complicating the binaries around objects, objecthood, and objectification. For the performing and explicit Black female

body this has radical potential.

With both a queer phenomenological approach—which questions what bodies/objects are in our proximity—and McMillan’s provocative reworking of objecthood as a performance strategy, it is worth re-examining the relationship between Narcissister and her objects in *Every Woman*. If a phenomenological approach is one where bodies wear clothes, the queer phenomenology suggests that the clothing objects wear Narcissister, and in this, Narcissister—as outfit—performs objecthood. Additionally, the clothing objects are sometimes understudies for Narcissister’s ‘real’ body: gender is performed as a Barbie-like mask; race is an oversized afro wig; sexuality is a fetishized merkin. These masks perform the interiority of Narcissister as exterior. Dance and performance scholar Ariel Osterweis covers much of this in her excellent essay on Narcissister’s work. Here, she speaks to the object, the dance, and the body that Narcissister weaves together:

Both in her use of objects and the manner in which she almost renders herself an object, Narcissister insists upon a particular type of corporeality, one that rests somewhere between the animate and inanimate, the human and the mechanical. Appearing uncannily like a doll or puppet, she, in turn, surprises with the sinew of a yoga contortion or fluidly muscular port de bras (arm movement) evocative of ballet. (“Public Pubic” 106)

Osterweis continues to describe how the mask and merkin both invite the spectator's attention, and yet reject the gaze. The mask is a particularly interesting addition to Narcissister performance. A re-purposed wig form designed by Verna Doran in Los Angeles in the sixties, the mask is both clearly plastic and oddly familiar. It comes in different shades, allowing Narcissister to perform different racial subjectivities, while still being read as a Black body. The mask also invokes sixties era femininity. Heavily lined eyes, high manicured brows sit against high cheek bones, a small, thin nose and (when it's not a half-mask) pursed pink lips. Narcissister describes the mask as a mirror: "Narcissister is nobody. It is a plastic mask that is only animated by the person who is wearing it. The mask becomes a mirror and it's very rare for artists to make themselves a mirror. It's so much more common that we get absorbed into them. Into their subjectivity" (Narcissister, qtd. in Keckler). Stepping away from categories of subjectivity entirely, Narcissister's goal with the mask is to perform identity as another layer, another object.⁴⁹



Figure 15: Narcissister, *Forever Young*, video still, 2017.

⁴⁹ Osterweis discusses these identities in detail across the body of Narcissister's work: "by performing striptease and its reversal, Narcissister takes on roles such as Angela Davis, Marie Antoinette, Josephine Baker, Whitney Houston, a mammy, and a trucker, fluidly slipping between iconicity and stereotype, celebration and degradation" ("Public Pubic" 101).

Of course, any material culturalist will tell you there is nothing inanimate about a plastic mask. The mask is a scriptive thing, that “invite[s] humans to move.... [that] script[s] meaningful bodily movements, and these citational movements think the otherwise unthinkable” (Bernstein 70). In her community project “Narcissister is You”, this is literalized, as Narcissister invites anyone, anywhere, to put on the mask and become Narcissister.⁵⁰ Performing subjectivity as/through objectivity, Narcissister peels at concepts like identity, stereotypes, and subjectivity. This too, she strips away. From the artist: “I love this concept of stripping away layers which could be seen to reference burlesque or striptease, but again I see it as a spiritual path. Stripping away your identities to arrive at some essential self, or to go even further, a non-self, represented by the mask and my naked body” (qtd. in Pelissero 34).



Figure 16: *Narcissister is You*, video installation still, Envoy Enterprises, New York, 2012.

⁵⁰ In one iteration of this piece, she specifically invited women to walk in public baring their breasts with the Narcissister mask. In describing the stakes of the piece, she asks, “[w]hat larger cultural shift could occur if women freely exercised their right to bare their breasts on their own terms, their sexuality fully embodied and belonging to them alone?” (Narcissister)



Figure 17 & 18: *Narcissister is You, Untitled (Bare Breasted)* video installation and sills, Petrella's Imports, New York, 2014.



Figure 19 & 20: *Narcissister is You*, exhibition, Envoy Enterprises, New York, 2012.

Narcissister may put on clothing, but she is still stripping away layers of subjectivity and identity. Osterweis rewords this to draw attention to the plasticity of the identity: “Her constant movement from persona to persona brings attention to the centrality of mutability in the performance of identity; in the end, Narcissister is *you*.” Similarly, Cercone suggests that beyond the mask and the merkin, another object that Narcissister wears is the costume of race and gender: “Woman cannot pretend to strip herself bare because as long as she is called ‘woman,’ she can never be bare. Gender, as such, is inscribed on the body to symbolize and reproduce social order” (Cercone “Every Woman”). Narcissister is never naked as long as she wears the costume of ‘every woman’. In making herself a costume for objects, Narcissister reveals how

womanhood, like objecthood, can be performed. Here is it something that Narcissister can take off and put on—a prop in her larger performance of gender and race.⁵¹

Narcissister also queers the gendered body by performing the striptease backwards. She queers the strip. The body is transgressed, and not revealed, as she pulls clothing and objects out of her body. The traditional scopophilic striptease is reversed and made strange, and in the process the boundaries of the body are queered: inside becomes out, out becomes in, naked becomes clothed, and the binary systems through which we gender the body are blurred. This transgression of the body, from inside the body and out, is reminiscent of Diana Fuss's formative text *Inside/Out*. Here, Fuss complicates the titular binary to explore the complicated way that homosexual identities are inside and out—both at the centre of hegemonic othering, and at its margins. While the “homo” constitutes the very border of heterosexuality as border by being on the ‘outside’, so too do we see a process of sexual outing as one dependent on cultural invisibility. “To be out is really to be in—inside a realm of the visible, the speakable, the culturally intelligible” (Fuss 3). In her evocative discussion, the “homo” sits as border, as she deconstructs the binary between homo and hetero—between inside and out— suggesting that the homo “is neither completely outside the boundaries of sexual difference, nor wholly inside it either” (6). Narcissister is both inside and outside, at the very edge of these margins, of interiors

⁵¹ This final point is interestingly complicated when put into conversation with Spiller's flesh/body. If Narcissister performs ‘flesh’ does she in fact, dodge some of what Cercone discusses, embracing the agency that McMillan suggests in performing objecthood? Or, can the flesh ever truly escape the social trappings of the ‘body’. Put differently, are objects not themselves subject to hegemonic and social influence? In making the generalized category of ‘woman’ something of a costume to be moved and removed, does Narcissister invite womanhood, too, to perform objecthood—a performance that points to the systems of commodification around womanhood, rather than conceal them.

and exteriors. The social and sexual limits or boundaries are made explicit, are transgressed and literalized on/through Narcissister's body.

Yet, while the performance of stripping is altered here, Narcissister is still actively teasing her audience. What does Narcissister's performance tease out/inside? Within neo-burlesque, the tease is a political act.⁵² The question is not about the exposure of the naked female body, but rather, the space and creativity between one reveal and the next. As neo-burlesque performer Fancy Chance describes, this interplay between nudity and the performance of the reveal is what makes up the tease: "It's not necessarily [about] people waiting for the person to get naked, people are kind of wondering *how* they're going to take their clothes off" (qtd. in Dodds 122). Neo-burlesque shift away from the 'strip' towards the 'tease', and in this brings the performance strategies of humour and politics to tint the experience. So, when a performer takes off a stocking or glove really slowly, is it really about seeing the naked arm or leg, or rather about watching the reveal in action? The anticipation is where the politics of the tease reside. It's the moment in *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, when Tim Curry (as Dr. Frankenfurter) sings "I'll make you quiver with antici—" and the camera cuts to Janet, leaning in ever so slightly, answering the sensual hail. The metaphor here is a useful one, because Janet leans in even though she knows what Frankenfurter is going to say. So too does the audience of a neo-burlesque show lean in, metaphorically and literally, not to see the naked body, but to experience the space between the front of the word and the end. To experience the quiver of antici.... pation. Or, as performer Kitty Bang Bang describes, "[i]t's about promising the audience something and it's about the

⁵² Based on historic burlesque, neo-burlesque involves multiple different performance styles that can include stripping, comedy, and drag. Neo-Burlesque involves "blending sly raunchiness and comedic timing with inventive costuming and satirical send-ups of female archetypes [and drawing on] traditions of vaudeville, performance art, modern dance, comedy, and circus performance, as well as elements of goth, rockabilly, punk, and 1940's lounge culture" (Ross 239).

journey getting there” (qtd. in Dodds, 121). The tease becomes political in that it “plays upon the performance of undress, while refusing to satisfy the desire aroused,” and in doing so, it “both advocates and critiques the stripping body” (Dodds 120). Narcissister’s performance invokes the politics of the tease. In coming out naked, she flips the strip on its head, exploring instead what might happen in the interplay between objects and bodies and in the space the tease creates. Narcissister’s performance of the Black female body as object in turn teases the other objects on her, in her, and around her, into movement.



Figure 21: Narcissister, *Every Woman*, 2009.
Photo credit: Tony Stamolis.

A ‘tease’ can be defined as an action that undoes knots—that pulls at a tangle. It can also be a malicious title for a female who flirts, but does not ‘perform’ on her provocation. We might be reminded of a final definition of tease, one that is specifically linked to the maintenance of afros. Narcissister’s clownishly oversized afro wig is easily 4 times the size of her own head, and sits with an afro comb poking out at the top (fig. 21).⁵³ The original goal of her afro was

⁵³ There is much more to be said about the significance of the afro comb for Black culture. Robin D. G. Kelley discusses Willie Morrow, who in 1962 carved the first African pick comb in the United States, and how the comb is connected to African heritage: “For Willie Morrow, the tragic event which led to the “bondage” of Black hair was the loss of the comb. Like the drum, the African comb or pick was an essential part of African culture. It was not

practical—another place to stash costume items and objects. In performance, it becomes another kind of mask. In his essay on the history of the afro, Robin D. G. Kelley suggests that while the afro has been linked to the history of Black power, Black militancy, and the masculinist, “phallogentric black nationalist politics” of the 1960s, there is another narrative of the afro that places the origin with Black female intellectuals. Originally aligned with “uptown chic”, and associated with Black female art and style in early 1960s New York, the Afro was a mark of Black fashion, intellectualism, and artistry (344). It was both a performance of Black pride and a rejection of racist beauty standards:

For black women, more so than black men, going “natural” was not just a valorization of blackness or Africanness, but a direct rejection of a conception of female beauty that many black men themselves had upheld. Indeed, the resurgence of black feminism in the 1970s was partly sparked by the lack of self-determination black women had over their image. They sought new definitions of beauty that celebrated diversity within blackness and challenged the dominance of the hair care and cosmetic industries (348-349).

The afro—here as mask or costume—speaks to a history of gendered and racial bodily performance. “In other words, hairdressers, writers, activists, defenders of the ’fro, created their own counter hegemony, not simply by wearing the style but by fighting for control over its meaning” (350). In Narcissister’s performance, the afro takes on absurd proportions. It is clearly a wig and not her natural hair. Through the afro, we might read Narcissister as performing with race itself as a costume.

only the most important tool for hair grooming; the comb was a work of art, hand-carved for the individuals and a crucial part of one’s identity” (Kelley 346).

By stripping layers of subjectivity, Narcissister makes Blackness material within her work. As Osterweis argues, “[w]hile her skin tends to be read as Black, she plays with the limits of racial legibility in her use of lighting, costuming, and multiple mask tones (including transparent and various shades ranging from cream to dark brown)” (106). In Anne Anlin Cheng’s book *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface*, Black materiality is discussed as a surface in itself. In her analysis of Josephine Baker, Cheng observes how dress evolves from a link between the body and the public. The layers of Black materiality invoke a pendulum swing between self and non-self until it arrives at the thing itself: cloth as skin (172). Racialized corporeality/materiality meet the politics of visibility. Echoing McMillan, Cheng asks what agency might be found in objectification. Through a decoupling of skin and flesh, by “attend[ing] to the curious interface between skin and organic surfaces emerging out of the first quarter of the twentieth century,” Cheng sees “raced skin as itself a *modern material fascination*” (14, italics in original). The second skin becomes a material object all its own. As such, “[t]he very process of objectification—even as it takes subjectivity from [Baker]—*also* invested the object around her with subjectivity, which in turn provides a kind of cloak for her nakedness.... objectification can be a kind of covering too” (116). So, Cheng proposes Baker’s nakedness as a costume, an object with material agency (111).

Nakedness as a costume—particularly in the context of Black materiality—is what we see on Narcissister as a second skin: a complex weaving of agency, objectification, and surface, begging us to reimagine the way we have traditionally read the Black feminized body. Cheng’s intervention is that Baker throws a wrench in the typical “rhetoric of becoming visible” that racial politics unpacks. Here, she suggests that the “phenomenological, social, and psychical implications inherent in what it means *to be visible*” are more complex than a simply deriding

objectification (167). Skin-as-cloth, as costume, can be brought productively into contact with Spiller's exploration of body and flesh. Is the Black body in the aftermath of enslavement and racial terror too like a costume, that sits as a discursive shroud to the flesh? What then do we make of Narcissister's explicit performance, her body, her skin-as-cloth, and her nudity as costume?

Reading the Black naked body as costume, as cloth, is complicated by the fact that Blackness is not something Black artists can take off or put on. Comparing Blackness to costume and clothing is not meant to further objectify Black bodies, but rather invite a material reading of that objectification. The body and textiles are in a "metonymic relationship" (or metramorphic?), where the corporeal, political, and aesthetic come together through clothing as the link between "the domain of the body and the public domain of the sign" (Vinebaum 21). Or put differently, "[i]f the body, with its orifices is itself dangerously ambiguous, then dress, which is an extension of the body, yet not quite part of it, links body to the social world and separates the two. Dress is the frontier between the self and non-self" (Turney 94).⁵⁴ As fashion studies scholar Joanne Entwistle observes, "dress is an embodied practice, a *situated bodily practice* which is embedded within the social world and fundamental to micro social order" (35). What Baker and Narcissister demonstrate in performing with Black materiality—and the difficulty of Black female objectification—is a process of crafting the social, the public, or discourse, as if it were an outfit. In altering one's objectification, as one might an ill-fitting dress, these performers reshape objectification and objecthood on their own terms, for their own bodies. In crafting her Blackness, Narcissister performs and wears her objecthood as agency. There is something

⁵⁴ Turney explores some of the juxtapositions and productive binaries that the knitted body/body-as-knitting brings with it. "The Knitting Body and the knitted object are indicative of both revealing and concealing, and the creation of a deliberate juxtaposition of the inside/outside, front/back, plain/purl" (108).

powerful in reframing the female body as abundance, and not lack. There is something critical about styling the Black femme body backwards, from inside out. There is something to the identity we craft every morning when we get dressed; the clothes we choose to put on are not neutral. This both/and approach is a method of queering traditional ways of reading the Black body. If we read race as another mediated surface, then objectification is not a dead end, but a tactic, a performance device.

The stakes of using race, gender, and objectification as material can be productively complicated by the historic example of Saartjie Baartman, or the Hottentot Venus. Baartman was captured, enslaved, and purchased in South Africa in the late 1880s, and exhibited mostly-naked across England and France for her steatopygia. Steatopygia is the scientific term to describe a sizeable amount of tissue in the buttocks and thighs. While she toured displaying her body, Baartman was the topic of debate for English abolitionists who worried that she was being exhibited against her will. However, when put on trial, Baartman claimed to be participating willingly. When she died, her body was dissected by George Cuvier, who took a scientific interest in Baartman and delivered lectures on the results of his autopsy. After Cuvier's world-wide lectures, Baartman's remains were displayed in the Musée de L'Homme in Paris. Eventually, most of her body was literally shelved in the museum's storage room, but her pelvic bone was displayed until the mid-1970s. In 1994, South African President Nelson Mandela requested that Baartman's remains be returned to South Africa. In 2002, she was finally returned to South Africa and buried. Baartman is not flesh, in Spillers's sense. Rather her flesh is rendered spectacular, is grossly objectified, until her burial in 2002. At the same time, Baartman's complex 'willingness' in her objectification further complicates any binary we might wish to place her in. It is worth questioning what kind of Black agency is possible in the late nineteenth

century England, given systemic sexism, white supremacy, and colonialism, along with the historical popularity of exoticized and abusive ‘freak shows’ and exhibitions. And yet, I am not comfortable retroactively and anachronistically taking all agency away from Baartman, who, when asked, stated she was not held against her will.⁵⁵ Instead of providing a clear or clean answer to this complication, Baartman represents the stakes that Narcissister explores in her work. Narcissister performs her complex dance with objectification, with nudity, with objects. Narcissister performs the body as object, the skin-as-cloth, and nudity as costume, but one that she chooses to perform in order to bring light to these complications. She interplays radical objecthood as agency, without an inclination to label the actions as participating in objectification, nor ignore the realities and horror of objectification for the Black female body.

Narcissister deconstructs and redresses Black femme performance as a performance with and through objecthood. Like McMillan’s ‘avatars’, Narcissister’s work looks to ‘rescramble’ or queer the Black female as a material category, to “remap live and dead zones away from these very terms,” to see the animacy implicit in the flesh, in objectification (Chen *Animacies* 11). Wearing objects disguised as body—a mask, a merkin—and pulling dolls, clothes, and accessories out of her body, Narcissister performs flesh as body and body as flesh, as a constant oscillation. This is the explicit Black female body:

Akin to anthropologist Bruno Latour’s “hybrids,” the black female objects I discuss violate the “distinct ontological zones” between human and object. Meanwhile, the sense of the uncanny provoked by some of these more nefarious objects, as Bill Brown observes in a discussion of black collectibles, is precisely because they uncomfortably remind us that “our history is one in which humans were reduced to things (however

⁵⁵ The question of Baartman’s complex agency is explored in Suzan-Lori Parks’s *Venus* (1996).

incomplete that reduction).” ...while I concur with this logic, I depart from Brown’s exclusive focus on the eerie material objects that contain this repressed history of “ontological confusion,” focusing instead on the performers whose bodies bore those slippages. Thus, I investigate the elastic recurrence of this dialectic in black performance art, specifically the savvy performances of objecthood staged by the cultural subjects in this book. Put simply, theories of object life become deeply fortified when black women’s performance work is recognized as a key player, rather than an aberration, in interrogating the dense imbrications of beings, objects, and matter. (McMillan 10)

I quote McMillan at length as he elegantly makes a case for the complex and oscillating dialectic of objecthood and agency. He reads performers like Narcissister as elastic, savvy, and consciously playing the slippage between object and subject, between flesh and body. Put differently, he speaks to the possibility of reading the history of Black female objectification as something of a performance. This performance does not diminish the complexities of contemporary racism, nor abstract or erase them through representation or mimesis. Rather, Narcissister’s performance articulates the radical nature of Black femme agency and illustrates the Black female performer as “less a dire example of black objecthood’s disturbing legacy and more an astute actress and key antecedent to the twentieth century’s artful and often-cerebral black performance art” (26). In recasting these historical figures—and contemporary artists—as cognizant of the politics within which they play, McMillan invites us to read Black female performance artists as producers that tease in/out the contradiction of Black objecthood.

Knot 3: Jaimes Mayhew and Performing Trans Identity

Narcissister performs the oscillation and uncertainty of Black objecthood through a dance with clothing and Black materiality. White trans performance artist Jaimes Mayhew performs with objects in a different way, similarly deconstructing the social gendered body, but instead of teasing with the reveal, Mayhew rejects the reveal, creating instead, through clothing and his body, a utopic space for trans performance. In his re-performance of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, Mayhew wears and deconstructs the trappings of ontological certainty; Mayhew rejects ontology that is equivalent to biological certainty. Instead, his piece cuts away at ontology, at the presupposed conditions around gendered being. In cutting away textiles and discourse that surround the trans body, Mayhew maps a space for queer and trans identity, allowing for a utopic expression of what it is to *be*.

When I first met Mayhew, he was running an artist workshop on making utopias. During the summer of 2015, we both attended an artist residency with the School of Making/Thinking (SMT). For a month, thirteen artists—including Mayhew and myself—lived side by side in a house in upstate New York. We all ran workshops for each other. Mayhew's involved creating and mapping utopia. In my experience, his workshop was a material and conceptual introduction to José Muñoz's concept of queer utopias. For Muñoz, "[q]ueerness is essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world" (1). Drawing on philosopher Ernst Bloch's idea of a "concrete utopia," Muñoz suggests a utopia that is not based on optimism, but rather "educated hope"; "the utopian function is enacted by a certain surplus in the work that promises futurity, something that is not quite there.... [Q]ueerness is primarily about futurity and hope. That is to say that queerness is always in the horizon" (3; 7; 11). Muñoz challenges the anti-relational turn within queer theory, which embraces a radical negativity that supposedly frees queers from the potential restriction or

pressure of imaging a queer future. Muñoz rejects the negative ontology that surrounds queerness, and instead invokes queerness as a community, as hope, as utopia.

In the workshop, Mayhew invited us to make utopia, literally, materially, in the space. We created the borders of our utopia, wrote a manifesto, and devised the rules of our shared universe. The rules were meant to be paradoxical; embracing a both/and logic, we used rulemaking as a method to define the ‘logic’ of our utopia, without sacrificing nonsense, play, and playing pretend in the process: the first rule was that there were no rules. When we made our first island of utopia, we traced the circular borders with white ribbon, creating a clear border, a clear in/out, for our island. The second time, inspired by the invitation that there were no rules, we engaged in some meaningful mess. I remember throwing the ribbon around; our borders crossed other borders, making knots. Where the boundaries of utopia started and ended wasn’t clear. Instead of making a border, we made a web. We put on Walk The Moon’s “Shut up and Dance,” and jumped around. After our web was made, it was manifesto time. We dreamed up ‘rules.’ Some were serious, touting the dream of affordable housing; others, absurd, asking for edible clouds. The conflict came when one artist said that they wanted to urinate candy. “Oh, I don’t want that,” another artist chimed in. We began to negotiate the benefits and downfalls of what this might mean—discussing the logic of our shared universe—before Mayhew reminded us, there were no rules. Any one rule could coexist with a contradictory one. We were creating utopia. His utopia existed outside of the logic of finite resources, of negation, of either/or binaries. And why, even in utopia, do we assume that if you get something it means I don’t get it? Why do we assume our desires are in conflict? We built utopia as we mapped it; we deconstructed the logic of rulemaking while we wrote our own rules. Utopia is not merely optimism or idealism. As Muñoz reminds us, “[t]he eventual disappointment of hope is not a

reason to forsake its critical thought process” (10). Utopia, in this version, is not a result, but a process, a doing, a way to get through, like wayfinding. At some point, Mayhew said, “I would like free healthcare for me and my friends”—here, a critical intervention, an invitation to see trans healthcare outside of the logic of scarcity, of either/or. Maybe we already live in a world where Mayhew’s desire for basic rights does not negate the rights of others.



Figure 22: *Samesies Island Map*, Jaimes Mayhew, Colored pencil on paper, 2014.

This workshop was based on Mayhew’s project Samesies Island. “Samesies Island is an imaginary, utopian separatist community for transmasculine-attracted transmasculine folks. Map includes access to healthcare, rural areas without fear of discrimination, public transit and more” (“Samesies Island Map”). Shaped like a pregnant seahorse (remember, it is the male seahorse that gives birth), Samesies Island is a collaborative project between Mayhew and a number of other transmasculine artists.⁵⁶ Both silly and serious, the island maps utopia for these individuals. The dentist can be found off the Lactation River. The Wet Spot and Reach Around locations are right off the Fluid River, next to the taco stand. The Neck Beard Wetlands and the Fudgepacker

⁵⁶ The full list of collaborators on the project include: Bones Mayor, Mickey Dehn, Jack Pinder, Asa Keiswetter, and Jaimes Mayhew.

[t]he wave appeared when a group of transmen decided to set sea in search of utopia, and were carried to an area of sea trash that they constructed in the shape of a pregnant seahorse to form Samesies Island. Once believed to be the only means to arrive on Samsies Island, the Wave of Mutilation is now understood to be a myth. It is notable that variations of the Samesies myth of The Wave of Mutilation exist across many gender variant communities, this monument stands as a permanent reminder of the reclamation of the very idea of mutilation, and the variety of ways that Samesies can healthily arrive in utopia. (Mayhew, “Wave of Mutilation”)⁵⁸



Figure 25: Jamies Mayhew, *The Wave of Mutilation*, 2015.

A fake wave off the coast of a fake island. The Wave first appeared as an art installation with Artscape, Baltimore in 2015. This hand-sewn inflatable wave sits about 12 feet high, is two different shades of blue, with detailing at the base made of blue and white plastic bags. It is

⁵⁸ Mayhew credits collaborator Jack Pinder for creating this mythology.

large, but not imposing. It curves at the top, looking like it might fall over. It is an intentionally absurd inflatable sculpture. It's like a bouncy castle that you can't jump around in—a phallic obelisk that cannot seem to keep itself up. *The Wave of Mutilation* is a metaphor for the assumption that trans bodies are 'mutilated' and that gender reassignment is necessary for a trans body to be trans. In discussing the variety of ways that he, and his community, transitioned, Mayhew tells me, "[y]ou're always told that you're mutilating your body.... The idea is that Samesies Island was started by a group of trans men, who thought that the only way to transition was through what other people called mutilation, but then later realized it's actually through freedom... The monument, that piece, is there to remind people that [transition] is not mutilation" (Mayhew, skype interview). Similarly, Judith Butler argues that to claim that the trans bodies are 'mutilated' is an act of prosecution and transphobia: "If there is any mutilation going on in this scene, it is being done by the feminist police force who rejects the lived embodiment of transwomen" (Butler qtd. in Williams, "Gender Performance"). *The Wave of Mutilation* reclaims the concept of mutilation by literalizing it—by illustrating it, blowing it up, and making it absurd. It is placed off the coast of his utopia; a wave that both brought the inhabitants of Samesies Island together, and always threatens to crash again on their shores. This semi-permanent myth lingers at the edge of utopia, a reminder of the failures of hope and a reclamation of the transphobia that brought them together in the first place.

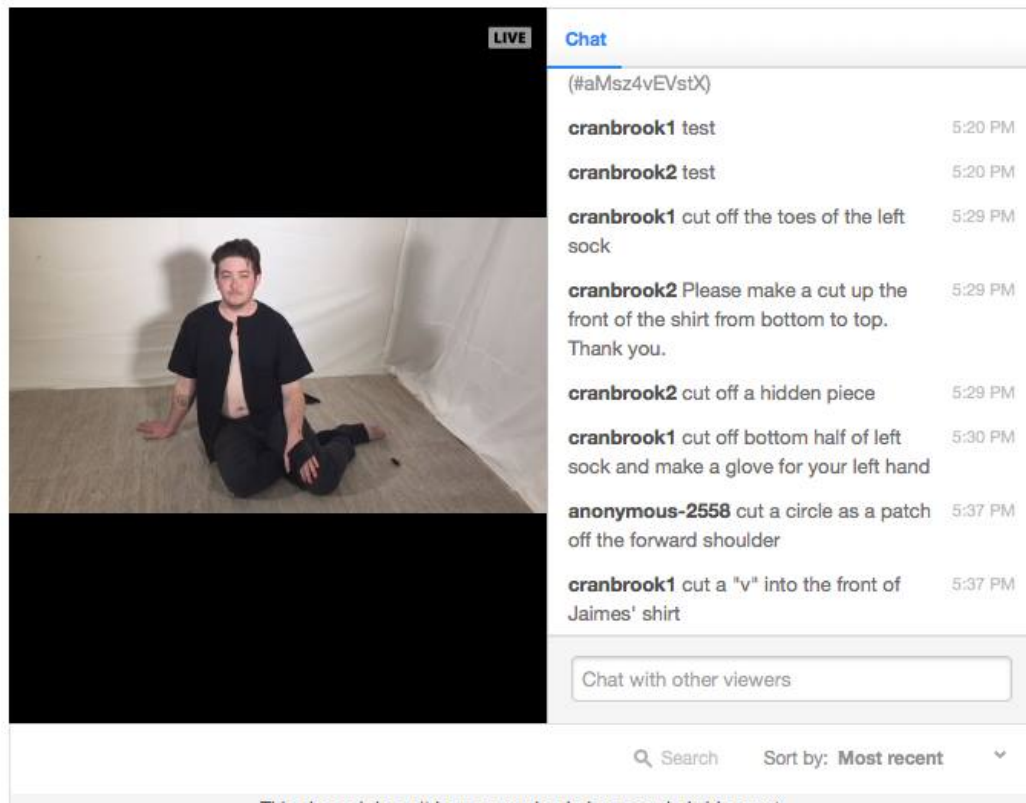


Figure 26: Jaimes Mayhew, *Cut Piece with a Transgendered Body (After Yoko Ono)*, Live Stream, 2016. Screenshot from Jessica Harvey.

It is with this question of utopias, map making, and trans ontologies that I turn to Mayhew's *Cut Piece With Transgender Body (After Yoko Ono)*. "On March 22nd, 2016, from 6:30pm-7:15pm [EST] trans-identified docents followed chat instructions from viewers to cut my clothes away" (Mayhew "Cut Piece"). The instructions were simple: we were to log on, watch the live stream, and then use the chat box to send instructions to trans and genderqueer identified docents who will use scissors to cut Mayhew's clothes away. In partnership with the Critical Studies program at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Mayhew's *Cut Piece With Transgender Body (After Yoko Ono)* offers a simple, evocative performance of trans experience.

It's 7:00 am in Perth, Australia, when I log on to watch Mayhew's re-performance. I do a screen recording, knowing that the document becomes, so often, the performance itself. As Philip Auslander has argued, "no documented piece is performed solely as an end in itself: the performance is always at one level raw material for documentation" (3). So too, my experience of Mayhew's *Cut Piece* is mediated; reviewing the memory now, I rely heavily on this screen recording to trace my experience. In my screen recording, I am distracted: it's early where I am, but dinner-time back home in Canada. I pause to answer a message or two, to 'like' a post or comment. The live stream freezes and I scroll some more. I go back to the live stream, where things seem to be moving again. In the chat box, I type a direction, asking the docents to cut a heart in Mayhew's t-shirt and then a hole in the knee of his jeans. Mayhew, who started with a black t-shirt and jeans, is slowly being cut away. He stares straight ahead, deadpan, with a similar look to Yoko Ono in her recordings of *Cut Piece*. I am scared for a moment of the dangers of letting just anyone from the internet into this private moment. What does it mean for me—a cis-gendered queer woman who just crawled out of the bed I share with my heterosexual partner (at the time)—what does it mean for me to direct trans docents, or Mayhew himself? How much of the way trans bodies are perceived is written by the voices of absent onlookers, who are not part of that community, who are not trans bodies? And yet, I am reminded too of the potentially democratizing, community-building power of the Internet. The live stream opens the doors to community members and tourists alike, acting as a time-sensitive heterotopia for both community engagement and potential voyeurism.

chat box to send instructions to trans and genderqueer identified docents who will use scissors to cut his clothes away.

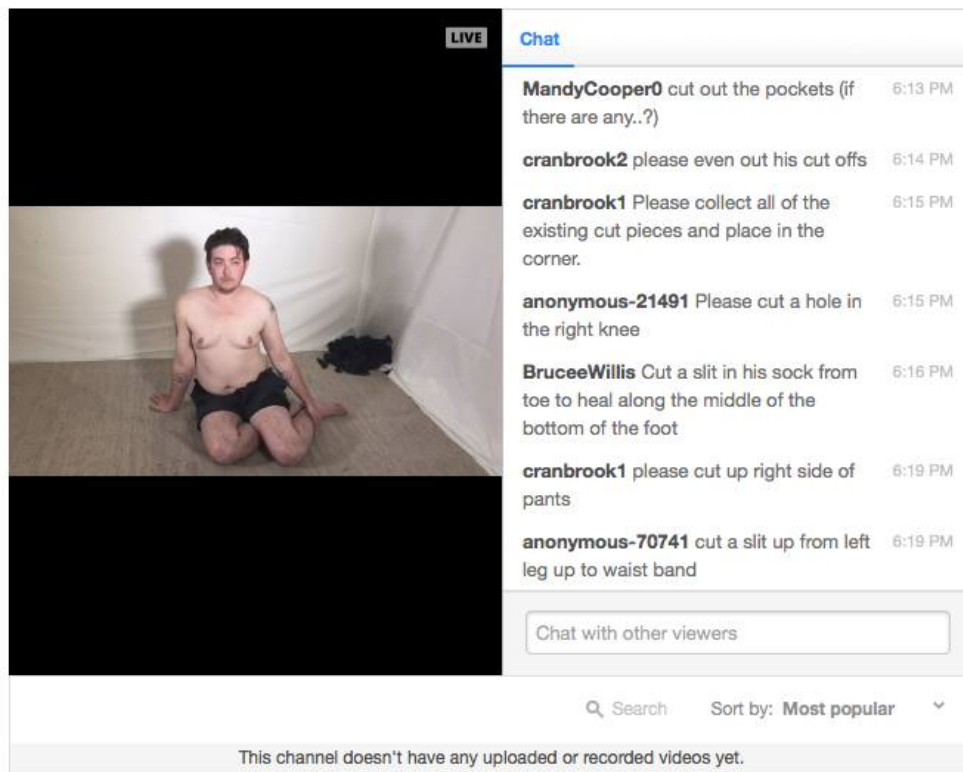


Figure 27: Jaimes Mayhew, *Cut Piece with a Transgendered Body (After Yoko Ono)*, Live Stream, 2016. Screenshot from Jessica Harvey.

I watch as a docent follows my cutting instructions: “Cut away the other knee, if you can (?)”. Aware of the way Mayhew is sitting, I know it might be hard to cut away the knee of his jeans without cutting his skin. I wanted to make it difficult, perhaps. It’s dangerous, maybe, watching this docent try to find an entry point. They are delicate, and cut only a little sliver, before perhaps deciding that it couldn’t be cut away. They leave it, walk away, and we are on to the next cut. My cut is attempted and ultimately rejected. This ‘rejection’ makes me feel more comfortable about my perceived ‘direction’ of the docents; they, ultimately, are in control of (t)his body.⁵⁹ I put on some music. I minimize the screen, as I scroll through iTunes, looking for the appropriate soundtrack to score my experience. Mayhew sits so still I wonder for a minute if

⁵⁹ Mayhew also had someone in the room reading out the instructions as they came in. This person was directed to take or leave whatever directions they wanted. Here again, another appropriate layer of mediation.

the screen has frozen again. But he's still there, waiting. I play Radiohead's 'Nude' because it seems energetically a little on the nose, and watch another docent cut away at Mayhew's waistband.

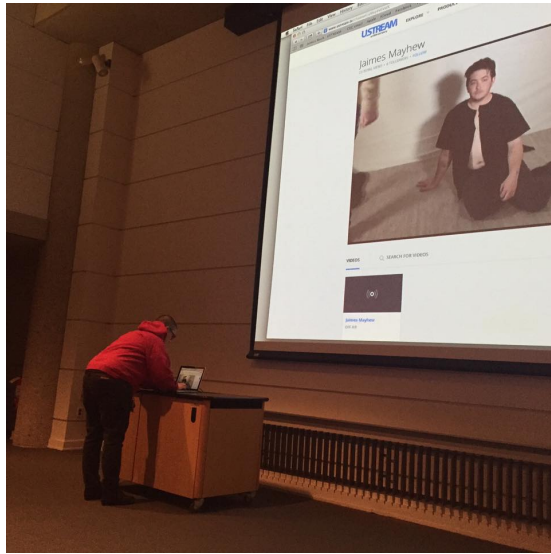


Figure 28: Jaimes Mayhew, *Cut Piece with a Transgendered Body (After Yoko Ono)*, Live Stream, 2016. Photo credit: Laura McGough.



Figure 29: Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York, 1965.

As the title suggests, Mayhew's piece is a re-performance of Yoko Ono's foundational performance, *Cut Piece*. For Mayhew, *Cut Piece* was "about people's fear of women's bodies. Both fear and curiosity at the same time. And I thought that applied to a trans body in a lot of ways" (Mayhew, skype interview). While this certainly gels with a feminist reading of *Cut Piece*, readings of the work have varied over time. In the original piece, which premiered in Kyoto in 1964, Ono sat on stage, in a black outfit, with a pair of scissors in front of her.⁶⁰ The audience were invited to come on stage, take up the scissors, and cut Ono's clothes off; whatever

⁶⁰ The first and second performances of the piece were in Tokyo in July and August 1964. The third performance in New York City in March 1965 at Carnegie Recital Hall. The fourth and fifth were in London in September 1966 as part of the Destruction in Art Symposium at the Africa Centre. Her sixth and final performance (to date) was in September 2003, in Paris at the Theatre Le Ranelagh.

they cut they could keep. Some made small cuts, others cut away large sections, or her bra straps. Throughout, Ono sat motionless and expressionless, staring straight ahead. The piece finished at the artist's discretion. Kevin Concannon suggests that while *Cut Piece* had very little critical reception when it was first performed, it has since been widely discussed, in many different and at times contradictory ways. In his essay on the historical resonance of the piece, Concannon describes these varying critiques: "[Ono] has characterized it as a test of her commitment to life as an artist, as a challenge to artistic ego, as a gift, and as a spiritual act. Critics over the years have interpreted *Cut Piece* as a striptease, a protest against violence and against war (specifically the Vietnam War), and most recently (and most frequently) as a feminist work" (83). While the different interpretations around the work speak to the mutability of the piece, and its resonance across time, it is useful to go back to Ono's reflection on the purpose of the piece, from an autobiographical essay written in 1974:

Instead of giving the audience what the artist chooses to give, the artist gives what the audience chooses to take. That is to say, you cut and take whatever part you want; that was my feeling about its purpose. I went onto the stage wearing the best suit I had. To think that it would be OK to use the cheapest clothes because it was going to be cut anyway would be wrong; it's against my intentions. ("If I Don't Give Birth Now," 34)

Ono frames *Cut Piece* as a gift to the audience, a gift so generous, that it becomes an act of taking. Is it still a gift then? This question is charged in the context of Mayhew's re-performance. How do we read Mayhew's trans reveal within the give-and-take logic of the original?

Interestingly, while Mayhew gives in his performance, the dynamic of his gift is different than Ono's piece. The reason is perhaps because the bodies are different. Ono's piece deconstructs the 'mystery' of the racialized cis-female body. Mayhew's explores the

‘uncertainty’ of the trans white male body. Without pitting one experience against the other, I am interested in the number of white people (including myself!) who have re-performed Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*. What does this instinct reveal and what does such a re-performance erase? The body of Asian females, fetishized by western audiences, could be at play with each cut. So too, can we explore the notions of the ‘passive’ Asian stereotype, which meets the ‘passive’ female of the male gaze in an intersectional performance of objectification. And yet, Ono complicates this, positioning herself as something as a neither/nor, or a both/and, offering an opening up of interpretation. Bryan-Wilson explores this in her essay on *Cut Piece*:

Despite the attention it has received, *Cut Piece* has implications for the mutuality of race and gender that have gone under-theorised. What does this suggest about art history and the need for closure, the wish to clean up a body that might speak its own messy and unclear limits? Does *Cut Piece*, with its dual faces of passivity and exhibitionism, exemplify a collective fantasy about the contradictory status of the silent but signifying Japanese female artist? It is important to keep in mind how Ono's (in)famous body has come to signify 'Japanese female' in very specific and often brutal ways. One must look at Ono's identity as complex and multi-sited within and through notions of 'Japaneseness'. She herself has both claimed and renounced this identity; consequently, to understand when it is employed and when it is cast away is a significant critical problem.

(“Remembering Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*,” 119)

I read the multiplicity within *Cut Piece* as another gift to her audience; take what you want from this piece, she seems to say. And yet, like with *Cut Piece*’s original audience, do white artists who re-perform *Cut Piece* take too much?

Amelia Jones discusses the resurgence of re-performances in her book *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*. Here, Jones explores how the very concept of re-performing relates to the performance studies concepts of iteration and citationality. She discusses the theoretical precedent that all art is, in some form, a re-performance—and that history too, enacts a form of repetition, or (re)performance. For Jones, power in the re-performance is its connection, and indeed failure, to the ‘authentic’ original:

Pil and Gallia Kolletiv have noted that there is a way for this failure of authenticity to function critically: ‘a historical moment is never new, which means that there is no original to repeat.’ They continue, drawing on Michel Foucault’s notion of history without ‘landmark,’ to argue that a ‘successful re-enactment would therefore [produce a disloyalty to the point of origin which] does not amount to historical relativism, but rather activates history from within the present, allowing us to move away from the sterile attempt to cut through the infinite mediations of the spectacle.’ I would add to this that re-enactments that do not acknowledge these paradoxes get caught up in the discourse of authenticity and genius, ultimately resting on an impossible (yet still intransigently common) notion of retrievable original meaning and artistic intentionality. (16)

Jones’s intervention is that the authenticity of the ‘original’ is something of a misnomer. Hers is a postmodern approach—nothing is new, and yet, that opens up interpretation rather than closing it down. Nothing has ever been new. The myth of the original, authentic, genius is just that—a myth. Mayhew honours Yoko Ono with his title, and while he re-performs the piece, I do not think he is taking too much. Instead, by re-contextualizing the cut on a trans body, Mayhew accepts the gift of Ono’s *Cut Piece*, and passes the gift along to his own audience. Mayhew’s re-performance is an act of creativity that challenges the concept of authenticity, but it’s not Ono’s

authenticity. Instead, Mayhew performs against an ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ male body, re-performing Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*—and his body—as an authentic and mutable, original and iterative. The potential contradiction we might read here is encouraged—for according to Mayhew’s guidelines, there are no rules; utopia invites a dialectic, where our thoughts and desires can co-exist productively in conflict. As such Mayhew’s re-performance is a utopic act. Through the methodical reveal of Mayhew’s trans body, at the hands of both trans docents and the larger live-streaming internet community, Mayhew performs *Cut Piece* as a form of self-portraiture, confronting assumptions around the trans body, while simultaneously grounding the piece in the utopic, performative materiality of (t)his trans body.

In some ways, I am compelled to engage with Mayhew’s *Cut Piece* as not only a re-performance at all, but as a script open to multiple forms of interpretation and performance. Given that Ono was such a foundational Fluxus artist, *Cut Piece* could be read more as a performance ‘score’ than performance piece, with Ono’s being only one way that the piece could be performed/interpreted. This reading is encouraged by the performance score published by Ono in 1966 in *The Strip Tease Show*, as well as Ono’s book of poems/scores, *Grapefruit*.⁶¹ The former:

First version for single performer:

Performer sits on stage with a pair of scissors in front of him. It is announced that members of the audience may come on stage—one at a time—to cut a small piece of the

⁶¹ From my understanding, *The Strip Tease Show* is the published ‘script’ of Ono’s performance of the same name, which was performed at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo, 1964.

performer's clothing to take with them. Performer remains motionless throughout the piece. Piece ends at the performer's option (qtd. in Jones *Perform Repeat Record*, 348).

In her own re-performance of the piece, artist Ming-Yuen S. Ma suggests that interpretation is what *Cut Piece* is all about. Reading the piece as a Fluxus invitation, rather than a singular, finite performance, Ma suggests:

Among the artists associated with Fluxus, Ono's artwork consistently challenged the socio-political issues and gender politics of her time... Yet, it seems to me that at its center, behind the provocation of its performance, is a blankness. This blankness does not signify lack, but rather a plural void that makes it possible for the simple action in the *Cut Piece* to encompass the contradictory notions of active and passive, violence and peace, violation and self-sacrifice. In other words, the meaning of the *Cut Piece* is embodied in the bodies and acts of the performer and the audience. (348-349)

Trans playwright Sylvan Oswald suggests something similar when they quote Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* at the beginning of their essay on plays and play texts. Oswald sees a growing interest in performance art, and yet an increasing, if arbitrary, a gulf between art and theatre. They suggest we might read Ono's score as a play script, where the entire performance text is one word long: Cut. As Oswald suggests, "'Cut,' is a polygon, a many-sided shape in one's choice of dimensions: two, three, or time. To a writer like myself who has long been obsessed with how the materiality of words collides with the unwriteable 'text' of performance, a one-word script is an exhilaratingly simple act of rebellion" (Oswald "*Cut Piece*"). Indeed, the materiality of words, the unwritable 'text' of performance are at work in Mayhew's performance; so too does the materiality of the body, along with the unwriteable 'text' of gender, get cut away and

reconfigured. Question of gender legibility, of the performing body, of the skin/costumes materiality, are in this “exhilaratingly simple act of rebellion”: the cut.

The act of rebellion, for Mayhew, is centered around the trans body. Like Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*, *Cut Piece With Transgender Body* invokes the tension of a potential naked body. In the original *Cut Piece*, we are given the potential of seeing the racialized naked female body; with Mayhew, we are unsure of what we will see. Mayhew’s intervention begins when he refuses to be seen while simultaneously inviting the gaze. I keep wanting to call this oscillation some kind of trans ontology. Yet, I think that too, along with other claims of trans essence or authenticity is rejected through Mayhew’s performance. I think my effort to call it ontology is a desire to give it gravitas. To point, and say, this matters! This matters to me, and it should matter to you! I think, in all my research, I am also trying to understand ontology, to say something that sounds smart. So that you, the reader, may in turn go, wow, what a smart thought; this must be an important artwork, about an important topic. I don’t mean to be glib here. I mean to show how tired I am, of navigating what I mean, my intentions, my desires. In my utopia, I would be understood. But so too would my instincts be criticized. Because these rules don’t have to make sense for us to make use of them.

Or, my desire to apply some kind of ontology to Mayhew is, in some ways, a desire to make sense of the tangle. To name, or situate his body in my discourse. But this ignores the critical potential of trans. As such, in building a theory around trans performance ontology—and following the trans body— we can see trans performance not as a definition, but as an opening up, as a passing through. Amelia Jones, in her introduction to a special edition of *Theatre*

Journal, *Transperformance*, discusses the power of that prefix.⁶² Quoting Mel Chen, she says, “‘trans- is not a linear space of mediation between two monolithic, autonomous poles... Rather, it is conceived of as more emergent than determinate, intervening with other categories in a richly elaborated space.’ The ‘prefixial trans’, Chen notes, opens up what Mira Hird has described as a ‘broader sense of movement across, through, and perhaps beyond traditional classifications’” (“Introduction,” 1). I cite Jones citing Chen citing Hird to metaphorically demonstrate the movement across, not just from Hird to Chen and so on to me, but from me, now to you. For the trans ontology is located precariously in bodies under siege, in identities contested, in ‘beings’ that are literally (at the time of this writing) denied by the United States government, bodies that do not exist. Trans bodies operate through a paradoxical ontology; existing despite their supposed ‘nonexistence.’ Through this negation, what utopic provocation can we find in applying Jones’s definition of trans to the category of gender?

Mayhew’s performance moves through the cut. It moves through the circle, web-making movement of making ‘boundaries’ to utopia with ribbon. We are passing through, not just from point A to point B, but from A, to B, to 2, to ☺, and back around. From point A to the sound of scissors cutting away clothes. From point A to my fingers typing on the keyboard. From A to a utopic set of symbols and signs that defy gender legibility. Like quilt hieroglyphics, the cut of Mayhew’s performance offers not a binary, but an archive of trans history and experience. In this way, Mayhew’s performance is a passing through; it’s a journey. Like the road trip Mayhew and I took during the SMT residency. Where we drove from that house to Roscoe NY, where I think

⁶² This is not a special edition on transgender performance, but rather on different uses of the prefix ‘trans’ as it may apply to performance. There is only one essay in the edition on transgender performance. That said, I use ‘trans’ performance to mean transgendered performance—as is common at the time of this writing. As this paragraph suggests, I am interested in excavating the other uses of this prefix and how they might be applied productively to gender.

I told him I had a crush on Dan, and where he talked about the things he loved and hated about trans performance, and where we scanned the radio for the pop-iest music we could find, before ending up at a distillery called prohibition, where we learned that gin is just vodka with spices added. And that you can tell when the spices have been added manually (and not just from a packet), when there is a beautiful film of oil from the spices floating on the top of the liquor. And I thought, as an avid gin drinker, that I didn't know there was more to learn. And the whole place smelled of juniper berries and coriander. And if you were to argue that the ontology of gin is vodka, then you wouldn't know much about gin. If I get too caught in arguments about *being* and *essence*, know that it's because I'm slightly afraid of the failure of just sitting in *becoming*. In the motion from somewhere to somewhere. But without the journey, you wouldn't get the smell of crushed coriander. And juniper. And you wouldn't be you—whoever that is. Whatever that is.

My desire to use ontology in relation to Mayhew's work is a desire to offer the gift of ontological certainty to trans bodies, because I feel as though my trans friends were the first to offered ontologically certainty to me and my experience as a pansexual queer woman. But there maybe more of a gift to give in embracing the mess of materiality, gender, and our bodies in concert. I strive sometimes, to fold my conversation too delicately into a binary. As I did in my own transition in prefixes from bi to pan, I can learn something from the shift away from the binary, towards thinking across a spectrum of experience, identity, and prefixes.

This rejection of ontology similarly rejects the desire within hetero/homo normative discourse, academia, news, and popular culture to "know" the trans body in biological terms. Contemporary pop culture and academia alike ask: "Do you still have your penis?," "are you pre or post op?," "but what's 'down there'?" When actor Laverne Cox, in an interview with Katie Couric was asked about her genitalia, she bristled:

I do feel there is a preoccupation with that. The preoccupation with transition and surgery objectifies trans people. And then we don't get to really deal with the real lived experiences. The reality of trans people's lives is that so often we are targets of violence.... If we focus on transition, we don't actually get to talk about those things. (Reynolds).

Cox rejects questions about specific transgendered genitalia, as it distracts from much larger issues within the trans community, such as oppression, violence, and health care (Reynolds). Similarly, John Oliver, on his long-form comedy news show *Last Week Tonight*, tells us that “some transgender people do undergo hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery as part of their transition. Some do not. And interestingly, their decision on that matter, is, medically speaking, *none of your fucking business*” (*Last Week Tonight*, emphasis mines). Mayhew too, recognizes this in his frustrations leading up to creating the piece. Discussing an early iteration of the piece, which took place in person, Mayhew reflects:

One of the first questions people asked me back then (it was different 10 years ago) is “like, what’s your— so have you had the surgery?” People wanted to immediately know what my genitals looked like when they found out that I was trans. And I was thinking about that in context of Yoko Ono, at least that piece, and I thought it would translate really well. And it did! So the first time I did it, people were asking the docents who were there handing out cards and telling people to cut pieces of my clothes away, they were like, “well, I don’t understand, if he’s trans why isn’t he wearing a dress,” or wanting to know if they could cut—like one guy whispered in my ear, “I promise I won’t cut your crotch out.” And I never mentioned that that’s what I wanted people to be curious about, but I also kind of knew. (Mayhew, skype interview)

Here, Mayhew's project deals with what he calls "fear and curiosity" around the trans body. But in revealing, he refuses to show. In cutting away, he refuses to be reduced to one thing. In this, he is being gender through doing, as a radical method of becoming.

Mayhew's *Cut Piece* asks us to watch the body unfold, as opposed to focusing on the naked trans body. The live stream ended abruptly, as if so say, "that's it. You've seen enough." Interestingly, the SMT residency where Mayhew and I met was all about re-performance. We did many re-performances. We re-performed our re-performances. Re-performing became an act of love, like a cover song, or an homage. It also was a method of expressing oneself through the art, actions, or style of another. Mayhew's re-performance takes on these qualities; it is a form of self-portraiture. Nina Arsenault—Canadian trans performance artist and theorist—discusses the dialectic of self-portraits:

[Self-portraits] are an active way of writing my life and of ordering my reality—the creation and recreation of the Self understood and presented without shame, through my own eyes, heart, mind, and body—not through the minimizing gaze of a society that is transphobic, sexist, misogynist, class obsessed, ageist; a society that is afraid of nudity, scars, trauma, sex, the body, and difference; a society that attempts to convince marginalized people that they are weak, sick, freaks, victims, unworthy; a secular society that has become ashamed of spiritual passion; a society that erases personal narratives with the aggressive, pervasive overwriting of who we are, how to act, how to work, how to worship, how to fuck, and even habituates in us HOW TO BREATHE. Living self-portraiture is, therefore, the REDEMPTIVE POWER TO SIGNIFY. It is to see, create, and vivify a rich personal mythology through the potentialities of life and culture. It is THE PRESENCE OF BEING at the nexus point of imagination and reality. (69)

Mayhew's *Cut Piece* sets the stage for radical self-portraiture. It is through the script of "cut" that Mayhew enacts a rebellious and intimate performance of his trans body. This is a performance simultaneously self-made, made through a community of trans docents, and made through the invisible internet onlookers. He gives us the power to tell him how to breathe, to signify, and yet, mediates this power through trans performance. Like the needle in Bennett's piece, the scissors don't mutilate, they create.

As such, the act of 'cut,' taken up by members of the trans/queer community, becomes a deconstruction of a performative apparatus—of 'real' gender— and the construction of trans materiality. In his essay, Oswald suggests it might be time for theatre makers to stop suspending their disbelief. To me, this invokes the complexities of being the trans body, in a world where being (ontology) and doing (performance) are in stark relief. What good is suspending your disbelief, when everyday belief seems rarely on your side?

It may no longer seem possible, safe, or advisable to willingly suspend our disbelief. Our nationalities, politics, identities, and aesthetics inform our terms of surrender. There are real reasons, even if we can't name them, behind our refusal to tacitly agree that a human we know is an actor is now this other figure, a character. Or that a chair is a throne; that a pattern on the floor is dappled sunlight; that it's time to feel scared because scary music is playing. Because, what then? To what other kinds of manipulations might we now be subject? Agreeing to pretend, the suspension of disbelief coined by Coleridge in 1817, is to consent to letting go. It means to permit one thing to represent another. In Ancient Greek it's called mimesis: to imitate. It's the imitation, or representation, that some people find troubling. When illusion gets equated with theater, plays too become suspect.

(Oswald, "Cut Piece")

Oswald's rejection of mimesis, or suspending our disbelief, is interesting when it is contextualized within the call for trans (self)representation. The desire to represent the trans body on stage, or in performance, is not a desire to imitate, or 'suspend' belief, but rather, apply belief productively to the category of trans. The desire to represent the trans body is a desire to believe the trans body. To see the trans body as it would like to be seen. This argues for a representational politics that embraces play while it simultaneously rejects playing pretend. Mayhew's performance is interested, ultimately, in rewriting gender, the body, and identity on his own terms, in a way that does not suspend disbelief but rejects it. The trans body/performance finds its feet in this very negation of disbelief. This is the belief that you are, while you are simultaneously told you are not. This represents a huge rift between being and doing, where a trans body will be doing while simultaneously told that they cannot be. Trans bodies are pathologized for the very terms of identity and experience they cling to. Pathologized for the 'wrong' performance of gender identity.

Trans theorists have discussed trans bodies in a variety of ways that look to extend queer theory beyond some of these (unconscious) binaries. Jack Halberstam discusses the indeterminacy of trans-ness, using the term Trans*; the asterisk at the end of trans* opens up, includes, or invites further—never ending, or never stable—definitions. This asterisk is an invitation away from the categories of male and female completely, a complete step away from the binary of gender identity: "The asterisk opens up the category [of trans] rather than closes it down.... trans* represents an instability that is now built into the system [of gender] itself" (qtd. in NYU Florence "Jack Halberstam").⁶³ It's as if Mayhew himself is placing an asterisk on the

⁶³ Susan Stryker discusses the trans body as a Frankenstein's Monster—a metaphor for an abnormal body unfairly deemed monstrous—and "queer theory's evil twin", again, suggestive of a body that is transgressive, ugly, or

original *Cut Piece*. In opening the representational potential of the piece, Mayhew uses scissors not to mutilate the body (because trans bodies are not mutilated bodies) but to cut away the reductive ideologies that surround trans bodies. Just as Ellen Gruber Garvey suggests that early American scrapbookers “wrote” with their scissors, bringing together different texts and concepts through collage, so too does Mayhew write his body, his gender, with scissors. Whereas Narcissister wears Black materiality like a costume, Mayhew cuts away concepts of gender legibility to indicate the materiality of identity. The body becomes a space of collage, creation, and pastiche. As Patrizia Di Bello explores, “collage at once cuts and repairs, fragments and makes whole again... these cuts and wounds are never fully ‘healed’ into a smooth continuous surface, neither physically or conceptually” (qtd. in Garvey 160). The trans body—and material trans performance—is one of violence and utopia. It is one that finds its material identity through negation, as resistance, as presence, as performance. As the clothes are cut away, some linger, as we wonder at the creative potential in deconstruction. Trans bodies are not mutilated bodies, but they are subject to violence. Mayhew invokes a utopian community through his self-portrait, through the mapping of trans experience. He does not make it alone, but instead invites trans docents to mark the borders of their utopia on his body as island, his flesh as dirt as they excavate and landscape their place in this world.

Conclusion: Dancing with Knots

This chapter is concerned with the binaries that are collapsed when explicit bodies dance with textiles. It is both interested in the body as object, self-objectification as a form of artistic

unwelcome within the ‘family’ of queerness (212, 213). Calvin Warren introduces the idea of tranifestation—a play on words with ‘manifestation’—a term that invites us to think about the specificities of being-in-the-world for Black trans people: “[w]e might understand tranifestation then, as a mode of “ontological resistance,” in which the self manifests despite the violence of gendered normativity.... only those who can resist ontology can be” (268).

agency and expression, and complicating the boundaries of the skin. It is interested in the conflicting ways textiles are inscribed across raced and gendered bodies, and how performance artists work with and against these inscriptions. The first case study, *A Woman's Work Is Never Done*, explores the labour and feminization of embroidery. Bringing the assumed whiteness and delicacy of embroidering together, Bennett embroiders her own skin, bringing the invisible labour women's work to the foreground. Narcissister also penetrates her own skin with textiles, but instead queers the strip tease by pulling objects out of her body, in a radical reclamation of Black objecthood. Mayhew, while never breaking the skin, also focuses on the trans body through a re-performance of Ono's *Cut* piece, with the goal of claiming the cut as a kind of passing through, not between one gender binary to the next, but between time, space, and experience.

There is more theoretical work to be done in putting these pieces in conversation with one another. They all work with Halberstam's asterisks, opening up interpretations, performances, and the potential of bringing bodies and objects together: Embroidery*; Strip*; Cut*. Each one of these case studies offers a collaboration between fabric/textiles and body: thread and needle meet skin, clothing sits in gendered and racialized orifices, and clothing is cut away to reveal not truth, not artifice, but utopia. These pieces are a dance, a movement between two (or more) unlikely partners that point to gendered and raced bodies as a form of negotiation. The feminized body is punctured. The Black femme body is turned inside out. The trans body is 'cut' into/through. Performance becomes the way that these artists offer alternative perspectives and orientations to questions of the body. Offered through the body, these artworks explore the queer phenomenology of the needle, the strip tease, and the trans body, inviting the viewer to turn around, and re-examine their own bodily position with Black objecthood, trans stereotypes,

and woman's work. The painful, satisfying prick of the sewing the skin, the laughter and titillation of queer tease, the slow snipping of the trans reveal: these are all bodily performance that invite bodily experiences.

It's worth too, exploring the limits of agency and asterisks. As with Baartman's historical commodification, none of these case studies offer an agentic model that is without its contradictions and complications. Let's start where I began, and take the needle as a closing example. For all my postulations of the artistic power of the needle, this has also been contested. Some women saw the needle as a pen—a positive means of artistic and self-expression.⁶⁴ However, not all women perceived the needle as a liberating form of expression. In her poem *Aurora Leigh*, Elizabeth Barrett Browning pointedly asks what the purpose of needlework is: “By the way,/ the works of women are symbolic. We sew, prick our fingers, dull our sight,/ Producing what?” (qtd. in Parker 156). Her focus on the embodied ramifications of sewing is important: she suggests that nothing is produced by sewing but a body that sews; a body that is physically worn and damaged. More than this, her introduction, “by the way,” functions ironically to demonstrate the afterthought that is women, and women's work, within a patriarchal and social hegemony.⁶⁵

So, what does the needle do? Does it liberate women's work or further marginalize it? The point this chapter tries to make is that the binary itself is reductive. The artists here ask for

⁶⁴ In her book *From Man to Man*, published posthumously in 1926, author and intellectual Olive Schreiner expresses the importance of the needle eloquently: “But the woman who is only a woman, what has she but her needle? In that torn bit of brown leather brace worked through and through with yellow silk, in that bit of white rag with invisible stitching lying among fallen leaves and rubbish that the wind has blown into the gutter or the street corner lies all the passion of some woman's soul finding voice-less expression. Has the pen or pencil dipped so deep in the blood of the human race as the needle?” (quoted in Parker 15).

⁶⁵ While not contemporary to Browning's work, feminist-Marxist Silvia Federici discusses the longstanding practice of dismissing feminine labour. See Federici, “Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint” (2008).

their artwork to be read with complexity. The question is not whether these performances reinscribe bodies into a white supremacist or sexist systems, or instead reclaim these systems of oppression and, in doing, deconstruct them. It is not an either/or, but rather, a both/and. With that, they demonstrate that objects and objecthood can be used as a method of expression. Like people, these performances are complex, contradictory, and ever-evolving. This is the knot; the point is not to undo it, but live with it. This final point is illustrated by an infamous sampler by Patty Polk, age 10, dated around 1800: “Patty Polk did this and she hated every stitch she did in it” (Parker 132; Bolton 210).⁶⁶ Textiles can be picked up in multiple ways: with defiance, with love, with gratitude, or simply, with habit. Regardless of the way they are picked up, the doing of textiles is powerful simply because it is not not-doing. With embroidery, women historically “perform magic with a needle” (Goggin 4). This magic comes through what the embroiderer performs: the stitches. This is a performance through/with the body, drawing on historical, cultural, and social worlds. Stitches, “with their structure, with hand movements required to make them, and with their seemingly infinite variation,” too, are magical (4).

⁶⁶ The existence of this sampler is disputed, as there have been other inauthentic samplers with the “hated every stitch” aphorism that have recently come up for sale on Ebay. This quote is from the appendix of Ethel Stanwood Bolton and Eva Johnston Coe’s *American Samplers*. Massachusetts Society of the Colonial Dames of America, 1921. p. 210, which reads: “Polk, Patty. [Cir. 1800. Kent County, Md.] 10 yrs. 16" x 16". Stem-stitch. Large garland of pinks, roses, passion flowers, nasturtiums, and green leaves; in center, a white tomb with “GW” on it, surrounded by forget-me-nots. ‘Patty Polk did this and she hated every stitch she did in it. She loves to read much more.’” The sampler is also mentioned in Parker’s seminal book, under a different name, “Polly Cook,” at 182.

Chapter Three: Scriptive White Feminism and the Pussyhat

You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful women—I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss. I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything.

-DONALD TRUMP

Fuck you, Elvis.

-BUSTY BEATZ, IN *HOT BROWN HONEY* (TORONTO, APRIL 2019)



Figure 30: Women's March on Washington - woman with pussyhat, by Thirty two, 2017.

I missed the Women's March on January 21st, 2017. I was in Perth, Australia, on my way to Adelaide for the Adelaide Fringe Festival. I was doing a show on feminism, drinking, and sexual assault, and having a hell of a time getting audience members. In the second largest fringe in the world, with Canadian comedian Tom Greene or Aussie treasure Tom Ballard performing only minutes from my venue, I was—like many of the independent artists at the fringe—experiencing the true meaning of the hustle. When I learned that the beloved hypnotist magician—whose 6-foot posters loomed large by the ticket lines where I would bother strangers and flyer my show—when I learned that his marketing budget was easily ten times the budget for my entire production, I started giving up a little. I knew there were queer feminists in Adelaide. Despite its

religious and conservative population (the City of Churches, they call it!), despite the fact that at the time gay marriage was still illegal in Australia, despite the suggestion from white cis-male producers that I “lighten up” my re-enactment of Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece* by adding the theme music from *Jaws*.... Despite all of this, I believed that my audience was out there.

I was eating frozen yogurt when a pink pussyhat walked past me down the red brick street. A week or so after the Women’s March, and I had been witnessing the flood of pink on social media. Friends had travelled down from Toronto to Washington to participate in what would be the largest protest march in US history. Public displays took up space across Canada— I read articles about the few in Sandy Cove, Nova Scotia, and the many in Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa. In Australia, it was another story. I clicked attending on a public display in Perth that I was unable to attend because of shows. But friends who did attend said it was not much of anything at all, mostly overshadowed by the looming presences of some bogans and their mates.⁶⁷ While there was a substantial march in Melbourne and Sydney, in Adelaide, I felt like the Women’s March was something I was seeing from the other side of the world, instead of something I was participating in.

Then I saw this woman, walking confidently in a pink wool pussyhat. Bear in mind it is mid-summer in Australia; wearing a wool hat is a deliberate choice. I mustered up the courage, and ran after. Catching up, I released the word-vomit: Her hat, my show, maybe she’d like it, she should come see it, free tickets, just trying to get good people in the same room. I handed her the coasters I had made as promotion material and walked away. Sometime near the end of my show run, I arrived backstage to find someone had left me a gift: a perfect beautifully knit pink

⁶⁷ Bogan is a colloquial, perhaps lovingly offensive slang for an Australian redneck.

pussyhat and a note. She wouldn't be able to make it to my show, but it had meant a lot that I had stopped her. She had been moved by the marches to buy yarn, to learn to knit, to make something out of this feeling. Her pussyhat experience was something like the experience I had when I first learned to knit, when I saw her walking by. It was this moment of a shared experience; something like #YesAllWomen, or even #MeToo. It was a way to signal to everyone where my loyalties lie. Here, finally, my audience.

In a kind of anticlimactic epilogue, I never wore the hat. Shortly after the sea of pink hit my newsfeed, it was simultaneously criticized for excluding trans women and women of colour. While the hat meant a lot to me, this stranger, and many other women, it also became a reminder of the historical exclusion of women of colour and trans woman in feminist and queer communities. Did the pink pussyhat adequately reflect the intersectionality that the Women's March and Pussyhat Project claim, or did it reflect the failure of textiles in politics to speak to the multitudes and intersectionality within women and feminism? Did I wear the hat, or did it wear me?

If there is an answer, it is somewhere in the mess in between. This chapter investigates public knots. The previous chapter attempted, through the metaphor of knots, to see what contradictions find themselves on material and gendered bodies. It looked to unpack/unpick these knots through a series of case studies that bleed body and textiles across one another, suggesting that performing the gendered body can make a material mess. This chapter asks what happens when we take those same knots, and bring them intentionally together for a political purpose. It brings together metaphorical, methodological, and literal knots to analyse the political potential of textiles in public performances of protest. When the performing artist moves from

the stage to the street, how does it change their gendered performance? What happens when gendered textiles enter public space for a political purpose?

This chapter looks at the performance of craftivism—activism through craft. It reads public, political crafts as an urban encounter with political stakes. I aim to navigate a discussion of both the material object and its political message. An analysis of craftivism invites a slippage between a material analysis of the objects and a larger political analysis of their ideological performances. This slippage is welcome and central to my analysis. As such, I reject the assumption that objects are inherently apolitical, or that politics don't contain material meaning. In her essay on 1990s periodicals and their promotion of knitting and other traditional handicrafts, Elizabeth Groeneveld argues for the politics of domesticity, yet she simultaneously tells us, “knitting itself is not political” (266). This phrase itches at me like a homemade sweater. What good is bolstering the domestic as political if the materials of that space are simultaneously rejected? I aim to approach the material of craftivism with the same intent of Daniel Miller, in *Why Some Things Matter*. Here, he reminds us that social worlds are material; material culture is not “some separate superstructure to social worlds” (3). His goal is to examine the diversity of material worlds. He looks at things within context, and without “reducing them either to models of the social world or to specific sub-disciplinary concerns” (3). In rejecting knitting—or any other material—as merely a model or metaphor for domesticity, as opposed to the very stuff that makes up the domestic, Groeneveld limits her analysis of craftivism. And Groeneveld is not an exception in her analysis. Alla Myzelev argues in her exploration of yarn bombing that the use of feminine handicraft in protest might be read as a “softening of the message,” making the political more accessible but at the same time, taking away its teeth. These arguments seem to forget that we make them with needles. The outright dismissal of textiles as objects with political power

reverberates out, infecting everything with its negation. To suggest that knitting is not political implies that knitting as a performance, along with the feminine and domestic, are also not political. Following Miller, I aim here to analyse objects as more than empty shells for the social, historical, or political (3). As Miller suggests, material culturalists’ “apparent embarrassment at being, as it were, caught gazing at objects,” turns society itself into a kind of fetish. Society becomes the “thing-like content to which all materials are reduced” (9). In this chapter, I try to look at the materiality of objects, as well as their political potential, and the mess in between. Yes, knitting itself can be political.

In fact, knitting’s variability as an object—its materiality as *thing*—is a key part of its political punch. Where does the object as object begin, and the object as “sign for the social” end? For example, can the pussyhat ever be read or worn as ‘just’ a hat? Can I (or should I) analyse its political impact without taking into account its hatness? Rachel Hann’s work on critical costume studies is useful in unpacking the many hats of political things within craftivism. Here, both as craft and culture, the costume makes visible “the process of dressing through the exposure of appearance”: “[A]n act of showing dressing” (32, 33). The costume is not simply clothing, nor semiotic narrative metaphor, nor character. It is all of these and more. This “situates costumes as an event” (30). Craftivist objects and actions are a kind of costume in that they are performed publicly. A craftivist object is not only the material craft or textile, the political statement it takes up, the body that makes it/wears it, or the public place it is performed. It is somewhere in the mess between these categories. As domestically charged objects that take up public space for a political purpose, craftivist objects—like costumes—“critique the act of appearance through the act of appearance” (Hann 32). It is this variability that marks their political potential. Within craftivism, knitting is both an everyday object, an action, and political

insignia. Science, technology and society scholar Noortje Marres, in *Material Participation: Technology, the Environment and Everyday Publics*, calls this “the instability or ‘liveliness’ of participatory objects” (21). What Marres calls instability, I call ‘mess’. This mess invites objects to be material, literal, ideological, and performative; in this, they are political.

Here I explore the political, racial, and material performances of craftivism and yarn bombing, as exemplified by the pussyhat. If I had an entire dissertation dedicated to this topic, I would offer a more nuanced spatial analysis of the Women’s Marches as well as public craftivism installations. I am curious what an ethnographic approach and qualitative interviews would reveal about the performance of the pussyhat in the march itself. While I acknowledge the value of these lines of inquiry, for the purposes of this dissertation, this chapter focuses on the representation of the pussyhat in the contemporary imagination, and how that reflects on the racial and gendered performance of craftivism at large.

Structurally, this chapter moves through different craftivist artworks, going from broad examples to very specific ones. First, I will give an overview of craftivism, its origins, intentions, and detractors. This takes us to a brief history of Third Wave feminism, the concept of intersectionality, and connections to creative forms of activism and ‘white feminism’. From here, I dive into the main case study, the pussyhat, and attempt to contextualize it within both the 2017 and 2018 Women’s Marches—the former where the hat was overwhelmingly adopted, and the latter, where it was generally rejected. I ask what happened between these two marches, and attempt to unpack the suggested exclusion of trans women and women of colour in the first Women’s March. From here, I look at yarn bombing and the pussyhat to discuss racial occlusions in craftivism at large. I ask who craftivism is for. Is this another example of white

women excluding women of colour in art and politics, or a more complicated example of ‘love and theft’—and what, really, is the difference (Lott)? By looking at yarn bombing as an exemplar of craftivism, I ask whose shoulders the craftivist movement has been built upon. Is craftivism just a white feminist practice, bringing with it all kinds of neoliberal pitfalls? What kind of bodies—and forms of protest—does craftivism privilege?

Finally, I turn to a material performance analysis to ask what role the pussyhat plays in these racial politics. I ask whether these objects are citational or scriptive and explore the difference between the two. Who is centre stage in a protest when certain objects upstage the people wearing them? I move from performative utterances, to citational objects, and finally to scriptive things. Linger here on material failure, I wonder—after Bill Brown—what happens when objects fail in the context of high-stakes political moment? Do we write political history, or are we written by it; do I wear the hat, or does it wear me? I close with musings on Trump’s “Make America Great Again” hat, the marketing tool that, by some accounts, won him the 2016 presidential election. Bringing together material culture across textiles as political performances, I analyse how these equations intentionally and unintentionally perform the politics of gender and race. Ultimately, I am interested in the public performances of political textiles: in their whimsical, if (a)political, encounters, in the times they script human action.

Knot 1: Craftivism

The term ‘craftivism’ was coined by writer Betsy Greer in 2003 to describe moments of activism through craft. However, Greer suggests that craftivism encompasses much more than this simple definition. On her website, Greer imagines craftivism as any creative approach to political and social causes. In a longer definition, she speaks to several different ideological leanings, broadly pointing to feminism, anti-materialism, and the post-9/11 era as political terrain

wherein craftivism found its feet. Craftivism lauds domesticity as something not to be ignored, suggesting that activism takes place on the individual level and within the everyday: “Craftivism allows those who wish to voice their opinions and support their causes the chance to do just that...but without chanting or banner waving and at their own pace” (Greer “Craftivism Definition”). Ultimately, Greer rejects the dichotomy between craft and activism, and the negative stereotypes associated to both words. By bringing craft and activism together, Greer hopes to make craft more political and activism more accessible. Greer suggests, “[c]raft was like the younger child not taken seriously by art, and activism made people uncomfortable, conjuring unpleasant images of tear gas and riot gear. What if each was treated as a positive entity? What if they could each use the energy created by the other to take on a new idea?” (“Craftivist History” 178). And so, by bringing them together, Greer attempts to reinvent both craft and activism.

Craftivism combined a public, activist, and feminist reclamation of domestic actions, specifically (although not exclusively) traditional feminine handicrafts. Aligning themselves with Third Wave feminism, all craftivist projects resituate the domestic in public space to point to larger political concepts. The form this takes can vary greatly. Sometimes, this takes shape as Knit-Ins, a public demonstration of knitting to show opposition to a political issue.⁶⁸ Another

⁶⁸ One example of this is the Revolutionary Knitting Circle. Founded in Calgary, Canada by Grant Neufeld in 2000, one of their main actions was to stage a Global Knit-in to protest the G8 Summit in 2002. The call to action was to transform “spaces [of corporate power] through knitting. [To] create 'soft' barriers of knitted yarn to reclaim spaces from the elite to the common good. As the community is knitted together, corporate commerce is slowed or halted and the community can prosper” (“Protest G8 Global Knit-In”). Another is Knitting Nannas Against Gas (KNAG). Established in 2012, this group of activists from the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales, Australia, stage Knit-Ins to protest the mining of coal seam gas. Their “Nannafesto” tells us, “[w]e sit, we knit, plot, have a yarn and a cuppa, and bear witness to the war against those who try to rape our land and divide our communities” (“Nannafesto”). For the Knitting Nanas, it is less about the product or skill of the knitting, but about “the act of bearing witness while we knit,” inspired by the “Tricoteuse” who sat knitting by the guillotine during public executions of the French Revolution (“Home”; “Origins”). KNAG stages Knit-Ins on exploration and mining sites, in front of the offices of politicians, companies, at rallies, and more.

example would be yarn bombing, where statues, trees, lampposts and other public structures are given hats, sweaters, or knitted ‘cozies’, making them stand out of the urban landscape. While there are many different performances, installations, happenings, and objects that fall under the craftivism umbrella, there are also some unifying trends. In what follows, I will analyse three different aspects of craftivism: its domestic ties, its link to public space, and its commitment to Third Wave feminism.

Irrespective of its activist leanings, all craftivist projects involve craft. One of the main goals of craftivism is to resituate domesticity and activities typically associated with the home in public, political, or unexpected spaces. Scholarship on the domestic, and the separation of genders into separate spheres, is wide and varied. In the past few decades, the dichotomy of the public/private, male/female sphere has been greatly challenged by feminists and socio-cultural historians: “Most studies of [the domestic sphere] have revealed the permeability of the border that separates the spheres, demonstrating that the private feminized space of the home both infused and bolstered the public male arena of the market, and that the sentimental values attached to maternal influence were used to sanction women's entry into the wider civic realm from which those same values theoretically excluded them” (Kaplan 581). And yet, the metaphor of the spheres has also helped delineate the history of men and women, and speaks to the specifics of female experience, history, and culture. In her excellent review of this history, Linda K. Kerber explains why the dichotomy between public/private and men/women has lingered: “The metaphor remains resonant because it retains some superficial vitality. For all our vaunted modernity, for all that men's ‘spheres’ and women's ‘spheres’ now overlap, vast areas of our experience and our consciousness do not overlap. The boundaries may be fuzzier, but our private spaces and our public spaces are still in many important senses gendered” (39). There are many

performance pieces that explore the overlap of these gendered spaces. For example, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and her piece, *Manifesto for Maintenance*, purposefully relocate domestic tasks of cleaning and childcare within the public gallery. In an associated performance piece, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, performed on July 23, 1973, Ukeles washes the front steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. By performing typically ignored performances of domestic maintenance, Ukeles sheds light on the invisible maintenance workers of a museum, but also resituates domestic activities in the ‘public’ sphere. She has been self-dubbed as a “maintenance artist,” a title which invites us to reimagine the politics and ideologies typically associated with the domestic.⁶⁹ Is art always creation, or is it sometimes an act of maintenance? What are the performances typically invited in to the public museum—and the canon—and how are these gendered? Can domestic acts be read as intrinsically political and worthy of artistic appreciation? Craftivism aims to create a similar binary explosion. By relocating the domestic practice of handicrafts within public space, we are asked to simultaneously examine the dichotomy of public/private space, and by extension reinvestigate the politics implicit in craft.

⁶⁹ For more on Ukele’s works as it relates to domesticity, maintenance and labour, see Jackson in *Social Works* at 75-103; and Levin at 112-119.



Figure 31: Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Washing/Tracks/Maintenance: Outside*, Hartford, Connecticut, 1973.

There are many ways we can discuss the performance of textiles in public space. In the previous chapter, I analysed the politics of being seen knitting (or sewing, crocheting, etc). As Rozsika Parker explored, “there is something disturbing in the image of the embroiderer deep in her work” (10). Parker suggests that the silence the embroiderer keeps is not kept only to be broken by men, but rather, that the embroiderer at work demonstrates an independence and knowledge that has nothing to do with male authority. This, to the patriarch(y), is disturbing. How does this disturbance shift when staged in public; what is it to bring this traditionally domestic practice/object out in the public sphere? Magda Sayeg, who is known for starting the yarn bombing movement, described the first time she covered a stop sign pole with yarn:

The reaction was wild. People would park their cars and get out of their cars and stare at it, and scratch their heads and stare at it, and take pictures of it and take pictures next to it, and all of that was really exciting to me and I wanted to do every stop sign pole in the

neighborhood. And the more that I did, the stronger the reaction. (Sayeg, “How Yarn Bombing”)

The addition of yarn to public space allows for a socio-performative encounter between a citizen and their city. The reaction that Sayeg describes is an urban encounter.



Figure 32: Artist unknown, Sewing on the Sun of the Summertime Yarnbomb, Redfern, 2013. Photo credit: JAM Project.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre defines the urban encounter, writing, “[e]very space is already in place before the appearance in it of actors.... This pre-existence of space conditions the subject’s presence, action and discourse, his [sic] competence and performance” (57). Following Lefebvre, the encounter between urban objects, people on the street, and the urban environment is a performative one. In this case, the “actors” Lefebvre speaks to are the knitted things on trees or a statue. The audience includes the people passing by, who are momentarily interrupted. And the space is the city. From Walter Benjamin’s and Lefebvre’s reading of the city as a space for life and experience within modernity, Helen Liggett suggests that within the city, there are moments of irony, beauty, and performance. Drawing on Lefebvre’s urban encounters, she writes:

The claim for the right to the city is the claim that the city can be the active space of human experience by fully realizing the unique spatial instances that are possible only in the diversity and density of chance occurrences of urban life. Lefebvre calls these moments urban encounters. They are situated, unplanned connections with which city dwellers assemble space that they co-occupy and that cannot exist outside of their encounter. In these moments the city dweller again becomes a citizen. (Liggett 15)

As Liggett—and by extension Lefebvre and Benjamin—suggests, the encounter with the urban space is not static, but rather something that you meet, in an active way, in a way that allows you to perform identity with and through the city. This urban encounter—one between yarn and metal, between passersby and textile art, between handicraft and industrialization—performs a moment of domestic, feminist engagement with the city. It legitimizes feminine handicrafts as worthy of public consumption and display, and by extension, legitimizes the women behind the making. A feminist, domestic intervention into traditionally masculine space—and by extension sexist hegemony—the yarn bomb asks us to reimagine who is automatically assumed to be a citizen, and who is relegated to the private sphere.⁷⁰

Resituating or reclaiming domestic actions and objects on the public stage is the goal of craftivism. Interestingly, craftivists often align this goal with Third Wave feminism. Recently, the division of the feminism along ‘waves’ has been criticized, with the suggestion that it leads to a more divisive, and indeed reductive reading of the feminist movement. As Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris discuss in *A Good Night Out for the Girls*, “both ‘Third Wave’ and post-feminism tend to be identified as starting somewhere around 1990; are defined ‘against’ or in

⁷⁰ I could further complicate this by discussing how yarn points to textile workers. These issues speak not just to the private sphere, but those whose labour produces the comforts of the domestic. The embodied labour of the textile worker, as discussed in chapter one, can certainly be extended to textile labourers in both western and non-western contexts.

opposition to the Second Wave of 1960s and 1970s, and are stated in ‘generational’ terms. This risks constructing both ‘waves’ as if they were singular monolithic categories, whereas evidence suggests that feminisms always have been, as [Amanda] Lotz puts it, subject to ‘contested and even oppositional meanings’” (6). Craftivists often identify specifically with these reductive trends of Third Wave feminism:

Many women see this current textile revolution as the actualization of personal choice that Second-Wave feminists fought so hard for.... Growing up in the punk and Riot Grrl [sic] movements which fought to reclaim so many aspects of traditional femininity in powerful new ways, Third Wavers have been beset with an exploration of female power and pride intertwined with pre- and post-feminist imagery. The needle is an appropriate material representation of women who are balancing both their anger over oppression and pride in their gender. The needle stabs as it creates, forcing thread or yarn into the act of creation. From a violent action comes the birth of a new whole. Women are channeling their rage, frustration, guilt, and other difficult emotions into a powerfully productive activity. (Chansky 681-682)

Certainly, the kind of reclamation discussed here is not foreign to many that might find themselves, generationally or politically, among the Second Wave. This division of Second and Third Waves has been similarly criticized in feminist and academic writing on craftivism, suggesting that the effort to bolster up one form of feminism at the expense of another works against larger feminist goals. The overall suggestion is that any effort to reduce feminisms to waves or generations removes the nuance and diversity of those feminisms who might locate themselves productively in between.

The emergence of the term “Third Wave” is often attributed to Rebecca Walker in 1992 (and her Generation X feminist contemporaries). She wrote, “I am the Third Wave,” in an article in *Ms.* magazine, in response to Clarence Thomas’s appointment to the Supreme Court (41).⁷¹ Yet Maria Elena Buszek suggests that the split from the Second Wave, and the increasing demand for intersectionality, can be attributed to the work, words, and criticisms of Frances Beale, Florynce Kennedy, Michelle Wallace, and Audre Lorde as early as the 1970s, which culminated in their anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour* (317-318). Founded by Lorde, Cherrie Moraga, and Barbara Smith, Kitchen Table Press created but never published an anthology titled *The Third Wave: Feminist Perspectives on Racism*, which Buszek points to as the first use of the term (*Pin-Up* 318). She suggests that this re-reading of history interprets the ‘Third Wave’ as a shift in feminist philosophy as opposed to a change in age or generation (318). This philosophical shift criticizes the Eurocentric focus of the previous waves, and acknowledges the absence of women of colour in mainstream feminism.

This emergent wave theorized by Kitchen Table can be viewed in the broader context of postmodernism, where there was a parallel effort to articulate the period’s break with what came before... Chicana theorist Chela Sandoval would later articulate this cultural moment as one marked by the revelation that not only feminism, but in particular feminists of color had ‘long understood [the postmodern notion] that one’s race, culture or class often denies comfortable and easy access to either category, [and] that the interaction between social categories produce other genders within the social hierarchy’. Or—as it is simply stated at

⁷¹ Here is the quote in full, for context: “So I write this as a plea to all women, especially women of my generation: Let Thomas' confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me, that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave.” (41)

the start of *This Bridge Called My Back*— ‘[w]e learned to live with these contradictions.

This is the root of our radicalism.’ (Buszek 318)

Buszek’s history reads the shift from Second Wave to Third Waves as part of a postmodernist turn. She suggests the major change as an increase in intersectionality, and rejects defining the wave along generational lines.⁷² As such, while craftivism aligns itself with Third Wave feminism, it is fair to say that its rejection of the Second Wave is at times reductive.

Continuing this critique, does craftivism speak to the concerns of intersectionality? This is the central question of this chapter. It might be more accurate to call craftivists punk feminists—closely linked to some of the ironic humour, handmade/DIY aesthetics, and revolutionary vibe of the Riot Grrrls. Influenced by postmodern art, craftivism engages in a playful and political tongue-in-cheek irony. Every project title is a pun, every name a clever cute wink to ironic domesticity. Examples include the group names, such as Stitch and Bitch, Happy Hookers (people who crochet), or CommuKnit. There is a literality to the ironic names: the CommuKnit group—a now defunct student group out of Queen’s University—also discussed Communism at their meetings.⁷³

⁷² Intersectionality was first mentioned in connection to feminism in Kimberle Crenshaw’s 1989 essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.” Here, she explores the tendency to discuss race and gender as “mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis” (139). Crenshaw argues, “the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated” (140). Importantly, intersectionality embraces conflict, and multiple ways of experiencing oppression; it asks us to read gender, race, class, and sexuality as different layers of oppression in a person’s life. “Black women can experience discrimination in any number of ways[;]... the contradiction arises from our assumptions that their claims of exclusion must be unidirectional” (149). While intersectionality addresses many more identity categories and ideological influences, including post-colonial ideologies, queerness, ethnicity, and religion, to name a few, the general definition seems the same as it was in 1992: intersectionality represents a “need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed” (Crenshaw “Mapping the Margins,” 1245).

⁷³ There is much more to be said on the wordplay and punning in the craftivism movement, as well as on the contemporary political left. There’s an argument to be made of the resurgence of Dadaism, and the instinct to respond with humour and nonsense to a world that seems to make no sense. For more on postmodern and Dadaism in contemporary politics see Sholette, Sommer, and Collinson.



Figure 33: Jane Kehler, *Womb with a View; or The Detachable Fetus Project*, 2010.

Another example of ironic literality in craftivism would be raverly.com member Jane Kehler, who goes by username “ladyladyjane.” Kehler created the project *Womb With a View*, a literal knitted fetus, uterus placenta, and umbilical cord which, when put together, offer an anatomical ‘view’ of a fetus in the womb. The project was created to help Kehler understand, grieve, and work through her second miscarriage. Another, more public project is the Snatchel Campaign, in which participants are asked to “knit a uterus for each male [representative] in

congress. If they have their own, they can leave ours alone!” (qtd. in CraftyGal). Created by the bipartisan group Government Free V-JJ, active from 2012-2017, the project is against government regulation of women’s bodies. In both these examples, the literal knitting—the making material—of a political moment or personal loss becomes a way to perform these politics. There is both an irony in the knitted vaginas, and an “explosive literality” through which textiles become performers for larger political causes (Schneider, *Explicit Body 2*).⁷⁴

⁷⁴ “Explosive literality” is a term originally introduced by Rebecca Schneider in her book, *Explicit Body in Performance*, to describe the kinds of performers who perform and complicate the distinction between real and symbolic moments across the body as stage (2). While these previous examples explore textiles that perform as vaginas, they join a legacy of textiles that perform in/on vaginas. At either end of the spectrum of these kinds of contemporary performances are Boryana Rossa’s *The Last Valve* and Casey Jenkins’s *Casting Off My Womb*. In *The Last Valve* (2004), Rossa sews her vulva shut with surgical thread in an performative escape of gender binaries. Bringing explosive literality to the Bulgarian sexist expression “Stitched up cunt”, Rossa’s gloved hands pick up methodological sews her vulva shut. At another end of the spectrum is Jenkins’s *Casting Off My Womb* (2013), where Jenkins knits daily out of her vagina. The white mohair-like balls of yarn are inserted into Jenkins’s vagina, so that the yarn is pulled out from the centre, easily unravelling from within her vagina. Performed over 28 days, Jenkins performed the piece through her period, which stained the white yarn, marking the long scarf-like bit of knitting with red and brown stripes. Both performances play and perform the meeting of the body and textiles, but in very different



Figure 34: Juliana Santacruz Herrera, Untitled, 2009.

Following this line of thought, craftivism is a collective action. In the 2009 book, *Yarn Bombing: The Art of Crochet and Knit Graffiti*, a chapter called “Get Your Crew Together,” suggests places to start building a yarn bombing community, provides reasons why it’s beneficial, and even offers tips on making a manifesto (Moore 91-112). The same book suggests that yarn bombers are different from traditional knitters or hookers (people who crochet) in that their art is public and anonymous; even when done alone, yarn bombing necessarily involves a larger public. Either as a feminist or political statement, or simply as public art, yarn bombing involves its community as participants, spectators, or both.⁷⁵ Sometimes this is literal, in that craftivists

ways, with surgical thread at one end, and white soft yarn at the other. Both are interested in performances with blood, but again, one in a way that is reminiscent of endurance art, and the other, in a way that demystifies the period through a process of slow dramaturgy. Both offer complex readings on performance of gender, and images of gendered bodies, head bowed, methodically focused on their work, their vaginas. For more, see Lara Stevens and D’Urso.

⁷⁵ Even when projects are not literally public, they are often open source, available online. For example, there is a website where you can turn any logo or image into a knitting pattern: KnitPro 2.0 (www.microrevolt.org).

will go to community members asking them to embroider on a project they've created.⁷⁶ Other times, they are simply publicly displayed, without much fuss or announcement, offering a different engagement between citizen and urban space. The underlying concept with such projects is that anyone, anywhere, can be a craftivist. Such art-making is intentionally participatory with the goal of moving beyond the public/private and art/craft divide. The goal is to democratize art. One artist, Juliana Santacruz Herrera, filled Paris's potholes with knit bits, illuminating the bad city infrastructure in a startling, beautiful way. While she works by herself, Santacruz Herrera is invested in public space. All yarn bombing projects actively engage in public space, asking passersby to look at their community with new eyes.



Figure 35: Olek, Charging Bull, 2010.

Yet, is craftivism the democratizing art it claims to be? It was artist Agata Oleksiak—

⁷⁶ For example, “Urban Fabric,” a participatory art project by Liz Kuenek, takes a hand embroidered map of a city, and invites community members to add significant places to the map through hand embroidery. Another example, Helen Vosters’s (un)sewing circles, will be explored in chapter four.

known as Olek—who covered the Wall Street Bull with yarn. This piece is now one of the images most associated with craftivism and yarn bombing, and it aligns politically with many of their goals to feminize public space. Yet, Olek disagrees with this categorization. “I don’t yarn bomb, I make art. If someone calls my bull a yarn bomb, I get really upset.” She continues: “Lots of people have aunts or grandmas who paint. Do you want to see that work in the galleries? No. The street is an extension of the gallery. Not everyone’s work deserves to be in public” (Wollan). While I do not agree with posing gatekeeping questions about what does (or doesn’t) “deserve to be in public,” I think there is something to Olek’s statement. Beyond chalking this up to the art/craft divide, there is perhaps something awry in the assumption that all craftivist projects invoke democratic deskills and anti-capitalist rhetoric. When an artist gets a paycheck for their work, its validity is not questioned; and yet, craftivism specifically takes up anti-capitalists’ goal in its approach and politics, suggesting that craftivism not only rejects capitalism by embracing the handmade, but actively combats it. What nuances within craftivism’s relationship to DIY politics, and its rejection of factory-made objects within a larger capitalist structure, is worthy of further discussion? For example, Magda Sayeg is now paid up to up to 20,000 dollars to create commissioned yarn bomb pieces for Absolute Vodka, Smart Car, the GAP, and Mini Cooper (Sayeg “Bio”; Clay). This should give us pause.



Figure 36: Magda Sayeg, Mini Cooper, 2011.

The problem is not that these artists are getting paid, it is that their success is in part due to their work and alliance with community-based art and artists. There is a foundational contradiction here. A telling example is The Crochet Coral Reef Project created in 2005 by Margaret and Christine Wertheim. This crochet installation brings the stunning and colourful images of coral into the space of the gallery, a reminder of the ways in which so many of these underwater spaces and species are dying. Beyond the artistry and history of the *Crochet Coral Reef*, the project also has a community component called satellite reefs, where communities can make their own installations. Yet, the fee to participate in the project starts at 5,000 USD. Let me be clear—I am not criticizing the right for artists to claim intellectual property and to benefit financially for the artwork they create. I think the suggestion that artists, charities, and non-profits should be wary about making money is an absurd and normalized ideology we should

attempt to unpack and rework.⁷⁷ However, I am cautious at calling something a grassroots or community project, when it comes with such a large price tag.⁷⁸ My critique here is not against The Crochet Coral Reef Project or Magda Sayeg, specifically. They point to a larger fuzziness around how craftivism is defined, and the tendency within craftivism to use anti-capitalist, DIY aesthetic precisely to sell a concept or product.

In what follows, I examine another contradiction within craftivism: racial exclusion and appropriation. Craftivism has been defined as an engagement with activism, “without chanting or banner waving” (Greer “Craftivism Definition”). Yet, one omnipresent textile object—the pussyhat—is engaged in just that. Using the pussyhat as a fascinatingly messy case study, I aim to reveal the dance between objects, bodies, and activism that is exemplary of craftivism. Yet, I also hope to unpack some further occlusions associated with the pussyhat, and craftivism at large: the exclusion of women of colour and trans women. Looking at the pussyhat in protest, this case study asks how much agency these objects have in scripting political action. Ultimately, through a combination of material culture studies, performance studies, and critical race theory, this case study looks at the moment when citational protest objects might flip the political script.

⁷⁷ I am inspired here by the writing and talks of Dan Pallotta, specifically his TED talk “The Way We Think About Charity is Dead Wrong”.

⁷⁸ It is important to note that the Crochet Coral Reef Project will adjust their fee for smaller communities. From an email: “Small community centers in towns or villages have a lower fee, between \$4000-\$5000 USD. We have a sliding scale and try to accommodate all kinds of communities, as much as the scope of our resources allows (we are a small non-profit with 2 part-time employees)” (Mayer).

Knot 2: Not All Pussies Are Pink



Figure 37: The Women's March, 2017. Photo by Amanda Voisard for The Washington Post.

The Pussyhat Project, created by Krista Suh and Jayna Zweiman, involved participants knitting, crocheting, or sewing pink hats after Trump won the 2016 election. Meant to make a clear visual statement at the 2017 Women's March—or a “sea of pink”—the project involves making and wearing hand knit or crochet hats. Designed to be simple enough for even a knitting novice, the pattern is a rectangle of knitting that you then fold in half and sew up either side. What results is a cute, pink hat that looks like it has cat ears (Suh; Zweiman). Beyond the word play of “pussycat,” the pussyhat intentionally references the derogatory term for female genitalia, “pussy.” “We chose this loaded word for our project because we want to reclaim the term as a means of empowerment,” the creators tell us (Suh; Zweiman). Further, the use of ‘pussy’ responds to the audio-clip of President Donald Trump (that went viral in 2016), boasting about how due to his celebrity and power, he can “grab [women] by the pussy” (nytimes.com, “Transcript”). Something of a textile comeback, the pussyhat brings femininity, ironic humour, and protest together in a way that is exemplary of craftivism. As the book *Protest Knits* states, the Pussyhat is an “instant, easy way to make a visible statement which, when worn en masse,

has enormous impact. Dare you to grab this pussy!” (Warner 7). In metaphorically externalizing interior genitalia, as well as interior political beliefs, the pussyhat protests sexism and sexual assault and performs positionality and politics.



Figure 38: Pussyhat pattern, <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/knit>

The use of pink too, is an intentional reclamation: “Pink is considered a very female color representing caring, compassion, and love – all qualities that have been derided as weak but are actually STRONG. Wearing pink together is a powerful statement that we are unapologetically feminine and we unapologetically stand for women’s rights” (Suh; Zweiman). In her book, *Pink and Blue: Telling the Boys from the Girls in America*, Jo B. Paoletti writes about the evolution of pink from a nursery room colour to “today’s ubiquitous use of pink as a sign of femininity” (xviii). Others have suggested that pink allows for a performance of femininity that is both self-aware and empowering: pink is “feminism’s sexy, ironic, parodic, straight or campy pleasure in the application of a heavenly rose-colored lipstick” (Joanna Frueh, qtd in Myzelev 68). Myzelev suggests that craftivism reclaims pink in the same way it reclaims craft: “[C]onnotations of pink as a color of femininity... are now being reclaimed as feminist strategies of social engagement” (69). Pink is intentionally integrated to politically ‘reclaim’ the negative associations with femininity.

These are the intentions of the pussyhat. If we use popularity as a barometer for success, then we can argue that the pussyhat succeeded; the 2017 March was certainly a “sea of pink”

with hats on nearly every head of the millions that marched across the globe. And yet, the hat—and its connection to pink, craftivism, and femininity—has been criticized. As Washington Post columnist Petula Dvorak wrote in the week leading up to the 2017 march, the “unruly river of Pepto-Bismol” is not a serious enough symbol of the Women’s March.

This is serious stuff.... The Women’s March needs grit, not gimmicks.... Sorry, knitters. I know the pink hats with pussycat ears y’all are knitting for next week’s march are totally clever and cute and fun. They’re a smart and snarky middle finger to the incoming predator in chief, who somehow managed to win the presidency despite openly bragging about grabbing women by their genitals. But it also undercuts the message that the march is trying to send. (Dvorak)

In response to Dvorak’s provocative statement, I am not the only one to ask, “why not both? Why can’t we have pussyhats and politics? Gimmicks and grit? Work and play?” (Miri). Hopefully, we can approach the concept of contemporary politics, and contemporary protest, with more nuance than a rejection of pink as trivial, or knitting as “not political.”

However, some of the criticisms against the pussyhat are more persuasive and lasting. The main critique can be summed up with the oft-quoted statement that not all women have pussies, and not all pussies are pink; the pink pussyhats were criticized for being both trans and Black exclusionary.⁷⁹ Is the pussyhat an intersectional symbol? Or does it exclude both women of colour and trans women? This came to a head during the 2018 Woman’s March, when a pussyhat was placed by an unidentified person on the statue of abolitionist Harriet Tubman, in

⁷⁹ It is not clear to me who—if anyone—was the original source of this quote. Toronto-based Black activist and artist Nicole Stamp wrote it in a tweet dated Jan 21, 2018. Pussyhat Project organizer Zweiman wrote the same thing in an article titled “Pussyhat Project: An Opening For Discussion” dated Jan 14, 2018. I wrote the phrase in an early version of this chapter that I presented at the Canadian Association for Theatre Research May 2017—although I certainly do not think I was the first. Some authors put it in quotations without a source. Others simply state it, as they might a mantra or hashtag that belongs to everyone and no one.

Harlem. In a post on Instagram most comments were negative. Many users asked, simply “why.” Others pointed to the hat on the statue as a symbol of gentrification. Another still, blamed white women specifically, saying “#StopWhiteWomen2018.” This is an interesting political moment of yarn bombing with polarizing results. Perhaps the goal was to create a historically dialectical moment, to speak to the history of feminist struggle, and to find in all of this, a moment of solidarity across time. Instead, many detractors on Instagram and Twitter criticized the racial connotations of pink, and the tendency—yet again—for white feminists to appropriate emblems of Black struggle.⁸⁰

Haitian-American writer Doreen St. Félix, a New Yorker staff writer and a “guiding voice in the worlds of writing, art and activism,” discusses this tension (Iseman):

The branding of the Women’s March has unified millions and, as would any phenomenon of its size, has also left many feeling disaffected. “Harriet Tubman with Pink Pussyhat” feels like an accidental effigy that has bred that skepticism. It’s a question of politics and of taste. The recruitment of historical figures into contemporary mores and fashions is a tic of the movement, a yearning not just for a better future but for a neater past.

⁸⁰ Another reading of pink is possible through Janelle Monáe’s music video PYNK. The film is an expression of Black femme identity and gender performativity that meets frilly labia-like textiles in a literal dance of sex positivity and queer celebration. Here too there are moments of craftivist-like ironic literality (underwear with “sex cells”) and anti-Trump critique (underwear with “I grab back”). However, we should note it is spelled “pynk” not “pink”.

Despite the intentions of the organizers and creators, the pussyhat represented in this moment the historical exclusion of women of colour in feminism and feminist art. It reflects the suspicion around white feminist and ‘democratic’ claims within craftivism. The rejection of the hat is a rejection of a familiar script for women of colour—their exclusion within feminism. This is also a moment of yarn bombing. Here, the dialectic between yarn and bronze no longer points to the masculine and feminine (or public/private), but rather to the racial categories of white and Black.



Figure 39: @onlychyld, Harriet Tubman wearing a pussyhat, screenshot, 2018.

Diving into my positionality, opinion, and associated arguments on whether the pussyhat *is* trans/Black exclusionary is perhaps beyond the scope of this chapter. A simple Google search will bring forth a veritable smorgasbord of opinions on the topic. For our purposes, I can make a few summations. First, it was not the intention of the organizers to exclude anyone, and in fact many of the march organizers, and one of two the creators of the Pussyhat Project, are women of colour. Second, intentions aside, certain (already marginalized) groups felt excluded. Third, the

political potential of the pussyhat depends on whether or not you believe that pink—and the citation of femininity— can be reclaimed. And fourth, if we concede that pink can be reclaimed, is the pussyhat successful in that reclamation? What seems important to note is that the pussyhat had a much larger presence at the 2017 march than at the 2018 march. Also, the language around the pussyhat has changed since 2017. At the time of this writing, the PDF pattern online has framed the experience of ‘woman’ inclusively, saying, “[i]n this day and age, if we have pussies we are assigned the gender of ‘woman.’ Women, whether transgender or cisgender, are mistreated in this society. In order to get fair treatment, the answer is not to take away our pussies, the answer is not to deny our femaleness and femininity, the answer is to demand fair treatment” (Suh; Zweiman).

Regardless of authorial intent, the pussyhat is a racialized knot within the Women’s March. Harriet Tubman in the pink pussyhat invites a discussion around the racial tensions within craftivism and questions of material agency in craftivist performance. In what follows, I further discuss the racial history of yarn bombing specifically.

Knot 3: Yarn Bombing as ‘Urban’ Encounter

It was sometime around 2005 when Magda Sayeg put a little knitted cozy on the door handle to her yarn shop in Austin, Texas. Known now as the ‘alpha piece,’ the cozy is widely agreed to be first case of yarn bombing by the craftivism community. Also called knit graffiti, guerrilla knitting, radical knitting, urban knitting, or (my personal favourite) yarn storming, yarn bombing is the action of covering urban or found spaces with knitted or crocheted yarn. Sayeg’s cozy is a prime example of craftivism. Her goals are specifically to infuse public space—and ordinary public objects—with a new vitality: “I was very curious about enhancing the ordinary, the mundane, even the ugly. And not taking away its identity or its functionality, but just giving

it a well-tailored suit out of knitting. And this was fun for me. It was really fun to take inanimate objects and have them come to life” (Sayeg, “How Yarn Bombing”). Yarn bombing looks to bring knitting—this domestic female knowledge—out of the private domain and into a conversation with public space. It brings a performative element to the everyday or the mundane. With irony and humour, it attempts not only to brighten up public spaces, but also to make them more feminine, injecting textiles into the patriarchal public.

Yet, while creating space in public for the feminine and domestic, we could also argue that yarn bombing and craftivism does so at the expense of other feminisms/women. In this next section, I ask what citizens yarn-bombing privileges; for whom is this encounter enacted? Here, we turn to the ‘ironic’ names of yarn bombing collectives. While Sayeg is to thank for the “alpha” yarn bomb, she also created the first yarn bombing collective, Knitta Please. In one of the only public statements about the group Knitta Please, Sayeg stated, “just as there are gangsters, there’s gangstas. We felt like we weren’t just knitters, we were knittas” (Nicolosi). The problems here are twofold. First, Sayeg is reinforcing the problem within craftivism and Third Wave feminism to promote themselves at the expense of other feminists/knitters. Second, the very name of the group reflects ignorance around the politics of race in the craftivism movement. Who is ‘knitta please’ for? In asking *who* the encounter of yarn bombing is *for*, I ask, who is allowed to take up the role of citizen, take up space, and by extension who is the intended audience for textiles in their public performance?

Let’s unstitch Sayeg’s statement. First: “[W]e weren’t *just* knitters...” Here we can see how the craftivist goal to reclaim feminine hand art assumes a historical rejection of textiles in the art world, which some artists and feminists disagree with. Design historian Fiona Hackney, who specializes in textiles, assures us that “this kind of craft practice is not undergoing a revival

because.... it never went away” (qtd. in Clarke 299). Put differently, women’s studies scholar Groeneveld asks why knitting needs to be reclaimed in the first place: “For whom is domesticity being refigured.... What is the political implication of ‘reclaiming’ these kinds of domestic pursuits?” (260, 265). As Groeneveld points out, the notion that we are reclaiming knitting or textiles reflects a historical amnesia: textiles have always had a voice in the political interventions by women, as early as Penelope unweaving her shroud in the dead of night, or Arachne protesting the rape of mortals by the gods in her infamous tapestry. Instead of acknowledging these histories, craftivism delivers an ironic, “campy performance” of domesticity, one that is portrayed as cool and hip, and decidedly “new,” and rejects the feminists that came before, saying explicitly that craftivism is “not your grandmother’s knitting” (Groeneveld 272).

Second: “...we were knittas”. If it’s not your grandmother’s, then whose is it? “For whom is domesticity being refigured” (260)? The answer is almost certainly young, white women. Many craft theorists have discussed how craftivism is a predominately white movement.⁸¹ In her essay on craft fairs and the indie craft movement in downtown Detroit, Nicole Dawkins writes, “[t]wenty-three out of fifty-five respondents to my online questionnaire felt that the growing craft community in Detroit was predominately white—notably, 91 percent of respondents also self-identified as ‘white’ or ‘Caucasian’” (267). Since 2009, the issue of race within craftivism has been much discussed in blogs and on social media.⁸² In a blog post on the topic, Greer compares the racial criticism of craftivism to that directed against the Riot Grrrls of the 1990s (“Crafting the Whole World”). These two movements are connected with their Third Wave

⁸¹ See Close, Solomon, Hahner, Dawkins, and Groeneveld.

⁸² See Greer’s blog for different links and comments that discuss this. While many of the links are now broken or dead, this is an indication of the conversation that was happening. <http://craftivism.com/blog/tag/racism/>

feminist politics and DIY approach.⁸³ In her essay on Riot Grrrls and race, Mimi Thi Nguyen analyses the feminist punk movement and its aesthetics of intimacy and oppression: “Women of color wondered out loud for whom writing ‘SLUT’ across their stomachs operated as reclamations of sexual agency against feminine passivity, where racisms had already inscribed such terms onto some bodies” (179). Reclaiming sexual assault and sexism is lauded as a kind of knowledge, or commodity within the Riot Grrrl movement. And yet, conversations about racial oppression are not awarded the same status. Lauren Jade Martin’s zine *You Might As Well Live* discusses the contradiction: “and yeah some of you say we are ‘out to kill white boy mentality’ but have you examined your own mentality? your white upper-middle class girl mentality? what would you say if i said that i wanted to kill that mentality too? would you say: ‘what about sisterhood?!’”(qtd. in Nguyen, 180). The contradiction of the Riot Grrrls revealed here, suggests that the aesthetics of intimacy, reclamation, and irony, may be racialized in ways that are both normalized and immune to criticism.

Returning to yarn bombing, we can look at how specific trends and phrases within the movement perpetuate the ‘white girl’ mentality. When we realize that the members of knitting groups such as Knotorious N.I.T., P-Knitty, and Knitta, Please, are all white, middle class women, what do we make of this (Hahner 314)? In a 2018 article on the topic, Samantha Close writes of the contradiction between the feminist and racial craftivism, calling the problem one of intersectionality. “Knitta Please sets a model for graffiti knitting that allows the largely White

⁸³ The comparison of Riot Grrrl and craftivism is further evidenced through Riot Grrrls’s theoretical commitment to “intimate aesthetics” as well as the many punk knitting books that exist. (“This desire for intimacy as a political end, and the location of the self as the source of authentic knowledge, proved for some (like myself) to be too close for comfort. Riot Grrrl reimagined a punk aesthetics of access to the means of intellectual and creative labor that sought to extend true love and intimate self-knowledge to all girls, all persons, on the convention, and the condition, that they embrace the terms of exposure” (Nguyen 178). One of the original Stitch and Bitch Books, created by Debbie Stoller, *Stitch and Bitch Nation*, offers patterns for arm bands and your very own knitted Joan Jett doll.

activists to speak about gender and labor-based oppression while sidelining ethnicity and race-based oppression”; the “troubles [with] knitting race come directly from the ways in which it knits gender” (879, 883). As such, craftivism does not reclaim femininity, so much as white femininity. It suffers from a problem of racial exclusion, as well as appropriation.

White appropriation of Black art, and hip hop specifically, is well-excavated academic terrain. In *Everything But The Burden: What White People are taking from Black Culture*, Greg Tate suggests that the fetishization of Blackness has led to ongoing and systematic cultural appropriation and commodity capitalism: “Capitalism’s original commodity fetish was the Africans auctioned here [in America] as slaves, whose reduction from subjects to abstract objects has made them seem larger than life and less than human at the same time” (4). In her book *Beyond the White Negro: Empathy and Anti-Racist Reading*, Kimberly Chabot Davis suggests that this is a reductive reading, that white consumption of Black art may be a catalyst for social change:

Although white co-optation is an undeniably potent force in the present, the possibility remains for white audiences to do more than simply consume and copy black style but to experience a perspective shift by being exposed to African American ways of seeing and interpreting the world, including racist structures of power.... [C]ross-racial sympathy can often resemble a colonizing appropriation of blackness for white needs, [and] the evidence also suggests that cross-cultural encounters can stimulate radical acts of treason against white privilege (3).

These two scholars are divided along Eric Lott's pendulum swing of "Love and Theft."⁸⁴ Davis is interested in a more generous reading of white "love" of Black art and culture, whereas Tate and Lott both suggest that this love is already a kind of theft, with hierarchies of white supremacy 'borrowing' the affects of Blackness not through an empathetic cross-racial admiration, but rather a commodifying and appropriative desire for mimicry. Put differently, is "Knitta Please" a kind of textile blackface?

Nathaniel Mackey discusses the ambivalence between the love and theft of Black mimicry in his essay, "Other: from verb to noun." Here, Mackey frames the appropriation of Black music as a movement from verb to noun—for instance, swing was an action, a dance, a verb, until it became mainstream and became a noun. This is a process of artistic othering: "[F]rom verb to noun' means the erasure of black inventiveness by white appropriation.... The transition from 'active' to 'exchanged', verb to noun, reflects the channeling of power through music" (52; 61). Mackey explores othering and appropriation as a process of commodification and objectification that has to do with performance. Interestingly, Mackey's analysis becomes complicated with his discussion of Gertrude Stein's "Melanctha" in *Three Lives*. Here, Stein offers an adaptation of her earlier, unpublished novel, *Q.E.D.* However, in "Melanctha," the lesbian relationship is replaced with an interracial relationship. Mackey describes "Melanctha" as *Q.E.D.* in blackface, suggesting that despite the virtuosity of the writing, "Melanctha" should be questioned as a scapegoat for other marginalia:

Orders of marginality contend with one another here. It is instructive that blackness is the noun-mask under whose camouflage two other forms of marginality gain an otherwise

⁸⁴ Lott's influential book *Love and Theft* (1993), meticulously explores the 1830s emergence of the blackface minstrel show, unpacking the racial and class dimensions of these performances. Bob Dylan named an album after it, and it was acknowledged in the credits of Spike Lee's 2000 film *Bamboozled*.

blocked order of animacy or agency, an otherwise unavailable "verbness." We are at the sacrificial roots of the social order, the ritual murder of which music, [Jacques] Attali argues, is the simulacrum. Under cover of scapegoat blackness, the otherwise marginal cozies up to the center. I say this not to encourage turf wars among marginalized groups or individuals, but to raise a question. (67)

Here, under the guise of Blackness, and at its expense, white female queerness "cozies up to the centre." The subjugation and objectification of Blackness allows for the animacy of white female queerness. Craftivism operates with a similar logic. Puns on famous Black artists, the 'clever,' or 'ironic' redeployment, turns the lived reality of "nigga" as verb into the much sanitized, noun, "knitta." The success of knitta survives due to the commodification of the racial term/slur. Knitta is textile in blackface. This echoes Riot Grrrls's appropriation of marginality: "Crossing of racial and class borders can be read as a commodification of the Other that aestheticizes identity for capital in a symbolic economy of signification" (Traber 131). Yarn-bombing and craftivism nod towards Black culture but do so for their own benefit, othering the already othered Other, to vie for their place centre stage.

We see a similar commodification of the Other in the practice of yarn bombing and its connections to graffiti. As Leslie A. Hahner and Scott J. Varda outline in their essay, "Yarn Bombing and the Aesthetics of Exceptionalism," knit graffiti is almost always compared to paint graffiti in journalism and by the artists themselves. Yarn bombing resembles graffiti in that it is similarly anonymous, sometimes political, and disrupts public space. It even borrows terminology such as 'tagging', 'piece' or 'get-up' (Moore 35). A tag, in graffiti, is the signature of the graffiti artist. A tag in yarn bombing serves the same purpose, but it is also a literal tag, attached to the project. Yarn bombing is often described in oppositional terms to graffiti—

attempting to wield the ‘transgression’ without the permanence of vandalism. Yarn bombing pits itself against graffiti, describing itself as beautiful community art, in opposition to the latter’s two-dimensional description as vandalism.⁸⁵ This is not to say that graffiti *is* vandalism.

Certainly, graffiti is regarded as public art by many scholars, artists, and communities. Rather, this is how yarn bombing is often described, in oppositional terms: similar to graffiti in that it is not sanctioned, but also better than graffiti, in that it does not deface public property and can be easily removed. “The cultural work of yarn bombing thus performs the duplicity of exceptionalism by concealing the privilege of its declaration,” Hahner and Varda tell us. It is “craft by and for white women” (Hahner 304-305). It becomes the cultural capital of the privileged class, frolicking in the “ambiguous affects of cute” in what Hahner and Varda rightly point out as “hipster racism”: “[A]ppropriating everything but the burden” (Greg Tate, qtd in Hahner 312-314). This way, yarn bombing appropriates and commodifies Black youth culture for its transgressive power, wearing it as one might wear a sweater—transgression, oppression, and postmodern cultural capital that white participants can take off and put on as they like.

This exploration of Black appropriation within craftivism lays the groundwork to better understand the pussyhat. While one of the creators of the pussyhat is a woman of colour, there is still an association with the hat—and craftivism—of white feminism: the exclusion of women of colour in feminist discourse. The reaction to the pussyhat, especially on the head of Harriet Tubman, is its own urban encounter. One that incites rather than excites. One that instigates action. This reaction speaks not to a person’s position as citizen, but to the exclusion of women of colour from participating in the performances of the city; or rather, it reflects the citizens’

⁸⁵ For examples on ways that craftivism borrows from paint graffiti with none of the legal consequences, see Close.

discontent at one image of Black empowerment being co-opted, without consent, by the feminist movement. To attempt to reframe Tubman within a white feminist narrative—regardless of good intentions—is ahistorical and myopic, to say the least.

In what follows I want to offer a socio-material reading of the pussyhat. Here, we have an object that was created to symbolize female empowerment. In less than a year, this image was reframed as white feminism and represented for many the material limits of white female privilege. I would like to read this through a combination of citational and scriptive, where the citational aspects of the pussyhat can affect the hat as scriptive thing. Here, the object that once was meant to cite a larger political position, and script bodies into a narrative, meets in a complicated mess of intentions and performance. Through Derrida's theory of citationality, I explore what might make an object performative (in Derrida's usage). From here, I turn to Bill Brown and Robin Bernstein to differentiate between an object that cites versus one that scripts. Looking at political performance objects as scriptive things, I imagine a narrative not about object failure, but rather, about asking who controls the repertoire of a historical moment; while people may perform the ideologies of protest, these things script their action. Finally, I close with what Judith Butler offers in her reading of material citationality, seeing the pussyhat as both failure and possibility.

Knot 4: Citational and Scriptive Things

In J. L. Austin's famous lecture, *How To Do Things With Words*, he introduces the concept of performative utterances. Austin is interested in statements that are neither true nor false, but enact something in the moment they are uttered. "To utter the sentence," he tells us, "is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it" (6). According to Austin, a sentence that *does* something is a performative

sentence, utterance, or simply, “a performative” (6). For example, when a bride or groom says, “I do,” to the person they intend to marry (and with the appropriate officiant and witnesses) they are then married; the words “I do” are more than a description of something, they are the doing of that thing. Austin goes on to categorize different kinds of performatives as infelicitous (unhappy) or felicitous (happy) depending on their circumstances. For instance, if that same person who said “I do” was already married, the performative is infelicitous. Austin—in an aside—describes theatrical utterances as “peculiar,” infelicitous utterances:

A performative utterance will, for example, be *in a peculiar way* hollow or void if said by an actor on the stage, or if introduced in a poem, or spoken in soliloquy. This applies in a similar manner to any and every utterance— a sea-change in special circumstances.

Language in such circumstances is in special ways— intelligibly— used not seriously, but in ways *parasitic* upon its normal use—ways which fall under the doctrine of the *etiolations* of language. (22)

While Austin brings up theatrical performatives only to exclude them, his account of parasitic language is taken up by Jacques Derrida in his criticism of Austin’s performatives, and his own introduction of citationality.

Drawing on semiotics, Derrida challenges Austin’s definition of performativity by suggesting that all performative utterances are all already citations of some kind. Here, he suggests that theatrical performances are not ‘parasitic’, but rather, open the potential use for performatives in language and discourse:

Isn't it true that what Austin excludes as anomaly, exception, "non-serious," citation (on stage, in a poem, or a soliloquy) is the determined modification of a general citationality— or rather a general iterability— without which there would not even be a

"successful" performative? So that—a paradoxical but unavoidable conclusion—a successful performative is necessarily an "impure" performative, to adopt the word advanced later on by Austin when he acknowledges that there is no "pure" performative.... Would a performative utterance be possible if a citational doubling did not come to split and dissociate from itself the pure singularity of the event? (17)

Derrida puts forward citationality as the condition of the performative, suggesting that a 'pure' performative does not exist. If we find citationality in the performative, can we not then argue that all language is citational? Here, he suggests that language, words, and writing (and therefore communication and discourse) are based on a system of iterability, and therefore, there is no single signifier, but rather an endless chain of signifiers.

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written (in the current sense of this opposition), in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in doing so it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable. (12)

Even on stage, the performative utterance is a citation in so much as it is understood and read as what it represents. A marriage on stage may not result in a 'real' marriage (a happy performative), but it is certainly understood as a marriage and read as a marriage by the audience. More to the point, even successful, or 'pure' performative utterances succeeds because of a chain of citationality. The chain or structure of citation reaffirms the performative utterance, allowing it to further produce a shared understanding of what marriage "is" (and as Butler discusses, with all the heteronormative hegemonic underpinnings). Marriage is repeatedly performed in this same way; we agree, this is marriage, and so this is what it is. The gap between the 'pure' or 'happy' performative utterance and chain of iterability is what marks the

performative as performative. Indeed, every ‘successful’ performative is haunted by the so-called failures—the citations, the poems, the soliloquies.

With the pussyhat, pink becomes a citation of gender along the lines that Judith Butler discusses in *Bodies That Matter*. Just as Austin’s performative utterances *do* something, Butler points out how the utterance of ‘it’s a girl’ by a doctor or ultrasound technician, names and performs that gender as such. The utterance is performative; it interpellates the ‘girl’ as ‘girl,’ in a way that constructs a gendered divide between ‘boy’ and ‘girl’.

To the extent that the naming of the “girl” is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain “girling” is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a “girl”, however, who is compelled to “cite” the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment. (232)

Here, Butler recontextualizes Derrida to suggest that femininity is not something static or the ‘norm’, but rather a “citation of the norm”. Herein lies gender’s performativity—as citation (felicitous or not) of heteronormative hegemonic practices. The colour pink is interpellating and citational. Just like the hail of “it’s a girl” casts the unborn fetus into a heteronormative system before its first breath, so too does the pink pussyhat perform “girling” in a way that has the potential to reinforce, as opposed to reclaim, the reductive performance of femininity.

If, for the sake of argument, we assume that femininity cannot be reclaimed—and that pink does more bad in its gendering than it does good—can the pussyhat be said to have failed? Failed its goals of representing women in all their diversity, failed in the goal of being both gritty and

gimmicky? Object failure is interesting terrain. Can an object fail? While failure may be understood as human-centric, it is interesting how often humans blame their failures on things. Late for work? Blame the transit. Drop your mug? Blame the hot tea. Lose an election? Blame those pesky red hats. What is this tendency to project failure onto things?

To answer the question, let's first attempt to distinguish the difference between objects and things. In Bill Brown's view, when objects 'fail' in their role as object, they become *things*. As per Brown, "[w]e begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the window gets filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily" (Brown 4). The *thing* is something that exists not as an object for human consumption but rather, something which interrupts that commodity exchange. In many ways, the thing is the mascot of failure; it does not perform for the human as either spectator or director, but dances to the beat of its own drum. When *something* fails, that failure is always defined through the assumption that human success is the desired outcome.

Extending Bill Brown's thing theory, in "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race," Robin Bernstein suggests that material things script action in explicitly political and racial ways. According to Bernstein, "things, but not objects, script actions" (69). In contrast to the object, a mere "chunk of matter," a thing "asserts itself within a field of matter" (69). This difference is not essential Bernstein continues, but "situational and subjective" (69). In language that is reminiscent of Austin, Bernstein writes that "[t]hings are performative in that they do something: they invite humans to move. Dances with things, too, are performative in that they constitute actions: they think, or more accurately, they are the act of thinking. Things script meaningful bodily movements, and these citational movements think the otherwise unthinkable"

(70). As such, the scriptive thing is performative in that it invokes ‘citational movement’—the thing asserts its materiality, and thus forces the person encountering it to confront their own materiality (70).

The pussyhat is a scriptive thing that incites citational movement. In knitting and wearing a pink pussyhat, the wearer runs the risk of inscribing themselves into the politics of not only the Woman’s March, but also the larger script of racism and transphobia within feminism. This reflects the politics of things back onto the body as racial and gendered material. The hat “[manifests] the repertoire of [its] historical moment... Scriptive things archive the repertoire—partially and richly, with a sense of openness and flux” (Bernstein 89).

And yet, to return to our “if” statement that incited this discussion on thing failure and scriptive things, what if we assume that femininity *can* be reclaimed? That despite the threat of failure, femininity can still be redeployed, precisely because of the expansive field of citations, or chain of iterations, that opens up the possibility for reperformance. It is this that Butler points to in her discussion of the way that queer has been reclaimed: in reanimating that slur through citationality, new and powerful moments of politics are possible.⁸⁶ In my own attempt to make sense of the pussyhat, I have occasionally found myself creating “regions of restrictive meaning” that may, in fact, contradict some of my larger intentions with this project (Schneider, *Performing* 18). When I try to parse through some of this, I get caught in knots. When I try to delineate whether the pussyhat is a scriptive object or a citational thing, I begin looking for clear

⁸⁶ Or, from Butler: “the contentious practices of “queerness” might be understood not only as an example of citational politics, but as a specific reworking of abjection into political agency that might explain why “citationality” has contemporary political promise. The public assertion of “queerness” enacts performativity as citationality for the purposes of resignifying the abjection of homosexuality into defiance and legitimacy. I argue that this does not have to be a “reverse-discourse” in which the defiant affirmation of queer dialectically reinstalls the version it seeks to overcome. Rather, this is the politicization of abjection in an effort to rewrite the history of the term, and to force it into a demanding resignification.” (*Bodies That Matter*, xxviii- xxix)

containers, binary definitions, forgetting that no one asked me to do such a thing. More importantly, the instinct to name, prescribe, or assign some kind of “rigid designator” or “referent” to these categories, may actually work to prescribe my project within the heretosexist and patriarchal matrix I seek to oppose (Butler, *Bodies* 159-166). As Butler reminds us, “[t]hat the category can never be descriptive is the very condition of its political efficacy” (168). What might be more revealing than attempting to define each container is to ask what each container *does*? Instead of thinking of these words— citation and script— as separate characters in a play, maybe instead they are the same play across different nights?

Or maybe better yet, these words simply point out that the hat performs. There is something alive in its discourse, through citation, through scripting. As such, the desire to take the slur “pussy” and cite it in a different way, on a different stage, and for a different script, has political promise. This is a mimetic moment:

This kind of citation will emerge as *theatrical* to the extent that it *mimes and renders hyperbolic* the discursive convention that it also *reverses*. The hyperbolic gesture is crucial to the exposure of the homophobic “law” that can no longer control the terms of its own abjecting strategies. (177)

This, Butler explores, is a process of materialization and identity (xxiii). This does not mean that we ignore the script of racial appropriation that the pussyhat brings with it, but rather that each reiteration is contextual, and speaks to the subject and history that surrounds it.

And so, the hat both cites and scripts. It cites the history of craftivism, the legacy of textiles in protest, and the questionable performativity of white feminism. And it scripts by engaging with the hats materiality; by putting it on, the wearer (un)intentionally aligns themselves with this discourse. But this does not mean that we have to agree with what the hat cites/scripts. As

Butler discusses in her deconstruction of political signifiers, “does politicization always need to overcome disidentification? What are the possibilities of politicizing *disidentification*, this experience of *misrecognition*, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong? And how are we to interpret this disidentification produced by and through the very signifier that holds out the promise of solidarity?” (*Bodies* 166). This provocative question helps us think about how the pussyhat may be said to ‘fail’ or ‘succeed’. For when we talk about the failure of objects, we mean failure for the humans involved. The hats themselves never fail in their function as hats; so long as they fit on a head, they can be said to be hats.⁸⁷ And while we may blame hats for Trump winning the election, we can’t forget that hats cannot cast votes.



Figure 40: Angela Peoples, Women's March, 2017. Photo credit: Kevin Banatte for New York Times Magazine.

⁸⁷ For more on performing hats, see Schweitzer’s “‘Darn That Merry Widow Hat’.”

During the 2017 Women's March, a photograph was taken of Angela Peoples, the co-director of the LGBTQ equality organization GetEqual, holding a sign that says, simply, "Don't forget: White Women Voted for TRUMP" (fig. 40). She is surrounded by a sea of pussyhats, and notably, very few women of colour.⁸⁸ In the background, the White House looms, as do three attractive, young white women on their phones. One is taking a selfie. I think back to this picture and the stir it caused online in the wake of the Trump's election and the Women's March. The sign is a powerful performative moment of disidentification. It turns the citation of the pussyhat back on the wearer. The sign suggests that we reject the urge to respond neoliberally with "well *I* didn't vote for Trump," and instead to accept that a true feminist revolution can no longer serve the needs of white women alone. An intersectional political approach is the only equitable, and therefore the only just, political option. Similarly, we no longer need to reject "your grandmother's knitting," domestic politics, or the potential of revolutionary femininity. Instead we can invite forms of political engagement and protest that embrace the complex engagement with textiles and refuse reductive binaries.

Conclusion: One More Hat

There's another hat that performs political positionality in a way that both cites and scripts: Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" baseball hat. News outlets have stated that this hat won Trump the election—becoming both a powerful icon of support, solidifying his brand, and dealing, practically, with Trump's oft-lampooned stray hairs (Spodak). Yet here too, we can wonder how the hat as a brand gets caught in a chain of citation that goes beyond the

⁸⁸ Angela Peoples is wearing a hat worthy of more analysis than I have space for here. I might turn to Shonda Rhimes's *Scandal* and their metaphorical and literal white hat, which points to the virtuous pursuit of goodness above all else. Alternatively, I could talk about Melania Trump's white hat (worn April 2018) to offer a contrasting example. Beyond the color, the style of the hat (a white flat brimmed baseball hat), and the caption "stop killing black people," are both worthy of consideration within the context of Black fashion and political merchandise.

expectations of its creators. In the popular television show, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, star and creator Larry David intentionally wears the hat in order to get out of an unwanted lunch date with Phil Rosenthal. Knowing the legacy of racism, homophobia, sexism, and hatred that the hat cites, and how that chain of citation then scripts the wearer, and those around them, into a pro-Trump narrative (that Rosenthal does not want to align himself with), David uses this script to his advantage. In a different example, I once saw a citation of the hat at a bar in Wilmington North Carolina, a few months before the election. Designed to look exactly the same as the ‘original’ hat, this man’s hat read, “Make America Racist Again.” Worn in a community where seeing the ‘original’ was not uncommon, this person used the iterative citationality of the hat to flip the script. The script of the original is still there, but through the performativity of the citation, the repetition of the acts, there is the chance for intervention within the script. “What would it mean to “cite” the law to produce it differently,” asks Butler, “to ‘cite’ the law in order to reiterate and coopt its power, to expose the heterosexual matrix and to displace the effect of its necessity?” (xxiii).

I still haven’t worn the pussyhat gifted to me in 2017. But I have kept it, safely stored with my other hats. I like hats in general, and have a few that I love, but seldom wear. Are they still costumes if they sit in storage? Are they still scriptive if they aren’t on stage? Can I co-opt the hat’s power if I never put it on? I think so. The pussyhat occupied many stages in 2017. It sat stoically in the Victoria & Albert Museum, as part of the Rapid Response Collecting gallery in spring 2017. It strutted the catwalk in Milan, at the end of designer Angela Missoni’s Fall 2017 show. It became the focus of feminist infighting—a place to hash out the arguments around how best to protest, and who feminism excludes. Overall, I see the pussyhat as responding to the needs of the moment. In the aftermath of the 2016 election, when Trump talked about grabbing

pussies, and *then won*.... I think I too would have started knitting a pussy. To make material meaning of my body. To make my body matter. If, after a time, I find the message of the pussyhat matters less, or scripts my body in a way I don't identify with, so be it. There will be other protest knits. But on that day in 2017, when I opened a hand knit hat backstage... it mattered. I mattered.

Chapter Four: Failed Threads and Toxic Textiles

There is nothing more terrible, I learned, than having to face the objects of a dead man. Things are inert: they have meaning only in function of the life that makes use of them. When that life ends, the things change, even though they remain the same. They are there and yet not there: tangible ghosts, condemned to survive in a world they no longer belong to. What is one to think, for example, of a closetful of clothes waiting silently to be worn again by a man who will not be coming back to open the door? Or the stray packets of condoms strewn among brimming drawers of underwear and socks? Or an electric razor sitting in the bathroom, still clogged with the whisker dust of the last shave? Or a dozen empty tubes of hair coloring hidden away in a leather travelling case?—suddenly revealing things one has no desire to see, no desire to know. There is a poignancy to it, and also a kind of horror. In themselves, the things mean nothing, like the cooking utensils of some vanished civilization. And yet they say something to us, standing there not as objects but as remnants of thought, of consciousness, emblems of the solitude in which a man comes to make decisions about himself: whether to color his hair, whether to wear this or that shirt, whether to live, whether to die. And the futility of it all once there is death.

-PAUL AUSTER (10-11)

*Your absence has gone through me
Like thread through a needle
Everything I do is stitched with its color.*

-“SEPARATION,” W.S. MERWIN

My mother sold her house in October 2018. Well, actually, it was her mother’s house. The house my grandmother bought when she retired. As a child who moved around a lot growing up, this house was the one constant. When my mother left my father, we fled to this house. Between moving from apartment to apartment in small-town Quebec, we stayed for stints in this house. When my sister got married we held the reception at this house: we landscaped the backyard, designed and placed the stone patio, and lay down sod the day before, ruining our manicures. When my grandmother and grandfather got sick, we moved back in, to take care of them. When my grandmother died, we had the funeral there. There are two dogs and two cats buried at the bottom of the yard, beneath my mother’s meticulously kept garden. It is a beautiful house. Finally, when both grandparents had died, it was time to sell.

It's amazing how much stuff can accumulate after 25 years in a house. We got rid of things for months: the broken piano in the basement; the wood floor boards that my grandmother had brought to Quebec from her previous home in New Haven. And her suits. An academic and innovative female biochemist, my grandmother had a number of perfectly tailored Jaeger suits. As my family tried to figure out what to do with them, I decided to try one on. It fit like a glove. All of them: a blue and white plaid skirt with matching sweater; a wool knee-length skirt and brown crushed velvet jacket; a pleated skirt with matching grey corduroy blazer. Beautiful bold prints, impeccable tailoring, and stunning sixties design. There were no zippers— everything came together with strategically placed buttons and hook and eyes. And everything—even the skirts—had pockets. We couldn't throw them out. So, I kept them. I wear them, when I can. Without romanticizing the tough, manic, workaholic that my grandmother was, wearing her clothes feels like it's igniting some kind of poetic 'rightness.' These were the suits she wore to conferences and to work. So, when I wear them to conferences, it feels something like memorializing, or paying homage. It feels like inviting her ghost into the room.

This chapter looks at textiles as performers for absent bodies. Combining material culture studies with feminist performance studies, I look at two case studies that perform the body's disappearance in startling ways. The previous chapters explore the dance of textiles and the body through textiles on the stage, on the body, and in the street. In this final chapter, I look at textile objects that move from performing as script, co-star or background, to center stage. I look at textile objects that have not necessarily upstaged their human counterparts, but rather act as understudies thrust onto the stage, taking on the role of absent bodies.

These bodies are not only absent. They are dead. I explore the different dynamics of this performance: Are objects possessed by the ghosts? Or rather are they memorial objects? Am I

performing memorialist or ghost buster? Is my interest in discussing the dead about reconciliation, or is it about guilt? And what is the difference? While I look at the process of memorialization, I am ultimately not interested in re-memorializing the dead. I do not explore the world of grief or loss, although these concepts certainly sit waiting in the wings. Rather, I am interested in my own failure to grieve, my failure to respond in the ‘normal’ affective way to loss. Following Jack Halberstam, I am suspicious of memorialization. In their effort to explore failure as a methodological practice, and propose low-theory and subjugated knowledge as a meaningful approach, Halberstam puts forward the thesis, “suspect memorialization”:

While it seems commonsensical to produce new vaults of memory about homophobia or racism, many contemporary texts, literary and theoretical, actually argue against memorialization.... precisely because memorialization has a tendency to tidy up disorderly histories (of slavery, the Holocaust, wars, etc.). Memory is itself a disciplinary mechanism that Foucault calls “a ritual of power”; it selects for what is important (the histories of triumph), it reads a continuous narrative into one full of ruptures and contradictions, and it sets precedents for other “memorializations.” In this book *forgetting* becomes a way of resisting the heroic and grand logics of recall and unleashes new forms of memory that relate more to spectrality than to hard evidence, to lost genealogies. (15)

As with previous chapters, I am not interested in “tidy[ing] up” narratives of memorialization through textiles, but rather, seek to make a mess of them, in order to situate myself in the messy terrain that is “disorderly histories”: histories of sexism, homophobia, and racism. To that end, this methodological knot is perhaps the most elusive, as I am performing within the limits of my own memory, and thereby grounding this chapter in my own experience.

This chapter is about who, what, and how we remember. The first case study is about my failure as a textile artist, alongside artist Helene Vosters's own embroidery and textile performances on who is forgotten and who is remembered. I ruminate on memorialization, nationalism, and failure, with Helene Vosters's *Unravel* (2011) and *Flag of Tears* (2015-2016). Vosters's artwork asks who is memorialized within Canadian nationalist ideology as she both unravels military uniforms in *Unravel*, and sews on the Canadian flag in *Flag of Tears*. Reading her work through a material culture lens, and the artist's own self-described 'failure' of certain aspects of the projects, I explore the ghosts (unwillingly) deployed in Vosters's embroidery work. Through an examination of the performance of failure, as well as Jack Halberstam's concept of the queer art of failure, I investigate the mastery of embroidery and memorialization, and imagine a world beyond the 'right' or 'wrong' way of making/memorializing.

The second case study analyses a dress made and dyed with arsenic, colloquially called the Arsenic Dress, in Alison Matthews David and Elizabeth Semmelhack's *Fashion Victims* exhibition at the Bata Shoe Museum (2016-2017). This case study explores concepts of touch and toxicity through my experience of seeing the dress, alongside my own forgetting, remembering, and connection to dead bodies. I examine the dress, arsenic dye, and my own contemporary experience of it through performative writing. The Arsenic Dress invites a conversation on toxic textiles, and how toxicity helps to reimagine and queer life, death, bodies, and time. This toxic dress takes on a liveness in that it threatens life; it is haunted because it is haunting. Here, I find myself yearning, phenomenologically, for toxic touch.

While the case studies are very different—the first is about remembering and the second about forgetting—they are both about dealing with the dead. They are about the objects that we ask to take on the role of dead bodies and how those objects ultimately fail in that performance.

In looking at the performance of the dead, this chapter is interested in the categories of liveness within performance and material culture studies. As mentioned earlier, Mel Chen discusses the concept of animacy in relationship to the live/dead binary. Their goal is “not to reinvest certain materials with life,” but to “remap live and dead zones away from these very terms, leveraging animacy towards a consideration of affect in its queered and raced formations” (11). This chapter is interested in a queering of the dead through lively, animate textile materials. Here, objects and ghosts meet in a number of lively performances in/on/with textiles: through toxicity, through memorialization, and through failure.

This final chapter is indebted to Chen who dives unapologetically into an exploration of their own disability, desire, and affect. I do the same here, discussing my failures, my desires, my disability, and those I have lost. I intentionally invoke performative writing in this chapter, and at times intentionally perform forgetting as a methodological approach. I am inspired in this chapter by both Chen and Halberstam, and their unique approaches to theorizing the world. I think it’s no coincidence that these trans theorists are instrumental in reimagining gendered space, discourse, and theories of performance, affect, and animacy. As discussed in the previous chapter, trans performance and experience is paradoxical (within a heteronormative/homonational capitalist system). I find a lot of that paradox alive in these case studies. I reject, in some of what follows, the way I am meant to ‘be’ in gendered, academic, artistic, and mourning spaces. Equally inspired by Chen, this chapter flirts with the autobiographical. I am interested in the textiles that I have touched, or have desired to touch. As mentioned in the introduction, I have chosen these case studies in a similar way to Julia Bryan-Wilson in her book *Fray: Art & Textile Politics*. Her curation of case studies is, in part, autobiographical, as she suggests any discussion of textiles “demands alternative methodologies, ones that extend from shared bodily

knowledge” (6). And yet, she equally picks her case studies based on “their capacity to be pulled, stressed and withstand tension, sometimes to their breaking point,” metaphorically speaking to her titular concept, *Fray*. All the examples discussed here reflect moments of tension that might be difficult to unpick, that seem nonlinear or contradictory, disruptive or counter-productive. In this chapter, knots appear as failures. They come up as unintentional obstructions in the ‘progress’ of textile creation. As I touch toxic textiles, I find madness in myself; as I pick apart the seams, I too am coming apart; as I look at artistic ‘failures’, I find some queerness, some contradictions, some alternative knowledge in my own body and words. In bringing toxicity, objects, and the dead together as lively assemblages, I hope to reconfigure the ways we think about bodies, textiles, and memorialization. I hope to put the dead bodies into queer space and time to talk about who we mourn, and how we live.

Knot 1: National Textiles and Failure to Mourn

In *Wartime Knitting Circle*, first curated with the New York Museum of Arts & Design’s 2007 exhibition “Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting,” artist Sabrina Gschwandtner opens up a conversation around textiles and war. Machine-knit photo blankets depicting archival images of women’s wartime knits adorn the walls of the gallery. People came to the space, talked about the Iraq war, argued, and knit. While the focus of the project was to create a space, any space, for participants to reflect on textiles and the war, a few of the patterns had a clear political message. One of them, *Body Count Mittens*, is a particularly performative object (fig. 41). A simple knitting pattern conceived by Lisa Anne Auerbach, the *Body Count Mittens* memorializes the number of U.S. soldiers killed in the Iraq War. The pattern asks the knitter to put the body count in the design of the mittens themselves. As the mittens are made one after the other, they illustrate the growing number of dead Americans. A tactile comment on the war in Iraq, “the

difference between the left and right hand explores the relationship between time and the escalation of dead Americans” (Auerbach). Auerbach’s own pair of mittens, made in 2007, demonstrate this well: the first mitt, made on January 30, 2007 marked a body count of 3,084. When she finished the second on February 10—only 11 days later, the count was 3,121 (Baldini 20). The *Body Count Mittens* make visible both the time it takes to make mittens, and the loss of (American) life that occurred during the making. In recording these changing statistics, the mittens become powerful tactile objects that perform the space and time of both creation and destruction. These are intentionally public memorial objects, but ones that ask the wearer to be critical of the imperialist project in the United States, or at the very least aware of the American deaths involved. Auerbach’s call at the end of the pattern is biting: “Wear history sadly and thoughtfully. Let the memories and unfathomable statistics keep you warm” (Auerbach).⁸⁹ Auerbach invites us to make visible the politics we are already wearing.



Figure 41: Lisa Anne Auerbach, *Body Count Mittens*, 2007.

⁸⁹ I could certainly criticize Auerbach for only including the death count of American soldiers, in comparison to the larger number of Iraqi war dead, including civilians and refugees. I can only speculate that her goal was to focus on American death count, to make the war more directly applicable to American citizens. It is also worth mentioning that there continue to be many disputes around the Iraqi body count, and so a single number would have been quite difficult to find at the time Auerbach was creating the piece. In the spirit of critical generosity, I choose to read her omission as a focus to the project, rather than as an intention or unintentional comment on the value of Iraqi life. For more on Iraqi body count, see the Iraq Body Count exhibit (2008-2009) and the Iraq Body Count project (IBC).

This project is far from the first time that textiles—and knitting in particular—have taken up the position of memorialization as a nationalist project. “Uncle Sam Wants You To Knit” was the un-ironic call for knitters during the First World War in the United States and Canada.⁹⁰ Historian Christopher Capozzola, in his book, *Uncle Sam Wants You: WWI and the Making of the Modern Citizen*, describes the knitting effort as coercive volunteerism. He discusses this widespread practice while simultaneously dismissing its importance: “Knitting was publicly lauded as an inclusive form of voluntarism that all women could undertake, and the knitting a woman provided, a powerful image of a female citizen fulfilling her wartime obligations, but [the socks] the U.S. Army needed required labor and skill that recreational knitters often did not have” (83). While it is certainly true that knitting became an act of performing citizenship during wartime, to dismiss the knitting—or make the unsubstantiated claim that many knitters are ‘amateur’—ignores the intricacy and ubiquity of knitting during wartime, as well as the many reasons why people choose to knit. As Julia Bryan-Wilson observes, knitting was a “way for women to occupy their time and sublimate their feelings of loss or trauma as well as a useful activity that directly supports the war cause” remarking that this practice “has reoccurred in every US Wartime” (“Knit Dissent” 247).

Drawing on the ubiquity of wartime knitting, white settler artist and scholar Helene Vosters intentionally complicates the connection between textiles and wartime memorialization/nationalism, asking who/how we mourn. In this first case study, I will unpack two of her performance/textile pieces, *Unravel* and *Flag of Tears*. These are both evocative

⁹⁰ For a longer, more in depth look at socks for soldiers, as well as other wartime textiles, see Strawn, Hermanson, Bryan-Wilson’s “Knit Dissent,” and MacDonald.

textile/participatory performance pieces, which explore the hierarchy of mourning within the industrial military complex (*Unravel*) and the absence of national mourning for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (*Flag of Tears*).⁹¹ These are both pieces I admire and have participated in, and they are both pieces I feel like I have participated in the ‘wrong’ way. As I explore my ‘failure’ to mourn in the ‘right’ way, I will place this next to Vosters’s own elegant musings on deconstructing how we mourn in a nationalist and colonial context. I do not place myself in opposition to Vosters, but rather aim to add my experience to her theorization on mourning through textiles, and offer, through our dialectic, a messier, knottier, way of “repiecing/repeaceing” (Vosters “Piece/Peace”).

Vosters’s participatory performance textile pieces draw on the history of textiles during wartime; an exploration of some this history helps foreground the analysis to come. Knitting during wartime has, at one time or another, been a performance of patriotism, nationalism, colonialism, and/or mourning. During practically every North American, British, and Australian war across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, knitting was gendered as a way for women to

⁹¹ There is a huge difference between theorizing the national mourning of military settlers and the often ignored or ‘forgotten’ Missing and Murder Indigenous Women. This is something of a knot in this first case study that is worthy of further exploration: there is no shortage of evocative textile pieces, and performance works, by Indigenous artist which discuss mourning (*REDress Project* by Jaime Black, and *Walking With Our Sisters*, the collaborative commemorative art project, to name only a few). However, I am interested here in critiquing aesthetics of mourning, and unpacking the way it can be sanitized and romanticized. That lens seems completely inappropriate when discussing Missing and Murder Indigenous Women. In this, I am conscious, too, of my desire to foreground Indigenous sovereignty, and to avoid potentially and unintentionally imposing a colonial analysis onto Indigenous artworks. As such, I have focused on a settler’s analysis of this kind of mourning, not to reject Vosters’s approach, but rather to extend its possibility. I recognize that this instinct is well-meant but fear-based. As opposed to doing the hard work of engaging in decolonizing my own theoretical approach, and positioning myself as a settler scholar and advocate for Indigenous sovereignty, is my focus on a settler artist actually re-colonizing these kinds of works? In navigating my continuous (un)learning, I recognize that this case study—too—is at times sanitized. These questions are noticeably absent from this case study (and indeed the entire dissertation); I look forward to exploring in future iterations of this project. These thoughts are inspired by “Public Writing, Sovereign Reading: Indigenous Language Art in Public Space,” by Dylan Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty* by Aileen Moreton-Robinson, and “A Moment of Reckoning, An Activation of Refusal, A Project of Re-worlding,” by Jill Carter.

perform their citizenship: “The knitting women on the home front was the Penelope of her time; knitting reassured the military and civilians alike that she remained faithful to her men and to the cause” (Strawn 255). During the American Civil War, women—novices and experts alike—knitted constantly, documenting their progress and output in their diaries. Hand-knitted socks were higher quality than machine-knit socks, and therefore in higher demand (Strawn 246). Soldiers received a variety of knit items: hoods, helmets, undershirts, gloves, but especially socks (246). There were approximately 17,000 knitters with the Red Cross during the Spanish-American War, and an astounding 20 million adult members in the U.S. during the First World War. An additional 11 million young knitters knitted for the Junior Red Cross, along with 5,000 Indigenous adults, and 30,000 Indigenous children (Strawn 249). For Susan Strawn, this range in numbers of knitters “suggests an obsession with wartime knitting—with a belief that knitters could indeed impact the war” (250). Additionally, these numbers represent only the number of knitters, and not the knitted items, which by all accounts are staggering. Throughout the war, the act of knitting became so congruous with nationalism that even the sight of a knitting bag was seen as a “badge of patriotism and a symbol of productivity—the larger and bolder the bag, the better” (251).

Yet, these numbers also point to knitting as a tool for interpellating communities within a national and colonial doctrine; the disparity between the number of Indigenous youth and the Indigenous adult knitters suggests that knitting was used as a method of colonial assimilation (250). Another example worthy of further analysis is the founding of the Six Nations Indians’s Women Patriotic League in 1915. Notably run by three non-Indigenous women, this was a group for Indigenous women who, among other things, knit socks for soldiers. The league boasts of the Indigenous handicraft, reworking Indigenous histories within a colonial cause. This short excerpt

speaks to the attempts at Indigenous assimilation and erasure, alongside casual racism and primitivism. From a November 1914 article from the *Brantford Expositor*: “What the Indian women do, they do well, and it might be said to their credit that no finer knitted socks could be sent than those knit by the women of the Six Nations. A century ago, the grand-parents of these women who are now working were refugees in the wilds of Canada, driven from their homes in the Mohawk Valley as the Belgians are in England today” (qtd. in Norman, 39). There is a lot to unpack here. First, there is a patronizing assurance to an assumed white reader that Indigenous women can, in fact, create good knitted socks. Next, there is the racist romanticization and primitivism of Indigenous heritage and history, which completely ignores the violence of colonialism. Finally, this erasure acts as a kind of magic trick, where the history of colonial genocide is sublimated into the Rape of Belgium; a strange acknowledgement of colonial takeover becomes, simultaneously, a call to support the motherland. Tied into the knitting of every sock is a complex performance of a certain kind of colonial, white nationalism.

As textile manufacturers modernized, the nationalist symbolic role of knitting became more pronounced. Bryan-Wilson suggests that as early as the Second World War, knitting had become “more a symbolic, nostalgic custom and ritual than an actual material necessity”; “many women knit because women had *always* knit during wartime” (“Knit Dissent” 247; MacDonald 295).⁹² In the Canadian context, even the briefest glance towards Canadian newspaper archives during the Second World War demonstrates the large role Socks For Soldiers—and the textile industry in general—has played in the war discourse. With the memory of the First World War still present to many, knitting became an expression of grief and mourning for those lost during

⁹² This too is contested. Here, we might find an interesting question: how ‘useful’ is ritual and symbol for those on the home front; how ‘useful’ is patriotism and citizenship for the governing powers? As useful as the socks themselves? For more, see Peele at 8.

the war. Basil Dean, writing for the *Hamilton Spectator* on December 14th, 1941, discusses how knitting and grief are intrinsically linked together for those on the home front:

The knitting needles click softly beneath the yellow lamp light, click away interminably, regularly as the clock on the mantel.... They were clicking this way 25 years ago, too, clicking when the news came that Tom would never return from France.... A shrapnel burst, they said it was, as he stumbled across the mud on the way back from a trench raid.... His picture sits there, beside the clock, which has ticked away the endless moments ever since. There are other pictures on the mantel, too: Bill; in the uniform of a sergeant pilot of the Royal Canadian Air Force; young Tom, bom-bardier in the artillery. Only the clock and the shadowed face beneath the lamp, with those gentle eyes gazing on the sweater as it grows beneath the clicking needles, knows how long each moment can be. That face.... It is symbolic of thousands of faces in Hamilton today. (Dean np)

Here, our figure knits across time—from one war, to the next—and the clicking of the needles and the ticking of the clock become one, as those at home wait and grieve and grieve and wait. The article goes on to tell us how the clicking, which marks the pain of waiting, is also what keeps the memories of the dead alive: “Those clicking needles are the means of keeping those memories alive: A labour of love for the men who march away. All through the winter evenings and in summer on verandas and in gardens they click. The women of Hamilton do not forget their own” (Dean np).⁹³ Here, not only is knitting a way to mourn the ones we love, but it’s framed as the only way, with questions of knitting and remembering/memorializing tied together

⁹³ Knitting as a labour of love and a performance of grief and waiting is the aspect of war textiles that remains today. For example, The Quilts of Valor Project, performs a similar support, patriotism, mourning, and productivity for US soldiers in Iraq.

in complex ways. During the Second World War, knitting was the right way to mourn, in a performance of nationally sanctioned love that simultaneously reinscribes the knitter within a pro-war nationalism.

In her textile projects, *Unravel* and *Flag of Tears: Lament for the Stains of a Nation*, Helene Vosters unpacks/unpicks this dizzying mess of mourning, nationalism, and colonialism as they connect to textiles. The seemingly endless knitting of Socks for Soldiers by women on the home front functioned as symbolic performances of nationalism and mourning. Such performances were especially visible in the First World War, when hand-knit socks were seen as more indestructible than machine-made socks, so much so that the Red Cross produced patterns to promote the durability of the objects. It is this very ‘indestructibility’ that Vosters takes up in her *Unravel* project, where she deconstructs/unravels a Canadian military uniform (fig. 42). *Unravel* was first performed over six days as part of *Visualeyez* 2011, in Edmonton. Here, Vosters took a military uniform, and using a seam ripper, methodologically and meditatively unravelled the uniform, deconstructing it into its parts, like a sewing pattern in reverse. In her essay “Piece/Peace Work” she discusses all the pieces of a military jacket she deconstructed: “The jacket is constructed of a total of ninety-four component parts: sixty-four cloth pieces; fifteen buttons (eleven small, four large); six pieces of Velcro (of varying sizes); six grommets; two cords; and one label” (4). We take things apart to better understand how they’re made. And so, through the deconstruction of a Canadian military uniform—with its seams, threads, fabric, and buttons— Vosters unpacks the material life of war fabrics, deconstructing both nationalism and mythologized memorialization. She deconstructs how war narratives mythologize seemingly “indestructible” bodies: “Nationalism constructs frames of legitimization and grievability through the production of privileged subjects whose destructibility is rendered ‘*unthinkable*’

while their acts of destruction are simultaneously rendered ‘*righteous*’ (“Military Memorialization” 105, referencing Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* 45). Whereas the women of the previous wars knit socks, Vosters invites us to take them apart, both literally and critically. “*Unravel* is a meditation on the warp and weft of militarism’s fabric: How do the threads of the military industrial complex bind us to one another?” (“Piece/Peace Work” 4).

The warp and weft are the longitude and latitude of a piece of weaving—the warp is what is affixed to the loom, while the weft is what is weaved over and under the warp to create different designs. These terms are unique to loom weaving—there is technically no warp or weft in knitting, embroidery, crochet, or quilting, although you can find them in most manufactured fabrics. While Vosters uses these terms metaphorically, I find it useful to pick at this metaphor when analysing this piece: what are the assumed stable structures—the warp—of militarism? And what, in turn, bends around these threads, dressing it up and creating the patterns we see on the surface—what is the weft? We might ask differently, what are the assumed ideologies around



Figure 42: Helene Vosters, *Unravel: A meditation on the warp and weft of militarism*, 2015.

militarism and what are the performances of these ideologies? How does *Unravel* reveal this distinction when notably Vosters does not unravel the literal warp and weft in the military uniform fabric?

Ultimately, unpacking the assumed ideologies and related performances of military and colonial textiles, Vosters illustrates the unacknowledged hierarchy of who we mourn. This is evident in the

evolution of the *Unravel* piece with Vosters's introduction of the (un)sewing circles. An homage to the sewing bee and circle that brought women together to knit, sew, and quilt during wartime, Vosters's (un)sewing circle invites people to come together to collectively deconstruct military uniforms. I participated in one myself, before knowing Vosters well, at the gallery showing for York-Ryerson University's Communication and Culture graduate conference, *Thinking|Feeling*, in February 2013. Different bits of half-(de)constructed uniforms were laid out at a big table. At any one time, four or five people were standing around the table, talking to Vosters about the project, or picking away at the uniforms with a seam ripper. Bowls of beautiful, kinky threads from past uniforms were in the centre of the table, looking like sculptures themselves, allowed to be artistic, now that they're metaphorically in their civvies. I sat for a moment, picked up the seam ripper and, well, ripped up some seams—tearing away at the green camo fabric itself, where—it turns out—the warp and weft are. I slowly pulled one away from the other (but who knows which), until the tiny threads frayed away from the camo fabric like a tired fringe. I had made a mess. Not knowing what to do with the tiny bits of thread I had ripped away, I piled them up, and made room for the next participant.

A year or so later, when Vosters and I became better acquainted, she mentioned her surprise at this habit that people had, of tearing apart the fabric of the uniform in such a way that it effectively destroyed the fabric. In her mind, people would have unravelled the way she did with the first durational performance, where the deconstruction of the uniform was meant to take apart the seams the brought the fabric together, but not the fabric itself. In the original piece that Vosters performed alone in a gallery, she deconstructed the uniform to 94 bits of cloth and buttons; yet the cloth too is made up of thousands of threads—is this fabric worth unravelling? I remember being surprised at her surprise: did I (un)stitch the fabric the 'wrong' way? I told her,

admittedly a little sheepishly, that I had be one of the people who ripped away at the fabric (it is a seam ‘ripper’ after all!), that it seemed only natural to me that the act of deconstruction be something destructive.

Of course, there’s no ‘wrong’ way to do any of this, but what is interesting, in this moment between Vosters and I, is how it reveals our different approach to deconstruction and memorialization. There is something reverent, still, in how Vosters carefully picks each thread—something loving and beautiful in her act of de(con)struction. She calls it care. Finding a productive play between piece and peace, Vosters muses on how she might deconstruct something to reflect on the past: “If performative re-doing or re-enactments drag time through time, or make visible the past’s present, and if craft’s ‘spectacle of slowness’ creates a time out of time, what of the temporality of undoing, of uncrafting, of the performance of unproduction?” (“Piece/Peace Work” 11). Vosters’s act of undoing investigates this temporality, embracing a perceived spectacle of slowness. It is in no hurry, and in that, there is time for reflection, memorialization, and grief. Yet, as she unravels, she also discovers that some threads will not go peacefully. They fight against her, they break, or get stuck. They become *things*, fighting still, with the animacy of veterans talking in their sleep. She sees in them possibility and poetry. “As threads drag through the cloth’s weave they become animated with impressions, with silenced voices and stories, of living and dead, from past and present” (“Military Memorialization” 107). The original performance certainly seemed to embody this sense: six days to slowly, methodically, take apart a single uniform. And in that un-peacing, enact a re-peacing:

Through the doing – or undoing – I discover a kind of peace. Not a simple or static peace. Not a guaranteed peace. Not a peace innate to the affectively feminized lexicon of cradling cloth in lap, holding thread in hand. Not a romantic or nostalgic peace. A peace

born and reborn – thread-by-thread – of the struggle with the ambiguity and ambivalence of the task. A peace requiring the constant negotiation and renegotiation of frustration, empathy, boredom, anger, resignation, hope and despair. (“Piece/Peace Work” 6)

While I was unable to see the original performance, the (un)sewing circle seemed to have a different kind of energy.

And yet, we might ask how in revering the undoing, Vosters further inscribes her work within the very “national authority” and “hierarchy of grievability” that she seeks to undo (“Military Memorialization” 105). For my part, I did not treat these military objects with reverence. I was not slow. I did not take care (not to be confused with “I did not care”). I made a mess. When you start deconstructing militarism, where do you stop? I did not stop— not where I was supposed to. If a thread snags, I rip it away. If the fabric fights, I fight back. In my own practice of de(con)struction, I am very good at picking apart knots, but just as keen to cut them out if they take up too much time. I am impatient with the pace of the methodical crafter suggested here, which perhaps explains why I have never been particularly ‘good’ at crafting. I learned to knit, and I knit fast, but not well. Writing now, this may be due to my own ‘madness’—my diagnosis of ‘manic’ from earlier this year washes over these actions. Did I rip because I am Mad? The mess of my work is marked by dropped stitches and changes in tension; a script, an archive of the moments where something I can’t see pushes me to move faster, where I am racing, where I can’t stop. I can’t forget that in weaving, knitting, and embroidery, there is a ‘right’ side and a ‘wrong’ side. The right side is the public side—the side what faces out. The ‘wrong’ side is where the knots, loops, and mess of the process hide. While the right side is the side people see the most—the visible side— you look to the wrong side to see how the thing is made, and related, how to take it apart. I unravelled the ‘wrong’ way; the messy way, the way

that showed how I too am coming apart at the seams.

In performing the ‘wrong’ way, I engage in the performative potential of failure. To approach failure it is best to start, as Sara Bailes does in her book, *Performance, Theatre and the Poetics of Failure*, with J.L. Austin’s oft-quoted felicitous vs. infelicitous performative acts (as discussed in the previous chapter). Bailes takes up unfelicitous utterances—or failures—as something intrinsic to theatre: “That chiasm between the real and the represented, between the thing and ‘a thing about a thing,’ frequently concealed but at other times crudely exposed describes the territory where performances fail, performance as failure, and the failure of performance gain their ground” (12). In her book, Bailes is interested in case studies that jump across this chasm, that flirt with form and the fourth wall, but still, in Austin’s term, *do* something. As Patrick Blenkarn points out in his *Performance Matters* review of Bailes’s book, she is interested in a form of poetic failure—one that still ‘succeeds’ in the realm of representation. We are not talking about a performance that is cancelled due to illness, or gets cut short because of a pulled fire alarm. Instead, as Blenkarn discusses, Bailes explores mostly intentional failures—moments where the failure on the part of the artist was built into representation itself. “Failure that fails at being failure [in Bailes’s sense] is unintentional failure—the failure that has no roots, that can’t be traced, that doesn’t conform to any logic of progress and development” (104). As such, while Bailes’s book opens up useful language to explore the political potential of failure, she seems equally caught up in failure of a certain kind: the ‘right’ kind of failure, an intentional failure, which follows the same logic of success that Bailes seemingly disavows. The “better failure” in Beckett’s lionized—“Fail again. Fail better” may actually be certain kind of success.

A material culture approach offers an alternative reading to failure, one that moves beyond

a representational model in order to look at what happens when things break, fall apart, or fail. In *The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Do Wrong*, both the anthropological methodology and materiality of failure is analysed through a series of case studies. Interestingly, material failure is considered par for the course: it is in “places of material rupture... that the architectonic form of the material becomes visible to the naked eye. What is usually concealed is made visible in distress. This is true both in the material and the social” (Carroll 6). Interestingly, failure is framed as a method to see what was previously unseeable. The moments when the seams rip, when we turn the work around, when the work unravels—are these not moments where we find out how things work? When things fail, I might get a greater insight into how they arrived at the scene to begin with. When I am in distress, what is it that I reveal?

In their book, *Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam defines failure as an alternative way of knowing. Suggesting that the categories of success and failure are most often measured through a capitalist, heteronormative, and patriarchal lens, they ask if we might not find some queer and radical potential in failure.

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again.” (2-3).

For Halberstam, failure becomes a methodology, a different kind of discourse that allows us to not only rebrand categories of being, but reimagine them entirely. My own failure in connection with Vosters’s work—my unravelling the ‘wrong’ way—is not about ascribing guilt or fault. I do

not believe Vosters would fault me for the way I picked apart the uniforms. In fact, the concept of disobedient, or ‘failed’ objects takes centre stage in Vosters’s next piece, *Flag of Tears*:

Lament for the Stains of a Nation.

In *Flag of Tears*, Vosters embroidered red tears on the Canadian flag, one for each missing and murdered Indigenous woman. As with *Unravel*, Vosters began her exploration alone. She originally tried to ‘redeploy’ the military threads from *Unravel* and embroider them back onto the flag, but found them unwilling subjects (*Good Mourning* 252). As Vosters reflects:

The teardrop is unrecognizable. A khaki blob embroidered onto the left of the two vertical red panels that frame the flag’s white center panel with its appliquéd red maple-leaf. The tear was to be one of 1181, each intended to memorialize one of Canada’s (officially acknowledged) missing and murdered Aboriginal women, women whose deaths have been made possible because their lives were rendered disposable, women whose deaths have a history in Canada’s disavowed colonial past.

At first, the threads’ refusal at redeployment cast the project into a liminal state of ghostly suspension. I wanted to insist on the poetic rightness of this cause, to press them into service. But perhaps this new flag needs new threads, red, like its leaf, red tears to bleed through time. (“Military Memorialization” 117)



Figure 43: Helene Vosters, *Flag of Tears: Lament for the Stains of a Nation*, 2015-2016.

So, red tears it was. She further developed the piece, as with *Unravel*, by creating sew-ins, community events where people could embroider a tear with the red embroidery floss, and talk about the MMIW. The “poetic rightness” of the cause would be challenged again during one such sew-in at the Feminist Art Council’s Exhibition, “You’re Not Here,” in March 2015. Here, I was invited to be a visiting artist, and, alongside Melissa Lepp and Paula John, I assisted participants in embroidering tears. During a break, while feminist comedians were making jokes about periods (a troupe aptly named ‘Crimson Wave’), someone, in our absence, embroidered a messy tear. Vosters details the experience:

Like its khaki predecessor, the tear is a messy abomination amidst the drops of carefully embroidered tears. It’s not the sewer’s “fault.” It’s we who failed in our task as the embroidery circle’s facilitators. We all stepped away from the table to watch some of the evening’s performances. By the time I returned, it was too late to offer guidance. Too late to delicately lay down embroidery’s rules of engagement. The sewer went rogue. Their offering is a sloppy explosion of red thread. I am too off-centre to inquire in earnest. Too

consumed by the effort to maintain the inviting tenor of my embroidery circle hostess demeanor. All I can manage in the moment is an abrupt assurance to the sewer that their contribution is just as it should be. It's a false offering, one I make despite my inner recoil and the obviousness of the globule-like tear's misalignment with the hundreds of other tears that have already been sewn onto the flag. (*Good Mourning* 257)

It is with surprise that I meet Vosters's words, having no idea at the time of her upset. I thought the tear was 'perfect', the most beautiful, a contained explosion of thread. With its three dimensions, it jumps out to the viewer, begging to be touched. It's as if the khaki teardrop—made up of crinkled discharged *Unravel* threads called back into service—it is as if this blob was not done interrupting the “poetic rightness.” As if the ghost of colonialism, militarism, and nationalism will forever haunt the process of reconciliation, especially on a stage such as the Canadian flag. As if the tears become a different kind of crimson wave—one that we cannot control, or put rules on. As if we aren't allowed to decide what is the right way or the wrong way—which way is facing out, as if on stage, and which way is pulling the strings—which way is public or private. As if we don't get to choose how we care—whether slow or fast, whether full of reverence or rage. As if there isn't a 'way' that textiles or mourning in all their public performances, *should be*.

“We might read failure,” Halberstam tells us, “as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing” (11-12). This is the most compelling definition of failure for me, and the one that rings true with my reading of Vosters's performance work, and my own ways of mourning. What is the place of knots in the larger tapestry of Vosters's work? What rejection of mastery can we find in her work, and what else might that rejection imply? For me, the different tear is

not a sad tear, but an angry one—it is not a delicate, romanticized image of sadness, it is hot, steaming, and ugly. Like crying. Like actual reconciliation. Like any effort to memorialize the bodies of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. Vosters knows this, and manages to get her poetry in the end after all. Best to let her have it, I think, along with the last word:

Perhaps [the rogue embroidered tear] ha[s] set out to disrupt the notion that care is necessarily equated with order and precision. Over time my gratitude for the rogue tear grows. It is a reminder that grief demands a messy affective mix, far from the disciplined poetics of military commemoration, or the illusive innocence of Canadian nationalism. Tears—like blood—defy the containment of elegiac order. And like the lamenting women who tear at their hair, who bare and beat at their breasts, grief defies aesthetic constraint. (*Good Mourning* 257)

Knot 2: “Messy Affective Mix”

In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, the titular Alice sees the Cheshire Cat disappear and his grin remain. ““Well! I’ve often seen a cat without a grin,’ thought Alice; ‘but a grin without a cat!’” (94). Alice’s observation, as she watches the Cheshire Cat slowly fade away, the grin lingering longer than the rest of the body, is picked up by performance studies scholar Spencer Golub in his book *Infinity (Stage)*. Here, Golub explores questions of performance, representation, and mortality in the aftermath of his father’s death. He invokes the cat-less grin to suggest an alternative reality is created when the impossible happens: when a father dies. He suggests, “we theorize the real because we are always becoming not only what we are, but what we are not. One of the things we sons are and are not becoming is our fathers” (4). In this paradoxical statement, Golub allows a space to revel in the strangeness of a grin-without-a-cat,

in these “remains without remains,” asking if there is “more to life and death than meets the eye” (6). Golub’s poetic and performative exploration is reminiscent of Peggy Phelan in her introduction to *Mourning Sex: Performing Public Memories*. Here, Phelan investigates a biology book she loved as a child, and a pop-up anatomical male body that she ripped out of the page, leaving only a hole behind: “It was also my first sense of the deep relationship between bodies and holes, and between performance and the phantasmatical. I loved that red book in part because it illustrated something about what haunted me even then, the ghostly mysteries of what we cannot see” (2). Both Golub and Phelan are haunted by ghosts—by the memory and performances of bodies who are no longer animated, and yet remain. “Something substantial can be made from the outline left after the body disappears,” Phelan tells us (3). Through affect, embodiment, and memory, this affective outline of those we’ve lost lingers like the grin-without-a-cat, as a performative impossibility, as a reminder of what once was, and as both becoming and not becoming our fathers.

This tension is at the heart of Phelan’s influential theory of performance in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*.⁹⁴ Here, Phelan attempts to analyse and deconstruct the ideological framework of visual culture by diving into the invisible. As opposed to calling for greater visibility of female bodies and subjects, or exposing the present systems of representation as oppressive, Phelan aims to build theory in what is not represented, in the very space of absence

⁹⁴ The theoretical history of liveness/disappearance in performance: In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan defines performance as disappearance. She defines representation as something beyond reproduction, suggesting that performance’s independence from mass production is its biggest strength. It cannot be recorded—instead the very act of performance involves a loss. Auslander opposes this “reductive binary opposition of the live and the mediatized” in *Liveness* (3). It’s theatre’s technical mediatization that defines the performance as live; “the live can only exist *within* an economy of reproduction” (53). Richard Schechner attempts to delineate performance and drama—the former being an ultimately ephemeral material. And finally, Joseph Roach attempts to move away from ephemerality all together, suggesting a kind of performance genealogy, where the action is “not to disappear, but to move, shift, to jump across bodies, objects, continuums” (30).

itself. By “exposing blind spots within the theoretical frame itself, it may be possible to construct a way of knowing which does not take surveillance of the object, visible or otherwise, as its chief aim” (1-2). The goal is therefore to analyse the “logic of representation,” to expose the seeing-is-believing aspects of visual culture, and in exposing, put forward the political potential of the invisible. This explores new representational models: “[B]y seeing the blind spots within the visible real we might see a way to redesign the representational real” (3). The potential for alternative models might allow for an alternative representation of the female body (6). Phelan suggests that performance might be an alternative to the current representational model; performance is ideal in exploring the political potential of disappearance and invisibility, as performance is “poised forever at the threshold of the present” (27). In other words, “[p]erformance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance” (146). Thus, for Phelan, the female body in representation should reject the dualism of gaze and given-to-be-seen suggested by the ‘visible’ representational model. Instead, she should embrace her disappearance, see it as an “*active vanishing*,” an immateriality that makes itself visible through invisibility (19).

In *Performing Remains*, Rebecca Schneider extends the materiality of this active performance, to suggest that performance remains. To assume that the material of performance is only in the presence or absence of something is to keep performance in what Schneider calls the “logic of the archive.... Such statements assume that memory cannot be housed in the body and remain” (99). While the question of ‘disappearance’ is still at the forefront of the definition of performance, Schneider’s foregrounds the dialectic between the material and the absence, allowing for a complex understanding of performance. What remains when a performance is over is my body, yours, and our embodied experience. This oscillation between what is gone and

what remains is central to Schneider's argument. This is the very stuff of performance: "This body, given to performance is here engaged with disappearance chiasmically—not only disappearing but resiliently eruptive, remaining through performance like so many ghosts at the door marked 'disappeared'" (102). She continues, "death appears to result in the paradoxical production of both disappearance *and* remains. Disappearance, that citational practice, that after-the-factness, clings to remains— absent flesh *does* ghost bones" (102).

This concept is illustrated with the epigraph to this chapter. In Paul Auster's memoir on his father, *The Invention of Solitude*, Auster's father is gone, and yet his things remain. This paradoxical energy, this agentic and affective invisibility, this ability for something to be both alive and dead at the same time.... this is what troubles Auster. The poignancy and horror of his father's things sit in contrast with his constant disavowal of the objects themselves as an animating force. They're nothing, he tells us, they're inert, and yet they're saying something. And whether he likes it or not, they animate the life of Auster's father, in ways he doesn't expect. Auster's horror at finding hair, condoms, and hair dye is a horror specifically about the (dead) body. His father's body, which fucked, shaved, and dyed his hair, is performing these actions through the things around the room. And yet, that body is also gone, it is dead. I would argue that what is truly terrible for Auster is not the objects in themselves, but that they are all that remain. They remind Auster of his father's death and his (eventual) own. They are both disappearing and remaining. In this final case study, I explore this "messy affect mix" of mourning and objects through my encounter with a dress dyed with arsenic, and its inclusion in the exhibition *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of 19th Century Dress*, at the Bata Shoe Museum in 2014. Here, curators Alison Matthews David and Elizabeth Semmelhack have

created a space for ghosts to come to the stage.



Figure 44: The Arsenic Dress, *Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of Dress in the 19th Century*, Bata Shoe Museum, Toronto, 2015.

Fashion Victims: The Pleasures and Perils of 19th Century Dress looks at Victorian clothing, styles, and trends that have exerted agency over the humans who wear them. Whether it is tight corsets, narrow shoes, colonial ‘mad’ hats, or toxic dyes, all the garments in the exhibition have caused physical harm. Semmelhack and David designed the space to resemble a Parisian shopping arcade of the nineteenth century (Badu). Different shoes, corsets, and hats sit, on display, behind glass. As I walk through, I am window shopping, as so many Parisian flaneurs might have. One item in the exhibition was particularly striking to me: a vibrant green dress, that I will colloquially call the Arsenic Dress. You don’t see the dress at first. You’ll see the elegant black top hat, and corsets, and shockingly small Chinese slippers before you happen on the glass cabinet. Funnily enough, my memory of seeing the dress is different than the press photos. The press images showcase the dress, encased in glass in a domestic setting, surrounded by wallpaper, with an endtable to one side, and a small mirror behind the dress. As if there was a body within the dress, we meet the dress at home. And yet, in my memory, the dress was in a more clinical protective display case, like something a collector might have for a doll or toy. As I

remember, it was smaller than I expected, as if the woman who wore it was petite, and shorter than I am. Maybe it is the infamous history that makes the dress, in comparison, seem small. You hear “arsenic dress,” and you think of a beauty-and-the-beast style ball gown, shimmering with toxicity among layers of fabric and petticoats. In truth, the dress is beautiful, but simple. A nice, bright, light emerald colour, that somehow seems as vibrant as ever next to its clearly faded lace trimmings. Behind the glass, it seems almost silly, gentle, and unassuming. I am reminded of the anti-climax Clarice Starling might have felt in meeting Hannibal Lecter for the first time. He too, in the book, is described as a small man. Yet regardless of the animacy I imbue in the dress, along with my misremembering, at first glance the dress does not seem dangerous. And yet is it toxic.



Figure 45: The Arsenic Dress, collection of Glennis Murphy, ca. 1860-1865.

Dated around 1860-1865, the Arsenic Dress is a shockingly emerald green silk dress, belonging to a private collection from Australia, coloured with a green dye that supposedly

contained arsenic. The dye itself was created in 1778, by chemist Carl Wilhelm Scheele when he mixed arsenic and copper. Known as Scheele's Green, this colour was so popular in the nineteenth century that it was used in paintings, wallpaper, clothing, and artificial decorative wreaths and bouquets.⁹⁵ By the 1860s, the poison of the pigment was known to the general public. In 1861, a London-based artificial flower maker, Matilda Scheurer, died of arsenic poisoning. She used green powder daily to 'liven up' the artificial leaves, and at the time of her death, an autopsy confirmed that there was arsenic in her stomach, liver, and lungs. Her death resulted in public arsenophobia, which in turn influenced the Arsenic Act of 1868 and alternative green pigments in the second half of the 1860s. By 1870s and 1880s the colour had fallen out of fashion (David 70-94).

For the exhibition, David tested three small clippings from the gown with the assistance of chemists at Ryerson University. The results showed the presence of copper, zinc, lead, iron, bromine, and "small amounts of arsenic" (David 93). But where exactly is this toxicity located? Is it in the representation of restrictive Victorian feminine ideals and in its toxic-fashion metaphoric implications, or is there something more interesting going on? Mel Chen theorizes toxicity as a queer and racial affect, that "interrogate[s] the fragile division between animate and inanimate" (2). Toxicity is an "animated, active and peculiarly queer agent" (10). Chen's approach puts bodies and objects in unique relationships, encouraging a feral approach to discourse. Ultimately, toxins and toxicity deconstruct the hierarchy of animacy that places humans at the top. "Toxicity straddles boundaries of 'life' and 'nonlife,' as well as the literal

⁹⁵ Michelle Murphy suggests in *Sick Building Syndrome* that it might be worth looking at toxicity through historical ontology: "Historical ontology is a term developed by historians and philosophers of science to describe historical accounts of how objects, such as germs, immune systems, subatomic particles, diseases, and so on, came into being as recognizable objects via historically specific circumstances" (Murphy 7). This approach allows for toxic molecules to be perceived in their historical context, and also invites us to see that "objects are many things at once" (10).

bounds of bodies (quite independently of toxicity's immunitary representation), in ways that introduce a certain complexity to the presumption of integrity of either lively or deathly subjects" (218). In what follows, I analyse the toxicity of the Arsenic Dress. I invite a more complex understanding of the dress's performance in the museum, and in my own active imagination. I'm tempted—like Chen—to look beyond the negative attributes of toxicity, and instead, see what ghosts toxicity might invite.

There are many dead bodies that haunt the dress, both in the gallery and historically. First, there is the body of Matilda Scheurer and the other nameless seamstresses who were poisoned by the pigment. A *Punch* cartoon from 1863 titled "The Haunted Lady, Or The Ghost In the Looking-Glass" points to the unjust labour conditions of seamstresses in the Victorian era (fig. 46). The caption to the cartoon reads: "*Madame La Modiste says: We Would Not Have Disappointed Your Ladyship, At Any Sacrifice, And The Robe Finished à Marveille.*" In the cartoon, a lady fawns over her marvelous dress only to catch sight of the dead body of the seamstress in the mirror. This cartoon sought to make visible the invisible and abusive labour behind Victorian fashion. Second, there are the bodies of the ladies themselves, dressed to the nines, subject to the oppressive standards of Victorian feminization, fetishization, and fashion. This dress was made at a time when the dangers of the arsenic dye were known. And yet, women continued to wear the poison dresses. And what of the other green-tinged shoulders and hands that held this dress—and others—on the dance floor?



Figure 46: John Tenniel, *The Haunted Lady, Or The Ghost In the Looking-Glass*, Punch, 1863.

There is another body that ghosts the dress: mine, as I stand in the museum looking at the dress. Regardless of how small the amount of arsenic, I put my hands on the glass and wonder, is the glass protecting me from dress, or the dress from me? Why is it that all I want to do is touch it? Touching toxic fabric activates a kind of feral feminism. A risky, dangerous, exciting dive into history and embodiment. I can't help but think of (and criticize my romanticization of) Chen's mercury poisoning in *Animacies*: "I am shocked when [my girlfriend's] body does not reflect that I have snuggled against it earlier, when the snuggling and comforting happened in the arms and back of my couch... What body am I now in the arms of?" (202). In their discovery that we are "all the same ontological thing," Chen reflects my own queer desire to get close to things—to see desire and animacy in 'dead' things. Is my desire to touch, to feel the tactility of the shiny green cloth, to try on the toxic dress, a desire to lose control? Or rather, a desire to find comfort and connection in alterative, toxic, spaces? It is not a death wish. But that does not mean it is a life wish. Just because I do not want to die doesn't mean I don't want to be possessed, or perhaps be something other than myself.

I think of Patrick Swayze in *Ghost* (1990), when he possesses Whoopi Goldberg to seduce his girlfriend, played by Demi Moore. In the film, Swayze as Sam Wheat is murdered, but stays on earth as a ghost to help bring the crime against him to justice. At one point, he consensually possesses the medium Oda Mae Brown (Goldberg), so he can “prove” to his girlfriend Molly (Moore) that he is real; so he can prove that he actually still exists. We are then transposed to a representational space—Goldberg’s hand becomes Swayze’s hand, and all of a sudden we see what is unseen, as Sam returns for one last romantic evening with Molly. Yet we cannot forget that the ‘real’ sexual meeting is both queer and interracial; it is Oda Mae and Molly who actually engage in coitus. From Molly’s perspective, she has no proof of the possession; she must suspend her disbelief. She must choose to believe in ghosts in order to accept the strange familiarity of queerness, in order to allow the real and the represented to collapse on one another.⁹⁶ In the gallery, I don’t know if I’m Moore or Goldberg in this metaphor—maybe I want to be both—both possessed and the recipient of queer touch. It’s not an either/or, but both/and, as I touch the glass and suspend my disbelief, surprised at my own desires, and yearning for some kind of queerness, some kind of closeness to things.

As Chen explored the power of their own mercury poisoning, and the intimacy they experience in a bout of toxicity, their changed state allows for animacy in things that don’t have a heartbeat. “What is lost when we hold tightly to the exceptionalism which says that couches are dead and we are alive?” they ask (210). Desire, affect, toxins... what else are these but invitations of some kind, for some other, queer, embodied experience? It’s not rational. It feels mad—and yet, the desire is here, in my fingertips, in my guts. I place my hand on the glass, thinking of Harry Potter looking into the glass aquarium of the snake in *Harry Potter and the*

⁹⁶ Perhaps it is reductive to compare the toxicity of the dress to the danger (for Molly) of queer interracial touch. But I think that is only if you think toxicity is ‘bad’.

Philosopher's Stone. I wonder about doing magic and being immortal. I think about Harry Potter's dead parents, his desire to be somewhere else, and his identification with the snake, this unlikely companion. I identify with the toxic dress, if that's possible. I desire it. I feel like I can talk to it, it can understand me, that I can talk to ghosts. And I wish I could make the glass disappear.

I'm mixing these allusions as one might mix yellow and blue (or copper and arsenic). Harry Potter, Alice, and Goldberg play dress-up together anachronistically as I sit here typing, as I look at nineteenth century Victorian fashion, as I remember my grandmother's clothes. Alice meets the Cheshire Cat right before she has tea with the Mad Hatter and the March Hare. In fact, it's the Cat who directs Alice their way. The Mad Hatter, in his top hat, is a reference to the use of mercury in making of hats. Mad hatter disease—or erethism—is a neurological disorder that is derived from mercury poisoning. Even when the hat is gone, mercury remains, invisible in its toxicity. Mercury animates the hatter, the tea party, and indeed, maybe all of wonderland—“we're all mad here” (Lewis Carroll). I feel lost, trying to make something linear of something queer. I read the article my grandmother published in *Nature* in March, 1966, “Effect of Aeration on the Consumption of Ethanol by the Isolated Perfused Rat Liver.” I sip on whiskey, as I read, pretending to understand (suspending my disbelief). Here again, toxicity. Here again, things at a molecular level. Here again a dialectical moment.⁹⁷

I feel Mad, with my hand on the glass barrier to the Arsenic Dress. With my hand on the glass of my whiskey tumbler. I am distracted by something I *forgot* to mention: the suggestion

⁹⁷ I am inspired here by Shauna Janssen, who identifies the “dialectical moment,” as a moment where past, present and future come together (157). It's similar to what De Certeau calls palimpsest, in which memory is locked not in place, but in performance, in “the every day acts of walking, eating” (108). There is something similar here, in my walking the museum, to Buckmorss's proposal that in the arcade, these “commodity graveyards,” we find a complex, dialectical relationship between past and present (37-38).

from Golub at the top of this case study—that sons are and are not becoming their fathers—is an intentionally gendered equation. When I wear my grandmother’s outfits, I am becoming and not becoming her—I am performing through my body, and her things, her body as disappeared. But do daughters ever (not) become their fathers? Moving beyond the potential reductiveness of the Oscar Wilde aphorism (“All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does, and that is his”), historically women who do and do not become their fathers were labelled hysterical. As Phelan discusses, in the first defining case of hysteria—Anna O.—the symptoms were reproduced somatizations of her father’s pain. As such, “hysteria... involves the use of the patient’s body as a stage for the body of another” (*Mourning* 63). Women who do (not) become their fathers engage in an embodied, hysterical “bleeding across bodies” (61). What bodies am I (not) becoming; what bodies have I forgotten to mention?

My father passed away when I was 16. He’s hard to mention, because he’s hard to mourn. He was not a good father, and was both physically and emotionally abusive with actions we might frame today as toxic masculinity. It’s easy for me to become my grandmother and wear her clothes. It’s harder to become my father. Possibly, because the theatrical canon suggests that this might drive me Mad: Ophelia, Hedda, Miss Julie.... daughters who attempt to perform the patriarch across gender lines are pathologized and often pay with their lives. This is why hysteria is called the Daughter’s Disease. I feel crazy because I want to become my father. Because we have the same mania, the same anger, because of all my siblings I feel the most like him. Because becoming the dead should be performed beyond the gender binary.

Maybe I feel lost because I’m operating in queer time. Chen discusses how toxicity opens up space for queer time. As E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen explore in the introduction to an anthology on queer time, “[l]iving on the margins of social intelligibility alters one’s pace;

one's tempo becomes at best contrapuntal, syncopated, and at worst, erratic, arrested" (1). They attempt in their introduction to "link the vital question of temporality to the perversities of becoming" (1). Following Deleuze and Elizabeth Grosz, they argue for a definition of onotology that is not *being* but *becoming*. Here, queer becoming and queer time come together in a series of moments:

With the notion of queerness strategically and critically posited not as an identity or a substantive mode of being but as a way of becoming, temporality is necessarily already bound up in the queer. This temporality, we further suggest, is not that of *chronos*, of linear time whose very name mythically signals lineage (in the ancient Greek myth, Kronos is father to Zeus); rather, the contingencies of the queer might be closer to the time of *kairos*, the moment of opportunity. (8-9)

Reading queer time and queer becoming as a moment of opportunity rather than a process of linear time or history, we find another reading of gender as performance. In the extro to *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler suggests it is the concept of time that underscores gender's performativity. But this time is not linear, but queer:

The notion of temporality ought not to be considered as a simple succession of distinct "moments," all of which are equally distant from one another. Such a spatialized mapping of time substitutes a certain mathematical model for the kind of duration which resists such spatializing metaphors. Efforts to describe or name this temporal span tend to engage spatial mapping, as philosophers from Bergson through Heidegger have argued. Hence, it is important to underscore the effect of *sedimentation* that the temporality of construction implies. Here what are called "moments" are not distinct and equivalent

units of time, for the “past” will be the accumulation and congealing of such “moments” to the point of their indistinguishability.... Indeed, the notion of the “moment” may well be nothing other than a retrospective fantasy of mathematical mastery imposed upon the interrupted durations of the past. (244–245)

I am having a moment—in the gallery, at the glass case. This is maybe part of my anachronism, part of my desire to put on toxicity, part of my (not) becoming my father. This is maybe instead how to frame my desire to touch: “Queer bodies are present in time, but anachronistic. Touching the past” (Chen 219). I am touching the past here—or trying—in imagining touching the sleeve of the green dress, as I might in a department store. I don’t want to window shop. I remember going to IKEA as a kid and putting my small body in between the hanging rugs. Dipping my sticky hands into the faux fur throws. Touch is so deeply linked with textiles and memory, that I find myself now, closing my eyes, thinking back to this memory, feeling that tingle at my fingertips. As Schneider reminds me, “performance does remain, does leave residue. Indeed the place of residue is arguably flesh in a network of body-to-body transmission of affect and enactment—evidence across generations of impact” (*Performing Remains* 101). In remembering touch, in touching the past, I get tied in knots.

I unpick knots by touching them. It’s through touch that I am theoretically and historically able to come to some kind of resolution. Touch is connected to memory in powerful ways. It is “a mode of both memory and knowledge in a register that attached the hand and the body to other times, places, people.” There is a both a “pleasure of touch and relationship to loss” (Raynor xxxii). Touch is also closely related to female madness and trauma. Phelan makes the revelatory distinction that the ‘talking cure’ is not *only* a ‘talking’ cure. In the cases of hysteria discussed by Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer, touching is important in curing the hysteric, as

trauma is embodied and located physically on the body. Freud discusses how “physical contact between doctor and the patient is instrumental to the cure” (51). As such, the talking cure is “launched by the security of a listening touch” (19). Touching toxic textiles is a complex assemblage of many things: my mad body, the historic hysteric, the mercurial ontological affect, poison dyes and killer Victorian fashion. It’s queer time, it’s touching past, it’s anachronistic, it’s listening touch. Following Robin Bernstein, my goal is that this “upsets the boundary between person and object. The thing and person are unmoored from fixed positions of difference and twirl in sudden mutual orbit, each subject to the other’s gravity” (Bernstein 70). In my twirling, I hope to navigate death, femininity, touch, tactile comfort, and how this all plays out across queer time and space. Or as Phelan suggests, “[t]he affective outline of what we’ve lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want still to touch... or at least the hollow of the outline might allow us to understand more deeply why we long to hold bodies that are gone” (3). In my memory, my Dad is driving and singing The Righteous Brothers’s “Unchained Melody” at the top of his lungs, and I am laughing, as we yell-sing,

Oh, my love, my darling

I’ve hungered for your touch

A long, lonely time

Time goes by so slowly

And time can do so much

Are you still mine?

I need your love

I need your love

God speed your love to me

But I know, deep down, that this never really happened.

Conclusion: ‘Deathly’ Inherited Things

In this chapter, the real and the representational are a toxic mix. I see it as a difference between what remains and what disappears. This dialectic is echoed in Phelan’s reminder in *Mourning Sex*: “The psychic problem raised by theatre is that it remains perpetual rehearsal. The one for whom the theatre maker makes the piece never arrives for the performance (nobody bears witness for the witness). This is why theatre remains an art rather than a cure” (Phelan 31). Put differently, the represented can never be the real—the thing represented can never really *be* the thing. What then, if we choose to blend the real and the represented. “The one for whom the theatre maker makes the piece never arrives for the performance”; this is only true if you don’t believe in ghosts. What if we do more than suspend our disbelief; what if we (like Demi Moore) believe in ghosts? Of course, my grandmother’s suits are never my grandmother; I am not my grandmother. But maybe I am (not) becoming her? Wearing them is about touching time, queer time, and ultimately queer failure. I’m just playing dress up, playing pretend— but does that make it any less real? Or as Harry Potter asked Dumbledore, after they have both died:

“Tell me one last thing,” said Harry. “Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?”

“Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?” (*Deathly Hallows* 591)⁹⁸

Of course, there is a political imperative to separating the real and the imagined. What we ‘believe’ does not exist in a vacuum, but rather in complex societal structures. As I discussed in a

⁹⁸ I bring Harry Potter in while simultaneously invoking a larger death-of-the-author ethos, as J.K. Rowling’s general thoughts on gender conflict with my own.

previous chapter, the question of believing has political consequences for trans bodies. So too might we open this up to other marginalized bodies. To Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women. To people who were raped or sexually abused. There are tangible politics and consequences to how and who we believe. I am not suggesting that we shift the categories of belief to match our own desires. I am suggesting that we engage in radical belief. That when marginalized bodies speak of their marginalization, that we start with belief. This is a call to see beyond a “seeing-is-believing” logic—beyond a “logic of the archive.” Not-believing is currently a strategy used to gaslight and silence marginalized voices and bodies. It is a strategy to maintain and ensure the success of some, and the failure of others; the death of some and the life of others.

This chapter is about my struggle with failure, affect, toxicity, and textiles. I feel stupid writing this. I feel like I’m failing. It feels desperate to cling to Halberstam (or Chen), and their suggestion that stupidity is just a rejection of normative discourse and power; that my madness might be methodology. I am tangled in their affects and methodologies. I am caught somewhere between Halberstam’s deconstruction of optimism and José Muñoz’s queer utopias. I am caught on the queer ‘becoming’ of becoming and not becoming our fathers.

This, like many of the case studies across this dissertation, is a process of mimesis. It is mimetic of the past, attempting to cross gender and time, in order to understand the present moment, in order to move forward. It attempts to “trouble linear temporality – to suggest that time may be touched, crossed, visited or revisited, that time is transitive and flexible, that time may recur in time, that time is not one—never only one— to court the ancient (and tired) Western anxiety over ideality and originality. The threat of theatricality is still the threat of the imposter status of the copy, the double, the mimetic, the second, the surrogate, the feminine, or

the queer” (Schneider, *Performing* 30). Perhaps what the patriarchy is afraid of, when daughters become their fathers, when we unravel militarism, is that this gender queer may be ‘better’ than the patriarchal ‘original’? This ‘failure’ plays itself across both this chapter’s knots, and in that we might find that inheritance, like unravelling, like grieving, like reconciliation, is messy and mimetic.

Along with my grandmother’s suits, I inherited my father’s degrees and awards. After his death, these objects of his success moved from his sister’s house to my mother’s house, to my sister’s house, where they sat in storage. During my last visit, she asked if I wanted them, since she decided she didn’t have room for them anymore. There were a number of framed degrees—journalism, law, and the Quebec bar exam. I didn’t want them. But I didn’t want to throw them out. So, I took them. “So, they’re not inherited,” my therapist tells me. “You just took them—they weren’t left *to* you, they were just left.” Yet, this is what remains, still, of my father. And I’d still argue it’s an inheritance. An inheritance is more than an object, it is something active:

To inherit is never a passive condition, never simply a transfer of title of some material goods or symbolic heritage, never just a felt sense that the violence of the past weighs on one’s psyche. Rather “to inherit” is to engage in a particular form of work that intertwines thought and affect. Following Derrida, one’s inheritance is never simply that which is given, “it is always a task.” (Simon 215)

We *do* our inheritance, like we do a speech act or performance. Or rather, it is done to us. So, what did I inherit from my father?

I did not inherit any textiles. I don’t have any sweaters, shirts, or blankets. I don’t know what happened to them. What would a daughter do with her father’s clothes, anyways? Perhaps they were tossed, Marie Kondo-like, with the other things that no longer spark joy. But if we

follow Phelan, maybe the very absence of textiles is still worthy of analysis. Maybe my very interest in textiles is inspired by their absence in my closet, because it's not as though my father left me nothing. I have the evidence of his successes.

The degrees were wet when I received them; it was Spring, and the shed wasn't waterproof. They took days to dry out; the glass that was meant to protect them kept the water in. Is the glass protecting me from him, or him from me? My dad died of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS. The disease involves the body becoming increasingly immobile, while the brain, with its thoughts and feelings, are as animated as ever. "A vegetable," my father used to joke (when he could be understood). A thing. It's not clear what causes ALS, but it is assumed to be at the molecular level. A chemical imbalance. A gene mutation. A protein mishandling. A failure, of some kind. A failure of the body's minutia.

However, in five to ten per cent of cases, it's inherited.

Extro: Labour of Love

This dissertation has spanned over two years of my life. During that time, I came out as queer. I was diagnosed manic. I was sexually assaulted (again). I got a dog. I moved across the world for someone, and then moved back for myself. I fell in love. Oh, and we collectively experienced a global pandemic. Much of this metamorphosis, or affective mess, has inspired chapters of this dissertation, influencing the comfort I try to find in knots and tangles, in queerness and performance, in ghosts and *things*. While the dissertation moves from page to street, from metaphoric to embodied, I also see across all these case studies examples of explicit and startling bodily expression. Some form of expression, in chapter one and chapter three, speak to how gendered bodies are abused and assaulted, and how survivors make sense of that. Other forms of expression, in chapters two and four, explore the limits of the marginalized body, pushing the body to physical extremes in order to locate something of the self within that. All are interested in questions of failure: bodily failure, personal failure, queer failure, gender failure, textile failure. All too, explore the politics of mimesis and iteration, blending, across theorists, discourse on how not only to *be* in this world, but how to tell your story, how to speak to the *being* and *becoming* around you. While this is something of a utopic project, I also attempt to take textiles to task for their historical legacy with white feminism and Black erasure. In this dissertation, I have aimed to focus on whiteness for the most part, aiming to thoughtfully position myself as a white scholar, and criticize the ubiquity of whiteness in/and crafts. I equally hope sections in this dissertation offer a stage for Black theorists and artists to have a voice; these were rewarding moments of theorization for me and I hope they resonate as some of the more ‘messy’ and rich explorations of performing objects and objecthood. Yet, I know there are still moments where I

have failed in this final goal, and I hope those failures will be visible to me in the future, so that I can better position this project, and myself, in future iterations.

This dissertation, ultimately, has attempted to embrace the oscillation back and forth from mothers and spiders, guts and pussies, skin and needles, the live and the dead together in affective assemblages of becoming. In becoming the body, I embrace the both/and of making, of gender, of race, and of radical affect. These questions are often hidden; my goal has been to focus on them. Like Velazquez's painting, *Las Hilanderas* ("The Spinners")— which focuses not on Arachne, but on the labourers, on the women weaving the thread, telling the Arachne myth but from the 'wrong' side— we're invited to the backstage, with the women of colour who spin the yarn in the foreground, while the myth of Arachne plays out in the doorway in the background. Framed like a proscenium arch, we see the labour, the work, the process of tapestry making, of myth making, of self-identification, of storytelling. The three weavers themselves are reminiscent of the fates, who spin, measure and cut the thread of life. In turning to the spinners, as something of a desperate attempt to tie up loose ends, I too turn to the background, the back stage, the wrong side, the fuck-ups, the failures, the feminist feralities that draw outside the lines, that break the skin. And in this theorizing, in this mess, I find methods of care, of creativity, of coping, of transformation.

In an effort to linger one final moment in the tangle, I'd like to close with some thoughts on textiles and class. The North American focus of this project has occluded some overt and compelling conversations to be had around class and textiles. This omission is not lost on me; just as Vosters stopped at 94 pieces in her unravelling, so too do I stop at the hat, the garment, the tapestry, and spend little time following those threads to the seamstress, the spinners, the sweatshops. This absence complicates some of my readings of gendered labour across this

dissertation. And while questions of class make invariable appearances across this project, there are few overt discussions of class and textiles in either Western or non-Western contexts. Certainly the conditions of sweatshop, immigrant labour, and fast fashion have influenced the garments that I speak about across this dissertation. These may even be the ‘real’ material conditions that I am meant to pay attention to.

To say this omission is intentional does not quite paint a full picture of how class has influenced my life and research. Class, as a focus, has sat as a thorn in my side throughout much of my academic career. I was raised in impoverished conditions. After my mother left my father, we lived in my grandparents’ basement for a few years of my childhood, before jumping from house to house to house in a small Quebec town. I have been financially independent since I was nineteen. What I find difficult in discussing class in academic settings—and in bringing it fruitfully into this dissertation—is the tendency for academics (in my experience) to locate class struggle within a particular space and time that is not *this* space and time. While there is much to be gained from a discussion of east and west labour conditions with textiles, and indeed a more deliberate focus on the rich and nuanced cultural histories of textiles outside of Canada and the US, still many of these narratives strive to locate poverty and class struggle *there* and/or *then*, and not *here* and *now*. This erases my own lived experience with these struggles within academia and the theatre communities. The irony (or knot) here is that some of my survival is due in part to the fast fashion industry, and the cheap labour outside of North America that makes it possible for someone like me to purchase clothes, or someone else to purchase them and then easily discard/donate them. Trickle-down textiles. I remember being a teenager and buying clothes from the rummage sale, a consignment sale that would happen in the local library basement every Saturday, and rummaging through piles of donated sweaters, dresses, shoes, all being sold for a

couple bucks. I remember going to the dollar store, where you could buy two skeins of yarn for three dollars, and knitting horrible, ugly scarves and selling them for five dollars. I remember loving costumes; stealing forgotten garments from theatre basement storage, and loving the textures and magic of dressing up. One of the first jobs I had was working with the costume designer for the Hudson Music Club, in Hudson, Quebec, and spending hours in her basement hot gluing flowers to hats for the production of *Hello, Dolly!* I remember the song “Ribbons Down My Back,” and feeling an intense identification with Irene and Minnie working the hat shop and looking for love. I’d sing “Put on Your Sunday Clothes” for years; “there’s no blue Monday in your Sunday clothes” being a promise of the joy to be found in dressing up, in your best suit. That much more impressive to me when Yoko Ono invited an audience to cut hers off.

Class has influenced my methodology, too. Our home was a mess of stuff: it was a skill to be able to find a pencil or pen that worked, to locate matching socks in the communal sock bin, to navigate the piles of things in order to get through the day. Too much stuff is not a condition of poverty—we’ve all struggled to find a pen or sock— but it’s compounded by it. As such, my family and I have always been high-functioning in dysfunction. We’ve always been good at making sense of the mess, to the point that we sometimes make our own messes, just to better make sense of the world around us.

I don’t want to romanticize poverty—a criticism lobbed at me the last time I tried to speak to my material conditions in an academic setting— but I do want to talk about it. And not as some ‘other’ thing that happened ‘over there,’ but as something that happens here and is happening to me. If this is romanticization, so be it. For there is something romantic about my goal to weave, in these final moments, class into the conversation—just as there is something romantic about William Morris’s goals in reviving the handmade object. There is something

romantic about textiles, about wearing ribbons down our back, about inviting strangers to cut off your best suit. William Morris's social goal is simply to give people the gift of a simpler and better life. For all its idealism, it, too, is a labour of love.

When talking about quilts, Showalter's goal is not romanticize. In her final discussion of Bobbie Ann Mason's short story *Love Life*, she talks about the complexities of inheritance and female genealogy:

The story suggests that these traditions may be burdens rather than treasures of the past, that there may be something mournful and even self-destructive in our feminist efforts to reclaim them. Is Jenny a feminist critic full of ideas who exaggerates the importance of women's culture? Are we ruining our eyes finishing a female heritage that may have become a museum piece? Is it time to bury the burial quilt rather than to praise it?

Mason's story is a useful reminder of the complex relationship of women's culture and women's writing in any era, a warning that in tidily closing off our critical pieces we may miss some of the ragged edges that are a more accurate image of our literary history.

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I share these personal stories as a method of closing, not for pity, for shame, or to romanticize poverty. I share them to show the ragged edges and point to where there is still work to be done.

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