

**FRAMING THE QUILT:
HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY
QUILTS OF NEW BRUNSWICK AND NOVA SCOTIA**

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ABSTRACT

Framing the Quilt: Historical and Contemporary Quilts of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia

Alison Crossman

The frame through which we perceive quilts continues to evolve. Quilts have moved from their functional origins covering beds to adorning the walls of exhibition spaces. The feminist movement beginning in the early 1970s, as well as the recognition of and the gradual acceptance of utilitarian processes as artistic ones, witnessed a reclaiming of quilts as fine art objects. With this new status, a debate ensued as to whether it was a beneficial move for quilts and their culture. However, within this paradigm shift and despite technological advancements, the communicative power of quilts remains constant and has much to offer artists, curators, historians, writers, and activists. This thesis traces the quilt's path from the 1800s to present day, establishing and exploring three ways in which quilts produce meaning, what they are signifying, and the transformations quilts have undergone. It will focus on several historical quilts from the collections of the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia museums and on four contemporary artists: Margaret Sawyer and Lois Wilby-Hooper of New Brunswick and Janet Pope and Barbara Carter of Nova Scotia. Through the three manners of generating meaning, a quilt has the ability to: delineate information and emotion; organize and cultivate women's social and political activities; and raise awareness for important social issues. The broadening of the quilt's frame has enabled a variety of artistic, theoretical, and activist practices to develop.

For Dabby and Nana.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

One thing I have learned throughout this journey is that quilts have a life cycle of their own and deeply affect those who own them, who sew them, and also those who write about them. At the suggestion of my thesis advisor, Professor Janice Helland, I enrolled in a quilting class and experienced first-hand the sense of sisterhood, community and healing present in the quiltmaking tradition. From my initial research to the final draft of this thesis, several of the ideas I discuss and develop surfaced in my life. My great aunt's eulogy praised her for her sewing ability as she was a beautiful quilter. I added stitches to the Life Quilt For Breast Cancer while visiting my mother at the hospital who was successfully fighting cancer for the second time. And for nine months this thesis paralleled my sister's pregnancy, which led to the women attending her baby shower to contribute stitches to a baby's quilt I had begun. Quilts touch our lives in more ways than we are conscious of and mark special people and events.

Part of the reason for enrolling in the Master's programme was to challenge myself. The challenge of writing and completing this thesis could not have been met without the support, guidance, and encouragement of several people. First, I wish to extend my profound gratitude to my committee, Professors Janice Helland, Loren Lerner and Catherine MacKenzie, for their insightful comments and unfailing enthusiasm and for showing me much compassion and invaluable support.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	viii
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
1 WINDOWS TO THE PAST	8
2 AT HOME IN THE ART GALLERY	35
3 (UN)COVERING THE POWER OF QUILTS	52
CONCLUSION	74
BIBLIOGRAPHY	79
FIGURES	90

LIST OF FIGURES

Measurements, where given, are in centimetres. Height precedes width. Information in square brackets indicates the source and the page number from which the illustration has been taken. Please refer to the bibliography for a complete reference. All other illustrations were photographed by the author.

- 1 Four-Patch, pieced quilt, made about 1810, probably in the Johnson family, Collingwood Cumberland County, wool, 188 x 168 [Scott Robson and Sharon MacDonald, Old Nova Scotian Quilts : 46.]
- 2 Hexagons, pieced quilt top, made about 1810, probably Halifax, cotton, 238 x 192 [Scott Robson and Sharon MacDonald, Old Nova Scotian Quilts : 47.]
- 3 Margaret Sawyer, Networking 1989.
- 4 Margaret Sawyer, Breaking With Tradition, 1994.
- 5 Janet Pope, Spider Weaves The World, 1991, unbleached cotton, black broadcloth and twill tape, 74 x 86.4.
- 6 Barbara Carter, Mother and Daughter (The Legacy), 1990, hand-stitched polyester and cotton, quilt batts, stretched on wooden frames 55.5 x 66. [Courtesy of the artist.]
- 7 Lois Wilby-Hooper, Don't Make Waves, 1995.
- 8 Janet Pope, Trapped Birds, Free Birds, 1993.
- 9 Barbara Carter, Home is Not Always Sweet, 1990, hand-stitched polyester and cotton.
- 10 Lois Wilby-Hooper, Sue Anonymous, 1993.
- 11 Lois Wilby-Hooper, Down and Down, 1994.
- 12 Lois Wilby-Hooper, Now You Don't Have Me, 1995.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of the feminist movement in the 1970s reclaimed and celebrated women's textile arts. Through collaborative art projects like The Dinner Party (1974-79) and books like Roszika Parker's The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine (1984), textiles began a slow and difficult journey into the realm of fine art and art history. Studying these feminist productions and seeing the quilts of Canadian artists Joyce Wieland, Barbara Todd, and Janet Pope prompted me to examine this medium and its place in Canadian art history. More specifically, my focus is New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, where quilting has continued to thrive and evolve throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

It is my position that quilts are rich and provocative resources from which much can be learned. However, due to the number of transformations a quilt has experienced, such as the fine art status and technological advancements, it is legitimate to question whether the cultural value of a quilt has diminished. In order to answer this question, I examine how a quilt produces meaning and what kind of information a quilt signifies as well as the various transformations the quilt has undergone. My primary method to accomplish this is to explore the social history of quilts beginning with the 1800s and continuing until today. I selected several historical quilts from the New Brunswick and Nova Scotia provincial museums as well as four contemporary artists: Margaret Sawyer and Lois Wilby-Hooper of New Brunswick and Janet Pope and Barbara Carter of Nova Scotia to explore the various aspects of the quilting tradition, noted above, of these two provinces.

The feminist writings of Rozsika Parker, Patricia Mainardi and Rosi Braidotti, to name a few, have been principal sources in terms of guiding my feminist methodologies and influencing my treatment of quilts. Women's diaries and autobiographies from the two provinces written during the nineteenth century and Scott Robson and Sharon MacDonald's comprehensive study of Nova Scotian quilts were key in contextualizing the production and consumption of quilts. Meeting and interviewing the four artists discussed in this thesis as well as the curators of both province's provincial museums proved beneficial in locating the contemporary position of both traditional quilts and art quilts.

Feminist practices of the 1970s engaged in the retrieval and celebration of traditional feminine crafts. Pennina Barnett states that this celebratory approach caused "women" and "traditional female arts" to collapse into one category: "woman".¹ From this, the term "traditional female arts" can lead to an essential or universal feminine implication.² While quilting may indeed be feminized, its producers do not need to be generalized and essentialized. Undoubtedly, within the quilting tradition there exists a strong sense of sisterhood prevalent at most quilting classes or bees. Sisterhood, the feeling of camaraderie and closeness, is sometimes denounced for its essentialist implication since it suggests an erasing of difference; however, the women involved in this particular creative process, often form an eclectic variety of experiences and backgrounds.

¹Pennina Barnett, "Afterthoughts on Curating 'The Subversive Stitch'," New Feminist Art Criticism, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995): 80.

²Barnett, 80.

Griselda Pollock cautions feminist writers that in order to avoid “the embrace of the feminine stereotype which homogenizes women’s work as determined by natural gender, we must stress the heterogeneity of women’s art work, the specificity of individual producers and products”.³ My intention is to avoid grouping quilts and their makers under one homogeneous umbrella, especially since I am focussing on one group of women. To do so would generalize the different experiences, circumstances and identities which play a key role in the production of a quilt. Alternatively, assuming a deconstructionist or destabilizing position stresses the diversity of women’s experiences. By celebrating the tradition of quilting, I am acknowledging, by default, the category ‘woman’. However, I intend to complicate this category by exploring the lived experiences of individual women. In Rosi Braidotti’s article “Sexual Differences as a Nomadic Political Project,” she sees identity as a site of differences. She devises three levels of sexual difference: differences between men and women; differences among women; and differences within each woman.⁴ I will be stressing Braidotti’s second level of difference, differences among women. While the social system for women may have been similar in these rural provinces, women’s experiences of the nineteenth century are distinctive; whether it was religion, literature, culture, or everyday life which fueled a quiltmaker’s creative impulses.

Women artists working with fabric inevitably end up working in the margins.

Dealing with artists and a medium that are viewed as “marginal”, I have assumed a

³Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and the Histories of Art, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1988): 55.

⁴Rosi Braidotti, “Sexual Difference as a Nomadic Political Project,” Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory, ed. Rosi Braidotti (New York: Columbia UP, 1994): 158.

deconstructionist position attacking the centre and allowing the margins to speak by articulating the experiences of individual women. I accomplished this with the use of private documentation and engaging in an oral history through conversations with artists living in these two provinces. However, beginning in the 1970s, quilts entered the mainstream artworld and were affiliated with modernism. The emphasis on formalism during this era forced a separation between quilts and their culture. In an attempt to unite the two again, I have played down the quilt's formalist elements, by focusing on their conceptual elements, primarily those which allow the quilt to continue to speak from the margins about women's health and welfare issues. Dealing with the issue of women's health and welfare, my position strategically employs a positive essentialism⁵ in order to address issues of disease and physical and psychological abuse threatening many women, no matter their race, class, or religion.

Semiology forms another part of my method in terms of offering a means to examine the quilt as a language - a system of signs - offering another form of communication. Through its physical make-up, imagery, title, motive for creation, and placement, a quilt has much to convey and evoke in the lives of the maker, the artworld, literature, popular culture, and the political arena. The theory of signs is crucial when examining quilts for they are filled with symbols. A quilt is, in a sense, a text(ile) waiting to be read and interpreted. Aside from this, semiology is often linked to literary theory and I discuss two literary works to accentuate my points: Margaret Atwood's Alias Grace

⁵Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 271-313.

(1996) and Donna E. Smyth's Quilt (1982). I have selected these two novels for their metaphorical use of a quilt. The vocabulary of textiles, and more specifically quilting, is often incorporated into everyday parole. The English language is steeped in fabric metaphors. One might say, I *weave* methodologies of feminism and semiology throughout this text, *piece* together concepts, and *uncover* a quilt's *layers* of meaning. These academic methodologies coupled with my first attempt at sewing a quilt and participating in a quilting group have shaped the manner in which I researched and wrote about quilting in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.

Throughout this thesis, I treat quilting as an art form. The abundance of literature on quilts defines it as work, craft, hobby, folk art, or fine art. It is not my intention to consider the art/craft debate in this study. I view quilts as an art form because quilting is a cultural practice embedded with history and aesthetics. It continues to evolve with time and it evokes emotion and communicates concepts to the viewer.⁶ Each of the three chapters will address one aspect of this definition of quilts as art: history, style, and communicative power.

At this point, I feel it is necessary to explain my use of certain terminology. A quilt typically consists of three layers: a top, either wholecloth, pieced, log cabin or appliqué, the batting for warmth, and the backing. Quilting stitches hold the three layers together and occasionally, the layers are tied together rather than stitched. This definition has evolved from the decorative crazy quilts of the late 1800s which eliminated the filler

⁶I have followed Parker's treatment of embroidery and expanded on her definition of embroidery as a "cultural practice involving iconography, style and a social function". Rozsika Parker, The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine (New York: Routledge, 1984): 6.

to today's art quilts whose dimensions no longer accommodate the size of a bed and stray from traditional patterns.

Because the definition of quilts has evolved since the end of the nineteenth century, my original intention was to refer to all quilts, past and present, traditional and non-traditional as "quilts". However, I have decided to make one distinction, between a "traditional" quilt and an "art" quilt. The term "traditional" does not imply "historical" since traditional quilts are still produced today. Rather, I am referring to a quilt depicting a pattern whose origins lay within the quilting tradition such as Nine Patch or Pinwheel. An art quilt's iconography bears little or no trace of such patterns and their construction and presentation are somehow altered. At certain points, it is obvious which type I am referring to, therefore, "quilt" is simply used. The term "wall hanging" implies the piece is meant strictly as an art object rather than as a bed quilt; however, I have chosen not to use this term as I feel it distances quilts from their culture. The title of this thesis indicates that I am discussing quilts of a "traditional" nature and a consciously art-based nature from both the past and present.

Some artists are referred to as fabric artists, textile artists, surface design artists, and quilters. I have employed the term "artist". Ostensibly, the artists I am discussing are working with fabric. I have not distinguished between quilter and artist. Both are involved in a creative process using material, design, color, and ideas.

Turning now to the structure of this thesis, the first chapter lays the historical foundation and serves as a starting point for my examination of the social, economic, and religious mechanisms within which women produced quilts. New Brunswick and Nova Scotia present an interesting context to examine separate sphere ideology and the

Victorian ideal of femininity. Most important is the quilt's role in reference to these notions of acceptable spaces and behaviour for women.

Chapter Two follows quiltmaking's continued popularity as it grows despite of and with the help of technology. I also briefly discuss how the quilt has ventured into the realm of popular culture. The quilts of Margaret Sawyer illustrate how today's artists are reassessing the criteria of a quilt. With this new criteria, artists and curators have opened up a new arena for the quilt - the fine art world. Focussing on a few exhibitions, I elucidate my investigation of the benefits and disadvantages of this new frame.

The third chapter explores how quilts are used by artists and special interest groups as a voice to encourage dialogue vis-à-vis women's health and welfare issues. Janet Pope, Barbara Carter and Lois Wilby-Hooper espouse their artistic talents and concepts to disrupt the categories defining femininity and a quilt, and expose current socio-political realities. By using "traditional" quilting as a starting point, these three artists are decoding quilts and recoding them with new messages.

The "ability to move, function and reference within multiple sites simultaneously gives textiles a tremendous power as a medium to comment on contemporary culture."⁷ This thesis seeks to explore the quilt's communicative power and engagement within "multiple sites" by tracing the evolving path of the quilt from the quilting frame to the fine art frame to the socio-political frame.

⁷Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Sheuing, introduction, Material Matters: The Art and Culture of Contemporary Textiles, eds. Ingrid Bachmann and Ruth Sheuing (Toronto: YYZ Books, 1998): 16.

Chapter One
Windows To The Past

“What is believed in society, is not always the equivalent of what is true; but as regards a woman’s reputation, it amounts to the same thing.”

-Margaret Atwood¹

In her book The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine, Roszika Parker relates how the feminine ideal was inculcated through sewing and how embroidery and the stereotype of femininity collapsed into one another. Domesticity, piety, and civility were thought to be inherent of a woman’s behaviour and these traits were best cultivated through sewing. In 1868, Godey’s Lady’s Book editor, Sarah Josepha Hale, stated that to not sew was unfeminine.² Sewing was promoted as a natural, innately quintessential feminine habit.

Canadian author, Margaret Atwood illustrates this Victorian attitude in her novel Alias Grace. The central character, Grace Marks,³ is convicted of murder at the age of

¹Margaret Atwood, Alias Grace (Toronto: McClelland-Bantam, 1996): 503.

²Sarah Josepha Hale, Manners; or Happy Homes and Good Society All the Year Round (Boston: J.E. Tilton, 1868): 192, cited in Elaine Hedges, Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society (San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press, 1987): 25.

³Grace Marks, the book’s protagonist, was one of Canada’s most infamous criminals in the 1800s. I will be referring to Grace throughout this thesis as a means to exemplify the issues I discuss vis-à-vis women living in Victorian society and the quilting tradition. Alias Grace is however, a work of fiction. Atwood has taken historical facts surrounding Marks, such as the murders, the trial, her stay in prison, and her employment at the prison Governor’s house and fictionalized circumstances related to these realities. The author did however, set her fictional scenarios within contemporary thinking of the day, like the “proper” behaviour of women, in order to present a more accurate picture. It is Atwood’s choice of scenarios and the thinking of the day which is of interest to me. For more information on her method see Atwood, afterword, Alias Grace (Toronto: McClelland-Bantam, 1996): 555-560.

sixteen in 1843 and sentenced to life at the Provincial Penitentiary in Kingston.⁴ Newspaper accounts documented the split in public opinion over Grace's character. Was she an unwilling participant whose involvement was forced, or a sexual temptress who instigated the murders?⁵ The questionable nature of Grace's character runs throughout the book. The reader encounters Grace's abusive and alcoholic father, her mother's burial at sea while on route to Canada from Ireland and her struggle to earn a living once in Canada. Despite her prison sentence, Grace is permitted to go to the prison Governor's home where she completes sewing tasks for his family. This setting presents an alternative to Grace's criminal nature. She sits quietly and sews a Pandora's Box quilt for one of the Governor's daughters. Her violent tendencies are left in the prison and are transformed into a reserved manner. Atwood uses sewing and an upper class setting to convert Grace into the perfect picture of femininity. Grace is only asked to sew the quilt tops as that was the fine work. A doctor observing Grace throughout the book considers her as the "marrying type", as she is an excellent needlewoman.⁶ Interestingly, the author has also titled each chapter after quilt patterns and has illustrated the pattern to reflect the chapter's contents. A quilt marks the stages of one's life, while chapters mark divisions in a book. Here, Atwood uses various quilts to divide Grace's life as well as the novel.

For art historians, quilts serve as rich artistic and archival resources and as Alias Grace demonstrates, can function as compelling literary tools. Aside from their

⁴Although Grace and her alleged accomplice were charged with two murders, they were convicted and sentenced to death after the first trial, therefore the second trial was unnecessary. Grace's alleged accomplice was hung, while her sentence was commuted to life in prison once her age, "weakness of sex, and supposed witlessness" were taken into consideration. Atwood, 555.

⁵Atwood believes these attitudes were indicative of the ambiguity surrounding the nature of women at the time, 556.

⁶Ibid., 466.

undeniable aesthetic value, quilts act as cultural transmitters, linking one generation to the next. Much can be discerned from quilts as they delineate, both implicitly and explicitly, social, cultural, religious, economic and sometimes political circumstances. The three ways in which quilts testify to these factors are through their: physical make-up, motifs and titles, and motive of inception and placement.

Quiltmaking is an art form that transcends racial, religious, class, and gender boundaries. Despite this, my focus for the most part is English, white, lower to upper class women. I am presenting an aspect of the tradition, rather than the history of quiltmaking. However, by focusing on one ethnic group, I do not intend to imply that English, white, lower to upper class women were the sole practitioners of the art form. There are a number of studies which trace quiltmaking traditions to various ethnic peoples from different parts of the world beginning centuries ago.⁷ The Atlantic coast received a number of European and American settlers, a portion of which included Negro slaves,⁸ as well as the indigenous Mi'kmaq and Maliseet peoples.⁹ The majority of the

⁷My purpose here is not to establish the origins of quilting. For studies examining this issue see for example: Averil Colby, Quilting (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971); Mary Conroy, 300 Years of Canada's Quilts (Toronto: Griffin House, 1976); and Lucy Lippard, Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990).

⁸It is believed that black people resided in Canada for almost as long as in the United States. The Atlantic region experienced two of its greatest influxes of black migrants after the War of 1812 and the American Revolution (1775-1783). For more information see Robin W. Winks, The Blacks in Canada: A History, 3rd ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1997).

⁹Quiltmaking is often overlooked as an art form practiced by Native peoples primarily because it is not "culturally intact". While quiltmaking may not have been practiced by Native People before contact with Euro-American culture, many of the sewing skills like appliqué work, as well as dyeing techniques had precedents in Native communities. For more information on Mi'kmaq and Maliseet decorative arts in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, see Gaby Pelletier, Micmac & Maliseet Decorative Traditions (Saint John, NB: The New Brunswick Museum, 1977) and Ruth Holmes Whitehead, Micmac Quillwork: Micmac Indian Techniques of Porcupine Quill Decoration, 1600-1950 (Halifax, NS:

early settlers, like Grace Marks, came from Ireland, as well as, Scotland, England, Germany, and France; each culture bringing its own quilting traditions, and adopting new motifs to reflect their new surroundings and Native influences. Due to the variety of early settlers, these two provinces possess rich quilting traditions.

Quilting is ostensibly linked to the home. Quilting was a part of women's work and was one of the first tasks which needed to be accomplished by early Maritime settlers. Warm blankets were essential in order to survive harsh winters. A quilt made (c. 1769) by Mary Morton on her family's homestead in New Brunswick is one of the oldest surviving quilts in Canada.¹⁰ By piecing together fabric scraps from family clothing and feed bags, women were able to sew warm coverings to aid physical survival through the winter. Besides serving as bedding to keep family members warm, quilts were also hung on the walls to prevent cold drafts from penetrating through cracks in the house boards. Gradually, as the initial need was met, women became more selective in their choice of materials to piece together. Quilts became a means to bring beauty to the modest pioneer homes. Once every bed had been covered, quilts were made with a new purpose in mind and evolved as a social and artistic pursuit. In days when women were taught that their silence was valued more than their spoken word, quilts evolved as an alternate form of expression. They became gifts, mementos, essential dowry items, and

Nova Scotia Museum, 1982). For information on American Native quilt traditions, see for example, Ann Fienup-Riordan, "American Quilts: Another History," *Fiberarts* vol. 24 no. 3 (Nov./Dec. 1997): 28-32.

¹⁰Conroy, 19. There is some degree of debate over this quilt's date. The quilt has been washed and the ink marking the date is somewhat blurred. Only the first two numbers, 1 and 7, are distinguishable, making it an eighteenth century quilt. The quilt is not believed to predate 1750 as the family only arrived in New Brunswick from New England in 1750. Peter Larocque, personal interview, 15 Aug. 1997. The McCord Museum in Montréal has a quilt in its permanent collection dated 1726. David Rose, "Quilts Keep Face-Freezing Cold at Bay," *The Gazette* [Montréal] 11 Feb. 1995: 11.

heirlooms to be treasured, preserved and passed on by family members. Quilts were generally listed in wills, and diaries thus attesting to their importance in their keepers' lives. It was expected of a young woman to have thirteen quilts as part of her dowry. Twelve of these were everyday quilts and once marriage was proposed, she would begin a fancy quilt intended as her wedding quilt. Often, friends and family would gather to help the bride-to-be finish the quilting.¹¹

Working on textile art, feminist art historians have discovered much which seems to provide answers for the domestication and marginalization of both the art form and the artist. In my opinion, however, ideologies, such as separate spheres, which polarize public and private arenas, have become generalized, over simplified and too easily linked to gender. Leonore Davidoff states that the public/private ideology is not a conceptual absolute, but rather a loose description.¹² Gen Doy believes that "we need to qualify and move beyond the notion that gender is the most powerful explanatory concept ..."¹³ Amanda Vickery also addresses the simplified notion of separate spheres, and debunks these dichotomies. She suggests that what the public sphere was, and is today, differs.¹⁴

¹¹With time, this tradition has changed for some. I interviewed Mrs. Dorine LeBlanc, an elderly Acadian woman of Memramcook, New Brunswick, whose daughters do not quilt. For each of her eleven children, she sewed six quilts once they were married. Of the six quilts, two were fancy, three were plain, and one was reversible. Dorine LeBlanc, personal interview, 11 Aug. 1997.

¹²Leonore Davidoff, "Regarding Some 'Old Husbands' Tales': Public and Private in Feminist History," Worlds Between: Historical Perspectives on Gender and Class (New York: Routledge, 1995): 228.

¹³Gen Doy, Seeing and Consciousness: Women, Class and Representation (Oxford: Berg Publishing Ltd., 1995): 62.

¹⁴Amanda Vickery, "Golden Age To Separate Spheres? A Review Of The Categories And Chronology Of English Women's History," The Historical Journal vol. 36 no. 3 (1993): 383- 414.

After researching the socio-economic trends of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, it became apparent that such a sweeping theory of female/private and male/public did not apply. Generally speaking, tasks were delegated according to gender and age, with “primary production stages being the domain of male labour and the intermediary and final stages that of females”.¹⁵ But for several tasks such as harvesting, the entire family worked shoulder to shoulder in the fields.

In the regions discussed, the primary industries were lumber, trapping, fishing, mining, and farming. In the first three instances, men often left their homesteads for months at a time. As Ruth Pierson points out in her article, “Women’s History: The State of the Art in Atlantic Canada,” women, therefore, had to develop self-sufficiency in order to accommodate the needs of the family.¹⁶ One diarist, Elizabeth Goudie, recollects her life as a trapper’s wife, stating, “the wife of a trapper... had to live as a man for five months of the year.”¹⁷ While Goudie sees the skills necessary for providing for the family as gendered, she makes it apparent that women were fully capable of performing such duties. Goudie also characterizes her relationship with her husband as one of partnership and mutual dependence, rather than one of male dominance and female subordination.¹⁸ I have discovered, through my research, women who successfully blurred the private/public boundary and pushed the Victorian standards of acceptable behaviour for

¹⁵Cynthia Wallace-Casey, “ ‘Providential Openings’: The Women Weavers of Nineteenth-Century Queens County, New Brunswick,” Material History Review vol. 46 (Fall 1997): 31

¹⁶Ruth Pierson, “Women’s History: The State of the Art in Atlantic Canada,” Acadiensis vol. 7 no. 1 (Autumn 1977): 124.

¹⁷David Zimmerly, ed., Women of Labrador (Toronto: Peter Martin, 1973): 162 cited in Pierson, 124. Although these words were written in the first half of the twentieth century, they nevertheless reflect the loosely structured sexual division of labour in Atlantic Canada.

¹⁸Pierson, 124.

women. While I deal with both the public and private sphere for women in the nineteenth century, I approach the private sphere as a celebration of the richness of women's accomplishments and culture.

Since women historians first took an interest in women's culture, the area of interest has slowly shifted from the focus on women's neglected activities in the public sphere to the sphere inhabited largely by women: the domestic sphere.¹⁹ Traditionally, this sphere has been overlooked or trivialized. Notions of the private sphere have tended to call up images of segregation and isolation, which in turn suggest limited appeal and lesser importance. Gen Doy also believes that "we need to be careful of seeing 'the domestic' as a peripheral, subordinate cultural space, equated with the feminine and therefore inferior."²⁰ In the Maritime provinces, a variety of women's tasks led them both inside and outside of the home. For example, the wife of a fisherman, although absent for the actual catch, was involved in each stage of the curing process, from splitting to salting to drying.²¹ A fishing expedition would often begin with the woman producing the net required for a successful catch. Diarist Janet MacDonald, residing in New Brunswick in the nineteenth century, noted: "April 8, 1859 - I am spinning nowadays for a shad [fish] net".²² Outdoor activities included for example, vegetable gardening, shearing sheep, milking cows, collecting eggs, and picking apples and berries. Indoors, women were faced with turning these natural products into clothing and food. This involved

¹⁹Margaret Conrad, "Sundays Always Make Me Think Of Home: Time and Place in Canadian Women's History," *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, eds., Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1986): 67.

²⁰Doy, 62.

²¹Pierson, 125.

²²Wallace-Casey, 32.

carding and spinning wool and transforming it into clothing or bedding. Sewing quilts, making soap and candles as well as churning butter, were all extra tasks to be done on top of the daily preparation of meals and cleaning.²³ Obviously, the tenacious life of rural living attested to a real sense of power and purpose for women. The private sphere was an arena for empowerment.

Work in the home was, and still is to a degree, not valued, particularly because domestic work is unpaid. It did not contribute to the national economy, as measured by economists, and was deemed unprofessional since it took place in the home. Women working in the home were rarely accounted for in census reports documenting the number of women 'workers'. However, women working in the home *were* active agents in the family unit, rather than passive subordinates. Women took a central position in the rural production unit. Despite expansion and industrialization, the resource-based industries in Atlantic Canada were not enjoying the same growth rate.²⁴ Women sometimes provided a second income in order for the household to function. In 1849, when Mary Bradley's husband's lumbering activities failed, and the family found themselves in deep debt, Bradley set up her loom, contacted her neighbours and soon had enough work to contribute to the family's income. She took payment in "such trade as was suitable for our family's use".²⁵ While much of the two provinces was indeed rural, by the 1880s, seven communities in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia had cotton textile

²³Pierson, 124.

²⁴Judith Fingard, "The 1880s: Paradoxes of Progress," The Atlantic Provinces in Confederation, eds., E.R. Forbes and D.A. Muise (Toronto: University of Toronto Press and Fredericton: Acadiensis Press, 1993): 82-83.

²⁵A Narrative of the Life and Christian Experience of Mrs. Mary Bradley (Boston: Strong and Brodhead, 1849), excerpt cited in "Mary Bradley's Reminiscences: A Domestic Life in Colonial New Brunswick," Atlantis vol. 7 no. 1 (Fall 1981): 93.

factories.²⁶ Three of the six weaving and carding mills in 1871, in Queens County, New Brunswick, employed women.²⁷ However, those performing household sewing jobs rather than working in mills and factories, did not function in isolation. They existed on “the levels of both production and exchange, an important part of the rural economy”.²⁸ Their work reached beyond their immediate neighbourhoods and interacted within a larger network at markets and with travelling salespeople.²⁹ They were not isolated from the outside world, but were rather part of a larger consumer culture.³⁰

A growing interest in the domestic sphere has turned scholars to private documentation. Historian Margaret Conrad believes that “given the fact that women’s lives have long been obscured by the silence surrounding the so-called private sphere, there is a certain appropriateness in having personal chronicles becoming the public record.”³¹ Women have often been left out of traditional history, their diaries discarded as being trivial. In actuality, records of such everyday events shed light on the social context within which these early Maritime women lived. The women’s journals and autobiographical letters from the nineteenth century that I read offered a first-hand look at women’s experiences, as opposed to relying on a writer’s interpretation of the period’s history. Diaries, letters, scrapbooks and recipes provide access to the everyday experiences of women in the nineteenth century. Included in the list of material evidence

²⁶Fingard, “The 1880s: Paradoxes of Progress,” 84.

²⁷Wallace-Casey, 31.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid., 32.

³⁰Ibid., 39.

³¹Margaret Conrad et al., No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotian Women 1771-1938 (Halifax: Formac Publishing, 1988): 1-2.

left behind for historians to analyze are quilts. Quilts also served as a means for recording a woman's experiences, and still do.

As Conrad points out, there are risks involved in using diaries. First, they eliminate anyone who could not write.³² Second, a geographical bias exists, as most of the diaries I read happened to come from western Nova Scotia and southern New Brunswick. Also, a number of diaries I read were written by religious women, where inward reflection was encouraged in Baptist and Methodist faiths, to name a few.³³ Although these biases lead the documentation toward educated and religious women, they still prove useful for the range of experiences. Writer Elaine Hedges feels that to gain an understanding of "the everyday lives of nineteenth century women, we must piece together scraps as they once did".³⁴ From diaries, letters and quilts "we are uncovering a strong tradition of industry, creativity and human expression that has been hidden too long".³⁵

Private documentation such as diaries and scrapbooks bare many similarities to quilts. In both cases, women record and document their lives. Hedges states that quilts are hieroglyphs of women's lives. Needles substituted as women's instruments of expression, in a way that was socially acceptable, and their quilts became their texts.³⁶ Therefore, I am treating quilting as a language - a means of expression and

³²Conrad et al., No Place Like Home: Diaries and Letters of Nova Scotian Women 1771-1938, 3.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Elaine Hedges, "The Nineteenth-Century Diarist and her Quilts," Feminist Studies vol. 8 no. 2 (Summer 1982): 298.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Elaine Hedges, Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society (San Francisco: The Quilt Digest Press, 1987): 11.

communication. This language is made up of signs which can be coded, recoded, and decoded.

Semiotics is the theory involved with the study of signs and signification. The chief tenets of semiotics concern how signs function socially, how they are arranged in systems such as language and how they are created and disseminated.³⁷ For my purpose, I am most interested in how a specific sign - a quilt - relates to these three tenets. American philosopher, Charles Sanders Peirce classified a sign into three different types: icons, symbols, and indexes. These three types of signs are based on the relationship between the signifier and the signified. The icon is a sign that relates to its object by sharing a resemblance with it, like a photograph. The symbol is a sign whose relation to its conceptual object is arbitrary; for example a flag is a symbol for a country. The index is a sign that relates to its object by causation, like a symptom or a footprint left in the snow.³⁸ The quilts' signs I discuss are primarily symbols and icons. They relate either to their maker and her family or reach a broader audience, by relating to the maker's community or country.

Clearly, quilts communicate a great deal of information. A quilt delineates information and meaning in three different manners. First, a quilt's composition and physical makeup - its fabric, stitching, and the method of construction - can symbolize class, social standing and character. Second, a quilt's imagery or motifs and titles can reflect historical and community events, or the maker's religion and heritage. Third, the

³⁷Joseph Childers and Gary Hentzi, eds., The Columbia Dictionary of Modern Literary & Cultural Criticism (New York: Columbia UP, 1995): 272.

³⁸Kaja Silverman, The Subject of Semiotics (New York: Oxford UP, 1983): 19-20.

motive for creating a quilt and its placement and use or non-use serve as important markers, distinguishing rites of passage, time and space.

The first method by which a quilt produces meaning is found in its physical makeup. Two of the oldest quilts discovered in Nova Scotia are presumed to have been made around 1810. These two quilts are excellent indicators of class. A pieced quilt, called Four-Patch (Fig. 1), arrived at the Nova Scotia Museum wrapped around a piece of furniture being delivered to the museum. Today, the quilt is held in higher regard as a cultural artifact than the piece of furniture it once covered.³⁹ The bland colours, recycled material, worn patches, and straight forward pattern tell the viewer that it was produced for everyday use, and most likely by a lower to middle class woman. The second quilt, Hexagons (Fig. 2), is also pieced and is made from an array of fancy dress and furnishing fabrics.⁴⁰ On the under side of the quilt, the paper templates are still intact and were cut from Nova Scotian newspapers, a hardware catalogue, and hand written letters.⁴¹ This suggests an upper-class quilter due to the amount of time needed to produce such a quilt along with the use of fancy cottons and reading material as templates. Crazy quilts, made from pieces of silk and velvet arranged in no definitive pattern, with decorative stitching marking dates, initials and iconography, became popular during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The visual equivalent to a diary or scrapbook is the crazy quilt, which is imbued with initials of the maker, friends and family, dates, and symbols of animals and events. Such quilts were made mostly by upper class women, as evidenced by the fabric employed, and were used primarily for decoration. The cluttered and

³⁹Scott Robson and Sharon MacDonald, Old Nova Scotian Quilts (Halifax: Nimbus Publishing, 1995): 46.

⁴⁰Ibid., 47.

⁴¹Ibid.

ostentatious Victorian aesthetic was marked by decorative excess. Crazy quilts were used as throws on chesterfields, or were displayed over pianos or on the wall.

Crazy quilts also indicated a woman's social standing. Victorian women were taught to decorate their home to reflect the family's income; crazy quilts, therefore, were excellent indications of wealth and social class. Also, if the material was imported from abroad, then the maker enjoyed a certain amount of wealth.⁴² Another piece from the Nova Scotia Museum is an unfinished cushion top made about 1890 from cigar bands. In the late nineteenth century, cigars were sold in bunches tied with silk ribbons.⁴³ This cushion top was constructed in the log cabin method, using these silk bands. Some of bands are from imported cigars, indicating an upper class household.

Perhaps one of the most interesting symbols of a quilt is character. As previously mentioned, proper feminine behaviour was inculcated through sewing during the Victorian period. Sewing became a means to acquire and portray a refined, quiet demeanor. However, it was through sewing that women were able to express either their acceptance of- or their disgust for- such characteristics. One such example is a quilt from the New Brunswick Museum. It is an Irish Calico quilt top, started in 1835 by two sisters, Susan and Sarah Hale, when the Hale family still lived in Ireland. The quilt, consisting of 3339 pieces, was brought to New Brunswick when the family settled in the Saint John region and was finished by Susan more than fifty years later in 1886.⁴⁴ Before reading the history of the quilt, it was obvious upon viewing it, that two women had worked on the

⁴²By 1840, a variety of cottons and linens were arriving in ports of New Brunswick. However, a number of women in rural areas continued to produce 'homespun' cloth and process their own flax for thread. Wallace-Casey, 30-31.

⁴³Robson and MacDonald, 75.

⁴⁴Exhibition didactic panel, Out of Ireland (Saint John, NB: The New Brunswick Museum, 21 June - 28 Sept. 1997).

quilt. The stitching along the edges of each hexagon piece came from two individual hands. One set of stitching is tight, short and straight, while the other is loose, long, and haphazard. These different stitches indicate that one of the sewers enjoyed the activity, possessed great skill, and took pride in her stitches. The other sewer worked in haste, indicating impatience and frustration, sending a clear message that sewing was not her favourite past time.

The second manner in which a quilt transmits information is the most obvious and most easily read. A quilt's title and imagery record socio-political events and pay homage to a maker's beliefs and culture. One political event which resulted in the production of a quilt was the first Canadian meeting to discuss Confederation: the Charlottetown Conference held in 1864.⁴⁵ Many of the women attending the gala balls and receptions had their dresses made by Fannie Parlee, a dressmaker working in Charlottetown.⁴⁶ Saving the scraps from these dresses, she made a crazy quilt of silk and velvet. The quilt is signed and dated "1864 Mrs. Parlee".⁴⁷ A note accompanying the quilt when it was donated to the King's County Museum in New Brunswick stated that "Libral" [sic] was inscribed on one block.⁴⁸ This block could be a testament to the maker's political preference. This quilt is a valuable memento of the historic conference and of women's participation in the event. An event which inspired many quilt designs was Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887. On many crazy quilts, such as Lelia

⁴⁵For more information on this conference see P.B. Waite, The Charlottetown Conference (Ottawa: Runge Press, 1963) and J.L. Finlay, Pre-Confederation Canada: The Structure of Canadian History to 1867 (Scarborough, ON: Prentice-Hall, 1990).

⁴⁶Conroy, 50-51.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸The quilt does not reveal this block, however, one block is completely worn. Conroy, 50-51.

MacLachlan's of Nova Scotia, "1837 Jubilee 1887" was scripted as well as a portrait of the Queen.⁴⁹ The Nova Scotia Museum has in its collection an appliqué quilt depicting five royal portraits.⁵⁰ In this instance, this quilt's signs are both icons and symbols. In the center of the quilt is Queen Victoria, who is surrounded by King Edward VII, Queen Alexandra, and the Prince and Princess of Wales, who later became George V and Queen Mary.⁵¹ Made in 1902 and attributed to Addie Wolfe, this quilt delineates much historical information because Queen Victoria's picture is bordered in black, symbolizing mourning of her death in 1901, and her son Edward wears his coronation robe from the ceremony in August 1902.⁵² Perhaps Wolfe made this commemorative quilt as a loyal monarchist no longer living in her native homeland.⁵³

Besides marking an important historical event, Addie Wolfe's quilt is also a testament to her heritage. In addition to the royal prints, images of the thistle, shamrock, and rose in between each print are stitched as a circular border. These three forms of vegetation symbolize Scotland, Ireland, and England respectively.⁵⁴ One might assume that Addie Wolfe's heritage was composed of all three nationalities. There are also more

⁴⁹This quilt is from the collection of the Fisheries Museum in Lunenburg, NS.

⁵⁰These portraits were commercial souvenir portraits printed from photographs on a half-tone printing press. Robson and MacDonald, 89.

⁵¹Robson and MacDonald, 89

⁵²ibid.

⁵³There are a number of other historical events which inspired quilts. The First World War inspired patriotic themes and patterns such as V for Victory. Popular colours were those of the Union Jack and the Red Ensign which were Canada's official flags, Conroy 94-95. These quilts substituted for flags and stood as symbols for the country. When Canada turned one hundred years old, many Centennial Quilts marked the country's birthday. These quilts generally illustrated maple leaves or the ten provincial flowers like the purple violet and the mayflower of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia respectively.

⁵⁴Robson and MacDonald, 89.

explicit ways of dedicating a quilt to one's heritage, such as pattern names like Double Irish Chain, and Irish Calico used by the Hale sisters.

In many quilting traditions, quilt patterns and titles are also representative of religious convictions. While pattern names like Star of Bethlehem, Jacob's Ladder or Five Crosses were often used by quilters, distinguishable religious trends represented in quilts are not apparent in these two provinces. I discovered one Bible quilt, however it was not made until 1957 by Mrs. MacFadden of southern New Brunswick. It consists of twelve blocks each depicting different stories from the Bible including Noah's Ark and David and Goliath.⁵⁵

Quilts can also provide a sense of the maker's community. Specifically, members of a community from a given year are immortalized by album quilts, often used for fundraisers, which bear the signatures of various people. The very names of quilt patterns were sometimes indicative of the community's way of life. Along the seaboard, Maritime names were attached to patterns like Fisherman's Reel and Mariner's Compass. New patterns were developed to portray an area's popular icons such as Bluenose patterns.⁵⁶ Farm life was also represented with names like Hole in the Barn Door, Turkey Tracks, and Flying Geese.

When discussing quilts, authors frequently mention the quilting bee. In the nineteenth century, bees, also referred to as quilting frolics or parties, were one of the most popular forms of socializing, not only for women, but for children and men as well.

⁵⁵Exhibition of Quilts (Sackville, NB: The Owens Art Gallery, Apr. 5-26, 1970): n. pag..

⁵⁶This pattern was also popular for hooked rugs and portrayed the popular Nova Scotian racing and fishing schooner launched in Lunenburg, NS in 1921. The Bluenose was commemorated with a postage stamp in 1929 and with Canada's ten-cent piece in 1937. For more information on the Bluenose, see Brian and Phil Backman, Bluenose (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1965).

A “bee” was generally organized in order to carry out a large task within the community. The event would occasionally end with entertainment and refreshments.⁵⁷ Quilting bees are often romanticized and trivialized as an excuse for women to gossip, and meet potential husbands.⁵⁸ However, what can be interpreted as casual chit chat can also be understood as an opportunity to network and discuss important issues within and without the group of quilters. Women began to recognize the limitations and restrictions they experienced and started to address social issues. Susan B. Anthony’s first speech appealing for equal rights for women was at a quilting bee.⁵⁹ The minute book of the Women’s Auxiliary of St. Andrew’s Anglican Church, Mulgrave, Guysborough County, Nova Scotia states, “[We continued] sewing on the quilt, while animated discussion was engaged in, on Political, Social and Personal Combinations.”⁶⁰ In addition to any political discussions or rallying for social reforms, this networking provided a means of helping members of the community or welcoming new people to the area. Traditional bees were the precursors for women’s groups like the Women’s Institute and the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire, as I will discuss later. In addition to the quilting frolic, women in the Maritimes gained “public” opportunities through religion, education, paid labour, voluntary philanthropic societies, and exhibitions. From 1860-1880, the city of Halifax gained a reputation as an “educational and ecclesiastical centre” boasting twenty-five churches and six colleges.⁶¹

⁵⁷Conroy, 33.

⁵⁸In Classic Quilts (Toronto: Key Porter, 1997), author Ruth McKendry states that those women who could not sew had a better chance at meeting a man because they would be able to socialize: 44.

⁵⁹ Elaine Hedges and Ingrid Wendt, In Her Own Image: Women Working in the Arts, (Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1980): 17.

⁶⁰As cited in Robson and MacDonald, 19. The entry is dated 8 January 1924.

⁶¹Judith Fingard, The Dark Side Of Life in Victorian Halifax (Porters Lake, Nova Scotia:

Based on the excerpts from diaries I read, religion played a significant role in Maritime women's lives. For Mary Bradley, religion was something she wished to participate in since she was a young girl. Throughout her life, Mary struggled with her desire to preach and societal constraints placed on a Victorian lady.⁶² She stated, "if it were customary for females to preach the gospel, how gladly would I engage in the employment".⁶³ Mary Bradley decided to attend the Methodist church which provided women with an expanding sphere, offering teaching careers and missionary work overseas. Conrad states that women were at the "forefront of missionary work, temperance activity, and moral uplift, thus participating in what Olive Banks describes as the 'evangelical contribution' to feminism."⁶⁴ Beyond religion's professional opportunities, the church served as the focal point for quilt production. Women began to form Ladies Church Groups and sewed numerous quilts for various fundraisers and other forms of community aid.

It is also important to look at the educational opportunities for women outside of those obtained in the home and from finishing schools. Educational opportunities opened up for middle and upper class women as the nineteenth century progressed. By 1891, women between the ages of ten and nineteen had a literacy rate of 85% in New Brunswick, and 90% in Nova Scotia.⁶⁵ There were a number of colleges that provided

Pottersfield Press, 1989): 15.

⁶²"Mary Bradley's Reminiscences: A Domestic Life in Colonial New Brunswick,": 92.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Margaret Conrad, "Recording Angels; The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces of Canada, 1750-1950," The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History, eds. Alison Prentice and Susan Mann Trofimenkoff (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985): 58. For a full discussion of the evangelical contribution to feminism see Olive Banks, Faces of Feminism (Oxford, 1981): Ch. 2.

⁶⁵Census of Canada, vol. II, table XIII (1890-1891): 194-216, cited in Conrad, "Recording Angels; The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces of Canada,

training, such as the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, the Nova Scotia Agricultural College, and the Saint John Vocational School. Mount Allison University⁶⁶ and Acadia University were among the first institutions in the British Empire to accept women.⁶⁷ The roots of Mount Allison's Fine Arts programme lay in the opening of their Women's Academy in 1854 where art was part of the curriculum.⁶⁸ A number of these students went on to teach art at the Academy from 1873-1893.⁶⁹ Mount Allison offered both a four year Bachelor of Fine Arts degree and a three year Craft course leading to a certificate. Mrs. Alonzo Beal has a quilt, circa 1890, made by her grandmother, Emma Harris, who graduated from Mount Allison University in Arts in 1860.⁷⁰ The Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, initially named the Victoria School of Art and Design, was established in 1887.⁷¹ The first evidence of Arts and Crafts classes, open to both men and women, was in 1912.⁷² In 1919, the school's new principal, Elizabeth Nutt, who succeeded Arthur

1750-1950": 41.

⁶⁶It is important to remember to whom these educational opportunities were made available. Tuition and residential fees at Mount Allison University were approximately the same as an average New Brunswick agricultural worker's wages for one year. Therefore this institution's enrollment was not representative of all the social classes of the region. John G. Reid, "The Education of Women at Mount Allison, 1854-1914" Acadiensis vol. 12 no. 2 (Spring 1983): 4.

⁶⁷Conrad, "Recording Angels; The Private Chronicles of Women from the Maritime Provinces of Canada, 1750-1950": 48.

⁶⁸Virgil Hammock, "Art at Mount Allison," ArtsAtlantic vol. 1 no. 3 (Summer/Fall 1978): 16.

⁶⁹Ibid, 17.

⁷⁰Exhibition of Quilts (Sackville, NB: The Owens Art Gallery, Apr. 5-26, 1970): n. pag..

⁷¹Donald Soucy, "More Than a Polite Pursuit: Art College Education for Women in Nova Scotia, 1887-1930s," Art Education (March 1989): 23-24.

⁷²A 1912 pamphlet advertises arts and crafts classes which included working with metal and wood. However, china painting, often considered a craft, was offered as early as 1896. Donald Soucy and Harold Pearse, The First Hundred Years: A History of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (Fredericton and Halifax: the University of New Brunswick Faculty of Education and the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1993): 38; 61.

Lismer, incorporated embroidery into the craft classes.⁷³ In 1925, the school's status was elevated to 'college', and when the motto of "Heart and Head and Hand" was adopted, design, decorative art and craft became the second category of the college's curriculum.⁷⁴ While there is no evidence of quilting being included in the craft courses at either of these schools, training in other needle arts and studio courses would only enhance a quilter's technique and style.

At the heart of women's political endeavours to gain equality and legal rights in the nineteenth century, lay the voluntary philanthropic organizations. Philanthropic endeavours by 'ladies of leisure' were initiated in the latter part of the nineteenth century. The middle to upper class women residing in urban centres offered assistance to needy lower class women. The Haven was established in 1887 in Saint John, New Brunswick.⁷⁵ Victorian society believed a woman would be robbed of her femininity and morality if she worked. For single women, it became slightly more acceptable. In 1869, the wives of Halifax's elite established a home called The Temporary Home for Young Women Seeking Employment in the urban centre. Its purpose was to care for the moral well being of these women, protecting women of an "unsuspecting disposition" from many "perils and temptations".⁷⁶ This home is thought to be a fore-runner of the YWCA, which emerged in the late 1800s.⁷⁷ Groups such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union

⁷³Soucy and Pearse, 83.

⁷⁴Ibid., 94-95.

⁷⁵Its initial aim was to provide a home for prostitutes, but expanded its role and took in abandoned children, women devastated by disasters, like the Springhill mine explosion in 1891, and ex-prisoners. Fingard, "The 1880s: Paradoxes of Progress," 102.

⁷⁶"Report on the Home for Young Women Seeking Employment, Halifax 1870," Atlantis vol. 5 no. 2 (Spring, 1980): 197, first published as the First Annual Report of the Temporary Home for Young Women, pamphlet, 1870.

⁷⁷Ibid., 196.

(WCTU), The Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE), the Women's Institute (WI), the Red Cross and others also organized women's participation in the public sphere. The Women's Institutes were founded across Canada with the purpose of raising "the standard of homemaking and health as well as to improve the intellectual and cultural life of rural women".⁷⁸ The Women's Institute was instrumental in keeping the quilting tradition alive and was one of the most influential groups in the province.⁷⁹ When the Red Cross established a chapter in Nova Scotia, many women from the WI worked for both groups.⁸⁰ The difference between these groups and the two homes is that the WI and IODE focused more on organizing a group of women with the goal of producing essential needs, raising funds for shelters or families, and raising interest in health care, rather than trying to influence and secure the moral upstanding of women. Through these agencies, quilts were used as networking tools within the group, and within the community. Whether it was raising funds for a charity or missionary endeavour, commemorating historical events and local politicians and dignitaries, or serving as banners and flags advertising slogans for women's rights, quilts became financial, commemorative, and political agents.

Quilts continued to be sources of relief and enterprise throughout the twentieth century. Quilts were also instrumental items of need - sent abroad during the two World Wars,⁸¹ or to fellow Canadians in times of sickness, sorrow, or disasters such as floods,

⁷⁸ Robson and MacDonald, 22.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid., 24.

⁸¹ Donna Gorham, national chairperson of the Red Cross creations program in 1988, stated in an article that assistance provided by the Red Cross volunteers dates as far back as the Boer War of 1899 when items, such as quilts, were provided to help the sick and wounded. "The Art of Quilting," Halifax Chronicle-Herald, 30 July 1988, "The Novascotian": 10.

mine explosions, and fires. The Red Cross records indicate that from 1915 to 1965, Nova Scotia sent 43,323 quilts overseas.⁸² The relief effort during the Depression of the 1930s sent quilts across Canada, and in 1950 thousands of quilts were sent to Manitoba for flood victims.⁸³ These numbers speak of the hard work and generosity of these women's organizations.

An important area in which women gained "public" opportunities linked directly with quilting was the exhibition, originating with the agricultural and provincial fairs. Beginning in 1765, Hants County in Nova Scotia has held an annual agricultural exhibition.⁸⁴ New Brunswick also organized provincial agricultural fairs with the first one held in 1864 and continuing triennially.⁸⁵ These local and provincial exhibitions developed into stimulating and competitive arenas, and quilts soon became regular and popular items to exhibit. Quilts appear in Nova Scotia's exhibition records for items sent to the great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations held at the Crystal Palace in London, England in 1851.⁸⁶ In 1854, Halifax began holding Nova Scotia Industrial Exhibitions of their own and again, a number of quilts are listed in the records under the "Manufactures of Woolen, Linen, and Cotton Department" as well as the "Fine Arts (Ladies) Department".⁸⁷ Organizations such as the WI and the YWCA, also offered a

⁸²This calculation does not amount to the total since the records for some years did not distinguish between quilts and other bed coverings and the records for two years are missing. Robson and MacDonald, 24.

⁸³Robson and MacDonald, 24.

⁸⁴Conroy, 41.

⁸⁵Wallace-Casey, 31.

⁸⁶Robson and MacDonald, 27. This exhibition of all nations was organized by Britain in 1851 as a means to celebrate its industrial might and national wealth. Joseph Paxton's massive iron and glass building, designed specially for the exhibition, became known as the "Crystal Palace".

⁸⁷Robson and MacDonald, 27.

chance for exhibition and competition by organizing and mounting their own exhibitions. These shows provided women with an occasion to display their work publicly, win prizes, gain civic, national, and sometimes international recognition and respect, meet other quilters, and exchange ideas and techniques.

The third way in which quilts delineate information and meaning is by their motive for inception, placement and use or non-use. In the nineteenth century, quilts served as scrapbooks, primarily because they held traces of fabric from a mother's apron, a daughter's nightgown, or a father's plaid shirt. In some instances, traces of each family member can be seen in a quilt. More importantly, quilts illuminate the maker's life cycle and mark life's rites of passage. Life's most important moments are marked with special baby, marriage, and death quilts.

Time is an important aspect of a quilt. Besides the incredible amount of time invested into its creation, a quilt exists through time and often incurs many transitions. Quilts defy temporality. Therefore, the quilt, like its maker, has a life cycle. John Forrest and Deborah Blincoe, in their book The Natural History of the Traditional Quilt, believe that the quilt's life cycle contains four parts.⁸⁸ First, is the conception, when the quiltmaker forms an idea and design. Second, comes birth, when these thoughts materialize into fabric pieces. Third, is the life span of the quilt which is affected by its purpose and surroundings. And finally, is death, which occurs once the quilt can no longer function as it was originally intended.⁸⁹ I would like to add one more aspect to the life cycle: rebirth or reincarnation. Once a quilt is pronounced "dead", it is sometimes cut

⁸⁸John Forrest and Deborah Blincoe, The Natural History of the Traditional Quilt (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995): 97.

⁸⁹Ibid.

down or ripped up. Depending on its condition, a quilt could be cut down for a crib quilt or quilted cushion top, used as batting for a new quilt, or ripped into strips for a hooked rug. In all these cases, a quilt experiences a metamorphosis. As Forrest and Blincoe aptly point out, it is important to consider the different types of quilts when considering various life cycles and life spans.⁹⁰ The life span of a patch quilt and of a fancy quilt are entirely different. A patch quilt is placed into service for everyday use while a fancy quilt is put into storage and only brought out on special occasions. In fact, if a fancy quilt is cared for properly, it is never intended to die, serving as an heirloom handed down for generations.⁹¹

A quilt is also used as a measure of time in a woman's life, marking certain milestones. In Atwood's Alias Grace, her protagonist, after years of sewing quilts for others, finally sews one for herself. Reflecting the important people and stages of her life, Grace sews a Tree of Paradise quilt as she felt that, once pardoned, leaving the Penitentiary was like "passing through the gates of Hell and into Paradise".⁹² She alters the pattern to suit her own taste and includes material representing the people and stages of her life; including a faded yellow piece of material from her prison nightgown.⁹³

Time is also an important component of investigating women's history. Margaret Conrad, in her article "Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home: Time and Place in Canadian Women's History," examines how private documents, such as diaries and quilts, serve as valuable tools for "learning how the larger historical forces intersect with

⁹⁰Forrest and Blincoe, 153.

⁹¹Ibid.

⁹²Atwood, 536.

⁹³Ibid., 551.

women's daily realities - how 'census time' intersects with 'women's time' ".⁹⁴ The traditional chronological manner of time-lines highlight important events like political change and unrest. These types of time-lines can still be used for women's history; however, Conrad believes women working in the home judged time not by the changing governments or wars, but by family and community events.⁹⁵ Some women measured time in terms of the amount put into a domestic chore or the number of times they completed a task. A handwritten notation about a crazy quilt made by Lelia MacLachlan, mentioned above, states that her quilt contains 930 pieces and that it was begun in Lunenburg, Nova Scotia in December 1887 and was completed in Montréal in November 1891.⁹⁶ It is not rare to see footnotes attached to quilts reporting the number of pieces, stitches, or how many times the needle had been threaded. Rebecca Ells, of Port Williams, Nova Scotia, recorded proudly in her diary that in 1902 "she churned 1363 ¼ pounds of butter".⁹⁷ It is no wonder that many quilt patterns were inspired from domestic activities. Two examples include the Churn Dasher pattern which reflects the inside design of a butter churn and a Rolling Pin Star pattern which is a stylized version of the everyday kitchen utensil.

Ways of thinking about space are often tied to gender. By discussing space in relation to quilts, it is infinitely connected to women through the inference of the home.

A quilt is closely linked to time and memories. Quilts were the most revered item taken

⁹⁴Conrad, "Sundays Always Make Me Think Of Home: Time and Place in Canadian Women's History," : 70.

⁹⁵Ibid.. While I agree women marked time in this fashion, it is important to remember that women chose to record worldly events, such as World War I, as well as familial and community events with their quilts.

⁹⁶Didactic panel, Fisheries Museum in Lunenburg, NS.

⁹⁷Acadia University Archives, Rebecca Ells Diary, 1901-05, cited in Conrad, " 'Sundays Always Make Me Think of Home' , ": 72.

when a daughter moved away from her home to establish a new life with her husband and children. Quilts became a lifeline connecting families separated by geography.⁹⁸ Occasionally, family members would mail each other pieces of fabric to be used for quilts. The exchanged pieces of fabric would serve just as photographs do for distant relatives today. By symbolizing a particular family member, the fabric scrap confirmed existence, and closed the geographical gap.⁹⁹ In this sense a quilt transcends a fixed space.

It should now be apparent that quilts are conduits of meaning on many levels, their importance reaching beyond the individual needs of the quilter and her family. Initially, quilts were women's work, and it is the quilt that is one of a very few forms of material evidence attesting to the amount of work women accomplished. Women's work could be immortalized in a quilt, for it is difficult to evidence the thousands of dishes washed or the loaves of bread baked.¹⁰⁰ As previously mentioned, Gen Doy cautions against seeing 'the domestic' as peripheral, subordinate and inferior. As I have demonstrated, this was anything but the case as quilts produced in the home impacted on the community's commerce, recorded political and social realities and were valued and respected as skillfully executed heirlooms. Quilts can be read as symbols of class, culture, religion, community, and character, as icons of history and markers of time and space. In the nineteenth century, quilts were transformed from testaments of domesticity, to expressions of women's creativity, to political emblems and used as a means to help women expand their world. Through quilts, we are able to see the cultural, historical and

⁹⁸Hedges, "The Nineteenth Century Diarist and Her Quilts," 296.

⁹⁹Ibid., 297.

¹⁰⁰Ibid., 296.

artistic heritage of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Quilts are truly windows to our past.

Chapter Two At Home In The Art Gallery

“...the transformation of the quilt from a private, domestic textile object to one that is at home in the public realm of galleries, museums, and lecture halls is a *fait accompli*.”

-Patricia Malarcher¹
(editor of Surface Design Journal)

What happens when you frame something? How does it affect what you are looking at? A frame is a border, either physical or conceptual, which shapes a viewer's perception. In this chapter, I discuss how the frame surrounding the quilt has transformed. For centuries, women have been putting their quilts into quilting frames and finishing them with borders. Now, artists and art galleries are framing quilts. The difference is that it is not a technical aspect or a horizontal frame but rather an aesthetic and vertical one. As discussed in Chapter One, the vertical placement of quilts is rooted in the nineteenth century, however it is this new fine art environment which is expanding the quilt discourse. As artists move quilts from the horizontal plane of the bed they continue to renegotiate the category of “quilt”. Most often, artists and galleries are not literally framing quilts, however their mere placement on the walls frames them as fine art. The “transformation” or move that Malarcher mentions in the above quote may indeed be a *fait accompli*, but are quilts truly “at home” in this arena? Their acceptance and approval by artists, art historians, art critics and the general public does not appear to be a *fait accompli*. The art gallery and museum are redefining the discourse surrounding quilts as their classification as hobby or artifact changes to fine art object. In this chapter

¹Patricia Malarcher, “Contemporary Quilts: Taking Stock,” Surface Design Journal vol. 20 no. 3 (Spring 1996): 2.

I discuss three main concerns which have surfaced as a result of this newly achieved status; namely, the exploitation of the quilt as a commodity, the alignment of quilts with modern art movements, and the split between quilts and their history and culture.

It was not until I saw Joyce Wieland's² (1931-1998) Reason Over Passion (1968) at the National Gallery of Canada, that I began to think of quilts as art objects and their planar shift from the bed to the wall. This led me to explore today's quiltmaking tradition, and the use of the quilt by contemporary artists and to question the extent to which quilts are being recognized and exhibited in art galleries and museums.

Quilts are represented in the textile collections of most provincial museums and there are two museums in Canada devoted solely to textiles: The Museum of Textiles in Toronto, Ontario and the Marsil Museum in St.-Lambert, Québec. However, these museums are not only collecting and exhibiting historical quilts. Despite readily available, machine made blankets and comforters, traditional quiltmaking is still thriving and steadfastly evolving from the monochromatic pieced scrap quilts of our foremothers.

The popularity of quilts throughout Canada has increased their visibility in a variety of environments. Provincially, quilts have been used as a means to promote local artistry and tradition. In Nova Scotia, the Department of Tourism and Culture declared 1989 the "Year of the Quilt" and 1997 the "Year of the Needle Arts".³ These two theme years generated a number of special events and exhibitions such as Quilt '89 at the Art

²With her landmark solo exhibition at The National Gallery, True Patriot Love (1971) and her retrospective at the Art Gallery of Ontario (1987), the first retrospective of a living Canadian woman artist, Wieland is heralded for her contribution to Canadian women's art and for breaking through modernism's hierarchies of "high" and "low", "marginal" and "mainstream" art with her quilts.

³This can be linked to the tourism industry as a means to encourage travel by promoting local artistry. However, this issue, while important, will not be discussed here.

Gallery of Mount St. Vincent University, and Patterns (1989) at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. In New Brunswick, Moncton's YWCA annual quilt fair is the largest of its kind in Atlantic Canada. The four-day event, beginning with four local quilters twenty-three years ago, now functions with the help of 275 volunteers. Approximately 5,000 visitors attend each year and between \$20,000 to 25,000 is raised for the development of programs at the Moncton YWCA's Women's Resource Centre. From this fair, Diana Fowler LeBlanc, wife of Governor General Romeo LeBlanc, has purchased six quilts for official gifts to present to heads of state who visit Rideau Hall.

Besides being presented as state gifts, quilts have been recognized by authors as literary gifts.⁴ Quilts are used as expressive vehicles from which a variety of themes are highlighted or extrapolated, as we saw with Alias Grace. Another Canadian novel, Quilt, uses the activity of piecing together a quilt for a church raffle to introduce the reader to the book's characters and plot.⁵ Living in rural Nova Scotia, the main character, Sam Sanford, has taken a woman, named Myrt, into her home, from social services, who was being abused by her husband. The plot unfolds as a small network of women gather to sew the quilt. Sam tries to persuade Myrt to participate, arguing that quilting would ease her pain and pass the time.⁶ Despite her attempts, the tradition is lost on the young Myrt who shows no interest.

⁴There are at least two web sites which reference hundreds of novels with quilts, quilting, or quilters as integral components to the book. For more information see Quilts in Literature, internet website: <http://www.people.virginia.edu/~jk15c/annot.html> and Quilts, Quilting, and Patchwork in Adult Fiction, internet website: http://.nmt.edu/~breynold/quiltfiction_adult.html. These two sites only include books appealing to adults. There are other sites for quilts in fiction for children and young adults, as well as sites referencing technical quilting books.

⁵Donna E. Smyth, Quilt (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1982).

⁶Smyth, 113.

Aside from history, the artworld, the tourism industry, and literature, quilts are also infiltrating popular culture. Through film, television and advertising, quilts are cast in the pivotal role of storytelling. The film How to Make An American Quilt (1995) is based on Whitney Otto's novel⁷ and tells the story of a young woman, who stays with her grandmother and great aunt while finishing her thesis on the ritual present in women's handiwork, like quilting. The grandmother and great aunt invite their quilting group over to sew a wedding quilt for the young woman. With each quilting session, the seven women's lives are revealed and moments of love, friendship, and family unfold and form the meaning behind their individually designed patches for the quilt. On a more sombre note, the television series Profiler also adopted the quilt for plot development. An episode titled "Home for the Homicide" (December 1998) portrayed a murderer who would cut a piece of material from his victims' clothes and place it in his sister's sewing basket. Using them in her quilt, she inevitably pieced together a patchwork of material evidence. In terms of advertising, Bounty paper towel sells itself as being "quilted, absorbent and strong", therefore "quilted" is an advantage since it is paired with the other two descriptives. It also refers to the home, with printed images on the paper towel of a country home with a row of quilts hanging on the clothesline. These examples illustrate how quilts are used as thematic and marketing tools.

The arena where we see the most expansion is in the transformation of the quilting bee. The modest gatherings of neighbours have developed into regional and national quilting guilds. To date, New Brunswick has seven quilting guilds⁸ and Nova

⁷Whitney Otto, How to Make an American Quilt, 1st ed. (New York: Villard Books, 1991).

⁸These include the Elm City Quilter's Guild (Fredericton), the Fredericton Quilters Guild, the Greater Moncton Quilters' Guild, the Sussex Vale Quilters Guild, the Marco Polo

Scotia has one guild, the Mayflower Handquilters Society, which oversees ten chapters throughout the province. There are also a number of churches throughout both provinces that form their own quilting groups. Nationally, the Canadian Quilters' Association produces a quarterly newsletter, The Canadian Quilter, and organizes annual Quilt Canada conferences and juried exhibitions. In 1990, the Canadian Quilt Study Group (CQSG) was formed for the purpose of encouraging and advancing the "study and research about quiltmakers, quilting, and quilts".⁹ The CQSG also publishes a quarterly newsletter Coverstories and research papers from their biennial seminars in Patchwords.

The small network of women gathering to quilt and swap patterns has grown by way of conferences, retreats, books, periodicals, the internet, fairs, and exhibitions. Besides using recycled material, quilters can select a variety of materials from a number of fabric stores as well as specialty quilt shops selling the latest gadgets and quilt kits with pre-cut pieces. Technological advances have not made the quilt obsolete. Contrarily, technology has enhanced the production of quilts with computer software such as Electric Quilt, and Quilt Pro and chemical treatments like cyanotype, which makes fabric light sensitive (similar to photographic film). These resources provide an even larger network of exchange and development within the quilting tradition. With these advancements, artists are adopting innovative techniques and designs and incorporating other media into their quilts. The challenge to the quilt's format began with the crazy

Quilters Guild (Saint John), the Kennebecasis Quilting Guild (Quispamsis) and the Northstar Guild (Bathurst).

⁹Canadian Quilt Study Group, internet website: <http://www.geocities.com/~cqsg>

quilt and continues with today's artists who are pushing the notion of what constitutes a quilt even further.

One such artist, Margaret Sawyer of Moncton, New Brunswick, working exclusively with quilts, exemplifies these recent trends with her quilt Networking (1989) (Fig. 3). Sawyer's technique correlates to the quilt's meaning. She applies a layer of netting over the quilt and unconventionally turns it 45 degrees to assume a diamond shape as it hangs on the wall. Sawyer has developed a variation of the pieced quilt by joining each square only at the corners. The spaces between each square symbolize the difference and uniqueness of each piece and yet they remain slightly connected to each other through the sharing of common threads. Sawyer's quilt serves as a metaphor for the essence of quilters and the strong sense of community emerging out of this network. Her title also refers to the explosion of knowledge and material present within the quilting milieu, be it on a regional, provincial, national, or international level.

Typically, quilting bees and this "networking" aspect have been undermined and denigrated as mere gossip sessions. For the most part, gossip is often viewed as a morally inferior pursuit. Gossip can sometimes be unproductive and harmful to others; however, it is not gender specific and can also be a rich resource for feminist projects which challenge master narratives. Its importance lies in its place in everyday life. Lorraine Code, in "Gossip, or in Praise of Chaos" attempts to work towards an "epistemology of everyday life" by examining gossip and reclaiming its value from its "habitual denigration as merely an idle female pursuit."¹⁰ Code's point is "to show that gossip, for all its randomness, produces knowledge so valuable that it can contest the paradigm

¹⁰Lorraine Code, "Gossip, or in Praise of Chaos," Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations (New York: Routledge, 1995): 144.

status of scientific method as the only reliable means of establishing truth”.¹¹ In “Gossip as Testimony,” Irit Rogoff agrees that gossip is a form of knowledge, however she does not attempt to cleanse it from its pejorative reputation. Rather, she argues that within gossip lies “a radical model of postmodern knowledge which would serve us well in the reading and rewriting of gendered historical narratives.”¹² I agree with both writers, as I feel gossip can produce valuable knowledge, and I also contend, as in Chapter One, that gossip and the quilting bee need to have their value restored. There is no doubt that women construct knowledge out of this ritual. When women begin to quilt they are situated at a distance from each other around the quilting frame. As the quilting progresses, they move closer together as the sides of the quilt are rolled up. The physical closeness parallels the psychological closeness.¹³ It is through the dialogue at a quilting bee that knowledge is exchanged, lives are revealed, laughter is shared and current political and social events are discussed. They piece together information to yield knowledge, just as they piece together scraps of fabric to yield a quilt.¹⁴

Besides art historians’ and feminists’ attempts to ascribe some degree of seriousness to the quilting bee, fibre artists are working to have quilts taken seriously. In her article “Breaking the Glass Ceiling”, Lynn Basa, believes that in order for fibre artists and their artwork to be taken seriously, there must be three components present: art making, awareness, and activism.¹⁵ This last element is of importance because through

¹¹Code, 150.

¹²Irit Rogoff, *Gossip as Testimony: a Postmodern Signature*,” Generations & Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings, ed. Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge, 1996): 59.

¹³Judy Elsley, “A Textual Quilting Bee,” Quilts As Text(iles): The Semiotics of Quilting (New York: Peter Lang, 1996): 53.

¹⁴Code, 146.

¹⁵Lynn Basa, “Breaking the Glass Ceiling,” Fiberarts vol. 20 no. 3 (November/December

quilting circles and guilds, artists “already have in place a network of support groups that far outstrips that of any other artistic discipline”.¹⁶

Basa’s statement is representative of some fabric artists’ desire to gain acceptance in the artworld. Malarcher writes that it is time to move beyond seeing the quilting movement as a series of revivals and begin to scrutinize it as a serious art form with a critical eye.¹⁷ Quilts are often written about by focusing on their construction and design elements which denies a quilt’s treatment as a serious fine art object. While I have the deepest respect and appreciation for their technical excellence, and admire their formal aesthetics, I feel method is most important as it relates to meaning and its historical and social relevancy such as Four-Patch (c.1810) (Fig. 1), discussed in Chapter One, and Sawyer’s Networking (1989) (Fig. 3) mentioned above. By the 1960s, when conceptual art began to take form, conceptual artists felt the ideas should take precedence over the aesthetic. As Basa points out, American artist Suzanne Lacy felt that the challenge was “to link conceptualism with craftsmanship, so that the seduction of the medium, as important as that is, isn’t the only thing worthy of discussion about the work”.¹⁸ As the quilt moves from the bedroom to the art gallery, its success relies on the realization of this link between conceptualism and artistry.

The women’s movement of the 1970s promoted a return to women’s artistic heritage. The quilt became a visual metaphor for women’s lives and women’s culture.¹⁹

The 1970s also saw major museums exhibiting traditional quilts as art objects rather than

1993):40.

¹⁶Basa, 40.

¹⁷Malarcher, 2.

¹⁸Basa, 40.

¹⁹Lucy R. Lippard, “Up, Down, and Across: A New Frame for New Quilts,” The Artist & The Quilt, ed., Charlotte Robinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983): 32.

as historical artifacts. While these exhibitions were well attended and the move was highly praised, it did not occur without criticism.

The quilts' vertical installation and non-use is not a new concept. As I have already indicated, privately, quilts often hung on the walls of pioneer homes to block cold drafts and crazy quilts were placed on the walls and chesterfields of many Victorian living rooms. Publicly, women displayed their quilts at community events and agricultural exhibitions. The disapproval of some stems not from this planar shift but *how* various types of environments are framing the quilt. Whether it is the white modernist cube of a contemporary art gallery or a historical settlement such as Kings Landing in New Brunswick,²⁰ curators create a framework of how the visitor will view and think about these objects. Radka Donnell believes that "the acceptance of quilts as art comes at too high a price for quiltmakers". She continues, "to have one's quilts stylized into art objects, and to be accepted as an artist only on design terms, is totally depersonalizing."²¹ Donnell's criticism derives from exhibitions which have highlighted quilts' formal elements, such as the exhibition Abstract Design in American Quilts at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971 and American Pieced Quilts at the Smithsonian in 1972. These exhibitions are often referred to as the first time traditional quilts hung on the walls of an art museum. However, prior to this exhibition, the Newark Museum, in New Jersey, organized an exhibition in 1965 entitled Optical Quilts, thus beginning the

²⁰Kings Landing Historical Settlement reenacts rural living along the Saint John River Valley in the nineteenth century. Quilting bees are a part of the special events organized throughout their operating season. For more information see Kings Landing Historical Settlement, internet website, <http://www.gov.nb.ca/kingslanding/home.html>

²¹Radka Donnell, "Out of Silence: Contemporary Quilts," Special Focus: Contemporary Quilts (Galerie Women Artists, 1990): 19.

endless pairing of quilts with Minimalist, Abstract, Pop and Op art movements by linking their formal elements.

The first criticism some feminist artists and writers have concerns this link to modern art movements as it results in a comparison to male painters. Quilts therefore gain validation as an art form because male artists have incorporated design elements similar to those of the quilting tradition into their work. Quilts are recognized as art once similarities can be drawn to “high” art. Therefore quilts are permitted entry into the artworld by riding the coat tails of modernist (male) painting. In The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition, author Jonathan Holstein draws comparisons between pieced quilts and modern (male) painters like Andy Warhol and Kenneth Noland, failing to cite any female modern painters.²² In his catalogue essay for American Pieced Quilts, these “resemblances” are discussed as “coincidences” rather than sources of inspiration or appropriation. Holstein states, “the finely realized geometry of the pieced quilt, coupled with this sophisticated sense for the possibilities of color and form, produced such works which *mirror* (my emphasis) in startling ways contemporary painting trends.”²³ As Mainardi points out, from this quote, one is left to wonder how something from the past can mirror, or imitate, something contemporary. This backward appropriation portrays the “innovators as followers”.²⁴

²²Jonathan Holstein, The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition (Greenwich, Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973): 113. Holstein continues to juxtapose the two art forms along gender lines by using masculine singular pronouns for painting and feminine plural pronouns for quilting. Holstein, The Pieced Quilt: 115.

²³Jonathan Holstein, American Pieced Quilts (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1972): 13.

²⁴Patricia Mainardi, “Quilts: The Great American Art,” Feminism and Art History: Questioning the Litany, eds. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard (New York: Harper & Row, 1982) : 344.

This leads to the second concern with exhibiting quilts as art. By highlighting formal aesthetics, a quilt's cultural importance and social context are erased from the art form. Miriam Schapiro believes that "if we were to remove them [quilts] from the frame of reference of women's culture, we would obscure a unique aspect of their identity, and women would lose a significant element of their own history."²⁵ In The Pieced Quilt: An American Design Tradition, Holstein stated that his intention was to "put aside the romantic associations of the quilt in American life".²⁶ In the exhibition, he used formalism to provide a high art framework within which traditional quilts could be viewed. By doing so, Holstein erased the most valuable aspect of a quilt, for often the production of a quilt is as much the subject as the object. As Mainardi argues, Holstein attributed quilts with adjectives like "strong", "bold", and "bravado", reinforcing the link to male painting and their acceptance in the artworld and gave appliqué quilts descriptives such as "pretty" and "decorative" aligning them with women and marginalizing them from the artworld by excluding them from the exhibition.²⁷ By ignoring appliqué quilts, Holstein eliminated a portion of the quilting tradition and attempted to distance piece quilts from its rightful place in quilts' and women's culture.

The problem is that the rise of fibre art occurred during the modernist era which forcibly split textiles from "its history and social place".²⁸ Holstein's exhibition attempted to strip quilts of their history and make them neutral. Fortunately, formalism has been overshadowed by postmodernist and feminist emphases on textile's historical

²⁵Miriam Schapiro, "Geometry and Flowers," The Artist & The Quilt, ed., Charlotte Robinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983): 31.

²⁶Jonathan Holstein, The Pieced Quilt, 8.

²⁷Mainardi, 343-344.

²⁸Ruth Scheuing, "Penelope and the Unraveling of History," New Feminist Art Criticism, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995): 188.

and social role²⁹ by curators and artists, thus providing a more appropriate home for quilts.

Holstein is often touted as being responsible for introducing quilts to the artworld. However, that same year, Joyce Wieland's quilts were featured as part of her solo exhibition True Patriot Love at the National Gallery of Canada. Predating both these shows, were two exhibitions of quilts held in 1967 and 1970 at the Owens Art Gallery of Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. Both shows were organized by the Sackville Art Association of New Brunswick and featured antique and contemporary quilts. These three exhibitions demonstrate the emergence and acceptance of both antique and contemporary traditional quilts as well as contemporary art quilts in the art gallery in Canada and Atlantic Canada.

Sawyer's quilt, Breaking with Tradition: Smashing the Dresden Plate (1994), (Fig. 4) critically responds to Holstein's exhibition by juxtaposing the quilting tradition with modernism. Recognizing the popularity of the Dresden Plate pattern, Sawyer decided to break free from this traditional pattern and push the motif by smashing the plate into pieces.³⁰ Beginning with a nearly intact plate in the top left hand corner, Sawyer breaks the pattern down into individual units. Large pieces get smaller and smaller while the centre piece floats along side until the smallest unit is smashed into tiny pieces down into the bottom right hand corner. In this section, Sawyer has deconstructed the pattern. In the smashed debris, Sawyer refers to other quilt patterns by creating Pinwheel and Bow Tie patterns from the broken pieces. The title alludes to breaking from quilting traditions; however, tradition resurfaces with these patterns. Has

²⁹Scheuing, 188.

³⁰Margaret Sawyer, personal interview, 19 Aug. 1997.

formalism and perhaps cubism influenced this traditional pattern or just the opposite? This quilt relates conceptually to both modernist art movements and traditional quilting. Sawyer straddles both by smashing tradition into modernism; and within that modernism references tradition.

The third concern for some, is that as fine art objects, quilts will become exploited as commodities. Such was the case in 1992, when the Smithsonian Institute had an antique quilt³¹ mass-produced at a factory in China and sold each one for \$269.³² The National Quilting Association was outraged at the disregard for an American treasure. Many quilters throughout the country were insulted at the reproduction of a one-of-a-kind cultural artifact. The museum defended itself by explaining they were highlighting the art and craft of American quilting and bringing awareness to their collection.³³ It is quite ironic that the museum wished to showcase the “art and craft” of American quilting by mass-producing a quilt at a factory in China. It is unfortunate that the museum felt compelled to copy the quilt, however, many visual art objects run the risk of being used for profit once they enter a gallery or museum’s collection. Many major museums turn to commercialism as a means to generate revenue via their permanent collection - simply walk into a museum’s gift shop where you can purchase a Monet Waterlilies umbrella or a deck of Pablo Picasso playing cards. Furthermore, the art gallery and museum are not alone in this venture as the craft and tourism industries have also turned to quilts to suit their economic agendas.

³¹This quilt was made in 1830 by Susan Strong of Frederick County, MD, and bears the design of the Great Seal of the United States, “Great Quilt Debate blankets the Smithsonian,” The Gazette [Montréal] 28 March 1992: K6.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

Artist, Ruth Scheuing believes that all media are charged with their own history³⁴ and textiles are undeniably tied to women's history. Miriam Schapiro concurs pointing out, "What is a quilt? Among other things, it is the history of women...".³⁵ For museums, textiles have become an important component in the documentation of women's historical role.³⁶ However, because historical exhibitions are most known for their "this-is-how-it-was" mentality, they do not escape a critical analysis. At times, the curatorial objective focuses on one object, such as a quilt, from which a general historical statement is extrapolated. If this is the case, I believe it is important to present the contemporary production of quilts to avoid keeping the tradition and its producers in the past. Because the history of women is so closely linked to the history of quilting, it inevitably invites essentialist readings. One way to avoid this is by not presenting quilts in isolation, but by presenting them in the context of their production and by showing diversity by focusing on individual makers. This way, objects are placed within a social and historical framework.

One major historical quilt exhibition in the Atlantic provinces was Old Nova Scotian Quilts, organized by the Nova Scotia Museum in 1993.³⁷ The show brought together fifty quilts from the museum's collection, dating from 1810 to 1952, and travelled across Canada until 1996.³⁸ The accompanying book explored the historical,

³⁴Scheuing, 188.

³⁵Miriam Schapiro, "Geometry and Flowers," 26.

³⁶Margo Mensing, "Close to Home: An Exploration of Historical Perceptions Concerning Women and Crafts, Fiberarts vol. 20 (Nov./Dec. 1993): 43.

³⁷My comments are based on exhibition reviews, as I did not see the exhibition. I am, for the most part commenting on the book, by the same title, which accompanied the show.

³⁸Beginning at the Nova Scotia Museum in 1993, the exhibition continued on to The Confederation Centre Art Gallery and Museum, Charlottetown, PEI; The New Brunswick Museum, Saint John, NB; The Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, ON; The McCord Museum of Canadian History, Montreal, PQ; The Provincial Museum of Alberta,

geographical and social factors that contributed to developing and maintaining the tradition in the province.³⁹ The authors, Scott Robson and Sharon MacDonald, present a well illustrated study highlighted with supporting documentation such as quotes from diaries, newspaper clippings, and listings from private inventories and provincial exhibitions, as well as beautiful reproductions of over fifty quilts. Unfortunately, of the fifty quilts presented, twenty-three remain anonymous and three makers were known only by their quilted initials.⁴⁰ However, the authors did focus on women's role and the impact of quilts outside of the domestic sphere by discussing women's groups and quilt exhibitions. In spite of this, the focus on women's education vis-à-vis quilting is limited to home teachings of sewing, despite the number of art programs (which I mentioned in Chapter One) available at colleges in Nova Scotia at the time. Sewing is portrayed as a natural part of a young girl's rearing and life. The section "Handing Down the tradition - Children Sewing" is illustrated by a photograph of two young girls ironing their dolls' clothes and an excerpt from Godey's Lady's Book (1857) describing a little girl's recollection of her first patchwork.⁴¹ In the section on the sewing machine, the authors describe it as a means to increase productivity. The authors comment that the sewing machine had little impact in Nova Scotia as most continued to piece by hand, but neglect to probe the question why.⁴² Again the section is enhanced with images from Godey's

Edmonton, AB; The Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, Winnipeg, MB; The Canadian Museum of Civilization, Hull, PQ; and Memorial University, St. John's, Nfld.

³⁹Robson and MacDonald, introduction: x.

⁴⁰Of these twenty-three, five were thought to have probably been made by a member of one specific family.

⁴¹Robson and MacDonald, 21.

⁴²Ibid., 36. The authors allude to the fact that the sewing machine eliminated the social aspect of quilting- the quilting bee and the feeling of pleasure and pride that accompanied hand stitching. I agree with these possible explanations and feel it could also be related to the cost of a sewing machine. Advertisements for Raymond's Sewing

Lady's Book (1863) comparing the old sewing machine to the new sewing machine.⁴³ The "old" one depicts a woman hunched over, straining her eyes by candlelight to sew. The "new" one shows two women using a sewing machine with ease. Herein lacks a critical analysis of the conditions of labour and a questioning of the social mechanisms which relegated women to these tasks. The exhibition itself was well received and attended. It presented the supportive documentation, shown in the book, as didactic panels. Mannequins sat around a quilting frame, allowing visitors to participate and add a few stitches. A bed exhibited two quilts, while the rest were hung vertically. Unfortunately, the tradition is left in the past, as its title suggests, as the youngest quilt was from 1952, failing to reference quilting's contemporary situation.

Regardless of the venue, I feel that for the most part, quilts retain a strong bond to women's culture. I agree with Lucy Lippard who believes that quilts cannot be disguised as genderless.⁴⁴ Whether the quilt is at home in the art gallery and museum depends on two factors: how the curator has framed them and the type of quilt being displayed. Ostensibly, art quilts are at home in the fine art setting and I feel they are deserving of much recognition from professional exhibiting institutions. Exhibitions in art galleries and museums are more complex and contested when they are displaying traditional quilts. With regard to these types of quilts, historians have a responsibility in the documentation and preservation of quilts which have been taken from their original owners. Curators also have a responsibility. Holstein's exhibition was problematic because he took a medium, erased its charged history and transplanted it into another

Machines located in Halifax, NS list prices ranging from \$15 to \$45. Robson and MacDonald, 36.

⁴³Robson and MacDonald, 35.

⁴⁴Lippard, "Up, Down, and Across: A New Frame for New Quilts," 33.

medium's history. Nonetheless, I see the quilt's move into institutions, whether an art gallery or museum, as a positive development in the continuum of the quilting tradition. Germaine Greer argues that while embroidery is indeed an art, it belongs in the home not a museum which represents a repository for dead male culture.⁴⁵ Applying this opinion to quilts, I disagree, believing this would limit the quilt's potential for recognition of cultural and artistic importance, and would also deny the quilt its exhibition history which began formally with the agricultural fairs of the nineteenth century. Pennina Barnett states, "if we think, instead, of 'women' and 'textiles' - like theory - as provisional, then we have a more expansive framework: one which enables other voices to be heard; diverse practices to be seen; and new discourses to be released."⁴⁶ By exhibiting quilts in institutions, they attain another forum to convey their narratives, to renegotiate the criteria surrounding the quilting tradition and of "high" and "low" art, and to progress as an art form.

⁴⁵Pennina Barnett, "Afterthoughts on Curating 'The Subversive Stitch'," New Feminist Art Criticism, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995): 77.

⁴⁶Ibid., 84.

Chapter Three:
(Un)covering the Power of Quilts

"I felt like a bird released from its cage."
-Mary Bradley ¹

As Parker points out, embroidery was used both as a means to educate women into ideal femininity and as a weapon to resist it.² Women have been using their sewing skills to resist dominant ideology for centuries, some have done so more openly than others; like the Suffragettes of the 1800s who hoisted cloth banners demanding women's rights. Whereas these women fought for privileges which did not exist, like the right to vote, today's women are fighting against institutions which do exist. In this chapter, I examine the double-edge sword of textiles as sources of enjoyment and as sites of resistance by focussing on two mythological figures to illustrate its historical roots, several art projects, and three contemporary artists. Each of these examples are indicative of a quilt's ability to speak out against threats to women's health and welfare. Specifically, I am referring to disease and violent acts which affect women's physical and psychological well-being. While sickness and violence against women can be viewed as separate occurrences, I treat them as similar in that they both violate a woman's body on multiple levels.

The artwork of Barbara Carter, Janet Pope and Lois Wilby-Hooper evoke reflection on the present state of women's health, in true postmodern fashion, by making

¹"Mary Bradley's Reminiscences: A Domestic Life in Colonial New Brunswick," Atlantis vol. 7 no. 1 (Fall 1980): 97. This quote is taken from a passage written by Mary Bradley while married to her first husband, David Morris, which lasted from 1793 until his death in 1817.

²Rozsika Parker, foreword, The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine (New York: Routledge, 1984): n. pag..

bold critiques of the “cultural certainties” of the world. The “certainty” which Carter and Wilby-Hooper attack is that of the feminine ideal. The pressure to conform to societal standards effects one’s emotional well being which directly effects one’s physical health. Following the lead of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, organizations and quilt guilds are using fabric to address other health issues threatening women, such as breast cancer. Another concern is violence against women and all three artists discussed here, have produced quilts related to this issue. These health concerns are unique and of equal importance; however, the motive for using a quilt as an expressive medium is the same. Beyond the artwork’s iconography, the medium itself contains a message. Artists have made a conscious decision to use a soft, fragile, comforting, and protective medium to depict and expose the harsh realities of sickness, disease, and violence. The artworks aim to provide a voice, to educate, to raise awareness, and to energize a response.

With this subject material, I have reached an intersection and need to renegotiate my position. My decision to destabilize the centre and deconstruct the category ‘woman’ by stressing ‘women’ in Chapter One conflicts with my discussion of issues which effect many women. Because I have a strong concern for issues of violence and disease affecting women, I have employed what Gayatri Spivak refers to as a strategic use of positive essentialism.³ I am referring to women in a general sense as a means to question the societal structures which entertain such threats to women’s health and to explore how artists are using quilts to expose these problems. Also, to avoid slotting women into the role of “victim”, I have substituted it with the term “survivor” or “sufferer” as I feel

³Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988): 271-313.

“victim” implies helplessness and subordination. A survivor has the ability to make choices and despite limited perimeters, there still exists the “potential for action”.⁴

Realizing the symbolic, comforting nature of quilts, many guilds use their quilts as vehicles for social commentary, and support local causes through fundraisers. The Mayflower Handquilters Society’s campaign for 1998 raised funds for non-invasive cancer treatment equipment. In one weekend the guild raised \$10,000.⁵ Elaine Hinks, a member of this quilting group, decided to raise money for abused women with a quilt raffle. Hinks created the centrepiece of Peaceful Dreams which depicts a rainbow arching over a woman sleeping peacefully as a dove watches over her. The border blocks were created by individual women aged seven to seventy.⁶ The Sussex Vale Quilters Guild in New Brunswick participated in their community’s problem by contacting the local women’s shelter. Members produced a number of “cuddle quilts” to be given to a child in need.⁷ The fearful emotions of a dire situation are offset by the comfort, warmth and security of a quilt.

Often, there exists a strong connection between the maker and a quilt or the viewer and a quilt. For the maker, this relationship is created through the act of sewing. The physical bonding of fabric with thread symbolizes the connection between quilter and quilt. Sewing also induces a rhythm in the maker’s psyche. The repetition of a stitch is relaxing, almost meditative, mostly due to the sense of trust felt between the hand,

⁴Susanne Kappeler, The Will To Violence: The Politics of Personal Behaviour (New York: Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1995): 18.

⁵Debbie Breeze, “Regional Reports; Nova Scotia,” Canadian Quilters’ Association, Newsletter vol. 16 no. 3 (Spring 1998):19.

⁶“ ‘Peaceful’ Quilt a Piece of Art,” Halifax Chronicle-Herald, 27 Apr. 1994: B4.

⁷Jean Foglein, “Regional Reports; New Brunswick,” Canadian Quilters’ Association, Newsletter vol. 16 no. 3 (Spring 1998):17.

needle, thread, and material. For the viewer, quilts are readily identifiable, a connection is felt because a quilt generally refers to a familial maker. Quilts evoke a sense of comfort, warmth and security, primarily because they refer to the home and more specifically, to our beds, thereby creating an intimate association.

The bond felt between a quiltmaker or a viewer and a quilt is ostensibly linked to the sense of touch. This sense lends itself to the healing power of quilts. Touch encourages and expresses a closeness, bringing the physical properties of a quilt to life. In The Natural History of the Senses, Diane Ackerman explains that what is fascinating about our senses is their capacity to span cultures, distance, and time.⁸ Touch has a tremendous capacity to connect us to the past, and some of our most cherished memories of people and places are remembered through the sense of touch. This relation to touch and its link to the power of healing is significant in a quilt's use for commemorative art projects.

Once the tragedy inflicted by AIDS and HIV was realized, a quilt was begun as a means to create awareness and honor those lost to the disease. By 1987, in San Francisco, The Names Project was established to manage a collection of cloth panels started by Cleve Jones after he made a quilt for his friend, Martin Feldman.⁹ The community art project was named the AIDS Memorial Quilt. The quilt travels internationally, regrettably, growing larger with every stop as the disease continues to ravage. Each panel is three feet by six feet, the size of a human grave. Their purpose is to celebrate and preserve the memories of those who have died of HIV and AIDS related illnesses. The

⁸Diane Ackerman, The Natural History of the Senses (New York: Random House, 1990): xvi.

⁹Emil Sher, "The AIDS Quilt," The Toronto Star 29 Nov. 1991: A29.

AIDS Quilt has over 42,960 panels which include 83,279 names and the quilt only represents twenty percent of all AIDS deaths in the United States.¹⁰ The World Health Organization proclaimed AIDS the world's fastest spreading epidemic, and worldwide, women are the fastest growing group of new HIV infections¹¹ The AIDS Memorial Quilt marks the first time that an illness has inspired a national monument.¹² The quilt gives a voice to those passed, allows panel makers to grieve, and forces society to acknowledge AIDS and hopefully, react.¹³

By 1989, Canada had started its own AIDS Memorial Quilt which consists of over 500 panels. Unlike its American counterpart, the panels are not sewn together to form one large quilt. Rather, eight panels are sewn together to form a single twelve foot section. There are more than seventy sections which form the Canadian Quilt.¹⁴ Appropriately, one of the first public buildings to display a portion of Canada's AIDS Quilt was Province House in Halifax in 1994. This site fittingly illustrates that AIDS is everyone's concern and affects all people as Province House is the people's House.¹⁵ Its

¹⁰The AIDS Memorial Quilt, internet website: <http://www.aidsquilt.org/quilt/facts.html>. These statistics were last updated 2 Sept. 1999.

¹¹The AIDS Memorial Quilt, internet website: <http://www.aidsquilt.org/namesprojectfoundation>

¹²Peter, Hawkins, "Naming Names: The Art of Memory and the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt," Thinking About Exhibitions, eds. Reesa Greenberg, Bruce W. Ferguson and Sandy Nairne (London: Routledge, 1996): 139.

¹³Another project involving quilts and the HIV/AIDS epidemic is the ABC Quilts Project. Established by Ellen Ahlgren of New Hampshire in 1988, the project brings comfort and happiness to HIV and AIDS infected babies by providing them with their own quilt. To date, approximately 250,000 quilts have been delivered to hospitals, foster homes, day care centres and homes of out-patients to the United States, Puerto Rico, Chile, Moscow, and Romania. For more information see ABC Quilts Project, internet website: <http://www.jbu.edu/ABCQuilts/>

¹⁴Canadian AIDS Memorial Quilt, internet website: http://www.quilt.ca/e_hist.html

¹⁵Maureen Googoo and Rick Conrad, "Putting a Face on AIDS: Ribbons, Quilt Memorials to Victims of Disease," Halifax Chronicle-Herald 2 Dec. 1994: A13.

placement also mimics the display of the American AIDS Memorial Quilt on the Mall in Washington D.C. framed by the Capital and the Washington Monument. Although not a federal capitol, Halifax's positioning of the quilt in front of buildings which stand for power, representation, decision-making and democracy, highlight the need to reverse the public's indifference and the politicians' inaction.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt is similar to the traditional quilting we saw in Chapter One in that it combines a memory quilt and an album or friendship quilt, by piecing together individually made blocks for specific individuals. While a traditional method is used, the discourse surrounding the quilt has been redirected. The AIDS Quilt is an example of the "transition from private to public symbols," from women's culture to national culture, from feminine imagery to feminine *and* masculine imagery, and "from separate spheres to common threads."¹⁶ Due to its scope, it is the largest ongoing community arts project thereby continuing the tradition of neighbours gathering together to sew and produce a quilt. Working together provides people not only with a sense of community but also of accomplishment. The AIDS sufferer or griever does not feel isolated and alone. Those who have lost someone to AIDS feel sewing a panel has eased their grief stating, "to sew is to grieve, to grieve is to heal."¹⁷ The AIDS Quilt's disarming comfort acts as a plea for humanity to pay attention, and it captures a range of emotions from hope and sorrow to rage and love.

With 18,000 Canadian women being diagnosed with breast cancer a year, this disease has become a primary concern for women.¹⁸ Wishing to participate in the fight

¹⁶Elaine Showalter, Sister's Choice (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991): 170.

¹⁷Sher, A29.

¹⁸Life Quilt For Breast Cancer, pamphlet. n.d..

against the disease, Barbra Amesbury and Joan Chalmers organized an exhibition uniting Canadian artists with breast cancer survivors in order to depict the effects of living with breast cancer.¹⁹ The exhibition, Survivors In Search of a Voice: The Art of Courage,²⁰ aspired to stand as a “moving symbol” like the AIDS Quilt²¹ as it travelled to galleries and museums across Canada. Twenty-four artists were chosen and two artists, Barbara Todd and Annette Francoise, produced quilts for their contribution. Todd decided to combine a spiral motif with the coffin shape as symbols for life and youth and old age and death.²² Francoise’s abstract quilt represents both the physical and emotional aspects of cancer by juxtaposing order with chaos.²³ Both artists successfully portrayed the ordeal of battling cancer by choosing a medium so closely linked to women, our bed, sickness, and healing.

The idea for the Life Quilt for Breast Cancer was also conceived in 1995 as a means to provide “emotional support through traditional quilting bees and raises funds to give practical information and support to women with breast cancer.”²⁴ This art-in-progress triptych is composed of three six by eight foot hand-painted cotton quilts and has been hand quilted by thousands as it crosses the country. More than 15,000

¹⁹Barbra Amesbury, Survivors In Search of a Voice: The Art of Courage (Toronto: The Woodlawn Arts Foundation, 1995)

²⁰For more information about this exhibition see Caroline Stevens, Working Bodies: Feminist Alternatives to Passive Representations of “Feminine” Corporeality. M.A. Thesis, Department of Art History, Concordia University, 1996. Stevens examines the exhibition’s denial of passive representations of women through its corporeal existence. Her study also investigates issues of philanthropy, activism and women’s perceived femininity.

²¹Amesbury, 6.

²²Ibid., 15.

²³Ibid., 43.

²⁴Life Quilt For Breast Cancer, pamphlet, n.d..

people across Canada have added stitches to the three quilts.²⁵ The first and second quilts have been completed and I was fortunate enough to add stitches to the third quilt which is near completion. Each painted panel is framed by a double border made of 136, six by six inch, squares created by over 100 individuals which relay personal stories of victory and loss. While the border panels convey stories of personal and varied experiences, the painted centres of each quilt articulate a universal narrative. Each quilt's painted centre was created by artist Gay Mitchell who chose landscape scenes to depict the journey of fighting cancer. The first quilt, Cut in Prime, shows a forest left devastated by clear-cutting. Only the stumps stand amidst a foreboding background. The second quilt, Call to Rebirth, depicts the same landscape, but the tree stumps have been replaced with signs of new growth of grass and fireweed,²⁶ symbolizing the glimmer of hope. The third quilt, The Green Canopy, stands for restoration as mature trees have replaced the damaged site.²⁷ The Life Quilt project also raises funds and distributes educational material in order to raise awareness. The second quilt was unveiled at the World Conference on Breast Cancer in 1997.²⁸ The Life Quilt for Breast Cancer iconically summarized the conference's motto - "Break the Silence - Stop the Epidemic: Open the Doors to Dialogue around the World"²⁹ - with its personal stories and by travelling across Canada reaching millions of people. These selected art projects are few among many

²⁵Life Quilt For Breast Cancer, pamphlet, n.d..

²⁶Anne Marie Todkill, "Fabric of Hope: The Life Quilt for Breast Cancer", Canadian Medical Association Journal vol. 160 issue 1 (1999): n. pag.. reprinted at the internet website: <http://www.cma.ca/cmaj/vol-160/issue-1/issue-1.htm>

²⁷Ibid., n. pag..

²⁸This conference was held July 13-17, 1997 at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

²⁹McGill, internet website; <http://www.mcgill.ca/jgh/hc/12.htm>

which have succeeded in raising awareness and garnering support for AIDS and breast cancer.

Quilts are entering the political arena by speaking up and out about a number of societal issues. However, using cloth as a voice to expose truths is not entirely new to this century. The beginnings of such uses for cloth predates the Suffrage movement³⁰ and can be traced back to ancient Greek mythology. Two female deities whose health was dramatically affected by cloth are Arachne and Philomela.³¹ The work and objectives of Carter, Pope and Wilby-Hooper I discuss parallel these mythological figures.

A confident Arachne challenged Athena, goddess of weaving to a weaving contest. Recognizing that Arachne had woven the better piece, Athena grew angry and hit Arachne on the head with her shuttle. Unable to endure this punishment Arachne hung herself. Sympathizing with the girl, Athena freed her from her noose and said, "Live on indeed wicked girl, but hang thou still".³² Athena then turned the rope into a web and transformed Arachne into a venomous spider destined to weave webs forever.³³

In Spider Weaves the World (1991) (Fig. 5), Janet Pope, of Hansport, Nova Scotia, states that as a fabric artist, she feels a close affinity to the spider and its woven webs. She wanted to celebrate the spider as a sister-creator.³⁴ Pope pays homage to Arachne by recognizing her not only as a sister-creator but also as a heroine. Pope is not

³⁰For more information the Suffragettes use of cloth banners see Lisa Tickner, The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign, 1907-14 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

³¹My thanks to Professor Janice Helland for referring me to Elizabeth Wayland Barber, Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years, Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times (New York: WW. Norton & Co., 1994).

³²Ovid, Metamorphoses vol. 1, book VI, English trans. Frank Justus Miller (1916; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1977): 297.

³³Ovid, 289-299

³⁴Janet Pope, personal interview, 7 June 1997.

alone in this tribute to Arachne. The spider web motif was often stitched into crazy quilts, including Lelia MacLachlan's crazy quilt discussed in Chapter One. Arachne had a great deal of confidence and talent. Even as a spider, Arachne has the ability to use thread to create beautiful patterns which host life and activity. Pope recognizes that, in the past, sewing was used to indoctrinate proper behaviour and that sewing a quilt was often viewed as a type of bondage. However, Pope also recognizes that self expression evolved within the confines of this bondage and that the notion of quilting as a household task changed once the sense of community and artistic expression developed from the quilting bee.³⁵ In Spider Weaves the World, the web is a symbol for this bondage, but within it, Pope finds the liberation to express her creativity and references women's connection to cloth.³⁶

Interestingly, Athena and Arachne were used as examples of proper and improper feminine behaviour as well as proper textile production. Not only did Arachne suffer at the hand of Athena, but she continued to be vilified by nineteenth century society. When John Ruskin³⁷ relayed this myth in an address in 1870, he polarized Arachne and Athena.³⁸ At one end was Athena who embodied "proper" womanhood and "proper" textile-making, and at the other end was the deviant Arachne. The evidence of their character lies in their embroidery.³⁹ Arachne depicted the "unmentionable" by illustrating

³⁵Janet Pope, personal interview, 7 June 1997.

³⁶The focus on women's biological ability to create life and the pairing of women and nature lends itself to essentialism and universalism. While these 'isms' may be evident and problematic, for me, this piece references sewing in women's heritage and addresses the 'bondage' involved in a women's rearing and its role for today's artists.

³⁷John Ruskin was a prominent English art and literary critic and social reformer in the mid to late 1800s.

³⁸Sarat Maharaj, "Arachne's Genre: Towards Inter-Cultural Studies in Textiles," Journal of Design History vol. 4 no. 2 (1991): 75.

³⁹Ibid.

twenty-one instances involving the gods' deceit and violation of women.⁴⁰ She used her weaving as her voice to expose the injustices threatening the health and welfare of women. Athena on the other hand, depicted situations where mortals had challenged gods and were punished (foreshadowing Arachne's fate) and celebrated civic manners, virtues, morals, and the laws of men.⁴¹ Speaking to the women in the audience, Ruskin's model for proper needlework/femininity praised Athena and condemned Arachne's fortitude. Women were encouraged to follow Athena's example and to resist Arachne's unbecoming ways. Ruskin stated, "Do young girls still sew samplers? Let's hope they have not let such sound, Athena-work lapse. It would amount to courting Arachne's fate".⁴² Ruskin's speech reaffirms society's inculcation of the notion of "proper" femininity in the 1800s. Yet, when reading Ovid's poem, I was struck by the sympathetic nature in which he portrayed Arachne. He describes her as graceful and deft.⁴³ This illustrates the shifting perceptions and how myths are readily adapted to fit the belief systems of a society. Both Barbara Carter and Lois Wilby-Hooper reject any received "wisdom" and cease believing in grand narratives by debunking the myth of the ideal woman.

Barbara Carter is a fabric artist from Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia. It was not until she incorporated fabric into her paintings that she decided to work entirely with quilts. Carter deals with issues of alcoholism, abuse, denial and the pressures that enforce social conformity. Her quilt Mother and Daughter (The Legacy) (1990) (Fig. 6), is part of a series of works based on family photographs and focuses on the artist's effort to explore

⁴⁰Maharaj, 75.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Ibid., 76.

⁴³Ovid, 289.

her own identity by examining the women who came before her.⁴⁴ Another piece, titled Their Purpose (1990), depicts four female relatives, lined in the same fashion as Mother and Daughter (The Legacy). The shades of brown Carter has selected for both the figures and the background are “reminiscent of sepia-tone photographs and of rural life”.⁴⁵ The flat background is itself muted, denying the figures their voice and forces the viewer to confront the rigid figures and their body language. Aligned in a row, almost in a militaristic fashion, the women march forward in their “status quo role”. The mother’s side glance suggests an authoritative examining of the daughter making sure she is behaving properly. For Carter, this piece comments on the code of silence between her female family members which went hand in hand with toeing the line. The layers of the quilt reflect the layers of self encountering familial and societal pressures.⁴⁶ Carter’s title is as layered as the actual quilt. By including “The Legacy” in her title, she refers to both quilting abilities and heirloom quilts which are generally passed on from generation to generation. Moreover, Carter alludes to the legacy of a particular set of feminine characteristics passed on from mother to daughter. Her quilt and title act as a metaphor for the way patterns of behaviour are kept like objects. The artist simultaneously refers to treasured objects and despised characteristics. Symbolically, Carter’s break from traditional quilting represents the aspiration of breaking free from old patterns of behaviour.⁴⁷ Her quilt will be passed on with the hope that this challenge to societal conformity will be passed on as well.

⁴⁴Some Women Artists in Nova Scotia Now (Halifax: NS: Art Gallery Mount Saint Vincent University, 1990): n. pag..

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Barbara Carter, personal interview, 4 Aug. 1997.

⁴⁷Ibid.

Carter's use of photographs and fabric is interesting, but certainly not new to quilting. As mentioned in Chapter One, photographs and prints were often incorporated into a quilt's design. Additionally, in pioneer days, when young women moved from home to settle and begin their own family, fabric scraps were exchanged by mail and substituted as photographs. The pieces of fabric included in a quilt would serve as reminders of individual family members or as memories of days spent together. Carter continues this correlation between photography and quilting by using a quilt to reflect on photographs of female family members. Typically, quilts embellished with photographs served as tributes to the person(s) depicted. Here, Carter makes a different comment; she is not simply presenting these women, but *re-presenting* them. Annette Kuhn states that a photographic image conveys meaning beyond the immediate context and speaks more of cultural meanings.⁴⁸ The family photograph serves primarily as a record. Just as pieces of material and quilts did years ago, a photograph stands for visual, physical evidence that the family exists. Kuhn believes a photograph "looks towards a future time when things will be different, anticipating a need to remember what will soon be past".⁴⁹ Kuhn's article focuses on a picture of herself as a baby and deals with her relationship with her mother. She sees the photograph as a public presentation of a "well turned out" child which acts as "a credit to her mother". Carter's Mother and Daughter (The Legacy) represents the generations of "well turned out" women. Kuhn believes family photos

⁴⁸Annette Kuhn, "A Credit to her Mother," Feminist Subjects, Multi-Media: Cultural Methodologies, eds. Penny Florence and Dee Reynolds (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995): 59.

⁴⁹ibid.

construct “the world of the family as a utopia”.⁵⁰ Carter exposes this utopia with her quilted photographs.

In Don't Make Waves (1995) (Fig. 7), Lois Wilby-Hooper, of St.-Stephen, New Brunswick, also symbolizes the externally imposed pressures of social conformity and knowing one's place. It is aptly paired with Carter's piece as the message relays the so-called appropriateness of submitting to one's role. Wilby-Hooper uses the traditional pattern of Sunbonnet Sue, which depicts a young girl standing in profile and whose face is covered by a bonnet. The pattern has been used roughly since the 1900s and continues to be popular today. Like the Dresden Plate pattern, Sunbonnet Sue quilts can often be found at quilt fairs. The figure bears a resemblance to the Holly Hobbie figures I collected as a child. In fact, my grandmother made a wall hanging for all her granddaughters depicting Holly Hobbie. Perfectly poised, in profile, with her bonnet covering her face and her hands clasped behind her back, Holly marches forward with her black cat trailing behind her. It was not until I met and interviewed Wilby-Hooper that I began to think of Holly/Sue in a different manner. As with Kuhn's baby photograph, Holly/Sue is a 'credit to her mother'. The idea for an art quilt using Sue evolved from research Wilby-Hooper was doing on Victorian costume. Through her studies, she began reading a number of advice books for women, popular during the Victorian period. Wilby-Hooper was intrigued to discover that the female writers' names were pseudonyms for male authors.⁵¹ It is telling that men were forming and promoting the characteristics of the “ideal” woman: quiet and submissive, performing selfless acts and occupying every moment with domestic duties. Wilby-Hooper related this “ideal

⁵⁰Kuhn, 64.

⁵¹Wilby-Hooper, personal interview, 25 Aug. 1997.

woman” to Sunbonnet Sue. In Don’t Make Waves, Sue fights to stay afloat as she struggles against the waves. In the artist’s words, “she is far from shore and no help is at hand. The waves obscure her view of the horizon and she rises and falls with no sense of direction.”⁵² The artist selected featureless fabric with no directional pattern to represent Sue’s plight.⁵³ The title is similar to the saying “Don’t rock the boat”. Both advise not to upset the order of things. Sue has perhaps not heeded this advice and strayed outside the confines of proper femininity which resulted in her predicament. This piece is part of a series representing violence against women which I will return to later in the process of revealing the rest of Sue’s journey.

One of the least acknowledged threats to women’s health are violent acts. Specifically, domestic abuse⁵⁴ poses great danger to a number of women in Canada.⁵⁵ In 1993, 59% of those killed in a domestic relationship were women.⁵⁶ This statistic has resulted in a number of shelters being developed for women and children suffering from abuse. In New Brunswick, in 1996, a reported 1074 women were residing at transition houses.⁵⁷ Domestic abuse should be treated as an equally serious infringement to women’s health as cancer and AIDS.

⁵²Lois Wilby-Hooper, artist statement, n.d.

⁵³Lois Wilby-Hooper, personal interview, 25 Aug. 1997.

⁵⁴By the term “domestic abuse”, I am referring to incidents of assault, both physical and psychological, occurring in the home by a family member or from an intimate relationship. I am specifically referring to instances where men are the aggressors, carrying out the abuse against women.

⁵⁵For more information see for example, Martha Albertson Fineman and Roxanne Mykitiuk, The Public Nature of Private Violence (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁵⁶Women in Canada, 3rd edition, Statistics Canada, cat. no. 89-503E (Ottawa: Minister of Industry, 1995): 103

⁵⁷NB Report Card, New Brunswick Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1997: 17.

Aside from the general statistics of domestically abused women across Canada, one of the most brutal focused acts of violence against women was the Montreal Massacre. On December 6, 1989, Mark Lépine walked into an engineering class at the Université de Montréal's Ecole Polytechnique armed with a semi-automatic rifle and declared, "You're all a bunch of feminists, I hate feminists."⁵⁸ He killed fourteen young women⁵⁹ and wounded another thirteen people. Public reaction and newspaper coverage were mixed.⁶⁰ A debate mounted as to whether this was an "isolated act of a madman" or a "reflection of misogyny in our society."⁶¹ Jacques Parizeau, then leader of the Parti Québécois, "spoke of silence as the only way to commemorate this tragedy."⁶² Ignoring Parizeau's attempt to avoid addressing the root of this tragedy, a plethora of vigils, rallies, and commemorative art projects began. However, debate ensued again once the design for a Women's Monument was revealed in Vancouver in 1994. The problem stemmed from the monument's inscription: "...in memory and in grief for all the women who have been murdered by men..."⁶³ Many men felt as though they were being blamed for the acts of a few. In her book, The Will to Violence, Susanne Kappeler notes that

⁵⁸Judy Steed, "Breaking the Cycle of Violence Against Women," The Toronto Star 4 Dec. 1994: A1.

⁵⁹These women were: Geneviève Bergeron (21), Hélène Colgan (23), Nathalie Croteau (23), Barbara Daigneault (22), Anne-Marie Edward (21), Maud Haviernick (29), Barbara Maria Klucznik (31), Maryse Laganière (25), Maryse Leclair (23), Anne-Marie Lemay (27), Sonia Pelletier (28), Michèle Richard (21), Annie St-Arneault (23), Annie Turcotte (21).

⁶⁰For more information see Louise Malette, and Marie Chalouh, eds., The Montreal Massacre, trans. Marlene Wildeman (Charlottetown: Gynergy Books, 1991). This book examines the reaction in Québec and compares the coverage in the French-language and English-language media.

⁶¹"Publisher's note", Malette, and Chalouh: n.pag..

⁶²Francine Pelletier, "They Shoot Horses Don't They," LaPresse [Montréal] 9 Dec. 1989 translated and reprinted in Malette and Chalouh: 36.

⁶³Paula Gustafson, "The Women's Monument Project," Espace vol. 31 (Printemps/Spring 1995): 19.

“violence is named after its victims: violence against women, sexual abuse of children, ... [and] anti-Semitism⁶⁴ The controversy over the monument arose from naming the initiators of the violence. If violence is named for its sufferers, why not acknowledge the instigators? Is this not a means to increase awareness and dialogue? Naming names by identifying AIDS sufferers with their names on quilt panels was essential to raising awareness about AIDS. Ignoring this crucial aspect of the problem of violence against women will only compound the problem. Certain art projects and the artwork of Pope, Carter, and Wilby-Hooper deny the silencing of this problem and challenge the suppression of women’s voices. In the past, opinions and criticism about abuse or the hope for happier days might have been hidden, as in Grace’s decision to sew a Tree of Paradise quilt in Alias Grace. A quilt pattern could express true feelings without crossing the line of acceptable behaviour. Today, quilters are overtly expressing their ideas. Their texts are more readily understood.

Philomela was a mythological figure who subtly used weaving as her voice to expose a violent act. Philomela was raped by her sister’s husband, Tereus. To ensure that she would not speak of this evil crime, he locked her away in a hut deep in the woods and cut out her tongue. Philomela wove the story of Tereus’s sins into a cloth and sent it to her sister who understood what had transpired, helped her escape and together they avenged themselves on Tereus.⁶⁵ Physically deprived of her voice, Philomela used her weaving to speak and to right an injustice.

⁶⁴Kappeler, 1.

⁶⁵Ovid, Metamorphoses vol. 1, book VI, English trans. Frank Justus Miller (1916; Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1977): 319-335.

Women have felt the pain of abuse for centuries. Mary Bradley, whom I referred to in Chapter One and is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, faced abuse in the late 1800s. Bradley struggled with her feelings of anger and hatred when her first husband's temper and disposition turned out to be less than satisfying. She had hoped to "receive the greatest marks of attention, kindness and indulgence from him" but rather was forced into obedience and shown "marks of resentment if his wishes were not met".⁶⁶ When thoughts of retaliation entered her mind, she noted in her diary that she "had sufficient self-possession to refrain from speaking in an unbecoming manner".⁶⁷ When her husband finally granted her permission to go into town and to stay as long as she pleased, she stated that she "felt like a bird released from its cage".⁶⁸

Unfortunately, Mary Bradley's words continue to be spoken. The analogy of an abused woman feeling trapped or caged is a popular one. Janet Pope's artwork Trapped Birds, Free Birds (1993) (Fig. 8) exemplifies Bradley's thoughts. The piece portrays a bird at three different stages.⁶⁹ First, the bird is isolated and trapped, boxed in at all corners, with no place to go. The second stage reflects the hope of breaking free as the bird begins to spread its wings upward and poke through the boundary. In the third panel, the bird is released from its confines and is completely liberated, joining other birds soaring towards the sun. The progression of panels in this piece depicts how the pain of entrapment of this bird is transformed into a more liberated, spiritual state of being.⁷⁰

⁶⁶"Mary Bradley's Reminiscences: A Domestic Life in Colonial New Brunswick," 95.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid., 97.

⁶⁹Pope actually thinks of the bird as genderless and represents for her the fragility of life; specifically, her brother's life, who died in 1992 of cancer, Janet Pope, letter to the author, 13 Nov. 1997.

⁷⁰Janet Pope, letter to the author, 13 Nov. 1997.

Carter's "cage" is not so literal and depicts the trappings/entrapments of one's own home. Her quilt Home Is Not Always Sweet (1990) (Fig. 9) reconfigures the adage "Home Sweet Home". The saying is generally inscribed on mats and signs welcoming visitors into homes. Carter creates a tension by depicting a scene and by using a title antithetical to the saying "Home Sweet Home" on a quilt - the epitome of home. A nice home with a white picket fence stands for the perfect picture of happiness. Carter shows that we should not be fooled by facades, or pictures. Just as her quilts relating to her family photographs showed, appearances can be deceiving. In the image, Carter has juxtaposed two scenarios under one roof. The viewer glimpses these two scenes through two street front windows. In the first, a man and woman, presumably husband and wife, sit side by side as the man affectionately wraps his arm around his wife. The couple seem to agree with the "ideal" setting. The other window depicts quite the opposite scenario. A man, much larger than the woman, looms over her with a raised clenched fist. The woman's arms are outstretched in protest and her mouth is open simulating a scream; but her screams are not heard from within the house walls. However, this quilt gives her that voice, just as Philomela's weaving supplied her with a voice. The tension present in domestic abuse juxtaposes the safety and security of the home and the threat or act of violence. Carter heightens this juxtaposition by using a comfortable medium to expose the uncomfortable issue of domestic violence. Again, Carter has uncovered the "myth of the ideal" by showing "a not so sweet reality".⁷¹

Continuing this same theme is a series by Wilby-Hooper. The artist decided to examine Sunbonnet Sue further and produce a series exploring the issue of domestic

⁷¹Lindsey Arnold, "Barbara Carter: Art and the Process of Politicization," Atlantis vol. 18 no. 1 & 2 (Fall/Summer 1992, 1993): 265.

abuse. Deeply moved by the Montreal Massacre, she decided to take a closer look at “Sue”. The artist was struck by the fact that in the hundreds of “Sue” patterns, her face is never shown. She felt that this was somehow symbolic. She began to wonder what the bonnet could be concealing. Besides reinforcing Sue’s anonymity, Wilby-Hooper felt the bonnet could be covering signs of physical abuse.⁷² In Sue Anonymous (1993) (Fig. 10), the tiny figure stands without perspective against a violent background of purple, red, yellow and green diagonal bands. The colours symbolize the colour of bruises.⁷³ Two interlaced hearts fall and lose their shape as they metamorphosize into drops of blood (symbolized by red beads) until they flow and drip off the bottom edge.⁷⁴ The reverse side of the quilt is a wholecloth of a printed spider web which serves as a symbol of Sue’s entrapment and also referencing Arachne’s fate. Wilby-Hooper believes that “as the cycle of physical abuse continues, it becomes entangled with mental abuse,”⁷⁵ therefore this was the next phase for her series. This form of abuse is just as brutal, but most difficult to represent visually. Violence is generally measured by its damage. Because psychological abuse leaves no visible marks, its seriousness and degree of pain is often overlooked. Wilby-Hooper struggled with how to represent something where the ‘proof’ - the psychological scars - are hidden. In Down and Down (1994) (Fig. 11), Sue tumbles head first from an indistinct gray area, into a downward spiral, which becomes darker and darker as she falls.⁷⁶ Using a spiral shape for the quilting stitch, Wilby-Hooper reinforces Sue’s “rapid descent and suggests the tornado of emotions she experiences”.⁷⁷

⁷²Wilby-Hooper, personal interview, 25 Aug. 1997.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Lois Wilby-Hooper, artist statement.

⁷⁶Ibid.

⁷⁷Ibid.

The artist states that “the subtle grays imply the insidious effect of mental abuse, from barely recognizable beginnings to the devastating realization of entrapment”⁷⁸. Again she uses traditional quilt motifs. Besides Sunbonnet Sue, the puddle is depicted by using a log cabin method. The last work in the series is titled Now You Don’t Have Me (1995) (Fig. 12). This title is taken from a quote made by a woman who had endured ten years of abuse and had finally left her situation, whose story Wilby-Hooper had read in the newspaper. This piece represents the sense of liberation and the end of abuse. After a long winter, the tree is awakened and a few buds are sprouting into leaves symbolizing revival and rebirth. Against the sunrise, the twisted branches at the top of the tree reveal a silhouette of Sue symbolizing a new life for Sue and the abused woman.⁷⁹ This quilt completes the series and liberates Sue from her static, muted pattern.

The power of quilts is immeasurable. Arachne and Philomela used the language of weaving to expose violations to women’s health. Art projects, such as the ones discussed above use quilts to ease mourning, evoke reflection, generate awareness, and inspire dialogue and action. The placement of a quilt in front of governmental or historical buildings, or along the corridors of hospitals, ignites people and provides a sense of comfort and security. Pope, Carter and Wilby-Hooper have created beautiful and inspirational quilts to depict the somber realities of physical and psychological abuse. All three artists have exposed the myth of the ‘ideal’, just as Arachne and Philomela took a stand and exposed truths. Arachne was criticized for sewing an “improper” textile because it did not conform to the category. Fittingly, Pope, Carter and Wilby-Hooper produce artworks which are often discussed as not agreeing with the category “quilt”.

⁷⁸Lois Wilby-Hooper, artist statement.

⁷⁹Lois Wilby-Hooper, personal interview, 25 Aug. 1997.

Carter, Pope and Wilby-Hooper have used their quilts as both methods of self discovery and as acts of politicization. All these artworks deny the shame and fear of sickness, disease and abuse and inscribe a sense of liberation to the maker and the viewer.

CONCLUSION

Despite the number of quilt revivals throughout the 20th century, often discussed in American and Canadian quilt history, the pivotal role of quilting in rural New Brunswick and Nova Scotia remained constant as an essential item, as a social activity, and as an aesthetic and political object.¹ Both provinces serve as excellent sites for examining the quilt's position in early pioneer and Victorian days and in today's quilting community and artworld. Besides fulfilling the family's essential needs of pioneer living, the quilt was transformed into a powerful means for women to contribute to society and expand their public role. The primary means of this move into the public sphere was through the disenfranchisement of the frolic or bee, which developed into exclusively female organizations, either religious or community-based. Whether sent abroad during both World Wars, across Canada during such disasters as the Manitoba floods (in 1950 and 1998), or used as local fundraisers for causes like domestic abuse, quilts serve as a driving force, cultivating women's social involvement and political activity, be it on a local, national or international level.

The power of a quilt extends beyond its ability to organize women and rally a social issue. Through its motive for creation, composition, imagery, and placement, a quilt relays a tremendous amount of meaning and emotion to both the maker and the viewer. The power of a quilt is closely aligned with community. Through the quilting bee, it involves members of a community. Special quilts reflect, rituals, events, and

¹This opinion is based on several interviews I conducted in New Brunswick and statements made by Robson and MacDonald, introduction: x.

problems of a community. Further, quilts impact upon a community by exposing socio-political realities, educating the public and aiding people in need.

Quilts can be treated as a language, each one being read as unique and expressive texts. This thesis functions like a quilt in that both are texts pieced together, accentuating some areas more so than others, but nevertheless forming a cohesive pattern. I have also shown how the role of quilts in our lives has surfaced in literature throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries whether documented in the personal diaries of nineteenth century women or used as thematic markers in novels like Alias Grace and Quilt.

The popularity of the quilt is evident in the continued growth of the quilting industry² and its venture into popular culture, assuming lead roles in plot development in film and television. Another example is the expansion of local agricultural fairs where women could display their creations and win awards. Today, the YWCA annual quilt fair in Moncton, New Brunswick is the largest of its kind in Atlantic Canada bringing together quilters from across the province, and has resulted in quilts being purchased as official gifts for world dignitaries.

By negotiating the sacrosanct boundaries of quilting, the AIDS Quilt and artists like Carter, Pope, Sawyer, and Wilby-Hooper have disrupted our conventional reading of a quilt; however, traditional quilting is not completely disregarded. Each of the artists I discuss incorporate elements of the tradition into their pieces. Pope often uses a crazy quilt pattern for her backgrounds. Wilby-Hooper and Sawyer remain close to the tradition by incorporating traditional patterns, like Sunbonnet Sue and the Dresden Plate

²It is estimated that quilting is a five billion dollar industry in the United States. Today, NBC, 10 July 1999.

into their works. One of the most important elements all the artists integrate at some point, is the use of recycled material. This aspect of quilting reaffirms the rebirth of material creating another life for the fabric. It also continues the oral history associated with recycled material and the sense of nostalgia involved in the quilting tradition. While these elements are secondary or are somehow altered, art quilts continue to act as cultural transmitters. Today's art quilts not only link generations of culture; they link traditional and contemporary ideas. Artists are building on the foundations of historical quilts. Drawing from the visual and structural aspects of traditional quilts, fabric artists take these aspects and cast them within a conceptual framework, thereby offering yet another "frame" for a quilt and adding to the quilting continuum.

The "art object" status being attributed to quilts by art galleries and museums has raised several concerns, specifically, the comparison to other visual arts, predominantly viewed as male, such as painting; the separation of quilts from women's culture; and the treatment of quilts as commodities. My opinion is that other art forms face these problems as well, and that the quilt were exploited before entering the fine art world. However, the second criticism is of some importance. Exhibitions such as the one at the Whitney Museum, in my view, are detrimental in that they erase or distance quilts from their culture. A quilt's formal aesthetics are difficult to ignore, however, as a sole focus paired with modernist art movements leads to misrepresentation and an elimination of an important component of the art form. How quilts are exhibited is the critical factor. Exhibitions, I agree, should contextualize and identify traditional quilts so that their makers are not rendered static and anonymous, and should also include contemporary work as to not leave the art form in the past. Exhibitions such as the two shows at the

Owens Art Gallery (1967 and 1970), strictly contemporary shows like Quilt '89 and Old Nova Scotian Quilts (1993) have broken from Holstein's model and have successfully portrayed the quilting tradition. Despite the risk of misrepresentation, art galleries and museums afford a certain amount of recognition and validation to the artist and the medium and offer quilts another venue to be heard, to be challenged and to impact the viewer. Because quilts are a historically grounded, aesthetic, compelling, and evolving art form, they deserve to be included in professional exhibiting institutions rather than restricted to the home and community exhibitions.

For thousands of years, cloth has been the "notebook that recorded the woes and joys, hopes, visions, and aspirations of women."³ Despite the transformation of the quilt throughout the last two centuries, women have continued to use them as sources of solace, pleasure, inspiration, empowerment, and resistance. Through the production of quilts, women have fulfilled the needs of their family, advanced and broadened their role in society, altered the definition of the "ideal" woman and the "ideal" quilt, and critiqued socio-political realities affecting today's women. Beyond the quilt's ability to affect women's lives, they exude influence within several sites including the home, societal belief systems, museums, literature, popular culture, the body (health), and political debate. The range of identities encompassed by a quilt, either as a cultural artifact, political emblem, or fine art object, have much to offer artists, art historians, writers, historians, and activists. From quilts, we can extract information to uncover aspects of women's social history. We can employ quilts as creative vehicles to express

³Elizabeth Wayland Barber, Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years, Women, Cloth and Society in Early Times (New York and London: WW. Norton, 1994): 256.

contemporary art trends. We can also benefit from their ability to expose hidden realities and voice concerns related to women's health and welfare. This expanding framework broadens the quilt discourse and ushers in socio-political dialogue and diverse artistic, and theoretical practices.

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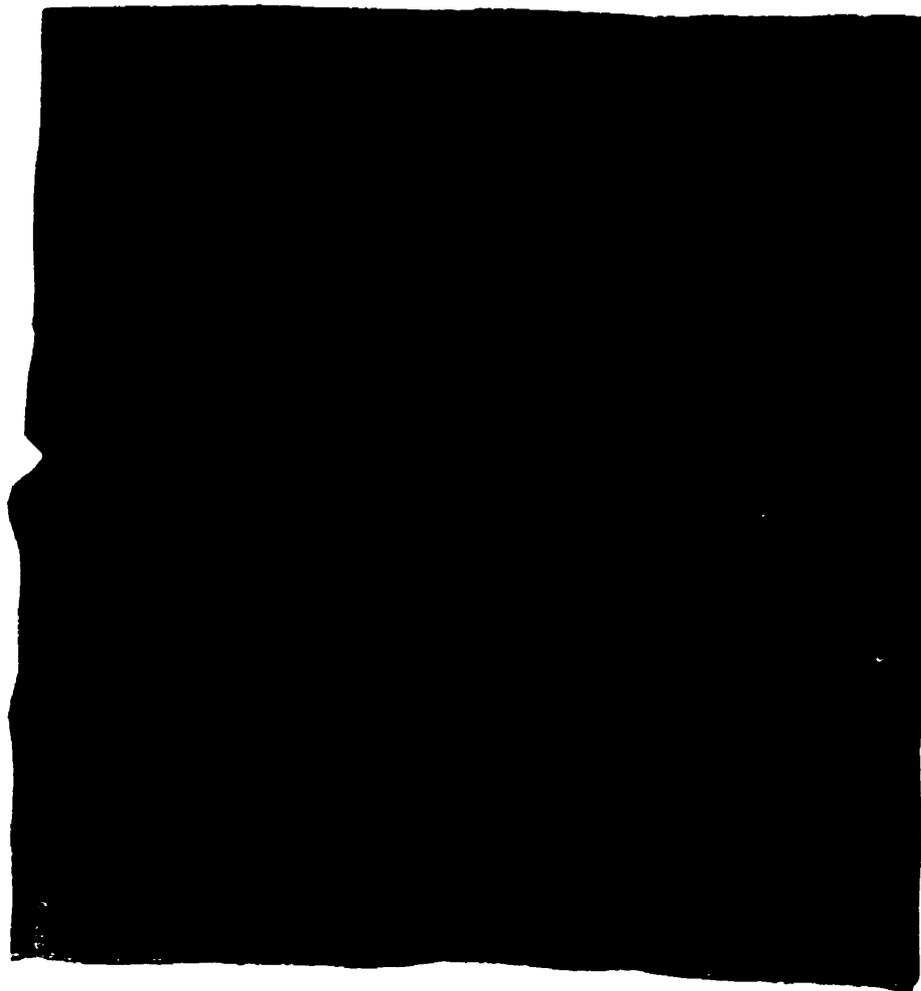


Fig. 1 Four-Patch, pieced quilt, made about 1810, probably in the Johnson family, Collingwood Cumberland County, wool, 188 x 168 [Scott Robson and Sharon MacDonald, Old Nova Scotian Quilts : 46.]

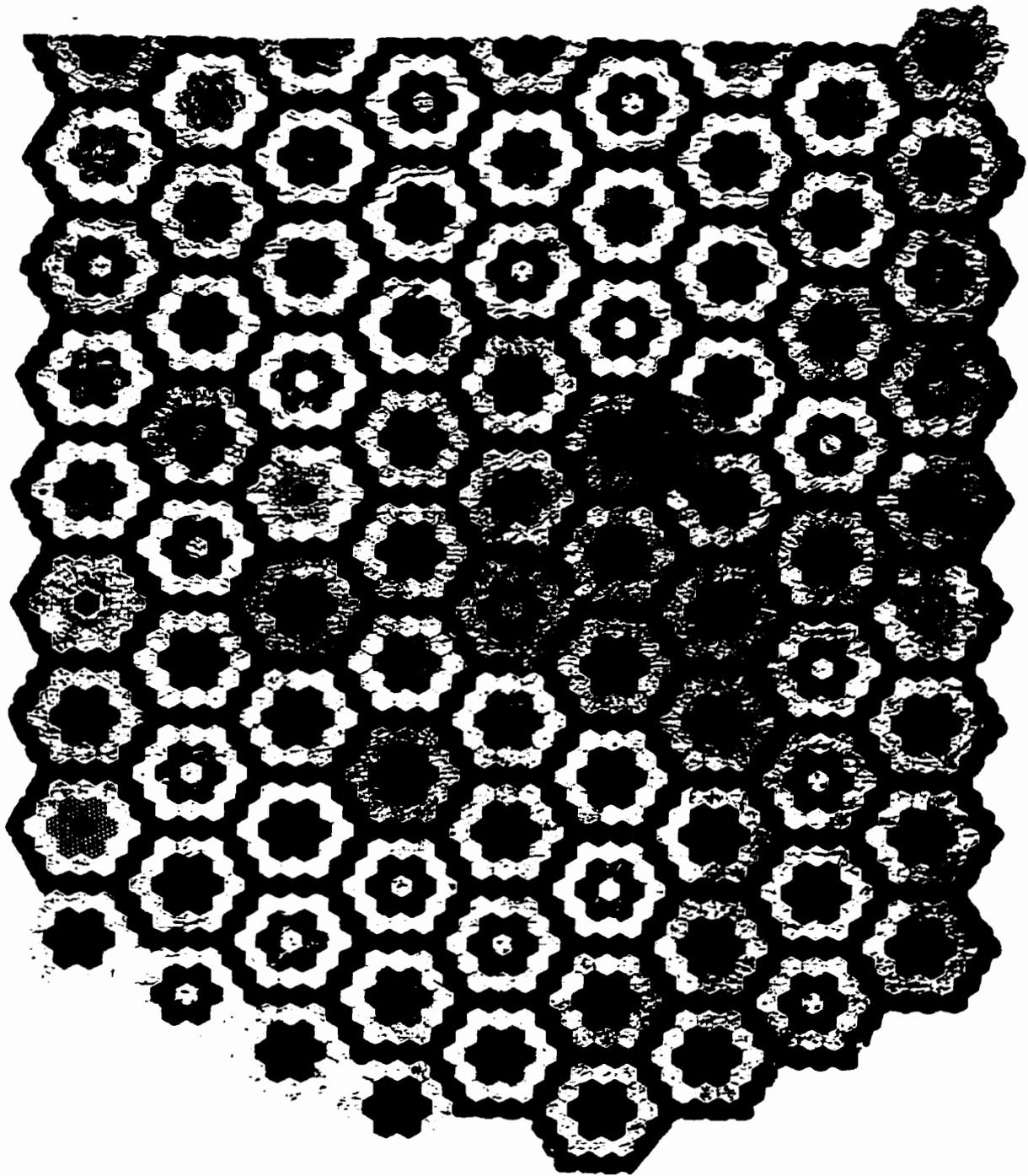


Fig. 2 Hexagons, pieced quilt top, made about 1810, probably Halifax, cotton, 238 x 192
[Scott Robson and Sharon MacDonald, Old Nova Scotian Quilts : 47.]



Fig. 3 Margaret Sawyer, Networking 1989.

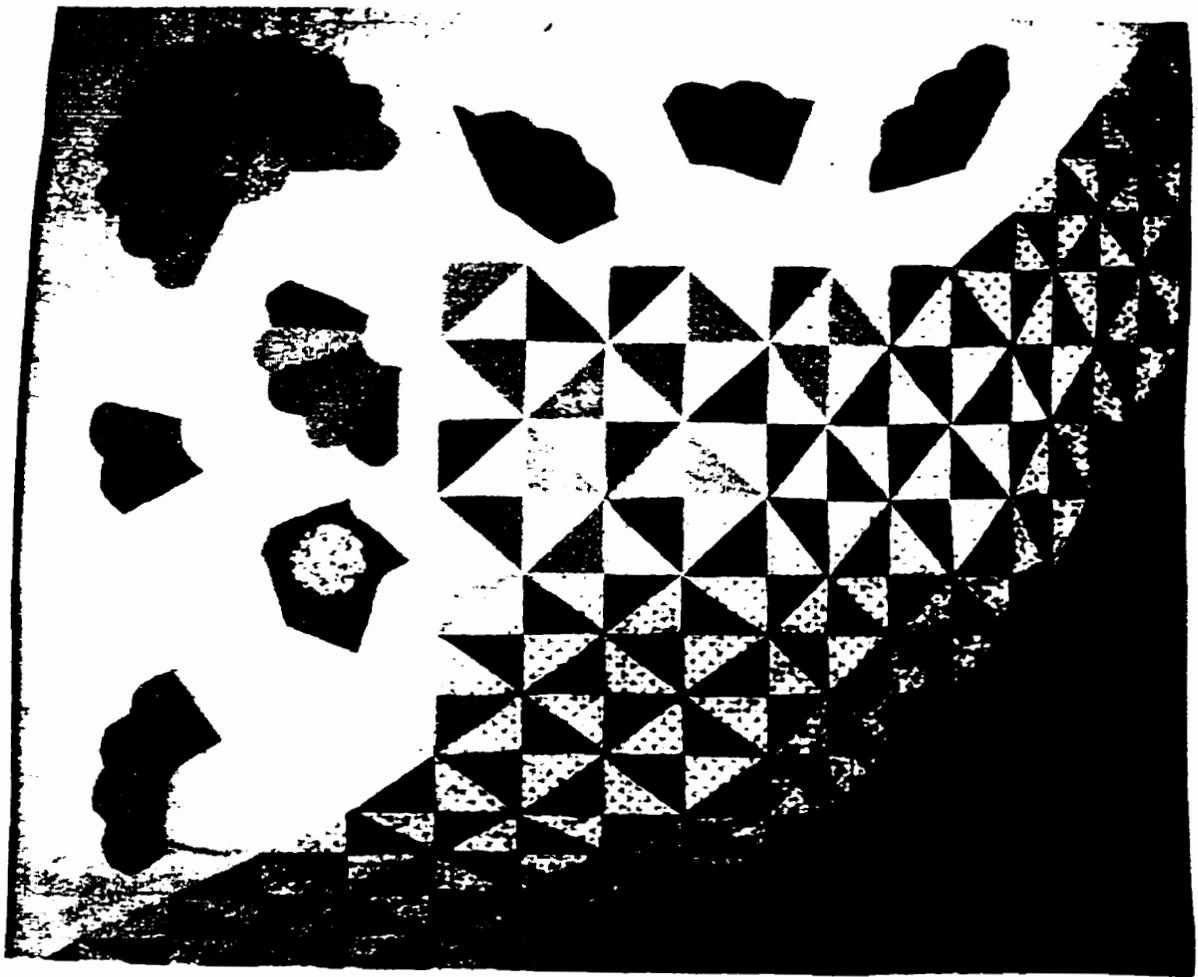


Fig. 4 Margaret Sawyer, Breaking With Tradition, 1994.



Fig. 5 Janet Pope, Spider Weaves The World, 1991, unbleached cotton, black broadcloth and twill tape, 74 x 86.4.

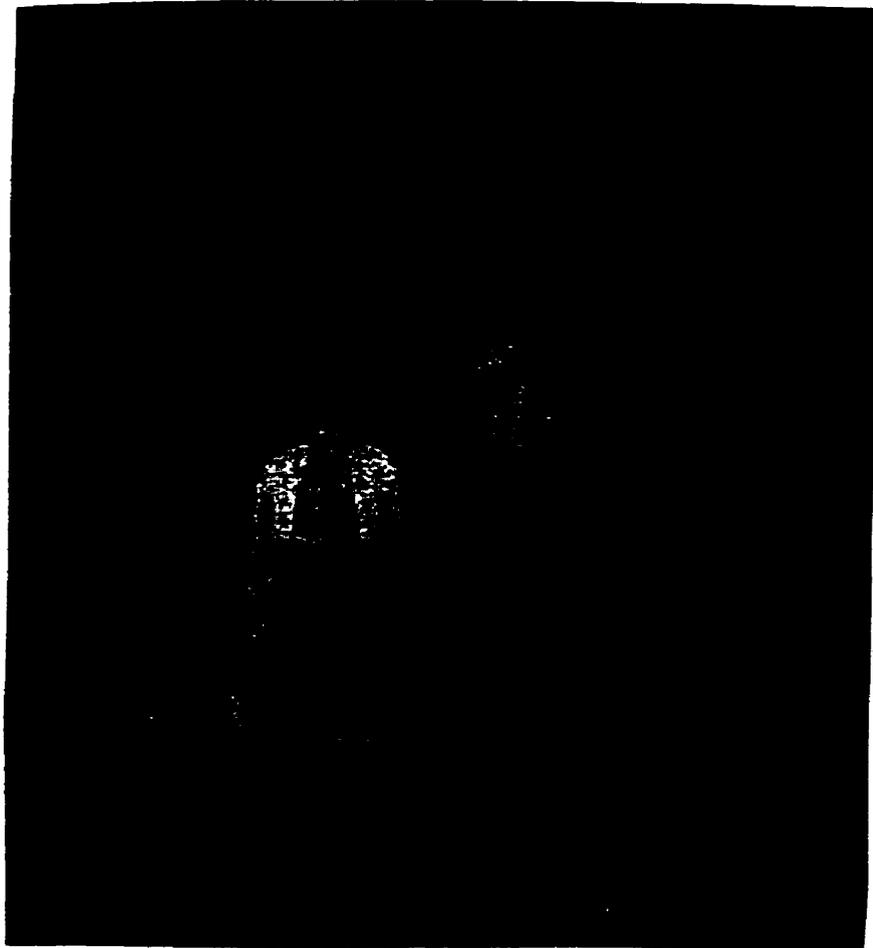


Fig. 6 Barbara Carter, Mother and Daughter (The Legacy), 1990, hand-stitched polyester and cotton, quilt batts, stretched on wooden frames 55.5 x 66. [Courtesy of the artist.]

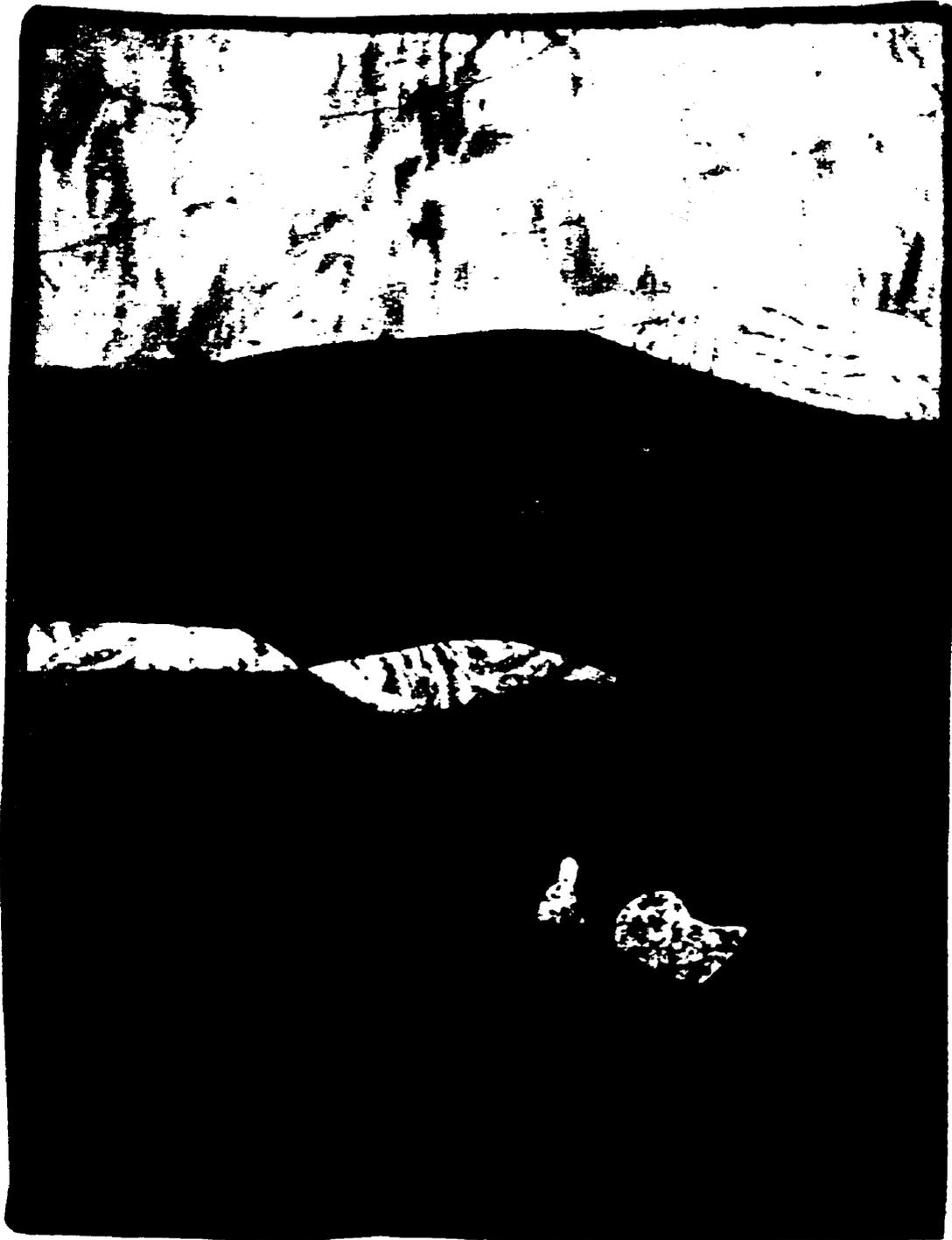


Fig. 7 Lois Wilby-Hooper, Don't Make Waves, 1995.

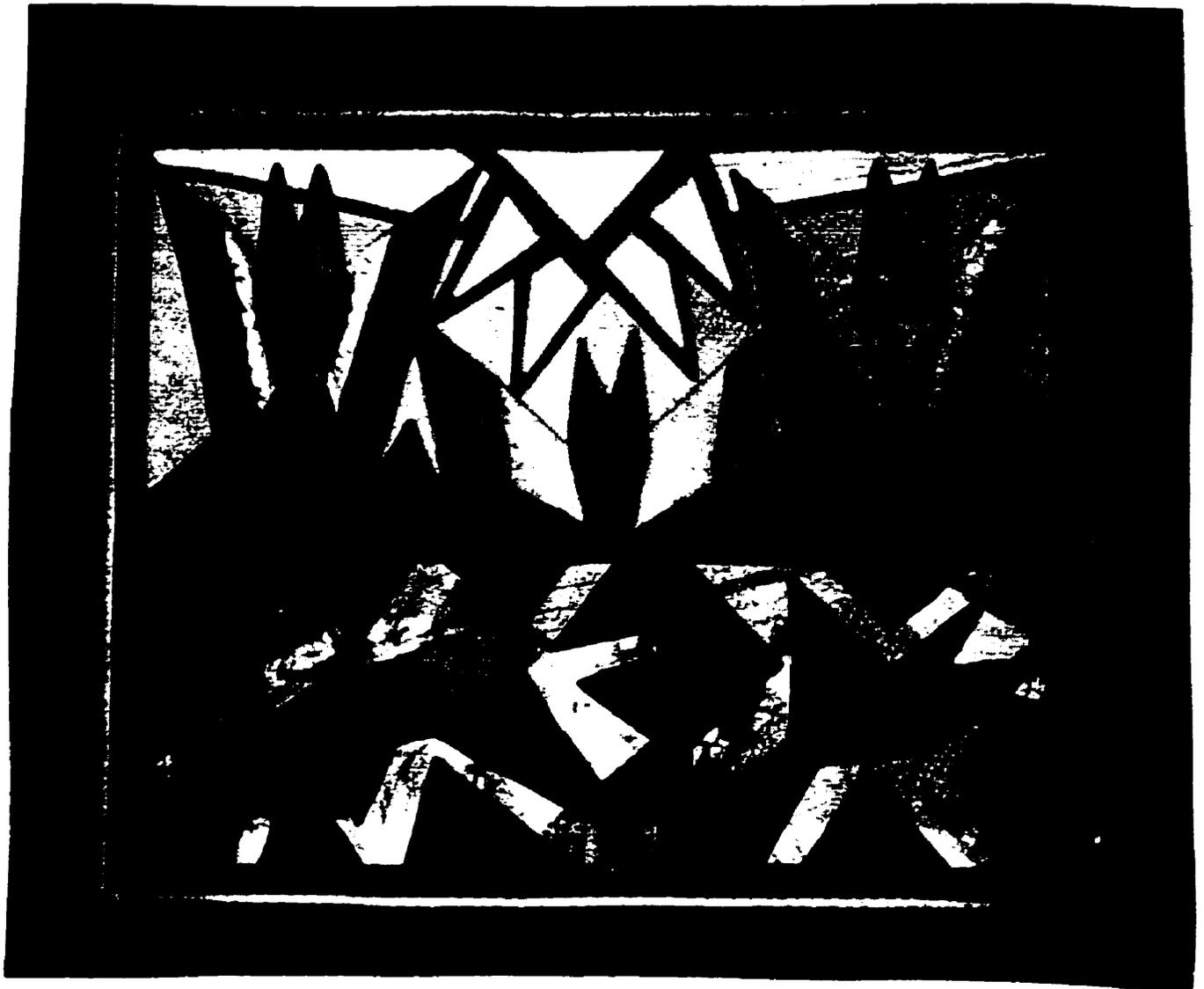


Fig. 8 Janet Pope, Trapped Birds, Free Birds, 1993.



Fig. 9 Barbara Carter, Home is Not Always Sweet, 1990, 1 cotton.

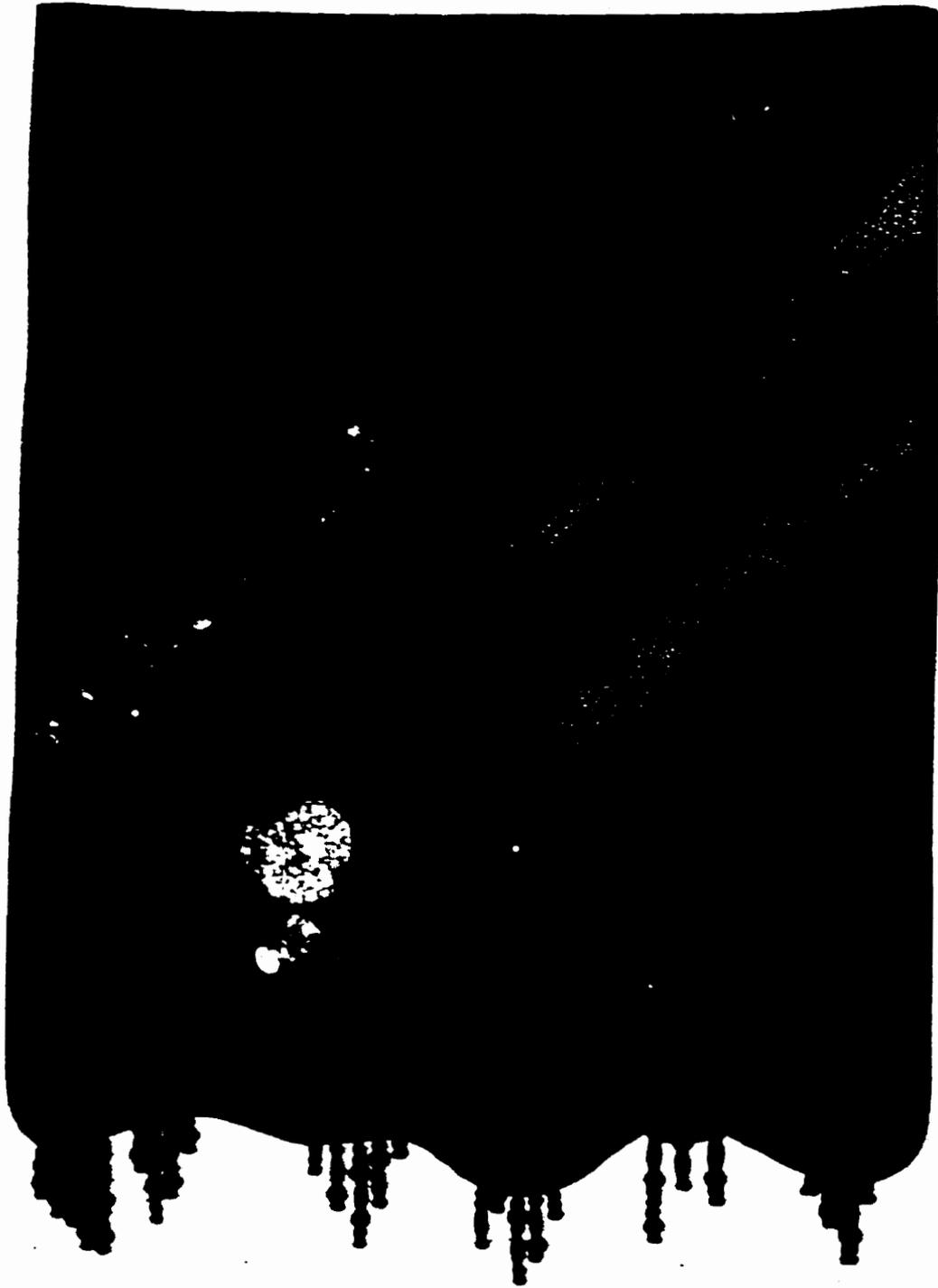


Fig. 10 Lois Wilby-Hooper, Sue Anonymous, 1993.



Fig. 11 Lois Wilby-Hooper, Down and Down, 1994.



Fig. 12 Lois Wilby-Hooper, Now You Don't Have Me, 1995.