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***Everyday Textures: Practices of Needlework,
Meaning-Making and Socio-Political Transformation***

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Abstract

Everyday Textures: Practices of Needlework, Meaning-Making and Socio-Political Transformation examines practices of needlework, specifically quilting, dressmaking, embroidery and knitting, and their narrative representations in the context of transnational feminist solidarity. This research is situated alongside a body of scholarly and popular discourses that have placed needlework and feminism either in direct opposition to each other or have heralded the generative connections between the two. By conceptualizing needlework as affective social practices of meaning-making, that is, as routine activities invested with emotion and entangled with concrete material and social conditions, I offer a generative framework for moving beyond such polarizing discourses. Using an inventive methods approach that includes interviews with makers as well as close readings of literary texts and the analysis of textile artefacts, this thesis explores what types of political acts the everyday performance of needlework and its narrative renderings make possible.

The sample of case studies is necessarily diverse because neither the everyday nor practices of needlework can be neatly fitted into disciplinary or methodological boundaries as they bridge that which is ordinary but also exceptional, forms of repetition, moments of disorientation and breakdown as well as potentiality. I critically engage with a number of text(ure)s: from the novels by African-American women writers, to the works of the US based youth organization the Social Justice Sewing Academy and the Afghan–European embroidery initiative Guldusi, to the Pussyhat Project and the Women’s March on Washington. Through this attention to texture on the level of everyday affective social practices of creative making, I follow different trajectories of meaning-making across the textured web of everyday feminist life lines. I argue that practices of needlework and their narrative representations make possible a politics of embodied orientation because they may move people physically and affectively towards new everyday imaginaries of social transformation. In addition, I show how practices of needlework allow for a dwelling in the potentiality of futurity and for a reconfiguration of relations based on the recognition of unequal flows of power and our affective attachments to them.

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Introduction: The Cultural Politics of Needlework

In late June 2019, the popular online knitting and crochet community platform Ravelry banned all expressions of support for President Donald Trump and his administration. Any 'forum posts, projects, patterns, profiles, and all other content' that favoured the 45th president of the United States and his government would from then on pose a violation of the community guidelines and could ultimately result in users being permanently banned from the site (Ravelry, 2019, n.p.). The privately owned website whose content is mainly user-driven by more than eight million participants worldwide justified this action stating: 'we cannot provide a space that is inclusive of all and also allow support for open white supremacy. Support of the Trump administration is undeniably support for white supremacy' (Ravelry, 2019, n.p.). This policy garnered a lot of attention in the craft community and beyond, with international news outlets such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* reporting it (Lytvynenko, 2019; Romano, 2019). While many users and members of the needlework community applauded Ravelry's move, a significant number of users deleted their accounts, criticising the policy as exclusionary and lamenting an unwelcome politicisation of textile crafts.

A month prior to the Ravelry announcement, the US-based Modern Quilt Guild (MQG), one of the largest international organisations for modern quilters, saw its followers similarly divided. The online announcement of its 2020 charity quilt challenge sparked discussion about politics, race, white privilege, and who is or is not included in the textile crafts community. The challenge's annual theme is 'text' and any submitted quilt should feature at least one word as a central design element of the quilt. According to the organisers, this choice of theme was based on the general popularity of text in modern quilting. As the images of selected quilts accompanying the post illustrate, this trend was also recognisable at the MQG's last annual quilt show,

QuiltCon, which included various quilts with text. Yet, in an early version of the post, this selection of images deliberately did not feature the work of Chawne Kimber, one of only a few well-known quilters of colour and a leading figure in the use of text in quilts. Her 2019 show entry titled *not showing proper deference to wypipo* (2018) consists of many small solid and printed black fabric scraps interspersed with narrow strips of various bright colours.¹ In the middle of the quilt, the words ‘uppity negro’ are spelled out in bold black-and-white lettering.

MQG officials apologised for any offence caused over the exclusion of Kimber’s work in an exclusive email to MQG members. In response to pressure from members and heated debate on social media, a disclaimer at the very end of the organisation’s post now publicly addresses the initial exclusion of Kimber’s work. According to the statement, the decision not to include Kimber’s quilt was due to the organisers’ editorial decision ‘to not give the impression that politics were the focus of the challenge’. Subsequently, the MQG ‘regrets’ their initial decision not to share Kimber’s quilt over fears of causing political controversy, since ‘her work represents some of the leading text work coming from modern quilters’. Further, they acknowledge that ‘this incident reflects the long history of people of colour’s contributions not being acknowledged’. Also, ‘looking at our edits from our perspective of white privilege made us not see an issue that is clearly present’. As a result of this realisation, they declared: ‘We continue to learn how our privilege impacts our day to day actions, and we continue to grow and work to improve those actions’ (MQG, 2019, n.p.).

The incident sparked discussions on social media among quilters and crafters similar to those related to the Ravelry policy announcement (Lytvynenko, 2019; Romano, 2019). The question of the role of politics in needlework, a hobby generally

¹ ‘wypipo’ is a colloquial abbreviation used especially in digital settings to refer to white people. See Kimber (2018) for more information about the background of the quilt.

thought of in relation to love, comfort and companionship, was once again the dividing marker between different camps. Some argued that politics could only ever be divisive for the quilting and needlework community and should therefore be avoided, criticising the MQG for displaying quilts that were explicitly or implicitly political.² Others, however, pointed out the inherent privilege embedded in calls for a seemingly depoliticised craft in which concerns for the comfort of some trump recognition of the everyday racism, sexism and exclusion that others face within and beyond the textile crafts community. Indeed, both incidents are also reflective of an increase in politicised social media hashtags like #blackgirlsknit, #diversknitty, #bipocquilter that draw attention to the debate outlined above.

This thesis grapples with the role of politics in contemporary practices of needlework and their narrative renderings. It frames the current discussion and controversy around practices of needlework as part of a long and contested history of the meaning, purpose, and potential of so-called women's craft in the context of a transnational feminist politics of solidarity. I examine quilting, home dressmaking, embroidery and knitting in this context through a careful selection of case studies that range from the US-based youth organisation the Social Justice Sewing Academy, an Afghan–European embroidery initiative as well as Toni Morrison's, Alice Walker's and Monica Ali's literary representation of needlework to the contemporary craftivism movement. As its central argument, this thesis contends that practices of needlework and their narrative renderings make possible a politics of embodied orientation because they move people physically and affectively towards new everyday imaginaries of social transformation. Through the different case studies, I develop a substantial and illuminating analysis of contemporary women's texts and textile

² At QuiltCon 2019, a number of quilts engaged, for example, with the #MeToo movement, addressed LGBTQ+ rights, environmental concerns and racism.

artefacts, offering a 'big picture' synthesis that moves across disciplines, theoretical frameworks, geographical contexts and social movements.

I regard practices of needlework and their narrative representations as always political in that they may reproduce structures of power, or, as I will argue, may gesture towards different kinds of social and affective relations. Consequently, I am not interested in providing a teleological account of how practices of needlework can be used to support a 'good' or 'bad' feminist politics. Instead, this thesis asks:

- What types of political acts make practices of needlework and their narrative renderings possible?
- How are people moved, affected and/or (re)oriented through practices of needlework and their representations in literary texts?
- What constitutes political practice within a textile-craft-based transnational feminist politics of solidarity?

As I will discuss in more detail in Chapter One, practices of needlework are historically imbricated in a number of binaries that operate within larger discourses about gender and femininity. These include, among others, art/craft, handmade/manufactured, subversive/conservative, capitalist/anti-capitalist. As Ann Cvetkovich points out, such binaries are representative of 'a long-standing set of constitutive tensions about the relation between the premodern and the modern, women's culture and feminism, and handmade and industrial modes of production' (2012, p. 172). These tensions are observable in mainstream media, scholarly discourses, literary texts and everyday life and, I contend, mirror larger transnational struggles around what constitutes feminist politics.

This thesis aims to move beyond these dichotomies to provide an intersectional analysis of the assemblages of meaning that have formed around needlework in

relation to race, gender, class, sexuality and nation.³ However, I am by no means ignoring these dichotomies and the socio-cultural context that creates and sustains them as I trace how they have become entangled with individual and collective practices of craft-based meaning-making and protest. By conceptualising needlework as affective social practices of meaning-making that is, as routine activities invested with emotion and intertwined with concrete material and social conditions, I focus my analysis on various textured encounters *with, in, and, between* texts, textile artefacts, and practices of textile making to examine how these encounters orient people affectively and politically. Thus, my analysis expands a substantial body of scholarship, outlined in Chapter One, that has examined practices of needlework and its representations in relation to feminist protest and women's identity. In addition, I engage with more recent scholarship that pays attention to the effects of the process of making and the role of crafting in political protest and organising. In this context, I am particularly interested in how the process of creating from fabric and fibre can function as a resistant practice that defies ready-made objects and structures, but also affects perceptions of the self and personal well-being.

Part of the struggle for a feminist politics is a struggle for what counts as feminist cultural and/or artistic expression. The feminist and political positionality of the maker, however, is secondary to this struggle. According to art historian Griselda Pollock, an art work, or rather any kind of creative product or practice:

has a political effect as a feminist intervention according to the way the work acts upon, makes demands of, and produces positions for its viewers. It is feminist because of the way it works as a text within a specific social space in relation to dominant codes and conventions of art and to dominant ideologies of femininity. (1987, p. 93)

³ See Hill Collins (2019), Puar (2012, 2007), hooks (2000, 1984) and Crenshaw (1991) for critical discussion of the concept of intersectionality.

Women's textile practices and their literary representations take a special role in this struggle for feminist expression, as their reception – as I will outline in more detail later – is also a reflection of shifts and developments in the feminine ideal at any one time (Goggin, 2002; Ulrich, 2001; Parker, 2010, 1984). My thesis builds on scholarship in feminist, cultural and literary theory that emerges out of 'the turn to affect' in the humanities and social sciences. Through its engagement with text and textile, my thesis expands research on the complex relationship of the discursive/representational and affect/materiality (Grattan, 2017; Coole and Frost, 2012; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012; Seigworth and Gregg, 2010; Ahmed, 2004). I understand affect as mediated through discourse and representation – as well as technology, the economy, cultural norms and structural relations of power (Malin, 2014). As a result, my research is also particularly indebted to scholarship in gender studies, critical race theory as well as postcolonial and decolonial theory, all of which explore affect in the context of race, gender, sexuality and identity (Love, 2007; Sedgwick, 2003; Hartman, 1997; Butler, 1990; Fanon, 1952). Through the study of individual and collective practices of textile making that range from the activist quilting practices of contemporary African-American quilter Chawne Kimber to literary representations of the private sewing activities of London immigrant homeworkers, I explicate the complex affective entanglements that are part of the performances of needlework and their narrative representations. Inspired by Cvetkovich's concept of an 'archive of feelings', I attend to a variety of cultural text(ure)s as affective archives 'which are encoded not only in the context of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and repetition' (2003, p. 7). I explore how the meaning of practices of needlework is shaped through the links between affect and personal and cultural narratives, literary representations and dominant discourses about needlework and feminist politics.

Affect, in this context, is conceptualised as thoroughly relational, as what ‘arises in the midst of in-between-ness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon’ (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, pos. 50). As such, affect is also ‘potential’: it is ‘a body’s *capacity* to affect and to be affected’ (Seigworth and Gregg, 2010, pos. 68, original emphasis). Literary texts exist in this charged ‘in-between-ness’, and, thus, can ‘catalyse human activity, pushing people together or pulling them apart’ (Grattan, 2017, p. 3). In this sense, stories matter not because they provide unmediated access to another’s lived experience, but because they signal ‘structures of feeling’ (Williams, 1977), while, at the same time, gesturing towards ways of imagining these structures differently. For this reason, by analysing practices of needlework featured in literary texts alongside material practices in and of themselves, I hope to attend to the ways narrative is important to processes of meaning-making (Bolaki, 2016, p. 7). At the same time, I am interested in how literary narratives shape and are shaped by wider cultural narratives and discourses about needlework and how these likewise influence makers’ individual accounts of their practices. Thus, I highlight how certain narratives transform or solidify as part of everyday processes of meaning-making, but also as a result of the transnational travels of textiles and texts. In this context, I am mindful of whose narratives dominate and how they come to serve as a baseline for craft-based transnational feminist solidarity initiatives that assume commonality among women based on their shared identity as practitioners of needlework.

My analysis also recognises the many ways that literature shapes dominant narratives about the meaning of needlework and I will discuss these in more detail in the next chapter. Further, I attend to entanglements of the discursive with the material and affective across disciplinary boundaries in art history, gender, literary and cultural studies and to the ways these entanglements shape knowledges about needlework and its efficacy for feminist politics (Pedwell, 2014, p. xiv). Affect is part of the way

'power constitutes and is reproduced by bodies' (Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 19), and, thus, a generative concept for feminist and postcolonial theory's attempts to map 'how power circulates through feeling and how politically salient ways of being and knowing are produced through affective relations and discourses' (Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012, p. 116). This thesis highlights moments of affective potential that develop through practices of needlework. Juxtaposing close readings of literary works by women of colour with analyses of dominant discourses about Euro-American women's supposed reclamation of women's crafts and makers' individual testimonies, I examine the specificities of these moments of possibility as well as their broader implications for the social, political, economic and cultural structures they are embedded in. Building on Clare Hemmings work on affective solidarity (2012), I trace how these fleeting or prolonged moments of potentiality created through shared or individual practices of making as well as the engagement with textile artefacts can become part of such a feminist politics. I then show how feminist affective solidarity makes it possible to move beyond divisive identity politics premised on unqualified assumptions about shared womanhood.

Stitched Practices

Textiles and the practices of needlework are ubiquitous in everyday life from the cradle to the grave. Babies are usually wrapped in cloth as soon as they are born and many cultures bury their dead covered with some kind of textile. Furthermore, textiles and practices of needlework are part of transnational assemblages that connect bodies, economies, cultures and societies on multiple levels. The North American production of cotton was based around the transatlantic slave trade, which supplied a cheap labour force. At the same time, European settlers to the New World brought with them practices of needlework like quilting that would be refashioned to become a constitutive

feature of the foundational myth of the United States in form of the American Quilt (Mazloomi, 2015, p. 7). Indeed, quilting and sewing skills were important tools used by American missionaries in order to 'civilise' the indigenous population of Hawaii (Kimokeo-Goes, 2019). Today, discount fashion chains like Primark are able to operate successfully because of the availability of cheap garments from South East Asia. These garments are often produced under highly exploitative working conditions dangerous for the lives of the workers involved. In contrast to that, a large number of development-aid initiatives for women in the Global South are centred around utilising women's needlework skills in order to generate a small income, for example by training them as tailors or by producing local traditional textile crafts to be sold to tourists or in the Global North (Jones, 2019).

My selection of case studies featured in Chapters Two to Five attempts to reflect this ubiquity as well as the diversity of textile practices. Each study provides new insight into how needlework as an affective social practice of meaning-making can orient people (makers, but also viewers and readers) differently. As each chapter looks at a specific type of needlework – quilting, dressmaking, embroidery, and knitting – the breadth and depth of needlework and its entanglements are highlighted. Yet, each chapter also draws out the subtle differences between these techniques and how they become construed within larger narratives about gender, race and class, sexuality and nation. Importantly, they also demonstrate how practices of needlework can be turned into vehicles for individual and collective meaning-making with a range of socio-political implications. In Chapter Two, the first case study looks at the connection between African-American quilting and black women's writing in the US, tracing a genealogy between writing and quilting as generative practices in black women's social justice work. Reading Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) and her short story 'Everyday Use' (1973) alongside the textile practices

of contemporary black women quilters like Faith Ringgold and Chawne Kimber, and the work of the US-based youth organisation the Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA), this chapter examines how creative textile practices may contribute to a shared anti-racist womanist politics. Chapter Three considers Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) which chronicles the lives of Bangladeshi garment factory worker Hasina and her sister Nazneen, who is a homemaker for a London sweatshop. The novel is loosely based on economist Naila Kabeer's (2000) qualitative study about Bangladeshi women in Dhaka and London working in the garment industry. It raises questions about the affective and generative properties of dressmaking in the context of the international labour market, the Bangladeshi diaspora and East London immigrant life. Chapter Four explores the German-based Afghan–European embroidery initiative Guldusi, whose mission is to use embroidery to help rural Afghan women generate an income while, at the same time, preserving the country's rich embroidery heritage and creating a space for a cultural encounter between Europeans and Afghan embroiderers. Lastly, in Chapter Five, I analyse the Pussyhat Project, the knitting initiative that developed in 2016 as part of the Women's March on Washington, in the context of the twenty-first century craftivism movement which embraces craft as a primary tool for social justice activism.

These examples have in common that they are about making connections, or, in other words, about creating entanglements between individuals, communities, cultures, materials, narratives, affects and across feminist genealogies. They are a part of past and present efforts in the transnational collective fight for social justice and individuals' everyday efforts towards social change. They all navigate the gendered history of needlework and the stories attached to it, but also enable new trajectories of meaning-making as they operate within and beyond the repressive binaries of this history. Though all case-studies emanate from the Global North and are often

connected to a particular place, for example, a country, city or individual home space, each is transnational or global in orientation to varying degrees. The anti-racist work of US black radical women writers and quilters is not only grounded in the legacy of the African diaspora and the Black Atlantic, but, like the work of the Pussyhat Project, also in the recognition that social justice issues connected to race, gender and the environment are of both global and local significance. Consequently, they are transnationally networked in their creative activist efforts through the use of digital technologies like social media. In this sense, they are also profoundly intersectional as they recognise the ways raced, classed, gendered and other forms of oppression converge. *Brick Lane* grounds the global garment industry and its multi-million-dollar economy in the capital cities Dhaka and London as well as a small rural Bangladeshi village and a decrepit English council flat. At the same time, the novel is caught in the transnational politics of cultural authenticity and its representation because it draws inspiration from an ethnographic scholarly study. And while part of Guldusi's mission is to build a bridge between Afghan and European cultures, the initiative is shaped by the geopolitics of a US-led War on Terror and the way it frames perceptions of Afghanistan in the Global North.

Through my diverse archive of texts and textiles I am able to engage with the everyday textures of affective social practices of meaning-making and to trace 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) that emerge as meaning is produced, blocked, destroyed, and revived. Practice, in this context, refers to the process of making or producing any type of textile craft, as well as the object that may result. However, this object need not be finished in the sense of acquiring a use or exchange value. It may be marked precisely by its unfinished quality as a handmade dress is tossed into the work basket before the seams are trimmed or row after row is added to a knitted scarf with no intention of it being worn or used for anything other than simply having

something to occupy your hands with. In other words, my focus is on the performance of the practice in all its complexity and the narrative representations of such performances. As such, this thesis addresses the relationship between personal and social transformation, social movements, politics and the role of everyday practices on the level of affect, knowledge and the phenomenology of making. Consequently, my analysis contributes to pressing issues in scholarly and activist circles alike as it examines these relationships within the context of transnational feminist solidarity. Through my innovative selection of case studies that places large-scale craft-based activist initiatives like the Pussyhat Project alongside makers' personal reflections about their textile practices and literary texts, I show how mundane practices of needlework can be generative for social transformation.

Entangled Textures – An Interpretive Framework for Feminist Politics

'Text', 'textile' and 'texture' are etymologically linked through the Latin *textura*, a weaving, and the verb *texere*, to weave (OED). While well into the nineteenth century 'texture' referred to a kind of woven cloth, the term has also come to denote 'any natural structure having an appearance or consistence as if woven' (OED) and as such could be any kind of tissue or web, for example that of a spider. Texture also delineates the specific properties of fabric, such as being coarse, plain or ribbed as a result of the specific way it was woven. In addition, the term 'line' can be linked to linen, a type of fabric made through the weaving together of individual flax threads into a cloth. By extension, texture may also describe 'the constitution, structure, or substance of anything with regard to its constituents or formative elements' (OED). As such, it can be applied to concrete tangible matter such as fabric, but may also invoke the immaterial as it refers to someone's disposition or character. Thus, texture implies a connection between the social, the (im)material and the affective while, at the same

time, acknowledging the impossibility of fully separating them from each other. Texture is 'a zone of entanglement [...] to which there are no outsides, only openings and ways through' (Ingold, 2016, p. 106). Needlework crafts, but also other processes of creative making, enable 'practitioners [to] bind their own pathways or lines into the texture of material flows comprising the lifeworld' (Ingold, 2009, p. 91). A focus on texture and its entanglements makes it possible to avoid essentialist categories and instead enables me to follow different trajectories of meaning-making across the textured web of everyday feminist life lines situated not in an abstract realm but in concrete material and affective experiences. As a result, I am able to consider the positionality of diverse groups of makers and to provide a nuanced picture of how practices of needlework and their narrative renderings can orient people towards resistant modes of being.

Storytelling, according to Tim Ingold, is a means of traveling along some of these entanglements without fixing them in place. As a process of meaning-making, storytelling makes it possible to consider different kinds of meaning that others have created. As one encounters these meaning, one is free to divert from these meaning paths and to take a different route. Storytelling is a process of meaning-making that is mindful of already existing meaning and narratives created by other sojourners – to stick with Ingold's travelling imagery. Yet, there is no obligation to include or adhere to dominant narratives, as one is free to traverse along different paths (Ingold, 2016, p. 77). Meaning is created and 'knowledge integrated' (Ingold, 2016, p. 94) as the story unfolds and one travels along a narrative as well as the physical and affective world of the storyteller or listener. According to Ingold, 'there is no point at which the story ends and life begins' (2016, p. 93). Therefore, textuality is more than the narrative or material properties of the text; it refers also to the phenomenological and affective practice of telling or reading a story with meaning being forged as part of the practice (Ingold, 2016, p. 94). I locate narratives of feminist resistance and creative making as part of

these practices of storytelling that Ingold refers to, and this thesis explores the different ways in which they are part of an anti-racist feminist politics (see also Hemmings, 2012). Through my case studies, I hope to define the terrain of a contemporary politics of making with fibres by exploring how textuality and materiality interact as part of this politics. In this context, storytelling and narratives are important because they not only enable people to give an account of their life, but also make the co-existence of a variety of accounts possible (Couldry, 2010; Harding, 2004). The multiplicity of the accounts of lived experience can then serve as a building block for social justice work committed to dismantling hierarchies of power and the equal distribution of resources and opportunities.

Thus, my selection of materials is purposefully diverse, as are the interpretive frameworks I use to make sense of them in recognition of the entangled nature of everyday life, and the difficulty of capturing these entanglements in the research process (Jungnickel, 2017; Hine, 2007; Law, 2004; Highmore, 2002b). My archive includes: novels and short stories; displays of textile works in galleries and quilt shows; the digital in the form of websites, online newsletters, and social media; makers' testimonies; and moments of direct political action like the Women's March on Washington. I put close readings of key passages of the literary works in conversation with literatures on craft research, feminist theory, affect, decoloniality and social movements. Furthermore, I provide analyses of quilts by Chawne Kimber and the Social Justice Sewing Academy as well as a number of textile artefacts produced in response to the Afghan–European embroidery initiative Guldusi. I use interviews I conducted and testimonials by makers to substantiate my analysis, but also to decentre my own white, cis-gendered voice in the case of my discussion of black

women's resistant practices.⁴ A refocusing towards modes of storytelling that travel along the textured histories of a transnational feminist struggle as opposed to across a fixed set of discourses that privilege the narratives of white, cis-gendered women in the Global North allows for a highlighting of the entangled and interwoven nature of meaning and knowledge. As a result, assumptions about commonality between women based on a shared identity as needlewomen can be bypassed.

I am also committed to a feminist citational practice that highlights the critical voices of women and purposefully refrains from privileging straight white male theorists, in an attempt to avoid the reinscription of a white male intellectual genealogy (Ahmed, 2017, 2013). For example, while I find Ingold's work useful and intellectually stimulating and also see resonances between my own research and his, and also (as I will discuss briefly in Chapter Three) the work by theorists of everyday life like Michel de Certeau and Henri Lefebvre, I am mindful of not over-emphasising their work and aim to place them in conversation with work by feminists, queer scholars and critics of colour. Though I am wary of narratives that locate an inherent connection between femininity and needlework (I discuss this further in Chapter One), this thesis explores how practices of needlework and their narrative representations participate in a transnational anti-racist feminist politics of solidarity precisely because of the prominence of this connection. By conceptualising needlework as practices of meaning-making, I am able to attend to who assigns meaning, how meaning is produced, and where and how meaning travels in a globalised world.

I am an experienced quilter who has taught classes in sewing shops and to guild, groups and my quilts have been on display in shows in the UK and Germany. For more than ten years, I have been involved with various women's quilt groups and,

⁴ I obtained ethics approval for conducting these interviews from the University of Kent's Humanities Research Ethics Advisory Group.

in these spaces, I had the privilege to be inspired, mentored and cared for by a variety of women, many of whom were my seniors by some decades. But it is also through my experiences with these women and the quilting and textile crafts community more widely that I started to dig deeper into the meaning of practices of needlework for women and their relation to femininity and feminism. This thesis developed from the wish to provide an intersectional and interdisciplinary analysis of practices of needlework that is attuned to the social positionality of the maker. As such, this thesis is also grounded in the recognition of a white, Western, patriarchal context as the starting point for many analyses of practices of needlework even in cases where these are using a feminist and transnational perspective. My analysis traces the kinds of meanings that are generated based on common assumptions about women's supposedly shared gendered identity across class, race, age, sexuality and national boundaries. Thus, I aim to complicate narratives that centre and privilege experiences of white (and often middle-class) Western women. As a white Western European woman myself, I do not claim to give voice to the experiences of women of colour in the Global North or to the meaning of practices of needlework to women from the Global South. Clearly, such a project would reproduce the very structures I critique by framing myself as the knowledgeable researcher speaking on behalf of marginalised groups (Alcoff and Potter, 1993). Conscious of such acts of epistemic violence (Madhok and Evans, 2014; Spivak, 1988), I hope to address the variety of women's experiences and the apparent lack of representation of this diversity within the context of transnational feminist anti-racist struggles for liberation. As such, I aim to draw attention to the unequal structures of power that value certain knowledges more than others and prioritise certain bodies as the producers of knowledge, as opposed to 'simply' attempting to fill a representational gap, though this gap most certainly exists.

Research practices committed to feminist epistemologies of knowledge that attempt to attend to the specificity of individual experiences in the context of larger social, economic, cultural and political structures are part of such a politics. As Celia Lury and Nina Wakeford argue, research processes that pay attention to how meaning is made are better able to acknowledge the open-endedness of the social world than processes that posit meaning as fixed (2012, p. 2). My attention to practice and its narrative representations allows me to attend to processes of meaning-making. The way that practice-based processes of meaning-making are represented in narrative and the engagement with the narrative itself provide instances of meaning-making that can be shared between people, but may also be very different among individuals and groups. In trying to capture the multiplicity of contexts, situations and individual experiences, Lury and Wakeford make use of ‘inventive methods or devices’ that are ‘tools, instruments, techniques or distinct (material-semiotic) entities’ (2012, p. 10; see also Coleman and Ringrose, 2013). However, inventive methods are not generic, that is, unable to attend to the specificities of a particular context, because they are ‘always part of an ensemble, assemblage, configuration or apparatus’ and as such subject to transformation (Lury and Wakeford, 2012, pp. 10-11). They are part of the texture of everyday life and as such already include the mundane and the exceptional, sequences of routine knitting and the special moment when a handmade Pussyhat is worn to a Women’s March. The purpose of applying inventive methods, or, indeed, of drawing on an inventive archive, as I do, is not, then, to untangle, straighten or smoothen out texture, but to attend to the potentiality of ‘temporary grouping of relations’ (Coleman and Ringrose, 2013, p. 9; see also Ahmed, 2006b). In each of my case studies, I consider the multiplicity of this potentiality which may, on the one hand, serve to reproduce existing structures of knowledge. On the other hand, it may also gesture towards new meanings, collective formations and ways of being. Participating

in a sewing competition organised by the Afghan–European embroidery initiative Guldusi, for instance, may provide a space for European women to ‘do good’ without having to question their own complicity in the reproduction of unequal structures of power. However, it may also stimulate their engagement with this complicity and, more importantly, provides an income for the Afghan women that may enable them to envision different ways of living.

In sum, attending to entanglements is not about trying to codify or fix meaning in place, but about mapping potentiality and, as such, involves ‘attending to the social and cultural world as mobile, messy, creative, changing and open-ended, sensory and affective’ (Coleman and Ringrose, 2013, p. 1; references omitted). Moments of gesturing and orienting towards new ways of being are not fully developed acts of resistance, but signify an opening up to resistant modes of being (Manning, 2016; Muñoz, 2009). Indeed, ‘becoming resistant’ is often a rather slow process in the same way that substantive social change which affects everyday structures of oppression takes time as new habits and practices need to form (Pedwell, 2016). Moments of gesturing or orienting indicate the potentiality of futurity as opposed to providing a blueprint for a different way of life (Muñoz, 2009). They are indicative of a prefigurative politics committed to the collective co-developing of another world in the shell of the old (Ishkanian and Saveedra, 2019; Swain, 2019; Dixon, 2014). As such, relationships and structures of power in the social and cultural world are being reworked as part of the process of becoming and being resistant within an unequal and oppressive system.

Texture as a concept, a materiality, and a framework for analysis is ideally suited to explore practices of needlework and their narrative renderings as affective social practices of meaning-making. Meaning-making is neither a smooth nor a linear process, but can involve multiple iterations and getting stuck; it is a *textured* process because it is multi-faceted in the same way that the meaning of practices of needlework

and their narrative renderings is not monolithic. Due to its etymological link to weaving, texture, as a concept, is already firmly grounded within histories of femininity, women's work and practices of needlework. As a result, it orients the critic towards exploring the textured nature of feminist politics that is deeply entangled with issues of power, protest and personal and social transformation. Textures are types of entanglements that invite an engagement with the individual threads and the knots they form outside of binary judgements of good or bad. As such, they invite exploration of 'where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and attending to things are already somehow present in them in a state of potentiality and resonance' (Stewart, 2007, p. 3). Though messy, they are entanglements that can orient the maker, the viewer and the critic alike as they follow their directions and "do things" with' them as part of everyday modes of being (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 550, 552; Stewart, 2007). As I have indicated previously, my own critical awareness has been shifted away from a concern about increasing diversity in discourses and scholarship about needlework and textile craft communities as my research has led to my personal involvement with anti-racist activist groups. I have become more attuned to the workings and effects of white fragility and to how discourses of diversity and inclusion do not necessarily imply a fundamental restructuring of power relations. I have also become more aware of whose emotional, intellectual and physical labour diversity initiatives often rely on, namely the efforts of people of colour (DiAngelo, 2018). As a result of being open to becoming oriented differently through tracing the entanglements of different practices and modes of thinking, new encounters become possible while others are blocked or moved out of reach (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 552). For example, the European participants in the Guldusi embroidery initiative are nudged towards considering the lived experience of their Afghan counterparts. However, I also show how participation in the initiative is not a guarantee for transnational feminist solidarity.

The everyday gendered domestic context in which much textile making takes place and in which the finished object is often used or displayed, plays a pivotal role in my analysis. By focusing on the everyday performance of practices of needlework and the way the practice is part of the texture of everyday life, and, consequently, of narratives about the everyday, I explore how needlework serves as a tool for meaning-making in the context of a transnational anti-racist struggle for social justice and feminist solidarity. In addition, I trace any potential shifts in meaning as practice and object leave the domestic sphere and travel into and through the public and digital domain without shrugging off the connection to the home. For instance, as I discuss in Chapter One, Chawne Kimber sews her quilts at home, but posts about the process online and many of her quilts eventually hang in art galleries or quilt shows with hundreds and sometimes thousands of people viewing them. Ethnographic novels like *Brick Lane*, which I analyse in Chapter Three, are consumed in private as well as public settings. Such novels are often presented as providing insight into the personal homemaking practices of a marginalised group like Bangladeshi immigrant women in London. Yet, the concept of ‘authentic’ representation is deeply problematic as it implies the possibility for an unmediated experience of the world. For this reason, my focus is on how practice *and* object orient people as well as the narratives we tell about them, individually *and* collectively, in the world.

According to Sara Ahmed, orientations ‘are about starting points’ (2006a, p. 545). To be oriented always implies being oriented towards an object. This object, however, does not have to be a physical object, but may also be ‘objects of thought, feeling, and judgment, and objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives’ (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 553). Yet, a shared characteristic of these objects is that they shape our experience of bodily surfaces through contact with them; they leave ‘impressions’ as part of our encounters with them that leave the subject with a sense of the materiality

of their body and the space it occupies (Ahmed, 2004, pp. 24-26). These impressions can be literal in the sense that a physical object comes into direct contact with the skin or can be more 'sensational' in the form of affects that we encounter on an everyday basis (Ahmed, 2004; Brennan, 2004). What we are oriented towards, and, consequently, what is foregrounded, is the result of histories of power struggles which, through acts of repetition and force, have imprinted certain orientations as the norm (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 552). The contested meaning of needlework is firmly embedded in these power struggles and efforts to make normative that which reproduces patriarchy and white supremacy as society's overarching structures (Perry, 2018). I am interested in how points of intersection between text, textile and texture allow for moments of affective realignment and reorientation, and as such may offer a space for alternative imaginaries to heteronormative and patriarchal structures of governmentality. Chapters Two to Four focus primarily on how practices of needlework and their literary rendering create spaces for dwelling in potentiality and imagining different ways of being. Chapter Five engages with the concept of 'DIY citizenship' (Ratto and Boler, 2014) and the contemporary craftivism movement as an alternative to traditional understandings of citizenship centred on voting and tax-paying activities.

Encounters, or, in other words, coming face to face with something other than the self, are 'mediated, affective, emotive and sensuous' (Wilson, 2017, p. 465). They are also relational, in that they imply the coming upon, or becoming oriented towards, something. As such, they can resemble an opening of sorts, but also serve to maintain relations of difference and hierarchy, for example, in the colonial encounter. It is precisely this ambiguous nature of encounter that makes it a useful analytical category when attempting to think outside binary logics. An attunement to the texture and temporality of encounters, what Helen Wilson calls a 'focus on the doing of encounter' (2017, p. 464), can reveal instances in which encounters shift relations and enable

different kinds of orientation. It is in these reorientations, and even disorientations, that I locate generative moments of dwelling in a potentiality that can foster personal and social transformation (Manning, 2016; Muñoz, 2009).⁵ Dwelling, in this context, refers to a state of inhabiting the body and noticing how its contours are shaped by feelings and the way they affect perceptions of what is inside or outside (Ahmed, 2004). As such, the act of dwelling is important to the doing of encounter as it offers a starting point for becoming oriented differently and for reshaping these contours (Ahmed, 2006a, p. 545). Yet, dwelling is not about linear practices of working through or overcoming the potentially disorienting or discomforting state of encounter. Instead it offers the opportunity to be in and stay with the complexity of the encounter and to make (re)orientation and by extension transformation a possibility. This thesis asks how practices of needlework like knitting or quilting can (re)orient individuals in a way that may lead to their participation in collective initiatives of social justice such as Black Lives Matter or the Women's March on Washington without assuming that this is necessarily a linear process.

Chapter One provides an overview of the development of a supposedly inherent connection between needlework and femininity and how literary representations of needlework served to further establish this link. Drawing on art historian Rozsika Parker's (1984) field-leading study on gender and needlework, I flesh out how the connection between femininity and practices of needlework has become part of an ongoing debate about needlework's suitability as a medium for subversion of constraining ideals of femininity. I show how many of these debates revolve around the political efficacy of fibre crafts given needlework's intimate connection with patriarchy and normative femininity. Can practices of needlework actually be

⁵ Deleuze and Guattari (1987) would speak of re- and deterritorialization.

subversive or do they, ultimately, always reproduce the very norms its practitioners might attempt to critique? Further, I consider the relevance of this discussion in the context of questions about what constitutes an appropriate medium for feminist activism more broadly. I make a case for the grounding of my archive in the everyday and locate this thesis as part of scholarship on social organising and change that is not interested in providing prescriptive accounts of a better future or effective activism, but in attending to modes of being that are receptive to actively creating another world as part of a creative radical practices.

Chapter Two engages with African-American women's practices of historical redress of official histories of slavery and its legacy through texts and textiles. Analysing Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* as well as her short story 'Everyday Use' alongside the activist quilt practices of Faith Ringgold, Chawne Kimber, and the Social Justice Sewing Academy, I argue that the writers and quilters participate in creating alternative affective archives of black women's experiences in the US. In this context, the home space functions as a site where radical creative practices are performed and sustained, but these practices also emanate outside in response to large scale acts of social grassroots organising such as the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement. I illustrate how quilting serves as a generative practice which allows makers to become reoriented and to dwell in the potentiality of a more just world.

Chapter Three provides a close reading of Ali's novel *Brick Lane*. I consider the novel's relationship with scholar Naila Kabeer's qualitative study about Bangladeshi garment workers in Dhaka and London and engage with critiques of the novel that perceive it in the context of 'authentic' ethnographic fiction. I contend that such a focus is problematic because it views the literary as representative of 'true' experience as opposed to recognising its potential as a creative experiment to trace how individuals

can become oriented differently through everyday practices of housework and paid piece-work for a local sweatshop. I consider the protagonist Nazneen's paid piece-work in relation to second-wave and neoliberal feminist narratives of women's liberation through paid work and meaningful leisure practices. As a result, I analyse how sewing serves as an important affective social practice of meaning-making that has a significant effect on Nazneen's personal development. I argue that sewing becomes part of Nazneen's everyday home routines and, because it is representative of the emerging relationship with her young lover Karim, is deeply tied to her slow recognition of her own desires and ultimately also of her ability to express those wants. As such, I demonstrate how the physical movement implied in the repetitive machine-sewing task affectively orients Nazneen towards a different and more assertive sense of self.

Chapter Four explores the Afghan–European embroidery initiative Guldusi. Drawing on various materials, including the initiative's website and online newsletter, short publications by and about Guldusi, an interview with its founder and an analysis of various textile artefacts by Afghan and European women produced in response to the initiative, I examine Guldusi in the context of textile-based, feminist-solidarity initiatives and a contemporary resurgence of Orientalism. I critically examine its objective to facilitate cultural understanding between European and Afghan needlewomen by sketching out the limits of feminist solidarity grounded in claims of a shared identity as needlewomen. Drawing on David Gauntlett's concept of 'making is connecting' (2018, 2011), I nonetheless locate the potential to become oriented differently through the practices of needlework that the initiative fosters for Afghan and European women. The European women, to some extent, become introduced to a reality that is not their own and the Afghan women gain a much-needed income that enables them to address their everyday needs from a financially empowered position.

Chapter Five examines the contemporary craftivism movement through an analysis of the Pussyhat Project which developed in 2016 as part of the first Women's March on Washington which took place in January 2017. Conceptualising the initiative as a texture, I engage with critiques of the Pussyhat Project as transexclusionary, white-centric and vulgar as representative of an ongoing struggle for intersectional transnational feminist solidarity. Drawing on the concepts of fabriculture (Bratich and Brush, 2011) and platforms for creativity (Gauntlett, 2018; 2011), I outline the Pussyhat Project's entanglements with digital modes of organising and creative making that attempt not only to develop new ways of 'doing politics' (Dixon, 2014), but also advance understandings of feminist solidarity that are rooted in a recognition of affective dissonance. The Conclusion recaps the various strands discussed throughout this thesis and synthesises them to argue that everyday practices of needlework and their narrative representations make possible a politics of embodied orientation as they move people physically and affectively to become part of social movements and everyday imaginaries of social transformation. They provide a space to dwell in the potentiality of a different future, but also attend to different means of reconfiguring present relations in ways that recognise the unequal flow of power that is woven into everyday life.

Chapter One: Stitched Entanglements – Needlework, Femininity, the Literary and Protest

A visit to the news agent today reveals an abundance of magazines and guide books on different kinds of needlework from crochet and cross-stitch all the way to patchwork and quilting. These publications are often geared towards a younger audience with slogans such as ‘not your grandmother’s knitted sweater’ or the now iconic ‘Stitch’n Bitch’. In addition, popular TV shows like the BBC’s *Great British Sewing Bee* (2013-2019) and a general hype for the homemade and handmade reflected in the frequency with which Etsy Maker Fairs and the like keep popping up in urban and often young-and-hip areas, has led some to speak of a revival of textile crafts (Black, 2017; Price, 2015; Stannard and Sanders, 2015; Dirix, 2014). There is also an observable rise in neighbourhood craft groups such as the Modern Quilt Guild which boasts of more than 200 local chapters scattered around the world, the majority of which are in the US. A number of cafés and women centres in big cities such as London also invite their young, modern customers to informal Stitch 'n Bitch sessions where they can crochet and knit anything from scarves and stockings to decorative items. Indeed, popular feminist print outlets such as *Bust* and *Bitch* magazine have embraced this trend and regularly feature the works of feminist needlework practitioners while providing their readers with instructions on how to make their own small feminist craft projects. The pink Pussyhats sported by hundreds of thousands of marchers in the initial Women’s Marches in 2017 have become synonymous with these developments.

At the same time, discourses that link textiles and needlework practices firmly to conceptualisations of traditional femininity and women’s supposedly inherent tendency to nurture are prominent in mainstream culture. While a number of commercial craft magazines may embrace a certain modern aesthetic associated with

young and contemporary makers, they often do so coupled with instructions for baby blankets and nursing covers in pale pink and blue and focus on ‘quick projects’ that the busy mom can whip up during nap time. The blogging world alike is full of quilt and patchwork blogs whose writers, according to their biographical information, identify first as mother, wife or homemaker and then as quilter, fabric lover or artist. Posts and photos of quilts and other projects are regularly accompanied by adorable pictures of their children and/or their delicious-looking culinary creations and other homemaking adventures. Bestselling book series like the Elm Creek Quilters by Jennifer Chiaverini (1999-2019) and a substantial number of popular novels that feature female characters who knit, sew, crochet or embroider speak to this trend.

The literary is composed of textures in which the meaning of practices of needlework, especially with regards to the tensions in relation to femininity, class, labour, and race, are portrayed, contested, sustained, and subverted – particularly in works by women authors. In literary criticism, texture refers specifically to the ‘constitution or quality of a piece of writing’ (OED) which can mean, for example, the imagery used, the rhythm of a piece or word choice. In this sense, texture can be created by the author who makes use of certain stylistic tools as well as by the reader who experiences them as part of the make-up of a text. According to Peter Stockwell, this means that literary criticism is primarily engaged with ‘the description of readings [which] consist of the interaction of texts and humans’ (2009, p. 1) – of moments when the lived experience of the reader becomes entangled with that of the author, as well as the linguistic, stylistic and narrative possibilities of meaning intrinsic to the text, considered as a combination of different syllables, words, phrases and sentences. The act of reading, then, stages an encounter between text and human. By extension, the texture of a literary work becomes more than the sum of its characteristic stylistic and narrative devices (Stockwell, 2009, p. 192). As John J. Figueroa suggests, ‘texture is

part of meaning, or is meaning itself' (1995, p. 158) Throughout the thesis, my interest is primarily in the literary text as a texture, an entanglement of meaning, as opposed to the texture of the text in the sense of traditional literary analysis which, for examples, pays special attention to form.

This chapter provides an overview of the establishment of the supposedly inherent connection between needlework and femininity. I flesh out the importance of women's literary works with regards to the development and maintenance of this connection alongside other cultural products, and consider the way literary representations serve to negotiate cultural narratives about the meaning of practices of needlework. I contend that it is precisely because of the connection between practices of needlework and femininity and the meaning of such activities to women that they also have historically strong ties to feminist activism and politics. On the one hand, practices of needlework are denied political efficacy because of their generic connection to normative femininity. On the other hand, such practices are framed as powerful tools of subversion of gendered ideals because of their supposedly inherent affirmation of these ideals. This chapter provides an overview of cultural and literary studies scholarship on practices of needlework, narrative representation, and feminist activism to which this thesis responds. I also gesture towards some of the more topical research on textile crafts and feminist activism, which I will discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters. Women's narrative renderings of the meaning of needlework are of particular interest in this context because of women writers' (and, more generally, women artists') struggle for the recognition of their works within patriarchal social structures that regarded their cultural productions as inferior to that of men. As such, this chapter fleshes out some of the key scholarship underlying my own research into the politics of everyday practices of needlework and their narrative representations.

Connecting Practices of Needlework to Femininity

The link between needlework and femininity and its development from the Middle Ages to the contemporary moment is outlined in art historian Rozsika Parker's groundbreaking study *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984). Indeed, her work continues to be one of, or probably *the*, foundational text for scholarship of textile crafts and gender. Through an in-depth engagement with textile artefacts, literary texts, paintings, and historical documents, Parker highlights how embroidery came to be gendered in the particular way which frames it as either an oppressive or subversive practice, and, more importantly, as inherently connected to the feminine. Though Parker's study is primarily focused on embroidery as a particular type of needlework, scholars in art, history, sociology and literary and cultural studies have applied her findings to other practices of needlework from lace making, knitting, crochet, patchwork and quilting to dressmaking and the sewing of household items such as sheets and tablecloths (Tamboukou, 2016; Pristash, Schaechterle and Wood, 2009; Elsley, 1996; Hedges, 1991). The conflation of these different types of needlework for analytical purposes, which I also apply to varying degrees throughout this thesis, is justified for multiple reasons. Firstly, terminology throughout history was not fixed. For example, the term 'quilt', in the eighteenth century, could refer to a quilted bed cover as well as to a type of soft furnishing like a stool cover (Audin, 2013, p. 10; Browne, 2010, p. 41). Secondly, the majority of women up until the mid-twentieth century were educated and proficient in a number of different types of needlework, and often actively practiced more than one at a time (Parker, 1984). Likewise, contemporary craft and DIY culture also encourages makers to try a variety of techniques and different types of needlework across the whole spectrum of fibre crafts. Nonetheless, as I will demonstrate, these kinds of conflations and generalisations need to be mindful of differences between practices, especially in relation to class and race

and the use or exchange value attached to the practice as well as the finished object. Scholars have done so to varying degrees (Bryan-Wilson, 2017; Tamboukou, 2016; Prichard, 2010; Goggin and Tobin, 2009; Stalp, 2007; Parker, 1984). More than anything, though, these different kinds of analysis show the similarity of gendered discourse and its narrative representations across diverse types of needlework and textile crafts.

In *The Subversive Stitch*, Parker highlights how specifically the practice of embroidery came to be gendered as a practice essentially connected to the feminine. She traces how, in Western Europe and North America, a process started in the sixteenth century had, by the nineteenth century, firmly linked embroidery with the feminine ideal of a virtuous, pious, and nurturing woman, indeed, 'the connection was deemed to be natural' (1984, p.11). Jennie Batchelor's research on embroidery plates in the British *Lady's Magazine*, published from 1770 to 1832, provides insight into the workings of this process and the way embroidery was marketed to the magazine's middle-class readership supposedly 'characterised by a considered elegance, marked by grace and cultivated through reflection and practice' which was to be mirrored through their embroidery (2015, para. 10). For a middle- and upper-class woman in these contexts, to embroider was to provide evidence that she embodied 'piety, feeling, taste, and domestic devotion' (Parker, 1984, p. 164; see also Quinn-Lautrefin, 2018;). Likewise, embroidery served to inculcate girls into this feminine ideal; popular sampler verses iterated the need for girls and women to be loving and dutiful to father and husband (Parker, 1984, pp. 83-88). This love was to be expressed through the provision of a comfortable home, which, in Victorian ideology, meant one filled with its mistress's embroidery (Quinn-Lautrefin, 2018; Plotz, 2008; Parker, 1984). As such, embroidery also functioned as a clear marker for the different spheres of men and women. A woman's world was the home, whereas man occupied the public sphere as

gentleman, businessman and politician. The home became a woman's domain in which she executed her 'work', that is her embroidery, not for money, but as a sign of love and service to her husband and family (Long, 2016; Parker, 1984, p. 154). In addition, Parker identifies in this separation of the different spheres the moment which marked the classification of embroidery as a craft and not as an art and, consequently, as inferior to the latter (1984, p. 5; see also Pollock, 1987). Victorians conveniently overlooked the fact that in medieval guild workshops both men and women embroidered side by side. Instead, they framed embroidery as having always been a woman's craft (Gajewski 2016; Hicks, 2007; Parker, 1984, p. 17).

Many early twentieth century textile historians initially accepted this assumption without further enquiry (Parker, 194, p. 46). Whereas in the Middle Ages, painters were as much part of a craft and guild as, for example, embroiderers, bakers and carpenters, the Renaissance, with its aspiring merchant class leading the way, framed painting as a fine art and embroidery and types of needlework as craft (Kempers, 1994; Parker, 1984, pp. 40-60). On the one hand, this was due to a new stress on the individuality of painters and their work, whereas professional embroiderers were often perceived as simply executing someone else's design. On the other hand, embroidery offered merchant-class men a way of providing their wives with an occupation that 'evoked the femininity of the nobility and yet suggested the service and subservience required of the merchant's wife' (Parker, 1984, p. 63). During the Middle Ages, women from the nobility had been known to embroider as a kind of professional pastime and, for example, in the case of the famous Bayeux tapestry, to have joined in with other women in the production of the opulent dramatic narrative sequences typical of the period (Gajewski, 2016; Frye, 2010; Hicks, 2007). In addition, embroidery conveyed a sense of patience and persistence as its execution was labour intensive and required the embroiderer to be meticulous (Long, 2016; Parker, 1984, p. 80). As a result, from

the sixteenth century onwards, embroidery, and women as its primary practitioners, became placed within the domestic sphere and their work was regarded as unskilled in contrast to that of the aspiring male artist who painted not for love, but for money and whose work was intended for the public sphere (Pollock, 1987; Parker, 1984). Tensions around whether needlework is part of art or crafts exist to this day and reflect broader disputes about definitions of the terms art and craft, or alternatively, distinctions between high art and popular culture (Sennet, 2008). Critics like Ana Chave (2008) and Karin E. Peterson (2011) note that in order for needlework to be categorised as art by the gate-keepers of the art world, the works need to appear to adhere to a modernist aesthetic and its male vanguards in painting. Instead of finding a new vocabulary to talk about needlework as a product of creativity and creative expression of women and as complex material cultural object, the art world attempts to frame it within already existing categories. Parker does not see this as an important step towards the recognition of women's needlework, but rather as a further consolidation of hierarchical categories which historically have tended to discriminate against women (1984, p. 5).

In the nineteenth-century framing of practices of needlework as a home-craft for women, questions of class, naturally, played a significant role. For a Victorian middle-class woman to sit at home and embroider for decorative purposes could be regarded as a leisure activity that did not necessarily suit the new capitalist work ethic and, because of its aristocratic associations, contained potentially dangerous ideas of class transgression. For this reason, the stress was put on the 'right spirit' in which women should embroider: as an exemplary manifestation of femininity in the service of others (Parker, 1984, p. 153). Indeed, a 2007 study by sociologist Marybeth Stalp found that contemporary middle-aged women quilters in the US still emphasise the importance of service to others when talking about their quilting practices. Quilting is framed by the

women as a form of care work for family and friends that by extension justifies the time it takes away from other household tasks or acts of care and emotional labour that the women perceive as part of their everyday responsibilities. Thus, in the twenty-first century, to practice needlework and to gift the finished object to a loved one, continues to be framed as an expression of women's care work for the family and by extension society as a whole in line with the Victorian image of ideal femininity (Stalp, 2007; Johnson and Wilson, 2005).

Victorian women took it upon themselves to teach embroidery to the poor as one 'aspect of Victorian philanthropy' (Parker, 1984, p. 173). Yet, differences in style, technique, choice of materials available and a focus on functional stitchery such as darning samplers assured the maintenance of class distinctions. As such, embroidery also held an important role in the education of girls (Rees, 2018, para. 22; Whiting, 2011). Girls were inculcated into femininity so that their subsequent behaviour in line with the feminine ideal of the time would serve as evidence of 'innate' qualities of femininity, including obedience and devotion to the family and the church (Parker, 1984, pp. 11, 164; see also Cherry, 2000). Parker identifies in these practices a clear manifestation of the fusion between embroidery and femininity (see also Quinn-Lautrefin, 2018). She writes:

When a middle- or upper-class woman embroidered, it was her 'taste,' [a result of her exemplary femininity], which shed a moral, spiritual light; when a working-class woman embroidered the change to her surroundings came not from the woman herself but from the embroidery. (Parker 1984, p. 179)

Indeed, for lower middle-class girls and women, needlework often provided the only respectable source of income if they were unable to find employment as a governess. In the American West, the performance of practices of needlework similarly functioned as a display of women's good taste and femininity (Prescott, 2009). Kathy Rees (2018)

offers a similar argument in relation to knitting. The image of the elegant Victorian woman daintily holding two knitting needles in her hands to show off her delicate hands and posture superseded that of the lower-class cottage woman knitting coarse material in order to make ends meet (Rees, 2018, para. 3). Likewise, for a Victorian matron or older woman, knitting was connected to ideas about care work, philanthropy and a Protestant work ethic. Servants and lower-class women used knitted frills and doilies to adorn their meagre belongings and household items in order to imitate middle-class respectability (Rees, 2018).

In this context, it is important to note that the type of femininity envisioned in these discourses was essentially white femininity. By extension, practices of needlework became a means for women of colour to demonstrate their respectability. Consider for example the well-known portraits of abolitionist Sojourner Truth, which she had printed as little postcards to hand out to supporters. They show a middle-aged black woman with small wire-rimmed glasses sometimes seated in a wooden armchair or next to a side table covered with a table cloth on top of which are placed a book and a small vase with a flower arrangement. She is wearing a long dress in dark colours with a bright white cap on her head and an equally bright white triangular shawl draped over her shoulders. On her lap is a small light-coloured bowl of yarn and she is holding a piece of knitting in her hands, though her hands are dropped and she is not actively working on the piece as she is facing the camera directly. These portraits have been analysed and framed as a thoughtful and clever use of early photographic portraiture (Zackodnik, 2005; Painter, 1994). The image serves to establish Sojourner Truths' middle-class femininity in order to legitimise her abolitionist and black women's rights advocacy. However, as Daisy Grimaldo Grigsby argues, the featured piece of knitting in progress is also representative of 'mindful and strategic self-authentication, akin to a hand-drawn or scribbled signature that registers her masterful, and bodily, presence

across the surface of the mechanically produced photograph' (quoted in Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p. 8). As such, Truth may have employed this particular prop not only because of its connotations with respectable femininity, but also because of it connotes a good work ethic and skill. Using her knitting also as 'an assertion of her strident activism and creative self-production' (Bryan-Wilson. 2017, p. 8), Truth presents herself as an active maker within the remit of respectable femininity and women's domestic work but active and capable nonetheless.

Victorian ideologies of embroidery and the feminine often conveniently ignored the painstaking work children and women performed in industrial and home-based sweatshops making and embroidering lace for the commercial market (Parker, 1984, p. 178). While specialist products like 'lace end embroidery' could not be fully manufactured before the 1880s, once the manufactured products were cleared of their associations with the plight of the workers, 'hand embroidery could be [fully] prized and sentimentalised for its evocation of home, hearth and heart' (Parker, 1984, p. 178; see also Quinn-Lautrefin, 2018). Stephanie Rudgard-Redsell argues that the often dire situation of the professional needlewoman was generally not reason for concern for the Victorian middle and upper class as the profession was 'associated with desperate poverty and fallenness' (2007, p. 56). Maria Tamboukou (2016), however, shows that seamstresses in France were quite vocal about their situation and actively demanded reforms. Through a wealth of resistant practices including personal and published writings, the Parisian seamstress emerged as one of the key figures in nineteenth-century labour-rights activism. In sum, while practices of needlework, on the one hand, functioned as a marker of class, it also, on the other hand, offered a dangerously easy route for class transgression and opposition to rigid race relations.

However, embroidery, and other practices of needlework, as I have already indicated through my discussion of Sojourner Truth's knitting, also provided a medium

through which to subvert the very feminine ideal that it ordinarily served to sustain. Firstly, it offered an 'instrument which enabled a woman to obliterate aspects of herself which did not conform to femininity' (Parker, 1984, p. 164). It enabled women to outwardly comply with social norms without actually being invested in these norms. Secondly, embroidery provided a tool that not only allowed for the negotiation of the constraints of femininity, but represented an actual 'weapon of resistance' to it (Parker, 1984, p. i). Parker provides a comprehensive array of examples from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century in which women consciously made use of this 'weapon of resistance' in often covert ways. Pictorial nineteenth-century embroidery frequently displayed scenes of estrangement between man and woman, and, as was common across all the arts at the time, scenes of human suffering (Quinn-Lautrefin, 2018; Parker, 1984, pp. 160-161). In about 1830, Elizabeth Parker used her embroidery skills to produce a sampler that recounts her own life story in writing. Between the chronological listing of her different employments as a servant, she hints at the abuse that she suffered at the hands of her employer and calls out his 'wicked design', which seriously impeded her mental well-being for the rest of her life. In the sampler, Elizabeth Parker narrates how, at one point during her suffering, she even considered the cardinal sin of suicide, but refrains out of religious faith in God's salvation (Goggin, 2009, pp. 44-46). Similarly, Austrian seamstress Agnes Richter densely embroidered her asylum uniform with snippets of autobiographical information. Today, the jacket provides a singular account of a nineteenth-century woman's experience of madness and incarceration (Hornstein, 2012). For these women, like many others, the embroidery canvas offered a rare space to express the estrangement and suffering imposed on them by the rigorous Victorian social norms. At the same time, across the Atlantic in the New World, quilts became a rare medium through which women could actively express their political allegiance by embroidering their name on a quilt in order

to signify support, for example, to the Temperance Movement, or for a particular candidate in the run-up to a presidential election, and later for women's suffrage (Kiracofe and Johnson, 1993).

Women writers of the nineteenth century drew on needlework's deep connection to femininity not only to negotiate their female characters' relation to Victorian ideals of femininity, but also their own identity as a writer which often clashed with precisely these ideals (Showalter, 1982; Gilbert and Gubar, 1979; Moers, 1978). Kathryn King (1995) notices a generative connection between text and textile in eighteenth-century works like Jane Barker's *A Patchwork Screen for the Ladies* (1723), where literary creation takes place alongside practices of needlework. Writing is 'troped as a handiwork, a craft, a form of fabrication analogous to the textile work long considered proper for her [Barker]: authorship becomes the work of women, women's work' (King, 1995, p. 87). Yet, towards the end of the eighteenth century, King observes a very different tone in Charlotte Smith's *The Old Manor House* (1794), in which this generative connection between text and textile is 'replaced by an opposition between them' that reflects women authors' struggle to choose the pen over the needle (1995, p. 87). More so it highlights the difficulty for women to express their lived experience and desires outside of a patriarchal logic that also structured creative expression. Practices of needlework feature prominently in the works of Jane Austen, the Brontë sisters, George Elliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Emily Dickinson, to name but a few (Parker, 1984). Indeed, biographical evidence confirms that the majority of these writers were skilled needlewomen as would have been expected of them at the time.

In their seminal *The Mad Woman in the Attic* (1978), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar show how Emily Dickinson's poetry is rife with ambiguous references to sewing. In Dickinson's poetry, needlework and the various imagery connected to stitching is portrayed as both oppressive and generative. Stitching can cover up and disguise a

woman's failure to confirm to the Victorian feminine ideal that was supposedly innate to the female sex. However, it can also mend fragmentation; in other words, it can successfully help women negotiate their own desires alongside society's expectations (1978, p. 604). Writing, similarly, asked Victorian women authors for a careful negotiation of the feminine ideal. As Gilbert and Gubar and others (Showalter, 1982; Moers, 1978) point out, writing, especially in the nineteenth century, was not an accepted activity, let alone profession, for women. To write, that is, to think and create, was considered unfeminine behaviour and a transgression into the male sphere because women were expected to be passive and subservient. Likewise, the value of women's writing was contested in the same way that needlework was relegated to the position of craft and not art (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Not only did nineteenth-century women writers lack female role models, but they also often lacked the support, respect and credit of their male peers as well as that of their female ones.⁶ Women writers regularly apologised for their literary endeavours and productions and fed the image of the demure woman in order to gain respect for themselves and hopefully also for their work (Showalter, 1982). Women's writing was considered not serious work in the same vein that embroidery was dismissed as fancy work, a work clearly not as serious as men's artistic productions.

Both Parker and Rudgard-Redsell identify the moment of a lover's address to a woman as a prime example in Victorian literature where embroidery serves to contain and mask a woman's passion and her amatory feelings (Rudgard-Redsell, 2007, p. 67; Parker, 1984, p. 166). It is only when the woman puts down her needlework that she submits to her lover's proposal and allows an insight into her feelings which is then

⁶ In this context, Victorians also conveniently overlooked prolific eighteenth-century women writers like Eliza Haywood and or Delarivier Manley and dismissed their works as trivial (Simpson, 2014).

regularly followed by the acceptance of the proposal. One example of this is Shirley Keeldar during her conversation with her future husband Louis Moore in Charlotte Brontë's 1849 novel *Shirley*. Until the moment that Shirley drops her needlework, her head is turned away from the speaker and it is unclear how she feels about the proposal. Similarly, in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1866), Cynthia uses her occupation with needlework as a shield from further enquiry into the whereabouts of her diminished allowance and her relationship with Mr Preston. In this context, the figure of the embroiderer is doubly interesting. The position of a focused embroiderer, head bowed down, eyes fixed intently on the work and hands and fingers delicately engaged with the cloth, evokes an image of submission and subservience. However, it is also one of withdrawal and introversion. A skilled needlewoman may easily, at the same time, embroider or sew and be thinking of a matter completely unrelated to her work: a matter that is private and may not be disclosed to any male onlookers unless she chooses to do so. In a way, the embroiderer defies patriarchal mechanisms of control through the act of embroidering, while the very act itself is nonetheless emblematic of exactly these mechanisms exemplified in the feminine ideal. Kathy Rees (2018) offers a similar argument in the context of fictional knitting-women in Victorian literature. Indeed, she argues that knitting 'invariably functioned as a barometer of female emotions: the act of letting the knitting fall into the lap conveyed shock and horror, the needless unwinding of worsted betrayed indignation, and the jerking of stitches imparted scorn and disdain' (Rees, 2018, para. 1). Yet, in the context of one of the most famous literary knitting women, Madame Defarge in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), the practice is also linked to power and women's resistance to the feminine ideal. Madame Defarge, an active schemer during the French Revolution in Paris, actually secretly encodes the names of people to be guillotined in her knitting (Rees, 2018, paras. 1, 10).

New Women authors from the 1890s to the 1920s, along with earlier sensation novelists, attempted to counter the Victorian feminine ideal through focusing their writing on a new type of woman less concerned with decorum and propriety than with gender solidarity, sexuality and the wish to shed the constraints of the feminine ideal (Heilmann, 2002; Ledger, 2002; Pykett, 1992). The drudgery of the needle sits alongside restrictions of women's dress for this reason, and is featured prominently in the texts of New Women writers such as Olive Schreiner, Sarah Grand and Alice Dunbar Nelson (Hedges, 1991, p. 346). Writing towards the end of the New Women's era, famous modernist author Virginia Woolf's texts also feature a number of female characters performing needlework. Knitting women like Mrs Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) are complex characters whose knitting and the way they 'flash' their needles place them in continuity with traditional Victorian ideals of femininity. However, the characters are also indicative of women's difficulties with negotiating this identity (Okumura, 2008). According to Elaine Hedges' history of the representation of needlework in women's writing, women writers' antagonism towards needlework culminated with the work of the American author Sylvia Plath (1991, pp. 347-348). When Plath passed away in 1963, she left a substantial body of work in which needlework was not only representative of the confines of domesticity and femininity, but also physically damaging to women as the needle pricked women's fingers and could be transformed into a stabbing weapon.

Yet, while some authors emphasised the debilitating effects that practices of needlework had on women and their sense of self, a new literary figure who made cunning use of knitting emerged: the amateur female detective. Sitting, supposedly focused on their knitting, became a successful way for the likes of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple to blend into the background and go unnoticed when, in reality, they were actively eavesdropping on the conversations around them (Rees, 2018, para. 26). In

addition, as Rees argues, knitting functioned to maintain the characters' status as an amateur detective who did not pose a real threat to the traditionally male profession (Rees, 2018, para. 26; see also Wells, 2018, para. 2). In sum, though the connection between practices of needlework and femininity was well established by the nineteenth century, the meaning of the practice to women was continuously contested across a variety of cultural texts and artefacts. As I will explore in more detail in the next section, both aspects mirrored wider questions about the position of women in society and the means through which they could articulate dissent. My thesis takes this contested relationship between practices of needlework and femininity as a starting point for exploring what kinds of political acts practices of needlework and their narrative representations make possible in the context of contemporary transnational feminist activism.

Connecting Practices of Needlework to Feminist Protest

The suffragettes, at the beginning of the twentieth century, tapped into the popular associations of embroidery and femininity in their campaign for women's vote, but fashioned femininity as a source of strength rather than weakness (Tickner, 1987; Parker, 1984, p. 197). They appliquéd and embroidered large banners with political slogans and took them to their marches, out in the public for everyone to see, thus making practices of needlework an active part of direct political action. As such, the suffragettes cunningly used a medium and practice which patriarchal society had constructed as a marker of femininity and the separate spheres of men and women and transformed it into a visible advocate for disrupting the strict boundary between public and private and between male and female (Parker, 1984, pp. 197-201). During the First and Second World Wars, this supposedly inherent connection between needlework and femininity received renewed attention. Knitting gloves or hats for

soldiers was framed as an appropriate way for women to show their dutiful devotion to the national cause and by extension to society's expectation of women (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p. 11; Parry, 2010, p. 101). In addition, during the dire years of the Second World War when austerity bit deep, and goods were difficult to come by, the British government encouraged women to 'make do and mend' by creatively repurposing clothing that was no longer in a state suitable for wearing (Hatherley, 2016, p. 8; Parker, 1984, p. 202). In addition, the production of handmade winter mittens and hats for soldiers allowed women to join in the war effort from the safety of their homes and to demonstrate their devotion not only to male family members who might be fighting in the war, but to the state as a whole. In her analysis of American women's wartime hand knitting from 1759-1950, Susan M. Strawn claims that knitting so called 'comforts' for soldiers, in fact, for some women turned knitting into a 'vehicle for gender appropriate political expression' (2009, p. 248). It was an intentionally patriotic activity, and even some suffragette groups participated. Though the actual contribution the women and their 'comforts' made towards the successful outcome of the war remains questionable, the activity provided important moral assurance to soldiers and civilians alike. In 1942, the US government issued propaganda posters that encourage female citizens to 'purl', i.e. knit, harder in memory of the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor (Bryan-Wilson, 2017, p. 11).

After the economically tight post-war years, there was a general decline in the popularity of practices of needlework as sewing for home use was no longer a necessity because of the ready availability of cheap manufactured textiles (Robertson, 2011, p. 199). Beginning in the 1960s, however, needlework experienced a revival as a leisure practice. Community education classes attempted to counter the dying of the crafts by advertising it as a suitable leisure practice for women, drawing on much of the same discourses of propriety and care that dominated the previous century;

moreover, needlework continued to be a constant in the school education of girls (Rees, 2018; Wells, 2018; Audin, 2013, p. 55; Parker, 1984, p. 188). However, this renewed interest in needlework and 'women's work' in general was also inspired by the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1960s and 70s (Dunn, 2014, pp. 45-52; Robertson, 2011, p. 199; Parker, 1984, p. 205). Second-wave feminism in North America and Western Europe openly questioned the century-long exclusion of much of women's creative productions and especially needlework from conceptualisations and representations of high culture and the arts (Prichard, 2010; Pollock, 1987). In her well-known installation *The Dinner Party* (1974-79), feminist artist Judy Chicago commemorated the achievements of women from history and included a large variety of handmade textiles produced by a group of women (Chicago, 2007). Feminist artist Faith Ringgold, who I discuss in more detail in the next chapter, likewise drew on the medium of textiles, more specifically quilts, to portray African-American women's identity struggle within a patriarchal and racist society. Her quilts are unique in that they are 'story quilts' that include texts and tell of African-American women's and their communities' struggles and clearly carry a political message. As such, personal experience was given an outward form in the same way that the poets and critics of the Women's Movement, including Audre Lorde, Cherri'e Moraga, and Adrienne Rich, were attempting to 'find language to express oppressions and liberations that had no name' (Reed, 2005, p. 89). In this context, representations of needlework and a general engagement with supposedly traditional types of women's work also served as a means to connect with the women of previous generations (Rich, 1978). However, as I will show throughout this thesis, and especially in Chapters Two, Four and Five, issues of race are often bypassed in these dominant narratives about the meaning of needlework and its representations. I locate this omission of or ignorance about race

within wider hegemonic practices that centre whiteness as the default mode through which experience is presented.

Second-wave feminism's embrace of traditional women's crafts is also recognisable in the literary works that emerged from the movement. Poets and writers like Adrienne Rich, Joyce Carol Oates, and Alice Walker began to frame needlework as a generative mode of female creative expression in the context of a focus on women's agency and questions of sisterhood and women's community (Hedges, 1991; DuPlessis, 1985; Walker 1983; Rich, 1978). In addition, Walker, whose work I discuss in detail in Chapter Two alongside that of Toni Morrison, like black feminist critic bell hooks (1991b), highlights the similarities between practices of writing, critical thinking and needlework in ways that Emily Dickinson did more than a century earlier. In fact, literary scholars have analysed both Walker's *The Color Purple* and Morrison's *Beloved* as structurally mirroring a quilt due to their fragmented nature (Falling-rain, 1994; Daniel, 2000; Dunn and Morris, 1992). Traditionally, a quilt consists of three layers: a so-called 'top' usually pieced out of various scraps of fabric; some kind of soft interfacing such as fleece, wool or cotton fluff; and a backing material. The term quilting refers to the process of putting all three layers together and securing them to each other through topstitching or by tying them together with yarn. However, the term can also stand for the overall process of making a quilt. Throughout *Beloved* the narrative focus switches between present and past as characters' recount their experiences of slavery, escape, and life in Ohio as free slaves before, during, and after the Civil War and are regularly overcome by flashbacks. In addition, the novel is divided into three parts, which can be said to echo the three layers of a quilt. *The Color Purple* has an epistolary format, in that much of it consists of Celie's letters to God, which are like diary entries that chronicle her life as a young black woman in a 1930s rural Southern community. The novel also includes letters by Celie to her sister Nettie in Africa and

vice versa that 'transcend time's boundaries' due to the long delivery time and the fact that Celie's husband Albert withholds Nettie's letters (Tavormina, 1986, p. 226). However, despite their variety, the fragmented recollections in *Beloved* and the textual fragments in *The Color Purple* are connected to each other through the overall narrative framework and, in the end, make up a coherent whole. They form a story, a novel neatly arranged between two book covers, in the same manner that a finished quilt resembles a complete whole.

Second-wave feminism was interested in reclaiming so-called women's craft as part of a feminist struggle about the value of women's creative expression and within a larger cultural struggle about the difference between high art and craft, as I will outline in more detail in Chapter Two. However, it was also very much concerned with freeing women from the confinements of housework and the home, the space in which practices of needlework were usually performed, thus also overlooking how the home space for black women was one of the only spaces to avoid white supremacy. Nonetheless, second-wave feminists and other liberation movements that followed on their heels also deliberately took practices of needlework outside of the home space by incorporating them as part of public instances of direct action such as the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the UK in the 1980s. The women protesters knitted practical items such as scarves or socks in the Peace Camp (Robertson, 2011). In addition, fibre installations on the wire mesh fence around the airbase, or as part of human protest performances such as sit-ins in front of one of the different airbase gates, regularly included yarn and wool as well as knitted items. Soon after its establishment in the fall of 1981, the camp was declared a women-only camp, with women and children portrayed as those likely to suffer most from nuclear war (Titcombe, 2013). A clear link was made between patriarchy as an overarching form of governance that affects women's lives inside and outside the family with the threat

of a nuclear war being only the 'tip of the iceberg' (Harford, 1984, p. 2). Making knitting, with all its stereotypical connotations of domesticity and femininity, a part of life at camp further emphasised the deep connection between the public and the private in relation to patriarchy's and militarism's impact on people's lives. Indeed, at first, the protesters were not taken seriously by either public or military-base authorities. They were dismissed as the experiment of a bunch of women participating in non-violent direct action while attempting to juggle work and childcare demands. Yet, to stage the protest as a permanent camp where the women lived and performed mundane practices such as cooking, childcare and personal hygiene powerfully demonstrated how any extraordinary type of direct action is always also necessarily surrounded and quite often sustained by everyday activities (Kauffman, 2017, p. 48).

Consequently, the women verbally reiterated as well as practically showed how the personal and the everyday are political in multiple ways.⁷ Through their constant presence at Greenham Common, the women not only demonstrated their strong commitment to the cause, but it was, as Elaine Titcombe argues, a powerful act 'of the individual bear[ing] witness to the immoral actions of the State' (2013, p. 317), as the women observed not only the relentless activity of armament taking place inside the base, but also the state's harsh and sometimes brutal treatment of the protesters which led to many women being arrested. As such, the Peace Camp, along with feminist and other liberation movements of the 1960s, also redefined popular understandings of direct action and what constitutes protest. While the women who chained themselves to the fence at Greenham were certainly regarded as protesters because they were

⁷ I suggest that the Occupy camp in Zuccotti Park with its infrastructure for sleeping and cooking – but also leisure time and education in form of classes and the library – made a similar statement about the relationship between the ordinary and political resistance as have other anti-capitalist resistance camps, for example in Spain or Greece (Butler and Athanaseou, 2013).

defying public order, their act of being present and bearing witness was an equally powerful form of activism.⁸

Another prominent example for the use of practices of needlework alongside liberationist activities is the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which was first displayed in its entirety on the National Mall in the Washington, DC in 1987. Conceived of by queer rights activist Cleve Jones, the project aimed to provide a tangible memento of the lives lost to HIV/AIDS and a powerful visual marker of the scale of a disease that public officials had not yet been willing to recognise. In addition, creating a quilted panel for a deceased person, which would then be displayed with thousands of other panels, was also intended to provide mourners with a creative and calming outlet for their grief (Stormer, 2013, Tanner, 2006). To this day, parts of the quilt continue to travel the US and the world and remain a testament to one of the most devastating health crises for the queer community. At the same time, it is evidence of the way a needlework-based initiative, in combination with more traditional grassroots organising led by the group Act-Up, made the national spotlight and, ultimately, forced the government to attend to the health crisis (Gould, 2009).

In the 1990s, with the advent of what came to be known as third-wave feminism, questions of femininity, domesticity and women's crafts received renewed attention. The third wave can be broadly characterised as united by an apparent wish in younger women to distinguish themselves and their experiences to those from feminists of the previous generation (Gillis, Howie and Munford, 2007).⁹ In this context, according to a study by Elizabeth Groeneveld (2010) about representations of domesticity and

⁸ Heather Ann Thompson (2019) makes a similar argument about the importance of being present at the scene of prison riots to at least partly bear witness to what is happening on the inside, given that journalists and lawyers are often denied access.

⁹ For a more nuanced discussion of the generational conflict in third-wave feminism as well as a consideration of the problematics of the wave metaphor in feminist theory as a whole see Gillis, Howie and Munford (2007).

crafting in third-wave feminist magazines like *Bust* and *Bitch*, third wave reclamation practices differ to those of their predecessors in their perception of domesticity. Groeneveld locates a drive for reclaiming domesticity as part of wider discourses about the reclamation of needlework. Yet, she also points out how these discourses and practices are 'marked by privilege, and, at times, ageism and classism' (2010, p. 274) in their efforts to differentiate their own crafting practices from those of older women connected to traditional forms of domesticity that do not match the kind of hip, urban and homemaking personas the magazines fashion as their readership. On the other hand, crafting practices are also presented as a means to forge connections with these older women, but not necessarily in a politicised context that considers class, consumption and feminist solidarity (Chansky 2010; Groeneveld, 2010, pp. 273-274;). Rather, as Wendy Parkins argues, one may locate a nostalgic wish for a supposedly de-politicised past in twenty-first century discourses about the reclamation of needlework. She theorises the notable increase in celebrities' public displays of practices of knitting as a response to general feelings of 'dislocation [in] global postmodernity' (2004, p. 426). According to Parkins, practices of needlework, through their connection to the supposedly 'better' and more importantly 'slower' olden days, but also through the ways the practice asks the knitter to engage in a repetitive meditative slow movement provide celebrities and other women with the opportunity to claim different temporalities for themselves as they carve out time and space to dedicate to their hobby (2004, pp. 426, 435). Chris Land, Neil Sutherland and Scott Taylor (2019) also note a nostalgia for a supposedly lost cultural authenticity in the contemporary popularity of traditional craft practice that ranges from home sewing to craft-beer production. In this sense, this return to craft can also be understood as a political response to the neoliberal capitalist order of the Global North and the negative affects it produces such as an alienation from work (Luckman, 2013; Dawkins, 2011;

Illouz, 2007; Hochschild, 1983). As a result, the amateur crafter is framed as having successfully reclaimed the meaning of work. Using the hands to manually perform practices of needlework is framed as a more embodied or connected way of working than people commonly experience as part of their paid employment (Hackney, 2013; Luckman, 2013; Sennett, 2008). In addition, crafting is figured as an alternative to capitalist consumption (Williams, 2011), though the flourishing global craft industry is also a testament to how craft practices resemble alternative consumption practices as opposed to an alternative to capitalist markets (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 171). Yet, as I will flesh out in Chapters Three and Four in my analysis of Ali's *Brick Lane* and the Afghan–European embroidery initiative Guldusi, such claims about needlework often emanate from the Global North and rarely consciously attend to the ways these amateur practices are entangled with the global labour market and especially the South East Asian textile industry.

Likewise, race is overlooked as a contributing factor to perceptions about the efficacy of women's craft-based forms of activism. However, the link between respectable white middleclass femininity and practices of needlework like knitting – which influences Sojourner Truth's portrayal of herself over a century ago – is also reflected in contemporary practices of yarnbombing. Alternatively called guerrilla knitting or yarn graffiti, this practice started in the early 2000s and refers to the covering of objects in public space with knitted items ideally during the night to create a surprise effect in the morning. For example, Magda Sayeg, one of the first women to become known for the practice together with other knitters covered a number of tree trunks in front of the Blanton Art Museum on the University of Texas campus in Austin. Another well-known installation is by Danish artist Marianne Jørgensen who together with hundreds of knitters from around the world knitted hundreds of pink squares that were then turned into a cover, or as they call it 'cosy', for a Second World War military tank.

The piece juxtaposes the violence of military weaponry with the assumed love and comfort of a hand-knitted blanket and was conceived by the artist as a protest against US, British and Danish involvement with the Iraq war (Goggin, 2014, p. 100). In a way, the cosy disarms the tank, though a knitted blanket, of course, cannot have an effect against the force of a tank or prevent it from doing harm. In this sense, Maureen Daly Goggin calls yarn bombing installations 'ironic' because they challenge expectations about domestic materials and public space and its usage (2014, p. 96). Other, less official, installations have been documented (often online) in different cities across the US, Canada, Europe and Australia to name a few. They may be as extensive as Sayeg's or just consist of one wrapped lamppost (Goggin, 2014, pp. 110-111). Often, the installations particularly engage with urban spaces and are seen as subversive acts of bringing colour and warmth into bleak cityscapes and their metal and cement facades (Hahner and Varda, 2014). As such, they can also be seen as a form of political protest against the contemporary moment and its culture of high performance as they invite passers-by to pay attention to and appreciate the mundane (Mann, 2015).

However, unlike practitioners of traditional spray-paint street graffiti, yarn bombers barely face repercussions from officials even though the activity of covering up and, by extension defacing, public property is illegal in most settings. And while yarn graffiti does usually not do long-term damage to buildings and other objects in the way that spray paint does, the remnants of a yarn bomb installations once destroyed either by vandalism or from prolonged exposure to the weather can clog up sewage systems and storm drains. Yet, yarnbombing installations are rarely removed by officials and indeed often get appropriated by local councils for publicity and marketing stunts as evidence of a city's peculiar charm as well as official support for locals' creative projects (Hahner and Varda, 2014, p. 302; Farinosi and Fortunati, 2018).

Spray-painted graffiti, though also a medium for the subversive (as well as direct) expression of political critique and resistance, in contrast, is perceived as vandalism and subject to stringent prosecution (Alexandrakis, 2016; Hahner and Varda, 2014; Graeber, 2009).¹⁰ In addition, street graffiti have become expressive cultural markers of unruly youth street culture, which is often conceptually linked to wayward male youths of colour (Hahner and Varda, 2014, p. 305). As Leslie Hahner and Scott Varda argue, the celebration of yarn bombing as respectable acts of protest only serves to further vilify spray-paint graffiti (2014, p. 312). They claim that ‘yarn bombing’s emancipatory potential is warranted through the aesthetic sensibilities of privileged classes’, namely white middle-class (and in many cases middle-aged) women as the primary practitioners of yarn bombing (2014, p. 302). Yarn bombing installations are perceived as subversive, but, due to the association between knitting and crochet’s and (white) femininity, also as non-threatening to the status quo. At the same time, a number of yarn bombers are also appropriating the supposed connection between their own practice and that of black graffiti and hip hop art by choosing aliases ‘to tag their work’ that echo this cultural tradition such as Knitta, Knitty Graffiti, Knotorious N.I.T., or P-Knitty (Hahner and Varda, 2014, p. 314). All in all, the possibility of yarn bombing as a subversive practice is deeply connected to questions of race and class privilege which are also relevant to the analyses of the Pussyhat Project and the Women’s March in Chapter Five.

Ann Cvetkovich (2012) regards crafting as a generative practice which allows people to tune into their experiences of depression and despair. She identifies these feelings as part of a shared negative response to the capitalist status quo as opposed

¹⁰ Though in some exceptional cases like Banksy the graffiti has come to be celebrated as artwork and become incorporated into the capitalist workings of the international art market (Ganz and Manco, 2004).

to conceptualising depression as an individual psychological disorder. Indeed, practices of needlework have generally gained prominence in relation to health and wellbeing discourses as effective tools for reducing stress and improving mental health (MacDowell, Luz and Donaldson, 2017; Pöllänen, 2015, 2013). This can be observed not only in the increase in scholarly research on the topic, but also in the large amount of popular craft books available with titles such as *Knit Yourself Calm: A Creative Path to Managing Stress* (Row and Corkhill, 2017) or *Craftfulness: Mend Yourself by Making Things* (Davidson and Tahsin, 2018). Literary engagements with illness also draw on this connection between health and needlework, such as Anne Boyer's short collection of lyric prose, *Garments Against Women* (2015), in which she aligns writing with sewing in an exploration of women's experience of time and the illness-ridden female body.

Discourses about needlework and well-being also regularly stress the practice's value to building community. Practices of needlework allow people to knit or sew from the privacy of the home, but also in the company of others, and, as part of a large transnational community of needlewomen linked through digital platforms like Ravelry and social media sites like Facebook and Instagram. Consequently, the digital has become an important fact in accounts that stress the generative potential of practices of needlework for forging new relationships (Gauntlett, 2018, 2011; Hackney, Maughan and Desmarais, 2016; Orton-Johnson, 2014b; Hackney, 2013; Bratich and Brush, 2011; Minahan and Cox, 2007). Knitters and other needlework practitioners make use of the internet in various ways: be that to access and share patterns; provide tips, support and encouragement to each other; purchase and sell patterns; and, importantly to forge an online community that can serve as an important tool for political activism. According to Stella Minahan and Julie Cox, contemporary crafters 'use new technologies as an enabler and resource exchange' (2007, p. 5). In this sense, many groups operate across physical encounters in cafés, yarn shops, or private homes as

well as through the virtual. The relationships forged as a result of these communities can be literal in terms of new friendships and networks with like-minded crafters. However, as I argue throughout this thesis, they can also reflect embodied orientations towards new ideas or feelings that may inspire a rethinking of the status quo and one's own positionality. According to Shannon Black, craftivism, that is craft plus activism, is identified as the 'broader political movement' that emerged from this renewed interest into textile craft alongside digital technologies at the beginning of the new century (2017, p. 700). Embracing a 'gentle form of activism' (Corbett, 2017) aimed at people who might not be comfortable with more confrontational forms of protest, craftivism consciously engages with popular gendered perceptions of fibre crafts that frame it as non-threatening. Yet, craftivism, not least through the word 'activism' in its name, and its subtle as well as explicit critiques of national and global political issues like low wages, fast fashion, environmental pollution, and people's displacement is outspoken about its commitment to fostering social change. Chapter Five provides a more in-depth analysis of the politics of craftivism in relation to the Pussyhat Project by considering the effects of a focus on kindness and conviviality in the context of transnational anti-racist feminist activism.

All in all, it is not surprising to see how practices of needlework – due to their long gendered history and the resulting links to various forms of women's protests on a personal, but also communal level – play a pertinent role in contemporary feminist solidarity and social justice initiatives, and also the ways the narratives about these initiatives are used to theorise feminist politics and social change more broadly. This thesis extends these theories through its unique collection of case studies and materials that illustrate how practices of needlework and their narrative renderings can serve as a starting point for a feminist politics of embodied orientation that gestures people towards different social imaginaries.

Making Meaning through Practices of Needlework and Narrative

Throughout this thesis, I attend to the mundane and quotidian as the setting in which practices of needlework are performed and narrative representations of the practices are produced, consumed and circulated. Drawing on various feminist understandings of the everyday by, for example, Rita Felski (1999) and bell hooks (1995, 1991b), the everyday is also where I locate the potential for personal and social transformation. Clearly the mundane cannot be avoided, because, even when attempting to define prolonged states of exception and extraordinariness – for instance during times of war – such evaluations of the situation are shaped by prior assumptions about what is ordinary and normal. Thus, the everyday is also the realm in which I locate the potential for individual and, ultimately, social change, because it is often on the level of everyday personal, but also collective, experiences that one comes up against the unequal flow of power and feels its impact, sometimes strongly and at other times less so (Stewart and Berlant, 2019; Stewart, 2007). This is not to disregard the ways people might be suddenly pushed to take action and participate in vigils or demonstrations because, for example, witnessing an elementary school become the site of a mass shooting has changed a person's view about gun control (Metzl, 2019). Yet, my concern is about how on the level of meaning-making, everyday acts of creative making reverberate with the potential for larger social transformation. This is, of course, not to suggest that small-scale political gestures will invariably be followed by large-scale acts of social transformation or, indeed, need to be followed by such acts in order to be validated. Rather, I am interested in the entanglements of the personal and the political, the local and the global, of affect and structure. Drawing on the etymological connection between text, textile, and texture, which I outlined in the introduction to this thesis, I attend to how practices of needlework and their narrative renderings are part of processes of meaning-making that attempt to make sense of these entanglements.

Drawing on Ingold's *Lines: a brief history* (2016), I understand these practices of making-meaning as modes of 'storytelling' that allow travel along various routes of meaning as opposed to following a fixed plot line or grid of meaning (p. 77). Imani Perry similarly is committed to developing modes of narrating and making sense of the past and the contemporary moment in ways that are critical of concepts, terms and legal formations such as personhood, property and sovereignty – which are regularly applied without recognition for how these concepts themselves are part of patriarchal structures of authority that were laid out across the world during the age of empire (2018, p. 6). In relation to feminist theory, Clare Hemmings identifies 'a series of interlocking narratives of loss, progress and return' (2011, p.3) that are indicative of Western feminists' struggle with gender essentialism, identity politics and intersectionality, and that are tied to problematic power structures. These narratives not only oversimplify the complexity and multiplicity of feminist theory(ies), but also foreground the experiences of Western feminist subjects as the tellers of these stories.

Rather than offering a corrective narrative, however, following Perry (2018), Cvetkovich (2012) and Hemmings (2011), I suggest that attention to the texture of narrative – to the stories we tell in text and textile to make sense of the world and to the plethora of practices that surround the creation and reproduction of these stories – makes it possible to attend to a radical feminist imaginary that is continuously in the making. Crafters, like storytellers 'participate from within the very process of the world's continual coming into being' as their creative practices lay out new routes for meaning towards which others may become oriented and, thus, 'contribute to [the world's] weave and texture' (Ingold, 2016, p. 83). These new routes for meaning may develop into what Margaret Wetherell calls 'affective ruts' (2012, p. 14) which form as a result of the affective involvement in the repeated performance of practices of needlework. As I will explicate in more detail throughout this thesis, it is in these affective ruts that I

locate the potential for being oriented differently. Thus, practices of needlework provide the opportunity to dwell in a state of potential that is open to a different, more just future without being prescriptive of what such a future may look like (Muñoz, 2009; Kelley, 2002). Rather, it is about modes of dwelling that allow crafters to remain radically open to the shape of this future (Pedwell, 2019) as well as using practices of needlework as a way of prefiguring the kind of relations that might be foundational for such a future. As I discuss in Chapter Five, this resonates also with one of the central tenants of the contemporary craftivism movement, which cherishes craft practices for their ability to provide a space in which people can express their dissent, but also actively practice the new relations they would like to see in the world. In this sense, it is also about 'developing another way of *doing* politics' (Dixon, 2014, p. 89, original emphasis) that neither reproduces patriarchal and white-supremacist structures nor orbits around the kind of individualism that has dominated recent neoliberal and post-feminist discourses. The literary likewise offers a space in which to creatively experiment and practice such a politics and to provide alternative accounts of what constitutes change.

In sum, this chapter has outlined some of the key discussions in relation to the meaning of practices of needlework and their narrative representations. I have fleshed out how the supposedly inherent connection between needlework and femininity established during the nineteenth century has effectively influenced perceptions about needlework in relation to gender, class, race and labour until today. By extension these links have shaped ideas about the possibility of subversion of social norms in and through needlework. In addition, this chapter has highlighted how the literary can provide a space in which the entangled meaning of practices of needlework can be negotiated. Both practices of needlework and their narrative renderings are processes of meaning-making through which the self and its relation to others and the world can

be explored. The following chapters provide insight into some of these processes and the potential of new orientations and relations attached to them.

Chapter Two: Redressing Textual Archives in Contemporary Black Women's Fiction and Quiltmaking Practices¹¹

This chapter explores contemporary practices of quiltmaking by African-American women alongside black women's narrative renderings of these practices.¹² Drawing on text and textile, I attempt to flesh out the relationship between different kinds of textualities and the ways they become entangled in black women's efforts to redress official records about the affective legacy of slavery and women's embodied experiences of racism and sexism. As part of a radical black feminist tradition grounded in everyday practices of creative making that emerge from the realm of the home space, black women use practices of quiltmaking in order to craft counter-narratives which offer alternative histories of African-American experience as private acts of making are intertwined with official histories and contemporary events. In addition, these practices of making provide a mode for dwelling in the possibility of a more just future. They provide a space in which to consciously inhabit the present while engaging with the past and its painful legacy. In addition, this space allows for an orientation towards radical social imaginaries that value black life.

Recognition for a representation of history from the view of people of colour has been central to anti-racist feminist liberation movements over the past century. Part of

¹¹ This chapter expands some work submitted to the University of Kent during my MA in Critical Theory.

¹² I use the term 'African-American' to explicitly reference the legacy of the forced African diaspora to North America and to refer to individuals who identify as part of this group. I use 'black' or 'people colour' more broadly to also include individuals who are not direct descendants of slaves but experience similar forms of oppression and discrimination in the US. While experiences of discrimination and structural racism are certainly similar for both groups, I want to highlight the different cultural legacies in which their identities are shaped and through which they may have become acquainted with practices of needlework, specifically quilting. For an excellent literary engagement with these differences see Adichie (2013). For a scholarly discussion of black diaspora and identity see Reed (2014), Yenika-Agbaw and Mhando (2014), Hartman (2007) and Segal (1995).

this effort has included a challenge to what constitutes an official archive, or rather, what materials are seen as providing meaningful insight into past experiences and their effects on the present (Sharpe, 2016; Hartman, 2007). Contemporary liberation and decolonising movements like Black Lives Matter emphasise the importance of rewriting official historical records in ways that decentre the perception of white people, but also acknowledge the material and affective consequences of settler colonialism and slavery in North America (Bacchetta, Maira and Winant, 2019; Hesse and Hooker, 2017).¹³ Turning to the affective and embodied legacies of slavery, colonialism and racism in the context of literature and postcolonial theory has been one way of challenging the official archive (Sharpe, 2016; Cheng, 2001; Fanon, 1952).¹⁴ In North America and Western Europe, the radical black feminist movement of the 1970s and 80s, which developed out of the 1960s Civil Rights and Women's Liberation Movement, stressed the importance of including the voices of women of colour in archives (Dixon, 2014, pp. 34-35). Black women felt that their specific interests and situations were neither represented nor recognised in the Civil Rights Movement or the Women's Liberation Movement. The first was dominated by black male leaders and the second was spearheaded by white, middle-class women (Davis, 2016, pp. 3, 95; Wallace, 1978, p. 21). For radical black feminists, to achieve recognition for the challenges of black women in general and black working-class women more specifically, a revision of official history as recorded primarily by white middle- or upper-class males was imperative. They argued that history written by members from the group of the oppressor, that is, history written by white people, could not account for

¹³ A more detailed discussion of decoloniality is provided in Chapter Four.

¹⁴ Frantz Fanon (1952), one of the founding thinkers of postcolonial theory, was deeply committed to this project of attending to the embodied experience of racism. Drawing on psychoanalysis he explored black people's affective experiences of racism and how their sense of blackness and masculinity was constructed in relation to whiteness.

'the way black identity has been specifically constituted in the experience of exile and struggle' caused by the institution of slavery (hooks, 1991b, p. 29). In particular, these accounts which have come to dominate in popular and state-sanctioned official discourses, could not adequately represent black women's affective experiences of intersecting forms of oppression like racism, sexism, ableism and classism.

This process of redress, of course, is ongoing in the same way that the struggle for liberation for people of colour is. In this chapter, I flesh out the importance of everyday practices of quilting for the reworking of dominant narratives about slavery and its legacy as I analyse literary texts, textile artefacts and activist practices of making alongside each other. However, I am not only interested in how quilts relate to and are part of discursive formations of social movements. Instead, I highlight how practices of quilting are part of a contemporary anti-racist politics that developed out of the creative critical practices of generations of black women. I outline a trajectory from nineteenth-century quilts made by slaves to the creative practices of contemporary black women writers and quiltmakers all the way to the Black Lives Matter movement. I aim to demonstrate how quilts are deeply embedded in narratives of African-American resistance and provide a tangible repository of the past while also sparking an engagement with the affective legacy of this past. I examine how these seemingly very different forms of creative expression function as practices through which more just ways of living together can be imagined. Examining individual and communal quilts alongside makers' personal testimonies as well as quilting practices featured in literary texts, my analysis participates in a tradition of feminist epistemology that challenges dominant notions of archive and methodology, but also notions about what constitutes resistance (Ahmed, 2017; Madhok and Evans 2014; Harding, 2004; Lorde, 1984). I analyse Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and her short story 'Everyday Use', as well as Faith Ringgold's story quilts, because

all three artists are publicly committed to black projects of historical redress. In addition, I examine the activist quilting practices of African-American modern quilter Chawne Kimber and the Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA), a US-based youth organisation committed to social justice education, through their blogs, media publications, videos and personal interviews. Throughout this chapter, I am interested in how practices of quilting, creative critical writing and blogging become part of everyday practices of meaning-making that are ways of telling stories about the past, the present moment, and a more just future outside of official records.

Following Cvetkovich, my analysis is attuned to 'forms of affective life that have not solidified into institutions, organizations, or identities' (2003, p. 9). I am curious about how these 'forms of affective life' connect people in and across diverse communities. In addition, I am interested in how they link preceding and future generations in ways that make it possible to persevere in the present moment while also becoming able to imagine not simply a more equitable future, but one that completely reconfigures existing power structures (Sharpe, 2016; Kelley, 2002). Attending to quilting and sewing at the level of embodied practice, that is, as a slow repetitive hand movement, I attend to a 'politics of feeling that is manifest not just in overt or visible social movements of conventional politics but also in the more literal kinds of movement that make up everyday life practices or forms of cultural expression' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 199). As a result, I highlight African-American women's struggle to narrate the affective legacy of slavery and its attendant experiences of racism and sexism in order to redress histories that have omitted and ignored their experiences. I attend to quilting and textile artefacts as the everyday life practices and cultural forms of expressions that Cvetkovich mentions alongside literary texts to show how they are all part of a 'politics of feeling', which connects ordinary practices to activism and visions of social transformation.

The chapter opens with a discussion of the affective legacy of slavery in the context of an understanding of slavery as cultural trauma and situates textual practices of redress, in particular Morrison's and Walker's texts, in relation to the concept of cultural trauma. Subsequently, I consider practices of quilting in the context of what Laura Tanner calls a 'bodily epistemology of knowledge' (2006, p. 6) that identifies the maker as part of the affective experience of the cultural trauma of slavery and its legacy. The subsequent sections build on this analysis by placing the contemporary activist quilting practices of Chawne Kimber and the Social Justice Sewing Academy within a creative black legacy of resistance that resonates from the home place. Lastly, I contend that such practices of making provide a means of dwelling in potentiality and the opportunity to imagine and become oriented towards a different future that successfully reconfigures social structures grounded in the exclusion of people of colour.

Everyday Textures of Trauma and Quilting

A dominant narrative that emerges from African-American anti-racist and social justice discourses in the US, is that of the legacy of slavery. Black Lives Matter as well as the current anti-incarceration movement all explicitly link the disproportionately large marginalisation of African-Americans in the US to the aftermath of slavery and post-slavery segregation (Davis, 2016; Sharpe, 2016; Dixon, 2014). According to the website of Black Lives Matter, the movement (founded by Patrisse Cullors, Opal Tometi and Alicia Garza in 2013) is 'rooted in the experience of Black people in [the US]' and, as a result, in the history of these people (Black Lives Matter, no date). Sparked by the vigilante killing of Trayvon Martin in the same year and fuelled by the subsequent police killings of Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland and Eric Garner, to name but a few, the movement regards these events not as isolated incidents, but

as symbolic of institutionalised racism and systemic state violence that disproportionately affect African-Americans (Lowery, 2017, p. 16). In this rhetoric, racism and social injustice are direct consequences of the institution of slavery 'in an attempt to manage free Black people,' as veteran activist and scholar Angela Y. Davis puts it (2016, p. 117). As such, the contemporary struggles of African-Americans in the US and elsewhere are historicised within the legacy of slavery, and the acknowledgement of its impact is framed as imperative to the creation of a more just and equal society (Black Lives Matter, no date).

According to Ron Eyerman, 'blacks viewed slavery as a social condition, a lived experience, producing a distinctive way of life, a culture, a community, and finally, an identity' (2004, p. 77). Eyerman (2004; 2001) along with other scholars has theorised these perceptions in terms of the experience of cultural trauma, which broadly relates to a group's shared traumatic experience of a sudden event or exposure to continual abuse which has permanently affected the group's identity (Alexander, 2004; Smelser, 2004; Erikson, 1995). Eyerman, however, specifies that the trauma of slavery is not located in slavery as an 'institution or even experience, but as a collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity formation of a people' in the post-Civil War period (2001, p. 1). The concept of cultural trauma is less concerned with an individual's experiences but focuses on the ways in which a collective's self-perception, its whole identity, is influenced by an experience which comes to be identified as traumatic (Smelser, 2004, p. 35). As a result, contemporary African-Americans may experience collective processes of mourning and melancholia for a pre-slavery identity and freedom which they never personally experienced (Sharpe, 2016; Hartman, 2007; Gilroy, 1993). This collective self-perception depends on a conglomerate of individual accounts that work together to form a discursive and affective whole that can serve as

the foundation for African-American resistant cultures like Black Lives Matter or the Civil Rights Movements.¹⁵

Personal memory as lived experience, in this context, is politicised because 'memory is most certainly constructed and, more important, always political' (Muñoz, 2009, p. 35). As a result, personal memory becomes essential in the creation of a collective memory which is inherently selective and aims not only to organise the past, but also the present as it actively shapes a collective's identity. For an experience or event to be considered as cultural trauma, it needs to be constantly represented and mediated as such (Smelser, 2004, p. 44). These acts of mediation rely on different forms or media and happen in private as well as public contexts, for example through public speeches, journalistic articles, novels, or artworks like quilts. More recently, social media, particularly blogging sites, have opened up new platforms and formats for the mediators of cultural trauma to 'influence public opinion through private [and public] networks' (Smelser, 2004, p. 457). Memory work is an important part in this process of creation and sustenance of slavery as cultural trauma. Across all platforms and formats, the trauma of slavery is entered into 'a dialectic of remembering and forgetting' that allows African-Americans to overcome a potential paralysis from the experience while at the same time acknowledging the long-term effects of trauma and their influence on individual and collective identity (Eyerman, 2001, p. 130).¹⁶

¹⁵ It is worth noting here that while the Civil Rights Movement focused on gaining rights and equality for people of colour within the existing liberal democratic nation state, Black Lives Matter questions the validity of this political system as a whole (Hesse and Hooker, 2017).

¹⁶ Neil Smelser insists that no historical event or situation 'automatically or necessarily qualifies in itself as cultural trauma,' because the 'status of trauma as trauma is dependent on the sociocultural context of the affected society at the time the historical event or situation arises' (2004, pp. 35-36). Slavery, consequently, had to be retrospectively constructed as traumatic (37). According to Smelser, for an experience or event to become recognized as traumatic to a community, it needs to be publicly framed by those affected as 'a) laden with negative affect, b) represented as indelible, and c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions' (2004, p. 44).

Texts and textiles, along with personal and collective narratives, play a prominent role in discourses and affective practices surrounding the cultural trauma of slavery. Through mixing text and textile literally by including one in the other or figuratively by drawing on its etymological history, new modes of knowledge are forged as official records and archives are rewritten by African-American writers, scholars and artists. This happens on a public scale, but also by more private actors within communal settings. Textile artefacts like quilts, in this context, are of particular interest because of the connection between their primary material, cotton, and African-American history. Slaves were put to work on the cotton plantations and, after the abolition of slavery, picking cotton or working in the cotton gins remained a primary source of employment for many African-Americans (MacDowell, 1997). On the cotton plantations in the American South, the connection between African-American identities and cloth took on a new level of meaning as slaves bled and sweated in the fields and toiled in the cotton gin. For Melanie McKay and Maaja Stewart, quilts, therefore, 'keep alive not only the stories of ancestors, but the very bodies of those who suffered in indigo fields and around indigo vats, or labored in the jeans, overalls, aprons and shirts' that would eventually be recycled into quilts (2005, p. 165). As the clothes and cloth are cut up and reassembled into a quilt they participate in the 'affective economies' (Ahmed, 2004) of mediating African-American experience.

Textile historians have stressed the importance of cloth in the African homeland; a tradition which slaves brought with them to the North American continent (Mazloomi, 2015; MacDowell, 1997; Benberry, 1980). Traditional African cloth and textile crafts included dyeing, appliqué, piece-work, and embroidery. Bed quilts popular in Europe and the New World were not common across the African continent, but patchwork and quilting were familiar techniques used in the production of other types of artefacts (Mazloomi, 2015, p. 7; Benberry, 1980). Quilting was one of the very few creative

practices to which slaves had access as they were denied the opportunity to read and write as well as access to the arts (Mazloomi, 2015, p. 6; Walker, 1983, pp. 234, 239). Scraps of used cloth could be salvaged from the master's home and old clothing was used as an additional source of material. Slaves made quilts in order to keep themselves and their families warm, but the small number of surviving slave quilts is also a testament to their creative and aesthetic investment in the practice. The practice of the quilting bee, a merry gathering with food and drink that accompanied women's work on a quilt, was also adopted by slave populations and often tolerated by slave masters. According to quilt and folk historian Carolyn L. Mazloomi, these quilts and their descendants are evidence of how slaves managed to preserve and pass on their African heritage through reference to traditional designs and patterns as well as the inclusion of symbols popular in African cosmology and mythology such as the snake. As such, the slave quilt 'became a covert expression of resistance within the context of storytelling,' even before it became employed in the Underground Railroad, a secret network that helped black people escape to the free North (Mazloomi, 2015, p. 7). It was a means to counter the suppression of the cultural traditions and knowledges of the African homeland and to pass them on to descendants. Some quilts were narrative in their appliqué designs which, like a picture book, offered a pictorial representation of a story: for example, the famous story quilts by black slave woman Harriet Powers. With other quilts, African-American history was more covertly embedded in the choice of material or the abstract design that required the explanation of someone versed in the meaning of the symbols and cloth. For Mazloomi, this practice echoes the narrative tradition of the African griot or oral historian as the quilts 'tell stories of family leaders, moral and spiritual values, and social concerns' (2015, p. 7).

However, up until the 1980s, black quilters were notoriously absent from traditional American quilt histories (Mazloomi, 2015; Klassen, 2009; Hood, 2001). It

was only then that quilt scholars began to more closely investigate African-Americans participation in the American quilting tradition as part of broader practices of rewriting histories of African-American experience and cultural production (Mazloomi, 2015; Scheper-Hughes, 2004; MacDowell, 1997; Benberry, 1992, 1992, 1980). In 1999, Jaqueline Tobin and Raymond Dobard's publication on the Underground Railroad sparked public and commercial interest in the topic. Yet, the white quiltmaker in her role as active abolitionist is regularly foregrounded as opposed to the plight of the slave and the detrimental conditions of slavery and racism that necessitated the creation of the Underground Railroad. In fact, contemporary quilt patterns in homage to the network are often marketed to a white audience alongside Civil War reproduction fabrics (MacDowell et al., 2016, p. 9; Cooks, 2014; Brackman, 2006). Popular narratives about the network likewise appear to romanticise the experience of escape for the slave as well as the involvement of white abolitionists in the journey of African-Americans' to the free North (Chevalier, 2013).

In 2002, the first exhibition of the now famous Gee's Bend quilts in the Fine Art Museum in Houston and its subsequent exhibitions, publications and documentaries established African-American quilting traditions in the spotlight of the American and international quilting community and generated new public and academic interest. The quilts made by descendants of former slaves living in the remote and impoverished community of Gee's Bend, Alabama, were heralded nationally and internationally for their apparent African-American aesthetic which centred around improvisation, asymmetry and bold colour choices (Arnett, 2002). As Yolanda Hood (2001) and - Cuesta Benberry (1992) argue, the reception of these works echoes a long legacy in American quilt scholarship which regularly placed African-Americans' quilts outside of the mainstream American quilting tradition. This is partly due to what came to be identified in the 1980s and 90s and eventually celebrated as an apparent 'African

aesthetic' in quilts made by African-Americans which sets them apart from traditional 'mainstream' American quilts through

vivid color palettes, strongly contrasting color combinations, asymmetrical or strip piecing, multiple patterning, uneven and large quilting stitches, use of protective charm symbols, large design elements, use of appliquéd figurative images, and individualistic interpretations of Anglo-American traditional patterns. (Klassen, 2009, p. 305)

In contrast to this, Eurocentric quilts are said to be defined through symmetry, order and a repetitive pattern (Mazloomi, 2015, p. 10).

Though a substantial number of quilts made by African-Americans fits these categories, and as such certainly do differ from traditional Eurocentric mainstream quilting, scholars have questioned the essentialist nature of this narrative (Mazloomi, 2015; Cooks, 2014; Klassen, 2009; MacDowell, 1997). While Mazloomi, for instance, does not deny that African-Americans developed a unique quilting style 'drawing on their African past', she criticises how this aesthetic is used to position quilts made by African-Americans outside of mainstream American quilt histories (2015, p. 7). Currently, the International Quilt Study Center and Museum at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln identifies the contemporary American quilter based on a survey from 2014 as 'female, 64 years old, well educated, and affluent' and, by extension, white – since it informs the reader a few lines further on that 'men also quilt, as do African Americans' (no date). As research by Marsha MacDowell (1997) and others (Mazloomi, 2015; Tobin and Dobard, 2000; Benberry 1992) demonstrate, African-American quilters have always been familiar with what came to be identified as mainstream American quilting and participated in it to varying degrees though this participation was not recognised. As Mazloomi states: 'no single style dominates African-American quilts' (2015, p 7). Individual quilts may show African or Eurocentric influences or a combination of both, and as such not only represent the 'diversity of

African-American quilting traditions', but also shed light on the wider involvement of African-Americans in American society (Sohan, 2015, p. 303).¹⁷

In mainstream quilt shows, African-American participants and their contributions continue to be scarce and elements of the so-called African aesthetic are often frowned upon (Scheper-Hughes, 2004, p. 96). Ethnographic research by Nicole Dawkins (2011) on the recent craft revival and the city of Detroit's refashioning as 'Maker City', promoting makers' fairs and craft markets, further supports this. According to the 2010 census, 83 percent of Detroit's population identify as Black or African-American, yet, this demographic is notoriously absent in the rebranding as 'Maker City' (United States Census Bureau, no date). One of the organisers of the Handmade Detroit makers' collective told Dawkins that although black crafters have applied to be part of the fairs, they have been excluded by organisers because 'their aesthetic doesn't fit in. [...] aesthetically, indie craft is very white' (quoted in Dawkins, 2011, p. 268). Whiteness is identified in opposition to being 'ethnically marked', implying that the maker's non-white ethnicity is somehow reflected in the artefact, for instance, in the form of an apparent African aesthetic (Dawkins, 2011, p. 268). In this framework, the white, supposedly unmarked, aesthetic is once more placed as the default mode and the works by crafters of colour are defined in relation to this standard and, as a result, become placed outside the mainstream. The quilt as material object, as featured in traditional mainstream American quilt histories, is thus exposed as a tool which has served to 'reaffirm existing

¹⁷ It was common practice in the South for black women slaves to assist their mistresses in the making of quilts following traditional patterns popular at the time (Mazloomi, 2015, p. 7; Klassen, 2009, p. 300). After the abolition of slavery, black quilters continued to have access to these patterns and kits in so far as they could afford to purchase them or received them as hand-downs from their employers (Klassen, 2009, p. 302). As part of the Freedom Quilting Bee in Alabama from 1965-75, members of the Gee's Bend quilters and other black women produced handmade quilts in an 'Eurocentric aesthetic' for US department stores like Bloomingdales and Sears (Scheper-Hughes, 2004, p. 21). MacDowell's (1997) work on African-American quilters in Michigan and her extensive registry of quilts made by African-Americans also shows that in the second half of the twentieth century many African-Americans made quilts according to patterns and kits available on the general market.

social relations and [...] established values' in favour of the status quo which subjected blacks to racism, systemic oppression and exclusion from American society (Klassen, 2009, p. 327).

Bridget Cooks (2014) identifies a similar pattern in her analysis of the representation and subsequent appropriation of the quilts and quilters of Gee's Bend. The women and their quilts gained fame only when a white folk-art collector 'discovered' them and they became associated with the works of white, male masters of high modernism. The international art scene and the modern quilt community more broadly celebrated the women and their works 'through [a] racial nostalgia that denies the reality of exploitation and poverty as an American tradition' that affected the black community in particular ways (Cooks, 2014, p. 354). The cause for the material reality of dire poverty and social exclusion in which the women lived and made their quilts as well as 'the continued exploitation and structural inequality in Gee's Bend and beyond' is ignored (Cooks, 2014, p. 59). Instead, the quilts are framed as the 'untutored expressions of a Western art-world aesthetic' while, at the same time, the makers become exoticized as 'carriers of a unique local tradition' (Klassen, 2009, pp. 320, 322). Indeed, a recent *Guardian* article in anticipation of the very first display of the quilts in the UK in the spring of 2020 echoes this rhetoric as it describes the quilts as 'miraculous works of modern art' (Brown, 2019, n.p.). Literary works and other forms of creative expression by African-American women are similarly placed in opposition to a white male canon and the above-mentioned received history of the experience of slavery. Thus, works by women of colour are dismissed not only on sexist, but also racist grounds.¹⁸ The next section explores how Alice Walker and specifically Toni

¹⁸ See Crenshaw (1991) for a foundational discussion of the effects of intersecting oppressions on women of colour.

Morrison address this marginalisation in their literary works as well as engage with African-American quilting practices.

Mediating the Horrors of Slavery through Text and Textile

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker regard their work as part of a wider anti-racist project of rewriting history and they interrogate the marginalisation of cultural works by African-American women. In addition, they place their own acts of rewriting within the context of the cultural trauma of slavery and attempt, as Morrison puts it, to 'disentangle received knowledge from the apparatus of control' (1989, p. 8). This entails not only the representation of history from a black point of view, but also the unearthing of how previous records by African-Americans were shaped and amended within the dominant narratives of an unequal and racist society. For example, black women's traumatic experience of slavery, until well into the twentieth century, had been frequently confined to the tradition of the slave narrative (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 90; Hartman, 2007). These narratives were 'instructive, moral, and obviously representative' and aimed to provide 'fuel for the fires [set up by] abolitionists' (Morrison, 1995, p. 87). Representation of the slave experience by black writers had to be sanctioned by white patrons before publication. Yet, much of that experience was also deemed 'too terrible to relate' to the reader and omitted under a veil of silence (Morrison, 1995, p. 91). As such, black women's affective experiences of slavery were essentially censored and placed outside of official archives.

Morrison consciously participates in the recovery and sustaining of an affective archive of African-American history. In her fiction, she attempts to connect the past with the present as she 'journeys to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply' (1995, p. 92). Morrison sees it as her duty as an author to attend to this archive and to relate what she calls the 'interior life'

of black people and as such 'fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left' (1995, pp. 93-94). Thus, *Beloved* follows the life of three generations of black women – Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver and Beloved - and their journey from slavery in the South to life in the free North. Walker, likewise, claims that African-American women authors have the opportunity as well as 'the great responsibility [...] to give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and hate but also of neighbourly kindness and sustaining love' (1983, p. 21). According to Walker, the experience of being black, female, poor, and Southern makes for a 'way [of] seeing the world [that] is quite different from the way many people see it' (quoted in Davis, 1994, p. 106). This is not to suggest, however, that there is such a thing as a black 'essence'; rather, it is a call to recognise how African-American identities have been specifically constituted through this experience (hooks, 1991b, p. 29). Walker's novel *The Color Purple* portrays Celie's development from silent and demure victim of racism and patriarchy to a successful business woman who has managed to patch up her relationship with her own community including her abusive ex-husband and step-son.

In *Beloved*, a quilt with two orange patches is a subtle, but constant point of reference throughout the novel as different characters engage with it to varying degrees in the house on 124 Bluestone Road. The quilt often recedes into the background along with the ordinary interior of the home, the pots and pans, jelly jars and the smell of leftover food from the restaurant at which Sethe works. Linked to slavery and racism, the quilt serves as a reminder of a traumatic and terrible past while, at the same time, encouraging engagement with this past. It is connected with Sethe's mother-in-law Baby Suggs and the latter's withdrawal to her deathbed in the keeping room where she 'will end her days defeated by slavery's cruelty' (Soon, 2011, p. 238). After Baby Suggs spends eight years 'ponder[ing] color' she concludes that 'there is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks' (Morrison, 1982, pp. 201, 89). Once Baby

Suggs has died, the quilt with the two orange squares, which stand out starkly in-between the 'scraps of blue serge, black, brown and gray wool' and against the muted and dark interior of the home remains a reminder of Baby Suggs and her life which was marked by slavery and racism (Morrison, 1987, p. 38). In addition, the quilt acts as a silent witness to the events in the home from the disappearance of baby girl's ghost to Beloved's appearance at the doorstep of the family home. As such, it also connects three generations in this family, namely Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Beloved, and Denver as they all turn to the quilt as a token of a past that throws its shadows on their present life (Kelley, 2002, p. 179).

In Sethe's case, the quilt prompts her meditation about Baby Suggs' withdrawal and her need to ponder colour, which eventually leads Sethe to face her own traumatic past (McKay and Stewart, 2005, p. 161). This includes the abuse Sethe suffered at the hand of her slave master and his students, and her own killing of her baby girl Beloved in order to save her from becoming enslaved. According to Rafael Pérez-Torres (1999) and Florian Bast (2011), the contrast between the lack of colour in the home in general and the two bright orange squares in the quilt is symbolic of the lives of Baby Suggs and other characters, marked by deprivation expressed as a lack of colour. Indeed, Sethe describes herself becoming as 'color conscious as a hen' from the day of the funeral of her baby girl, which could be attributed to the 'effect of chronic shock' suffered from the trauma (Morrison, 1987, pp. 38-39; McKay and Stewart, 2005, p. 162). Sethe's need to face the past is 'catalyzed' by the appearance of the teenage Beloved – possibly her ghost – and heightened through the girl's fixation with the quilt (Krumholz, 1999, p. 115). Likewise, in reading the character of Beloved not only as an incarnation of the killed baby girl, but also as symbolic of the 'Sixty Million and more' Africans killed on the middle passage to America to which Morrison dedicates the novel, the necessity for Sethe to face her past is turned into a more general need for

all American people to face the past. A past, which, as suggested in the last chapter of the novel, is one that is difficult to narrate and remember. 'It was not a story to pass on', that is, a story that should be retold and 'passed on', but rather one to be avoided, 'passed on' (Morrison, 1987, pp. 274-275).

The change in Sethe's attitude to her past, at the end of the novel, is mirrored in the refashioned appearance of the quilt. The dark and muted colours have been replaced and it is now a quilt of 'merry' and 'carnival colors' while the house is decorated with 'ribbons, bows, bouquets' and scattered with 'brightly colored clothes' (Morrison, 1987, pp. 240, 271, 272). Yet, the quilt as a physical object within the home continues to be a reminder of the persistence of the cultural trauma of slavery in the same way that Sethe cannot fully overcome her individual trauma or be fully reconciled with the past. Once she faces her past, Sethe becomes an invalid, emotionally and physically unable to care for herself and Denver, and she comes to rely on the support of the community. As such, the reworked quilt is also symbolic of the process of redress to which Morrison herself is committed: one that 'remembers at the site of rupture [but] does not cast away the ravished body or the memory of injury, but finds them central to re-creation' (Priest, 2014, p. 475). Through the quilt, Sethe manages to approach a past, which she struggles to put into words, on an affective level that is less structured than that of language or narrative (Ngai, 2005, p. 27). The quilt is affectively charged with memories, 'smelling like grass and feeling like hands – the unrested hands of busy women: dry, warm, prickly [...]'; as such, it provides an entryway 'to recreate what happened, how it really was' for Sethe, Baby Suggs and the sixty million more affected by slavery (Morrison, 1987, p. 78). It is only after this repeated contact with the past through the quilt that Sethe becomes able to articulate how her own experiences as a slave led to the killing of her baby girl. Yet, Sethe has difficulty expressing herself in the form of a coherent linear narrative: she circles the topic in the same way she literally

circles Paul D and the kitchen table as she is trying to tell her story. While the quilt propels Sethe to face and tell her story it is also representative of the continuous haunting of it.

In sum, projects of redress are a vital element in feminist anti-racist activism as they not only correct official records about the experience of slavery and its legacy for people of colour but also question the form and format of such records. Narrative is a means to recognise personal lived experience in the context of the shared experience of cultural trauma. It can be a way to map the affective relations of this connection. The following section examines African-American women's writing and quilting practices in the context of an affective economy of processes of historical redress and the cultural trauma of slavery. I show how they serve as building blocks for contemporary black feminist anti-racist practices of resistance.

The Affective Economies of Quilting

Black quilting and writing – like any creative practices – need to be considered within the context of their production and in relation to how product and practice become entangled not only in discursive formations, but also in what Ahmed calls 'affective economies' (2004, p. 46). She employs the term 'affective economies' to highlight how feelings 'do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation' (2004, p. 8). It is only through circulation and through being 'sticky' with affect that quilts as material objects can participate in African-American identity politics as carriers of memory and as means to transmit cultural knowledge to future generations (Higgs and Radosh, 2013, pp. 64, 75). Walker illustrates this in her short story 'Everyday Use' (1973). The story follows an unnamed mother and her daughter Maggie as they welcome Maggie's older sister Dee for a short visit. During the visit Dee asks for some family-heirloom quilts, which she would like to display on the wall of her house as a

memento for her African-American heritage. By simply looking at the two quilts, the meaning of their individual scraps and fragments is not accessible to the viewer. It is only 'through the application of language to [the] material item,' that is, Mama explaining to Dee the trajectory of each individual piece of material, that the significance of the quilt in relation to her family's history and wider African-American history becomes accessible to Dee and any outsider (Klassen, 2009, p. 324). For example, Mama explains that 'one teeny faded blue piece, about the piece of a penny matchbox', in one of the quilts came from the uniform of Dee's great grandfather Ezra who fought in the Civil War (Walker, 1973, p. 32).

The quilts also connect Mama to her matrilineal heritage as they had been sewn by her mother and were quilted by herself and her sister Big Dee, who in turn had been taught by the women in the family how to sew and quilt. Following the example of her own mother and sister, Mama has passed this knowledge on to her daughter Maggie. By contrast, Dee had refused to learn how to quilt because she believed it to be backwards (Walker, 1973, p. 32). The quilts in question had already been promised to Maggie, but Maggie claims that she does not need them as a way to remember her ancestors because she feels connected to them through her knowledge of the practice of quilting. Mama appears to share this sentiment: to her, wearing out the quilts through everyday use does not represent a carelessness in the handling of a family heirloom, because, like Maggie, she knows how to make a quilt (Walker, 1973, p. 33). Dee, who now prefers to be called Wangero in a symbolic attempt to free herself from the lineage of the white slave owners who had named her ancestors, accuses her mother and sister of a lack of appreciation for the history of the items. For Mama, Dee's first name is inherently connected to a genealogy of women in her family named Dee. Yet, for Dee, the name is representative of the history of enslavement of black people and she claims that she 'couldn't bear it any longer, being named after the people who

oppress [her]' (Walker, 1973, p. 29). The items she requests, to Dee, are symbolic of a past during which black people were unfree and economically destitute and quilts had to be sewn by hand because of a lack of sewing machines. Dee had previously shown little interest in her family history, but this appears to have changed through her involvement with the Black Power Arts Movement of the 1960s and early 70s. This movement was concerned with establishing an authentic black identity free of any influence or connection with the white oppressor, but as such was also 'fundamentally essentialist' as it 'dismissed all forms of cultural production by African Americans that did not conform to movement criteria' (hooks, 1995, p. 68; see also Byerman, 1991, pp. 810-811). The movement centred around an 'abstract idea of cultural heritage, with links back to an imagined Africa and an abstract America, where the formal identity of citizenship and the romantic identity of cultural heritage were held in a tension filled unity' (Eyerman, 2001, p. 63).

For Dee, the quilts are a '*priceless*' reminder of slaves' ability to provide for themselves and make do in a harsh environment (Walker, 1973, p. 33, original emphasis). She accuses Mama and Maggie of being unable to value this heritage through the recognition and display of everyday objects as precious artefacts from a horrible past. The material object, for Dee, is representative of this past, but more importantly, as an artefact, it is also symbolic of the progress of the present moment. She insists that times have changed and 'it's really a new day for us [black people]' dismissing her mother's affective attachments to the objects which bear the marks of the people who both made them and interacted with them on a daily basis (Walker, 1973, p. 43). In contrast to that, Mama and Maggie value 'the functional nature of their heritage and [imply] that it must be continually renewed rather than fixed in the past' (Christian, 1994, p. 130). To make quilts and to use them in the home, to include the beautiful in the everyday, is for them to appreciate the creative legacy of their ancestors

while also acknowledging the horror of slavery (Boudreau, 1995, p. 453). The affective investment in this legacy manifests itself in Mama and Maggie's quiltmaking practice, which shapes their own identity in relation to their heritage. As Ahmed argues: 'emotions are not 'in' the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects' (2004, p. 10). As the women cut, sew and quilt fabrics they are invariably confronted with their own heritage as well as the history of the people whose clothes they might be upcycling or who have taught them the craft. They are moved by the material while simultaneously moving the material. Consequently, 'affective economies are social and material, as well as psychic' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 46).

As such, quiltmaking and crafting more broadly, as Mama and Maggie indicate, are best conceptualised as a 'doing mode' (Mazanti, 2011, p. 60). Thus, as Louise Mazanti explains, craft is not defined 'by its relation to a specific material but rather to the role that it performs in the world of objects' (2011, p. 60). Crafting and, consequently, quiltmaking involve movement in the sense of 'moving and being moved as a form of labour or work, which opens up different kinds of attachment to others' (Ahmed, 2004, p. 201). In this sense, crafting is closely connected to conceptualisations of creativity as an embodied process and a 'feeling' (Gauntlett 17). In this vein, Cvetkovich claims:

Defined in relation to notions of blockage or impasse, creativity can be thought of as a form of movement, movement that maneuvers [sic] the mind inside or around an impasse, even if that movement sometimes seems backward or like a form of retreat. Spatialized in this way, creativity can describe forms of agency that can take the form of literal movement and are thus more e-motional or sensational or tactile. (2012, p. 21)

This literal movement can be the guiding of a needle through a piece of cotton fabric or a pair of shears cutting up an old sheet. Theorised as an embodied practice,

quiltmaking becomes a form of 'making' which involves a creative process as well as the repetitive interaction between a physical body and a physical world. The body, then, is not only moved by the material, but, as Ingold puts it, also 'follow[s] the forces and flows of material' (Ingold, 2009, p. 97; see also Cvetkovich, 2012; Ahmed, 2006b).

For Mama and Maggie, quilting is a means to connect with their ancestors through a 'bodily epistemology of knowledge'; they are linked to them through the embodied practice of quiltmaking (Tanner, 2006, p. 6). Thus, quiltmaking becomes an embodied mechanism to 'interrogate the categories' within which African-American experience is framed through different public discourses such as those of the Black Power Arts Movement and institutionalised historical records (Tanner, 2006, p. 6). In the end, Mama takes the quilts from Dee and 'dump[s] them into Maggie's lap' in acknowledgement of her younger daughter's commitment to her heritage (Walker, 1973, p. 34). With 'Everyday Use', Walker provides a written record of black experience which, at the same time, is also evidence of an unofficial affective archive filled with cultural texts such as quilts that function as 'repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices, that surround their production and repetition' (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 7). Knowledge about the self, but also its relationship with others, is developed in response to an engagement with these written and stitched records and the affective repositories and practices that surround them.

As such, the 'affective qualities of textuality' need to be considered within the literal and figurative interplay of the textual 'and the ways in which [it] participates in the materialisation of political relations of feeling' (Pedwell, 2014, p. 4). The meaning of the textile artefact is mediated through language but also through affect which travels between person and object. Because slavery and its legacy are perceived as an all-encompassing force that literally affects every part of life, cultural texts like textile

artefacts become caught up in the official and private, material and psychic, as well as social and personal processes involved in the 'dialectics of remembering and forgetting' (Eyerman, 2001, p. 130; see also Del Rosso and Esala, 2015, p. 38). The affective structures thus produced 'constitute cultural experience and serve as the foundation for public cultures' (Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 11). As I have shown, Morrison's and Walker's literary works, like Ringgold's story quilts (which I discuss in more detail in the next sections), provide a foundation not only for public trauma cultures, but also for cultures of resistance against white supremacy and patriarchy. As such, they also highlight the entanglement of personal and public experiences as well as between affect and structures of power and governance.

Legacies of Everyday Creative Resistance

In her landmark essay 'In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens' (1983) Walker explicitly aligns the legacy of African-American quiltmakers with that of contemporary African-American women writers and critics attempting to rewrite discourses of black experience. She identifies quilting as an important tool in black women's resistance against slavery, racism, and patriarchy alongside practices of creative critical writing. Though black slave women and their descendants may not have referred to themselves as artists and their work was not recognised as such, Walker insists that these women are the artistic and spiritual forerunners of African-American women artists and critics today (Walker, 1983, p. 23; see also hooks, 1991b, p. 116). She laments how the grandmothers of many African-Americans were deprived by their white oppressors of the right to be artists and to express themselves creatively and critically (Walker, 1983, p. 234). Slaves were forbidden to read or write as well as denied access to the materials needed to become a sculptor, painter, or inventor. As a result, many young black women artists and critics later struggled to place

themselves and their works within their fields for a lack of role models – apart from a few exceptional cases like that of the poet Phillis Wheatley. Walker insists that African-American women have nonetheless always managed to find creative outlets such as quilting, singing, or, in the case of her mother, the planting of beautiful flower gardens. As such, these women have left a creative legacy for contemporary African-American women writers and critics from which to draw inspiration (Walker, 1983, pp. 234-243). While writing *The Color Purple*, Walker purposefully took to working on a quilt as a form of meditation, during which the characters would ‘come to her’ and the story would begin to unfold as her quilt began to grow (Walker, 1983, p. 358). In commemoration of her grandmother, who was an avid quilter, black feminist critic bell hooks claims that she inherited the ‘legacy of commitment to one’s “art”’ from her grandmother and she ‘proudly points to ink stains on [a] quilt [made by her grandmother] which mark [her own] struggle to emerge as a disciplined writer’ (199b, p. 121).

African-American artist Faith Ringgold appears to reference this tradition in her famous storyquilts that feature text written onto the fabrics to form a collection of short stories or, as Ringgold says, a ‘mini novel’. These narratives are referenced in other parts of the quilts where Ringgold has drawn images on the fabric and then embellished them through quilting stitches. Indeed, Ringgold refers to her series of storyquilts *The French Collection* (1991) as being ‘like [her] first novel’ (Ringgold, Freeman and Roucher, 1996, p. 26). With *The Purple Quilt* (1986), Ringgold even created a storyquilt inspired by *The Color Purple*. It features the novel’s main characters as the quilt’s centre piece, which is framed by panels with excerpts from the novel. For Ringgold, the piecing together of fragments of personal and historical experience in the same manner that material scraps are pieced together is critical for her artistic practice (Ringgold, Freeman and Roucher, 1996). As African-American

writers and artists flesh out black people's experiences from the early days of the slave trade to the contemporary US, they provide alternative histories of African-American experience. According to Ringgold's daughter, cultural critic Michelle Wallace, it is imperative for black women's liberation to produce such alternative histories because 'knowledge of "the past" determines power in "the present"' (1978, p. 22). Wallace values creative and critical histories steeped in personal experience as opposed to the supposedly objective factual history writing which does not provide space 'for taking into account contradictory voices and interpretations' (1978, p. 25). In this context, for Ringgold, written and textile works by African-American women become art works outside the dominant financial and institutionalised systems of the art world as she identifies art as 'based on something you know about and have experienced', (Ringgold, Freeman and Roucher, 1996, p. 14; see also Graulich and Witzling, 1994). Her own painted quilts are 'an expression of the African-American-female experience', as are the works of many other African-American quilters and the material object cannot be separated from this experience (Ringgold, Freeman and Roucher, 1996, p. 10).

According to Walker, those early quilters 'handed down respect for the possibilities – and the will to grasp them' (1983, p. 242). To find space for the creative engagement with fabric and thread amidst the continuous abuse and degradation the majority endured at the hands of their masters, for Walker, is an act of resistance against a form of systemic oppression that aimed to extinguish any kind of spirit, and consequently also creativity, among black people. bell hooks refers to this attitude as an 'aesthetic of existence' characteristic to the African-American experience:

many displaced African slaves brought to this country an aesthetic based on the belief that beauty, especially that created in a collective context, should be an integrated aspect of everyday life, enhancing the survival and development of

community, these ideas formed the basis of African-American aesthetics [...] rooted in the idea that no degree of material lack could keep one from learning how to look at the world with a critical eye, how to recognize beauty, or how to use it as a force to enhance inner well-being. (1995, p. 66)

In this aesthetics, the homeplace and the everyday are placed at the core of a radical politics of survival. As the space removed furthest from the control of white supremacy, the homeplace simultaneously becomes the space in which resistance can flourish and dehumanisation can be resisted (hooks, 1991b, pp. 42-44).¹⁹ Walker recounts how her mother always planted very 'ambitious gardens' no matter where they lived or the size of her mother's general workload (1983, p. 241). These gardens with their colourful and beautifully arranged selection of flowers, according to Walker, are a powerful expression of her mother's creativity as she, like many quilters, 'left her mark in the only materials that she could afford' (Walker, 1983, p. 239).

Similarly, in Ringgold's storyquilt *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* (1991), the group of famous African-American women (including Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman and Ella Baker) gathered around a quilting frame, affirm in the presence of famous modernist artist Vincent Van Gogh 'We are all artists. Piecing is our art. [...] We did it after a hard day's work in the fields to keep our sanity and our beds warm and bring beauty to our lives. That was not being an artist. That was being alive' (Ringgold, Freeman and Roucher, 1996, p. 37). In this way, Ringgold questions dominant definitions of art and links women's everyday practices of quilting to those of high art in an attempt to 'explore the significance of the everyday in [the lives of African-American women]' (Graulich and Witzling, 1994, p. 18). Indeed, in an essay about her mother and her artwork, Wallace recounts how Ringgold's art practice was part of

¹⁹ Though it is worth noting that for Celie in *A Colour Purple*, the home, at times, was also a place of violence and abuse against women and girls. As hooks (1982) argues, through these acts of patriarchal violence and displays of toxic masculinity the legacy of slavery also found its way into the black home through the reproduction of gendered forms of oppression.

everyday family life with the dining room functioning as Ringgold's studio. The large dining table provided a surface on which to lay out the quilts for the whole family to admire and discuss while Ringgold's mother assisted with some of the sewing (Wallace, 1990, p. 40; Ringgold, Freeman and Roucher, 1996, pp. 16-17).

Yet Ringgold not only defies institutionalised definitions of art, she also affirms a connection between beauty and the mundane practice of quiltmaking with social change and activism. She says: 'I put the women together as quilters to say that they are piecing together freedom in this country' (Ringgold, Freeman and Roucher, 1996, p. 37). In the storyquilt, as the sun sets and the women are no longer able to continue with their quilting, they claim: 'Now we can do our real quilting, our real art: making this world piece up right' (Ringgold, Freeman and Roucher, 1996, pp. 32, 37). The women are not only in charge of creating textile artefacts; they are also portrayed as active participants in international social justice movements and as advocates for women's rights, voter registration, civil rights and much more. Quiltmaking is thus depicted not as separate from these engagements, but as a vital part of them in its affirmation of life and beauty. As Mysha Priest argues in relation to Ringgold's works, the quilt becomes a 'metaphor for cultural creation and a mode of redress for oppression enacted on the Black female body' (2014, p. 463). However, this relation is not only metaphorical, but is also felt. As Priest claims: 'The quilt is a process of self-recognition embodied' (2014, p. 468); the material object moves the body while the body moves the material. For hooks, this makes quiltmaking part of an aesthetics that is 'more than a philosophy or theory of art and beauty' but a phenomenological way of being in the world, that is, 'a way of inhabiting a space, a particular location, a way of looking and becoming' (1995, p. 65). As such, the practice of quiltmaking provides a way of dwelling in the current state of being as part of an embodied sense of self that recognises this experience as a starting point for new becomings.

Creativity, thus, is part of everyday life and presented as essential for survival. Drawing on Audre Lorde's work, Sara Ahmed argues that for those 'never meant to survive', creativity is, in fact, necessary in order to survive (2017, p. 236). It becomes a means to forge out a living and to develop creative ways to support one's existence in a world in which this existence is constantly under attack. In such an environment, to claim a space for making and to leave one's mark in material, be that fabric or paper, is always a political act. Making then is not only a conscious refusal of ready-made products but also of existing social structures. More so, creative practices can generate resilience in makers to enable them to continue facing the oppressive structures they are working to redefine. In this sense, works by Walker, Lorde, Ringgold and hooks have anticipated the emergence of scholarship and discourses that stress the positive effects of practices of needlework for mental health and well-being.

Stitching as Self-Care

In the last decades, occupational-therapy and mental-health research has highlighted the calming and stress-reducing effects of crafts on people's general sense of well-being (MacDowell, Luz, and Donaldson, 2017; Hackney, Maughan and Desmarais, 2016; Pöllänen, 2015; Burt and Atkinson, 2012). Crafts are described as 'a way to remove negative emotions,' because the 'lengthy process of craft making can enable negative feelings to be confronted and worked through by doing with hands' (Pöllänen, 2015, p. 95). Specific research into quilting shows that the engagement with colourful textiles appears to have an 'uplifting effect on the mood', (Burt and Atkinson, 2012, p. 54). In addition, participants in studies by Pöllänen (2015, 2013) and Emily Burt and Jacqueline Atkinson (2012) value the freedom of choice their crafts provide. Handling materials and equipment as well as performing the necessary techniques produces 'a feeling of control' that might not be present in other areas of life; it is

empowering and 'offers a sense of agency' (Pöllänen, 2013, p. 223; hooks, 1995, p. 71). The black slave woman was controlled by her white master in more or less every aspect of her life, including her sexuality. Piecing quilts out of scraps of material, which she was able to secure from her master's house or from discarded clothing, was one of the few areas in which she could take control of her actions (hooks, 1991b, p. 119).

For Celie, the protagonist in Walker's *The Colour Purple*, it is this creative activity that keeps her going, and keeps her mind occupied, amidst her hardships. When she finds out that for years her husband Albert had kept her sister's letters from her, it is the taking up of a 'needle and not a razor' that prevents her 'right there in [his] house from killing [him]' (Walker, 1982, pp. 133, 224). Creative practice, in this context, becomes a means to work around an impasse and, in Celie's case, a means to deal with her grief and anger. As Celie's friend and lesbian lover Shug suggests: 'Times like this, lulls, us ought to do something different. [...] Let's make you some pants' (Walker, 1982, p. 132). Through her quilting and sewing practices Celie manages to connect with other women like Shug and Sofia, the wife of her step-son, and through these relationships she slowly changes from passive victim to active agent of her own well-being. Used to the continuous abuse suffered at the hands of black men, Celie had adopted an attitude of numbness because, as she puts it: 'What good it do? I don't fight, I stay where I'm told. But I'm alive' (Walker, 1982, p. 22). Towards the end of the novel, this attitude has changed and Celie stands her ground against her husband: 'I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening [sic]. But I'm here' (Walker, 1982, p. 184). In this spirit, she leaves Albert and accompanies Shug to Memphis to start a successful sewing business. On her return to her community, Celie reconciles with Albert in the process of teaching him how to sew and quilt.

In sum, in *The Color Purple*, quilting and sewing are practices of survival, means to hold 'a needle and not a razor in the hand', but also symbols of female and communal connection. This 'aesthetic of existence', to use hooks's term, is ultimately a black feminist or womanist aesthetic in its 'commit[ment] to survival and wholeness of an entire people' (Walker, 1983, p. xi). As such, quiltmaking, sewing and writing become united within Walker's womanist prose that 'celebrat[es] black woman's insistence of living' (Christian, 1994, p. 37).²⁰ It becomes evidence of the 'outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behavior' of a womanist, a black feminist and descendant of millions of black women who have endured the unendurable and not given up on themselves (Walker, 1983, pp. xi-xii). For hooks, it thus resembles a:

commit[ment] to an aesthetic that focuses on the purpose and function of beauty, of artistry in everyday life, especially the lives of poor people, one that seeks to explore and celebrate the connection between [black people's] capacity to engage in critical resistance and our ability to experience pleasure and beauty. (1995, p. 71)

Creative making and resistance go hand in hand.²¹

For Celie, quiltmaking is connected to opportunity. To choose materials and a design offers a means of creative self-expression unregulated by other demands on a woman's life, such as her role as housewife, step-mother, and spouse or by the racism and sexism African-American women find themselves confronted with on a daily basis. Celie has no rights in either her family or her marriage, except insofar as her stepfather and, later, her husband choose to grant them. In her quilting and sewing, however,

²⁰ According to Walker, a womanist is a 'black feminist or feminist of color' (1983). The concept acknowledges the link between gendered oppression and race and takes the particular lived experience of black women as a generative starting point for inclusive transnational feminist practices of resistance (Layli, 2006).

²¹ This is also interesting regarding the creativity many participants of protests connected to Black Lives Matter have shown with regards to the production of signs, memes, sweaters, slogans and other kind of movement paraphernalia (Taussig, 2012; *Black Lives Matter*, no date).

Celie is free to choose her own patterns and designs as suggested by the pattern name 'Sister's Choice'. She plays with the regularity of the pattern as she tries to 'work in a piece [of Shug's old yellow dress] every chance [she] get [sic]' (Walker, 1982, p. 56; see also Kelley, 1994, p. 190). In 'Everyday Use,' the quilters likewise took their creative liberty with the Lone Star and Walk Around the Mountain patterns of the quilts mentioned in the story. These patterns, which are generally marked by a repetition of colour schemes, appear to be broken up through the inclusion of unique pieces of fabric such as the small blue scrap from Great Grandpa Ezra's Civil War uniform (Walker, 1973, p. 32).²² Thus, for Celie as well as Mama and Maggie, everyday creative practices and their finished objects are foundational to the individual and collective orientation towards resistance. The following sections explore this relationship further through the activist quilting practices of Chawne Kimber and the Social Justice Sewing Academy.

Making and Dwelling in Potentiality

Contemporary African-American quilter Chawne Kimber explicitly draws on the rich relationship between quilting and the African-American experience in her textile works. Quilts from old clothing by her great-grandmother, who laboured on a plantation, were a constant in Kimber's home when growing up. In line with their original purpose, the quilts were utility objects used to keep family members warm and, because of tight

²² In Walker's works this agency or rather the reclamation of it is further represented through the deconstruction of gender roles. In *The Color Purple*, men like Harpo prefer housework over fieldwork, whereas his spouse Sofia likes any kind of manual labour such as fixing a roof. The gendered nature of sewing is also questioned as Nettie reports that in Africa it is primarily men who practise quilting and Albert comes to enjoy sewing, even though he was not allowed to sew as a child, because it was considered women's work. In 'Everyday Use', Mama is proud of the fact that she can 'kill an clean a hog as mercilessly as a man' as well as of her sturdy physical build, which, although not considered feminine, allows her to lead a life independent of male help as she is able to execute any task required around the house or on a farm herself (Walker, 1973, p. 24).

finances, had been patched up many times (2017, Appendix 1). Today, as Kimber explained during our interview, quilting, for her, is a way to affectively connect with her grandmother:

I feel I have to commune with the things that I make. It's about the process of the feel of cotton in your hands. It's about the sound of pulling thread through cotton very slowly. These are the best things. It's a full-body experience. The smell of [the material] when you first press it – it's just so crisp and earthy in a really delicious way. [...] I think it's important to slow it down. It isn't social media. It's not immediate gratification, it's not that instant message. [...] I want to know what it felt like for my great-grandmother to make a quilt. [...] I'm communing with her in a way through these [hand-piecing] projects. (Kimber, 2017, Appendix 1)

The tangible properties of the material are essential in this process as they have become part of the sensory experience of present and past. As a result, both the sensory and the affective 'shape and define our relationship to one another and our experience of the world' (Tanner, 2006, p. 8). Kimber has barely any memories of the design of her great-grandmother's quilts, but she remembers very well the weight of these quilts heavily stuffed with cotton fluff and she connects them with fond memories of family and home (WJRH, 2017).

For Kimber, it is important to value the process employed by her great-grandmother. For this reason, she has made quilts from clothing that she previously collected from family members. The resulting quilts are treasured by Kimber not so much because of the beauty of the design, but because of the connection she feels with her grandmother as a result of making them. More so, the practice of gathering various different pieces of clothing from relatives and sewing them together to form a quilt is perceived as a generative act of community building. Like her grandmother, Kimber feels that she is 'kind of pulling together all these different aspects of members of the family through the fabrics' (2017, Appendix 1), thus, joining not only cloth, but

also people. However, Kimber's own quilting practice is also marked by an awareness of how times have changed since her great-grandmother sat down to make quilts from upcycled clothing. She is very much aware of how different her own situation as a black tenured professor of mathematics at an American college is to that of her great-grandmother who was working on a plantation just a couple of decades after the Emancipation Proclamation. As a result, Kimber also reflects on the limits of shared processes of making to forge connections between generations and between people with different lived experiences. She notes: 'How do you represent the kind of privilege that I do have now? I do face all sorts of discrimination, but I have to admit that the kind of education I have achieved [and] the job I have allow me even more [than my father and his generation]' (2017, Appendix 1).

Some of her quilts reflect this tension through the choice of material as well as the textual elements employed. Kimber's 2015 large bed quilt *Cotton Sophisticate* (Fig. 1) features thousands of colourful scraps of cotton sourced and manufactured in the US. Towards one end of the quilt, amidst these tiny pieces of fabric, a large banner, the width of the quilt reads: 'In essence, I am a sophisticated cotton picker'. For Kimber, using text in her quilts was at first a way to 'control the message people were getting' from the quilts (2017, Appendix 1). However, she also consciously plays with the ways text can be open to interpretation.



Fig. 1. *Cotton Sophisticate* (2015) by Chawne Kimber.

The statement on *Cotton Sophisticate* is a reference to how her situation as an African-American woman in the twenty first century is different from that of her ancestors. The phrase is a quote taken from the autobiography of popular African-American entertainer Eartha Kitt, who had picked cotton as a child growing up in South Georgia close to the area where Kimber lived. Kimber explains:

As a sense of thinking about my family, it resonates very well with me. It's a statement about slavery, a statement about the results of slavery, of course, because it didn't just end with the emancipation. At quilt shows many people [just] respond to the [many fabrics and colors used in the quilt]. They believe it's

about someone who has a very large stash [of fabrics]. It's a way to avoid the other more serious issues of that statement. (2017, Appendix 1)

These reactions are symptomatic of the mainly white middle-class audience of quilt shows. It reflects not only people's unwillingness to engage with the relationship between race and social justice, but also how their whiteness provides them with the privilege to do so (DiAngelo, 2018). It is easy to ignore how others are systematically discriminated against if one is not directly affected by these acts of oppression.

By now Kimber is a household name in the quilt world with a large online following and a busy schedule of teaching quilting all over the US alongside her day job at university. In 2016, her quilt *The One for Eric G* (2015) in response to the death of Eric Garner at the hands of New York police, was awarded first prize in the improvisational category at QuiltCon, the annual convention of the Modern Quilt Guild (Fig. 2). Yet, the quilt world is still wary of quilts that include strong political messages and, as I have indicated in the introduction of this thesis, works like Kimber's tend to cause debates about appropriate subject matter for quilts. Kimber notes:

People were saying you shouldn't do this on a quilt: 'It's our sacred space. [...] Please do not come in and corrupt our world.' But it's really also playing up white privilege. People have the privilege [of] not noticing the news, not paying attention to what's going on. They hate it when you point out that shit happens in the world. (2017, Appendix 1)

In this context, quilts are a powerful medium for drawing attention to social issues because of their inherent connotations with domesticity, femininity and comfort that I have traced in the previous chapter. Works like Kimber's bed quilt *Todd's No-Baby Baby Quilt* (2012) which has, right in its centre, 'legit rape here' (2012) in white letters on a blood-red background, challenge these conventions in a powerful way. 'Catching people off guard is a great way to have a profound effect and sticking in memory [sic]', asserts Kimber. 'They're gonna remember and ask more questions. They're gonna

have [...] more intense emotions about it too' (2017, Appendix 1). On the one hand, Kimber hopes to provoke a strong reaction in people, one that may ultimately move them to reflect on their own positionality and on wider unequal structures of power. On the other hand, Kimber is conscious that people can also be put off by the intensity of the feelings that such an engagement generates.



Fig. 2. *The One for Eric G* (2015) by Chawne Kimber.

It can take up to two years for Kimber to complete a quilt. As a result, the original event or incident that inspired the making of a specific quilt may no longer be present

in people's minds. For this reason, Kimber 'tries to make sure that [her] quilts all have a context beyond the incident itself' (quoted in Allen, 2017, para. 4) and, as such, speak to different people on different levels of meaning. Her online blog serves as a channel to document the different stages of making from conception to finished product without revealing too much of the final message (Kimber, 2017, Appendix 1). For Kimber, the time spent working on the project allows her to reflect on the incident that inspired a specific quilt and its broader context – such as the shooting of Trayvon Martin or the election of Donald Trump: 'Working on that project is the time for me to meditate and do more reading and think through what I am going to be putting out as the ultimate message' (2017, Appendix 1). On her blog, she may list some of those readings or other types of media through which people can learn more about topics such as race, social injustice and women's rights. Kimber explains:

The blogging is my opportunity to catch someone. They come through the quilting [...] that's why I don't filter in the politics constantly because I don't want to turn people off. But the final reveal is when I get to blast out 'Hey, let's go read more about rape culture'. My quilts are my voice. They are me speaking out. So, I obviously have an intent of educating the audience, affirming the experiences of those who have similar experiences to me. (2017, Appendix 1)

Thus, Kimber participates in the rewriting of official records that traditionally exclude or marginalise experiences of black women just as Walker, Morrison and Ringgold do. They all assert the specificity of their experiences in the context of the legacy of slavery and pervasive racism and sexism, yet, also draw strength from these shared experiences of persistence and resistance in a hostile environment.

The Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA), which was founded in 2016 and designs social justice education for youth around practices of quiltmaking, similarly participates in this project. Sara Trail, a Harvard graduate in her early twenties and founder of SJSA explains:

Quilts [...] have been deeply tied to [African-American] experiences of survival. Particularly taking our scraps and making it into something that can, like, sustain and support, nurture us in the midst of everything that we've experienced from one decade to another. [...] It's all just, like, a metaphor for the ways we survived. We survived through secret messages in drum beats [...], we survived by, like, you know, stitching and sewing, and, like, telling stories through the scraps of what had been given to us. (Trail, no date)

Her organisation aims to allow youths to 'explore, discuss and express modes of oppression, lived experiences and creativity' (SJSAcademy, no date). The curriculum of the six-week summer programme or shorter workshops, 'draws on concepts taught in history, ethnic studies, education and sociology' as a means to make students 'aware of systemic injustices' and their historic legacies, while at the same time equipping them with the ability to become active participants of social change (SJSAcademy, no date). Materials in the workshop section aimed at raising 'student's [sic] level of critical consciousness' include 'readings from Angela Davis, bell hooks, Kimberly Crenshaw, Toni Morrison, Patricia Hill Collins, Maya Angelou, Audre Lorde and others' (Hazlewood, 2017, n.p.). The materials selected hope to counter American public schools' standard history curriculum which, according to Trail, 'is not inclusive, ostracizing hundreds of thousands of Black and Brown people whose history lies outside of the dominant American narrative' and does not acknowledge 'today's social, educational and economic inequality as remnants of that history' (quoted in Britex Fabrics, 2017, n.p.). Like many African-American critics (hooks, 2000, 1982; Walker, 1983; Wallace, 1978), Trail implies that the reclaiming of black history and understanding of how it was and is being shaped through Western Eurocentric discourses, is imperative to social justice. The second part of the workshop introduces students to sewing, showing them how to cut fabric, use a sewing machine and create quilt blocks expressive of social justice issues important to the teenagers (Hazlewood,

2017, n.p.). Students are free in the design of their blocks and only receive technical guidance. The finished blocks are then mailed to volunteers across the US that embroider and embellish them before they are sewn together into a quilt (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. A community quilt from the Social Justice Sewing Academy.

For Trail, fibre is an appropriate medium through which to address these issues not only because of its deep connection with African-American history, but also because of its etymological links to concepts of weaving and storytelling which connect people and tie them together (Trail, no date). Stories, for Trail, are an essential part of

social justice activism, because she believes that they enable 'people to feel hooked to an issue. You have to experience things on an individual level to feel motivated to act on a systemic level' (no date). Indeed, according to quilt historian Carolyn Mazloomi, quilts echo the narrative traditions of the African griot or oral historian. Through pictorial appliqué, symbols, special pieces of cloth and the affective attachments to them, quilts tell 'stories of family leaders, moral and spiritual values, and social concerns' (2015, p. 7).

Hosting many workshops in different parts of the US, Trail was struck by how students' experiences differ regionally (Hazlewood, 2017, n.p.). Concerns around social justice for teenagers in private schools are more likely to centre on issues such as climate change or ending animal abuse, whereas youths in areas like Oakland and Chicago were concerned with police and gang violence as well as drug abuse because they had been directly affected by them in their immediate environment (Hazlewood, 2017, n.p.). Through sending the blocks across the country to be finished off by volunteers, people for whom social justice is 'a far more "removed" concept / theory/ issue' as opposed to those for whom it is a 'lived reality' come into direct contact with these experiences (Trail quoted in Hazlewood, 2017, n.p.). In addition, SJSA's Instagram feed and website offer a glimpse of the many creations as have some small local exhibitions and, recently, also larger displays at popular quilt shows. In this sense, the quilt blocks and finished quilts can be the starting point for an affective investment in a cause as they help orient people towards certain affects connected with the lived experience of others. They can gesture viewers towards considering the fear of the violent consequences of racist profiling that accompanies black adolescent men and their families in their everyday life. According to Cvetkovich, 'affects that become an index of how social life is felt become the raw material for cultural formations that are unpredictable and varied' (2012, p. 48). It is in this unpredictability and variety that I

locate the potential for unexpected and diverse practices of resistance that are able to exist along everyday life entanglements and unequal flows of power.

The blocks or small individual art quilts created by the youth are appliqué blocks that very explicitly address certain issues. For example, a quilt by Bryan Robinson features the torso of a black man with a gun held by a white hand to each side of his head. The names Tamir Rice, Trayvon Marten [sic], Oscar Grant and Eric Garner are appliquéd in large letters around the torso. The piece is titled *Born a Crime* (2016) and Robinson explains: 'At first I couldn't think of any social justice issue to sew that would directly relate to me until I realized the value of my experience as a young black male in society. In an effort to bring awareness to an epidemic of killing unarmed black men, I carefully situated as many names as I could on the quilt' (SJSAcademy, no date). Another piece by Carina Cabriaes features a 3D pink skirt which ends shortly above the knees of a woman. Next to a tape measure the length of the legs are four labels that read from top to bottom 'Slut', 'Easy', 'Tease' and 'Prude'. On the other side of the piece are three speech bubbles in which is embroidered 'No means no!,' 'I am more than what I wear' and 'Stop Slut-Shaming' (Fig. 4). Cabriaes writes: 'This quilt serves as feminist affirmation that one's choice of material clothing should not determine societies [sic] judgement of her or solicit unwanted advances' (SJSAcademy, no date). Some of the recent community quilts feature blocks in alphabet fashion with each letter addressing a specific issue, for example, 'A is for abolition' accompanied by an image of a black figure hanging from a tree, or a portrait of Barack Obama accompanied by the slogan 'O is for Obama' (SJSAcademy, no date). For Trail, 'the community aspect is key' (Hazlewood) because she believes that 'by bringing the two fabric artists together through sewing, a common ground of understanding and empathy is found' which hopefully may motivate people to become activists of social change (Trail, no date).



Fig. 4. *I Am Not My Clothes* (2016) by Carina Cabriales with the Social Justice Sewing Academy.

These practices redefine what counts as art as opposed to crafts in the same manner that Ringgold and Walker claim their own conceptualizations of art outside institutionalised discourses. Instead emphasis is placed on personal aesthetic validation. 'Good art makes you feel something,' says Trail, which is why she is also wary of any hierarchical distinctions between art and craft which regularly place textile works and quilting in the latter, inferior, category (no date). The Social Justice Sewing Academy is open to all genders and sewing is presented as a medium of creative expression accessible to any one, notwithstanding its often pejorative connection to women's culture and femininity (Hazlewood, 2017, n.p.). For Trail, using fibre and

particularly quilting, resembles a form of resistance not only because of the social justice issues that the students address in their works, but also because it attempts to 'incorporate forms of knowledge that come from people of colour [...] that are not necessarily part of the western Eurocentric narrative of what is art. [It's] really that idea of making our own definitions of what is valuable rather than listening to other people's definitions [...]' (no date).

An insistence on the relevance of personal lived experience is part of such processes of redefinition in which the personal is made political. Black and Women's Liberation Movements first introduced this connection in the 1960s and attempted through consciousness-raising groups to identify systemic structures of oppression alongside women's subjugation in the private sphere (Reed, 2005, p. 77). For Angela Y. Davis, 'there is a deep relationality that links struggles against institutions and struggles to reinvent our personal lives, and recraft ourselves' (2016, p. 106). By insisting on the homeplace as a space for resistance, it becomes politicised as it radiates with beauty and life amidst real material hardships and life in a racist system. Walker recounts: 'Because of [my mother's] creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms' (1983, p. 241). The inclusion and appreciation of beauty in everyday life for both hooks and Walker, therefore, resembles a commitment to an aesthetic of existence. Lorde (1984) and Ahmed (2017) similarly speak of creative techniques of survival with regard to the painstaking and continuous work of crafting a life within a normative system that does not acknowledge the value of life outside of the norm. For Ahmed, this work is essentially political and a form of protest as opposed to creative activity being mere self-indulgence (2017, pp. 227-237). In this sense, quilts are 'more' than simply material objects for adornment or practical use. The material object as well as the practices of making and narrating it are entangled in a legacy of political warfare on

the side of African-Americans. Both are part of the women's struggles to forge their existence and to recognise how African-American identity has been implicated by the legacy of institutional slavery and its aftermath. 'Quilting becomes an act against oppression. It is a way for our participants, which tend to be those belonging to a minority or marginalized group, to share their untold stories', affirms Trail (quoted in Hazlewood, 2017, n.p.). Ultimately, the SJSA hopes to 'create conscious art activists who will use their creativity to change their world one stitch at a time' (SJSAcademy, no date). This means that participants, hopefully, reflect not only on how they are personally affected by social injustice, but also become leaders and organisers in their communities that actively work to address and change these issues.

Towards a Different Future

In all the examples discussed in this chapter, the everyday, the beautiful and the critical/radical are connected through the creative practice of making, which is about more than the mere production of artefacts. Creative making is a radical practice that, through its performance, 'enables communities to envision what's possible' (Kelley, 2002, p. 7). A commitment to an aesthetic of existence is expressed in an attitude, which requires one to notice beauty in the everyday, because, as Shug Avery puts in *The Color Purple*, 'it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it' (Walker, 1982, p. 165). Through insisting on the homeplace as a site of resistance, everyday practices of making in text and textile are politicised in their potential to affect and change structures beyond the personal home space. Routinised everyday practices therefore become 'enabling of both compulsive repetition and creative becoming' (Pedwell, 2016, p. 2; see also Cvetkovich, 2012). Consequently, practices of needlework are always brimming with the possibility for a change in orientation, or at least a gesturing towards such transformation. In this sense, textile

practices also echo the double nature of the home space, which I will discuss in more detail in the following chapter, as a space that can be oppressive, but also the realm in which resistance takes shape. On the one hand, second-wave feminism demonised the homeplace as the space expressive of the drudgery and discrimination of the housewife caught in traditional patriarchal structures (Johnson and Lloyd, 2004; Friedan, 1963). On the other hand, feminist and anti-racist theorists like hooks, Wallace and Walker have, in different ways, highlighted its generative potential as a means to encounter macrolevel oppression and the way this affects everyday (or microlevel) experience.

However, regular practices of creative making are certainly no guarantee for transformation on either an individual or public level.²³ Nor are the moments of intensive feeling that Kimber observes in viewers of her quilts necessarily connected to a dynamic model of 'becoming activist'. Indeed, like Pedwell, I am suspicious of the progressive narratives that connect social change to a radical 'rupture of consciousness', which supposedly leads to a rethinking of personal and collective politics and a commitment to transformation (Pedwell, 2016, p. 4). Trail's hope of mobilising people into activists on the basis of having them connect on an emotional level with the lived experience of a marginalised people, echoes this narrative to a certain extent (no date). Yet, she also speaks of changing the world, and by extension the people in it, 'one stitch at a time', thus indicating the necessity of continuous engagement with the practice and the problems it hopes to address. I contend that there is more value in conceptualising routine practices as a way to manifest a consciousness or awareness that can lead to active political engagement and

²³ Though in the context of climate change or environmental pollution small changes in everyday behaviours and practices are often credited with a significant, but not directly tangible, impact (Shove, E., Pantzar, M. and Watson, M., 2012).

eventually social change because, as T. V. Reed states, ‘surrounding the drama of social change there takes place much undramatic day-to-day activity that alone can consolidate the work of movement’s “ritual public displays”’ (2005, p. xix). In this way, the personal and the home space become once more implicated in the political. Indeed, for Robin Kelley, it is ‘in the poetics and struggles and lived experience, in the utterances of ordinary folk, in the cultural products of social movements’ that it becomes possible to imagine different ways of being and living together (2002, pp. 9-10). As such, everyday practices cannot only prefigure another, more just world, but they are, indeed, essential to the practice of prefiguration itself (Swain 2019; Yates 2015; Dixon, 2014). They make possible modes of dwelling in which new futures, or new ways of relating to each other, can be imagined and practised on a small scale. Thus, following Pedwell, I am interested in how, in the case of quiltmaking and African-American women’s culture, an attention to everyday practices of making becomes a means of ‘approaching progressive social change through an understanding of the imbrication of the revolutionary and the routine – engaging the relationship between the force of affective sparks and the ongoing coordination and adaptation of habits’ (Pedwell, 2016, p. 3). In this sense, the mind and the body are both affected by movement on a conceptual as well as a physical level. This is further mirrored in our understanding of political and social movements that may move people emotionally but also literally as they take to direct action.

For Cvetkovich, crafting is intrinsically connected to habit and practice due to the forms of repetition it requires, for example, the repetitive motion of inserting the quilting needle into the three layers of the quilt sandwich from the top, pulling it through and taking it back into the material from behind before the whole process starts over again (2012, p. 189). As outlined above, studies have found that this ‘calms the mind and even rais[es] the spirit’ (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 189; see also Pöllänen, 2015, 2013;

Burt and Atkinson, 2012). In a hostile environment, habitual acts of making are, consequently, political because they facilitate survival. Ahmed describes racism as an 'attack on the cells of the body, an attack on the body's immune system' (2017, p. 238). It is an all-encompassing force that penetrates and permeates the personal and the political, the private and the public, and exposes the deep entanglements between these realms (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 120). According to Ahmed, 'being poor, being black, puts your life at risk' and one has 'to work out how to survive in a system that decides life for some requires the death or removal of others' (2014, n. p.). In *Beloved*, the psychological and physical effects of racism are exemplified through Baby Suggs' retreat to her deathbed, where she finally succumbs to the fact that there 'was no bad luck in the world but white people [because] they don't know when to stop' (Morrison, 1987, p. 104). Baby Suggs' friend Stamp Paid, speaks of a similar experience which he describes as a fatigue in 'his marrow' caused by years of drudgery as a slave and later by the psychological stress of aiding black people escape to the free North (Morrison, 1987, p. 176). For Celie, on the other hand, quiltmaking and sewing become ways of dealing with trauma, not necessarily because they offer a form of escape, but because they allow for a dwelling in (negative) affect that is not fixed around a teleological end goal such as working through or overcoming. Instead, stitching offers her the possibility of forging an existence in which she is neither incapacitated by the horrors of her own past nor deny its effects of the present.²⁴ Once Celie has embraced sewing as a regular activity she tries to forge out as many opportunities for sewing as she can. It sustains her in moments when she feels low as well as during the happy times she spends with family and friends when she is 'so much in the habit of sewing

²⁴ See Love (2007) for a discussion of such modes of dwelling in relation to queer trauma.

something [she] stitch[es] up a bunch of scraps, try to see what [she] can make' (Walker, 1982, p. 252).

When Kimber first took up quilting at the age of thirty, she did so because she 'needed something to occupy [her] mind' (2017, Appendix 1). The projects she committed to at the start were a means of learning various techniques and her work was focused on precision piecing as she copied various available patterns. She only switched to more improvisational and artistic works after the sudden death of her beloved father: 'I kind of went back to sewing thinking that the meditative effect of making would help me through. But it felt really futile to make that precision patchwork and so I had to find meaning in what I was making' (Kimber, 2017, Appendix 1). By then she had also become more aware of the modern quilt world's 'hype' around improvisational and abstract forms of quilting and its connection to the supposedly African-American quilting aesthetic. Kimber criticises that many modern quilters who have made successful careers in the quilt industry in the area of improvisational quilting regularly leave this connection unacknowledged (2017, Appendix 1). 'I still haven't figured out what this label is trying to do. I had women come up to me, just unsolicited, saying that my quilts aren't African-American quilts', remembers Kimber grudgingly (2017, Appendix 1). Like Mazloomi (2015) and MacDowell (1997), Kimber appears to differentiate between quilts that are made by African-Americans and as such are part of a radical creative legacy as opposed to the ones supposedly representative of a so-called African-American quilt aesthetic. Improvisational quilting has become a generative practice for Kimber not because of the aesthetic qualities of the finished product but because of the way in which improvisational piecing allows for meaningful forms of dwelling marked by uncertainty:

I often do not know what my quilts look like until that final unveiling after they're done. [...] I don't have a design wall [on which individual sections are laid out

before sewing them together] because I don't want to encourage self-doubt, you know, just constantly moving around little tiny pieces that won't have a very huge effect in the large scale. I often work very small modules and then combine them to make bigger. And I have had some failures where at that unfurling I go 'Uuhh, what just happened?', But it's about accepting those results. (Kimber, 2017, Appendix 1)

Given that it can take a couple of years for Kimber to finish a quilt, the process is just as important as the end product. Some of her improvisational piecing is as small as a quarter of an inch, which not only means that it takes many pieces in order to get to a substantial size, but also makes it a rather fidgety process. 'It's not about doing the same thing over and over again', explains Kimber (2017, Appendix 1), but about dwelling in a state that is not prescriptive of futurity. It is about the opportunity to pause, reflect and realign, and about consciously inhabiting this space. In this sense, the process of quilting, for Kimber, is also a metaphor for life and political activism (2017, Appendix 1). With her explicitly political quilts, Kimber does not intend to 'give direction on what to do necessarily', and indeed she is critical about people approaching her and asking for advice about how to foster change and provide support (2017, Appendix 1). Since injustice and oppression are the result of white hegemonic social structures and not caused by people of colour, Kimber sees this line of questioning as another manifestation of white privilege: 'My people didn't cause the problem. [...] So to assume that the solution should arise from within [the African-American community] is actually really a kind of denial' (2017, Appendix 1). Rather, Kimber hopes that through her work and blog she is 'poking at people to learn more so that they then can start generating the solutions on their own' (2017, Appendix 1). The

poking becomes a way of orienting people towards the possibility of imagining a 'different future in the present' (Kelley, 2002, p. 9).²⁵

These practices of 'poking', for Kimber, are firmly embedded in legacies of black resistance reaching from her great-grandmother's practices of quilting as a means to keep a large family warm to the current Black Lives Matter movement who, by the time Kimber had finished *The One for Eric G*, had since popularised the slogan 'I can't breathe' through its activism. Through constantly placing herself as a well-to-do black middle-aged woman in the contemporary US in dialogue with the historical legacy of slavery and social injustice, Kimber highlights the intersectional nature of the struggle. At the same time, by not fixing meaning on the level of text, textile, or narrative representation, her works allow for an understanding of 'the concrete differences in context, experience and oppression' (Black Lives Matter, no date) that African-Americans and other marginalised groups experience. The works become a means of 'reading the relation between affect and structure, or between emotion and politics' that places an individual's struggle within a collective context that is not static but open for transformation (Ahmed, 2004, p. 174). In this framework, creativity and creative practices such as quilting and their narrative renderings become a means to attend to these relations without insisting on fixing them in place.

Stitched Potential

According to Cvetkovich, quilting and other practices of crafting are part of what she calls the 'utopia of ordinary habit' in which a creative practice functions as 'a repeated action whose meaning lies in the process of performing it' (2012, p. 191).

²⁵ For a discussion of contemporary 'nudge' theory and policy as a means to control or guide humans in the interest of social stability as opposed to more democratic ways of affectively (re)orienting people towards sustainable social change see Pedwell (2017).

Making, as I have indicated in the previous section, is therefore conceptualised as an embodied practice, a mind-set, marked by repetition as well as generative potentiality. Through a conceptual focus on quilting as embodied movement and process, meaning, likewise, becomes constituted as fluid and as 'always in the making' (Roberts, 2011, p. 257). As Cvetkovich insists: 'daily life in all its ordinariness can be a basis for the utopian project of building new worlds in response to both spiritual despair and political depression' (2012, p. 191). Throughout *The Color Purple*, Celie's practice of sewing and making changes from one marked by numbness and endurance into one that resembles potentiality. Eventually, Celie develops a successful sewing business out of what started as a meditative hobby. This success is framed as a lucky coincidence rather than the implementation of an ambitious business concept or a drive for financial independence. Similarly, the many serendipitous plot developments seem almost too good to be true and, at times, challenge realist notions of the harsh reality of institutionalised sexism and racism in the American South of the 1930s and 40s in which the novel is set.²⁶ At the end of the story, everyone is united at Celie's Fourth of July celebration, a holiday that for the black community is not one to celebrate America, but one on which, in the spirit of hooks' black aesthetic of existence, black people 'can spend the day celebrating each other' (Walker, 1982, p. 254).

For this reason, for Wallace, *The Color Purple* is 'the closest thing to an African-American utopian novel [she's] ever read' because it 'softens men, strengthens women, and turns economic, political and racial frustration into manageable units at an astonishing rate' (1990, p. 90). She is critical of how easily systemic issues related

²⁶ These include: Nettie who becomes the carer of Celie's children and gets to know the African homeland; Celie who inherits a house and a store while at the same time discovering that her children are in fact not the result of incest and makes peace with her husband; Nettie with her husband Samuel, and the children all healthy and joining Celie in her new home, although they had been officially declared dead due to a shipwreck.

to racism and patriarchy are ultimately overcome and at how, particularly in the movie adaptation by Steven Spielberg (1985), the story glosses over the material realities that produced the conditions in which Celie and the other characters find themselves (Wallace, 1990, p. 95). Barbara T. Christian, however, identifies in the novel's utopian characteristics Walker's womanist 'celebration of the Black woman's insistence of living' (1994, p. 137). It is an insistence marked by a generative creativity that allows for black women's 'transformation despite opposition of the bits and pieces allowed [them] by society into a work of functional beauty' (Christian, 1994, p. 129). As such, it is also the celebration of practices of actively imagining and living different futures in the present moment.

For José Esteban Muñoz, 'the utopian exists in the everyday, and through an aesthetic practice [...] [and] endeavor that reveal [that] the inherent utopian possibility is always in the horizon' (2009, p.145). This practice is not marked by unity and conformity, but through moments of disorientation and rupture (Ahmed, 2006b). As a result, meaning becomes an 'ongoing emergent product of practice' that is never fixed, but always in the making (Sohan, 2015, p. 298). For Lacey Jane Roberts, this 'inability to be defined' is an attribute of practices of needlework and, indeed, an 'asset' (2011, p. 257). She argues that crafting, and more specifically quiltmaking can be conceptualised as powerful strategies for challenging unequal systems that rely on categorization as a means to justify oppression. From this perspective, quiltmaking can 'become an agent to resist stereotypes and to challenge the constructed systems of visual and material culture' (Robertson, 2011, p. 258). It therefore helps expose the connection between femininity and practices of needlework as part of heteronormative modes of governing that denigrate so-called women's work and explicitly marginalise women of colour and their creations. The Black Lives Matter movement embodies this approach through its affirmation of intersectional forms of being and its dedication to

'freeing [black people] from the tight grip of heteronormative thinking' (Black Lives Matter, no date). It conceives of itself as an 'ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systemically and intentionally targeted for demise' on a daily basis (Black Lives Matter, no date). Thus, like the writing and quilting practices that I have discussed throughout this chapter, Black Lives Matter places regard for black life at the heart of its vision for a more just society.

Practices of quilting and their narrative renderings are performative as well as phenomenological as they 'emphasize the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds' (Ahmed, 2006b, p. 2). Indeed, Cvetkovich conceives of regular making practices as a form of 'spiritual practice' which nurtures in people a willingness and ability to face the discomfort that, for example, is often involved when being confronted with one's own white privilege (2012, p. 200). In addition, creative practices can assist people in being able to stay with these moments of discomfort, to embrace the ambiguity of the moment of disorientation, while, at the same time, allowing for new orientations to form. hooks actually recounts how for her grandmother quilting was, in fact, 'a spiritual process where one learned to surrender [to beauty]. It was a form of meditation where the self was let go' (1991b, p. 116). The performance of everyday practices thus becomes a mode of dwelling in a state that is not prescriptive of futurity, but marked by a potential that 'is and is not present' (Muñoz, 2009, p. 99; see also Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 191).²⁷ Everyday creative practices are expressive of this potentiality because neither their meaning nor the way they are performed is fixed (Pedwell, 2016, p. 10). As such, they are always also 'available for a change to come' (Malabou, 2008, p. viii). The present,

²⁷ See Muñoz (2009) for a discussion of queer temporality in this context.

Pedwell argues, therefore, can be conceptualised as ‘active, brimming with change – and yet impossible to fix or isolate from other temporalities’ (Pedwell, 2016, p. 15). Rather, the performance of creative practices becomes a way of sitting with this present, the legacy of the past and that which is yet to come.

In the examples discussed in this chapter, literal and figurative practices of quilting and their accompanying objects become imbued with a sense of potentiality that cannot be fixed in the present (Muñoz, 2009, p. 99) as cultural heritage and knowledge are preserved and continually renewed. According to Mysha Priest, ‘the quilt is the mother’s garden that makes possible’ (2014, p. 468). Quilting, in this sense, becomes an active verb that is ‘about doing and moving forward’ (Jefferies, 2011, p. 232) in a state of continuous potentiality. Further, it resembles a radical politics that insists on a non-prescriptive futurity which recognises a multitude of experiences as opposed to one single official discourse. In *The Color Purple*, this potentiality is represented in the novel’s possibly utopian ending, which is marked by reconciliation and reunification. In *Beloved* and ‘Everyday Use’ as well as the works of Faith Ringgold, Chawne Kimber and the SJSA, potentiality is entangled in the non-prescriptive nature of the works as they ‘attempt to enhance our attunement to [...] mind-body-environmental assemblages and understand “progress” as an experiential possibility in the present’ (Pedwell, 2016, p. 22). As such, this potentiality is also part of a radical practice that, as Kelley argues, ‘takes us to another place, envisions a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling’ (2002, p. 11) that is grounded in the affective experience of the unequal flows of power of the present moment. Thus, it has the potential to be transformative as part of everyday entangled modes of being that connect the affective, the social and the political.

This chapter has demonstrated how quilts and their narrative renderings are part of these radical practices of resistance and transformation. Both texts and textiles

can generate moments of disruption as well as affective attachment as they move from the personal sphere of the home into the public as part of quilt shows, gallery exhibitions, online platforms and also through direct action. These encounters between people and material objects are part of the affective, social, and political entanglements through which the status quo is perceived and reconfigured. A quilt may cause disorientation through its design, background story, or the context in which it is created and displayed. As quilts are usually connected to comfort, warmth and familiarity, expressive quilts like those by Chawne Kimber or the community quilts of the Social Justice Sewing Academy challenge normative perceptions of the meaning of practices of quilting through their outright confrontation with questions of gender, race and identity. Along with the story quilts of Faith Ringgold, and the literary works of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker they examine how these categories are implicated in the lived experience and political struggle of African-Americans. As a result, the quilts and the literary works offer counter-narratives to official records about black women's experiences of the legacy of slavery and the pervasive effects of racism and sexism. In addition, they generate resistant modes of being grounded in a generational legacy of creativity and selfcare. Committed to processes of historical redress, the writers and quilters discussed in this chapter use quilting and narrative representation of this practice to create space for the affective dwelling in the potentiality of a different, more just future. They actively challenge the status quo.

Chapter 3: Stitching Desire: Homework, Women's Agency and Bangladeshi Diaspora in London

This chapter provides a close reading of Monica Ali's novel *Brick Lane* (2003) in order to examine how practices of needlework, while firmly grounded in the everyday and its attendant home space, are also implicated within wider processes of global capitalism and the labour market, including exploitation and migration. The novel chronicles the life of two Bangladeshi sisters working in the global garment industry: Hasina as a factory worker in Dhaka and Nazneen as a homemaker in London. Through this unique setting, the novel allows for an exploration of practices of needlework, particularly garment sewing, alongside questions of agency, political consciousness and the everyday politics of domesticity and paid labour within a transnational diasporic context. Through reading *Brick Lane* with a focus on the performance of homework, I show how the novel illustrates the complexity of women's experience of paid and unpaid work in the realm of the home space. By paying attention to how these practices are entangled with affect and unequal structures of power, I refrain from locking them into reductive binary discourses that rate women's experiences of labour and the home as either positive or negative. As a result, conceptualizations of women's homework, particularly in relation to sewing and piecework in the global garment industry and its relation to a feminist politics of the everyday, are complicated.

Though *Brick Lane* is loosely based on a qualitative ethnographic study by economist and social theorist Naila Kabeer (2000), the aim of this chapter is not to position this literary text as a 'transparent vehicle for conveying the "truth" of another's experience', in this case, Bangladeshi women in London and Dhaka working in the garment industry (Whitehead, 2017, p. 2). In fact, I engage in detail with the problematic reception of narratives by 'ethnically marked' writers like Ali, who migrated

with her parents from Bangladesh to England as a young child. Their works are often faced with critiques regarding questions of authenticity and representation. Notwithstanding the importance of such critiques, I frame the novel as a medium that enables an attunement to individuals' particularised experiences. The literary can generatively complicate cultural narratives, for example, about the meaning of practices of needlework and paid work for women, precisely through providing an account of lived experience marked by 'ambivalence, contradiction and paradox' that cannot be folded into neat binaries (Potter and Stonebridge 2014, p. 7; Whitehead, 2017, p. 139). More specifically, I argue that the protagonist Nazneen's coming to consciousness is grounded within the texture of her everyday life shaped by housework, emotion work and homework for the sweatshop. As such, I am interested in how personal as well as potentially social transformation is not necessarily (or, at least, not only) founded on a 'radical rupture of consciousness' (Pedwell, 2016, p. 4), but is steeped in the politics and textures of everyday practices of making. Thus, my focus is on the sewing that Nazneen performs from home for a local sweatshop and how it orients and moves her perception of self. Drawing on the work of Margaret Wetherell, I conceptualise Nazneen's sewing as an affective social practice of meaning-making and trace how, through the needlework, Nazneen is confronted with her own desires and ultimately moved towards following their pull.

Firstly, drawing on practice and affect theory, as well as on theories of the everyday, I outline my understanding of affective social practices. Secondly, I provide an overview of the novel's mixed reception in public as well as scholarly circles that focused on questions of authenticity and representation, and I argue that attention to practice allows for a more generative negotiation of these questions. Next, I consider working practices within the home which include unpaid housework and emotion work, as well as Nazneen's paid homework for the sweatshop. By tracing the performance

of these types of homework in relation to the politics of the quotidian, I show how Nazneen's coming to consciousness is connected to the textures of her everyday life and grounded in the monotony of routine and the cluttered home, as well as the shifting modes of desire that enter the home space through the paid sewing work.

Everyday Affective Social Practices of Meaning-Making

My understanding of social practices is based on Andreas Reckwitz's 'idealized model of practice theory' (2002, p. 244). This model can be called idealised as it is less concerned with the nuanced distinctions between different scholars of social practice, but rather looks at how practice theory in general attempts to make sense of the body, mind, things, knowledge, discourse/language, structure/process and agent/individual in opposition to other cultural and social theories (2002, p. 243).²⁸ According to Reckwitz, practice theory "decentres" mind, texts and conversation. Simultaneously, it shifts bodily movements, things, practical knowledge and routine to the centre of its vocabulary' (2002, p. 259). As such it encourages perceptions of self that are grounded in 'object/subject/affect-assemblages' (Knudsen and Stage, 2015, p. 9). A 'practice', from this perspective, is a 'routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one other' (2002: 249). These elements, for Reckwitz, include 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (2002, p. 249).²⁹ As such, practice theory allows for an exploration of entanglements between 'bodily routines of behaviour, mental routines of

²⁸ Theodore Schatzki (2001) also argues that there is 'no unified practice approach' (p. 2), though theorists generally agree about the importance of practices for understanding human (and non-human) existence, as 'practices are the source and carrier of meaning, language, and normativity' (p. 12).

²⁹ Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) have simplified Reckwitz's model and identify the constitutive elements of a practice as materials, competence and meaning though in sum these elements are similar to the one Reckwitz lists.

understanding and knowing and the use of objects' in relation to micro- and macro-level social, cultural and political structures (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 258). In other words, practice theory examines the points of intersection and divergence of object/subject/affect-assemblages and follows their patterns across time and place. Ways of cooking, consuming or, indeed, of sewing or embroidering are included in such practices. They imply knowledge of the way in which certain elements are put together, materials that are needed, and movements that need to be performed, for example, when sewing a button to a shirt. In addition, the performance of these practices may include certain 'states of emotion' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249) and affective experiences that may be fleeting or recurring. It can be related to the pleasure of playing with colourful materials and about creating objects like a new dress or a quilt that can be admired and used once completed. Likewise, the moment of making can be accompanied by states of frustration as a particular seam will not lie flat or it turns out that a piece of fabric has been cut too small and will not match its counterpart. As I have shown in the previous chapter, making can also be accompanied by feelings of anxiety, fear or anger as well as love and care as it is associated with social justice issues or beloved family members.

Margaret Wetherell picks up the role of emotion in social practices to develop a theory of affective practices concerned with routinised patterns of experience. As such, she is concerned with feelings in relation to the unequal flows of power that make up everyday life. As a result of exploring these entanglements she encounters 'shifting, flexible and often over-determined figurations rather than simple lines of causation, character types and neat emotion categories' (2012, p. 4). In this sense, theories of affective practice reject – or rather find it impossible – to differentiate between emotion and affect in the way that some affect scholars like Brian Massumi (2002) and Patricia Clough (2007) suggest. Broadly speaking, for these scholars, affect and emotion are

two separate entities, because one, that is emotion, can possibly be controlled and is actively felt and experienced, whereas the other, affect, exceeds discourse and is outside the conscious grasp of humans. For Wetherell 'an affective practice is a figuration where body possibilities and routines become recruited or entangled together with meaning-making and with other social and material figurations' (2012, p. 18). Consequently, affective practices are entanglements 'in which all the parts relationally constitute each other' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 18). Meaning, then, is the result of the various constellations of the parts, yet, is also subject to change in response to new configurations. The shift from being an unconscious sensation (i.e. affect) to a conscious emotion cannot be pinpointed either and one might actually implicate the existence of the other (Ahmed, 2004, p. 6).³⁰ Consequently, I suggest that affective as well as social practices can be grouped together as object/subject/affect-assemblages. Because of their entangled nature, it is not always possible to identify where and when one stops and the other begins, or whether they are, in fact, mutually constitutive (see also Wetherell, 2012, p. 14). As Wetherell argues:

analyses of affective practices [...] will take as their subject how these practices are situated and connected, whether that articulation and intermeshing is careful, repetitive and predictable or contingently thrown together in the moment with what else is to hand. Affective practice is continually dynamic with the potential to move in multiple and divergent directions. (2012, p. 13)

As a result, it is not always useful to try to single out particular elements of this assemblage as this could have a debilitating effect on the dynamic patterns and 'lines of flight' they create as well as make it impossible to trace them.

³⁰ Throughout this thesis, following scholars like Sarah Ahmed (2004), Ann Cvetkovich (2012) and Carolyn Pedwell (2014), I use emotion, affect and feelings interchangeably in order to highlight the difficulty in clearly distinguishing between these terms. For a detailed overview of critiques on the epistemology and ontology of affect, see Clough (2007), Gregg and Seigworth (2010).

In my reading of *Brick Lane*, I explore how affective and social practices shape the textures of Nazneen's everyday experience and (re)orient her perception of the self. As such my focus is on 'processes of developmental sedimentation, routines of emotional regulation, relational patterns and 'settling'' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 22). I follow Wetherell as well as Elizabeth Shove, Mika Pantzar and Matt Watson in arguing that these processes 'routinely embed patterns of affective practices as a kind of potential' and are therefore promising starting points for research into the dynamics of personal and social change (Wetherell, 2012, p. 22; Shove, Pantzar and Watson, 2012, pp. 19, 163-164). In this sense, I trace Nazneen's development from submissive housewife to paid homemaker and extramarital lover, and then to employed single mother through a focus on the affective social practices of homemaking and sewing that make up her everyday life.

The everyday is the realm in which these practices are performed and, consequently, in which change can start to take shape. However, the most defining feature of the everyday, is, in fact, its lack of any such defining characteristic. It is ubiquitous in that it refers simply to the ordinary elements of our daily existence, but in a manner that is also 'strangely elusive, resists our understanding and escapes our grasp' (Felski, 1999, p. 15). At the same time, it is also the realm in which the extraordinary takes place and the backdrop against which we define the latter (Highmore, 2002a, p. 16; see also Stewart, 2007). As such, as Ben Highmore puts it, everyday life 'signifies ambivalently' (2002a, p. 1). It can be the realm of reassuring routine as well as of oppressive boredom and these perceptions may alter depending on their context. As a result, 'everyday life is a thoroughly relational term' that cannot be definitely fixed (Highmore, 2011, p. 2). In this sense, theories of the everyday share some characteristics with Wetherell's theory outlined above, as she also stresses the relational nature of affect and affective practice (2012, p. 74). According to Wetherell,

theories of affective practice need to recognise that 'affect has conscious and non-conscious, bodily and cognitive, elements linked in highly complex ways' (2012, p. 61). Consequently, the study of affect needs to be concerned with the conscious and unconscious as much as with the social, the discursive, and the material.³¹ It is only through an attention to all these elements, she argues, that processes of affective meaning-making can be traced as the 'flow of affect is located in the body [and] in the flow of ordinary life' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 77; see also Stewart, 2007; Ahmed, 2004). Like the everyday, 'the concept of affective practice stretches to encompass both conventionality and unconventionality' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 117).

By implication, the study of affective practices as well as that of the everyday is notoriously difficult as it encompasses a multiplicity of objects for analysis and points for entry. As I demonstrate throughout this thesis, it is this multiplicity that makes the everyday such a generative category for research into personal and social transformation as it makes possible an attunement towards different kinds of assemblages and the ways such figurations might manifest themselves or change. Over the years, scholars from various disciplines have approached both the everyday and affect from various vantage points and with different agendas in mind. For instance, for Walter Benjamin, the everyday is intrinsically connected to the experience of modernity and the metropolis (1999, 1982). For Georg Simmel, methods of 'making strange' such as montage were needed in order to highlight the ordinary (Frisby and Featherstone, 1997). In contrast to that, the British Mass-Observation project of the late 1930s, which was relaunched in the 1980s, took an exhaustive and cumulative

³¹ In this sense, the elements that Wetherell (2012) lists as part of affective practice are similar to the ones listed by Reckwitz (2002) as well as by Shove, Pantzar and Watson (2012) in relation to social practices. However, Wetherell does not explicitly connect these dots and she uses a different terminology.

approach that tried to gain as much information as possible about as many people as possible leaving an archive that to this day has not been fully explored (Highmore, 2002a, p. 11). Henri Lefebvre (1992) developed the concept of rhythmanalysis in an attempt to sketch and trace the patterns and flows of everyday life. In his seminal *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau was concerned, as his title suggests, with everyday life on the level of practice and hoped to discover 'the logic of these practices' as a way to capture, or at least come closer to, the foundations on which society operates (1984, p. xv). Conceptualising practices in the context of consumer/producer relations, he was interested in the ways people used practices such as reading, walking in the city, and cooking as a means to conform to or subvert a particular social or economic order. In this sense, de Certeau's reading of practices is similar to Wetherell's and my own, as he recognises the political potential of everyday practices. Yet, he was more concerned with grasping the 'formal structure of practices' and understanding how people make *use* of them as opposed to looking at what practices *do*, how they orient people (de Certeau, 1984, p. xv).

The everyday 'is not abstract' (Highmore, 2011, p. 2) and neither are affective practices. They are grounded in material structures that make up the physical environment of the everyday. With regards to the home space, the 'banal materiality of everyday life in the home' includes items of furniture, and utility objects as much as decorative ones (Pink, Mackley and Morasanu, 2015, p. 210). On her arrival in England, Nazneen finds that her husband has already filled their home, a small flat in London's Tower Hamlets, with more furniture than she had ever seen in one room before. The living room houses:

a low table with a glass centre and orange plastic legs, three little wooden tables that stacked together, the big table they used for the evening meal, a bookcase, a corner cupboard, a rack for newspapers, a trolley filled with files and folders,

the sofa and armchairs, two footstools, six dining chairs and a showcase. [...] There were plates on the wall, attached by hooks and wires which were not for eating from but only for display. (Ali, 2003a, p. 14)

The glass showcase is equally 'stuffed with pottery animals, china figures and plastic fruits' graced with a fine film of dust (Ali, 2003a, p. 14). It is in this environment that Nazneen spends the majority of her life in England, particularly in the beginning as she barely leaves the house – spending her days cooking and cleaning, or aimlessly drifting around from room to room in between these activities.

For literary critic Sukhdev Sandhu, Ali's detailed attention to the apartment's interior and Nazneen's daily chores appears 'flatly compendious [...] or pointlessly accretive' (2003, para. 31). He fails to acknowledge, however, the importance of the material structures that shape the quotidian as they themselves are subject to continuous change. They can shift place and shape, break, disappear or be replaced and as such are part of 'an ongoing process through which the textures of home are continually renegotiated and renewed' (Pink, Mackley and Morasanu, 2015, p. 221). They provide the space 'for the exploration of Nazneen's sense of self' (Cuming, 2013, p. 340) and as such are deeply connected to Wetherell's affective meaning-making practices. As Nazneen's situation becomes more unbearable, so does the flat become more cluttered and packed with books, stacks of papers and broken chairs that Chanu plans to one day repair and sell. The interior of the apartment forms part of 'the texture of [Nazneen's] lived experience and its complex combinations of hope and despair' (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 158). When she first arrives in London, Nazneen takes pride in the interior of her husband's apartment and in the sheer number of its contents since no one in her Bangladeshi home village had ever had such possessions (Ali, 2003a, p. 14). However, her perception shifts over time and 'the flaws in the flat's décor' become representative of her own unfulfilled hopes and desires (Hiddleston, 2005, p.

65). Nazneen feels 'trapped inside this body, inside this room, inside this flat, inside this concrete slab of entombed humanity. They had nothing to do with her' (Ali, 2003a, p. 56). Her daily activities become perforated by 'domestic guerrilla actions' as she 'hated the socks as she rubbed them with soap, and dropped the pottery tiger and elephant as she dusted them and was disappointed when they did not break' (Ali, 2003a, p. 75, 30). Yet, Nazneen eventually discards these actions because, ultimately 'they annoyed only her' and her husband appears immune to her unhappiness (Ali, 2003a, p. 75).

The experience of everyday life is essentially a phenomenological one as it is 'a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided' (Stewart, 2007, p. 9). It cannot only be felt through the material which impresses on the body, but also through what Highmore calls 'the immaterial material, [that is], affect, emotion and the senses' (2011, p. 140).¹⁰ As Nazneen conducts her daily life within the confines of her council flat and the wider council estate, 'life made its pattern around and beneath and through her' (Ali, 2003a, p. 30). Her body adjusts to these domestic rhythms as she cleans and prepares meals for her husband, but also rebels against them as she avoids sharing meals with him and eats while cooking in the afternoon or gets up in the middle of the night to raid the fridge for leftovers (Ali, 2003a, p. 30). For

¹⁰ In this sense, theories of affect are strongly linked to new materialist epistemologies and ontologies (Highmore, 2010, pos. 1674). Diana Coole and Samantha Frost define materiality as 'always something more than "mere" matter: an excess, force, vitality, relationality or difference that renders matter active, self-creative, productive, unpredictable' (2010, p. 9). Matter is recognised 'as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways' (p. 10). As a result, new materialism moves beyond traditional philosophical dualisms such as nature/culture, human/non-human, material/ideal as it regards materiality as part of entanglements that are multiple and constantly in flux (Coole and Frost 2010; Alaimo and Hekman, 2008). New-materialist scholarship is interested in the 'choreographies of becoming' embedded in the formation, reorganisation and dispersal of these entanglements as opposed to critically separating the entanglements into individual strands (Coole and Frost, 2010, p. 10; see also Coleman and Ringrose, 2013; Highmore, 2010, pos. 1676).

Wetherell, the study of affect is ultimately the study of patterns, though these patterns are not necessarily fixed but

multiple, dynamic, intersecting, sometimes personal and sometimes impersonal. Patterns are sometimes imposed, sometimes a matter of actively 'seeing a way through' to what comes next, and sometimes, like a repertoire, simply what is to hand, relatively ready-made and 'thoughtless'. (2012, pp. 46-48)

The patterns are part of the texture of everyday life and I follow them – their sudden breakdowns and new formations – through the novel.

Nazneen is worn down by the patterns of everyday life and 'had to concentrate hard to get through each day' (Ali, 2003a, p. 152). The death of her infant son Raqib leaves her with trauma from which she never fully recovers. Though the period directly following Raqib's death is not actually narrated it is insinuated that much of Nazneen's later personal struggle is connected to this experience. The everyday rhythms and demands of life as a wife and mother of two girls take their toll on Nazneen's well-being as 'sometimes she felt she held her breath the entire evening. It was up to her to balance the competing needs, to soothe here and urge there, and push the day along to its close' (Ali, 2003a, p. 152). Nazneen questions her ability as a mother as:

on bad nights when her thoughts could not be submerged by rice or bread or crackers she began to wonder if she loved her daughters properly. Did she love them as she had loved her son? When she thought of them like this - when they grew distant - her stomach fell down through her legs and her lungs shot up against her heart. [...] And she squeezed Raqib from her mind. That way lay the abyss. So she swallowed hard and prayed hard, and she used prayer, in defiance of her vows, to dull her senses and to dull her pain. (Ali, 2003a, pp. 152-153)

Steady perseverance with her daily chores becomes Nazneen's coping mechanism to deal with personal loss and her unhappiness, though 'it took all her energy. It took

away longing. Her wants were close at hand, real and within her control. If only she focused sufficiently' (Ali, 2003a, p. 152). These patterns of perseverance, however, are also regularly interspersed with what Kathleen Stewart calls moments of 'surging affects' (2007, p. 9), as 'sometimes, when [Nazneen] put her head on the pillow and began to drift into sleep, she jerked herself awake in panic. How could she afford to relax?' (Ali, 2003a, p. 152). In addition, the instances in which Nazneen 'failed' to sustain the household's equilibrium are described as 'eruptions' accompanied by 'a flogging or a tantrum or a tear-stained flat cheek' that make her feel 'dizzy with responsibility' (Ali, 2003a, p. 152).

As such, 'the ordinary is a shifting assemblage of practices and practical knowledges' closely linked with affects (Stewart, 2007, p. 1). Due to this shifting nature, it is almost impossible to capture the ordinary through cultural, sociological and empirical research. The quotidian and its attendant affects can only ever be approximated by zooming in on the object/subject/affect-assemblages that are often fleeting and yet also recurring through their repetitive performance (Knudsen and Stage, 2015, p. 9). In this context, the literary offers a medium through which to zoom in on these entanglements and explore the texture of everyday life without staging authoritative claims. It becomes a means to discover and trace various patterns as opposed to establishing one guiding plot line around which all stories must be arranged (Ingold, 2016, p. 77). Narrative, or the telling of stories, is thus always also a 'form of world-making' (Nikoleris, Stripple and Tenngart, 2017). It recognises the value of individual women's lived experiences and the way these experiences 'do impact and are impacted by' what Michelle M. Wright calls "'glocal" forces': the interconnection of the global and the local (2014, p. 335). It is through storytelling as a shared practice of meaning-making that attention to 'the actual lines of potential that a *something* coming together calls to mind and sets in motion' becomes possible (Stewart, 2007, p. 2,

original emphasis.). Tracing how these lines come together, how patterns are interwoven and form 'affective ruts' offers ways of exploring how people engage with the 'momentous and the global political' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 14, 7). By attending to the ways in which Nazneen's sewing for the sweatshop and her daily homemaking routines orient and move her, I aim to flesh out how these practices are implicated within the 'glocal forces' of the garment industry, gendered discourses about homework, and neoliberal discourses about women's self-actualisation. The following section explicates in more detail how Nazneen's and her sister Hasina's stories connect to wider cultural narratives about authenticity and the cultural specificity of marginalised women's lived experiences.

***Brick Lane* and the Struggle over Authenticity**

Brick Lane inhabits a curious position in these debates about authenticity as it is a work of fiction based loosely on a qualitative study by scholar Naila Kabeer (2000) about Bangladeshi women working in the garment sector in Dhaka and London. The novel had already garnered much media attention before its release as Ali was named one of Granta's Best Young Novelists of the Decade and, in 2004, was named Newcomer of the Year at the British Book Awards. Subsequently, *Brick Lane* was shortlisted for a number of major literary prizes such as the Booker Prize, the George Orwell Prize and the Commonwealth Writers' Prize. Consequently, media attention was high and continued to be so for some time, particularly when a movie adaptation of the novel was produced in 2006 and released in 2007. From the beginning, many of the critiques of the novel put forward by reviewers in the press as well as by scholars appeared to read the novel through an 'anthropological prism' focused on generalisable truths about the experience of Bangladeshi immigrants to the UK and, more specifically,

about the experience of Bangladeshi women working in the garments sector in London and Dhaka (Ahmad, 2004, p. 199).

On the one hand, critics praised the novel for providing insight and access to a community and its inhabitants that seemed wholly 'other' to a mainstream white audience. As one reviewer puts it: 'it opened up a world whose contours I could recognise, but which I needed Monica Ali to make me understand' (Bedell, 2003, para. 9). In this context, Ali's 'foreign-sounding' surname, her brown skin and Bangladeshi heritage function as prominent signifiers in the assessment of her work. Presumably those characteristics lent credence to her depiction of Bangladeshis in both London's East End and Bangladesh. Ali is credited with possessing 'insider' knowledge of these communities and, as a result, the novel becomes framed as a particularly 'authentic' representation of the 'non-Western other'. Ali's acknowledgement of the connection between her writing and Kabeer's scholarly work further strengthened this view (Perfect, 2008, p. 118). The novel is framed as providing, at least to a certain extent, a true-to-life representation of the people and settings it portrays. It is treated as realist ethnographic fiction that allows the observer to tap into the everyday experience of the individuals under observation. According to Jane Tallman, 'the ethnographic novel written by someone from within the culture has a point of view unsullied by the culture-boundness and the blind-spots that accompany any outsider, no matter how well-trained' (2002, p. 13). As such, ethnographic novels 'bring to the study of culture indigenous voices often absent in the anthropological literature'; and, as a result, provide valuable insight to the reader who is presumably an outsider to the community and culture depicted (2002, p. 21). In this sense, Ali's novel is not only framed as providing insight into the personal experience of individual characters, but also objectifiable knowledge about a particular group of people in the context of wider social structures.

On the other hand, critics and some members of the Bangladeshi community in East London questioned Ali's position as 'insider' and consequently dismissed the novel for its supposedly false and inauthentic representations. Indeed, in these discourses, Ali is fashioned as an outsider to the community she writes about. Siding with the offended Brick Lane citizens, Germaine Greer argues in a *Guardian* article that 'Ali is on the near side of British culture, not far from the middle. She writes in English and her point of view is, whether she allows herself to impersonate a village Bangladeshi woman or not, British' (2006, para. 2). Ali is the child of a British mother and a Bangladeshi father, but, though she spent most of her childhood in Britain, has never lived in the rural Bangladeshi settings of her novel nor in the Tower Hamlets of London's East End. Greer further claims that 'by giving her novel such a familiar and specific name, Ali was able to build a marvellously creative elaboration on a pre-existing stereotype' (2006, para. 7). Such stereotypes, according to the spokespeople of the community, include Ali's supposed representation of Bangladeshis from the area of Sylhet as backwards and uneducated. These accusations climaxed in 2006 in a dispute between locals and the production company which carried out some filming on Brick Lane for the movie adaptation of the novel (Cacciottolo, 2006; Lewis, 2006). About 120 community members, the overwhelming majority of whom were men, staged a protest on Brick Lane to voice their discontent about the film and the novel (Cacciottolo, 2006). As one protester complained: 'This hard-working community has been offended by lies, slander and cynicism. There should be a limit to what you can write or say. You can write fiction, but you cannot use names that are reality. The reality is Brick Lane' (quoted in Cacciottolo, 2006, n.p.).³² Ali is accused of 'dar[ing] to create

³² Indeed, Brouillette (2009) has found that 'several of the business leaders most vocally opposed to *Brick Lane* were also involved in the campaign to refashion and rebrand the area as Banglatown, a 'monocultural enclave' meant to present a commercially visible, viable, and essentialized image of Bangladeshi identity' (p. 435). For her, the predominantly male

the characters' in her novel rather than basing them on any kind of authentic personal experience (Greer, 2006, para 5). According to Greer, as a result, Ali's characters appear as 'caricatures' rather than valid representations (2006, para. 6).³³

Ali, however, defends her work by stressing the fictional and creative nature of a novel. She explains that she 'write[s] from character' and has a primary interest in the development of a character so that 'the characters can speak and breathe for themselves' (quoted in Ali and Adebayo, 2004, p. 345). As such, Ali insists that 'any literary endeavour must be judged on the work alone', that is the literary qualities of a text, though in her specific case, her 'brown skin is the dominant signifier' (2003b, paras. 14-15). Questions of authenticity and representation also appear to be the dominant modes of analysis with regards to the characters featured in the novel. For instance, Ali Rezaie accuses Monica Ali of 'oversimplifying the cultural concerns of the Bangladeshi immigrants in England' through an endorsement of liberalism and linear self-development (2016, p. 62). Nazneen's quest for self-actualisation through work and her shedding of traditional kinship relations, cast a 'reductive picture of the world in which non-Western individuals are presumed to have nothing to gain from their cultures except oppression and backwardness' (Rezaie, 2016, p. 71). In particular, Rezaie is critical of Nazneen's development of agency in relation to paid work and critiques the assimilationist rhetoric of this tale. Once again, Ali's own position as a well-situated, middle-class Londoner is the focus of attention as she is accused of 'depoliticizing' her character 'by turning Nazneen into a "good", assimilated Muslim' (Rezaie, 2016, p. 71). Rehana Ahmed also laments that 'the novel fosters a culturalism

opposition to the novel springs from anxieties about the liberation of women within traditional patriarchal Bangladeshi society through paid labour.

³³ For a more recent, but similar, debate about literature, cultural difference and appropriation sparked by comments by American author Lionel Shriver criticising a large publishing house's new diversity agenda see Kureishi (2018), Mangu-Ward (2017) and Foreman (2016).

that allows it to be read as an allegory of a woman's journey into the neutral space of an "inclusive" multicultural Britain' (2010, p. 25).

In this context, Alistair Cormack takes issue with Ali's use of classical realism. According to him, 'the "doubleness" of hybrid cultural and psychological structures', which he regards as inevitable to any tale of migration and diaspora that traces how a person from one cultural background comes to live in another, 'is flattened when it is represented in a form that stresses linear development toward self-awareness' (2006, p. 496). Both Cormack and Michael Perfect (2008) conceptualise *Brick Lane* in the context of the *Bildungsroman* and nineteenth-century traditions of realist writing of individual development. Nazneen's development is thus located in her move from 'passive object of historical forces, [i.e. her cultural background and immigrant experience] to being in a position of control' (Cormack, 2006, p. 712). This is exemplified by the contrast between the opening and last chapter of the novel. The novel starts by recounting how Nazneen, from the beginning of her life, was taught by her mother to submit to fate because 'what could not be changed must be borne. And since nothing could be changed, everything had to be borne' (Ali, 2003a, p. 11). By the end of the novel, however, Nazneen has discarded this attitude, empowered by the knowledge of 'what [she] can do' and her decision to remain in England where, as her friend Razia puts it, 'you can do whatever you like' (Ali, 2003a, p. 413). This potentially all-too positive ending certainly flattens the complexity, not only of Nazneen as a character, but also the multiplicity of immigrant experiences, in particular with regards to questions of assimilation and multi-culturalism. However, an overly narrow focus on the supposed outcome of Nazneen's individual development diverts attention from the context in which this development takes place. Nazneen's coming to consciousness is grounded within the texture of her everyday life, which is shaped by housework,

emotion work and the literal homework for the sweatshop.³⁴ It is in this environment that I locate the novel's potential for 'refram[ing] and multiply[ing] the sites of tension between individual desire and the demands of socialisation' (Bolaki, 2011, p. 11) and for resisting the linear structure implied by the *Bildungsroman* form. *Brick Lane* illustrates how everyday practices provide a space for the negotiation of affect and social structures without implying any definitive objectives.

Readings of the novel like the two types outlined above, which aim to determine whether it champions or deconstructs stereotypes, are reductive in that they limit the discussion of the text and its reception to questions of authenticity and representation. As Jane Hiddleston argues, 'existing readings, that conceive the text either as uniquely revelatory or as grossly misrepresentative, can be counterposed with this awareness of its implications as a literary experiment, a space where different discourses and rhetorical strategies are juxtaposed and realigned' (2005, p. 61). Indeed, John Marx claims that it is 'precisely [in] the moments that *Brick Lane* breaks with realism and with its mimetic conceit' (2006, p. 22) that the text is at its most powerful as it opens up a space for exploring the politics of the everyday in relation to women's labour, agency, liberalism and representation.³⁵ Thus, my focus is on what Ali Ahmad terms 'the quotidian texture of Nazneen's existence – her confinement and boredom, the invisibility of her labour, and its subtle appropriation by her husband' (2004, p. 201). Like housework and emotion work, the homework for the sweatshop is delegated into the background of day-to-day family life. Indeed, it becomes subsumed as part of the

³⁴ Following Arlie Russel-Hochschild, I define 'emotion work' as 'the management of one's feelings to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display' in a private context where such an act has use-value (1983, p. 7). In contrast to that, 'emotional labour', which requires the same kind of management of one's emotions is performed in return for a wage as and, as such, has exchange-value.

³⁵ For example, at the end of the novel, when Hasina refuses Chanu's help, and runs off with the cook from the family she worked for, Nazneen's defends her sister's decision. She recognises Hasina's romantic impulses as just as valid a choice and opportunity as her own decision to remain in London as a single working mother (Ali, 2003a, p. 364).

emotion work requested of Nazneen in support of her husband's plan to relocate the family to Bangladesh. Yet, ultimately, it is also within this monotony of routine and the cluttered home space that Nazneen develops a sense of self that empowers her to claim and pursue her own politics. In this sense, in the context of Nazneen's home, affective and social practices intersect across multiple trajectories and form the backbone to her process of personal transformation.

A heightened focus on realism and questions of authenticity with regards to the novel, I suggest, is due to a misplaced framing of the author as an ethnographer with the power to completely access the mythical other. Richard van Oort identifies in such beliefs a vestige of traditional assumptions about ethnography as a method suitable for producing supposedly objective knowledge about a particular culture (2004, pp. 627). These assumptions are present in the readings of *Brick Lane* that applaud it for its authentic representation of Bangladeshis as well as in those that criticise these representations for being stereotypical. The former bases this assessment on a traditional understanding of ethnography as a method for producing knowledge through participant observation which Ali was supposedly able to perform while living in the community she writes about (Atkinson et al., 2007).³⁶ In this narrative, as Ali has claimed herself, her brown skin and Muslim surname become the dominant signifiers with regards to her work and questions of representation and authenticity. Readings of the novel as stereotypical are based on the same assumption as they deny Ali any claim to 'appropriate' representation on the grounds that she is not a member of the community she writes about and as such cannot give an 'authentic' rendering of it.

³⁶ This view of ethnography, of course, is essentialist in its own right and has long since been complicated (Atkinson et al., 2007; Tallman, 2002; Clifford and Marcus, 1986). However, it should also not be ignored that ethnography continues to be a contested field or rather methodology that various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences interpret differently (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. 3).

Ali's use of the findings from Kabeer's study on the experiences of Bangladeshi women working in the garment sector in London and Dhaka further complicates this discussion. Ali came across Kabeer's scholarship while working for Verso, the publisher that contracted the book version of Kabeer's study *The Power to Choose: Bangladeshi Women and Labour Market Decisions in London and Dhaka* (2000). Subsequently, the two women met and, according to the acknowledgements at the end of the novel, Kabeer even provided feedback on Ali's manuscript (Ali, 2003a, p. 366). For her study, Kabeer conducted in-depth interviews with sixty Bangladeshi women in Dhaka and fifty-three in London, and compared the women's first-person narratives about their work and personal situation to a vast body of explanatory narratives 'about the women workers in question' (Kabeer, 2000, p. viii, original emphasis). These narratives are informed by the observations of 'journalists, trade unionists, feminist activists and employers, a range of people who had, or claimed to have, some form of first- or second-hand knowledge of the workers' (Kabeer, 2000, pp. viii-ix). In addition, Kabeer looked at academic works that 'take the form of theories about the behaviour of social actors in general, of whom [these] women workers [...] represent particular examples' (2000, p. ix). As such, one may describe Kabeer's methodology as ethnographic on the basis that it includes in-depth interviews (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. 5). Juliet Ash, for example, praises Kabeer's work for 'the specificity of its meticulous and detailed ethnographic research' (2004, p. 134). On the contrary, others would potentially find this label inappropriate as Kabeer did not perform direct participant observation within the factories nor did she embed herself within the communities of her participants (Atkinson et al., 2007, p. 2). Indeed, Kabeer describes her methodology as "'testimony-based" hypothesis testing' (2000, p. 405). Through this method she attempts to synthesise the everyday politics of these women's lives within the wider politics of globalisation and transnational capitalism.

In fiction, however, questions of representation can be addressed in a different manner to qualitative sociological studies because fiction may particularise. It does not aim to generalise in the way that ethnographers and social scientists often do (Tallman, 2002, p. 12). According to Didier Fassin, 'if the fictional imagination lies in the power to invent a world with its characters, the ethnographic imagination implies the power to make sense of the world that subjects create by relating it to larger structures and events' (2014, p. 53). Yet, Fassin goes on to qualify this statement as he stresses that both ethnographers and fiction writers ultimately present a 'unique association of reality and truth' shaped by a given context (2014, p. 53). *Brick Lane* follows the specific life stories of Nazneen and Hasina and through these characters the reader is also offered glimpses into the lives of other Bangladeshi garment workers in London and Dhaka such as Razia, Jorina, Aleya and Shahnaz. Fiction is truthful and authentic in its own right as it contains 'valid' knowledge in that it may 'reflect an external reality' (Elliott, 2005, p. 22; Lewis, Rodgers and Woolcock, 2008, p. 209). In *Brick Lane*, Marx locates this truth in the novel's ability to 'facilitate our understanding of global women at work' through its particular fictional setting and characters and the detailed exploration of these (2006, p. 22). The novel gives texture to dominant narratives about identity, domesticity and women's employment in a transnational context.

In fact, Ali explores the same phenomena as Kabeer but with the freedom of the fiction writer and an 'attention to the significant details of life that render each individual singular, impenetrable [and] unpredictable' (Fassin, 2014, p. 53). Attention to the texture of everyday life of the characters in the novel makes it possible to trace the entangled trajectories that constitute the quotidian. It becomes possible to zoom in on a variety of object/subject/affect-assemblages and to explore their effects on the self and the relationship with others. The novel raises questions about what it means for different women from different backgrounds to work in London and Dhaka's global

garment industry and it negotiates questions of identity and agency on an individual level. There is no claim that the characters are representative for all women working in the garment industry (Marx, 2006, pp. 22-23). Ali grounds her story in the texture of Nazneen's everyday life. As such, valuable insight is gained by 'looking for shared ways of narrating the situation of women rather than for differences in opinion' (Marx, 2006, p. 4). In this vein, Ali claims that her novel can be viewed outside the 'traditional ethnic narrative' because it addresses 'essential human questions about the way we exist and the way we find our place in the world' (quoted in Ali and Adebayo, 2004, p. 349). Diran Adebayo locates in this approach the power of the contemporary postcolonial novel because it 'tells universal truths from a different angle that's been less explored' (quoted in Ali and Adebayo, 2004, p. 350).

Understood in this way, a radical claim to imagination becomes a powerful tool for marginalised groups to claim authority: the authority to imagine and tell stories that naturally oscillate between personal experience and imagination, and need not be fixed by conventional expectations of realism. For bell hooks, fiction is a means of resistance because it can be reflective of an imagination suffused with resistance (see also Brochin and Medina, 2017). As hooks suggests, 'critical fictions disrupt conventional ways of thinking about the imagination and imaginative work, offering fictions that demand careful scrutiny [and] resist passive readership' (1991a, p. 56). As such, the novel itself represents an entanglement of different meanings and no singular truth can be extracted through a normative reading practice. Instead the practice of reading itself serves to orient and move the reader, not in the sense that contemporary fiction is necessarily a vehicle for mutual understanding or empathy, but in the way it stages a confrontation with the unequal flows of power that are invariably part of encounters between different subjects (Whitehead, 2017, p. 12, 129; see also Davis, 2016). Thus, fiction, as Luisa Valenzuela puts it, can stimulate 'the imaginary expression of desire'

(1991, p. 82) and as such, functions as a 'progressive force that underlines movement [and] resists interpretation and any final closure' (Gorton, 2008, p. 1). It provides moments for dwelling in the possibility of a differently arranged future in which new kinds of entanglements have formed and, thus, prefigures more just ways of living together. The next sections explore how different kinds of gendered working practices in and outside of the home, including home-sewing for the sweatshop, are part of such entanglements in Ali's novel.

Working Practices inside the Home

According to Kathi Weeks, work, in industrialised and neoliberal societies, is framed as an inherent quality of the supposedly 'natural order' in which every individual is meant to earn a living through participation in the labour market (2011, p. 3). As such, working is 'part of what is supposed to transform subjects into the independent individuals of the liberal imaginary' and, as Weeks shows, is not merely an economic necessity but a social one as well (Weeks, 2011, p. 8). In this sense, like other practices, working involves 'bodily and mental routines' and has an affective dimension (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 257). As 'a central component of daily life rather than an outcome', people may be worn out and frustrated by the rhythm of work, but also inspired by and pleased with what they do (Weeks, 2011, p. 18). What counts as work is not only connected to the 'privileged model of waged labor', but also varies across time and is heavily gendered and classed (Weeks, 2011, pp. 14, 19; see also Glucksmann, 2000, p. 20). Homework and housework inhabit an ambiguous place in this dynamic. Domestic tasks performed for a wage in someone else's home, for example by maids or servants, operate as part of the traditional complex of wage labour. However, such work engagements are often precarious, and the (mainly) lower-class and immigrant women working in the sector are not protected by labour law due to a lack of

employment contracts and social security (Chang, 2016). In contrast, as I will show below, waged homework may become subsumed into the larger category of housework when women perform paid work in their family home alongside unpaid domestic tasks.

Historically, women's work has been closely linked to the home space and to practices of homemaking with a focus on care work and childrearing. Since the early seventeenth century, the term housework has functioned as an umbrella term for all these practices associated with housekeeping and the armada of chores found in the domestic sphere (OED). While typically these chores include cleaning, cooking and childcare, the term is ultimately rather vague in that 'it can include all these elements (and more) and has no specific practices, set of objects or temporal boundary' (Highmore, 2011, p. 91). It is unclear where it begins and ends, both with regards to the temporal structure of a day and with the practices it includes. Some of them will be the same on a daily basis or as part of a weekly or monthly routine such as doing the laundry, changing the sheets or deep-cleaning the bathroom. But it may also include unexpected tasks that could not have been scheduled in advance, such as nurturing the sick or attending to various forms of spillages and breakages, for example a child's spilled glass of orange juice or, though more extreme, dealing with the excess of water flooding the home due to a burst pipe. As such, it is a practice marked by repetition and ephemerality, 'essential to the life of a household, but so quickly needed again' (Highmore, 2011, p. 91). For Rita Felski (1999), such forms of repetition are an essential part of the experience of everyday life. On the one hand, they provide a form of security and reassurance within the chaos of the contemporary world as a reliable habit that structures one's life. On the other hand, this repetition can be experienced in terms of endless drudgery and boredom. In sum, 'repetition can signal resistance as well as enslavement' (Felski, 1999, p. 21). The same can be said of the home space

as the epitome of everyday life. For Highmore, due to 'ordinary life [being] the arena of fear and threat as much as it is of reassurance and safety', consequently, the home is a 'highly charged political arena' (2011, p. 20). Unequal flows of power can be reproduced in everyday life and the homespace, but both can also form the realm in which people are slowly moved towards imagining and materialising different ways of being.

The figure of the housewife is tied to this complex perception of housework and the home space. As the traditional manager of the household, the home space falls within her domain. As a result, particularly in the 1940s and 50s, the figure of the housewife became a dominant popular representation of women, and also a specific target for advertising (Hardy, 2012; Johnson and Lloyd, 2004). This narrative suggested that the experience of physical drudgery that many housewives apparently experienced could be alleviated through new technological gadgets, which were intended to aid them with their daily chores (Johnson and Lloyd, 2004, p. 157). The regained freedom of time, however, was soon framed within discourses of boredom and in opposition to the popular myth of the 'happy housewife', especially as part of the second-wave feminist movement (Johnson and Lloyd, 2004, p. 157). Second-wave feminism paid particular attention to the ways in which housework functioned as a form of enslavement for women, especially because it was basically a form of unpaid labour in the home. As a result, many second-wave feminists placed housework at the root of wider social issues of sexism, gender inequality and patriarchy (Malos, 1980; Oakley, 1974; Greer, 1970; Friedan, 1963; de Beauvoir, 1949).³⁷ According to these narratives, housework and the role of the housewife denied women the freedom of self-actualisation. As a result, demands for wages for housework were voiced particularly

³⁷ Though, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, this has also been challenged by feminists of color like bell hooks (1982).

in the 1970s, partly also as a means to demonstrate that women did not simply perform domestic labour because it was in their nature to do so (Weeks, 2011, p. 113). However, as Leslie Johnson and Justine Lloyd show, second-wave feminism grounded its critique of housework within wider modern narratives about individual identity and choice and, ultimately, within a 'linear narrative of liberation' through paid work (2004, pp. 13-14).

I am conscious of the danger of conflating Nazneen's experience as a South Asian immigrant in London between the 1980s and the mid-2000s with a narrative put forward primarily by white middle-class second-wave feminists in the US and the UK. However, as will become clearer below, the novel does echo second-wave feminism's narrative of women's self-actualisation through paid work alongside perceptions of the oppressive home space. Second-wave feminism attempted to trace and explicate the patterns of women's everyday domestic experience and its attendant affective practices in consciousness-raising groups. These meetings were intended to provide women with a space in which to 'reach a feminist account, as an account for oneself with and through others, connecting [personal] experience with the experience of others' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 30). The home space with its attendant practices of housework was the primary space in which these accounts formed and, thus, the starting point for a politics in which the personal was always also political. As I have shown in the previous section, Nazneen's apartment is the space in which she experiences oppression, boredom and unhappiness. Once in London, Nazneen's everyday practices of housekeeping and her daily rhythms align themselves with everyday British ways of being.³⁸ Her life is marked by repetition as she spends her

³⁸ This also poses interesting questions about the colonisation of everyday life, the home space, and normativisation of the everyday in the context of empire and global capitalism. I discuss these points in more detail in the next chapter with regards to cross-cultural

days cleaning the flat, doing laundry and preparing food for her husband and children as well as aiding her husband in his personal hygiene, which involves the regular cutting of his corns and facial hair.

When Nazneen is unable to complete her regular chores for a number of days due to an illness, Chanu stays home from work in order to assist his wife. Failing to properly perform any tasks, he tries to gloss over his shortcomings by 'philosophizing about the nature of housework' as Nazneen and the girls attempt to tidy up the flat (Ali, 2013a, p. 251). Still shaky on her legs, Nazneen finds that:

the sitting room crawled with toys, clothes, books and abandoned kitchen utensils. A pack of toilet rolls stood on the table; five tins of baked beans nested on the sofa. Attempts had been made to unpack shopping bags, but at some stage between bag and cupboard each attempt had foundered. If a bag had been emptied it lay on the floor and gaped with the mess. Emergency rations of food marked the path from door to sofa to table. (Ali, 2003a, p. 244)

Chanu is described as 'helpless in the face of this natural disaster' while he tries to 'direct [the] operations' of the clean-up (Ali, 2003a, pp. 251-252). He explains to his daughters that housework is 'not easy' and reminds them that their mother does not 'have an easy job' – without recognising how he contributes to the difficulty of this job as he 'ate slices of bread spread with ghur and saw no necessity for a plate' while 'Nazneen swept around him' (Ali, 2003a, pp. 252). Housework is described as being a 'little like God, without end or beginning. It simply *was*' (Ali, 2003a, p. 251, original emphasis). However, it is not clear who is speaking at this point, whether it is the third-person narrator repeating Chanu's expostulations or free indirect discourse with Nazneen as the focaliser. Nonetheless, it highlights how the woman's presence in the home is taken for granted in the same way that her labour is. For Nazneen, however,

representations of women's shared everyday practices (Bacchetta, Maira and Winant, 2019; see also Ong, 2006; Ganguly, 2002).

the messy apartment also provides 'some satisfaction' because 'for years she had felt she must not relax. If she relaxed, things would fall apart. Only the constant vigilance and planning, the low-level, unremarked and unrewarded activity of a woman, kept the household from crumbling' (Ali, 2003a, p. 244). Only once the household does start to crumble does this activity get dragged out of its invisibility.

When, after the death of her son, Nazneen struggles and appears to be aimlessly drifting through the day, Hasina advises her to take up homeworking like the other women on the estate. At this point, Hasina has already been working in a garment factory in Dhaka for a few months and 'the novel represents work as having an extraordinary effect on Hasina's sense of her place in the world' (Marx, 2006, p. 21); it empowers her not only financially, but also because she comes to feel part of a community, in which she is valued based on her skill as a machinist. Indeed, she experiences working as a 'cure' because 'sewing pass the day and I sit with friends. As actual fact it bring true friendship and true love' (Ali, 2003, p. 113). Her situation as a single woman separated from her husband improves significantly once she begins work in the garment factory. Kabeer's (2000) research into the labour-market decisions of Bangladeshi women was initially inspired by the apparent paradox of these choices. It seemed that in Bangladesh more and more women from mixed age groups and social backgrounds and of different marital status, left the home space in order to work in factories. On visits to Bangladesh, Kabeer observed these developments irrespective of Bangladesh's strong tradition of female seclusion, or so-called purdah, which was a prominent practice in the workers' communities and family structures. Within Bangladeshi communities in Britain, however, a significant number of women evidently turned to home-based work 'at a time when research based on official statistics in the UK had declared that manufacturing homework was a "relative rarity"',

not compliant with contemporary economic trends and Britain's long tradition of female factory workers (Kabeer, 2000, pp. vii-viii).

According to Kabeer's findings, the Dhaka-based garment workers benefit from their involvement in the labour market. They are empowered financially which, in many cases, leads to their empowerment within Bangladesh's rigid gender and class system. For instance, some of the participants report that they gained a voice with regards to how the household's money is being spent as a result of their own contribution to their family's finances (Kabeer 2000, p. 153). She concludes that the Dhaka workers developed 'new sense of identity and self-worth' through their work, though this does not rule out an awareness of often problematic and difficult labour conditions (Kabeer, 2000, p. 189; see also Kabeer, 2004). In *Brick Lane*, many of the stories of Hasina's colleagues, which she shares with her sister through letters, echo the voices in Kabeer's study. The accounts by Kabeer's interviewees include, among other topics, a summary of the women's situations prior to taking up paid work, the decision process that led them to do so, their experience as workers, and any difficulties they might have faced along the way, particularly from spouses and male heads of family. Specific attention was paid to women's perceived changes in 'intra-household relationships as a result of their paid work' (Kabeer, 2000, pp. 408-409). Hasina's colleague Aleya, for example, uses her wages to send her children to school – which was given as a primary motivation for seeking work by a number of Kabeer's participants. Like many of the spouses of Kabeer's interview partners, Aleya's husband is not happy with his wife's decision to seek paid work outside the home as he feared for his reputation as the family's provider (Ali, 2003a, p. 112; Kabeer, 2000, p. 419). Aleya's insistence eventually forces him to give in; however, her husband accompanies her to the factory and back on a daily basis. In addition, he requires her to wear a burqa, as a means to manifest and safeguard her purdah. Shahnaz, a young unmarried colleague of Hasina,

echoes Kabeer's findings in her questioning of the traditional practice of dowry to be paid by the bride's family when she states: 'Why should I give dowry? I am not a burden. I make money. I am the dowry' (Ali, 2003a, p. 112).³⁹

However, Hasina's situation changes dramatically once she becomes romantically involved with her male co-worker Abdul. Her positive descriptions of men and women working alongside each other like 'brother and sister', with women's purity secured because they 'keep purdah in the mind [where] no one can take it', change as her colleagues begin to shun her (Ali, 2003a, p. 114). The women are concerned about Hasina's reputation and that of their own working selves as both might be tarnished by gossip about the supposedly promiscuous nature of the so-called 'garment girls'. Ultimately, Hasina is fired from her position and Abdul rejects her, while their boss makes allowance for Abdul's behaviour because young men 'have to get a little practice in before marriage' (Ali, 2003a, p. 120). Subsequently, Hasina is forced to resort to prostitution as a means to support herself until she eventually finds a position as a maid in a rich Bangladeshi household.

In contrast to the findings from Dhaka, Kabeer concludes that, in London, 'women's homeworking activity had a fairly limited impact on gender relationships within the household and in the wider community' (Kabeer, 2000, p. 306).⁴⁰ Instead, the homework has to be worked around the many other demands the women face in terms of hospitality, child rearing and household management. Unlike the Dhaka women, the London homeworkers did not cite 'basic survival imperatives, children's educational expenses nor the need to accumulate dowry-related savings' as important

³⁹ Michael Perfect demonstrates in detail, how, through the character of Hasina, Ali actually even reproduces some of Kabeer's participants' testimony almost word for word (2008, pp. 116-117).

⁴⁰ Christine Koggel (2003) has similarly found that paid labour does not automatically imply a change in gender relationships in terms of empowering women. Indeed, it 'may do little to promote women's agency if work is inside the home and invisible' (p. 171).

motivations for joining the labour market (Kabeer, 2000, p. 231). Rather, homework provided a practical opportunity for the women to earn a small wage while, at the same time, observing their community's expectations of women with regards to purdah and domesticity. The women's income was generally very small, the stupendous and repetitive 'flat' machining they performed was regarded as unskilled women's work, and the broader family's involvement in this work was high due to it taking place within the home (Kabeer, 2000, pp. 280, 285). Yet, the majority of the women did share the 'view that women's capacity to earn was critical to the respect that they received within their families' (Kabeer, 2000, p. 301). This respect, however, was limited, because the decision to perform homework had to be negotiated with regards to 'various anxieties related to the boundaries of gender, culture, and class' (Kabeer, 2000, p. 238). Nazneen's process of gaining her husband's permission to take on homework echoes these findings. Like many of the husbands of participants in Kabeer's study, Chanu is concerned about gossip within London's Bangladeshi community with regards to his status as a 'respectable' man and the family's breadwinner, though the family is indeed struggling financially due to his unemployment (Ali, 2003a, p. 135). In addition, he is concerned that the activity might take too much time away from Nazneen's main occupation: that is the management of the household, including cleaning, cooking, looking after the children and providing for guests.

For Chanu, Nazneen's homework only becomes acceptable once he subjects it to his agenda of moving his family back home to Bangladesh. Her work is framed as an act of selfless devotion to the 'family project' of relocation even though neither Nazneen nor the girls are ever consulted by Chanu. Nazneen's paid labour is subsumed as part of the everyday housework and emotion work that she performs for her family – her income is even used to pay for the flight tickets to Dhaka. Chanu frames the monotonous piecework as similar to the 'old and honourable craft of

tailoring' popular in Bangladesh, and in the process elevates it from unskilled to skilled labour (Ali, 2003a, p. 154). The sewing work is not framed within the exploitative context of sweatshop work and the global textile industry, but as reclaiming Bangladesh's rich textile history, which, according to Chanu, had been ruined by British colonialism through the implementation of tariffs on textile goods from Bangladesh and India (Ali, 2003a, p. 236). Like her housework and emotion work, the paid homework is relegated to the background of day-to-day family life and is not part of a straightforward journey towards liberation. However, in the form of the routine practice of sewing, the paid homework functions as a starting point for Nazneen's orientation towards resistant affects like her increased unhappiness with her situation and her budding desire not only for Karim, but also for a different way of being. The meaning of homework, housework, emotion work and paid work is historically and culturally contingent, but it is also affectively charged and, thus, brimming with potentiality. The next section examines in more detail how sewing as an affective social practice moves Nazneen towards a changed self-perception that, ultimately, leads her to claim autonomy for herself and her teenage daughters.

Moving the Needle and the Self - Sewing Practices and Affective Meaning-Making

Homework blurs the boundaries between the private and public, and between the domestic and industrial.⁴¹ Homeworkers inhabit a curious position within market economies as they are often not self-employed but working for subcontractors that pay them by the finished piece as opposed to by the hour (Leach, 1998). In addition, homeworkers are often expected to work with their own machinery – in this case a

⁴¹ See Cuming (2013) for a discussion of how the boundaries of the private and public are further blurred in *Brick Lane* through its council-estate setting.

sewing machine and potentially a flat iron – while also paying out of pocket for the electricity needed to run this equipment (Luckman, 2013; Leach, 1998). However, this arrangement may also allow the homemaker to avoid potentially unhealthy and dangerous working conditions within a commercial sweatshop. The sweatshop in which Nazneen's neighbour Razia is employed is shut down by public health inspectors who, among other things, criticise the extreme heat that envelops the machinists as they perform their sewing tasks (Ali, 2003a, p. 169). Unlike the traditional worker, who leaves the home to go to the office or factory, for the homemaker, the boundaries between paid and unpaid work are not clear-cut, as the paid task is performed, particularly in the case of women, alongside the large amount of unpaid housework and care work they already perform for the family.⁴² Consequently, Belinda Leach argues that 'forms of work like homework do not readily fit into the common-sense meanings of work or family in contemporary capitalist societies, rendering them uncertain factors in people's sense of identity' (1998, p. 101). Through homework, two powerful concepts around which the modern self can be organised – that is work and family – cross paths in a manner that makes it difficult to locate distinct meanings in the everyday practices linked to it (Luckman, 2013; Leach, 1998). Due to the heavily gendered nature of homework and its 'close connection to women's responsibilities for the home and childcare' it is usually women who find their sense of self tied to such practices of embodied meaning-making (Leach, 1998, p. 98). The contemporary craft economy, in which online platforms for selling crafts like Etsy have lowered the barriers for independent small-scale businesses to compete on a global market, provides women with new opportunities for balancing work and motherhood outside of more traditional employment settings. Yet, these self-employed entrepreneurs also face high

⁴² As Luckman and Thomas (2018) show, this phenomenon is also reported by self-employed women working in contemporary craft economies.

levels of precarity in an increasingly competitive global market (Luckman and Andrews, 2019).

Kabeer's findings for Bangladeshi homeworkers in London demonstrate that, due to homework's literal setting within the home, women's earnings are often subsumed into the general family income because they are perceived as the product of a shared labour process (2000, p. 290). Unlike with Hasina, who leaves her rundown accommodation to work in the factory, Nazneen's paid labour is intrinsically tied up with the various forms of unpaid labour she performs for her family. As Nazneen's middleman for the sweatshop, Chanu comes to find new meaning 'in a role which he viewed as Official [sic] and in which he exerted himself' (Ali, 2003a, p. 154). He closely supervises her sewing and checks the quality of her work. He also takes it upon himself to manage Nazneen's earnings and 'for two whole months she did not even know how much she had earned' (Ali, 2003a, p. 154). Only when Chanu takes on a job as a taxi driver does his monitoring of Nazneen's work cease and she is assigned a new middleman, her soon-to-be lover Karim. Once Chanu no longer directly controls her work, Nazneen is able to hide a small amount of her wages from her husband and to use them to support her sister or to satisfy the growing demands of her teenage daughter who has begun to ask for extras like earrings and shampoo (Ali, 2003a, p. 219). However, even then Nazneen finds herself using her savings to support her husband as she pays off his credit with the community's loan shark Mrs Islam.

Hence, for Nazneen, the introduction of paid work into the home is not connected to a radical change in consciousness or position, but is instead accompanied by a gradual shift in self-understanding. Her self and desire are reoriented through the embodied practice of sewing alongside other everyday practices. New 'patterns of active practices of potential' (Wetherell, 2012, p. 22) enter the home space through the sewing machine and the paid work. However, it takes time

and, literally, practice for these patterns to settle and this is not a straightforward process. The motions required to operate the sewing machine, at first, are foreign to Nazneen and she has to learn how to use it. Nazneen has to practise for two weeks in order to learn how to sew on buttons, hem trousers and insert zippers under the guidance of Chanu and Razia. Once she has mastered all the features and techniques, Chanu claims that 'all you have to do is sit there' in front of the sewing machine and perform the motions (Ali, 2003a, p. 154). As such, her piecework is placed in the same supposedly omni-present space that her housework occupies. Nazneen sews while the other activities of the household are taking place around her – such as Chanu reading or watching the television, and her daughters doing their homework. Placing the fabric under the presser foot of the machine, inserting the bobbin and controlling the foot pedal become routine motions that in their specific patterning form a practice. Yet, the motions of a practice can be interrupted and one may be required to pause and realign. Thread might get tangled up in the sewing machine, bobbin thread might run out, and a glossy material may cause the piece to slip; stitches may need to be taken out and reworked. Changing emotional landscapes and sudden bursts of affect may also defer the seamless flow of a practice. As I explain in more detail below, in Nazneen's case, it is her lust and yearning for Karim that interrupts the regular flow of her sewing.

Desire plays an important role in Nazneen's transformation of the self and serves to orient her along different lines of being. With the paid homework comes not only the promise of a salary and ultimately financial independence, but also Karim. He awakens a physical desire in Nazneen that she has never before experienced. With her husband, sexual intercourse is an act that is part of Nazneen's routine of married life, in the same way that cooking, cleaning and cutting her husband's corns are. It is an act she endures, but it does not give her pleasure. Her perceptions of her husband

and their shared bed are tied up with his capacious physical presence and the way his large belly sticks out and his body comes to touch hers in the middle of the night as he takes up most of the bed (Ali, 2003a, pp. 57, 96, 131, 246). Though Nazneen is the focaliser of these observations, they are mainly descriptive in nature and do not necessarily resemble expressions of repulsion. By contrast, when Nazneen takes note of Karim and his body, it is clearly linked to pleasure and desire as Nazneen takes in his broad shoulders and muscular forearms as well as his confident movements. Chanu, on the other hand, is presented as insecure and ultimately unsettled despite his large physical presence, as he struggles to find his place in British society and the wider Bangladeshi immigrant community.⁴³ The discovery of her own desire is as new to Nazneen as actually embracing this desire. Following tradition, she had subordinated her own needs and wants to those of her husband, as well as to society's normative expectations, and had never directly voiced them. Instead, she had learned to ask for things by framing them as her husband's wishes or concerns for his well-being. Her lust for Karim is experienced as intensely embodied as she becomes acutely aware of her own body and presence 'as though just now she had come to inhabit it for the first time and it was both strange and wonderful to have this new and physical expression' (Ali, 2003a, p. 255).

Though the first moment of intimacy between the two is not narrated, Nazneen is subsequently presented as an active participant in their sexual encounters as Karim moans 's-slow down, [...] But she could not' (Ali, 2003a, p. 223). Desire for Nazneen comes to interrupt her daily routines as:

in the mornings she said her prayers and did housework and began her sewing and there was nothing inside her that demanded more. By lunchtime when she looked for Karim out of the window, her stomach began to surge with excitement

⁴³ See Weedon (2018) for a more detailed discussion of Chanu, Karim, masculinity and questions of immigrant belonging.

and dread and on the days when he did not come she had to leave the flat and walk around the streets for fear that she would wear out the remaining threads of carpet. (Ali, 2003a, p. 285)

Her ordinary state of being is upset by the experience of these new and conflicting feelings that 'give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences' (Stewart, 2007, p. 2). Nazneen's experience of her newly found desire is charged with tension as it makes her way into the rhythm of her everyday life. The meaning of this desire and its attendant affects of exhilaration, but also shame and remorse, is unclear to Nazneen. Yet, it is also impossible to reduce to something that is simply good or bad. Nazneen's yearning for Karim, although new and exhilarating, is experienced within the same quotidian setting in which she feels sad, tired and bored. And it is precisely in these relational modes of experience – in which different practices and affects intersect – that alternative meanings and forms of being outside of restrictive binary categories become a possibility (Stewart, 2007, p. 3). Nazneen's desire leads to the development of its own routine grounded in her and Karim's daily schedules as they attempt to fit in meetings in her flat while the girls and Chanu are not at home under the pretence of Karim delivering or collecting Nazneen's sewing (Ali, 2003a, p. 223). According to Don Slater, 'notions like "routine" and its cognates are labels that accord particular social status and value to particular forms of action and practices, and that strategically stabilise them in specific ways' (2009, p. 217). In this sense, a practice constituted by a mental and physical routine can 'be evaluated [...] in terms of [its] potential for expanding or contracting social agency, reflexivity and critical consciousness' (Slater, 2009, pp. 217-218), in the same manner that the everyday can be described as a realm of potentiality, but also oppression. A routine practice can resemble an attachment to certain structures that secure the

status quo, but, consequently, can also be a starting point for redefining it through a change in routine.

Through much of the novel, Nazneen's relationship to her own desires is conflicted especially with regards to her affair with Karim as it makes her both 'sick with shame [and] sick with desire' (Ali, 2003a, p. 223). This experience is powerfully captured by a scene where Nazneen spontaneously tries on one of the sequined vests she has been working on for the sweatshop. The sparkling material of the sequins reminds her of the figure ice skaters she enjoys watching on TV and she is intrigued by the potential that appears embedded in the fancy material. As she slips on the vest as opposed to her usual sari, her mind is transported to visions of herself elegantly floating across the ice with Karim by her side. Yet, she suddenly becomes acutely aware of the adulterous nature of her thoughts and quickly slips off the top. She notices that, in reality, 'the sequins were cheap' and, in a matter of seconds, the formerly beautiful garment had changed to what 'looked like fish scales' (Ali, 2003a, p. 163). Nazneen is well aware that adultery is a crime within the Bangladeshi community, one that in her home country might be punished with the death penalty. Eventually, her guilt about her affair, in part, causes her nervous breakdown as Nazneen becomes overwhelmed with juggling her household chores, filial and cultural responsibilities, and her personal desire. Yet, 'in between the sheets, in between his arms, she took her pleasure desperately, as if the executioner waited behind the door. Beyond death was the eternal fire of hell and from every touch of flesh on flesh she wrought the strength to endure it' (Ali, 2003a, p. 223). But 'out of the bedroom, she was – in starts – afraid and defiant' (Ali, 2003a, p. 223) as she is stricken with inner turmoil about her actions, her own desire, and her knowledge about what is considered appropriate social conduct.

Kristyn Gorton describes desire as a 'fluid, multiple and dynamic force that is transformative, destructive and life-changing' (2008, p. 1). As such it signifies ambivalently in a manner similar to the everyday and affective practices in its embodiment of potentiality as well as lack and restraint (see also Menon, 2016). Phenomenologically speaking, desire can be conceptualised as movement, as it orients a person towards certain objects, people, places or ideals in the past, present and future (Gorton, 2008; Ahmed, 2006a). As such, desire is 'always 'in progress and therefore difficult to pin down' in the same manner that affect is dynamic in its traversing across different patterns of ordinary life (Gorton, 2008, p. 4; Wetherell, 2012, p. 77; Menon, 2016, p. 21). While Nazneen, on the one hand, reproaches herself for her illegitimate relationship with Karim, she, nonetheless, does not bring it to a close as 'she drew him like a moth to the flame' and 'tenderness could not satisfy her, nor could she stand it' (Ali, 2003a, p. 223). The affective surges of her own desire cannot be quieted and during their intimate encounters, Nazneen is moved by 'desire's pull towards an impossible transcendence [which] creates a lack and, at the same time, a draw' (Gorton, 2008, p. 10). For Nazneen, 'in the bedroom everything changed. Things became more real and they became less real. Like a Sufi in a trance, a whirling dervish, [Nazneen] lost the thread of one existence and found another' (Ali, 2003a, p. 223). It is in those moments that Nazneen gives in to her desire as opposed to social norms or the passive submission to fate as preached by her own mother. As her desire disrupts the monotony of her everyday life, she is reoriented in her sense of self as new affective patterns take shape that offer different forms of being.

In this context, the sewing comes to inhabit an ambiguous, but also flexible and generative, position in Nazneen's life. On the one hand, it resembles a mindless routine similar to housework as she stitches zip after zip, and hem after hem, trying to meet the deadlines amid finishing her other household chores. On the other hand, the

homework for the sweatshop and the sewing machine as a material object become intrinsically tied to Nazneen's sexual desire and her illegitimate relationship with Karim. In this relationship, Nazneen is driven by her wish to take her own pleasure above his or anyone else's and as such it also symbolises potentiality, that is 'a layer, or layering to the ordinary, [that] engenders attachments or systems of investment in the unfolding of things' (Stewart, 2007, p. 21). Through her relationship with Karim, Nazneen 'sense[s] her own existence for the first time in her marriage' (Kuo, 2014, p. 180). In the conversations with her friend Razia and the wider Bangladeshi community on the housing estate, the sewing homework becomes representative of the open rumour about Nazneen and Karim's affair. His frequent and prolonged visits to Nazneen's apartment have made the neighbours suspicious that their relationship might be more than simply professional. When her neighbour Nazma casually drops by Nazneen's flat to borrow some spices, Nazma suggestively slides her hands across Nazneen's sewing machine on the dining table as she inquires in a supposedly casual manner whether Nazneen is still being provided with sufficient work by her middleman (Ali, 2003a, pp. 272, 285).

As Nazneen and Razia canvas the various fabric shops in the East End, Nazneen is acutely aware of her secret as she cradles and examines the different types of fabric on the bolts. Razia clearly has her own suspicions about Nazneen's relationship with Karim, but instead of addressing the subject they 'discussed material. They spoke of weight and colour, texture and sturdiness, loveliness and ease of care. They pulled out roll after roll [...] [and] all the while Nazneen counted her secrets' (Ali, 2003a, p. 232). Sewing is further linked with Nazneen's sexual desire, as she is unable to concentrate on her work with Karim in the room. She is aroused as Karim teasingly hides a handful of buttons that belong to Nazneen's work assignment in the pocket of his jeans and 'Nazneen felt an electric current run from her nipples to her big toes. [...]

Nazneen tried not to think of the buttons. She could think of nothing else' (Ali, 2003a, p. 194). As a result, Nazneen's descriptions of her own arousal are linked to sartorial imagery as 'her skin was attached to thousands of fine silk threads, all of them pulling, pricking at the point of tension' and she perceives 'a needle of excitement down her thigh' (Ali, 2003a, pp. 194, 255).

While Nazneen sews, Karim often keeps her company. He works on texts for the Muslim activist group he recently founded on the estate and lectures her about black and Muslim resistance. But unlike when Chanu lectures her about the world, Nazneen is actually expected to participate in these conversations by physically answering and she consciously soaks up the information and reflects on it. In fact, Karim criticises her for 'always working' and demands that Nazneen 'talk to [him]. Leave it' (Ali, 2003a, p. 194). Nazneen replies that '[she] will listen. You talk' but also remarks that 'buttons will not sew themselves', thus drawing attention to the fact that her homework, like housework, does not take place in the omnipresent manner that Chanu believes; it requires her active participation (Ali, 2003a, p. 193). While Chanu appears to need an audience to which he can feel superior, Karim 'makes [Nazneen] feel as if she had said a weighty piece, as if she had stated a new truth' (Ali, 2003a, p. 194). Through Karim, Nazneen is introduced to another world outside of the domestic and the marital unit, as she is encouraged by his political activism to attend the meetings of the local Muslim activist group which 'stimulates Nazneen's awareness of ethnic politics and how she might be able to reposition herself in the wider society' (Kuo, 2014, p. 179). Yet, their relationship is not only marked by the exciting and exceptional, but also involves familiar practices that Nazneen usually performs as part of her married life. She serves and assists Karim in the way that she normally does with Chanu, bringing him food or anything else that he requests while he lounges on the sofa in Nazneen's apartment. However, unlike with her husband, for Nazneen

these chores are connected to her sexual desire to Karim and, to her, 'this playing house' provides her with a 'thrill' (Ali, 2003a, p. 223). They are affective practices elevated out of the routine of the everyday through new attachments and yet firmly grounded in it.

Due to its flexible and transformative nature, desire has been linked to processes of self-awakening. Gorton, in her discussion of desire in fiction and film, is particularly interested in 'the way in which desire does something to the characters and the narrative to move them along, to change the path they have been on, to transform the way they see the world' (2008, p. 4). In this vein, Hsin-Ju Kuo argues that 'bodily transgressive acts generate, in Nazneen, a process of becoming, moving her from a fixed identity inscribed by conventional patriarchal society in her early years of marriage, to a more fluid and borderless one at the end of the story' (2014, p. 179). Towards the end of the novel, Nazneen decides to separate from Chanu. She will not accompany him back to Bangladesh, but remain in London with her two daughters. In addition, she rejects Karim's offer of marriage as she realises that her sexual desire for him was coupled with a desire for personal self-transformation. She also comes to see how their relationship was driven by their mutual longing for a negotiation of the meaning of home and the self within the context of their migrant cultures. In his mind, Karim had framed Nazneen as 'the real thing. A Bengali wife. A Bengali mother. An idea of home. An idea of himself that he found in her' that was inherently tied to Nazneen's background as a supposedly 'unspoilt girl. From the village' (Ali, 2003a, pp. 337, 286). Nazneen, likewise, realises that Karim had served as a mirror for her desire and the wish to negotiate her position as a woman in London's Brick Lane community. She acknowledges that she 'had patched him together, working in the dark. She had made a quilt out of pieces of silk, scraps of velvet, and now that she held it up to the light the stitches showed up large and crude, and they cut across everything' (Ali,

2003a, p. 337). Her image of him had to be actively created and pieced together through acts of affective meaning-making. The sartorial imagery, once again, highlights the deep connection between her sewing practice and the awakening of desire. Nazneen concludes that they both 'made each other up', as throughout their relationship 'I wasn't me, and you weren't you': they were both idealised materialisations of each other's desires (Ali, 2003a, p. 337). With this realisation, Nazneen decides to remain in London as a single mother supporting her daughters and herself through her own labour.

On multiple levels, her relationship with Karim helps Nazneen 'to know what [she] could do' in terms of her economic, sexual, and political agency (Ali, 2003a, p. 361). As a result, her adultery is reframed in terms of women's autonomy and removed from the patriarchal and hierarchical discourse that paints it as immoral (Kuo, 2014, p. 179; Das, 2016, p. 17). Her sexual relationship with Karim functions as a 'means of psychological development' and 'less as a moral transgression' (Kuo, 2014, p. 171). Through new patterns of affective social practices that include, among others, the anticipation of their meetings, their arousal and actual physical intercourse, their joint time spent in the living room, as well as Nazneen's sewing work for the sweatshop, she discovers forms of consciousness that empower her to position herself differently within her diasporic environment. The home space and the everyday, in this context, provide a 'liminal space' in which Nazneen is restrained in her desire and choice of options while she struggles with familial conflict. Yet, it is also within these very confines that she comes upon a 'threshold of transformation created by the intertwined relationships among and continuous traversing of private/individual and public/community spheres' (Kuo, 2014, p. 178). As a symbol of this change within Nazneen's identity, the sewing machine remains on the dining table as the last item to be packed while the rest of the household has already been placed into boxes or

marked for auction and charity in anticipation of the family's proposed move to Bangladesh (Ali, 2003a, p. 342). The sewing machine is representative of Nazneen's ongoing development as she decides to remain in London and join her friend Razia in the latter's newly founded fashion business.

Transnational Orientations of Desire

At the close of *Brick Lane*, discontented with the subcontractor system that leaves homeworkers with a meagre income, Razia turns from homemaker to entrepreneur as she opens her own fashion business, which produces garments inspired by South-Asian fashion for Western customers. Homeworkers or machiners in sweatshops usually perform only individual steps of the garment process like inserting a zipper, but do so in large quantities. By contrast, Razia and her fellow seamstresses from the estate construct the garments from start to finish. Furthermore, they aim to expand their business model to include design work as well. As a result, the women's work is moved from the invisibility of the home space into a sewing and design studio, and as such replicates more traditional liberal and capitalist work settings, as well as progressing from unskilled to skilled work. Naomi Pereira-Ares identifies this development as 'new practices which enable female empowerment without entailing exploitation' (2012, p. 1), as the business is founded on ideas of mutual support and female friendship that exclude exploitative sub-contracting methods. The novel appears to support this reading in the very final scene when Razia and the girls take Nazneen ice skating. As the latter protests that she cannot ice skate in her sari, Razia replies: 'This is England. You can do whatever you like' (Ali, 2003a, p. 365). This scene, and Razia's statement, which is the novel's final sentence, have been at the forefront of much of the popular and scholarly discussion of the novel. It is arguably problematic, and critics have used it to support either of the two opposed readings of the novel

outlined at the beginning of this chapter: a celebration of British multi-culturalism versus a stereotypical and uncritical rendering of the immigrant experience based on a glorification of neoliberal narratives of individuality and economic success. Throughout this chapter, I have attempted to show that such an analytical attempt is not particularly useful as it locks the text within problematic binary categories rather than attending to its full narrative complexity.

As I have outlined in the introduction to this thesis and in Chapter One, the binary categories that are often used in relation to practices of needlework are similarly restrictive; needlework is categorised either as subversive or as conservative. Consequently, the possible ambiguity as well as the generative opportunities for different forms of resistance created by the 'lines of flight' and entanglements in which practices of needlework are enmeshed are often overlooked. By focusing on processes of affective meaning-making grounded in everyday practices, my analysis has unpacked some of these entanglements with regards to the textual practices of the novel as well as the textile practices featured in the novel. As I have shown, the discussion of these textual practices has been dominated by questions of authenticity in relation to 'ethnically marked' narratives by people of colour, and ethnographic fiction and research more broadly. My analysis of the novel, through a focus on affective practices of needlework in the context of housework and paid homework, has highlighted how the literary can allow for a narration of the complexity of lived experience and the way moments of friction and discord sit alongside those of cohesion.

Through tracing the affective patterns that Nazneen's everyday sewing practice creates, I have shown how sewing moves her towards a new perception of self grounded in her own desires. Nazneen is not only moved *by* desire, but also *towards* desire as she sews hem after hem, and zipper after zipper. As a result of this

orientation, Nazneen becomes capable of taking actions that place the objects of her own desires within reach. She begins an affair with Karim and refuses to accompany her husband back to Bangladesh in order to create an autonomous life in the UK for herself and her daughters. In Nazneen's case, the sewing practice becomes the starting point for a politics of embodied (re)orientation. She transforms from passive figure to conscious actor within the transnational entangled context of the garment industry and South East Asian diasporas to the United Kingdom. The following chapter continues with the idea of entangled transnational practices in the context of a cross-cultural needlework initiative between Afghan and European women. Developing the idea of entanglements, I explore how affective social practices of needlework can highlight similarities between women and thus provide a ground for empathy and solidarity, while at the same time emphasising the unequal flow of power that is often enmeshed in such encounters.

Chapter Four: Stitching Practices of Feminist Solidarity with the Afghan–European Embroidery Initiative Guldusi⁴⁴

This chapter focuses less on literary texts, because, unlike the previous two chapters, it does not provide a close reading of literary prose forms like novels or short stories. However, it continues to be concerned with the textures of narratives or, in other words, with the stories we tell to make sense of things, as it explores the unequal flows of power in the construction of meaning in the cross-cultural needlework initiative Guldusi. Examining this Afghan–European embroidery initiative, I trace how practices of needlework are used as active avenues of meaning-making in the context of transnational cultural encounters and women’s solidarity. Guldusi is based in Germany and was founded in 2004 by the French-German textile artist Pascale Goldenberg.⁴⁵ Currently, Guldusi provides an income to about 230 women in Afghanistan by selling their embroideries in Europe. I locate Guldusi as part of a broad landscape of women’s transnational solidarity projects involving various forms of traditional handicrafts such as needlework (Jones, 2019; de Jong, 2017). In this context, Guldusi inhabits a special position as it sells small embroideries intended to be incorporated into new textile artefacts such as quilts or clothing, as opposed to selling finished items. This is significant to the way Guldusi’s customers engage with the embroideries because they are encouraged to enter into the process of creating something new in response to the Afghan embroidery.

⁴⁴ Parts of this chapter have appeared in May (2018b). It also expands some work submitted to the University of Kent as part of my MA in Critical Theory.

⁴⁵ Goldenberg speaks fluent French and German, but not fluent English. Some of the English content of the website, in my opinion, does not resemble a correct translation of the German ‘original.’ Where appropriate, I have provided my own English translation of the German texts featured on the website in order to allow for clarity of the content discussed as well as better readability of the quotations cited. All personal communication between myself and Goldenberg was conducted in German and I have provided the English translation.

Through my analysis of the organisation's website, travel reports, newsletters and gallery books, an interview with the initiative's manager as well as the resulting textile artefacts, I critically examine how meaning about practices of needlework is construed. I show how supposedly universal representations of everyday practices of homemaking and of needlework are attributed with the power to connect women across different cultures due to their shared gendered identity as women and practitioners of needlework. I contend that while similarities can be found in material practices of embroidering, as well as in popular cultural customs similar in the UK and Afghanistan – for example tea drinking – there are limits to the extent that these connections can foster generative acts of transnational feminist solidarity. Indeed, I expose how acts of feminist solidarity grounded in assumptions about a shared gendered identity as needlewomen risk reproducing contemporary Orientalist discourses that privilege the narratives and experiences of white women from the Global North. I want to be clear though that my aim is not to defame Guldusi and its participants or to accuse them of cultural insensitivity or negligence. Rather, I hope to draw attention to the ways assumptions about the meaning of practices of needlework and women's shared gendered identity can emulate unequal global power relations through craft-based solidarity initiatives. In this context, I am not only interested in how Orientalisms circulate on the level of the discursive, but also in the affective attachments to these structures. In other words, I tease out how European women's intimate investment in practices of needlework influences perceptions about the political potential of cross-cultural needlework initiatives between women in the Global North and South.⁴⁶ For this reason, I call for a more nuanced awareness in textile

⁴⁶ I would also like to acknowledge that I do not operate outside these power relations and am, at times, complicit with them. However, I hope that a reflexive approach can help to disrupt such hierarchies rather than reify them (see also Pedwell, 2010, pp. 7-8).

scholarship as well as among craft-based women's solidarity initiatives about how narratives of difference and sameness are produced and by whom.

Building on David Gauntlett's concept of 'making is connecting' (2018; 2010) and Guldusi's vision of bringing together different cultures, I also outline a different framework through which to approach cross-cultural needlework initiatives. By conceptualising making as form of encounter that connects not only materials, but also people and affects, I attend to the ways intimate attachments to structures can be unsettled and reshaped. Thus, I show how making, as a form of connecting, can generate openings towards different modes of feeling and being for both Afghan and European women. As such, this chapter further develops this thesis' central claim about how practices of needlework can enable a politics of embodied orientations. Through its analysis of Guldusi as a cross-cultural needlework initiative, it highlights the complexities of transnational feminist solidarity and demonstrates how practices of making and sharing can function as limited, but generative, starting points for affective relations based in the recognition of unequal flows of power, and the ways they affect personal positionality.

The chapter opens with a detailed overview of Guldusi, who has received little to no critical attention so far, before situating representations of shared everyday practices of homemaking and needlework within a broader discussion of postcolonial theory and decoloniality. Next, I outline the effects of Orientalism on contemporary discussions of women's veiling practices and liberation in the context of the US-led War on Terror in Afghanistan in order to demonstrate how cross-cultural needlework initiatives can reproduce unequal power structures that marginalise women in the Global South. I explore how Guldusi's European participants use their narrative power to frame experiences of solidarity and the meaning of practices of needlework. Lastly, I show how practices of needlework may foster feminist solidarity and cultural

exchange between needlewomen through providing the possibility for new affective relations and attachments to take shape.

Guldusi – An Afghan–European Embroidery Initiative

Guldusi, which means embroidery in colloquial Farsi, was founded in 2004 by Pascale Goldenberg and the German–Afghan Initiative (DAI), a registered charity. Goldenberg is an established textile artist and tutor based in the south of Germany.⁴⁷ Her motivation to establish Guldusi was twofold: ‘We aim to provide opportunities for [the women] to generate an income using their embroidery skills and at the same time hope these projects will help to safeguard traditional hand embroidery skills from disappearing’ (Guldusi, no date). Afghanistan has always had a rich and varied embroidery heritage, with different ethnic groups specialising in distinct styles and techniques (Paine, 2006). The Hazara, for example, are famous for their use of graphic patterns whereas the Uzbek are known for their couched threadwork. However, the most popular stitch across ethnic groups and regions is probably the Kandaharidusi, a fine satin stitch. This type of embroidery traditionally embellishes the fronts of men’s shirts or children’s clothing and as such is a staple of Afghan everyday life. It can also be found on the tshador or burqa, the full body cover for women, in combination with some drawn threadwork to create tiny stars, rosettes and cross motifs.⁴⁸ Besides clothing, it was common to embroider decorative items for the home, though these often had a functional purpose such as protecting a prized possession like a gun, a

⁴⁷ In her role as manager of the initiative, Goldenberg is also the main author of newsletters and travel reports, which is why this analysis necessarily draws heavily on material authored by her.

⁴⁸ ‘Tshador’ is the Farsi/Persian term for women’s full body cover and primarily used in Afghanistan. ‘Burqa’ is the Arab/Middle Eastern term, though a number of academic papers talking about veiling practices in Afghanistan also use this term (de Groot, 2013). I use the term interchangeably as a number of the materials I look at, for example the textile artefacts and testimonials by Guldusi customers, do not distinguish between the two nor does it make a difference with regards to the wider meanings attached to this particular piece of clothing.

watch, or the Koran. Imagery like birds, flowers or religious motifs that often carried symbolic meaning might be found on such works (Paine, 2006).

Yet, with the rise of the Taliban and the ensuing war, the hardships and challenges of daily life nearly caused hand embroidery to disappear from the everyday in Afghanistan. Livelihoods were destroyed during the war and the Taliban's restrictions on women, and particularly women's movement, prevented them from engaging with life outside of the private sphere (Heath, 2011; Skaine, 2002). Displacement within and outside Afghanistan affected many Afghans as a result of the US-led-war. Skills like embroidery, but also crucial knowledge about farming the country's typically arid land, were lost as a result of the displacement of Afghans within the country and outside, for example to refugee camps in neighbouring countries like Pakistan. People's everyday trajectories and routines were affected due to a change in the spaces and places that housed them.⁴⁹ As a result, common practices associated with the everyday underwent major transformations within the timespan of one generation as the material and social environment in which such practices could flourish or would be passed on and shared between multiple generations no longer existed (Heath, 2011, p. 12). In addition, an influx of cheap manufactured textiles from Pakistan reduced the need for handmade clothing (Paine, 2006, p. 19).

At the same time, young girls stopped showing interest in hand embroidery as they believed it to be 'old-fashioned' and unsuitable to the 'modern' identity they were attempting to fashion for themselves (Goldenberg, 2016b, n. p.). While embroidered clothing and textiles were and are still popular, according to Goldenberg, many Afghans now prefer to buy manufactured goods, which are regarded as 'better', instead of investing time and effort in making their own. As such, these Afghans' attitude to

⁴⁹ For a discussion of the effect of war on everyday life and the shift from the extraordinary state of crisis into the everyday mundane see Hardt and Negri (2005) and Ganguly (2002).

embroidery is reflective of, on the one hand, global narratives of capitalism and globalisation, and, on the other hand, of competing gendered discourses about needlework as outlined in the first chapter, which represent a continuous struggle about the value of the handmade in comparison with the mass-produced. In a number of industrialised countries in the Global North a renewed appreciation for the traditionally handmade can be observed as part of anti-capitalist movements and/or as a reflection of popular contemporary DIY aesthetics linked not to an economic need to make do-and-mend, but to the financial and cultural capital of having the resources to dedicate time and money to the handmade (Dawkins, 2011, pp. 267-268; Campbell, 2005).⁵⁰ By contrast, in the Global South, those aspiring to become active participants in capitalism, symbolised for them by a spending power that allows the purchase of the ready-made, may disregard the handmade as old-fashioned, backwards, and as a sign of an economic deficit (Adichie, 2013; Appadurai, 1996). Consequently, embroidery as a skill, but also as a material object that would be saved and treasured as an heirloom, was under threat of disappearing from everyday Afghan life.

At the start of the Guldusi programme in the village of Laghmani, about sixty kilometres north of Kabul on the Shomali Plains, Goldenberg hired two local women, who were still familiar with traditional Afghan hand embroidery. These women functioned as tutors who would pass their knowledge on to women interested in learning the practice and who had either never before embroidered or had not done so for a very long time. The stitches taught included a number of traditional stitches like

⁵⁰ Hall and Jayne (2016) note a new commitment to homecrafts and the handmade as well as the spirit of make-do-and-mend popularised by the UK government in response to the economically tough times during the First and Second World War. They identify the resurgent interest in home dressmaking in the UK, Europe and the US as a response to contemporary condition of austerity. While this seems a viable argument in the context of garment alterations and upcycling, it must not be ignored that dressmaking (as well as other textile crafts) are relatively expensive hobbies. The raw materials needed to make a garment will often cost more than a finished garment from a fast-fashion retail store such as Primark.

the Kandaharidusi. Initially, the vision had been to teach the Afghan women how to process and incorporate their embroidery into finished textile products and to sell these locally. A two-week workshop led by Goldenberg was intended to introduce the women to potential ideas for the further processing of the embroidery into handmade patchwork bags or book covers. The intention was to support the women in creating a local business network in Afghanistan that would eventually allow them to gain financial independence. Yet, Goldenberg soon had to realise that this, as she says, was the rather 'naive' vision of a 'nice European woman' who believed that Afghan women would be excited about such a prospect (Goldenberg, 2005, n.p.). Given the reality of the women's living conditions this idea proved unfeasible. According to Goldenberg, the women's daily life centres around the everyday challenge of making ends meet, and they had neither the time nor energy to spare to design products and to develop a business network (Goldenberg, 2005, n.p.). In addition, the widely used Chinese sewing machines, with their apparently inherent tension problems together with the coal irons available in the region made any sewing activity a very tedious process and the end product was usually not very neat.⁵¹ Further, out of the initial more than thirty participants, only two, a young unmarried woman and a widow, were allowed to travel by taxi to the nearest town to offer their goods to the local women's centre.

As a result, the initiative's focus changed to producing hand embroidery that caters for a European market and is managed by Goldenberg and the German–Afghan Initiative (DAI). This way, the Afghan women need only be concerned with the production of the embroidery while Guldusi takes care of the marketing and sales

⁵¹ In order to produce an even taut stitch, the tension between the top and bottom threads of a sewing machine (also called bobbin) needs to be correctly calibrated. With the cheap Chinese sewing machines available to the women in Laghmani, it was nearly impossible to get this right. As a result, stitches were either not very neat or had to be repeatedly unpicked and sewn again. In addition, the available coal irons do not allow for the kind of precision ironing necessary for the construction of more intricate bags or garments (Goldenberg, 2005, n.p.).

aspect as well as providing the women with a stable salary. Currently, the project in Laghmani has contracts with about 200 women and a second program founded in 2009 in west Afghanistan near Herat employs 30 women from the ethnic group of the Hazara. The Hazara women embroider in silk thread only, and create small rectangles or diamond shapes to avoid competition with the project in Laghmani. The embroidery produced in Laghmani with cotton floss must fully cover an 8 cm (3 in) square and the women must use the materials provided to them (Fig. 5). This material – cotton floss and cotton or linen bed-sheets – are donations from Germany that get sent to Afghanistan. The completed embroidered squares are collected quarterly by members of the initiative and the women are paid for the previous delivery as they hand over the next one. With each collection, about 3500 to 4000 pieces of embroidery are shipped to Germany. Volunteers in Germany cut the embroidered sheets into individual squares and sort, bag, price and label the pieces with the name of the embroiderer. The embroidery is then sold across Europe through the initiative's website, or by a network of national representatives at craft fairs and large textile shows.



Fig. 5. Cotton embroidery by Shafiqqa from Laghmani.

Guldusi also regularly organises European-wide competitions in cooperation with sponsors from the textile sector such as sewing machine manufacturers or patchwork magazines. Often, special motifs like leaves, letters, hearts or a particular animal will be commissioned from the Afghan embroiderers for these purposes. Participants in the competition are required to purchase one or more pieces of embroidery and to include them in their own textile works. Exhibitions which include a selection of successful submissions are frequently shown across Europe and are often embedded in large textile shows such as the European Patchwork Meeting, which takes place every year in the Vosges in France.

Part of the concept of Guldusi is to deliberately refrain from selling finished textile products in Europe, as is often the norm with transnational needlework initiatives geared towards providing women with an income through the sale of handmade textile products outside of their home countries (Goldenberg, 2009, p. 14).⁵² While the embroidered squares themselves, in a sense, resemble finished pieces of embroidery, the way they are cut up and sold encourages buyers to integrate the embroidery into new textile projects. The possibilities for inclusion are endless and the website and Goldenberg's publications about the initiative offer only a small window into these options as do the exhibitions. Among other things, the embroideries can be included in quilts, patchwork bags, book covers, fashionable belts and clothing as well as intricate art quilts that feature screen printing, machine embroidery and felting. According to Goldenberg, the finished textile works form a 'Four Hands Project' because they include at least one embroidered square created by a needlewoman in Afghanistan as well as the creative handiwork work of a European needlewoman.

⁵² The initiative Rubia Handwork, for example, sells finished needlework products made by Afghan women in Afghanistan or refugee camps (Lehr, 2011). For an overview of initiatives outside of Afghanistan see a recent special issue of *Textile* edited by Sue Jones (2019).

Guldusi claims that through this practice of including one woman's work into another's, two different needlework techniques get combined and 'symbolically speaking – two cultures meet' (Goldenberg, 2009, p.14). This connection is supposedly established through the women's shared practice of needlework as well as their shared gendered identity as women.

For this reason, a short publication featuring a brief history of the embroidery initiative, as well as an array of images of embroidered squares and completed textile artefacts by European needlewomen is titled *Threads Unite* (Goldenberg, 2009). The very first cross European competition organised by Guldusi in 2005 was similarly named 'Threads Unite Women' and aimed to 'promote curiosity and interest for the other's culture, the act of meeting between two peoples and solidarity' (Guldusi, no date). In the following section, I critically examine how discourses about everyday practices of homemaking and needlework are employed in order to facilitate such transnational encounters. I contend that the envisioned encounter often reproduces Orientalist discourses and power structures, which take the experience of the European needlewomen as the vantage point for theorising the role of everyday practices like needlework and consequently, the impact of the encounter itself. While the European women are surely excited by and invested in the prospect of the encounter with the Afghans, the way they frame these encounters is influenced by their own embodied positions within social, cultural, economic and political systems that marginalise women in the Global South.

The Challenge of Everyday Representation

One of the key challenges for Guldusi is to ensure that the Afghan women produce embroidery of high quality and of a style that appeals to potential European buyers while at the same time preserving traditional embroidery techniques and motifs. As a

result, the selection process for the embroiderers is necessarily rigorous. Women interested in joining are told in advance the date of a trial to allow them time to practise. On the day of the trial the women are provided with embroidery materials and sent home to start working on a square. They will then return a few days later and complete the embroidery in Goldenberg's presence to prove that it is truly their own work. For successful applicants, official employment contracts, which highlight the need for high-quality embroidery, are agreed with the women. Translators are present at all stages of this process to support Goldenberg and the other volunteers. Guldusi also employs a local who arranges the collection of the embroideries and other logistics, and serves as an accessible point of contact for the women.⁵³ The amount of squares a woman is contracted to deliver per quarter varies. The work's quality and its popularity on the European market play an important role, but social factors are also considered. For example, women who have to support many children are allowed to deliver more squares than young unmarried girls. However, Goldenberg also makes sure to always employ a significant number of unmarried girls between the ages of twelve and twenty, in an attempt to revive this dying craft among young people (Goldenberg, 2006, n.p.). In order to ensure that the initiative remains financially viable, over the years, Goldenberg has found herself forced to fire some of the women because their embroidery was deemed to be lacking in quality and did not sell. However, in recent years, the DAI has been able to provide stipends to women in situations of extreme hardship, and the works of the successful embroiderers allow Guldusi to keep women whose work is not so popular employed.

The embroiderers are free to choose the design, but are required to use more than one colour of thread. They are, however, encouraged to take inspiration from their

⁵³ Because the role involves a lot of travel in Afghanistan, a man was chosen as a more suitable candidate for this position of local middleman (Guldusi, no date).

local surroundings and Afghan traditions. The Hazara women embroider the traditional graphic patterns for which their ethnic group is well known. In the beginning, images of Hazara embroidery had to be mailed to Afghanistan from Germany because the war had left the community without any original samples to use for inspiration. The women in Laghmani embroider graphic patterns as well as figurative/pictorial scenes of their choice. Even when special motifs or themes are commissioned for competitions, the women are at liberty to create their own designs. The types of embroideries for sale, as well as those commissioned for competitions, suggest that the everyday, its practices and representations, emerged as a general theme that allows the charity to negotiate its vision of cultural encounter alongside market demands and cultural difference. Most of the Afghan women's lives revolve around their compounds, their families and the everyday tasks of homemaking, such as cooking, gardening and farming – but all within the context of the aftermath of the US invasion and the country's more than forty-year-long legacy of occupation and continual warfare. The villages' plain brick constructions covered in sandy brown mortar and surrounded by trees, stand out amid the flat landscape of the Shomali plains with large grey mountains in the background. This landscape forms the visible background in which these everyday practices take place, and is often represented in the embroideries. Obviously, the cultural, social and geographical context that makes up the ordinary life of these Afghan women is certainly different to that of their European counterparts. However, in general, homemaking practices, such as washing and cooking, and – since their participation in the initiative – needlework, are similar across this cultural divide in that they consist of 'forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, "things" and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge' (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). They are routine

everyday affective social practices in the lives of the women in the Global North as well as the South embedded within distinct social and emotional structures.

A series of embroideries by Meshgans from Laghmani details some of these practices in almost comic-strip-like fashion (Fig. 6). Some show a woman and a man, most likely husband and wife, collecting firewood. Others portray a woman getting water from the village's well, laundering the washing by hand in a basin, and hanging it up to dry on a clothes line, before she is shown perching on the floor of her stone house ironing the clothes with a coal iron. Another series shows a woman lighting a fire indoors to prepare tea and food, which is then served to members of the household seated underneath a *sandal*, a common device for keeping warm in the winter by placing a bowl of hot coals underneath a short table covered with a blanket. As everyone congregates on the floor around the table, feet and legs are slid under the cover for warmth. These are all acts of everyday domesticity that in their modified form are familiar to Guldusi's European customer base. Other descriptive Afghan embroideries feature farm animals, common fruit and vegetables, ordinary items like cups and bowls as well as local plants and animals. Birds, for example, are popular embroidery motifs and feature prominently in Afghan culture, where many people keep birds as pets in small cages. Flowers are also a favourite among the women as many tend opulent flower gardens that form colourful oases in the brown, ochre, yellow and green of the Afghan landscape (Goldenberg, 2009, p.42, 46-47).



Fig. 6. An example of Meshgans' embroidery which chronicles village life in Laghmani, Afghanistan.

In this sense, the women's gardening practices appear to echo Alice Walker's observations about her mother's flower garden, as discussed in Chapter Two, which provided a colourful and creative outlet amid the hardships of her everyday life and the limited material means available. The flower garden represents the women's refusal to be bogged down by the aftermath of war and conflict, as well as by the harsh conditions of the land which has likewise suffered from years of war and destruction.⁵⁴ In this context, it is interesting to note that *guldusi*, the colloquial Farsi term for embroidery, is a composite noun made up of the term *gul*, which means flower, and the word *dusi*, the more formal term for embroidery. According to the organisation, the women use the term *guldusi* to refer to all kinds of embroidery, but in particular to the ones they perform for the initiative. By now, more than fifteen years into the program, the Afghan women casually say that they have produced many *gul* over the years, referring to the individual squares they have embroidered, as if these small colourful creations were indeed like little flowers in a garden.

The embroidered motifs considered as representations of the quotidian and as objects produced within the realm in which these practices take place, 'invite viewers to imagine rhythms, sensations and experiences of other people's everyday lives' (Pink, 2012, p. 44). The domestic, as well as the objects associated with it, supposedly speak to women's universal experience of domesticity. The Guldusi competition, 'Out

⁵⁴ Occasionally, Guldusi receives embroidered squares that portray acts of violence, war or destruction. Goldenberg has questioned the women about the meaning of such works, but, as Goldenberg told me during our interview, the women are generally not very keen on engaging in conversation about the meaning of a piece beyond its literal representation. For example, when asked why, in the embroidery, the knife was taller than the man, the embroiderer just shrugged and claimed that there was no particular reason for this. Gabriele Franger-Huhle, a German sociologist who has published on war and textiles (2009), buys any Guldusi embroideries that appear to depict violence, war or destruction. To this date, Franger-Huhle (2018) has not yet published anything about these specific embroideries, but she plans to include them in a special exhibition soon.

of the Kitchen' (2013), for example, invited European needlewomen to collaboratively work on a textile piece with the Afghan embroiderers. For the first time, rather than producing embroidered squares for Europeans to buy, the Afghans were tasked with continuing a needlework project that had already been started by a European needlewoman. In a third step, the piece would then be returned to the original maker who would complete the work. According to Joelle Jan-Gagneux, who initiated the collaborative project alongside Goldenberg, it was important to ground the exchange in a concrete theme that all women could relate to, as opposed to focusing on complex interpretations of a potentially abstract topic (Guldusi, no date). As a result, kitchens and kitchen utensils were chosen due to their relevance to the daily life of both Afghan and European women. Jan-Gagneux hoped that this theme would 'allow each woman to express something personal or individual that was still universally accessible' (Jan-Gagneux and Goldenberg, 2014, n.p.).

However, the execution of the project proved difficult. Some of the Afghan women struggled to recognise and interpret the objects outlined by the European needlewomen. Consequently, Goldenberg attempted to tutor the Afghans in the process through a guided analysis of the original piece. She examined each submission together with the respective Afghan embroiderer exploring questions like:

What do you see on the surface? What is it used for? How is that done in Afghanistan? What kind of complementary development might be possible? So what should you embroider, and where on the cloth could you envision a particular embroidery the size of two standard embroidered squares? (Jan-Gagneux and Goldenberg, 2014, n.p.)

Looking at the different submissions, it can be noted that the Afghan women drew on their standard repertoire for embroideries, including some of the usual motifs and patterns like flowers, birds and ornamental filler designs. Others added female figures as well as some writing. In addition, many embroidered objects typically found in

Afghan village kitchens, such as cups, bowls, jugs, spoons, spatulas and different kinds of fire places including open wood fires or camping stoves, as well as a selection of different fruit and vegetables. However, the alignment of objects, at times, does not adhere to that of the initial layout suggested by the European needlewoman. Indeed, sometimes, it is exactly the opposite so that a teapot embroidered by an Afghan woman might be upside down compared to the one that had been originally placed on the cloth by the European maker. Barely any of the works appear to have considered depth and many of the objects in them appear to be floating in space.

Each step of the process was photographed, and the online art book that accompanies the final exhibition chronicles the three-step process. In 2015, the competition 'Gardens Around the World' repeated this three-step process, but this time the theme was, as the title suggests, gardens. In the total of seventy-seven juried submissions, eleven European countries were represented. Goldenberg sums up: 'The diverse perception of gardens and aesthetic attitudes of the Afghan embroiderers are reflected in the works of art. Whilst several of the women aimed to reach a uniform composition, the remainder in many cases portrayed a contrast' (2016a, n.p.). The results of both competitions, according to Goldenberg, represent some new developments in the women's embroidery that were 'satisfying in some instances, sometimes surprising, not to say puzzling' and representative of an apparent 'gulf' between the two cultures which in itself is part of the special character of the finished pieces (Goldenberg, 2016a, n.p.).

For example, in the previous chapter, I outlined how second-wave feminism worked to change representations of the home space from the epitome of women's happiness to one of oppression and drudgery. In the following analysis, I examine in more detail the everyday, particularly representations and practices connected to the everyday of the home space, as a contested realm representative of a continuous power struggle between what Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) theorised as the East and the West. In this cultural narrative, the so-called West represents itself as the centre, while placing the East and its inhabitants and culture on the periphery. Said's seminal work for postcolonial theory has been variously expanded and critiqued since its publication.⁵⁵ The most salient critiques in relation to feminist theory have questioned Said's relegation of gender and sexuality to mere sub-categories in the analysis of colonial discourses (Farris, 2017; de Groot, 2013; Yegenoglu, 1998). Meyda Yegenoglu contends that 'representation of sexual difference [...] is of fundamental importance in the formation of a colonial subject position' (1998, p. 2). Drawing on a vast archive of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century texts, Yegenoglu shows 'how the discursive constitution of Otherness is achieved simultaneously through sexual as well as cultural modes of differentiation' (1998: 2). In these discourses, the Orient is framed in relation to sensuous and feminised fantasies of 'the exotic' as well as 'gendered and sexualized depictions of dominance and subordination' (de Groot, 2013, p. 193). While, arguably, the dualism that Said sets up between East and West is problematic and prone to essentialising the Eastern as well as Western subjects and cultures, the legacy of practices of Orientalism, as I will show in more detail below, continues to inform the contemporary social, cultural and political

⁵⁵ For a detailed overview of the various strands of critique see the edited collection *Debating Orientalism* (Elmarsafy, Bernard and Attwell, 2013). For an in-depth discussion of the legacy of Said's work and the concept of Orientalism, see the recent edited collection *After Said* (Abu-Manneh, 2019).

imaginary of the Global North and South (Farris, 2019; Winant, 2019; Mulholland, 2018; Behdad, 2010; Ong, 1999). Indeed, these practices affect not only the way women in the Global South are represented in the Global North – for example in the media or in political rhetoric – but also mediate people’s affective attachments in relation to the self and others. Guldusi, like other aid and development initiatives (Dogra, 2012), is implicated within these discourses particularly with regards to its focus on cross-cultural exchange and collaboration. The act of bridge building or cultural encounter is not a simple or straightforward one, but embedded in global epistemic power struggles and problematic conceptualisations of feminist solidarity that become imbricated within Orientalist rhetorics and practices (de Jong, 2017).

As I have shown in the brief overview of theories of the everyday in the previous chapter, the majority of these theories have emerged from a primarily white male Western/European context, in particular within the tradition of French and German continental philosophers of the mid-twentieth century. Yet everyday life cannot be reduced to a common denominator ‘given the radical diversity and contingency of daily life at a planetary level’ (Procter, 2006, p. 65). Nonetheless, for centuries, the everyday has been caught in processes of normativisation. The civilising mission of the supposedly uncivilised and barbaric other was one of the cornerstones of the imperial project of the nineteenth century alongside economic and hegemonic interests of the European powers. In this context, a white Western European everyday was framed as the norm in opposition to the practices and representations of the everyday life the colonisers encountered abroad. The advent of postcolonial theory questioned the whiteness of these theories that operated within an Orientalist framework geared towards penetrating the most private spaces of the Oriental other (Yegenoglu, 1998; Spivak, 1988; Said, 1978). Rather than providing a space for cultural encounter that could lead to a dismantling of power structures, these encounters were ‘underpinned

by the [West's] reassuring fantasy of difference and distance that ritually reallocates the other to (or beyond) the margins' (Procter, 2006, p. 76). The lure of exoticism enabled the inclusion of exotic objects in the (colonial) European home, consequently, 'remov[ing] the everyday object (a digging implement, a cooking vessel, a novel) from the daily concerns of both "native" and Western mainstream culture' and attributing to it the status of the exotic that deserves specific attention (Procter, 2006, p. 76; Huggan, 2001, p. 22; McClintock, 1995).

Subsequently, decolonial theory developed as a critical mode to address postcolonial theory's inevitable links with moments of colonial encounter that posit a difference between coloniser and colonised. As a result, decoloniality 'refers to socio-political formations that are at least partly "outside the box" of colonialism or postcolonialism' (Winant, 2019, p. xiv). It attends to resistant practices in response to colonisation, but is also particularly interested in the ways alternative epistemologies and ontologies have been sustained and are actively being developed alongside new racial, ethnical and national formations. As such, decoloniality is committed to countering the legacy of nineteenth-century colonisation as well as ongoing acts of neocolonisation through a radical restructuring of society based on the abolition of the unequal colonial power structures at the heart of society's current make-up. Rather than thinking of the current moment as 'post'colonial, it perceives the world as in the midst of ongoing processes of decolonisation and neocolonisations. Of course, works that fit this remit have also emerged from within postcolonial theory and many postcolonial theorists subscribe to the ideals of decoloniality. The latter concept, however, explicitly embraces a radical politics committed to alternative knowledges and to imagining different ways of being and living together outside of Western models of the state and governance (Winant, 2019, p. iiv, xiv; Bacchetta, Maira and Winant, 2019, p. 14).

I contend that the Guldusi embroideries, to some extent, operate within an Orientalist discursive legacy marked by a fascination with 'the exotic'. Through the purchase of the squares and the integration of them in a craft piece, the exotic other can be consumed from the safe space of one's home. European needlewomen's use of the embroideries provides a space to fantasise about the life of the Afghan women and to muse about differences and commonalities. The everyday, the local and the home interact to secure a 'national imaginary as a taken-for-granted site' that resists contamination by the other, even when the other enters the homeland (Procter, 2006, p. 72; Ahmed, 2004). James Procter suggests that, often, postcolonial studies is less concerned with the mundane and the ordinary, but attends to the heightened intensities of the extraordinary conditions of 'the colonial encounter, war, catastrophe, independence struggles, migration' (2006, p. 62). Such an approach, however, may serve to establish postcoloniality as that which is always 'other', always outside of everyday routines and ordinary life, thus, replicating some of the very practices it critiques (Procter, 2006; Quayson, 2000). Further, this conceptualisation is problematic because it attempts to define the everyday based on a binary between the ordinary and extraordinary. Ultimately, this is a futile move, because it disregards the fact that what becomes defined as exceptional is already grounded in the mundane and ordinary.

Attention to specific aspects of the ordinary – for example a particular object in a living room – moves this object from the realm of the ordinary into that of the extraordinary by classifying it as worthy or as deserving of specific attention. As a result, the home space is a realm in which the struggle between the everyday and the exotic is regularly negotiated. For Paolo Boccagni, 'home as an experiential dimension of migrants' everyday life' (2016, p. xxiii) becomes the locus through which migrants – by means of various home-making practices – negotiate their identity in relation to

everyday normativity in their country of origin and their new place of residence. In his study of the 'West Indian' front room, Michael McMillan argues that the interior of this room and the practices associated with it 'symbolised working-class respectability' for West Indian migrants in Britain whereas, 'in the Caribbean, the front room reflected the performance of middle class values – that is, the colonial elite in the domestic interior' (2008, p. 44). As I have explicated in Chapter Two, the home space has also been identified as an important place of resistance for African-Americans against white supremacy. Thus, the home space is a principal site in which norms and structures of power are reproduced, contested and actively subverted.

Postcolonial theory itself is implicated in this struggle, as there seems to exist 'a more general anxiety about the passage of the postcolonial into the realm of the mundane, the clichéd, the everyday' (Procter, 2006, p. 62; Loomba, 2005). This is also reflected in the standardisation of postcolonial studies and decolonial theory within academia and the curriculum, to the extent that it may be performed in a formulaic manner rather than from a deep commitment to decolonising exclusive and discriminatory structures of knowledge and representation (Procter, 2006; Loomba, 2005). Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang note with concern that decolonizing discourses, especially in relation to indigenous peoples, have become appropriated within the academy as forms of 'civil and human-rights based social justice projects' that are not committed to changing what is ultimately an education and knowledge system based on settler colonial power structures (2012, p. 2). Instead, decolonial theory and its commitment to decolonising power structures have been appropriated as part of institutional box-ticking exercises that embrace challenges to 'racism, imperialist ideologies, and colonial violence' only in rhetoric and not as an attempt to fundamentally transform social, political, cultural and economic relations and, by extension, the quotidian as we know it (Dar and Rodriguez, 2018, para. 6). Thus, 'a

critical analysis of the everyday must be central', not only to ethical decolonising practices, but also to transnational feminist solidarity initiatives (Quayson, 2000 quoted. in Procter, 2006, p. 63). Only through such practices can it become possible to move away from the West and the Western subject as the central vantage point in relation to which everything else is constructed as the periphery.

Using the concept of transnationalism, anthropologist Aiwah Ong suggests attending to 'the condition of cultural interconnectedness and mobility across space' (Ong, 1999, p. 4; see also Pedwell, 2014, p. 22). Rather than looking at the world in terms of centre and periphery or through cardinal directions such as East/West or North/South, Ong attends to 'flows of capital, information, and populations' to map the 'cultural specificities of global processes' (1999, p. 5). In other words, she attends to everyday entanglements of meaning and practices that resemble 'a form of cultural politics embedded in specific power contexts' (Ong, 1999, p. 5). As such, practices of decolonisation ultimately operate within a transnational context because they recognise how oppressive structures and practices like Orientalism circulate and take different forms. In this context, representations of everyday life, as Pink argues, are not 'stopping points or crystallisations that become fixed and internal meanings' (2012, p. 33). Instead they are reflective of the global unequal flow of power, and conscious or unconscious affective investments in the structures it produces. Since representations have been actively constructed as part of these cultural politics, they are not permanent, but subject to change. For this reason, I have been attending to the ways representations of everyday life and practices of needlework are implicated in wider transnational flows of power in relation to race, gender, nationality and capital. In the context of cross-cultural needlework initiatives like Guldusi, representations of everyday life can serve as starting points for new orientations. While they are firmly grounded within global structures that, as I will outline in more detail in the next section,

privilege the accounts of European needlewomen, they are also the starting point for the possibility of encounter as craft practitioners in the West are moved towards considering the everyday life of women in Afghanistan. Using the example of British and Afghan shared practices of tea drinking, the next section analyses in more detail how representations of the everyday can instigate processes of solidarity and cultural encounter but also reproduce unequal power structures.

Narrative Power and Stitched Cultural Encounters

Testimonials from buyers of Guldusi embroidery indicate that European needlewomen are drawn to the Afghan embroidery not only because of its aesthetic qualities, but also by the context of its production. Uschi Brenner, a quilter from Germany reports: 'I love the concept [of incorporating the Afghan embroideries into my own works]. [...] It's doing good and having fun at the same time!' (Guldusi, no date). Liliana Musco Pepitone from Italy states: 'I was keen to learn more about Afghanistan, the initiative and the embroidery. I love to travel and getting to know different cultures and traditions' (Guldusi, no date). Sandra Germann-Struck from Germany reports that, due to her engagement with the embroidery, she became more attentive to news reports about Afghanistan. She claims that this is not due to an actual increase in reports about the country, but because she had developed a new sensitivity for news about Afghanistan because of a growing connection with its people: 'I feel that through the embroidery I am able to form a connection with an individual person; Afghanistan is no longer simply a country far away from me' (Guldusi, no date). Germann-Struck has become affectively oriented towards Afghanistan and its people through her own creative making practices.

Indeed, many of the works created by European needlewomen that are shared with Guldusi or submitted as part of competitions appear to embrace the initiative's

visions of the textile artefact as a dialogue between two cultures and as a connective medium between women. Many of the works clearly show that the maker has put some thought into the cultural context of the embroidery. With pieces that respond to a particular competition's theme, this may be due to the competition's guidelines and requirements. Yet this is surely not the case for every completed textile artefact. The engagement with Afghanistan and the socio-cultural context of the women embroiderers is fostered through Guldusi's repeated foregrounding of it. The website, which can be accessed in English, German, and French, provides detailed information about the initiative and the situation of the Afghan embroiderers. In regular travel reports available on the website, Goldenberg and her fellow volunteers recount their experiences of visiting the women in Afghanistan. Only by assuring that the buyer and exhibition visitor know about the background of the small embroideries, can the vision of creating a 'bridge' between two different cultures be realised. The resulting 'four-hands-projects' can then form another such 'bridge' in their own right. They invite the viewer at an exhibition, in the home, or at a local quilt group's 'show and tell', to likewise engage with the cultural context in which the piece was conceived.

In 2007, the EU-wide Guldusi competition 'Afghan Inspiration' assigned fourteen European countries a specific embroidered motif and asked for submissions that engaged with it. The motifs were carefully chosen with the intention that they would have symbolic meaning for each respective European country as well as for Afghanistan. The Netherlands, for example, were assigned tulips in recognition of the popular tulip fields that every year draw thousands of visitors to the country, but the plant is also native in Afghanistan and enjoys large popularity in domestic flower gardens. Austria was assigned mountains which grace the landscape of this central European country as well as that of Afghanistan. Latvia in Eastern Europe shares with Afghanistan the experience of long and bitter cold winters. The UK was assigned

teacups, teapots and other kinds of drinking vessels with a nod to shared British and Afghan traditions of tea drinking. In an extraordinary turnout compared to the other participating countries, Guldusi received seventy-seven submissions from the UK, which were showcased in Greenstede Gallery in Sussex that year. Twenty-six of these pieces were selected for the European tour of the competition results, which were shown in multiple countries across the EU.⁵⁶

Tea drinking has a long cultural history in Afghanistan and is part of common hospitality practices that are important in traditional Afghan customs (Coulson et al., 2014). These practices 'require' Afghans to serve tea to any guest whether known or unknown and day-to-day politics are also addressed and resolved over a cup of tea. However, with only a relatively small amount of arable land, tea growing in Afghanistan is difficult and tea leaves need to be imported. Due to Afghanistan's location along traditional Eastern trading routes, this has not been a problem. The tea leaves are usually mixed with spices like cardamom and cinnamon before being brewed. Today, due to the country's proximity to Pakistan, one of the world's largest importers of tea, tea is still a readily available good in Afghanistan. Similarly, tea is not a plant native to Britain and its consumption and status as a national beverage is deeply tied to the country's colonial legacy. Before the nineteenth century, tea had only been available to the rich and belonged to the 'world of upper-class feminine domesticity' in contrast to another imported beverage, coffee, which, in the eighteenth century, was strongly connected to male coffee-house sociability (Sharma, 2012, p. 243). Originally, tea had to be imported from China, which was not controlled by the British Empire. However, when in 1823, British explorers discovered wild tea plants in the Assam region in India, it was reasoned that since India was British, tea, in fact, was British as well. By the

⁵⁶ Each piece measures about 30 cm x 50 cm (12 in. x 20 in.)

nineteenth century, the popularity of tea had immensely increased throughout British society. As a commodity, it 'crossed ideological boundaries' (Fromer, 2008b, p. 537); it was consumed by people across genders and classes and had ascended to the status of British national beverage (Fromer, 2008a, 2008b). In addition, it enabled a large number of Britons to participate in the imperial project by literally consuming it (Fromer, 2008a, p. 59; Daly, 2011, p. 97). Throughout the empire, the British were united in the practice of tea drinking as it embodied 'idealized notions of English social practice such as social charm, personal grace, and lively but polite discourse' (Fromer, 2008b, p. 533). As such, tea played a significant role in the self-fashioning of a unified British Empire by uniting its scattered citizens under this emblem of English domesticity.

However, while tea provided comfort in the home space, it also 'simultaneously jeopardized the ideological safety of those spaces by bringing the public world of the marketplace and the empire into the private space of the parlor' (Fromer, 2008a, p. 27). As such, tea can be seen as emblematic of the necessary negotiation with the exotic that British subjects in the nineteenth century and beyond were confronted with as a result of the formation of the empire and its continuous expansion. Indeed, the introduction of the practice of tea drinking to colonial subjects of colour became a means to civilise the barbarous Other through exposure to the 'socializing properties of the tea table [which] were understood to have a salutary effect' (Daly, 2011, p. 92). This rhetoric, in the spirit of Orientalism, dismissed any already existing practices of tea consumption in the colonies as inferior. As such, while tea can be consumed as an individual activity it also stages a figurative as well as a potentially real encounter with foreign others.



Fig. 8. *Tea with Latifa* (2007) by Eva Cantin.

A number of the UK textile submissions for the competition pick up the idea of tea drinking as an encounter between two people and more specifically two cultures.⁵⁷ The piece by Eva Cantin, which includes a flower carpet with an embroidered square with a teapot in the upper centre of the piece, is titled *Tea with Latifa* (2007) after the name of the Afghan embroiderer (Fig. 8). Liz Ashurst's piece similarly features an embroidered square of a colourful teapot on a table against a background of different sections of green fabric embroidered with the contours of leaves. The work is called *Tea in the Forest* (2007) and, while it does not feature any human figures, the idea of an encounter at the tea table resonates clearly with the viewer. *Ways to Communicate – Voices on the Road* (2007) by Molly Bullick expresses this idea of tea as a medium for cultural encounter more directly through its title and the work features a teapot above a strip of possibly screen-printed fabric with Arab or Persian lettering on it (Fig. 9). Like Cantin's piece, Janet Clark's *Hobeda and Me* (2007) addresses an encounter

⁵⁷ A selection of these submissions can be viewed at: <https://www.guldusi.com/ausstellungen/afghanistan-inspiration/grosbritannien.html> (Accessed: 5 September 2018).

between two different needlewomen that symbolically happens through the joint creative process and the inclusion of Guldusi embroidery in the work of the British needlewoman. Indeed, Joelle Jan-Gagneux, the initiator of the 'Out of the Kitchen' competition, speaks of her Afghan needlework partner as a 'friend' without ever having met the woman or having had any other exchange with her other than the embroidery.



Fig. 9. *Ways to Communicate – Voices on the Road* (2007) by Molly Bullick.

It appears that in both countries the women can relate to the practice and can recognise a teapot, cup, or other type of drinking vessel as representative of it. Yet, the representation is not an unbiased one of a neutral shared practice. Like any other affective social practice, tea drinking is implicated in global and local trajectories of meaning-making. Practices of tea drinking and making are not simply about the performance of certain routine bodily practices that involve boiling the kettle and getting out the cups. They involve an affective component that may be linked to feelings of home and well-being, but also to pressures to conform with common norms of hospitality. Power plays an important role in these trajectories of meaning-making that

often appear to find comfort in commonality at the expense of recognising difference.

However, as Chandra Mohanty suggests:

in knowing differences and particularities, we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining. The challenge is to see how differences allow us to explain the connections and border crossings better and more accurately, how specifying difference allows us to theorize universal concerns more fully. (2003, p. 505)

As such, practices of transnational feminist solidarity should be committed to using differences and commonalities as starting points to redefine rather than reproduce existing discourses of inequality and injustice (see also Emejulu, 2018, 2011; Pedwell, 2014; Hemmings 2012). In fact, Ong asks for 'an open-minded transnational sisterly solidarity' based on principles of decolonial theory that 'acknowledge[s] the validity of diverse ethical regimes (of which feminist humanism is but one)' (2006, p. 52). Solidarity must neither be based on cultural relativism nor on the privileging of the knowledge and experiences of white women in the Global North as a result of ongoing colonial practices that marginalise women of colour and women in the Global South. Instead, solidarity should be based on a willingness to build supportive relations among women that redefine rather than reproduce existing power structures.

The cultural encounter that symbolically takes place in the finished textile works is not neutral nor is it happening on mutual ground. Grounded in ideas and practices of the everyday, the encounter emanates through the narrative power of the Western needlewomen and, to a certain extent, repeats a problematic history of encounters between East (as colonised) and West (as coloniser) without critical reflection. According to Joanna Liddle and Shirin Rai, 'the possession of greater power generally invests the knowledges of the more powerful with greater authority than those of the powerless, and this authority facilitates the creation of universalised images of both the powerful and the powerless' (1998, p. 497). Yet, as decolonial theorists argue, 'for all

its horrors and predations, empire and colonization were not total' (Bacchetta, Maira and Winant, 2019, p. 14). Indeed, one of the pillars of decoloniality is the recognition of the existence of 'forms of action and thought that ruling regimes cannot access' (Bacchetta, Maira and Winant, 2019, p. 15). These resistant practices, which I locate in practices of needlework, function as a creative micropolitics, attentive to 'context, subjectivity, and struggle', which orients people towards a different political imaginary. In addition, this creative micropolitics potentially prefigures a society organised according to different ethico-political guidelines. Consequently, an attention to the micropolitics of everyday life, through which meaning is produced, manifested, negotiated and subverted, benefits from a textured analysis that allows for a zooming in on the entangled processes of meaning-making on the level of affect and practice.

In the case of Guldusi, it is the European needlewomen who eventually place the embroideries within a wider cultural narrative. This thematic framework is naturally influenced by the Europeans' knowledge, perceptions and fantasies of Afghanistan and the Orient in general. Their own notions of the meaning of needlework to women's identity also play an important role in this framing. As a result, recurring themes portrayed in the textile works include: cultural encounters, dialogue and travel; the Oriental in a range of different contexts such as clothing, architecture or myths; women and practices of veiling; and women, identity, creativity and agency in relation to needlework. This knowledge and its accompanying fantasies, I contend, are marked by the European needlewomen's own socio-cultural and historic context which, in turn, is shaped by wider Western cultural history and the legacy of Orientalist representations about the West's encounter with the East. For this reason, while tea drinking is a common practice in the UK and Afghanistan, this commonality alone is not sufficient basis for fostering feminist solidarity. Likewise, attributing differences in the performance or the meaning of the practices to cultural particularity does not

sufficiently address people's intimate attachments to unequal structures that privilege the experience of some over those of others. While Said's theory of Orientalism certainly has its own problems, especially with regards to how it frames both the East and the West as monolithic entities, it is worth noting the extent to which Orientalism continues to shape the encounter between these two parts of the world (Makdisi, 2019, p. 182). In particular, the strong focus on veiling in the Four Hands Projects as well as in Goldenberg's own art practice, which I discuss in more detail in the next section, are influenced by the obsession with veiling among Western media and politics, which is shared by some feminists (Farris, 2019; Baker, 2013; Russo, 2006; Cloud, 2004). The following section explicates this through an analysis of representations of practices of veiling in various textile artefacts produced by Guldusi participants and their reception in the context of the US-led War on Terror and discourses about feminist solidarity and women's liberation in the US and Europe.

'Uncovering' the Texture of Afghan Women's Life

Alongside its history of war and occupation, Afghanistan has a long history with international aid and development initiatives. Particularly during the years preceding and directly following the US invasion of Afghanistan, international attention from so-called developed Western countries to humanitarian issues was high. Rhetorically, these discourses were gender-focused in nature with the 'liberation' and 'empowerment' of Afghan women as their main objective (Abirafeh, 2008, p. 5). Already in the mid-1990s the US-based Feminist Majority Foundation, in conjunction with other human rights organisations, started the 'Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan Campaign' with the aim of supporting women's rights in Afghanistan. The campaign drew public attention to the increased restrictions that women faced under the Taliban regime which denied women access to education, confined them to the

privacy of the home, and consequently banned them from participation in public life, while, at the same time, forcing them to wear a burqa when entering public spaces (Skaine, 2002).⁵⁸ The campaign was successful in drawing international public attention to the human rights violations taking place under the Taliban and the campaign was instrumental in the UN's decision to deny the Taliban regime formal international recognition (Abirafeh, 2008; Kensinger, 2003). Notably though, as Lina Abirafeh (2008) and Ann Russo (2006) show, the campaign's major occupation was with the Taliban's policy of the burqa. Afghan women's veiling practices were regarded as indicators for the general state of women's rights, with the implication being that veiling equalled oppression and a lack of women's agency (Ayotte and Husain, 2005; Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002, pp. 351-52; Abu-Lughod, 2002, p. 786). This rhetoric was championed by many Western feminists as an act of solidarity with oppressed Afghan women and entered mainstream media after the campaign – and an associated report of the situation of women in Afghanistan was featured on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* in the US (Kensinger, 2003).

Through their focus on the liberation of Afghan women and practices of veiling, the Feminist Majority Foundation's campaign provided a rhetorical model that would later serve the Bush administration in its justification of the invasion of Afghanistan (Russo, 2006). In his speech to Congress in which he officially declared war on Afghanistan in September 2001, President George W. Bush cited the fact that 'women are not allowed to attend school' (G. W. Bush, p. 67) as one example of the Taliban's unfitness for rule. Interestingly, in countries like Saudi Arabia, that are important economic partners of America, similarly repressive laws for women are also in place

⁵⁸ It should be noted that men's lives, under the Taliban, likewise became subject to severe restrictions and strict norms. Failure to adhere to these norms would also result in punishment (Abirafeh, 2008).

but do not seem to warrant sanctions from the US (Barakat and Wardell, 2002, p. 928). A month later, in her radio address to the nation, First Lady Laura Bush 'kicks off a world-wide effort to focus on the brutality against women and children by the al-Qaida terrorist network and the regime it supports in Afghanistan, the Taliban' (2001, para. 1). For the first time, the president's weekly radio address is delivered entirely by a first lady and this strategic move by the White House turned Laura Bush 'effectively [into] the voice of the U.S. government on the subject of women's oppression in Afghanistan' (Ayotte and Husain, 2005, p. 123). Because Laura Bush is speaking up for, as her husband puts it, 'Muslim women – women of *cover*' (G. W. Bush, 2001b, n.p., my italics), her discourse 'should be the discourse of every woman concerned about sexist oppression (and [of] every man interested in "saving" women in need of rescue)' (Ayotte and Husain, 2005, p. 123).

More or less every other sentence of Laura Bush's short radio address features the word 'women' and she lists a number of 'plights' and 'brutalities' that women in Afghanistan face, such as no access to health care and education, restrictions on movement, and corporeal punishment (L. Bush, 2001, paras. 1-2). And while many Afghan women are certainly suffering under these conditions, Laura Bush places them in an unqualified manner in direct relation to what Lila Abu-Lughod calls the hyphenated monster identity of the Taliban-and-the-terrorists: the evil other that seems to waver above the life of every Afghan woman (2002, p. 784). As a result, responsibility for the oppression of women in Afghanistan is placed solely at the feet of the terrorists, that is Al Quaida and the Taliban, conveniently ignoring US support for the Taliban prior to 9/11 (Ayotte and Husain, 2005, p. 124; Stabile and Kumar, 2005, p. 772).⁵⁹ Only once the situation of Afghan women 'proved rhetorically useful' (Stabile

⁵⁹ From as early as 1979, when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, the US government supplied funds to Afghan fighters, known as the mujahedeen. The mujahedeen, to whom

and Kumar, 2005, p. 771) in the US government's mission did they shift attention to the matter. American mainstream mass media quickly adopted this viewpoint and provided lip service to Bush's agenda through their portrayal of Afghan women (May, 2015; Abirafeh, 2008). In the UK, then-Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife joined Laura Bush in her effort to boost public support for the invasion of Afghanistan. In a rare public speech, Cherie Blair lamented the state of women's rights in Afghanistan, and like her American counterpart, took particular issue with the burqa (Chakrabarti, 2001; Ward, 2001). A focus on the veil as an indicator of women's liberation and acts of public unveiling as representative of the success of the US mission arguably characterise much of the media reporting on the war in Afghanistan (Abirafeh, 2008), and, consequently shapes the perceptions of Guldusi's European participants of Afghanistan and its citizens.⁶⁰

Little attention has been paid to the socio-cultural context of veiling practices (Abu-Lughod, 2002, pp. 785-786) and the garment became caught in a complex of 'larger confusion regarding the intersection between Afghan women, culture, and religion' (Abirafeh, 2008, p. 98; de Groot 2013).⁶¹ This type of confusion can be traced in multiple instances in which Western feminists made the liberation and empowerment of their so-called Third-World sisters their primary objective. Echoing Orientalist

President Ronald Reagan referred as 'freedom fighters' were supplied with monetary aid, weapons, and training in order to fight the US' proxy war with the Soviet Union (Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002, p. 342; Stabile and Kumar, 2005, p. 767-768; Russo, 2006, p. 567). The majority of US aid was, in fact, funnelled to some of the most extremist groups of those fighting the Soviets. For example, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's group received as much as 50 percent of US aid, though he was known for attacks with acid on women who refused to wear the veil. Overall, these US policies led to the 'marginalization of moderate and secular voices' and provided fundamentalist groups like the Taliban with a stepping stone to power (Hirschkind & Mahmood, 2002, p. 343).

⁶⁰ Instances in which Afghan women do unveil and in public are amply highlighted by the media. See Abirafeh (2008) for a discussion of some examples.

⁶¹ See de Groot (2013) for a review of the 'complex genealogy combining gendered European Orientalist imaginings, with equally gendered Middle Eastern nationalist, reformist and anti-colonial agendas, and postcolonial religious revivalisms and cultural nationalisms of recent decades' (p. 202).

narratives of the civilised West as the saviour of a barbaric and backwards East, these discourses in fact deny the women in question the agency that they are supposedly to gain through the support from Western feminists. Like the Orient itself, its women are fashioned as a homogenous whole (Mohanty, 1988, pp. 51-53). This reduction to one singular group is already apparent in terms such as 'Muslim women', 'Arab women', 'Oriental women' or 'Middle Eastern women' which uniformly give these women an 'identity that may not be theirs' (Lazreg, 2001, p. 283).⁶² These practices of naming carry a 'reductive tendency to present women as an instance of a religion, ethnicity or race' and, thus, show the same kind of 'unwarranted generality' that Orientalist discourses do about the Orient as a whole (Lazreg, 2001, p. 283). Religion, that is Islam, also plays a large role in Orientalist constructions of Middle Eastern women. Orientalism paints Islam as backwards and the determining factor on the lives and behaviour of its followers (Lazreg, 2001, p. 289; Said, 1978, pp. 56, 60-61).

As a result, Middle Eastern women are regularly depicted as helpless victims of an archaic systems that they are forced to obey; or, alternatively, as devout and submissive, but unreflective believers (Lazreg, 2001, pp. 289-290). The first version, in particular, places Islam at the core of a system in which 'uncivilized men systematically abrogate' women of their inalienable rights which every human being is awarded in the context of Western civilization (Cooke, 2002, p. 468). In her seminal work 'Under Western Eyes' (1988), Mohanty identifies in this the colonial move

⁶² Certainly, terms like 'Western feminists' are similarly reductive. However, I will continue to use terms like 'western feminists', 'European needlewomen' and 'Middle Eastern' or 'Third World' women to highlight how these identities have been constructed and shaped within Orientalist and imperial practices emanating from the hegemonic centres of the Global North. I will use the term 'Afghan women/needlewomen' when referring to the female citizens of Afghanistan. Mohanty (2003) provides an in-depth discussion of these types of naming practices and their reflection of global power structures. Like her I am not opposed to the use of generalising categories for analytic purposes as long as they are used with a critical awareness of the trajectories of the terms involved. Thus, 'Western' or 'Third World' feminist refers not to 'embodied, geographically or spatially defined categories [but] to political and analytic sites and methodologies used' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 502).

because she argues that this kind of representation 'ultimately robs [Middle Eastern women] of their historical and political agency' (p. 72), while simultaneously managing to present Western women as liberated and active agents. Mohanty exposes the complicity of Western feminism and scholarship in a colonial project that claims representative knowledge of the 'Third World' woman, both as a category, and, more specifically, about those women's situation and struggles. In these discursive constructions of 'Third World' women, Western feminist scholarship, however, conveniently ignores its own position within global capitalist structures of power. Sara Farris speaks of 'femonationalism' to describe the parallel phenomenon of the mobilization of women's issues and gender equality by both right-wing nationalists and visible feminists in order to frame Islam as a 'quintessentially misogynistic religion and culture' (2019, p. 4). Images of veiled women as symbols of oppression confirm Western women in their self-perception as liberated and emancipated women and, thus, are important foils to their identity (Farris 2019; de Groot 2013; Lazreg, 2001; Yegenoglu, 1998). Just as the concept of the barbaric East is important for the self-construction of a civilised West in general, so is the veiled Muslim woman for that of Western non-Muslim women.

Many postcolonial and decolonial feminist critics have thus argued that in the past Western feminism has actually been complicit in imperial and Orientalist endeavours (de Groot, 2013; Mohanty, 2013, 2003, 1988; Lazreg, 2001; Yegenoglu, 1998; Spivak, 1988). By equating veiling practices with oppression and backwardness, a thoroughly Western and non-Islamic interpretation of the practice is applied and Western forms of liberalism and agency are used as the benchmark against which the situation of Afghan women is evaluated (Russo, 2006, p. 564). Indeed, Western complicity in the situation of Afghan women is further erased as questions of dress style are deemed more injurious to women than the effects of the US war with its

myriad of civilian casualties and refugees, and its destruction of living quarters and agricultural resources (Russo, 2006, p. 569; Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002, p. 345). Rather than creating spaces in which Afghan women's voices can be heard, Western feminists present themselves as qualified spokeswomen of their Afghan sisters, and this has real consequences for the type of international aid that is provided to Afghanistan. As Huma Saeed (2015) and Abirafeh (2008) note, development initiatives that presented themselves as geared towards women's empowerment were much more likely to be approved for funding by, for example USAID, than projects that focused on men. This is not to say that the initiatives for women did not deserve to be funded, but this observation exposes an interesting association that appears to assume that within a deeply patriarchal culture it is the women that must act as arbiters of change. Simona Sharoni and Rabab Abduhadi identify this fixation on women as vanguards of change as a general problem across transnational feminism that is heightened at points of crisis when outside aid is needed in the Global South (2015, p. 654).

Guldusi similarly appears to use the burqa, or rather its increasing absence, as a symbol for progress. In 2006, in one of her travel reports, Goldenberg takes positive notice that at her Afghan hosts' home, there are no longer burqas hanging on a hook behind the front door. Women's embroidered self-portraits that show the subjects without any headcover are similarly interpreted as progress (n.p.). Certainly, these portraits may be representative of advancements in women's opportunities for creative self-expression outside of the restrictions the Taliban placed on arts and culture. However, using the embroideries as an indicator for wider social progress, seems a stretch, in particular because this raises the question about what is considered progress and about who gets to define what counts as transformation. Goldenberg's own artwork has developed as a result of her engagement with Afghanistan and its

women and she recognises a large 'discrepancy between her own situation as a Western European woman and that of the Afghan women' (Guldusi, no date). She describes Afghan women as 'not free' (the inverted commas are hers) because the women have no right of movement: they do not own a passport nor are they allowed to make their own decisions or to simply leave their compound as they please. In addition, she laments that the women have to be fully veiled in public and cannot decide whether they would like to send their children to school or not (Guldusi, no date). By contrast, Goldenberg describes herself as 'free' (again using inverted commas) (Guldusi, no date). As a symbol of these two different realities, Goldenberg's own artistic textile practice explores the veil as a central theme. She explains: 'As a symbolic carrier of this particular global issue, I have chosen the "thaderi", the full body cover of the Afghan country woman, as the theme for my artworks' (Guldusi, no date). For her, the burqa appears to be a convenient shorthand for the multiplicity of everyday problems and forms of oppression that Afghan women are exposed to. In this sense, the resulting textile artefacts, like many others created in response to Guldusi embroideries, at least partly, reflect the dominance of practices of veiling in discourses by the media and policymakers about Afghanistan and Middle Eastern women more broadly.

One of Goldenberg's art pieces is a textile book titled *The Afghan Woman* which includes a selection of articles about Afghan women that are primarily about the burqa. She has collected these articles over the years from different types of media, such as newspapers and books. The art book is fashioned as a concertina in which the front and back of a page are filled so that, due to this special folding technique, the viewer can endlessly flip back and forth between the various pages. According to Goldenberg, this design invokes the 'endless history of suffering caused by the tshaderi' (Guldusi, no date). The garment is fashioned as the root cause of Afghan women's suffering

even though, judging by her statement about her own art practice, Goldenberg appears to have some knowledge about the socio-cultural context of veiling practices in Afghanistan, since she defines the burqa as ‘the full body cover of the Afghan *country* woman’ (Guldusi, no date, my italics). In addition, in *Gardens Around the World* (2016), Goldenberg notes that the thaderi is commonly worn by elderly women and that many young girls no longer use it (n.p.). She implies that the burqa may have been worn prior to the Taliban regime thus breaking the discursive chain that repeatedly uses the burqa as a symbol of Taliban atrocities. Nonetheless, she also appears to contextualise the burqa as a symbol of a patriarchal Afghan society whose general ‘backwardness’ is mirrored in the treatment of its women. As a result, the West is once more fashioned as superior in its general treatment of women based on its lack of veiling practices.

A series of textile installations by Goldenberg titled *Disguised Views* similarly deals with the topic of veiling. In one section of the installation called *3 Women from Laghmani* three burqas from very light to bright blue are hung from the ceiling, suspending them as ghost-like figures directly above the floor. This installation is striking, given that one of Goldenberg’s main reasons for her first trip to Afghanistan was to get to know the women and she has, after more than ten years as the initiative’s manager, become very familiar with the embroiderers’ individual stories. At sale stalls at quilt shows, she often makes casual comments about the embroider as part of the sales transaction pointing out things like ‘this woman has been with the initiative from the very beginning’ or ‘she really struggled at first, but her work has improved so much’ (Goldenberg, 2017, Appendix 1). In this process, the women are framed as individuals with their own talents and stories. The empty shapes of cloth at the installation, however, reduce the women’s identities to the burqa in the manner common to Western discourses about Afghan women and practices of veiling. As part of an installation at a gallery in Leipzig, Germany, these figures are surrounded by painted

and photographed portraits of women in a hijab, a special type of veil that covers the hair, but leaves the woman's face fully exposed to the viewer. In the gallery space, the empty shapes of cloth form a stark contrast to the individual portraits that grace the walls. Given the current unstable political climate, the women are afraid of a potential backlash should they be publicly identified beyond their immediate community as women employed by a foreign organisation (Guldusi, no date). For this reason, the website features barely any pictures of the embroiderers that show the women's faces as the women have refused Guldusi permission to show their portraits online. They have, however, given permission for their portraits to be shown as part of exhibitions. In this sense, the exhibition functions as an exclusive act of unveiling during which the embroiderers' faces can be viewed for the length of the installation only. *Gardens Around the World* (2016) also includes an active act of unveiling. A photograph covering the full height of the page shows the embroiderer Shila with the burqa lifted and tossed over her head so that her face is visible (n.p.).

Through media, government and aid discourses as well as art pieces like the ones described above, the everyday life of Afghan women is inherently connected to a garment. The burqa, as a woven piece of material, is a tangible texture through which the encounter with the Afghan woman takes place. It is as if the Afghan's own perception of the quotidian, as well as others' perceptions of them are only possible through the fabric of this piece of cloth; it is an actual texture but also conceived as symbolic of the texture of Afghan women's everyday life. To this extent, the veil not only physically covers the women's bodies, and, at least somewhat, restricts their movement and vision, but also figuratively constrains them in their development and their right to claim their own identity as Afghan women, while, at the same time, locating agency within this category. Western feminism's 'deficit model of agency' (Emejulu, 2011, p. 383) categorises Afghan women as lacking in this capacity. As a result, rather

than making space for Afghan women to define their own experiences on their own terms, Western women configure themselves as the saviours of oppressed Afghan women (Sharoni and Abdulhadi, 2015, p. 663). Consequently, the act of solidarity, in fact, becomes one of protectionism (Russo, 2006, p. 573). In this sense, the European women's practices of needlework in response to the Guldusi embroidery become a means to negotiate their own positionality as well as their perceptions of the Middle Eastern woman. It can be a space for critically reflecting about one's own agency in contrast to the perceived lack of agency of the Afghan women – in the way that Goldenberg thinks of herself as 'free' and the Afghan women as 'not free'. However, it can also reproduce power dynamics that place European women's sense of agency and self at the heart of transnational feminist solidarity. Such forms of solidarity are obviously problematic because they take as their starting point the affective attachments of white women in the Global North to their particular sense of self and privileged positionality. This undercuts the possibility of developing new relationships and attachments grounded in the recognition of affective dissonance in women's experiences of their shared gendered identity.

UK artist Gillian Travis' wall hanging *Add this Square* (2015) echoes such problematic attempts at transnational feminist solidarity (Fig. 10). The pattern of an embroidered Guldusi square is repeated across the whole background of the piece. In the foreground, two brown women clothed in blue and white niqabs that cover their faces and torso, but leave a slit for the eyes, sit cross-legged next to each other, their heads bent over embroidery hoops, diligently stitching another square for Guldusi. Again, the veil as a symbol for the women's situation dominates the artwork, even though this piece once more decontextualises the practice of veiling. In fact, as Goldenberg explained during my interview with her, the women would normally not be covered while embroidering as they stitch in the privacy of their homes or compounds,

sometimes alone, sometimes in the company of other embroiderers. Yet the expressive power of the veil as a substitute for the women's lives and experiences seemingly overshadows, or literally veils, the political potential and agency immanent to the particular performance of practices of needlework and everyday practices more broadly. The following section outlines some of the different affective investments in practices of needlework by the Afghan and European women.



Fig. 10 *Add this Square* (no date) by Gillian Travis.

Shared Practices of Meaning-Making

Attention to the everyday is vital to transformative decolonising projects because of the deep ties between the local, of which the everyday is part, and the global, to which the former is intricately linked. Like Mohanty, I see potential in 'grounded, particularized analyses linked with larger, even global, economic and political frameworks' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 501; see also Cvetkovich, 2012, 2003, Stewart, 2007, Ong, 2006). In the context of Afghanistan and its women, this means recognising how their particular situation is implicated in wider global power structures deeply linked to capitalism and globalisation. As we have seen, Western feminist discourses about feminist solidarity and empowerment are similarly caught within these larger trajectories of capitalism. Likewise, development aid often functions within this framework, which influences the kind of aid provided and the values and discourses attached to its distribution. For example, projects focusing on financially empowering individuals and, as a result, making them active participants in the market economy, are grounded in the assumption that participation in capitalism can solve existing problems as opposed to recognizing this particular economic system and its unequal distribution of wealth as responsible for the problems in the first place (Abirafeh, 2018). Feminist cross-cultural work needs to be grounded in an awareness of these trajectories and how power travels along them in order to fully commit to transnational practices of feminist solidarity that 'move through the specific context to construct a real notion of the universal and of democratization rather than colonization' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 518). A relational approach to difference is not supportive of such projects of solidarity as through such discourse 'questions of power, agency, justice, and common criteria for critique and evaluation are silenced' (Mohanty, 2003, p. 520). Such an approach focuses on framing distinct practices as different only to the extent to which they appear particular to a specific cultural context, as opposed to attending to the embodied and

affective entanglements of these practices.⁶³ So instead of emphasising difference over commonality or the other way around, feminist solidarity should, according to Mohanty, be envisioned as ‘relations of mutuality, coresponsibility, and common interests’ that allow for ‘differences and commonalities [to] exist in relation and tension with each other in all contexts’ and at all times (2003, p. 521). With regards to practices of needlework this implies a recognition of the ways that embroidery, sewing or quilting are intertwined in particular entanglements between the local and global.

In the context of cross-cultural collaborative needlework initiatives like Guldusi, it is important to consider the meaning of practices of needlework and making in relation to discourses about women, identity, agency and empowerment. As such, it is also crucial to pay attention to the power dynamics at play in the creation of these discourses. Who tells the stories that serve to ‘authenticate’ theories about the meaning of practices of needlework for women (Hemmings, 2006, p. 117)? What and whose stories get marginalised and how is this marginalisation representative of wider power struggles, particularly within the context of transnational feminist solidarity? In a wall-hanging for the competition ‘Message’ organised by Guldusi in 2016, UK textile artist Gillian Travis included the following quote in its French translation: ‘Each stitch is a reaffirmation of identity, a setting down of the past. Embroidery gives us a sense of belonging, connects us to our land and gives us an identity’.⁶⁴ The wall hanging is titled *Letter to my Friends* and, while the quote originated in a Palestinian context, Travis explained to me during our interview that she believes that a similar argument can be

⁶³ See Pedwell (2010) for an in-depth discussion of such acts of cross-cultural comparison that, for example, link ‘African’ female genital cutting and ‘Western’ body modifications like cosmetic surgery.

⁶⁴ The guidelines for this specific competition stipulated that any text had to be in French as the successful submissions were to be on show primarily in galleries/exhibitions across France.

made for the Afghan embroiderers or indeed for needlewomen across the world. She notes: 'I have worked with different textile initiatives around the world, for example in India, Palestine and Guatemala. The statement [on this wall hanging] shows how important the work is to the women' (2017, Appendix 1). In this discourse, practices of needlework are closely linked to women's identity, agency, and sense of empowerment. A connection between the women and their respective cultures is established through the women's shared practice of embroidering and sewing as well as, perhaps, through their shared gender identity as women. Consequently, these discourses risk echoing the kind of problematic solidarity narratives produced by Western feminists which foreground a supposed unity based on 'shared womanhood' (Salem, 2018, p. 245), but often disregard the ways in which Western feminists reproduce the colonial power structures that marginalise women in the Global South.⁶⁵

Embroidery is strongly connected to identity as it provides a medium for women to engage with their personal past as well as the wider geographical and cultural histories in which they are located. Fiona Hackney suggests that many contemporary activist makers are 'historically savvy' and 'possess an awareness of an alternative history of domestic crafting' beyond stereotypic ideals of traditional femininity that enables them to be 'quietly active as they open up new channels of value and exchange by engaging in alternative craft economies and harnessing assets in often surprising, productive ways' (2013, p. 171). In addition, Hackney argues that the 'spaces of the amateur' form the realm in which the 'masculine system of capitalist culture' can be resisted because they allow for a different affective investment in practices of making (2013, p. 175). Following Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush (2011), she

⁶⁵ See Hemmings (2011) for a detailed overview of '*dominant narratives* that emerge in the telling of Western feminist stories of the recent past' (16, original emphasis). Hemmings traces a developmental narrative of progress that moves across claims of unity, diversity, and fragmentation.

locates potential in affect precisely because affect has historically been sidelined and dismissed as unimportant or ineffective in the context of overarching patriarchal and capitalist structures of governance.⁶⁶ Physically and affectively removed from traditional capitalist spaces of production, the amateur hobbyist is conceptualised as existing in a space of potentiality in which she can be affectively moved to imagine different ways of being.

In one of her travel reports, Goldenberg writes that she hopes that the regular practice of embroidering might serve the women as a 'kind of therapy' or 'meditation'. The time spent embroidering would give participants the opportunity to pass a couple of hours in creative engagement with different colours and designs as well as time to focus on themselves. While the women embroider, they might be able to forget, at least for a little while, their daily challenges and hardships. The feedback Guldusi receives from participants appears to support this idea. The embroiderers claim that they enjoy the activity very much. In addition, the Afghan women's works show a high 'potential of individuality' in the design and execution of their embroidery which is indicative of the creativity involved in the process of embroidery. In this context, women's self-portraits were explicitly encouraged by Guldusi (Goldenberg, 2016b). According to Parker:

the finding of form for thought ha[s] transformative impact on the sense of self [...] the experience of embroidering and the embroidery affirms the self as a being with agency, acceptability and potency [...] The embroiderer sees a positive reflection of herself in her work and, importantly, in the reception of her work by others. (2010, p. xx)

Guldusi has always placed high importance on supporting participants in developing their own individual embroidery styles. This includes going over the women's work and

⁶⁶ See Greco and Stenner (2008) for an overview of the development of scholarship on affect.

providing them with feedback on composition, stitch quality, and colour choice during Goldenberg's regular visits to the villages. Thus, emphasis was put on 'individualism and the assertion of creative authorship', which are important markers for art in the Global North (Dawkins, 2011, p. 269). In addition, it may have been seen as a generative way for boosting Afghan women's self-confidence in their ability to create, not only with needle and thread, but also in others areas of their lives.

Likewise, Guldusi attempts to foster a sense of achievement and accomplishment in the women by asking them to develop a personal signature with which to sign their embroidery, as well as by paying them wages for the completed squares. To the mainly illiterate women, this initially appeared to be a strange request since, for many, the concept of a signature, as an 'unmistakable way to be individually identifiable', was quite foreign (Goldenberg, 2016b, n.p.). This may also be due to traditional kinship structures, which define the individual primarily in relation to his or her wider relationship to the family, tribe and ethnic group (Emadi, 2005; Monsutti, 2004). Goldenberg observes that the majority of the women from Laghmani all seem to be related in some way or other and that it is common to marry within the extended family. Women from the same compound may embroider in each other's company but many also work in solitude. Guldusi offered literacy classes to the women and girls of the village alongside the request to develop an individual signature and, over time, many embroiderers have started to incorporate the written word into their works. For Goldenberg, the production of self-portraits as well as the inclusion of writing in the embroidery have been developments of 'revolutionary' character: 'It was as if a rift had been vaulted, as if the shadow of the Taliban had been forced back by a degree' (2009, p. 101). It appeared to her as if the women were no longer afraid to embroider anything they wanted to, after the abolition of the Taliban's policies which had, for many years, placed restrictions on the women in almost every area of daily life. It is therefore

possible that for the Afghan women the practice of embroidering, to a certain extent, has a similar effect on personal wellbeing as has been recorded in the case of women in developed countries in the Global North (Pöllänen, 2013, 2015; Burt and Atkinson, 2012).

Nonetheless, there is one essential difference between the meaning of practices of needlework for the Afghan women and the European supporters of Guldusi. For the Afghan women it is 'not a hobby', but a job (Goldenberg, 2006, n.p.). The women of Laghmani and Shahrak embroider because, considered by rural Afghan standards, they will be paid a substantial wage for their work.⁶⁷ By Western standards, the communities of Laghmani and Shahrak are both affected by extreme poverty. In the aftermath of the Taliban occupation and the ensuing war, the embroiderers' wages are a welcome and necessary addition to the subsistence farming of the village. Widows especially have often no other form of income or support, and outside of Kabul, employment opportunities for women are generally rare (Billaud, 2015). The women report that they have used the money to buy groceries and firewood or to pay for medical treatments. Some of the younger girls have spent it on new 'modern' clothing like a jeans jacket (Goldenberg, 2006, n.p.). While the women's wages are clearly used to supplement any additional, meagre family income, Goldenberg feels that it is generally the women who decide on how the money is spent. At the start of the initiative, there was a concern that men would not allow women to participate in the programme, would seize women's wages or would be upset about the fact that their wives were earning more money than them. These fears, however, have not been confirmed and many men appear happy about the additional income. Some have even

⁶⁷ In this sense their position is somewhat similar to that of the nineteenth-century professional needlewomen in the Global North for whom needlework was the only paid work available and whose families' survival often depended on their income (Tamboukou, 2016; Parker, 1984).

pressed Goldenberg to hire their wives after they had been rejected during trials (Goldenberg, 2006, n.p.).

The embroidery is an activity the women can practise from the confines of their home and compound and it is, therefore, a convenient form of work that is not very physically demanding. In addition, it can be worked around their numerous other daily duties that include food preparation, garden and farm work and looking after the home and children. Goldenberg has noticed that over the summer months the quality of the embroidery often deteriorates and the work seems rushed. The embroiderers are so busy looking after their fields and gardens at this time and preparing for the cold winter months, that they do not have sufficient free time to dedicate to the embroidery. Homemaking practices literally find their way into the embroidery squares in the form of uneven and large stitches or sloppily executed designs. As such, the textile comes to physically encapsulate the texture of the women's everyday life.

While generally the women claim to enjoy embroidering, Goldenberg reported during out interview that the women freely admit that they would not embroider if there were no financial gains involved. For the average Western needlewoman, on the other hand, needlework is often defined by its non-economic character. In this context, Marybeth Stalp argues, needlework functions not only as a form of care work for the self but also for the larger family, which is often the beneficiary of the finished textile artefacts (2007, p. 129). However, in recent decades and with the rise of online shop platforms such as Etsy or Bluprint (formerly Craftsy), many Western hobby sewers have, in fact, transformed their hobby into small business ventures (Luckman, 2013; Walker, 2007). Some of the participants in the Guldusi competitions are such entrepreneurs; they sell patterns or finished products and work as professional textile artists as well as tutors: for example, Gillian Travis from the UK, Judith Mundwiler from Switzerland or Elsbeth Nusser-Lampe from Germany. Consequently, the needlework

practices of these women are, to a certain extent, influenced by external factors such as competition deadlines, a perceived responsibility to online followers and, in some cases, certainly also financial needs. In addition, they may struggle to make time for their personal hobby alongside demands on their presence as carers and/or professionals (Luckman and Thomas, 2018; Luckman, 2013; Stalp, 2007).

The Afghans are required to deliver their completed squares in time for the quarterly collection. For each embroiderer, the number of squares she is commissioned to produce can vary from ten to one hundred squares. The pressure of time, or lack thereof, naturally also affects not only the execution of the embroidery, but also the initial design process. This became very obvious in the two projects already described in a previous section in which the Afghans had to engage with an initial design that was provided to them ('Out of the Kitchen' and 'Gardens around the World'). As I mentioned, despite detailed guidelines to align their embroidery with the work provided to them, many did not do so. Some did not even consider the orientation of the already embroidered motifs. 'It was only then that I realized the sharp contrast to the amount of time the European women had to engage with the project, to design and to become acquainted with the concept', explains Goldenberg, 'To the Afghans this must appear as a complete luxury' (2013, n.p.). After all, each European needlewoman participated in the scheme because she chose to do so, whereas for the Afghans it was a work assignment, which they had only six days to complete. Nonetheless, Goldenberg feels that the resulting textile artefacts form interesting examples of cross-cultural collaborative textile works in their own right. For her, they resemble the 'different realities and expectations that collide as two very distinct cultures meet' (Goldenberg, 2013, n.p.).

These expectations also clash in the reception of the completed Four Hands Projects – at least in Europe. Testimonials from Guldusi's website suggest a high

degree of awareness of the cultural background of the embroideries and interest in the Afghan women, on the part of the Europeans. For example, Sylvia Tischer from Germany says 'The project made me want to find out more about the country, its history and culture and the lives of its people, especially the women in Laghmani. By now I have an invested interest in them – they have become a part of my world and of our shared world' (Guldusi, no date). By contrast, as Goldenberg explained during our interview, the reaction of the Afghan women appears to be very different:

The Europeans are often disappointed when I say this, but experience shows that the Afghan women are neither very interested in what happens with their embroideries nor do they show much appreciation for the finished works. Their homes do not feature any wall decorations so perhaps they do not connect with many of the pieces from a decorative or artistic angle. But even if there are practical aspects to a piece, for example, a bag, they do not understand why someone would invest time and money into making something when its manufactured equivalent could be easily purchased. (2017, Appendix 1)

In other words, the envisioned act of cultural encounter and exchange appears to be primarily one-sided and to take place through the expressive narrative power of the European needlewomen. Both Afghan and European women speak of the enjoyable and meditative effect of practices of needlework. Yet these embodied experiences take place within very different contexts and thus do not reflect similar investments in the meaning of the practices, or indeed in the feelings attached to them. However, as I argue in the next section, drawing on David Gauntlett's concept of 'making is connecting' (2011), practices of needlework provide both the Afghan and the European needlewomen (albeit in diverse ways) with the opportunity to become oriented towards different ways of feeling and being.

The Potential to Connect

This chapter has highlighted the complexity of transnational feminist solidarity initiatives between women in the Global North and South. I have shown how practices of needlework and representations of everyday shared cultural practices like tea drinking, cooking or gardening are not a neutral foundation through which to mediate cultural encounters. Women's affective relations to these practices differ with regards to their personal positionalities, and reflect larger unequal power structures that privilege the experiences of women in the Global North. As a result, the extent to which shared practices and a shared gendered identity as needlewomen can function as a building block for transnational feminist solidarity is limited. Indeed, as I have shown, the encounter between the different women and their cultures, as well as the resulting textile artefacts regularly frames the Afghan women and their embroideries within contemporary Orientalist discourses. The cultural encounter is shaped within a discursive and affective framework that constructs the Afghan women (to some extent) as the Oriental other fixed within dominant cultural narratives about a backwards and oppressive Islam and its disenfranchised women in contrast to the supposedly empowered and autonomous women of the Global North.

For cultural studies scholar David Gauntlett, however, any act of making is always also an act of connecting. Not only are disparate pieces put together, but 'acts of creativity usually [also] involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with each other' (2011, p. 2). Such connections take place, for instance, as Goldenberg advises the Afghan women on their embroidery, or when European women purchase Guldusi embroidery from a national representative at a quilt show, or as hundreds of people view a selection of Four Hands Projects in a local gallery somewhere in Europe. On another level, Gauntlett proposes that making is connecting because 'through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and

connection with our social and physical environments' (2011, p. 2). As such, making generates encounters with materials, people, ideas and also affects. Through practices of needlework, the Afghan and European needlewomen are moved affectively and socially. The European women are gestured towards the experience of women from a different cultural context and, in many cases, become invested in a country, culture and a group of women to which they previously did not pay much attention. Guldusi invites and encourages European needlewomen to creatively engage with the history of the Afghan embroideries and the textured life of their makers. As such, the purchase of an embroidered square is not necessarily an act of mindless consumption, but can also resemble an act of participation grounded in beliefs about 'the social, communal, reciprocal, and identity-forming aspects of amateur making' (Hackney, 2013, p. 182).

The Afghan embroiderers develop new relations with themselves and others in their immediate community as a result of their new creative routine. As Gauntlett suggests, 'making and sharing is *already* a political act', because individual and collective creative practices provide a space for the negotiation and expression of the self in relation to others (2011, p. 233, original emphasis). As I have explained, this negotiation does not necessarily result in a shift in people's intimate attachments to unequal structures of power that privilege their experience over that of other. It does, however, put the possibility of this shift within reach. In this sense, cross-cultural needlework initiatives like Guldusi may orient people towards a transnational feminist solidarity: one not grounded in the presumed shared gendered experience of needlewomen, but rather in the recognition of the affective dissonance of this experience. Through the making and sharing of the embroidered squares and the Four Hands Projects, different individuals and cultures become connected within existing structures of knowledge and power. In this sense, Guldusi provides a space for political acts to take shape and place. A received awareness of power structures and their

workings, however, is indispensable. Only then can needlework practitioners and scholars engage productively with cross-cultural collaborative needlework projects as spaces for cultural encounter and as a means to foster solidarity and support between needlewomen from different cultural backgrounds. As a result, the status quo, which places certain cultural narratives over others, can be questioned and redefined.

Chapter Five: Craftivism, Fabriculture and Knitting together a Feminist Politics

A large glass case in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London protects a white milliner's bust, on which sits an average-size pink knitted hat with a wide cuff area followed by stockinette stitch with two pointed 'ears' on each side of its upper end. The catalogue identifies it as a 'Pussyhat worn at the Women's March in Washington on 21 January 2017' (V&A, no date). It entered the collection of the V&A only a couple of weeks after the Women's March as part of the museum's Rapid Response Collecting activities which aim to 'engage in a timely way with important events that shape, or are shaped by design, architecture and technology' (V&A, no date). The hat is further defined in the catalogue as 'a global symbol of female solidarity and the power of collective action' (V&A, no date). Yet, when on 21 January 2017, hundreds of thousands of protesters, the majority of whom were women, wore their fluffy pink hats at the Women's March in Washington, or at one of its satellite marches across the world, the hat and the initiative linked to it – the Pussyhat Project – had already been subject to a series of criticisms on social media, in the press, and in scholarly circles alike. Indeed, the coverage and discussion then and thereafter have been marked by a polarisation that has come to characterise the initiative and the Women's March as a whole.

This chapter explores the Pussyhat Project in relation to contemporary feminist craftivist practices and theories of critical making. In this context, the Pussyhat Project is of particular interest because it combines craftivism (the supposedly gentler form of activism) with traditional forms of direct political action, such as a protest march, as well as online and offline forms of social organising. Extending the analysis in the previous chapters, I use the concept of 'texture' as a lens through which to trace the different threads that have shaped the Pussyhat Project and its reception, while, at the

same time, paying attention to the entangled nature of these threads. Texture here encompasses the materialities of woollen or acrylic yarn, completed hats, and the needles and bodies involved in the making process, but also the moods, sensations and affective intimacies created through networked forms of making and activism. Textures can be rugged and cracked, but also smooth, glossy and polished. Thus, I attempt to move beyond binary conceptualisations of the Pussyhat Project as ‘good or bad activism’, or, indeed, as good or bad feminism (Zougarri, 2018). Instead, I interpret the Pussyhats, and by extension the Pussyhat Project, as a texture that makes visible the unevenness of the feminist struggle and those who labour on its behalf. The hats and the project form a texture against whose surface communal and individual bodies are shaped, not only in public, but also in intimate everyday spaces – while simultaneously permeating the boundaries of these supposedly distinct spheres. In other words, I reflect on the connection between the individual process of making a Pussyhat and the relational trajectories along which the finished hat travels – as part of marches and as the visual icon for the largest protest in US history to date. As a result, I flesh out how everyday textile practices facilitate extraordinary performances of direct action, but also private acts of (re)orientation.

Further, I consider how the Pussyhat Project may orient people towards what scholar-activist Chris Dixon calls ‘another politics’ that avoids polarising discourses and attempts to figure out ‘how to work in the space between our transformative aspirations and actually existing social realities’ (2014, p. 8). This framework aims to allow for meaningful critiques of the project to be used generatively towards the shaping of such a radical space. Drawing on the concepts of prefigurative politics and DIY citizenship, I show how the Pussyhat Project enables an orientation towards modes of feminist solidarity grounded in a recognition of affective dissonance, through which practices of resistance, models for social transformation and different futures may emerge. The act

of making a hat as well as the knitted object itself become active mediums through which to create meaning on the level of the individual, the communal, and their intersections, guided by hopes of social transformation and women's liberation. Extending key arguments developed throughout this thesis, my analysis also challenges dominant narratives of what constitutes activist practices and social transformation by attending to the relationship between individual (re)orientation and social transformation.



Fig. 11. Pussyhat in the collection of the V&A, London.

This chapter opens with some background information on the Pussyhat Project and an overview of the various critiques it sparked on issues such as transphobia, white privilege and effective protest. Next, I consider the Pussyhat Project as a texture in the transnational feminist struggle for liberation. Further, I analyse the initiative in

relation to popular definitions of craftivism that frame the latter as part of wider grassroots activist practices pursuing a prefigurative politics. These activist practices are committed to forms of resistance and direct action from which a more egalitarian and democratic society may evolve as part of the very process of taking action and 'doing politics' (Dixon, 2014, p. 7). I then examine some of the digital textures of the Pussyhat Project, reflecting on the relationship between digital technologies, feminism, activism and practices of needlework. Lastly, drawing on the concept of DIY citizenship, I demonstrate how the act of making and the hat itself can orient people differently by creating new affective avenues for meaning-making that may move people towards a different politics that questions and, at times, actively subverts, the status quo.

The Pussyhat Project: Knitting Anger, Discontent and Solidarity

The election of Donald Trump as 45th President of the United States of America in 2016 came as a great shock and disappointment to many of the Democratic support base in the US, and to leftists across the world. Feminists in particular feared the devastating effects his administration might have on women's rights and human rights, especially reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights and immigration legislation. These feelings of fear, frustration – and the need to somehow react – inspired Teresa Shook in Hawaii and Bob Bland in New York to suggest on Facebook a women's protest on the day after Trump's inauguration in January 2017. This immediately produced lots of positive responses online, and when the two women decided to team up, the foundations for what is now known as the Women's March on Washington with hundreds of satellite walks in other US cities and all over the world were laid (Tolentino, 2017; Nicolini and Hansen, 2018, p.1). The response to the event, which was to take place on the National Mall in Washington, DC the day after the inauguration, quickly

grew in popularity, with women and allies across the country organising bus tours and flights to the national march or to one of the sister marches. It is estimated that more than 2.5 million women marched across the world with between 400 000 to 500 000 marchers in Washington, DC alone (Przybyla and Schouten, 2017, n.p.). At the same time, many more who were unable to physically be present at a march for financial, health or scheduling reasons remained in solidarity with the marchers. Indeed, it was as a result of her inability to personally be at a march due to a debilitating injury, that around Thanksgiving of 2016, Jayna Zweiman, together with her friend Krista Suh, launched the Pussyhat Project to ‘provide people who cannot physically march on the National Mall a way to represent themselves and support women’s rights’ (Pussyhat Project, no date). They conceived the now-iconic pink hat with the two cat-like ears as a means to demonstrate solidarity with the marchers by making such a hat and gifting it to a marcher. That way, those unable to attend could still demonstrate a material presence at a march.

In addition, Suh and Zweiman were inspired by the wish to empower marchers through ‘a unique collective visual statement [...] which will help activists be better heard’ (Pussyhat Project, no date). Well aware of the power of images, and the speed at which they spread thanks to digital technologies, their vision was a ‘sea of pink hats’ at the National Mall and at the sister marches (Suh, 2018, p. 71). The fact that both were novice knitters but had managed to produce this basic hat in a short amount of time under the guidance of an experienced knit store owner, convinced them that others would be able to do so as well (Suh, 2018, p. 72). As a result, they partnered with the aforementioned local store owner in LA, and with an artist, to create accessible knitting, crochet and sewing instructions for the hat. They then began harnessing the internet and social media to publicise their initiative (Suh, 2018, p. 124). The project also ties in with the wider spirit of craftivism, which regards the time and effort invested

into making something as a sign of one's dedication to a particular cause. Suh explains: 'if it was too easy, people wouldn't feel that they were really doing something meaningful [...] Challenge will add meaning and purpose, which will inevitably draw people in, and those will ask others to be involved, and so on and so forth. And in this way, movements are born' (2018, p. 125). Indeed, the initiative soon became so popular that knit stores had trouble re-stocking on the bright pink colour that the pattern called for (Fielding, 2017). The day after the Women's March, Suh and Zweiman posted on the project's website that their goal had been achieved: 'we've created a sea of pink' (Pussyhat Project). This declaration was accompanied by an aerial shot that showed hundreds of marchers wearing pink hats.

The hat design itself addresses in various ways the concerns of the marchers and the reasons for the organisation of the protest. The Project's website states: 'the name Pussyhat was chosen in part as a protest against vulgar comments Donald Trump made about the freedom he felt to grab women's genitals, to de-stigmatize the word "pussy" and transform it into one of empowerment, and to highlight the design of the hat's "pussycat ears"' (Pussyhat Project, no date). The hat is a reference to the infamous Access Hollywood recording in which Trump said that as a celebrity he was at liberty to grope women without their consent. By calling the hat a Pussyhat – as a humorous gesture towards its design and the term pussycat – Suh and Zweiman also aimed to reclaim the term 'pussy' from its derogatory usage not only in relation to female genitalia but also with regards to 'the feminine' (Pussyhat Project, no date), a term that is still regularly associated with weakness, inadequacy and irrationality (Compton, 2017). Similarly, according to Suh, the colour pink was chosen precisely because of its connotations with femininity and how by extension it becomes 'a code for women' and, as such, 'is considered a little bit frivolous, girly, weak, soft, [and] effeminate' (quoted in Compton, 2017, n.p.). Wearing this hat as part of a women's

protest, for Suh and Zweiman resembles an act of reclamation in which ‘the symbolism is all about “pussy power”’ (quoted in Compton, 2017, n.p.).

Although the Project gained in popularity, Pussyhat collection points were arranged all over the country, as well as meeting points ahead of the start of the march, the initiative also received criticism from all sides of the political spectrum with regards to the design and name of the hat, as well as its general vision. The name and its association with female genitalia came under attack on social media and in the mainstream press for being transphobic by reducing women’s identity to female genitalia (Gentile, 2018; Richardson, 2018; Shamus, 2018; Boothroyd et al., 2017, p. 714; Compton, 2017; Derr, 2017). The name of the hat was seen as a recourse to biological essentialism, which premised women’s identity on their reproductive organs, thus excluding transwomen without a vagina from defining themselves as women (Derr, 2017). Conservatives, on the other hand, expressed outrage at the perceived vulgarity of the hat. A yarn shop owner in Tennessee, for example, refused to sell pink yarn to customers wanting to create a Pussyhat. Elizabeth Poe, the shop owner, justified her position in a Facebook post saying that ‘the vulgarity, vile and evilness of this movement is absolutely despicable. [...] As [...] a Christian, I have a duty to my customers and my community to promote values of mutual respect, love, compassion, understanding, and integrity. The women’s movement is counterproductive to unity of family, friends, community, and nation’ (quoted in Andrews, 2017, n.p.; see also Levenson, 2017). Later Poe reportedly told a newspaper that she is not against women’s movements in general, but against the methods of protest: ‘I’m not trying to throw stones at this movement. I’m just telling you we’ve lost our sense of social decency in this nation’ (quoted in Andrews, 2017, n.p.). As journalist Travis M. Andrews claims, Poe’s language and justifications are ‘reminiscent of that from other store

owners who adopted similar policies' – albeit on different issues – such as bakeries and wedding outfitters refusing to cater to same-sex ceremonies (2017, n.p.).

In addition, both conservative outrage about the supposed vulgarity and leftist critiques about biological essentialism tap into a long history of cultural discourse in which the vulva has symbolised the abject: that is, something which is to be feared and consequently, policed; namely women's sexuality. At the same time, however, the vulva and feminine genitalia more widely have also been turned into a symbol of empowerment in discourses of 'feminist reappropriation of the materiality of women's bodies' (Zougari, 2018, p. 1). Yet these discourses have also been critiqued for their similarity to those by advocates for biological essentialism (Gentile, 2018; Clarke, 2016; Jenkins, 2013). I suggest that the Pussyhat cleverly juxtaposes these positions against each other by placing that which supposedly makes women irrational and by extension inferior to men on the head, the body part commonly associated with reason and consequently superiority.⁶⁸ Thus there is a recognisable element of humour to the Pussyhats that explicitly appears to playfully question sexist discourses and should not be ignored in analyses. According to Majken Jul Sørensen, humorous political stunts actually rely on a certain 'incongruity' of their message 'that causes at least part of the audience to be amused' while others interpret it as offensive (2016, pp. 202-203). As a result, such stunts are also highly effective because, as with the Pussyhats, they manage to secure the attention of various groups that include political supporters, critics and those drawn in simply by taking offence or because they are enjoying a good laugh.

The pink colour of the hat has also come under attack for being white-centric and racist as it has been interpreted as suggestive of female genitalia as naturally pink

⁶⁸ With thanks to Vinita Joseph for bringing this connection to my attention.

which excludes women of colour.⁶⁹ This critique in particular resonates with more general criticisms of the Women's March and its agenda as primarily white and mainstream feminist – and thus lacking inclusivity and intersectionality (Brewer and Dundes, 2018; Bunyasi and Smith, 2018; Moss and Maddrell, 2017; Boothroyd et al., 2017). These points, voiced by organisers from Black Lives Matter among others, 'suggest concerns that white feminists lack motivation to prioritise issues that disproportionately affect Black communities' (Brewer and Dundes, 2018 p. 50). In this vein, Sierra Brewer and Lauren Dundes' work shows that a number of women of colour believe that 'the march provided white women with a means to protest the election rather than a way to address social injustice disproportionately affecting lower social classes and people of color' (2018, p. 49). Further, drawing on Lauren Berlant's work, one could say that the election of Trump – and the Women's March as a response to it – are examples of how 'the genre of crisis can distort something structural and ongoing into something that seems shocking and exceptional' when indeed it is part of everyday life for many (2011, p. 7). Misogyny and racism are certainly not new problems for the US, nor indeed for any of the other places where satellite marches took place. Yet the election of Trump – and the public social acceptability of hate speech that arguably accompanied it (in a manner similar to Brexit in the UK and right-wing populism across Europe) – was perceived as a huge shock and surprise by many white liberals in the West (Singh, 2016).

For many people of colour, on the other hand, the election was no surprise, nor indeed a sign of crisis, but rather confirmed the structural racism and white privilege that they experienced to various degrees throughout their lives. The peaceful atmosphere of the Women's Marches with no arrests nor any direct clashes with police

⁶⁹ Myzelev outlines that acts of the reclamation of the color pink as symbolic of the stereotypical feminine have been part of feminist art since the 1970s (2015, p. 69).

recorded can be viewed as a further manifestation of white privilege because for many white women the march appeared to be a 'fun' experience of protest and direct action. Their whiteness, and in many cases heteronormativity, enabled them to 'march freely', whereas Black Lives Matter protests which are primarily attended by Black people invariably encounter police in riot gear (Ramanathan, 2017). The marches also echo ongoing debates about participatory citizenship and who has access to the public sphere and, consequently, about who is heard politically (Ratto and Boler, 2014, p. 14). Yet, some critics also suggest that the Pussyhat Project and the 'fun' atmosphere of the marches diminish the radical political potential of the protest as its playfulness and connotations of cuteness, craft and homemade comfort 'undercut the message that the march is trying to send' (Dvorak, 2017, n.p.). Calling for 'grit, not gimmick' at the Women's March, Dvorak remains strangely vague about identifying this central message (2017, n.p.). Nonetheless, she appears convinced that having anything playful or fun at a women's protest would be detrimental to its effectiveness, thus echoing larger debates about strategic direct action and different activist tactics.

I contend that the Pussyhat Project and the Women's March faced particular scrutiny in this respect because they were women-led and made use of a stereotypically feminine practice, namely knitting. As such, critiques of the protest and the Pussyhat Project as too playful and, consequently, too feminine, resonate with a long cultural history in which femininity, women's work and activism as well as craft have been dismissed as irrelevant within a society in which patriarchy is the overarching structure (Perry, 2018).⁷⁰ In addition, some of the critiques echo positivist approaches to measuring the effectiveness of a protest or social movement in terms

⁷⁰ Scholarship in media analysis shows that during the period from 1986 to 2006 feminist activism and protest were repeatedly negatively framed by mainstream media and their actions were delegitimised (Nicolini and Hansen, 2018, p. 2).

of, for example, quantifiable changes (Dean, 2016; Kauffman, 2017). Such approaches are limited because they can lead to restricting social movements to a framework where success is measured according to standards put in place by the very system the movement is trying to change. In other words, if policy change is the ultimate measure of success, radical visions for a society founded on alternative forms of governance are side-lined from the outset. Within this framework, it is also difficult to conceptualise change outside linear narrative, which moves inexorably from action or protest to policy change, when, in fact, it is more often a non-linear process that includes various iterations. Claims about the necessity for movements to be united around a single issue are similarly part of a positivist approach to understanding social transformation (Petrick, 2017). From the very beginning, the Women's March was not a single-issue protest, but was marked by a multiplicity of concerns that made protesters take to the streets: ranging from reproductive rights, healthcare and police brutality, to outrage about Trump's sexist comments, and a disappointment about Hillary Clinton's election loss (Brewer and Dundes, 2018; Bunyasi and Smith, 2018; Moss and Maddrell, 2017). The organisers of the Pussyhat Project appear to have been aware of this diversity and indeed embraced it as a means to start conversation across different issues and to develop intersections between them. Knitters were given the opportunity to print a simple paper tag on which they could write about what inspired them to support the protest and talk about issues that are deeply important to them. This form could then be attached to the finished hat.

Many of these critiques were revived when the first anniversary of the Women's March approaches, with some organisers going as far as asking attendees to refrain from wearing a Pussyhat. In response, the project published a statement on its website in January 2018. In this post, 'inclusivity, compassion, creativity, personal connections, and open dialogue, all to further women's rights and human rights' are identified as the

founding principles of the project (Zweiman, 2018, n.p.). The statement then goes on to address the separate points of concern, reiterating the reasons for the project and the design, but also stressing the importance of these critiques. Subsequently, the critiques are embraced as an invaluable 'opening for discussion' (Zweiman, 2018, n.p.). In her role as co-founder of the Pussyhat Project, Zweiman states:

some have interpreted pink hats with cat ears as white women's vulvas. Not all women have pussies. Not all pussies are pink. Our intent was and always will be to support all women. We hear some of you saying that this symbol has made some women feel excluded. We hear you. We see you. (2018, n.p.)

As the critiques of the Pussyhat Project and the Women March show, such an open discussion is certainly needed because feminist solidarity between women cannot be taken for granted based on women's shared gender identity. Instead, as Akwugo Emejulu argues, feminist solidarity must be actively developed and practised 'through individual and collective action'. In addition, it 'requires tough conversations' about white women's complicity with racist and sexist structures that disproportionately marginalise women of colour, when white women themselves also experience oppression on account of their gender (2018, p. 272). Critically assessing one's complicity with patriarchy and white supremacy, and how these structures are often (and perhaps unintentionally) reproduced in liberation movements and initiatives like the Pussyhat Project, can be an uncomfortable experience for activists who consider themselves as anti-racists and ethical individuals. It requires personal reflection as well as an active commitment to unpicking the fundamental weave of North American and Western European societies with the intention to assemble it anew while being conscious of personal positionality and privilege. 'Tough conversations' push people towards an awareness of their personal privilege and the intricate ways their actions are embedded within larger social structures. This process of recognition, however, is rarely a pleasant one and will invariably require white people to challenge their own

behaviour and to leave their 'cocoon of racial comfort' (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 111). Being confronted with personal privilege and complicity can be an unsettling experience as it not only asks people to confront social structures, but also intimate attachments to institutions, feelings, relations, and systems that, at the very least, have provided a degree of comfort and stability to them. So rather than dismissing the Pussyhat Project as 'bad activism', it seems valuable to consider how it has acted as a catalyst to have these 'tough conversations' on social media as well as through the mainstream press.⁷¹

But what if, as Eleanor Wilkinson asks, 'we don't want to see change in our intimate life, what if it serves us well, keeps us comfortable, keeps us happy? How can we be the change that we *don't* want to see?' (2009, p. 42, original emphasis). I suggest that participation in the Pussyhat Project, particularly as the knitter of a hat, can provide an initial entryway into exploring one's own affective ties with structures that oppress others and oneself. While this participation may not result in measurable social change for the reasons outlined above, it can provide an opening for an engagement with the nature of these attachments. It is precisely because of our affective attachments with structures of power that reflection about our intimate connections may lead to a questioning of the status quo. In this context, Tal Fitzpatrick and Katve-Kaisa Konturri speak of a 'micropolitics' that encompasses 'focus and belief in the transformative power of brief political moments, slow repetitive processes, and subtle yet sensible relations' (2015, section 4). Following Deleuze and Guattari's work on micropolitics (1987), they locate the political in fleeting intimacies and momentary desires as well as lasting affective investments (see also Colebrook, 2002). Crafting can initiate such a micropolitics as in the case of the Pussyhat Project; it can gesture

⁷¹ This is, of course, not to disregard the long history of women of colour and other marginalised women making this claim over and over again. However, I suggest that the popularity of the Women's March and the Pussyhat Project provided the critiques with a uniquely public and mainstream platform.

people towards these brief political intimacies and towards the creation of new relationships without insisting on absolute unity. It can serve to create 'a greater extent of communality' because people who would not necessarily be sharing a space together are brought together (Fitzpatrick and Konturri, 2015, section 4). In addition, initiatives like the Pussyhat Project can make people more aware of their own positionality in relation to other bodies, and, more importantly, open themselves up towards these bodies 'and to feel how their relation to other bodies is both constitutive and indispensable' (Fitzpatrick and Konturri, 2015, section 3). As a result, the focus is moved from one that aims to eradicate differences to one that explores how it becomes possible to exist in this state of dissonance and to collectively organise for a more just future. In the spirit of a prefigurative politics, collective visions for the future free from domination thus become part of the tactics of the present moment (Swain, 2019; Yates, 2015).⁷² These tactics are grounded in affective relations.

The Pussyhat Project defines itself not as a context specific initiative that exists only in relation to the Women's March, but as 'an ongoing movement that uses design to create social change' (Zweiman, 2018, n.p.). Like the Women's March itself, the project is invested in fostering grassroots community activism through facilitating activist networks and encouraging more women to become community leaders and to run for political office (Pussyhat Project, n.d.). Indeed, with more women and people of colour elected into office in the 2018 US elections than ever before, one could in fact speculate about the positive effect of the movement (Bialik, 2019) without attributing sole causality for these election results to either initiative.

⁷² Prefigurative politics gained popularity in the 1980s in response to critiques of the centrist structures of the liberation movements of the 1960s. In order to achieve freedom from oppression, it was argued, movements had to stop reproducing hierarchical structures within their own organisations (Dixon, 2014).

Texturing Craft-Based Activist Practices

Contemporary knitting activists (and knitters in general) often find themselves in a position to define their activism against a long genealogy, or texture, of feminist protest as well as the wider history of textile crafts and femininity outlined in Chapter One (Clarke, 2016; Fields, 2014; Newmeyer, 2008). Indeed, there appears to be a need to repeatedly texture – that is, to make uneven – the representations of these genealogies and histories (Bryan-Wilson, 2017; Pentney, 2008). As Emanuelle Dirix suggests, it is important to note, amidst all the talk about histories of knitting and its so-called contemporary revival, that knitting, ‘in fact, never went away’ (2014, p. 92). According to Joanne Turney, ‘knitting is something that everyone is familiar with: it is everywhere’ (2009, p. 1). As a result, in its ubiquity, it allows for people to have different associations with the practice, the makers and the finished objects – from manufactured knitwear on display in department stores to knitted gifts for new-borns and so-called yarnbomb installations in urban spaces. What is in flux with regards to knitting are the representations of knitting and their currency in popular media outlets, as well as the audiences at which these representations are directed. For Turney, the ‘familiarity’ and ordinariness of knitting have all too often resulted in an inattention to the practice and its objects in scholarly as well as popular discourses (2009, p. 1). For example, as I mentioned in Chapter One, in case of the 1980s Women’s Peace Camp at Greenham Common in the UK, the visibility of women knitting in the camp and the fibre installations on the airbase fence were arguably part of the reason why officials and the public at first dismissed the protest as unimportant and ineffective (Titcombe, 2013; Harford, 1984).

However, this complex or textured nature of textile practice may also be what lends it efficacy as a potential tool of subversion (Robertson, 2011). As I have shown, binary and reductive definitions of needlework often regard it either as a traditional

manifestation of femininity or as expressions of feminist empowerment that echo post-feminist choice rhetoric. In order to avoid such problematic definitions, Beth Ann Pentney suggests to regard knitting and other needlework practices as 'part of a continuum model' (2008, para. 2). This model allows for a more nuanced reading that avoids hierarchical categorisations, while acknowledging that – in the same manner that neither women nor feminists are part of a homogenous group – neither are knitters (Turney, 2009, p. 3). Bryan-Wilson similarly conceptualises textile practices as a generative means to explore everyday life beyond binary categorisations of inside or outside, or, for example, of home versus public. Textile practices are imbued with cultural significance because they are part of human experience from the moment a baby is wrapped in a hospital blanket to the cloth that lines the inside of a casket (2017, p. 34). Yet, as I have already suggested, the positionality of the maker and the raced and classed histories along which she travels play a role in the way that her knitting practice is considered a politics. As one participant in a study about an activist campus knitting club at a large US university puts it: 'crafting is a luxury that many women cannot afford' (Springgay, Hatza and O'Donald, 2011, p. 60); it requires the excess of time to commit to a project and learn the skill as well as the financial means to purchase yarn. In sum, what resembles a form of feminist protest to some women is certainly not a universal recipe for global feminist activism.

Pentney asks if 'the fibre arts are a viable mode for political action' in the contemporary moment and examines the case of knitting in particular (2008, para. 1). She analyses the well-worn binary discourses surrounding the resurgence of knitting as well as that of other so-called women's crafts that frame them in the context of feminist acts of reclamation of 'women's work'. As a result, knitting is reframed 'in the spirit of feminist goals of empowerment, social justice, and women's community building' (2008, para. 1). This narrative, however, is often countered by claims that 'the

celebration of the domestic arts is neither politically effective nor feminist; rather, the resurgence in the popularity of knitting is merely an extension of a trend that supports individualistic, apolitical consumerism' (2008, para. 1). One of the most well-known propagators of the first argument is Debbie Stoller, knitter, author and co-founder of the third-wave feminist magazine *Bust*. Her popular *Stitch'n Bitch* (2010, 2006, 2003) series of knitting and crochet craft books targets the contemporary young woman – be she novice or advanced knitter – and features general instructions as well as accessible patterns 'for a new generation of knitters' (2003) and advice on how to start a stitch'n bitch knitting group. Thus, Stoller and her followers clearly distinguish themselves from a 'grandmother's kind of knitting', subverting traditional connotations of needlework and femininity while also embracing a new type of domesticity and homemaking that echoes post-feminist choice discourses (Fields, 2014; Kelly, 2013; Myzelev, 2009; Somerson, 2007). A cunning use of language and traditional symbols of femininity is typical for these contemporary discourses about knitting; they frame traditional women's crafts as well as other homemaking activities such as cooking and baking as fun and relaxing leisure activities that women choose to do as opposed to being expected to do according to traditional ideals of femininity. Consider for example one of Stoller's crochet books geared towards, as the cover states, 'the happy hooker' (2003), presenting crochet as a 'decadent and self-indulgent' practice that allows women to renegotiate questions of femininity as well as sexuality (Myzelev, 2009, p. 149).

Pentney's (2008) conceptualisation of knitting and textile crafts in general is useful in this context because not all knitters explicitly identify with any of the familiar categories noted above, for example, 'traditional housewife' versus 'hip postfeminist'. As Turney argues, 'knitting has a multiplicity of meanings, purposes and objectives' that are also reflected in who performs it, when, where, and why (2009, p. 3). In the

same manner that women are not a homogeneous group, neither are knitters. To allow for the consideration of these differences, Pentney proposes a horizontal 'continuum model [of] different feminist knitting practices' (para. 2). Although knitting practices may vary greatly in terms of their function, significance, and in relation to perceptions by individual practitioners across place and time, for Pentney they, nevertheless, are part of a 'feminist ethos' (2008, para. 2). Under the umbrella of this ethos, Pentney unites feminist reclamation acts with local community building and fundraising activities as well as forms of direct action including large-scale public political protests alongside community outreach and funding activities.

These groupings rely on Pentney's understanding of Amy Gray's work who conceptualises of feminism as 'a *practice* as well as a politics and a strong intellectual movement' (Gray, 1997, p. 9, original emphasis; Pentney, 2008, para. 3). Thinking of feminism as practice, allows for the negotiation of different intersectional feminisms beyond the, at times, rigid and potentially divisive categories of identity politics. As such, for Pentney, knitting is a feminist practice as long as it is grounded in an awareness of its gendered genealogy and 'is created within and for the goal of purposeful social change' (2008, para. 3). However, such an approach needs to be treated with care as it remains unclear how Pentney defines 'purposeful social change', given that not all proposed transformation is within the spirit of a feminist politics, nor does it necessarily reconfigure existing power structures (Bacchetta, Maira and Winant, 2019). I follow bell hooks in defining feminism as a 'movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression' in which intersectionality is not an option but a condition if oppression is to be abolished (hooks, 2000, p. viii; see also hooks, 1984). Pentney attempts to address this issue by specifically focusing her analysis on third-wave feminism, which she identifies as different to previous feminist waves and their fight against gender oppression. Third-wave feminism is depicted as a movement more

directly tuned in to intersectional issues, which are embedded in a 'critical (yet playful) engagement with capitalist consumption and media' (2008, para. 4).

Indeed, this relation to capitalism is important because as Cvetkovich argues, a DIY aesthetic is not necessarily an alternative to capitalism and market politics, but rather a different type of market politics (2012, p. 117). This is regularly overlooked in accounts that praise knitting's DIY aesthetic and the handmade and homemade over manufactured and purchased goods, ignoring the significant economy that has formed around these practices. However, others like Gauntlett (2011; 2018) would go as far as stating that the fact that people are indeed making something with their hands rather than purchasing a ready-made object has political implications in and of itself. To make, for example one's own clothing, food, or garden shed, as opposed to buying a finished product is regarded as a conscious rejection of existing structures that claim authority over how something (a dress, a loaf of bread, an outbuilding) should fit, taste or look. Knitting as a political practice is always somehow grounded in the specific textured structures of oppression in which it invariably takes place. The positionality of the maker and the raced and classed histories along which she travels play a role in the way that her knitting practice is considered a politics.

Shannon Black, therefore, asks for an acknowledgement of the full complexity of the Pussyhat Project as a textile-craft-based initiative that

encourages activism that is at once accessible and multi-scalar, functioning at the personal (i.e. making and/or wearing hats), community (i.e. the exchanging of hats [and, I would add, the making of hats together in groups]), national (i.e. wearing and making hats at the Women's March), and international (i.e. the making and wearing of Pussyhats at various marches throughout the world) levels, cultivating relationships and promoting participation in the spirit of political activism and change. (2017, p. 702)

Certainly, the impact of the networks created as a result of the project remains unknown and is difficult to determine. Yet it is useful to follow their trajectories and to consider instances of breakdown as well as of sustainability in the context of the complexity of a shared feminist politics of solidarity. To knit and wear a Pussyhat, to participate in a Women's March, and/or to be supportive of the initiative are tangible as well as intangible ways of joining the feminist struggle for liberation. The Pussyhat Project provides a texture – a tangible fibrous form – representative of the continuous struggle within feminist activism itself over questions of solidarity, intersectionality and liberation. Exploring the concept of craftivism as a form of resistance and advocacy more broadly, the following section outlines how craftivist practices like the Pussyhat Project may be part of a larger landscape of grassroots organising committed to a prefigurative politics (Dixon, 2014).⁷³ This type of political practice, as I will show in more detail in the following section, attempts to fashion a new social order by practicing a movement culture that actively prefigures the different ways of 'doing politics' it hopes to achieve on a larger scale.

Craftivism: Practice and Potential

Betsy Greer is widely credited with coining the term 'craftivism' and providing one of its first in-depth definitions in 2002, which was followed by her purchase of the domain name craftivism.com in the spring of 2003. The website soon grew in popularity with many people contacting Greer and sharing their own experience with craftivism – though that may not have called it that at the time. Greer explains: "Craftivism" gave people a quick way to explain what they were doing and a platform from which to

⁷³ Occupy and the UK group Sisters Uncut, along with some of the recent Greek and Spanish anti-capitalist movements are part of this landscape (Ishkanian & Saveedra, 2019; Dixon, 2014).

create' (2014, p. 8). The website provides a useful resource for anyone interested in the term, or looking for inspiration for potential projects, along with success stories and interviews with craftivists. In addition, it features a Craftivist Manifesto co-authored by Greer and twelve other craftivists. The manifesto opens by acknowledging the inclusivity of the term as it states that 'a craftivist is anyone who uses their craft to help the greater good' (Greer, no date). As such, the practice can be embraced by anyone no matter what their medium for making and on whatever scale: from random acts of kindness within your neighbourhood community to the presence of craftivist objects at large-scale public protests such as the Women's March on Washington.

The manifesto argues that 'craftivism is about raising consciousness, creating a better world stitch by stitch, and things made by hand, by a person' recognising that 'activism, whether through crafts or any other means is done by individuals, not machines' (Greer, no date). In addition, it asks craftivists to recognise their own practice as existing within a long historical tradition of activist makers, and to understand how craft has traditionally been dismissed as a 'benign, passive and (predominantly female) domestic past time' (Greer, no date). It suggests that through an active engagement with these stereotypes, for example by purposefully using pink yarn for the Pussyhats, craft is turned into 'a useful tool of peaceful, proactive and political protest' (Greer, no date). The manifesto, however, also asks that craftivists use their skill to 'share ideas with others in a way that is welcoming, not dividing', so that 'craftivism is a tool to instantly create a small part of the warmer, friendlier, and more colorful world we hope to see in the future' (Greer, no date). According to this perspective, craftivism as a practice resembles a prefigurative politics in which the means used for activism in the present moment mirror the desired social relations of the future (Ishkanian and Saavedra, 2019; Yates, 2015). In addition, this statement echoes popular discourses about textile crafts and comfort, yet, as I have suggested

throughout this thesis, it is vital to consider whose comfort is regarded as the baseline in this context. As I outlined in Chapter Two in relation to Chawne Kimber's work and the quilts from the Social Justice Sewing Academy, when the comfort – in the sense of an object that boosts well-being - explicitly addresses questions of white privilege and white supremacy, those benefiting from these systems in one way or another are often the ones to take offence because their comfortable sense of self is being openly disrupted and at times attacked.⁷⁴

Critiques of the Pussyhat Project engage with questions of comfort and division from two main directions. On the one hand, the Project has been dubbed inappropriate for political activism because of its playful nature and its associations with domestic craft and women's care work. On the other hand, it has had a divisive effect in terms of alienating women of colour and transwomen. Yet Greer also claims that 'the very essence of craftivism lies in creating something that gets people to ask questions; we invite others to join a conversation about the social and political intent of our creations' (2014, p. 8). In this sense, I argue that it is partly due to the heightened international visibility and popularity of the Pussyhat Project that the concerns of women of colour and transwomen, along with the wider histories of domination in which these concerns are embedded, have attracted widespread attention in the media and on social media. In addition, these conversations keep being revisited, along with a discussion of the perceived success and/or failure of the Pussyhat Project, the Women's March and the grassroots organising initiatives that have followed in their wake, especially as part of

⁷⁴ As I have argued in a blog post about relief quilts for Hurricane Katrina survivors, making a quilt for a Hurricane Katrina survivor from the safety and comfort of one's own home may serve as a means to demonstrate empathy and compassion without being moved to take any action beyond acknowledging that catastrophe has struck some, but luckily not others. As such, it becomes a way to affectively engage with the disaster, without acknowledging the deep structural inequalities that caused black Americans to be disproportionately affected by the storm and its aftermath (May, 2018a). For a detailed discussion of the relationship between empathy, compassion, and privilege see Pedwell (2014), Ahmed (2004), Berlant (2004).

the March's anniversary. Without the Pussyhats as a possible visual marker for white and cis-centrism within feminist movements these tendencies, which surely exist in certain factions of the movement, could perhaps not have been addressed and discussed so widely because critics previously lacked a tangible marker in which to ground their critiques, which relate not only to the Pussyhats but also to wider systemic and structural issues within feminism.

Sarah Corbett, who founded the activist social enterprise Craftivist Collective in 2009, is, alongside Greer, a central figure in the international craftivist movement. Her latest book *How to be a Craftivist: The Art of Gentle Protest* (2017) provides not only a guide for new and experienced craftivists on all aspects from sourcing materials, publicising projects and measuring impact, but also theorises the practice with, as the subtitle suggests, a focus on 'gentle protest'. A veteran activist and community organiser, Corbett found herself burnt out by traditional forms of protest such as marches, vigils or collecting signatures for petitions. She not only perceived the process as very draining, but also felt that along the way she and fellow activists were often alienating more people than they were recruiting as supporters, while also not effecting much change. By contrast, for her, craftivism provides a form of gentle protest through which one can 'alone or in a group - effectively protest against harmful structures, attract people to protest, and reflect on the way we want our world to be, challenging injustice and harm through values of love, kindness and humility' (2017, p. 30). She claims that 'approaching injustice with aggressive anger is unhelpful for our protest'. For this reason, Corbett suggests that 'compassion and empathy for all involved' (2017, p. 27), including victims and perpetrators is the first step to an activism that recognises everybody's humanity. The time invested in making a craft is a crucial aspect of this form of protest. It symbolises compassion and introduces an element of mindfulness into protest because of the calming and restorative effects associated with

craft practices. Further, the time investment should be seen as an important reminder to the often slow pace of change, which requires a long-term commitment as opposed to quick and rash, but showy, actions. According to an article in *The New Yorker*, Greer regrets the lack of recognition of the time commitment involved in the press coverage of the Pussyhat Project. For her, this is, in fact, a vital aspect of the initiative as it ‘may signify that we are ready to take action in a way we haven’t seen before’ (quoted in Walker, 2017, n. p.).⁷⁵ Given a tweet by Trump’s lawyer Michael Cohen which questioned whether the Pussyhats had been made in America this point appears especially important (Walker, 2017, n. p.).⁷⁶ Trumpists seemed quick to dismiss protesters’ efforts and credibility by drawing attention to the presumed ethical shortcomings of their actions, which were framed as evidence of the initiatives’ inability to live up to the same moral standards they demand from government and society.⁷⁷

In her *Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology* (2018) released as part of her practice-based PhD installation, Tal Fitzpatrick argues that craftivism as a method for protest is also about turning anger into something sustainable for personal well-being, which can also effectively promote social transformation. Yet Fitzpatrick acknowledges the legitimacy of anger in the face of social injustice and its importance for ‘galvanizing

⁷⁵ I am an intermediate-level knitter, and, based on my own attempt to make a Pussyhat using the pattern the project’s website provides, I would say it takes about three to five hours on average to knit a hat.

⁷⁶ The ‘Make America Great Again’ caps that became a symbol of Trump’s campaign were not made in America but, like so many other apparel items, produced in South East Asia. In addition, the company in California responsible for sewing together the caps employs mainly Latinx immigrants and has refused to release information about their workers’ wages (Anderson and Flanagan, 2018)

⁷⁷ Nonetheless, it is worth noting that these comments echo a larger issue with what scholars and activists call commodity or visibility feminism. Products like T-shirts with slogans promoting feminism that have been manufactured by women in sweatshops in the Global South raise questions about the kinds of feminist solidarity the distributors and wearers of these shirts envision (Daily, 2019; Banet-Weiser, 2012). According to Lisa A. Daily ‘commodity feminism and commodity activism serve as exceptional tools to enact a marketized version of the empowered and possessive individual’ (2019, p. 144) that echoes problematic neoliberal politics of individuation and agency.

and mobilizing large groups quickly' (2018, p. 2). In addition, she demonstrates an awareness of different forms of 'tone policing', which are historically directed specifically at women of colour. The Black Lives Matter movement, for example, has been criticised for its 'refusal to contain black rage', because this may lead to the alienation of white supporters as well as being counterproductive to eliciting white empathy (Hooker, 2017, p. 484). However, as Audre Lorde (1984) argued more than three decades ago, anger is crucial to conversations about racism because to recognise black women's anger is also to acknowledge the structural racism at the bottom of it. Indeed, for Lorde this anger is generative because it can be creatively transformed into practices that foster social change (1984, p. 128). Fitzpatrick suggests that this creative element can be provided through the process of crafting as well as the finished object (2018, p. 2). In this context, irony and humour and the incongruities they create are perceived as useful tools for effectively highlighting different viewpoints.

Not only do craft-based initiatives provide an opportunity to offer practical solutions to local problems, but they can also orient people differently in that they 'inspire that kind of love and generosity that gets people to open their hearts and change their minds' (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 2). As such, craft can potentially also be a useful method to highlight the difference between hatred and anger: both emotions that dominated during the run-up to the presidential election, and continue to do so under the Trump administration (Bell, 2019). For Lorde, hatred has only one objective: to be divisive and to cause death and destruction (1984, p. 129). Unlike anger it cannot serve any generative purpose. Indeed, hatred has been identified at the heart of much of Trump's immigration legislation including the forceful separation of children from their parents, or in the white-supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia (Bell, 2019). Anger, on the other hand, Lorde argues, 'is a grief of distortions between peers and its object

is change' (1984, p. 129). It resembles women of colour's sadness and frustration about white women's ignorance and refusal to recognise the links between racism and patriarchy, and the multiple forms of oppression that women of colour face because of this connection. Yet, grief, like anger, is linked to an investment in the possibility of change. In this sense, black women's critiques of the Pussyhat Project and the Women's March should be understood as commitment to liberation and not as an attempt to derail the movement.

Craft initiatives like the Pussyhat Project can create a texture on which this anger and grief can leave an imprint and function as a tool through which to eventually transform the fibres of individual and collective politics. As art historian and critic Julia Bryan-Wilson suggests 'to textile politics is to give *texture to politics*, to refuse easy binaries, to acknowledge complications: textured as in uneven, but also [...] as in tangibly worked and retaining some of the grain of that labor, whether smooth or snagged' (2017, p. 7, original emphasis). Indeed, the repeated process of making and the circulation of the finished object can become an instance of sticking with this anger and grief. It provides an opportunity to dwell in emotions that have generally been framed as negative and in need of being overcome or mastered (Cvetkovich, 2012). Rather than simply supplying the opportunity to work through an issue, or to move beyond an impasse, the performance of practices of needlework makes it possible to *be with* discomfort. As such, it can be productive for a transformative politics that questions linear narratives of progress and change rooted within the structures at the heart of oppression and social injustice; namely patriarchy and white supremacy.

Politics, according to Fitzpatrick, is 'a process of opening-out issues to conflict, disagreement, and alternative framing of socio-political relations' (2018, p. 16). While much of craftivism may be overly concerned with consensus and conviviality (Fitzpatrick and Kontturi, 2015), craftivism can also be a powerful tool to open

discussion and provide space for dissensus within an anti-racist feminist politics that recognises personal privilege, and values the lived experience of others. In a way, the Pussyhat Project gives texture to the continuous struggle of solidarity within anti-racist feminist movements. It has provided a platform, or rather a texture, against which critiques that have historically been marginalised within the feminist movement have become part of the mainstream.⁷⁸

Digital Textures and Platforms for Creativity

The digital has come to play a vital role in contemporary activism and social organising. From the Arab Spring to Occupy and Black Lives Matter, digital technologies have helped bring people together, arrange protests or spread the word about a particular cause. In addition, through hashtags like #metoo or #FergusonFriday, they have enabled participatory digital archives that highlight the pervasiveness of sexism and racism in society (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2019; Pedwell, 2019; Gerbaudo, 2012). Fitzpatrick explicitly includes the digital in her detailed definition of craftivism as a 'uniquely 21st Century practice [that] involves the combination of craft techniques with elements of social and/or digital engagement' (2018, p. 3). In this sense, her definition reflects how the digital is not only part of the texture of activism and craftivism, but of craft practices as a whole. Jack Bratich and Heidi Brush (2011) conceptualise textile crafts' deep intersection with the digital under the term 'fabriculture'.⁷⁹ The term acknowledges the multiple ways in which the digital is used to share patterns and inspiration, purchase materials, network with other makers and display one's own

⁷⁸ Though this is not to ignore the danger that such critiques may become mainstream and by extension potentially meaningless (Banet-Weiser 2018).

⁷⁹ Subsequent scholarship has simply used the term fabriculture as an umbrella term for capturing textile practices of making without specific attention to the digital. When I speak of fabriculture, however, I'm purposefully drawing on its original association with the digital.

creations. However, fabriculture is also attuned to the ways the digital shapes the gendered spaces in which needlework is usually produced, including women's groups as well as the domestic environment, and how these spheres, in turn, are shaped by the capitalist craft industry. Thus, fabriculture is concerned with the entanglements of practices of needlework in relation to broader 'meaning-making, communicative, [and] community-building' activities (2011, p. 234).

Networked technologies have not only enabled new forms of connections and sociality among makers, but, as Kate Orton-Johnson shows, 'have given users new ways to think about and engage with their creativity that, in turn, have become an *embedded part* of their construction and enjoyment of leisure practice' (2014b, p. 305). The nature of the material practice of making something with your hands also changes in this context as 'the material, tactile processes of knitting are integrated with digital practices of livestreaming', for example through recorded tutorials and work-in-progress shots that are shared on platforms like Instagram and Flickr (Orton-Johnson 2014b, p. 305). These digital practices, in turn, have an effect on the kind of meaning-making that results from the performance of needlework as the process of making accumulates meaning beyond individual notions of dwelling and relaxation. Through capturing and sharing the process of knitting a Pussyhat, sewing a dress, or stitching a quilt across different types of digital media, the possibility for new entanglements and orientations for the self and others is entered. Chawne Kimber's blogging, instagramming and tweeting practices outlined in Chapter Two illustrate this. The work-in-progress shots that she shares are intended as ways to nudge, or 'poke', others towards dwelling in states of blockage or potential as part of everyday performances of the practice. Kimber, as I have outlined in Chapter Two, hopes that her followers will take these work-in-progress shots and her comments about the project as a starting point for reflection about their own positionality and privilege in relation to race, gender,

class and sexuality. Thus, social media and other digital practices are not merely a supplementary element to the performance of needlework. They are a significant part of doing needlework and contribute to the experience and meaning of the practice. Many Stitch'n Bitch or other types of needlework groups started out as leisure-activity gatherings without a clear political agenda, but a significant number of groups transitioned into activism through the Pussyhat Project. As that initiative spread on social media and through the press, more and more knitting circles participated in making Pussyhats, and for many knitters their involvement culminated in their attendance at a Women's March. In this context, the digital was as much an enabler for activism as was the actual knitting.

According to David Gauntlett, the internet has enabled knitters and other crafters 'to collectively develop a firm and positive sense of shared meaning, and mission, which was probably more difficult to establish when craft activity was more fragmented and isolated' (2011, p. 6). The supportive feedback that the online community provides to the maker is extremely important, particularly since the internet and social media, in other areas, are marked by trolling and a reduced inhibition to give rude or offensive commentary (Gauntlett, 2011). Jessica Bain's (2016) research into home dress-making communities on Instagram, for example, shows that these spaces developed with the clear goal of practising kindness and body positivity, forms of communal conduct that the women felt were lacking in other spaces. Likewise, for many taking up knitting as a new hobby "'becoming" a knitter occurs through and with the digital' as written and visual tutorials from blogs, YouTube channels and personal and commercial websites are used as resources for learning (Orton-Johnson, 2014b, p. 312). Meaning is therefore also created through the shared experience of practicing the same hobby (Orton-Johnson, 2014b, p.313). However, it is important to note that engagement between practitioners online, as in offline knitting circles, regularly moves

beyond the topic of knitting as they share personal stories and family pictures, and discuss day-to-day world happenings – and ultimately also politics (Bratich and Brush, 2011, p. 241).⁸⁰ For David Gauntlett (2018, 2011), combining one’s individual crafting practice with social media activity of all kinds is decisively political because it allows for new personal connections to be made and networks to be forged. In this sense, sharing information about the Pussyhat Project and one’s participation online is not only about spreading the word in order to secure a large turnout at a march, but also about entering into new relationships with others.

In this context, Paolo Gerbaudo speaks of the important ‘choreographing’ function of digital technologies – and in particular social media – to social movements as they provide a ‘means not simply to convey abstract opinions, but also to give a shape to the way in which people come together and act together’ (2012, p. 4). Choreographing collective action is about more than simply getting a large number of people to show up at a specific place at a certain time. While social media surely played an important role in moving protest from the virtual to the town squares of Cairo, Egypt during the Arab spring and the streets of Ferguson, Missouri after the shooting of Michael Brown, it alone does not hold the power to create social movements. Instead social media need to be used in collaboration with face-to-face communication and interaction between participants (Gerbaudo, 2012, p. 75). The popularity of the Pussyhat Project certainly grew through social media, and because the pattern and tutorials were available online. However, direct contact between women as part of

⁸⁰ Some groups and online networks explicitly ask members to refrain from talking about politics or other contentious topics such as abortion in the interest of keeping conversations focused about crafts. This ‘exclusion’ of politics is seen as a way of creating a kind, depoliticised and non-confrontational space in which everyone is supposed to feel encouraged, supported and comfortable, but, at the same time, serves to reproduce and protect white privilege. The new policy by the knitting platform Ravelry that I discussed in the introduction is unique in that it prohibits all expressions of support for the Trump administration (Lytvynenko, 2019; Romano, 2019).

knitting groups was probably equally as important. Participants came together in face-to-face knitting groups to knit alongside those who knitted alone from home but also connected online.⁸¹ More so, it was through the combination of the online and the physical community of knitters and marchers that a space could take shape in which to organise not only the logistics of the Pussyhat Project and the Women's Marches, but to consider the very politics of these initiatives and their longevity. Fabriculture, in this context, involves the stories knitters share online and offline about personal experiences of sexism and discrimination, their concerns about the Trump presidency, but also their visions for mundane and extraordinary acts of resistance. As such, fabriculture not only choreographs collective action, but also resistant attitudes that can move people towards joining a march or knitting a hat for a protester.

The Pussyhat Project further capitalised on this virtual community through its Pussyhat Global Virtual March initiative to mark International Women's Day on 8 March 2017. The initiative asked people to 'Put on your pussyhat, make a sign about where you are and what you are for and take a picture. Upload to social media using #pussyhatglobal' (Pussyhat Project, no date). People without social media were provided with an email address to which to send their images, which would then be shared on social media by the Pussyhat Project team. On the same part of their website where the Global Virtual March is announced, the Project also offers links to translations of the original hat pattern in multiple languages while encouraging site visitors to provide translations in languages not yet included. In addition, the website

⁸¹ Concepts of use versus exchange value are blurred as part of these practices. Social media outlets like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are corporate businesses that run adverts and collect surplus data about their users, who are very valuable financially to these platforms (Gauntlett, 2018; 2011). In addition, yarn shops can only sustain themselves as businesses if they have a paying customer base. However, given that most yarn shops are small independent businesses run by women, supporting these businesses through purchasing yarn and other supplies like needles can be conceptualised as an act of feminist solidarity in the sense of a lifestyle politics (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). It is a conscious act of supporting small local businesses, as opposed to ordering supplies online from large retailers like Amazon.

also provides a list of yarn stores across the world, who are allies to the project. As allies, these stores are committed to supporting those interested in making a hat as well as hosting Pussyhat-making sessions for groups and serving as a drop-off point for those keen on donating hats to marchers. In addition, allies allow customers who want to support the project but do not want to knit hats themselves to purchase yarn from them and to have it made into a hat by volunteers. Further, the Pussyhat Project's website shares information about any Pussyhat-making gatherings that individuals around the world are organizing, thus serving as a virtual as well as a real-life community-building platform. These aspects of community building in relation to all kinds of making (physical or digital) are rewarding to makers, who typically value the recognition and support from a community of like-minded creators. In this context, online-to-offline functions as a continuum 'connecting the digital realm and the physical everyday world' (Gauntlett, 2018, p. 307). Relationships and affective attachments developed in one arena carry-over to the others and vice versa.

For Gauntlett, 'any and all kind of events, spaces, environments, tools, or toys' that encourage and foster people's engagement with creativity and creative practices in any way can be conceptualised as platforms for creativity (2018, p. 231). I suggest that the Pussyhat Project can be understood as such a platform for creativity, and by extension for social transformation – for creatively imagining a different kind of world. Platforms for creativity can connect people and provide ways for shared meaning-making and fostering understanding of others. Consequently, over the course of time they may also be conducive for fostering 'social change, community resilience, and sustainability' (Gauntlett, 2018, p. 318). Inviting people to knit or crochet a pink hat with two cat ears is in itself a rather banal idea, yet, it becomes elevated through the existence of a purposefully built platform for creativity to support the creation of a hat and chronicle the afterlife of the finished object. By doing so, the Pussyhat Project also

actively contributes to practices of social transformation. People are encouraged to participate in the politics of this transformation by sharing their concerns and ideas on the personalised labels that get attached to the hats. The makers become engaged with both 'minds and bodies', which may 'help people to recognize that they can make and shape their own worlds' (Gauntlett, 2018, p. 233). In addition, platforms for creativity ideally include the opportunity to exchange creative gifts among participants (Gauntlett, 2018, p. 307). The Pussyhat Project supports such an economy of gift-giving, as it was initially founded around the idea of offering those unable to march with a way to demonstrate solidarity with the movement precisely through the act of gifting a Pussyhat to a marcher. As a result, the Pussyhat Project, considered as a platform for creativity, refigures problematic twentieth-century models of leisure time as forms of passive consumption into an opportunity for creative connections and exchange between people. By extension, people become more attuned to those around them and their needs (Gauntlett, 2011, p. 237).

In the same way that crafters use the internet to connect with like-minded spirits, feminists have come to embrace it as a useful tool for advocacy and consciousness-raising. Carrie Rentschler and Samantha Thrift speak of 'feminist activist techné' when referring to 'the technical practices and practical knowledge feminists come to embody as they do feminism with media' (2015a, p. 240). This 'doing' of feminism is also an embodied practice. It makes use of the internet as a platform for creativity, and equally utilises the medium's capacity to connect feminists to each other (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller 2019; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015a;). 'Doing' feminism then also implies the 'making and sharing [of] feminism' as well as, I suggest, active participation in the shaping and reshaping of the meaning of the term; doing feminism is an active form of meaning-making (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015a, p. 331). In these processes of meaning-making and doing feminism or politics, craft can be a very useful tool because

it 'fastens the concrete and the abstract into a material symbol' (Bratich and Brush, 2011, p. 246). Yet more useful, it allows for an embodied outlet to work through 'the concrete and the abstract' as part of the process of making a craft item like a Pussyhat. Making, whether physical, 'digital or digitally mediated' then encompasses not only the transformation of the material but also of 'the sense of self' (Ratto and Boler, 2014, p. 1; Gauntlett, 2011, p. 244). The various opportunities for exchange of material gifts, but also of moods and knowledge, as people discuss their reasons for participating and make plans for future actions like voter canvassing can sharpen people's perception of themselves and in relation to others. The individual experience of being a young, old, black, white or trans woman in the contemporary United States is textured as a result of the participation in networked creative projects of resistance like the Pussyhat Project. Instead of smoothing over these experiences, they become part of resistant fabricatures committed to redefining the status quo. For this reason, the final section of this chapter explores how critical making practices like the Pussyhat Project can also be conceptualised as a kind of DIY citizenship, which challenges normative understanding of citizenship that are deeply embedded in the political apparatuses these practices critique.

Critical Making and DIY Citizenship

According to Matt Ratto and Megan Boler (2014), critical making provides the maker with the opportunity to be attuned to a variety of entanglements between human bodies, different types of materials such as wood, metal or synthetic fibres, and affect. They argue that

critical making invites reflection on the relationship of the maker to the thing produced, reflection on how elements (whether nuts and bolts, bits and bytes, or breath, blood, flesh, brain, and neurons) work together – in short,

consideration and awareness of the mediated and direct experiences of interacting with the material world. (p. 3)

The Pussyhat Project provides such an environment for critical making. In this case, these interactions with the material world apply to the act of using needle and yarn to make a hat, either in the privacy of the home, or in a public setting like a café or a yarnshop, but also to the act of using digital technologies as part of the process. Consideration of the maker's as well as the wearer's positionality invites the maker to reflect on their relationship with the object they are creating through multiple avenues. What symbolism does the hat hold for the maker? Is it a symbol of empowerment or indeed of sadness and political depression? Is it reflective of how little meaningful progress has been achieved with regards to a particular issue for which an individual may have been actively campaigning for the last fifty years? The wearer might simply appreciate being provided with warming headwear for a protest march in cold weather or be deeply affected by the personal story of sexual abuse that the maker has shared on the hat's tag. In addition, the act of making as well as the handling or seeing of a knitted or crocheted hat might invite people to think about how needlework and craft more generally are deeply entangled with contested histories of women's work, gender, race, class and activism.

As such the making and wearing of a Pussyhat invites 'individuals and communities [to] participate in shaping, changing, and reconstructing selves, worlds, and environments in creative ways' (Ratto and Boler, 2014, p. 5). Affect plays an important role in these processes of individual and communal reshaping and structuring because attention to it allows the tracing of 'mediated and direct experiences of interacting with the material world' that take place as a result of critical making (3). The material world, in this context, refers not only to tangible physical objects, but also to the textured structures that continuously affect our everyday being

in the world, as we respond to the impressions they leave on us and that cause our 'bodily surfaces [to] take shape' while, at the same time, creating affective ruts on these textured surfaces (Ahmed, 2004, p. 25; see also Zouggari, 2018; Wetherell, 2012). As such, 'affect theory is not only a theory of encounters between subjects' or 'of encounters with texts' (Grattan, 2017, p. 26), but, I suggest, is also a theory of textures. These textures are already a tangled meshwork of the material and immaterial, both of which make up the affective practices of everyday life. The Pussyhat makes visible a variety of these textures: histories of exclusion and discrimination as expressed by the critiques from women of colour and transwomen, but also histories of empowerment, consciousness-raising and reclamation of women's voices. The Pussyhat Project allows for a consideration of 'making as a 'critical' activity' because it provides people with the opportunity to take part in a questioning and restructuring of the status quo. However, it also provides a means of reflecting on the unequal flows of power that make up this status quo and on how these inequalities are manifested and reproduced by 'infrastructures, institutions, communities and practices' precisely because of the critiques it has raised (Ratto and Boler, 2014, p. 1).⁸² As a result, the potential for feminist solidarity based on the recognition of difference rather than on the insistence of reconciling this difference becomes part of a concrete political imaginary.

Drawing on the work of political philosopher Jacques Rancière, Ratto and Boler use the term DIY citizenship to talk about a mode of being and making through which this concrete political imaginary can emerge. They define DIY citizenship 'as a hybrid of art and politics' that can challenge supposedly fixed structures of inequality which attempt to suppress calls for transformations (2014, p. 15). As such, the term allows

⁸² Though of course, the kinds of critiques that emerged in response to the Pussyhat Project have continuously been raised by feminists since the inception of first-wave feminism. Yet, they are often not paid much attention because they have been raised by marginalised women (e.g. transwomen, women of colour).

for a variety of ways that citizenship can be practised because it 'sits at a the intersection of a series of tensions: between consumers and citizens, between experts and novices, between the individuals and communities, and between politics as performed by governments and politics and DIY grassroots democracy': all tensions which, as I have shown, can be identified in craftivist practices in general, and more specifically, in discourses about practices of needlework (Ratto and Boler, 2014, pp. 3, 5). Ratto and Boler also apply the term DIY citizenship as an act of reclamation of the loaded term 'citizenship' in its traditional understanding, which conceives of citizen participation in terms of state-regulated activities like voting or advocating for policy changes (2014, p. 7). DIY citizenship, however, allows for a much broader understanding of what constitutes citizen participation and practices of world-making: ranging from the setting up of community gardens, to hackers exposing a company's unruly activities, to individuals knitting tiny blankets for their local NICU, to thousands of people across the world making Pussyhats for themselves and/or others. As such, DIY citizenship also allows for an analysis of these and other practices outside of the binary of good versus bad activism. Instead, it makes it possible to ask and trace what motivates individuals and communities to become involved in creatively questioning the status quo as well as actively working towards reshaping existing structures of inequality. In this sense, DIY citizenship not only refigures common understandings of citizenship, but also perceptions of the everyday: of what is normal and appropriate. It draws attention to normative everyday practices that essentially reproduce patriarchy and by extension white supremacy as society's overarching structures because it may move people to reflect on why making something (a hat, a book shelf, a free online platform for exchanging gardening and home DIY tools) challenges common patterns of consumption and reproduction (Ratto and Boler 2014, p. 5; see also Portwood-Stacer, 2013).

In her craftivist manifesto and methodology handbook, Fitzpatrick similarly links craftivism to citizen participation because it enables individuals and communities to, at the very least, slightly alter the texture of the status quo through hands-on affective practices of meaning-making that serve to reorient the individual (2018, p. 6). I conceptualise this initial moment of reorientation using Erin Manning's notion of the 'minor gesture'. She argues that 'the minor gesture is the force that makes the lines tremble that compose the everyday, the lines, both structural and fragmentary, that articulate how else experience can come to expression' (2016, p. 7). While this little 'tremble' is certainly a long way from the revolution and a total makeover of society, I contend that it gestures towards it: it prefigures the vigorous rocking and shaking that is yet to come. More so, as a platform for creativity that connects people, the Pussyhat Project through its long-term commitment to the development of grassroots organising communities also provides a space in which the revolution can be imagined. Making something with the hands moves people physically and affectively because 'they break new ground materially and internally' (Gauntlett, 2018, p. 24). As such, it can orient individual and collectives towards modes of being that actively engage in creative practices to reshape the world they live in (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 6). The repetition intrinsic to practices of needlework, or, in the case of knitting, the repetition of knit and purl, is key in that it not only moves the maker once but over the duration of the whole project, thus allowing for the formation of affective ruts in Wetherell's sense or, to use Sara Ahmed's terminology, for the formation of a sticky relationship between physical and affective gestures. This is not necessarily a smooth process, as, drawing on knitting imagery, stitches can be dropped, knots can form, and knitting can unravel. As such, affective social practices of meaning-making can provide 'a mode of social engagement attuned to *inhabiting the present* in all its ambivalence and complexity' (Pedwell, 2016, p. 3, my emphasis). They become a way of being with the ambiguity

and multiplicity of the status quo in order to become able to develop strategies for resistance in the midst of uncertainty and anxiety about the incoming Trump government, climate change, or widening inequality. In this sense, creative practices of making like knitting are generative because they make dwelling in potentiality possible, as well as gesturing towards the texture of these new kinds of worlds.

Following Clare Hemmings, it is in these modes of dwelling that I also locate the potential in initiatives like the Pussyhat Project for forms of 'affective solidarity' to emerge as a baseline for a 'sustainable feminist politics of transformation' (2012, p. 147). This type of feminist solidarity differs from other notions in that it does not assume solidarity on the basis of commonality of shared experience and affect. Instead it looks to 'affective dissonance' as the starting point (148). This ties in with Fitzpatrick's (2018) call of using craftivism as a way to make space for respectful dissensus as opposed to an oppressive focus on consensus and conviviality that often further manifests the comfort of the privileged. While dissensus may be openly experienced and expressed, Hemmings' affective dissonance appears to operate more on the level of gesture in that it is often fleeting and its impact can be neither managed nor predicted (Hemmings, 2012, p. 157). Like practices of needlework, or indeed everyday practices more broadly, it is not subversive or rebellious by default, yet, it can gesture towards feminist politicisation or more resistant modes of being. Participants in the Women's March as well as the Pussyhat Project can be perceived to have acted – marched, knitted, or both – 'from experiences of discomfort' about the incoming Trump administration, police brutality, pervasive sexism, or reproductive rights (Hemmings, 2012, p.158). This shared experience of discomfort does not imply that all marchers shared similar concerns and certainly not in the same order of importance. Further, it does not lay the foundation based on which the differences between the individuals involved can be overcome nor does it aim to do so.

However, both the March and the Pussyhat Project can provide a texture through which it becomes possible to engage with the affective forces of the current political moment in relation to the rhythms of everyday life (Pedwell, 2016, p. 3). As Stephanie Springgay, Nikki Hatza and Sarah O'Donald demonstrate, essentialist understandings of activism and activists assume that recognisable activist actions, such as participating in a demonstration or starting a petition, are the consequence of an individual's prior self-identification as an activist and as a conscious opponent to the current systems (2011, p. 407). Yet such an approach ignores the possibility of being turned into an activist through cultural production – that is, critical making – as well as through the experience of affective dissonance. While neither participation in critical making nor the experience of affective dissonance are a guarantee for turning people activist (Springgay, Hatza and O'Donald, 2011, p. 407), they operate as part of a micropolitics that gestures people towards another politics. This politics is not defined by traditional categories such as party lines or religious beliefs. Instead people are united in a 'political tendency' committed to ending 'all forms of domination, exploitation and oppression' while acknowledging that the means to do so are varied and need to be actively created as part of the ongoing struggle to adapt to the changing political and social landscape we live in (Dixon, 2014, p. 6; see also Pedwell, 2019, p. 132).⁸³ This allows for an understanding of social transformation not as a project of conversion of the subject, but as an ongoing process of adjusting complex object/subject/affect-assemblages that have formed in response to the unequal flow of power (Pedwell, 2016, p. 16; Pedwell, 2019, p. 135). Once more, it is not about leaving difference behind or indeed about overcoming it, but about acknowledging the existence of

⁸³ This consciously echoes bell hooks' definition of feminism as a 'movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression' (2000, 1984). Dixon (2014) lists the feminist movement and particularly women of colour's contribution as foundational to the development of current movements like Occupy and Black Lives Matter which are committed to a prefigurative politics.

difference – and by extension that of affective dissonance – as the starting point for a shared feminist politics of solidarity.

A micropolitics, for Fitzpatrick and Kontturi, is concerned with the potential of fleeting moments of resistance, slow repetitive processes, and profound affective relationships (2015, section 4). Thus, they locate the ‘political efficacy’ of craftivist projects like the Pussyhats in their ability to bring together diverse people and groups around practices of making that allow them to become oriented differently and to engage in acts of direct action together. The possibility of the experience of affective dissonance, I argue, is part of this efficacy, as it may allow for an orientation towards diverse modes of resistance based on different experiences of discomfort. As such, gestures of feminist solidarity can move away from problematic expressions of solidarity ‘based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels’ that may ultimately reinforce existing power structures (Hemmings, 2012, p. 158). The micropolitical on the level of everyday affects, practices, orientations and gestures may prefigure larger systemic structural changes. Yet it offers no guarantee to bring about such changes, nor is it prescriptive with regards to what they may look like; rather, it is a way of becoming acquainted with and dwelling in the possibility of change.

The Pussyhat in the V&A’s collection mentioned at the beginning of this chapter was, in fact, knitted by the Pussyhat Project’s co-founder Jayna Zweiman, and was worn at the original march in Washington, DC. Yet this fluffy pink hat has long since gained symbolic relevance beyond the specific context of the first Women’s March on Washington and the Pussyhat Project. My analysis has attempted to move beyond the hats’ iconic status as, according to the V&A, ‘a global symbol of female solidarity and the power of collective action’ (V&A, no date). Instead, I have considered the Pussyhat Project as a texture in the struggle for feminist solidarity in the women’s liberation movement of the Global North, particularly in the context of North America and Europe.

This texture is an entanglement of the material, social, digital and affective. It includes the physical Pussyhats and the directions of travel they take as they are made, worn, preserved in a museum, stuffed in drawers or treasured as a personal keepsake from the Women's March. It is also made up of the affective ties that formed online and offline between feminists across the world in response to the project – as well as the ties that got ruptured because of it. I have used the term texture not only to draw attention to the above-outlined entanglements, but also to highlight how attention to the social, material and affective allows for a *texturing* of the feminist struggle for solidarity. Rather than focusing on the polarising discourse that was sparked in response to the Pussyhat Project and the Women's March in general, a focus on texture can bring to the fore the entangled nature of different discourses and different forms of the struggle for women's liberation, which, while painfully ordinary for many feminists of colour and transwomen, have been systematically absent in mainstream feminist circles.

In sum, while taking into account the valuable critiques that have been developed in response to the Pussyhat Project, this chapter has refrained from judging the success of the project in relation to whether it has advanced measurable real-time political change. Instead, drawing on theories of DIY citizenship and affective dissonance, I have fleshed out how the act of making and the object itself serve to orient people towards new affective avenues for meaning-making that may move them towards a different politics that questions and, at times, actively subverts, the status quo. I have suggested that the Pussyhat Project as well as the finished knitted hats can serve as a texture against which difference takes shape. The resulting forms of affective dissonance can serve as a generative starting point for a shared feminist political imaginary that fights all forms of oppression and exploitation.

Conclusion

'I want to be like her, [Faith Ringgold]. With dolls instead of quilts' (Jones, 2018, p. 141). This is the vision of aspiring Atlanta artist Celestial, the female protagonist in Tayari Jones' award-winning novel *An American Marriage* (2018). And like Ringgold, Celestial manages to turn an everyday home-sewing practice into a flourishing art business that produces celebrated art-commissions alongside high-end children's and collectors' dolls catering to the well-to-do black community in Atlanta as well as to a white audience. And like Ringgold's quilts, Celestial's poupées, as the handmade textile dolls are called, are a testament not only to the cruel legacy of slavery that black people experience in the US, but also to everyday creative practices of resistance. *An American Marriage* chronicles the love story of Celestial and Roy, from the first jolt of new love and the cultivation of their everyday life as a young married couple, to that horrid night when both are brutally dragged from their hotel beds by police, to Roy's wrongful conviction as a rapist and his early release from prison five years later. Many of the poupées are likenesses of a baby Roy, 'adorably symmetrical, chubby-cheeked and shiny-eyed' dolls adorned with beaded crystal head caps and swaddled in small luxurious cashmere blankets (Jones, 2018, p. 226). Celestial finds pleasure and solace not only in making them, but also in giving 'a pretty brown doll to a pretty brown girl and watch[ing] her squeeze and kiss it' (Jones, 2018, p. 57).

Yet, the pretty dolls are also 'baby prisoners': they are symbolic of the American criminal justice system's constant threat to Black boys and men's lives through wrongful arrests and convictions, unusually long sentences and police brutality (Jones, 2018, p. 63). When Celestial enters a beautiful poupée dressed in a diminutive pair of prison blues made from waxed cotton in an art contest at the National Portrait Gallery, the doll is chosen as the winner. She is struck by the way the quotidian structures of

systemic racism and oppression in the US are made visible, but also removed from everyday experience, through the choice of material, the doll's outfit and the placement of the handsewn object in a public art gallery. Celestial comments: 'In the baby clothes it was only a toy. In the new way, it was art' (Jones, 2018, p. 64). At the awards ceremony, Celestial does not share her husband's story with the audience, but instead names the prison-industrial complex and the work of anti-incarceration activist Angela Y. Davis as inspiration for the doll. She explains to Roy: 'What is happening with you is so personal that I didn't want to see it in the newspaper' (Jones, 2018, p. 64).

Roy, however, takes offence at Celestial's omission of his story, and, indeed his existence as an innocent black man in a prison cell, and questions the usefulness of her advocacy against mass incarceration: 'Please explain to me what a baby doll is going to do to help anybody in here. Yesterday, a dude died because nobody would give him his insulin. I hate to break it to you, but no amount of poupées is going to bring him back' (Jones, 2018, p. 65). As such, Roy's criticism echoes many discourses and critiques about the political efficacy of practices of needlework – critiques I have discussed and probed throughout this thesis. He questions how individual craft-based acts of resistance can effect large-scale social change. Further, Roy's disappointment about Celestial's choice to keep their situation private echoes discussions about the relationship between the personal and the political as well as the way practices of needlework expose these links as part of a zone of entanglements that includes, but is not limited to, affect, bodily materiality and the social world. The poupée in the prison jumpsuit provides Celestial with the opportunity to raise awareness about an important social justice concern that affects herself and the black community as a whole, without having to publicly reveal her personal experience. Indeed, whenever she tells her personal story, 'the truth doesn't get delivered' (Jones, 2018, p. 66). White audiences appear unwilling to consider the couple's personal story in relation to wider social and

political structures, and focus only on Celestial and Roy's blackness and the negative stereotypes associated with it. As Roy's cellmate puts it: 'She is a black woman and everybody already thinks she got fifty-eleven babies with fifty-eleven daddies; that she got welfare checks coming in fifty-eleven people's names' (Jones, 2018, p. 67). Mentioning her incarcerated husband in the context of the public exhibition and the award, Roy eventually concedes, would be detrimental to her status as an upcoming artist and business woman, nor would anyone be likely to pay attention to her critique of the American policing system.

Celestial's sewing practice, which developed from a personal need to deal with the trauma of an abortion into a flourishing creative resistant practice and sustainable business model, also resonates with my analysis of the shifting meaning of practices of needlework in relation to the maker's positionality. The poupées are not only political as 'baby prisoners', but their beautifully crafted black and brown soft bodies are positive affirmations for children of colour living in a world where, as Sara Ahmed argues, their bodies are constantly under threat (2014). They are a form of self-care not only for Celestial and her small team, who appreciate the making process even in a capital-driven retail environment, but also for the children (and adult women) who receive or purchase a doll. Indeed, some of the poupées in the shop are 'flawed on purpose' with 'eyebrows too thick' or a 'long torso with short stubby legs' (Jones, 2018, p. 226). To Celestial, these dolls are as lovable and 'crooked as real children' (Jones, 2018, p. 226) and the same care has gone into making them as into perfectly symmetrical and polished dolls.

Through a careful selection of case studies, this thesis has zoomed in on a variety of entanglements around the political potential and meaning of practices of needlework in a transnational context. The variety of these case studies reflects the ways textiles, texts and narratives travel as part of global cultural, political and financial

economies. In addition, my selection recognises the extent to which many social justice and feminist solidarity movements are firmly committed to networked forms of organising across national boundaries and beyond localised identity politics. Chapter Two explored how African-American women employ quiltmaking as a resistant practice in honour of a womanist legacy of opposition to patriarchy and white supremacy. The textile practices of African-American quilters like Faith Ringgold, Chawne Kimber and the young participants from the Social Justice Sewing Academy, alongside the narrative representations of quilting by Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, are a testament to their communities' commitment to social justice work and self-care as a radical strategy for survival. Further, as I have argued, these examples also demonstrate how practices of needlework can offer a space for dwelling in a state of potentiality in which it becomes possible to imagine a different and more just future. Chapter Three paid particular attention to the relationship between paid home-sewing activities, emotion work, housework, immigrant experiences, representation and women's desires. Through a close reading of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), I showed how regular sewing orients the protagonist Nazneen towards an embodied mode of being in which she becomes able to explore her own desires – especially in relation to her sexuality and her situation as a married Bangladeshi immigrant and mother on a London council estate. Focusing on the Afghan–European embroidery initiative Guldusi, Chapter Four explored to what extent transnational feminist solidarity can be possible based on a shared gendered identity as needlewomen. I contended that narratives about the power of practices of needlework to foster solidarity between women from the Global North and the Global South often privilege the stories of white western women. I traced how these narratives and the textile artefacts created by the women from the Global North in response to the Afghan embroideries reproduce contemporary Orientalist discourses that have regained new prominence through the

political and media rhetoric accompanying the War on Terror. However, by placing these discourses in relation to the affect and materiality of practices of needlework, my analysis has also identified openings for the reconfiguration of the unequal power structures between needlewomen. Through attending to the transnational affective entanglements of everyday practices like tea drinking, cooking and gardening, I have shown how making is a way of connecting not only materials, but also bodies, in ways that generate new openings for feminist solidarity. Chapter Five examined the Pussyhat Project as a texture that is representative of the feminist struggle for transnational solidarity. I argued that the Pussyhats themselves, as well as the making of a hat, can gesture people towards different social imaginaries and provide a space for a prefigurative politics to emerge, one grounded in affective dissonance.

I have not attended to zones of entanglement in an attempt to unpick their different strands or to assign them fixed meanings. Instead, I have trailed some of these strands and the paths they create in order to explore the relationship between cultural narratives, individual accounts and literary representations about practices of needlework and feminist politics. As a result, I have shown how practices of needlework and their narrative renderings make possible multiple politics of embodied orientation that move makers, viewers and readers towards modes of dwelling in the potentiality of creating new social imaginaries that also reconfigure relationships between the self, other humans, and the more-than-human. In addition, I have argued that practices of needlework and their narrative representations provide a mode for being with or dwelling in the discomfort and negative affects that may arise as a result of experiencing these reconfigurations of relationships, especially when they involve the acknowledgement of white privilege and personal complicity. Indeed, my analysis of the Pussyhat Project shows how the practice and the finished object both function as a texture against which the discomforting affects and struggles that are part of

transnational anti-racist and feminist organising become visible. As such, this thesis has also given texture to the whiteness and white fragility that appear to be one of the root causes for the lack of intersectional and transnational scholarship on practices of needlework which initially inspired this research. As a result, this thesis is an important contribution to the scholarship of textile practices and gender as it complicates existing narratives about the meaning of practices of needlework and exposes how whiteness and white fragility shape dominant narratives. Further, it makes a significant methodological contribution to the field through its novel combination of diverse case studies, which foregrounds entanglements that have previously received little scrutiny. Placing text and textile alongside each other, I have drawn on the etymological history of the two terms to explore some of the textures that emerge from everyday practices of needlework so as to show how they influence people's sense of self and their relationships with the world. I have highlighted how narrative, affect, and bodily movement shape the meaning of practices of needlework and the types of resistant acts they make possible. Moreover, this thesis demonstrates the usefulness of interdisciplinary and innovative methods – including interviews and close reading in combination with different media for analysis like literary texts, textile artefacts and the digital - to cultural studies as well as feminist and gender studies. The complexity of everyday life and the meaning of practices of needlework requires a diverse approach that attends to their various entanglements and textures without attempting to fix their meaning indelibly. Likewise, it is important to recognise the ways whiteness is embedded in structures of everyday normativity.

One of the key claims of this thesis is that practices of needlework and their narrative renderings make new orientations possible. In the same spirit, I hope that this research helps to (re)orient the scholarship on textile practices and feminist activism. I advocate for a more rigorous engagement with the role of whiteness and its affective

entanglements in relation to the meaning of practices of needlework and, more importantly, with regards to how knowledge about needlework is created. The affective dimension of practices of needlework – the hope, pain, love, anxiety and potential connected with them – needs to be considered in claims about the meaning of needlework to account for how a privileging of some emotions (for example love and comfort) marginalises the lived experience of makers of colour. I therefore view this thesis as an opening towards an ‘un-suturing’ of the white hegemonic structures that are reproduced even in many intersectional accounts about the meaning of practices of needlework. At the same time, however, I also want to acknowledge how these very structures are reflected in this thesis, myself, and, in particular, in the way my analysis takes the Global North as the vantage point from which to trail the transnational entanglements of practices of needlework and concepts like the everyday, the home space and domesticity. As such, this research also calls for heightened awareness about the different ways in which individual, cultural and scholarly narratives about the meaning of needlework and the representations of these narratives reproduce not only patriarchal structures, but also white hegemony.

American philosopher George Yancy speaks of the ‘sutured’ white self in order to describe a type of self-conceptualisation that is protected and secured in place, similar to the way that the stitches of a seam hold together two separate pieces (2018, p. 105). Yet these stitches are also reflective of the labour of maintaining the narrative authority of whiteness as an exclusive construct protected from outside influences and infestation from otherness (Yancy, 2018, p. 105). They expose white hegemony as a social construct in need of constant reproduction in order to maintain itself: the stitches literally need to hold the construct together. To be sutured, then, is to be oriented towards whiteness as the default mode for conceiving of the self and the world in ways that influence how people take up space, act, and envision social change (Yancy,

2018; Ahmed, 2007). It means taking access to certain spaces and services for granted, being able to find 'nude'- or 'flesh'-coloured products that match one's skin tone in stores as well as walking down a street in a dark hoodie without being labelled as suspicious. And, to return to Jones' powerful account of the dolls, it means not being a 'baby prisoner' simply by virtue of one's gender and colour of skin.

Yancy conceptualises the process of becoming aware of whiteness and white privilege in terms of becoming 'un-sutured'. To be un-sutured is to have the seams of everyday white normativity ripped open and to be exposed to one's own conscious and unconscious complicity in structures and whole ways of life that discriminate and oppress people of colour not only in the US, but across the world. It is a process during which people confront their own whiteness and recognise it as implicated within 'whiteness as a systemic hegemonic feature of American social, political, economic, cultural, and epistemic life' (Yancy, 2018, p. 14). As a result, whiteness is disclosed as a social construct that, by the very nature of its own constructedness, is susceptible to change. Thus, un-suturing agitates the very foundations of the white hegemonic status quo as white people realise 'how [they] are always already exposed, vulnerable, and open to be wounded' (Yancy, 2018, p. 112). Being subject to change and new impressions can open up the possibility of a shift in power relations that challenges white privilege. Consequently, un-suturing may be perceived as threatening by white people and is often accompanied by intense experiences of discomfort, fear and rage. Un-suturing, for Yancy, thus, is not simply a metaphor for the realisation of personal positionality, but a deeply phenomenological experience 'where your white body trembles in its contingency, openness and responsibility; where it stands in awe, where the perceptual and sensorial are shaken, unhinged' (2018, p. 112). To be un-sutured is to be moved into a state of heightened affects brimming with potentiality similar to the way practices of needlework can gesture people towards new forms of orientation.

While marked by discomfort, un-suturing also signifies a state of possibility and potential. In fact, Yancy suggests that experiences of deep distress and vulnerability are a precondition for white people to embody and advocate for an anti-racist feminist politics (2018, p. 112). As I have argued throughout this thesis, while disorientation may imply irritation and uneasiness, it also includes the prospect of being oriented differently. According to Yancy, to exist in a state of disorientation is a 'radical way of being-in-the-world' (2018, p. 112) that *affectively* opens people up to new ways of encountering the self and others. Disorientation, as I have shown – in particular with regards to the Pussyhat Project – can move people towards displays of solidarity with other women not simply on account of shared gendered experiences, but because of a recognition of the affective dissonance between the experiences of women based, for example, on race, class, sexuality and nationality. Indeed, it is in the dwelling in a mode of disorientation that does not focus on an immediate overcoming of this vulnerable state, where I have located the potential of new creative imaginaries for social transformation to emerge. In *Brick Lane*, Nazneen struggles to identify and formulate her own needs and desires, but her sewing practice eventually moves her towards recognising them. Similarly, African-American quilter Chawne Kimber finds in her quilting practice the opportunity to address the various forms of discrimination and oppression that she experiences as a black woman in the contemporary United States. Thus, building on Yancy's argument, I argue that practices of needlework can be a catalyst for processes of un-suturing.

A recent piece by British embroidery artist Hannah Hill (2019) captures the process of un-suturing that I have outlined above in all its rich affective dimensions (Fig. 12). The embroidery features two hands in front of a cream-colored background on which words are stitched in an almost translucent thread. The hand on the left is filled with a mosaic of different patches of 'skin colour', from dark brown and caramel

to a pale tan and the soft pink commonly referred to as the colour of 'flesh'. The hand on the right is completely embroidered in 'flesh' only, holding a needle between the thumb and index finger. The needle is threaded with a thick red thread pulled taught. The thread is attached to the middle of a large bright red suture across the palm of the hand in different shades of brown and pink. The suture appears unfinished, as if a first row of stitches has already been completed, but the second one, to be placed on top of the first for strength and durability, is only half finished. The words in the background include terms like burden, pathetic, broken and therapy, but also meaning, soul, healing and peace. Though Hill explains that the piece is primarily a response to an ongoing hand injury which has made it difficult and painful for her to embroider, it also resonates with other themes she regularly addresses in her embroidery. A brown British woman of Guyanese heritage in her mid-twenties, Hill engages through her embroidery with topics like sex positivity, race, feminism, activism, social media and the history of needlework, as well as grime music and culture.

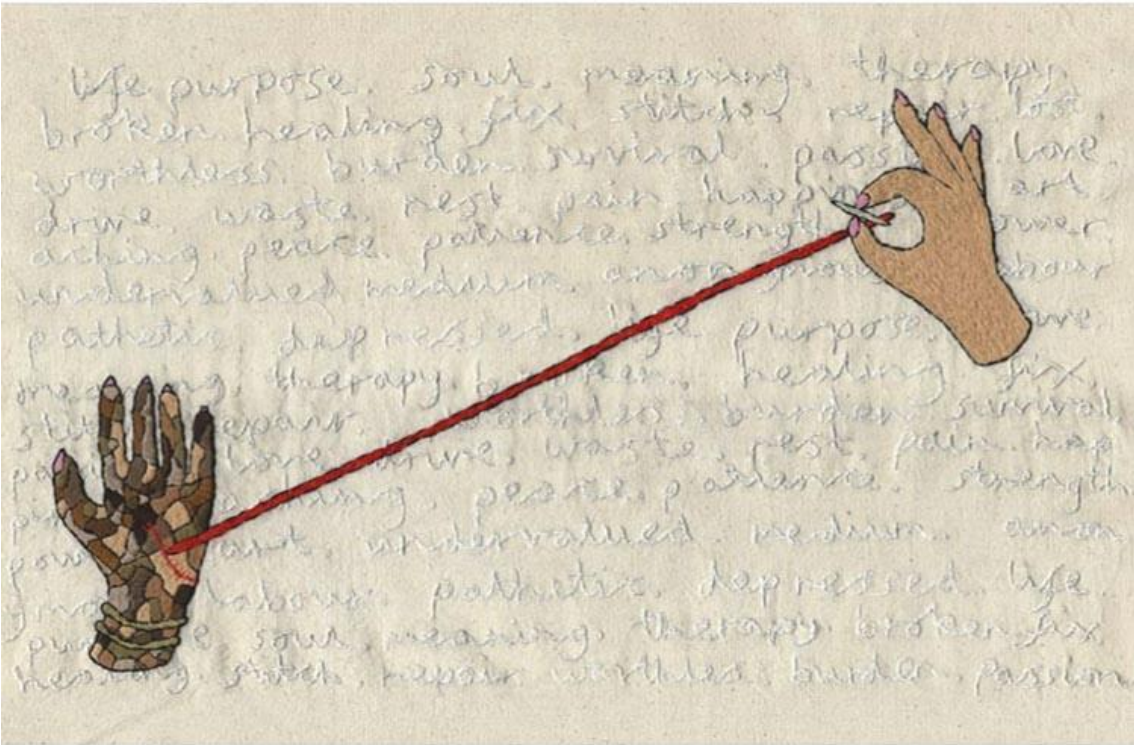


Fig. 12. Untitled embroidery by Hannah Hill (2019).

Although the suture in the embroidery described above is reminiscent of a physical injury, I argue that it also evokes another kind of wound inflicted by white hegemonic structures on the bodies and psyche of people of colour. According to Yancy, this type of wound is intended to harm, to debilitate and to violate (Yancy, 2018, p. 100), or, to use some of the terms from the background of the embroidery, to 'depress', to cause 'pain', and to be made to feel like a 'burden'. Unlike the wounding involved in the process of un-suturing, the hatred of racism and white supremacy cannot provide a generative space for becoming oriented in new ways (see also Lorde, 1984). Nor will the suturing, or sewing up of this wound, provide relief and protection to people of colour in the way that whiteness offers a 'site of closure and control' to white people (Yancy, 2018, p. 104). But in its seemingly unfinished state, the suture in the palm also represents a state of possibility for new orientations. More stitches could be added to tighten the existing seam and to close off any opportunities for openings. However, the suture may also be easily opened as stitches could be unpicked and taken out, consequently putting the possibility of being un-sutured within easy reach. As such, the embroidery is not only symbolic of a wound, but, as a creative and resistant practice also offers a way of feeling it and staying with it, without being destroyed by it.

Hill's embroidery powerfully captures some of the struggles at the core of anti-racist feminist practices committed to a decentring of whiteness in all ways of life. In addition, like Celestial's poupées, it illustrates how the links between personal experience and social structures are mirrored in the difficulties Hill faces as a brown British woman and aspiring embroidery artist in a competitive art-world setting that has historically marginalised women and needlework. Yet, since Hill worked on this particular embroidery over the course of two years, the piece is also a testament to the ways practices of needlework enable one to stay with discomfort and pain for a

prolonged period of time. Practices of needlework and their narrative renderings, as this thesis has demonstrated, are essentially political because of needlework's strong connection with contested understandings of femininity, women's work, protest and the political. Hence, my focus has been to identify the kinds of political acts practices of needlework and their narrative representations make possible in the context of craft-based anti-racist feminist transnational activism. This study, though, is certainly not exhaustive. By conceptualising practices of needlework and their representations as modes of potentiality for affective orientation towards new social imaginaries and ways of being, I have also uncovered a multiplicity of orientations and entanglements. Based on my diverse set of case studies, I have focused on some of these orientations in this research and identified them as part of an embodied politics within transnational anti-racist and feminist struggles for liberation. I remain curious about the 'lines of flight' that are to emerge from these orientations and the potentiality that reverberates from and through them.

Appendix 1: Interviews Conducted for Research

I obtained ethics approval for conducting these interviews from the University of Kent's Humanities Research Ethics Advisory Group.

April 2017:

Phone interview with Pascale Goldenberg from Guldusi and UK textile artists Gillian Travis followed by a few email communications to clarify some points.

July 2017:

Skype interview with Social Justice Sewing Academy (SJSA) founder Sara Trail. Subsequently, Trail shared with me unpublished video footage of herself talking about SJSA.

August 2017:

Skype interview with quilter Chawne Kimber.

Appendix 2: List of Figures

- Fig. 1 *Cotton Sophisticate* (2015) by Chawne Kimber. © Image: Chawne Kimber
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- Fig. 5 Cotton embroidery by Shafiqqa from Laghmani. © Image: Guldusi
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- Fig. 11 Pussyhat in the collection of the V&A, London. © Image: V&A
- Fig. 12. Untitled embroidery by Hannah Hill (2019). © Image: Hannah Hill

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