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Fabricating Texts of Empire

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Fabricating Texts of Empire

Abstract
Maps, however symbolically, indicate the materiality of empires as physical space measured in degrees of latitude and longitude. Materiality is also experienced, often brutally, by the colonized as physical force exerted by armies of invasion and occupation. The constant interaction between periphery and centre on which empires depend is also expressed materially, through the exchange of trade commodities or the regular movement of colonial administrators to and from the centre, but symbol and metaphor are equally important. If nations are, in Benedict Anderson’s words, ‘imagined communities’, then empires require still more abundant imagination to maintain disparate races and cultures as part of a cohesive whole. Consequently, texts of empire are continually fabricated and refabricated by colonisers and colonised alike, while images of cloth and weaving, with their associated imagery of narrative construction, can play an important part both in asserting bonds of empire and in challenging them.
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In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow, entering a waiting room in the European office of his future employers, observes a map 'marked with all the colours of a rainbow'.

There was a vast amount of red - good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch, to show where the jolly pioneers of progress drink the jolly lager-beer. However, I wasn't going into any of these. I was going into the yellow. Dead in the centre.¹

This description is framed by an account of two women attendants, one young, one old, continuously knitting with black wool, who admit prospective employees into the waiting room. Marlow dwells on the older woman:

An eerie feeling came over me. She seemed uncanny and fateful. Often far away there I thought of these two, guarding the door of Darkness, knitting black wool as for a warm pall, one introducing, introducing continuously to the unknown, the other scrutinizing the cheery and foolish faces with unconcerned old eyes. Ave! Old knitter of black wool. *Morituri te salutant.* Not many of those she looked at ever saw her again - not half by a long way. (146-7)
In a novel where thread, cloth and clothing form a significant sub-strand of imagery, Conrad offers two images of fabric and fabrication in relation to empire – the map, which resembles patchwork, and knitting.

The fabric of empires, pieced together on the map, combines different geographical regions and cultures rather like crazy patchwork, where irregularly shaped scraps of coloured cloth are stitched onto a plain ground. Marlow describes his boyhood delight in maps which revealed what, from a purely European perspective, seemed the blank spaces of the earth, one of which still fascinated him as an adult. 'It had ceased to be a blank space of delightful mystery – a white patch for a boy to dream gloriously over. It had become a place of darkness' (142). By implication, the appearance of multicoloured patches of European imperialism on a formerly 'blank' space has contributed substantially to creating this place of darkness. The patchwork motif reappears later in Marlow's description of the harlequin figure.

His clothes had been made of some stuff that was brown holland probably, but it was covered with patches all over, with bright patches, blue, red, and yellow, – patches on the back, patches on the front, patches on elbows, on knees; coloured binding around his jacket, scarlet edging at the bottom of his trousers; and the sunshine made him look extremely gay and wonderfully neat withal, because you could see how beautifully all this patching had been done. (212)

Red and blue dominate the map described earlier, with yellow indicating the African colony where the narrative unfolds. The harlequin, while foolish, appears a fabulous character in traditional clown's motley – a stage performer enveloped in and shielded by youthful glamour, inspired perhaps by romantic enthusiasm similar to the excitement blank spaces on maps had once aroused in Marlow himself. He has patched his clothes with material stolen from Kurtz's store-room, although it is unclear whether the cloth is of native manufacture (for the tribes of the Congo basin have a rich tradition of cloth making) or whether it is some of the 'ghastly glazed calico' and 'confounded spotted handkerchiefs' traded with the Africans for ivory. The anger this theft arouses in Kurtz's lover, the African woman, whom Marlow equates with the 'tenebrous and passionate soul' of the African wilderness, links it to the much greater theft signified by the coloured patches on the map.

The two knitters guarding entry to the heart of darkness are another key image in the novel. There is a link with mythological figures of the Fates weaving the thread of human life, as well as with the tricoteuses sitting alongside the guillotine in the French Revolution, and also perhaps with Conrad's image of a mechanical, unfeeling universe, which renders impossible any hopes for moral growth within society, described in a letter to R.B. Cunninghame Graham.
There is a — let us say — a machine. It evolved itself (I am severely scientific) out of a chaos of scraps of iron and behold! — it knits. I am horrified at the horrible work and stand appalled. I feel it ought to embroider — but it goes on knitting. . . . You cannot by any special lubrication make embroidery with a knitting machine. And the most withering thought is that the infamous thing has made itself; made itself without thought, without conscience, without foresight, without eyes, without heart. It is a tragic accident — and it has happened. You can't interfere with it. The last drop of bitterness is in the suspicion that you can't even smash it. In virtue of that truth one and immortal which lurks in the force that made it spring into existence it is what it is — and it is indestructible!

It knits us in and it knits us out. It has knitted time space, pain, death, corruption, despair and all the illusions — and nothing matters. I'll admit however that to look at the remorseless process is sometimes amusing.3

The moral monstrousness of the woven design is indicated by descriptions of the African working party enslaved by colonialism and linked together with chains that Marlow sees on first arriving in the country. Then there is the dying African with a piece of white worsted round his neck. 'Was it a badge — an ornament — a charm — a propitiatory act? Was there any idea at all connected with it? It looked startling round his black neck, this bit of white thread from beyond the seas'(157). The twisted wool indicates both imposed bondage and the threads of trade and administration which bind this country to the colonising power. But the image of the two women knitting represents more than the workings of destiny, it also relies on ancient associations between textile skills and story telling. Marlow, described as 'a spinner of yarns'(138), is himself, along with the yarn he spins, knitted into the wider, impersonal fabric of African exploration and European colonisation.

Heart of Darkness forms an important point of intertextual reference for Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook where empire is imaged as woven tapestry. Just as Marlow, sailing up the Congo, penetrates not only the heart of the 'dark continent', but the dark recesses of human behaviour as well, so Lessing's protagonist, a writer called Anna Wulf, who has also lived in Africa, discovers she too must explore the heart of darkness at the centre of her own personality if she is to write fiction which approximates in any way to truth. Like Marlow, who indicates parallels between Africa and Britain, the Congo and the Thames, she also discovers the heart of darkness at the centre of empire. London is represented in The Golden Notebook not merely as a centre of British imperialism, but as a great centre of capitalist hegemony, for Anna is committed to the ideals of socialism and is, for much of the novel, a member of the Communist Party. In 'The Red Notebook' section, concerned mainly with Anna's political involvement, she records a dream:

I dreamed marvellously. I dreamed there was an enormous web of beautiful fabric stretched out. It was incredibly beautiful covered all over with embroidered pictures. The pictures were illustrations of the myths of mankind but they were not just
pictures, they were the myths themselves, so that the soft glittering web was alive. There were many subtle and fantastic colours, but the overall feeling this expanse of fabric gave was of redness, a sort of variegated glowing red. In my dream I handled and felt this material and wept with joy. I looked again and saw that the material was shaped like a map of the Soviet Union. It began to grow: it spread out, lapped outwards like a soft glittering sea. It included now the countries around the Soviet Union, like Poland, Hungary, etc., but at the edges it was transparent and thin. I was still crying with joy. Also with apprehension. And now the soft red glittering mist spread over China and it deepened over China into a hard heavy clot of scarlet. And now I was standing out in space somewhere,...I stood in a blue mist of space while the globe turned, wearing shades of red for the communist countries, and a patchwork of colours for the rest of the world. Africa was black, but a deep, luminous, exciting black, like a night where the moon is just below the horizon and will soon rise.4

The red areas are gradually invaded by colours of other countries with the different hues flowing and merging until the entire world unifies into one beautiful, glittering colour Anna has never seen before. The sight inspires deep joy, but suddenly everything explodes and the world flies into fragments leaving only empty space. She hears a voice saying, 'Somebody pulled a thread of the fabric and it all dissolved'(294). Images of weaving and embroidery combine in an ironic commentary on Marlow's view of the map in Heart of Darkness where the red patches of British imperialism carry very different meanings from those representing the Soviet imperium in Anna's vision. But the dream's context within The Golden Notebook is more painfully ironic, sandwiched as it is between diary entries recounting conflict in Anna's local Communist Party branch where the faithful try to hold disillusionment at bay by clinging to a tissue of lies and misrepresentation woven by the Party hierarchy to explain and justify Stalin's policies.

By portraying the Soviet Union and its associated countries as woven fabric covered in a living embroidery of human myths, Lessing emphasises the constructedness of nations, empires and political systems to which mythmaking and storytelling contribute so significantly. But those with a vested interest in promoting political allegiance are anxious to conceal the fabricated nature of the narratives and signs underpinning it. Roland Barthes' famous analysis of a photograph in Paris-Match of a black soldier saluting the French flag demonstrates how ideology seeks to convert culture into Nature.

In the case of the soldier-Negro, for instance, what is got rid of is certainly not French imperality (on the contrary, since what must be actualized is its presence); it is the contingent, historical, in one word: fabricated, quality of colonialism. Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact.5
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Flags are particularly interesting signifiers of empire, for they are both fabric and fabrication, magical pieces of cloth which, erected on the soil of one country, can absorb it into the substance of another, even when located on the other side of the globe. Indeed flags and military uniforms are two powerful examples of how political and religious elites in many different parts of the world still depend quite literally on cloth to mobilize human emotions.

Tennyson's poem 'The Defence of Lucknow' demonstrates Barthes' view of historical circumstances purified by imperial myth.

Banner of England, not for a season, O banner of Britain, hast thou
Floated in conquering battle or flapt to the battle-cry!
Never with mightier glory than when we had rear'd thee on high
Flying at top of the roofs in the ghastly siege of Lucknow -
Shot through the staff or the halyard, but ever we raised thee anew
And ever upon the topmost roof our banner of England blew.

The Union Jack, continuously kept aloft, signifies not only indomitability, but vulnerability, because of the presence of British women and children amongst the besieged, with the distressing prospect of rape should the opposing Indian soldiers, represented here as wild animals, prove victorious.

There was a whisper among us, but only a whisper that past:
'Children and wives - if the tigers leap into the fold unawares -
Every man die at his post - and the foe may outlive us at last -
Better to fall by the hands that they love, than to fall into theirs!' (1252)

Wives and children are yet another form of colonial possession, so defence of empire is equated with civilization protecting families against barbarians at the gate. The entire poem smoothly elides the commercial and political advantages the British derived from their occupation of India and the accompanying oppression and dispossession which prompted the Indians to revolt. But, in lines which correspond remarkably to Barthes' interpretation of the picture of the African saluting the tricolour - 'look at this good Negro who salutes like one of our own boys' — Tennyson celebrates those Indians who stood by the British.

Praise to our Indian brothers, and let the dark face have his due!
Thanks to the kindly dark faces who fought with us,  
faithful and few,  
Fought with the bravest among us, and drove them, and  
smote them, and slew,  
That ever upon the topmost roof our banner in India  
blew. (1253)

Because of its immense semiotic potential, cloth belongs in both the material and metaphysical realms. As material substance it figures largely in national economies and trade exchanges, while operating as a powerful symbol of social cohesion, evoking as it does ideas of connectedness and tying, and in many societies it has 'furthered the organization of social and political life'. Colonialism intervened massively, as an economic and political force, in processes of cloth production, causing severe cultural dislocations among colonised peoples, for whom creation and exchange of cloth was crucially important in determining patterns of social relationship. In India, the British, eager to emphasise distinctions between European and native dress, enforced an 'orientalist' dress code upon the Indians, based on very imperfect understanding of local customs. They also undermined the centuries old cotton textile industry to ensure the advantage of Lancashire cotton manufacture, so that India was eventually transformed 'from the world's most advanced producer of cotton textiles to an exporter of raw cotton and an importer of cloth', resulting in increased poverty, famine and disease. Ultimately, however, this led to cloth production becoming a site of nationalist resistance, through the boycotting of English cotton goods. One of Gandhi's most important political moves in the struggle for independence was to lead a revival of handspinning so that the resulting cotton material, khadi, became accepted garb for asserting Indian national identity. British authorities, royalty included, were forced to receive him in peasant dress made from handspun cotton, thereby accepting his political position and revealing their own loss of power:

He used his appearance to communicate his most important messages in a form comprehensible to all Indians. Engaged in the simple labor of spinning, dressed as one of the poor in loincloth and churidar, this important and powerful man communicated the dignity of poverty, the dignity of labor, the equality of all Indians, and the greatness of Indian civilization, as well as his own saintliness.

An image of the charkha, or spinning wheel, now holds pride of place on the Indian flag, celebrated rather wryly by the contemporary poet, Kamala Das, as embodying ideals still far from realised:

The orange stands for fire, for fire that eats  
Us all in the end . . .

The white stands for purity that we dream of and
Never find

The green stands for pastures of Paradise
Where even the poor

May have a place. The wheel in the centre,
Stationary stands

For what else but time, arrested falsely
By human hands?¹³

In most societies, cloth is gendered, usually through its association with women. By elevating homespun cotton cloth and the peasant woman's spinning wheel, as 'central, unifying symbols of the national struggle for liberation from British rule',¹⁴ Gandhi refabricated Indian national identity, at the same time representing himself as 'female', performing 'feminine' roles like spinning.¹⁵ But, despite adopting the 'feminine' mode of passive resistance in promoting the national struggle for independence and validating female participation in that struggle, Gandhi's views on appropriate roles for women were not so very far removed from nineteenth century British attitudes.¹⁶ He went as far 'as "extending" women's roles as wives and mothers, but not in making interventions in patriarchal order or political power'.¹⁷ Although women in colonised countries might be recruited by nationalist leaders to participate in anti-colonialist struggles, after independence they usually found themselves relegated to a subordinate role, often entrenched by nineteenth century colonialism through missionary urging that they take up and confine themselves to the kind of domestic tasks defined as feminine in a European, middle-class milieu - sewing, housekeeping, childcare and cooking.¹⁸

Ideals of womanhood and femininity are themselves fabrications to which textiles in their various forms have contributed both materially and imaginatively. Cloth and its production held a place in the lives of women colonists, often indicating their complex role both as colonisers and as colonial subjects. In nineteenth century England, middle- and upper-class young women were expected to acquire a range of accomplishments, of little practical value, which helped define femininity - music, sketching, fancy needlework, collecting flowers, pressing and arranging them. In The Backwoods of Canada (1836), Catharine Traill describes how, on the voyage from Britain, she kept boredom at bay with needlework - 'women have always their needle as a resource against the overwhelming weariness of an idle life'. Emigration, however, usually put an end to idleness, and ladylike accomplishments survived only in drastically modified form. Later experience led Traill to list a highly exacting set of requirements for a settler's wife:
...she must become skilled in the arts of sugar-boiling, candle and soap-making, the making and baking of huge loaves, cooked in the bake-kettle, unless she be the fortunate mistress of a stone or clay oven. She must know how to manufacture hop-rising or salt-rising for leavening her bread; salting meat and fish, knitting stockings and mittens and comforters, spinning yarn...making clothes for herself, her husband and children. 19

In letters from Australia, Rachel Henning describes how the whole household had to help mend harness, make canvas bags and stuff and line saddles: 'I added lining saddles to my knowledge of fancy needlework'. 20 Many of these middle-class women settlers expressed anxiety lest the need to undertake forms of domestic labour, relegated to servants when in Britain, might render them déclassé, and letters and memoirs show them trying to negotiate their status as ladies in circumstances which frequently undermined it.

Sometimes, colonial life seemed to challenge not only established class hierarchies, but the very nature of femininity, for the ideology of womanhood on which British imperialist ideology depended was essentially contradictory. On the one hand, women's supposed delicacy and fragility justified the imperial struggle:

The ladies at home were both the motive for fighting and striving, in themselves – in their need for protection, and their ability to offer rewards to the victor – and the guardians and transmitters of a more abstract justification, of ideals, a sense of purpose and rectitude. They were both the warriors' prize and the embodied ideal. 21

On the other hand, the empire required women as breeding stock, for there were fears lest the British birth-rate prove insufficient to people the imperial territories, leaving openings for more populous countries such as Germany or the United States to take over. 22 This need for healthy child-bearers who could withstand the physical hardships of pioneering in remote imperial outposts, conflicted with ideals of the passive, delicate Victorian lady, prone to ill health, but guardian of spiritual values of hearth and home, 23 and letters and journals of many nineteenth century women settlers show them wrestling with this contradiction.

But dominant ideologies of femininity were so powerful that women colonists, even while they themselves were being reconstructed through new experience, struggled to reconstitute the safe domestic enclosures society decreed they should inhabit. With increasing consolidation of British settlement in countries like Canada and Australia, women's crafts functioned once more as markers of class division, even though this was less rigidly maintained than in Britain.

Women of the upper classes tended to spend their creative forces on work for the home which was highly ornamental and decorative, whereas women of lesser means were more concerned with making functional objects of necessity. 24
Very occasionally, colonial women's textile skills might be employed in the cause of resistance, as in the 1854 goldfields' Eureka uprising in Australia where the rebel flag, with its white cross and stars on a blue ground, has been described as 'the earliest Australian women's communal artwork'. But women were more likely to endorse imperial values with their needles, embroidering patriotic motifs - British and colonial intermingled - on quilts or wall hangings, while in war time they responded to requests to knit garments for troops overseas. Images of women supporting the empire with their stitching and knitting, symbolising femininity, nurturance and guardianship of spiritual values, persisted well into the twentieth century. V.C. Clinton-Baddeley's popular pantomime Aladdin, first performed between the wars, but still playing in the late nineteen forties, contains the following rather incoherent lyric:

Methinks I see beside the camp fire sitting
Many an Empire Mother at her knitting.
Take heart! The bonds of friendship draw us close –
Soon we shall be one family – who knows?

The Mothers of the Empire are mothers of us all,
From humble cot or palace they hear Britannia's call.
On Baffin's icy margin or Africa's sultry shores,
They hear the call to duty and answer it by scores.

See them trooping to the Standard, hear them answer to the cry
Across our far-flung frontiers (theirs not to reason why).
The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rocks the world,
And it waves above each infant head a Union Jack unfurled.

Just as Victorian fabrications of womanhood helped construct imperial ideology, so imperialism itself contributed to the cultural production of femininity. The Girl Guide movement, founded partly as an outlet for girls whose eagerness to join Boy Scout troops both threatened the masculinist ethos of scouting and challenged contemporary notions of the feminine, was deliberately oriented towards 'a mystical ideal of empire'. But adventure and outdoor activities were firmly associated with domestic skills, as indicated by the cover of the Girl Guides' Gazette (founded in 1914), dominated by Britannia standing in front of a globe, revealing outlines of India and Australia, with a Girl Guide on either side, one holding a flag and saluting, while the other stands with head bowed over her knitting. In one corner of the frame is a toasting fork and gridiron, in another a pair of scissors and thimble. Expansionist visions of empire had to be offset by images of women's confinement to the domestic sphere for which, in a centuries old tradition, textile skills had traditionally served as a marker. Andromache in the Iliad and Penelope in the Odyssey are ordered back inside the house to take up their weaving, away from public spaces where men's business is enacted.
distaff and needle served as emblems of chaste virtue in opposition to the pen, symbolising eloquence, learning and writing, which because they partook of the public world were seen to threaten women with dishonour, since the proper woman was an absence enclosed within a private household. Tennyson’s Lady of Shalott must remain imprisoned in her room weaving pictures of the world only as she sees it reflected in the mirror: gazing out the window in response to Sir Lancelot’s song, results in her death. She is punished for taking action, engaging directly with the world and initiating a sexual encounter for, on one level, the poem is a warning to women against abandoning the passivity of their socially imposed role.

The semiotics of cloth and its production have been deployed in the cause of sexual politics, just as they have in the politics of imperialism. Obvious analogies between the composition of written texts and activities of spinning and weaving mean that textiles have afforded a rich theme for literary expression, and because ‘the predominance of women in cloth production and distribution in many parts of the world is linked to the widespread symbolic systems in which cloth evokes female power’, some women writers have found cloth-making images particularly useful for defining or asserting female identity. Certain myths of origin represent all creation as spun and woven by a primordial mother goddess – the Egyptian Neith, the Greek Eileithyia or Spider Woman in Hopi Indian mythology – imaging not only the female occupation of providing clothing, but women as child-bearers clothing humanity with bodies spun and woven in the womb. Women at their looms were also figures of how past, present and future are linked together by the thread of time, woven by the Fates or Moirai – Clotho the spinner, Lachesis the measurer, and Atropos, cutter of the thread.

Although for male writers, women weaving threads of birth and death is often a menacing image, as in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, women writers have used it both to celebrate female generation, and to protest against societies which regard women primarily as breeding stock to replenish the nation. In her story ‘At the Bay’, Katherine Mansfield presents a picture of Mrs Fairfield, ‘a long piece of pink knitting in her lap’ sharing an afternoon rest with her young granddaughter, Kezia. Details of casting wool on bone needles and counting stitches punctuate the story she tells the child about her Australian Uncle William who died of sunstroke while still a young man, and the astonished Kezia discovers that ultimately she too will die. In response to her outburst, “What if I just won’t?”, the old woman sighs and draws a long thread from the ball. “We’re not asked, Kezia,” she said sadly. It happens to all of us sooner or later. Wool represents both continuity and the thread of family narrative in Mrs Fairfield’s keeping, while the pink knitting on bone needles points to her role as creator of life, since she is progenitor of several characters in the story, Kezia’s mother and aunt, Kezia herself, her
siblings and cousins. She too, however, is knitted into the warp and weft of human existence, refusing to answer her granddaughter's request that she promise never to die.

Despite her mythic resonance, Mrs Fairfield, firmly ensconced within the domestic sphere, fulfils the prescribed feminine role. But, in 'The Angel Makers' section of *Lesbian Triptych* (1980), Quebec writer, Jovette Marchessault, protesting against the colonising power of the Roman Catholic church, plays on the expression *faiseuse d'ange*, or abortionist in Quebec parlance, to create a highly subversive image of the woman knitter as goddess controlling life and death.

Her knitting is red, not pink like Mrs Fairfield's, and sometimes, taking knitting needles with her - 'the thick ones and the graduated ones and the circular ones', she answers calls for help from women who seek deliverance from unwanted pregnancy. As she knits, bending over the woman's body, she carries on her back... 'Noah's Ark, the Old and the New Testaments, that ignoble inheritance, that voracious teeming of generations which has been fused from women's bellies' - and, in ironic contrast to the Christian story of the Annunciation, delivers an angel with 'no shadow, no name, no father'. As Gloria Orenstein comments: 'Abortion is envisaged as a high form of spiritual rebirth in a world where maternity leads to victimization', and the angel maker acts as a spiritual midwife assisting women in giving birth to their own new identities. 38

Many postcolonial women writers use textile imagery both to represent artistic creation and to reinforce a sense of place, as in Janet Frame's novel *Living in the Maniototo* (1979), where the narrative interweaves Auckland, Stratford and various other New Zealand locations with Baltimore and Berkley in the United States. Language is represented through the recurrent image of a golden blanket: 'All Beautiful words that people have but seldom used, the wide, rich tapestry of language that could cover the whole earth like a feasting-cloth or a golden blanket...'. 39 The narrator, novelist Mavis Halleton, covets and removes a golden blanket from the house in Berkeley, California, offered by its owners, the Garretts, as a temporary refuge where she can retreat to write. This house of fiction, an artist's 'garret', while luxuriously appointed, also proves awkwardly constricting and Mavis must remove that rich tapestry of language, the blanket, because, although it may have been woven in the house of art, it also belongs to the world beyond, prompting memories of the blankets in her New Zealand childhood and their association with specific places.
Their brand names were marked in the corners. Some were English – Wilton – a name I had heard spoken with the reverence obviously due to it; others, with names that caused a shiver of homesickness, a memory of school days when places became their products – Onehunga, Mosgiel, Kaiapoi: the places with the woolen mills and therefore the blankets. (228)

Periphery and centre interweave, while art, represented here by the craft of weaving, is expressed through the mundane responsibilities of housekeeping:

I remember my mother looking out at the fluffy-clouded sky with its patches of pale blue, saying, ‘It’s blanket weather.’ That meant washing. The washing was a remembered ritual and risk. The women’s magazines printed regularly long serious articles with such titles as ‘Dare I Wash My Woolen Blankets?’ and ‘The Risk of Washing Woolen Blankets,’ sometimes pages of ‘Hints on Washing Woolen Blankets.’ Blankets in their washing and drying were part of the poetry of the outside world and its weather. (228-9)

Language, woven by the artist, can link past with present, uniting the world of everyday experience with that of the imagination, producing warmth and comfort for all who wish to avail themselves of it.

In Tirra Lirra By the River (1978), the Australian novelist, Jessica Anderson, considers the role of the woman artist, establishing strong associations between place, particularly a woman’s place, and textile art. The ageing Nora Porteus reviews her life on returning to the family home in Brisbane in the 1970s after many years of absence, first as a married woman in Sydney and then as an expatriate living in London. Her situation as artist is represented within the historical context of life in early twentieth century Australia and the limits it imposed on female creativity and sensual expression. And, just as Janet Frame interweaves New Zealand and United States locations to demonstrate contrasts between the two countries and to show the power of American hegemony even in a place as remote from the ‘centre’ as New Zealand, so Anderson moves her heroine between Australia and England to explore the situation of the expatriate artist and the effects of British cultural imperialism. Although Nora’s decision to travel overseas is taken on impulse rather than from any conscious desire to seek the centre, her sense of provinciality is a colonialist construct which she sheds completely only in old age.

Nora is linked with Tennyson’s lady of Shalott through the novel’s title, by her own fascination with the poem and her yearning for fulfilment, symbolised for her by the image of Camelot, ‘a region of my mind, where infinite expansion was possible’, and by her work with textiles. As a girl she embroiders, and, for much of her adult life, supports herself by dressmaking. When young, she has only a rudimentary sense of artistic
vocation, and her later career as dressmaker offers little artistic scope, although she is eventually employed at a London theatrical costumier's:

I became chief dressmaker, and worked with many designers. A few were brilliant, and I often had the pleasure of seeing one of these alter his designs at my suggestion, a pleasure denied to him, since it was a natural part of his great talent that he absorbed suggestion and regarded the result as wholly his own. (111)

The irony underlines how Nora's personal and artistic development is impeded by the social roles imposed on women and an accompanying lack of economic independence. As empires absorb colonised countries into maps fabricated by the colonizer, so 
gatrirachy absorbs colonised subjects into the fabric of its own weaving.

One of the many truths about herself Nora must confront in old age is her achievement as an artist, marked by three wall-hangings she embroidered as a young girl - revelations to her as much as to the reader, since she has long forgotten them. But a lifetime's experience now enables her to evaluate their quality. The first shows a stylised orange tree beneath which strut and peck 'eight little birds, all fabulous yet touchingly domestic' (58). Tree and bird are important both as separate and conjoined images within the novel. For Nora, birds are linked with freedom, and golden fruit with sensual joy, and the conjunction of bird and fruiting tree also indicates the life of art in the novel. The second embroidery shows 'a swag of jacaranda leaves with the head and breast of a big magpie thrusting through' (101). Nora judges it artistically inferior, good in conception, but muddled in execution. It is possible that the magpie, noted for its imitative skill, represents an artistic direction - faithful imitation of conventionally beautiful subjects like the jacaranda - which the youthful Nora had not recognized as a blind alley. But, seeing the third embroidery, of swirling suns, moons and stars, she is forced, grudgingly, to concede its excellence. Here, bird and tree motifs are combined and transcended. The sky is associated with the flight of freedom and the heavenly bodies with the golden fruit of sensuality, especially after Nora's earlier descriptions of being enthralled by the brilliant intensity of the tropical night sky (19), and how as a young girl she lay on the grass baring her breasts to the moon: 'I don't believe I was looking for a lover. Or not only for a lover. I believe I was also trying to match that region of mind, Camelot' (11).

Initially, the ageing Nora is resentful to discover how good her youthful embroideries are, for, at first, they seem to represent unfulfilled artistic promise. But, in terms of the novel, Nora's life is represented as an almost completed work of art, with its years of 'vile wastage' an integral part of artistic achievement. The embroideries, never taken very seriously by those around her, mark out a territory of rich creativity, and Camelot, which she had hoped to reach by departing from her origins, is waiting
for her in her own back yard. The subjects of the embroideries are not, at first sight, characteristically Australian, but the text suggests that, for Nora, they are strongly associated with her place of origin. There are many references to jacarandas flowering in Brisbane, and, when she first contemplates a return to Australia, it is because 'I don't want to live in a climate where they can't grow oranges' (88). The novel also associates the brilliance of the night sky with Brisbane’s tropical climate and, on looking at her embroidery of it, Nora is also jolted into the recognition that she might have found her vocation as an artist had she spent her life in Brisbane:

But this shows I had begun to do something here after all. I have never done anything of this quality since. Who knows what else I may have drawn...

I stop myself in time. The words in my mind were 'drawn out of the compression of a secret life.' (128)

Both Jessica Anderson and Janet Frame take the textile crafts which have been dismissively relegated to the woman's sphere to be practised in domestic seclusion and use them to signify the creative achievements of art as they explore the space of women's exclusion.

Cloth and its production have contributed materially and symbolically to the fabrication of empires. A vital trade commodity, textiles are also potent signifiers of national dominance and the interweaving of one territory into another. Both literally and metaphorically, they have offered a means by which existing power structures may be subverted and new identities established. Moreover, because so many societies have gendered cloth production as female, it has marked, again literally and symbolically, the implication of women colonists in the imperialist process, together with the efforts numbers of women have made both to subvert hegemonic power structures which marginalise them and to create new identities of their own.

NOTES


2. The desire to maintain a semblance of respectability indicated by the harlequin's justification that his original clothing was so tattered, 'I wasn't decent' (227), together with the meticulousness of his mending, also invites comparison with the white accountant Marlow meets near the start of his journey, who is so elegantly turned out he appears a similarly fantastical figure, 'a sort of vision', a miracle. 'I saw a high starched collar, white cuffs, a light alpaca jacket, snowy trousers, a clear necktie, and varnished boots'. This immaculate appearance which signifies his status as both European and bourgeois is gained through exploiting an African woman whom he has compelled to do his laundry. 'It was difficult. She had a distaste for the work.'
12. *Ibid*, p.368
14. Weiner and Schneider, *op. cit.*, p.18
16. *Ibid*, p.400
17. *Ibid*, p.403
25. *Ibid*, p.182
28. Bratton *op.cit.*, p.206
32. Tennyson, *op. cit.*, pp. 354-361
34. Weiner and Schneider, *op. cit.*, p. 21
38. Gloria Feman Orenstein, ‘Postface’ in Jovette Marchessault, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-95
41. I am indebted to my colleague Dr Joseph Pugliese for this suggestion.