Through the eye of a needle:

Ethnographic engagements with textile creative practice and
the meaning of making in contemporary Australia

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The extraordinary ordinariness of making, I could tell you a story –
the materials, the process

(Jane Whiteley, in Daw et al. 2002:np.)

Making is to do with making meaning

(Cochrane 1992:409)
Abstract

This thesis explores the significance of making, time, and materiality within the folds of textile creative practice. It is based primarily on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Australian non-Indigenous women who actively engage in creative practices such as knitting, weaving, quilting, coiling, stitching, embroidery, and sewing. Transcending a binary classification of ‘art’ and ‘craft’ whereby the cultural meaning and value of women’s textile-making has often been muted or cast as categorically inferior, I show that while a gendered implication is indeed present, a clear heuristic emphasis emerged that took the research beyond a focus and analysis informed by issues of representation alone. Positioning their creative making as a mode of signification and inquiry, the women with whom I worked derived understandings and gave form to their lived experiences via distinctive and tactile engagements and grounded aesthetic practice.

Focusing on ethnographic and visual data, and as both textile-maker and researcher in my field of inquiry, I foreground time and materiality as a lens to bring to life creative strands of women’s making and the significance of lineage, skill, process and place. Whilst the role of the visual is paramount, my concern is to make explicit the dynamics of tactile and experiential knowledge production through material and visual means. The inflection between tacit knowledge, tradition and transformation, the demarcations of everyday practice, and a sociality amongst fellow makers that materializes through a shared interest in textile material culture are also heightened. Drawing on theories about performativity and materiality, I consider creative practice as a mark-making process, and textile-making as a creative act in which women speak through doing. I conceptualise this as a revelatory mode of inquiry and expression through which new understandings about textile-making emerge.

Contemplation of textile creative practice as a research site in which cultural meaning and value are engendered and located facilitates a bridging of, on the one hand, the anthropology of material culture and the visual and, on the other, visual practice itself. Placing the process and temporal aspects of making central to understanding the meaning and cultural significance of textile material culture, this thesis creatively transcends the finished or exhibited visual product to emphasise and contextualise aesthetic engagements inherent to textile creative practice. These, in turn, reflect and embed meaning in the narratives of the women who make.
Declaration

This thesis is my own composition resulting from my own research. It does not contain work that I have published, nor work under consideration for publication. All sources have been acknowledged. The thesis has been substantially completed during a period of candidature as a post-graduate student at The University of Western Australia and has not previously been accepted for a degree at this or another institution.

Signed:

Martien van Zuilen
August, 2013
This thesis is dedicated to the memory of

my grandmother Marie van Zuilen-van Daatselaar (1903-1981)
whose treasured bobbins and yarns hold too many untold stories

and my mother Antoinette Marie Karskens (1927-2001)
who, bless her, couldn’t sew to save herself

It is also dedicated, with joy and love, to

my sister Stans van Zuilen
steady and steadying warp in the fabric of family life

and her daughter Nina Warmerdam
who embodies the next generation in bold fashion

One lineage
Four very different women in different times
In the button-bag of life, all are special
Acknowledgements

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My ‘big sis’, Stans van Zuilen has the uncanny ability to know when to call, and lift my spirits. Though we live (too) far apart, our paths run closely alongside one another. She makes me laugh like no-one can. Her support continues to sustain me. Finally, and not least, my partner and best friend Geraldine Box embodies the essence of thoughtfulness and unconditional support, and shared it in abundance as I negotiated the long path of a PhD journey. With gentle patience and kindness she coaxed me through my moments of doubt and kept me from unravelling along the way. We celebrate together this moment. And to dear Clementine, who has so eagerly anticipated long walks on the beach, I say ‘Woof’ (let’s go)!

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A note on names, copyright, and abbreviations

In anthropological fieldwork, considerations regarding confidentiality and the identity of research participants are imperative matters of deliberation. In the visual arts, infringements of copyright and unauthorised or uncredited publications of artworks are an ongoing and serious concern. Against this background, all participants in this research project who took part in interviews were given the option to be identified by name if quoted, and credited as the makers of creative works of which images are included in this thesis. All participants chose this option and, with their permission, all names used in this thesis are the actual names of the individuals involved, and images portraying individuals are included with the informed consent of those depicted. Artworks of which images appear in this thesis are credited to the respective artists/makers, and the images were kindly made available by them. Copyright of all artworks included in this thesis remains with the artists/makers involved. Photo credits are acknowledged throughout. Image captions of artworks are listed in liaison with the artists/makers concerned.

In this thesis, the following abbreviations are used to indicate participants’ quotes and, where appropriate, my field-notes:

**IN**: Interview with research participant, followed by month/year, ie. (IN 02/07);
**REC**: Recording of public talk or gathering, followed by month/year, ie. (REC 09/07); and

**FN**: Field-notes made during ethnographic research, followed by month/year, ie. (FN 11/07).

Words printed in italics in participants’ quotes indicate emphasis in expression.
What is a beginning? What must one do in order to begin? What is special about beginning as an activity or a moment or a place? Can one begin whenever one pleases? What kind of attitude or frame of mind is necessary for beginning?

(Said 1975:xi)

The only way to get going is to just grasp that yarn between your fingers and twist.

Just start

(Jacobs 2007:71)
Chapter One       Casting on

To knit, you have to have the stitches on one needle. “Casting on” is the term for making the foundation row of stitches. ...Once you have cast on, you are ready to knit. (Thomas and Rabinowitz 2002:30-32)

1.1     Oh, that’s nice dear, you crochet...

In contemporary Australia, as elsewhere in the world, textile material culture is often at the heart of socio-cultural life. Interpreted as evidence of human thought and action (Barber 1991; Kraft 2004), textile material culture is woven into people’s daily routines, a second skin and indicators of social identity and cultural significance. Yet its presence can be inconspicuous, a seamless social given with a significance taken for granted. Most days we use a towel to dry ourselves, we get dressed and perhaps wear a knitted scarf to keep warm, draw the curtains in the evening and put our head on a pillow at night.¹ Likewise, Australian English is imbued with metaphors that reference textile material culture. We talk of the social fabric of a community, or a close-knit circle of friends. Some of us tie the knot, others may feel a little frayed at the edges, fabricate a story, tie up loose ends, or weave in and out of traffic. A yarn is a thread, but it is also a story, a tale that communicates. Textile historian Elizabeth Barber (1994:148) notes that cloth is akin to a coded language, meaning that ‘right from our first direct evidence twenty thousand years ago, [cloth] has been the handiest solution to conveying social messages, visually, silently, continuously’.

British feminist and textile scholar Janis Jefferies notes the importance of attending to the interwoven dimension of language, texts and textiles as a means of probing the conditions of ‘subjectivity in process’, in particular ‘the textual configurations of subjectivity in language and the potential performative role of textile practice’ (1997:14). This is an approach shared by Peterson (1988), Brennan (1997), McCall (1999), Barnett (1999), Jones (1992, 2001) and Hemmings (2003) who, in various ways, posit storytelling, writing and textile-making as analogous performative acts and suggest that textiles can be ‘read’, like a narrative text that chronicles and translates

¹ Kirk (2004:n.p.) notes that ‘textiles are in such common use in society that they can be invisible’, and Mellor (1999:21) writes that textiles ‘have been a companionable part of life for so long in so many ways and in every cultural situation imaginable, that I sometimes contemplate and marvel at the number of times the earth could have been wrapped in them, Christo-like, since human beings began to work with them’. See also Weiner and Schneider (1989), Barnett (1999) and Good (2001:216).
personal experience, cultural identification, and socio-cultural life embedded in multiple layers of meaning. Jones (1992:11-12) notes:

The ancient link between textile skills and story-telling, where we spin a yarn and keep or lose the thread of narrative or discourse, still appeals greatly to authors and critics. ...Feminist interest in textile production as a source of literary and critical metaphor has also gone hand in hand with renewed attention to women’s traditional crafts. ...For, just as metaphors of spinning, weaving or embroidery can be used to illumine literary texts, so, it is now recognised, many women have inscribed in textiles the text of their lives.

The words ‘text’ and ‘textile’ are related, sharing the same Latin linguistic root ‘textus’ meaning woven, or to weave (Kruger 2001; Danet 2003; Barnett 2003; Hemmings 2003). In anthropological discourse, a cultural ‘text’ is the instrument of social knowledge which informs and shapes the seemingly natural order of things (Moore 1986), such as the delineation of what are deemed to be male and female activities in everyday life, including the creation of material culture. Strathern (1988) reminds us that material culture has a gender, and Kimmel (1997) and Martinez and Ames (1997) identify a number of ways in which gender, as a negotiated and interactive process, is inscribed in material culture objects and artefacts, be this through the use of quotidian objects and their enduring value, through processes of production and practice, or by attending to material culture in connection to wider understandings about the performance of gender in everyday life.

With these emphases in mind, in Australian cultural life textile arts and crafts, such as needlework, quilting, lace-making, patchwork, beading, spinning, sewing, knitting and crochet, have long been ascribed as a sphere of female experience and accomplishment, and textile material culture occupies a cultural space which is foremost defined by gender. For example, to see two men knitting and chatting while both wait for appointments at their doctor’s surgery is a scene that is, somehow, socially unsettling. To see two women do exactly the same thing is an unquestioned scenario of two people passing the time of day. Such cultural validations and representations, as Brumfiel and Robin (2008:9) note, ‘go unchallenged precisely because they are so central, naturalized, and ingrained in our society’.

2 Whereas the English word text stems from the Latin word textus, the Latin word textus does not mean text. It translates as weaving and the product of weaving, and originates from the verb textere, which means to weave. The French literary theorist, philosopher and linguist Roland Barthes also described text as ‘woven fabric’, made up of a ‘weave of signifiers’ (1977:146).
In Australian anthropology, where it concerns textile material culture and fibre-based arts and crafts, interest is often invested in material culture such as dilly bags, beanies, beadwork, baskets, batiks, spinning and string-making, and other fibre works (Bell 1998; Ryan and Healy 1998; Hamby 2001, 2005, 2010; Kaus 2004; Biddle 2007; West 2005, 2007; Ryan 2008; Bolton 2011; Keller and Tjanpi Desert Weavers 2012). Involving time-honoured techniques and time-intensive skills, this is mostly work done by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, whose creative endeavours in everyday contexts are justly recognised as culturally and aesthetically valuable, and their visual objects are considered as narratives reflecting spiritual, emotional, and socio-political dimensions and cultural knowledge in constantly evolving ways. Every-day textile-making by non-Aboriginal women, however, is not considered along similar lines. Instead, such activities tend to be invisible, and are regularly conceived as something women do as ‘just a hobby’, in the privacy of their own home or amongst female friends, as a pseudo significant pastime.3 Attaching everyday textile making by non-Aboriginal women to the realm of craft and the domestic sphere, and peripheral to expressions of cultural meaning and value presents a schism. Auther (2002:6) points out that ‘ancient construction methods such as coiling, linking, knotting, netting, plaiting and twining, and looping’ (techniques employed in Aboriginal fibre arts and crafts), are ‘commonly known as knitting, crochet, and tatting’. This indicates that Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women are, by and large, doing similar activities, yet in anthropological domains and public recognition more broadly, their creative work and making remains categorically valued in different ways.

Ardener (1975, 1978) uses the term ‘muting’ to describe what occurs when certain groups or modes of expression are marginalised in representations of culture, society and sociality. Relating this concept to gender in particular, she highlights the mechanisms by which the presence and activities of women and the gendered nature of categories thought to pertain to their socio-cultural lives is routinely taken-for-granted in the scope of investigation, relegated to the textual margins, where a certain cultural validation is assumed. The consequences and the danger of muting is not that women and their activities are excluded altogether, but that they are ‘not silent’ (Ardener 1978:21), creating the illusion that they have been accounted for as part of socio-

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3 Textile scholar Janis Jefferies puts this as follows: ‘Textile work is perceived as labour-intensive, slow and painstaking and yet, in a double twist, rendered and devalued as invisible women’s work, non-work, or non-productive labour’ (1995:164).
cultural life in a realistic sense (see also Moore 1988:3-4; Reiter 1975:12; Rosaldo 1989; di Leonardo 1991; Fuery and Fuery 2003). Appadurai (1992:34) also notes the ‘deeper assumptions of anthropological thought regarding the boundedness of cultural units’, an emphasis evident in Australian anthropological inquiry where, despite feminist and post-structuralist critiques, nuanced understandings about women’s textile-making remain muted. In other words, representations about women who partake in everyday textile creative practices (‘oh, that’s nice dear, you crochet’) fail to engage with or reflect how women themselves conceive of their creative textile-making and its significance in their lives.

1.2 The research question

The question I explore in this thesis is how non-Indigenous Australian-based women who engage in textile creative practice ascribe and communicate meaning to such aesthetic engagements. Who are the women and where are they located? What is the extent of their practice and how is it integrated with their lives? What does their creative work signify, what aspects of making are important to them, and what informs their making? What is it about textile-making that engages them, and why do they choose to work in this particular medium? How do they connect with other makers and what significance do these contacts have? How might such ethnographic understandings project outwards into wider socio-cultural contexts and the Australian idiom, and in anthropological thought and practice?

Various influences have a bearing on this study. As a post-graduate student undertaking fieldwork I engaged with people's yarns and words, but I am also a textile arts practitioner and have worked with fleece, needles and cloth for over 25 years. Early memories of my textile-making stem from my primary school years in Holland in the late 1960s and include learning to knit (a hideously bright orange and white doll’s scarf) and completing a small embroidery sampler. Undeterred, in my early teens I embarked on knitting my first jumper. I was determined then, as I am now, to be engaged in tactile ways; every few weeks I would use my precious pocket-money to buy another ball of speckled brown yarn, hoping that the shop’s supply would not run out before my jumper was completed. I knitted, with little idea how patterns related to size yet feeling merrily entangled all the same. I remember the moment I showed my mother what I had created: a striking hand-knitted fabric, resembling a garment with
arms that reached halfway to my knees and a bodice which would have held two of me, at the time. I was proud as punch. My affinity with textiles and cloth expanded over the years; I learned to spin from a high-school friend, followed by self-taught weaving on a rudimentary hand-built loom. In the mid 1980s, with a social work degree in my back-pocket, I left Holland with a back-pack and eventually settled in Australia where I soon learned how to make felt using the finest Merino fleece. Immediately captivated by this fascinating medium, I decided to pursue its exploration full-time and launched my free-lance felt-making career.4

Anthropology entered my life quite by chance when, in 1997, I undertook a felt study tour to Mongolia and Europe. My research involving ethnographic collections of textile material culture in Denmark and Russia, and my time amongst nomadic people and their felt-covered yurts in Mongolia proved pivotal to subsequent directions in my art and other professional interests. I commenced undergraduate studies in anthropology in 2001 with a particular interest in gender and material culture studies. My Honours thesis, titled Fabric-ation of the Steppes: (Re)positioning Women in Representations of Mongolian Culture and Sociality, investigated the position of women in representations of culture and sociality in nomadic Mongolian society through an analysis of felt-making practices. I concluded that women are centrally involved with the production of culture through creative textile practices reflective of their wider socio-cultural environment (van Zuilen 2005). This research experience led me to question to what extent such research had been undertaken in the Australian context. I found ample evidence relating to material culture made by Indigenous women yet found minimal scholarship addressing this through the lens of anthropological inquiry where non-Indigenous women are concerned. It was at this point that my doctoral research took shape, into an Australian-inspired ethnographic study, amongst non-Indigenous women, of textile creative practice and the meaning of making.

4 Since graduating with an Advanced Certificate in Studio Textiles from the Melbourne College of Textiles in 1989, I have worked as a textile arts practitioner specializing in handmade wool felt, teaching classes throughout Australia and sometimes overseas. My work has been exhibited both in Australia and overseas, and published in a number of national and international volumes. I also continue to be involved in a number of not-for-profit textile groups and associations, including the coordination of a national community textile arts project whenever time permits.
I commenced my doctoral research informed by feminist critique which has successfully explicated the gendered dimensions and reasons why art made with fabrics and threads occupies a ‘lesser’ place than art made with paint (Parker 1984; Parker and Pollock 1981, 1987; Fuery and Fuery 2003; Hardy 2005). I endeavoured, in part, to advocate a rightful recognition for textile-making within anthropological inquiry in particular and Australian socio-cultural life more broadly and I wanted to investigate what such a space might look like, by exploring how it is constituted and signified by women who engage with textile-making, in the Australian locale.

Initially, based on the works of Geertz (1973), Bourdieu (1977), Moore (1986, 1988, 1993, 1994), Hall (1997a, 1997b) and Hall and du Gay (1996), I considered a theoretical framework regarding practice, cultural identity, gender, and representation. Hall (1997a), in particular, identifies representation as the practice of constructing and exchanging socio-cultural meaning via signification by which people embody and transmit ideational values and beliefs, and make visible symbolic accounts about lived experiences and events. Importantly, Hall also notes that while representation connects meaning to culture though social action, the process by which this occurs is socially determined by an epistemic authority that ascribes and fixes certain cultural meanings to images, practices and language used. He emphasizes the need to attend to the ways this ascription occurs and the commanding means by which representation is socially and culturally circumscribed. In a similar vein, Lorraine Code (1991, 1995) and Judith Butler (1988, 1997) argue that representation is a controversial term; at once operational for the expressions that can be made and a constraint in the way knowledge and subjects are conceptualised and validated. They suggest this process of ascription occurs by a habitual language and a cultural vocabulary that is determinant of the expressions that might be made, and which regulate how and why subjects count as knowledgeable and what counts as known. I suggest that such an approach has limited the questions asked of textile creative practice and by extension has allowed the significance that non-Indigenous women assign to their work to remain muted. During my fieldwork, a participant expressed it in the following way:

Language gives us a framework to live in...[but] when we have a name for something, maybe you cease to see it so well. Textiles is a female thing...when something is viewed as women’s work, what is detracted from it is a seriousness...the world is divided into the domestic and the other. And if it is domestic then it is amateur, it’s unpaid; it’s something people do with their spare time. They’re all stereotypes though. I think it’s not fair to say that all textiles carry that connotation or that if they do, [that] it detracts’. You can
make so many things with textiles. You can make work that is highly political, and work that’s very conceptual, and work that’s functional and wearable and work that’s definitely not (Ilka, IN 09/07).

My initial ethnographic fieldwork was, to some extent, shaped by an effort to re-present muted representations of both textile-making and those who crochet, weave, stitch, coil and knit, while acknowledging the collective histories and individual narratives that have shaped their creative practice over time. I wanted to learn about the relevance of textile-making to the women with whom I spoke, the place it holds in their lives, the meanings they attributed to it, and the ideas, experiences, beliefs and feelings that they endeavoured to express (or not) through their creative work. I asked questions that I felt expressed this approach: for example, if textile-making was a narrative, then what were some of the themes women narrated in and through their creative work? My reasoning for such an approach was that women’s ideas, emotions and life experiences would be integrated and represented through the objects and artworks that they produced.

My efforts to apply a largely representational model failed to reflect the creative process and experiences of those I worked with. Through my interactions with women over time, I realised that rather than the aesthetic and material objects created, paramount in their stories was an emphasis on the creative process itself and the material and temporal agency of their chosen medium and materials, placing the central significance of their creative practice beyond a representational format or model alone. What I found was that the process of making held a privileged position over the eventual, finished work, for example, women recounted to me the significance of, and time for making, involving intentional engagement, reflection, immersion and experimentation. They also highlighted the very materiality of textiles, and the tactile significance of yarns and cloth. In this context, Rowley (1992b:57) notes that:

Many people assume that artists draw on personal experience, and that art is a form of ‘personal expression’. But for artists, work itself may be amongst the most significant of their ‘personal experiences’...the expression of that experience is mediated by the process of making the artwork.

The women’s narratives about the things that were meaningful to them in their creative practice came to re-shape my own theoretical interests and ethnographic

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5 The anthropologist Howard Morphy also draws attention to this by emphasising analyses into not what something means, but how it means (1991:143).
understandings, encouraging me to shift my focus from a thematic approach to one that Barbara Bolt (2004) has termed ‘the work of art’. Positioning art-making as an expression beyond representation, she emphasises the performative nature of aesthetic and creative engagements and knowledge production that occurs in the very moments of making. I draw attention to this emphasis to highlight a shift in my approach to the visual as something beyond representation. By this I mean not to abandon the concept altogether, but to understand how representation tends to obscure the moments and processes of making, and therefore certain understandings about textile creative practice. In similar vein to Bolt’s work, the idea of ‘material thinking’ (Carter 2004) or ‘thinking through practice’ (Duxbury et al. 2008) centres on the notion of cultural knowledge that exists in, and as a result of, a process that is actively autobiographical, temporal, material, cultural and political. Duxbury and Grierson (2008:7) define ‘thinking through practice’ as:

[w]hat it means to think through making and all that is involved in sustained forms of creative practice - questioning, reviewing, reflecting, analysing, performing, speculating, relating, remembering, critiquing, constructing and ultimately further questioning. …[It refers to] ways of legitimating affective understandings and perceptions, ways of exposing not only aesthetic but also epistemological and ontological understandings. We are talking here about the process of creating in a way that reveals something more than self-perpetuation. It is a process of bringing forth awareness or appearances through the work of art.

I found further resonance in my thoughts regarding women’s narratives in the writings of Pennina Barnett (1999), whose use of the term ‘poetics of cloth’ is particularly perceptive, as is her understanding of textile-making as a performative act of ‘writing culture’, akin to a tacit and layered narrative dialogue communicating experiential and embodied knowledge. In similar vein, Brennan (1997) likens the act of stitching to the physical process of writing, the needle as pen. She employs the terms ‘running stitch’ and ‘stitching from life’ to signify the needle as a story-telling device and notes that ‘[o]ral histories so often bypass the written word: they are sung, recited, drawn, in dust

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6 Bolt (2004) refutes the notion that art is a representational practice and argues for a performative relationship between art and artist within the ‘fuzziness’ of practice. I discuss the relevance of Bolt’s work to my thesis in more detail in Chapter Three.

7 I am grateful for the opportunity to meet with Pennina Barnett (Senior Lecturer in Critical Studies, Department of Art, Goldsmiths, University of London) in London in 2008, and acknowledge here her generous exchange of ideas, as well as her encouragement regarding my research endeavour. Whilst Barnett’s work may hold some resonance with the idea of ‘féminine sentences’ (Wolff 1990) and ‘écriture féminine’ (Cixous 1976), these authors posited women’s textual vocabularies as intentionally created and existing outside, and thus not bounded by, structural discourse that routinely marginalised and excluded women’s specific forms and mediums of expression. This is not a focus I take in this thesis.
upon the ground, passed into social currency *through the agency of thread*’ (Brennan 1997:91, emphasis mine). Brennan also places the act of doing (in this case stitching) and the agency of one’s materials at the centre of scholarly consideration: ‘a single row of stitches, closely spaced, can be read as a code for a precise sequence of movements of the arm and hand’ (1997:95). Likening the act of stitching to mark-making in this way places the work and the process of making itself as form of communication, an act of speaking through doing, or speech act, so to say (cf. Butler 1995, 1997, 2005).

The concept of time is integral in textile-making; it is a tradition-laden medium (Rowley 1999:6; Floyd 2008), and involves time-intensive methods and skills. I mention time here, as in most aspects of my research time materialised.⁸ Importantly, Adam (1990:3) writes that ‘we seem to weave in and out of a wide variety of times without giving the matter serious consideration’, while elsewhere she notes that when quantified, time ‘forms only one aspect of the complex of meanings’ associated with the experience of time that permeates everyday life (1994:509). She emphasizes the significance of time in the creation of meaning and suggests that the tempo embedded in social and material process relates not only to ‘events in time’ but also (and this is important in the context of my study) ’time in events’ (Adam 1994). It is in and over time that gestures, including those integral to textile-making practices, evolve into richly activated narratives, and in this thesis I consider how material matter and processes of making engender time, including how through their creative practice, women inhabit the temporal dimension of textile-making in ways that constitute a different meaning than standard clock-based time alone.

Embroidering further on the aspect of time, the idiom of textile practice has routinely been conceived as being grounded in notions of repetition, symbolised in practice through endless rows of knitting and countless stitches, time after time, same after same. Repetition, according to Adam (1994:521) is grounded in temporality and the becoming of the possible; the ‘presencing’ and the ‘reality-creating aspect of recurring activities’ alludes to the capacity for new ideas to be conceived, material

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⁸ Johannes Fabian notes in *Time and the Other* that anthropological investigation is ‘unthinkable without reference to time’ (1983:24). He states that time is a ‘dimension, not just a measure, of human activity’, and notes: [a]s soon as culture is no longer primarily conceived as a set of rules to be enacted by individual members of distinct groups, but as the specific way in which actors create and produce beliefs, values, and other means of social life, it has to be recognized that Time is a constitutive dimension of social reality’ (1983:24). Noting Fabian’s work here, Adam (1994) in particular clarified my thinking about textile creative practice through the lens of time.
transformations to occur and new understandings to emerge. To extend this viewpoint, Attiwill (2005:np) suggests that textiles and fibre are ‘dynamic matter’, akin to a material substance in which both ‘matter and process become content’ while its temporal aspects make apparent ‘change and movement’. Such an approach resonates with Judith Butler’s discussion of the speech act, and in particular the performative utterance which, when conceived as something that enables the assertion of alternative domains of cultural knowledge, can re-signify the effects of which it speaks (Butler 1995, 1997).9

Butler’s work on speech acts provides further critical insights into the potential re-significations of discursive representations of gender appropriate acts and her work is relevant to the description and analysis that follows. Butler shifts the spotlight from the representation of certain (cultural) texts in which people are spoken about, to the way individuals perform and speak their own narrative; a focus that attends to the speaker and their acts of narration. Using theories initially developed by Butler and later applied and developed by others including Parker and Sedgwick (1995) and Threadgold (1999), I suggest that a representational approach to textile practice is problematic, given that it disguises ‘nuanced understandings of the relations between what have been blandly, confidently disguised as “text” and “context”’ (Parker and Sedgwick 1995:15), it also limits understandings regarding narrative expression and obscures the processes and breadth of cultural knowledge production embedded in textile material culture. Through a focus that is specifically material, temporal and performative, I argue that textile creative practice reflects ‘the salience of materiality to academic analysis and everyday life’, and draws attention to material forms as a ‘potential bridge between domains of knowledge and experience, and therefore as crucial anthropological tools’ (Geismar and Horst 2004:5, italics in original).

To position the performative aspect of making as an enactment, as I have done in this thesis, attends to the intentionality of its makers and where and how in the process knowledge is made. It draws on the unique potential of the medium itself in ways that makes the ephemeral, subjective and aesthetic meaningful in ways other than a representational approach allows.

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9 This is a discussion I take up in Chapter Three.
1.3 Visual anthropology and material culture: ways of seeing/doing, and thinking about seeing/doing

My thesis is concerned with the communicative potential that resides in the doing of textile creative practice. It is grounded in visual anthropology and the anthropologies of gender and material culture. Visual anthropology is concerned with both the production and presentation of knowledge through the study of art and material culture as signification and an integral, expressive part of culture (Morphy and Banks 1997). Fuery and Fuery (2003:126) note that visual culture is ‘never simply about the image’, while Pink (2003:190) observes that ‘things become visible because of how we see them rather than simply because they are observable’ (emphasis mine). In this context, Berger (1972) reminds us that central to the perception and validation of visual culture is our ‘way of seeing’. A central premise of my research is that creative practice is embodied and occurs in the midst of life as a form of aesthetic communication akin to a language of expression. In other words, I emphasise ways in which cultural and social life is enacted, signified and performed through visual practice, and consider how this practice is interwoven with lived experience and, in turn, is reflected in the fabric and sociality of cultural life.

Visual anthropology is ‘in vogue’ and has, over the past two decades, greatly expanded and diversified well beyond, though still inclusive of, photography and ethnographic film (Banks 1998:9-11). Much has been written about image-based methods and techniques, approached from the angle which either places the anthropologist as the creator of film and photographic images or examines visual media and imagery in their finished formats10. Amongst these, Emmison and Smith (2000), and Jenks (1995) provide frameworks which tend to objectify, generalise, prescribe and, I suggest, ultimately detract from the very complexity and subjectivity that a focus on the visual has to offer ethnographic inquiry and understandings about the human dimension more broadly; the visual or image is posited as a visual aid (Ruby 2005) as ‘mere illustration’ (Strathern 1990), and as proof or ‘visual hook’ upon which to hang an

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10 See, for example, Prosser (1998), Emmison and Smith (2000), Edwards (2002), and Jenks (1995). The concern here is that the potential of ethnographic film and photography to get a visual image across in mere seconds raises critical questions as to the use of this methodology. As Bourdieu (1984:43) puts it: ‘The value of a photograph is measured by the interest of the information it conveys, and by the clarity with which it fulfils this informative function, in short, its legibility, which itself varies with the legibility of its intention or function, the judgement it provokes being more or less favourable depending on the expressive adequacy of the signifier to the signified. It therefore contains the expectation of the title or caption which, by declaring the signifying intention, makes it possible to judge whether the realization signifies or illustrates it adequately’.

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argument that is ‘already hypothesized’ in the text (Banks 2001:7, 1998:15). What is at stake in such an approach is the potential of an image over, above and alongside text; its effects, authority and representation, and the ethical concerns on the part of ethnographers where textual sketching of an ethnographic site arguably invites and requires a deeper engagement than visual representations alone can provide. As the anthropologist and ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall succinctly stated some 15 years ago: ‘[a]nthropology has had no lack of interest in the visual; its problem has always been what to do with it’ (1997:276).

In *Rethinking Visual Anthropology*, Banks and Morphy (1997) provide an overview of theoretical, epistemological and representational shifts in the role of the visual, ranging from an historic marginality of visual objects as a tool, to a more recent recognition of the integral role of visual cultural forms through which unique contributions to anthropology as a theoretical discipline are made. They stress the need for a more reflective and critical view about the positivistic use of visual methods and records, taking account of the positionality and interest of all involved. In similar vein, for Ruby (2005:165), the anthropology of visual communication is ‘an enquiry into all that humans make for others to see’ and is premised on ‘viewing the visible and pictorial worlds as social processes, in which objects and acts are produced with the intention of communicating something to someone’. Although Ruby’s review of 20 years of visual anthropology is limited to mainly the USA and the UK, it makes an important distinction between three overlapping and contending approaches, these being visual anthropology as ethnographic film, the cultural study of pictorial media, and anthropology of visual communication. Ruby defines the latter as encompassing ‘the anthropological study of all forms of visual and pictorial culture as well as the production of anthropologically intended visual products’ (2005:159, emphasis mine). Such an emphasis extends the field of visual anthropology to include the actual making of material culture, beyond a prevailing understanding of visual anthropology as involving mostly ethnographic film. Ruby (2005:161-3) further writes that considerations of the visual by way of ‘going into the field for an extended period of time to examine, participate and observe the social processes surrounding (…) visual objects’ places the consideration of ‘contextualising information’ about the visual as

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11 As a result of wider access and reduced costs of equipment, over the past decade, the use of visual media and film in visual anthropology has seen a democratisation amongst students and researchers. A changing field has also seen new alliances between anthropology and art, including the use of digital imagery and social media (Ruby 2005; Pink 2003, 2007, Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005; Deger 2008).
central to conveying anthropological knowledge and narrative. Importantly, it also places the visual and its cultural meanings beyond that of a tool, visual aid, or research end in itself, and foregrounds the making of meaning through visual communication, aesthetic engagements and acts of making while accounting for the contextual setting and validation surrounding the creative work, ideas and intentions of the makers within the wider socio-cultural domain.

Amongst others, Banks (2001) and Pink (1999, 2003, 2006) discuss the need to attend to anthropological approaches to the visual that are different to prevailing modes of inquiry, and argue for methods that are ‘informed by different epistemological and methodological concerns’ (Pink 2003:189). Banks (2001) advocates the need to take into account the visual in light of other contextual data by attending to what he calls the ‘internal’ and ‘external’ narratives in cultural texts. The ‘internal narrative’ refers to the content or narrative that the image itself communicates. It is linked to, yet analytically separate from, the ‘external narrative’, this being the socio-cultural context which grounds the existence of the image while taking into account creativity, visual practice, and cultural meaning beyond representation. Banks writes that representations derived from the visual, including drawing, paintings, and material culture are ‘products of specific intentionality’ (2001:7). He notes that ‘clearly, it is not merely a question of looking closely but a question of bringing knowledges to bear upon the image’, to go beyond the visual ‘text’ itself and to take into consideration the ‘internal narrative’ of visual representations (2001:3). Elsewhere, Banks (1995) and Pink (2003, 2006, and 2007) also critically position, or indeed re-position, the visual component and methodology of ethnographic research. Both emphasise that it is relatively easy to create or select a visual image that illustrates or emphasises a certain written argument but this places the visual in service of textual preoccupations and merely incorporates the visual as a supplementary dimension to an already established methodology, analysis and research aim. Relevant to my study is the idea that anthropological meanings and knowledge are situated and can be distilled in the very engagement with visual and tactile elements and sensory practices in the field, and by

12 The anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in another time, used the term ‘thick description’ to denote in-depth analysis as to ‘the meaning particular social actions have for the actors whose actions they are, and stating, (…) what the knowledge thus attained demonstrates about the society in which it is found and, beyond that, about social life as such’ (1973:27). Although Geertz by and large omitted a focus on gender, his cultural perspective on symbolic forms and representations as mechanisms whereby people relate ideas to specific actions and vice versa, highlights the need for emic perspectives.
considering ‘the materiality and agency of the visual’ in the moments of its making (Pink 2003:180, emphasis mine).

Important in light of my own practice as a textile artisan, and the muted validation of textile-making in Australian anthropology, is Pink’s emphasis on gaining new understandings about the known and familiar; via a ‘narrative strategy as a way of communicating knowledge about the unknown by creating resemblances to the familiar, thus offering audiences a framework through which to understand and incorporate new knowledge’ (2003:181). She argues that a focus on what is familiar and seemingly homogenous can foreground difference and complexity about experiential engagements and outsider perceptions regarding aspects of socio-cultural life. Importantly, her argument attends to the intentionality of its makers and attention to where and how in the process meaning is embedded and produced. It also acknowledges that understandings about an ‘other’ are not unmediated but inextricably linked to re-presentations and knowledge of the ‘self’. Adopting this reflexive viewpoint in the material manifestations of culture, an approach that attends to ‘the relationship between image and viewer’, encourages a contextual and theoretical underpinning that brings together anthropologies of the visual and visual practice itself (Pink 2003:188). Furthermore, it brings to the fore practice-informed ethnographic fieldwork and research that recasts theoretical considerations while emphasizing how the visual (and processes by which the visual is created) generates and (re)presents ethnographic knowledge and cultural understandings (Banks 1995, 2001; MacDougall 1997; Pink 2003; Ruby 2005; Biddle 2007; Deger 2008). The concentration thus shifts to an inquiry about anthropological knowledge that is communicated through visual, experiential and textual means and recognizes the ‘intersubjectivity that underlines any social encounter’ (Pink 2003:190). Against this background, this thesis, and the questions and narratives that inform it, is grounded in the materiality of textiles, which differentiates it and at times stands in contrast to the fixed nature of text. To consider textile-making, such as stitch, as a medium of signification and of personal expression, positions it as a visual language, not beyond text, but as text. As a way of speaking, it places the subjective and the experiential as integral components of the construction of knowledge, and the tactile process as a form of understanding in and of itself, over time.
1.4 The research participants

At the centre of this ethnography is a diverse group of women. Ranging in age, and socio-cultural and economic background, what they have in common is that they intentionally engage with textile-based creative practice as a form of aesthetic expression. If asked, these women might define themselves as a quilter, embroiderer, knitter, lace-maker, dyer, weaver, or visual artist, although they are frequently skilled in any number of these and other creative forms. In the context of the women’s lives, their textile-based creative pursuits exist alongside other ways in which they might self-identify, including as mothers, environmentalists, academics, nurses, pensioners, retirees, carers, engineers, and arts administrators.

My experience and contacts as a textile practitioner likely eased my entry into the ethnographic field. In order to find research participants, early on during my fieldwork I attended monthly meetings of The Western Australia Fibre and Textile Association, an organisation that promotes the public profile, breadth and diversity of textile and fibre art practice in Western Australia. At the first meeting I spoke about my intended research project and invited women to take part by way of an interview. Ten women expressed interest and from initial interviews with these individuals, contacts with a number of other women materialised, alongside invitations to attend a number of textile groups to which some of the women I interviewed belonged. In these group settings I was amongst women who would knit, stitch, make lace and crochet and who shared their textile work and projects with others present. More specifically, within the groups I attended was a knitting group, variably consisting of seven to ten women who gathered once a fortnight for an extended morning of knitting. Over time I realised that this group met for social and supportive reasons as much as for the time and a place to be creative. The second group I attended and then joined was a contemporary quilting group which met once a month. More formally run than the knitting group with a more definable pattern of activities, day-time meetings typically consisted of a general meeting, a hands-on demonstration of a textile project or technique, a show and tell of members’ work and the setting up and cleaning of the room. I decided to join both these groups as I felt that I could learn about the social aspects of textile practice and
the relevance of the groups to some of the women I eventually interviewed and others who attended.13

Alongside individual interviews and conversations, and the two textile groups in Perth, Western Australia, my primary research locale, I attended a number of national residential workshop events in New South Wales and Victoria, as well as regular exhibitions, public talks by artists, and fairs, including Quilting and Knitting Shows.14 My presence in these groups and at events was readily accepted, most likely as I was already known as a ‘local’ (albeit wearing a slightly different hat). My research topic was well received and I felt heartened by comments from fellow makers who told me that my research was ‘important’, in the sense that they envisaged that it would ‘lift the profile of textiles’ in wider domains (FN 011/06). I shared with them an affinity with textile-making and felt at ease in their midst. In return, I think that they also found it relatively easy to speak to and interact with me.

In total, I conducted formal, semi-structured interviews with twenty-eight women. Of these, twenty women were non-Indigenous Australian born women. One woman was born in Indonesia to Dutch parents, two women had migrated from New Zealand, one woman from North America, and the remaining four were of European-born background. The youngest woman I interviewed was, at the time of interview, 35 years of age, and the oldest 72. Of the twenty-eight women, six were partially self-employed through their artwork, six were full-time mothers and home-makers, one was in full-

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13 In the early stages of my fieldwork, and following an invitation by one of my interviewees, I also attended weekly meetings of a local lace-making group to which she belonged. Whilst the group was very welcoming towards me, I felt that their hope for participation and my study was that it would raise the public profile of lace-making, something I could not be sure of doing. I discontinued my involvement with this group after two months in order to refine my focus on the rich opportunities and the contacts I had established with individuals and my participation in the other two groups.

14 Research activities prior to commencing fieldwork included a survey of textile database searches of several Australian Galleries and Museums, these being the National Gallery of Victoria’s Australian Fashion and Textiles Collection, The Western Australian Museum in Perth, The Powerhouse Museum in Sydney (the Lace Study Centre and the Decorative and Applied Arts and Design Collection), The National Quilt Register and the Museum of Australia in Canberra. This illustrated the diversity of textile techniques and objects, ranging from relative function to the purely aesthetic and which indicated female lineages of skill, knowledge and creativity. I also attended exhibitions, consulted exhibition catalogues, textile publications and conference proceedings. For instance, the 2004 exhibition ‘Transpositions: Contextualising Dutch Australian Art’ at the Western Australian Museum on the experiences of migration for 13 Dutch women made visible a women’s lineage across time and place through textile art. Two other exhibitions in Western Australia around that time, Woven Forms (Parkes 2005) and Seven Sisters: Fibre Works arising from the West (Murray 2003) illuminated how Indigenous and non-Indigenous women textile artists addressed cultural representations pertaining to a collective, Australian identity.
time work and three in part-time paid employment. Three women received a government disability pension, one was no longer employed as a result of post-traumatic stress and eight were retirees. I conducted follow-up and multiple interviews with nine women, whose narratives came to shape the central thread of this thesis. Of these, five lived in Perth, and three in Melbourne, and in the following section I briefly introduce some of the women with whom I spent the most substantive time.\textsuperscript{15}

\textbf{Michele} had, in her own words, ‘always done sewing’, starting with making her clothes as a teenager to creating contemporary art quilts when we met in 2006. By that time Michele had successfully negotiated the completion of a visual arts degree as a mature age student while raising two children, part-time employment and maintaining the family household and associated home duties. \textbf{Rosemary} was a retired pharmacist who had long engaged with textile-making as a hobby and returned to university in her 60s to study textile art and design. Married with seven adult children, and having put her textile interests on hold for decades, Rosemary identified her engagement with textile-making and university studies as ‘her’ time, separate from but alongside familial obligations and caring for her ailing husband. \textbf{Holly} was born in England and arrived in Australia as a seventeen-year old, an experience she likened to having ‘fallen off the edge of the world’ and landing in an alien landscape. Holly identified primarily as an installation artist who utilised domestic textiles, such as old blankets, to convey her experience, emergent understanding of, and connection to place. \textbf{Ilka} was a weaver and textile artist, and part-time textile educator at a university in Melbourne. In her textile work, Ilka explored her family heritage and, more recently, her work sought to conceptualise her time in and engagement with the natural environment. \textbf{Ruth} was a contemporary quilt artist. After studying zoology and environmental engineering she chose to concentrate her skills and energy on being a full-time mother. A practicing religious person, Ruth’s award-winning and finely executed quilts referenced both the natural world which she conceived as God’s creation, and childhood experiences as she observed them through her own young children. \textbf{Julia}, like several of the women I met through my research was a self-described ‘jill-of-all-trades’ where it concerned textile-making. Her engagement with textiles was akin to therapy and her studio constituted a sanctuary, more so since being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder some years prior to my meetings with her. Before migrating with her family

\textsuperscript{15} As mentioned in the opening pages, the names used throughout this thesis are participants’ actual names.
to Australia, **Trudi** spent her early years with her Dutch mother in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in the territory now known as Indonesia. The experience deeply affected Trudi’s life and the development of her textile works. She was a self-employed textile artist and tutor, and (unofficially) the person in charge of the fortnightly knitting group. **Sue**, one of Trudi’s close friends, was a tapestry weaver and professional counsellor, although she no longer worked in this field due to a degenerative back injury. Divorced with adult children, and two grandchildren who shared her love of colour and threads, Sue would weave whenever her health allowed it, in her studio shop on the outskirts of Perth. Lastly, but not least, **Nalda** was an elder amongst the textile community of Western Australia in particular and Australia more broadly, a teacher and mentor to a large number of textile-makers, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. A largely self-taught textile artist with a preference for using materials available mainly in her immediate and natural environment, including grasses, bush-plants and nuts, blankets and human hair, Nalda’s works had been exhibited and represented in various collections, including the Art Gallery of Western Australia.

After my first interview with Nalda, I was able to ‘follow’ her as she taught a week-long class in fibre-art at the Geelong Fibre Forum in 2006.16 Five students in this class, who all lived in Melbourne at the time, subsequently also became participants in my research.

The ethnographic component of this thesis results from my engagement with the identified nine women, in particular. It also draws on interviews with nineteen others. At the same time, the research (not unusually in ethnographic studies) draws on data collected from many other women and several men who contributed to the research in ways that informed my understandings and the broader framework of this thesis. They include individuals I met at public textile events, exhibitions, and workshops, as well as partners of research participants and conversations with arts educators and

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16 Fibre Forums are six day residential conferences held twice a year, in autumn in the state of New South Wales and in spring in Victoria. Organised through the Australian Forum for Textile Arts, these Forums offer participants a choice of 15 week-long workshops, access to exhibitions, and daily lectures by leading international and Australian tutors in a variety of textile and fibre disciplines. It is a residential week of in-depth learning along with a celebration of the full spectrum of the textile arts, and an opportunity for 250-300 likeminded people to gather in a creatively charged atmosphere. During the course of my fieldwork I attended six Fibre Forums, as a participant and observer, and later also as a member of the organising team. I explore this part of my fieldwork in more detail in chapter Six.
administrators.\textsuperscript{17} While their narrative contributions do not appear in detail in the ethnographic chapters, I have included, where appropriate, people’s comments and my observations where broader research helps to illustrate and contextualise the ethnographic data and, ultimately, research findings and analysis.

1.5 Privileging women’s voices, lines of inquiry, and some notes on terminology

Everyday conversations about my research with friends and others brought to light a number of perceptions about hand-made textiles and the people who engage in such activities. A common, first reaction was: ‘oh that’s not really done anymore is it?’\textsuperscript{18} As it turned out, almost everyone I spoke with actually knew of someone in their family or immediate circle of friends who could (and did) knit, crochet, sew, quilt, or embroider. I was told stories about an aunt who engaged in highly-skilled lacework, a grandmother who was teaching her grandchildren to knit, and a mother who knitted jumpers and had completed a quilt as a wedding present for her son. Others relayed seeing ‘knit-graffiti’ in public spaces or knowing of friends who had participated in similar activities.\textsuperscript{19} All in all, evidence of textile-making materialised in unexpected pockets and social interactions, including a fellow chorister in my local choir who had embarked on making a quilt, a friend who treasured her late grandmother’s sewing tools, and a magistrate who knitted tea-cosies late at night after a day in court. These conversations illustrated the ubiquitous presence of textile-making but also its gendered inference as something that pre-dominantly women would do.

In my quest to uncover aspects of creative textile practice that have been muted in anthropological inquiry, I was heartened by cross-disciplinary scholarship that operates from the premise that the subjective experience of, in this case women, is central to the research focus (Cixous 1976; Code 1991; Binns 1997; Jefferies 1997; Barnett 1999; Bolt 2004; Hardy 2005; Biddle 2007). My underlying belief is that women’s textile-

\textsuperscript{17} This includes an interview with Kevin Murray who, at the time of my fieldwork in 2007, was the Director of Craft Victoria, an organisation that promotes the making and marketing of craft and the interests of its membership of craftspeople and designers.

\textsuperscript{18} To illustrate this, Casellas (2008:30) observes that, being a middle-aged woman, she formed part of ‘the last generation of women to have actually endured a subject at high school called domestic science; learning to sew a hem, tailor a buttonhole, cover a curtain ring with blanket stitch. She writes: ‘In the space of a generation, the ability to hem a skirt has vanished, replaced by the ability to send a text message.’

\textsuperscript{19} Sometimes also referred to as yarn bombing, guerrilla knitting, and yarn-storming, graffiti knitting is a form of street or public art using displays of knitted or crocheted yarns rather than paint or chalk. See for example Moore and Prain (2009).
making, in all its aspects, should be told through women’s own narratives and understandings of their creative expressions. As such, I deliberately emphasise a perspective on and of women, but not to the exclusion of men. Even though their interests and activities may vary, both women and men engage in the same social and symbolic order, this being the wider political, economic and cultural Australian context (Moore 1986, 1988; Ortner 1996). In using the terms women (and men), I acknowledge that the use of such finite or all-encompassing categories as umbrella terms runs the risk of negating the diversity and the qualitative differences that exist. It is not my intention to propose such an essentialist approach or to suggest that women’s experiences as they are included in this thesis could be analysed as representative of all women who engage in textile-making (Moore 1993, 1994; di Leonardo 1991). Through a focus on the experiential and by ‘enlarging’ the framework about textile-making to include ethnographic material, my aim is to challenge what I see as certain problematic ‘contexts of perception’ (Strathern 1995) regarding women’s textile creative practice. To do this, I have chosen to use the term women (and men) in order to enable engagement with existing texts and to recognise and consider the things that these particular women bring to their particular practice, how they visualise lived experiences, and how their creative practice strengthens their identity using aesthetic and visual means. My aim is to validate women’s textile-making within Australian anthropology and Australian cultural life more broadly, and to make its meanings and processes noteworthy and visible.

Rather than presuming to survey the field of textile practice, this ethnography of textile makers, their narratives and experiences, is intended to provide a refined focus on the intertwined nature of women and textiles in cultural life. Similar to other fine-grained ethnographic work, the people with whom I worked did not and do not constitute a sample, category, or a ‘representative of any group’ (Miller 2008:291). Rather, as Okely (1996:8) notes, a study that draws on in-depth participant observation ‘can raise questions and answers across any region’ and in effect be qualitatively powerful. The

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20 The notion subjectivity and experience as it applies to textile creative practice is, of course, not exclusively female. Leong (2001), amongst others has explored subjectivity through focus on men’s textile creative practices in the face of societal views about accepted forms of masculinity in which such practices have, routinely, no place. In a process not unlike ‘gender bending’, he positions men as agents of ‘mark-making’ and subverts those forms of ‘conventional masculinity’ deemed appropriate for men. By extension, this also unsettles the categories of ‘femininity’, and ‘women’s work’.

21 My point here, also, is that the relatively few men involved in textiles get a substantial amount of attention, yet women’s activities in the same realm do not. See for example http://www.theloomroom.co.uk/wordpress/?tag=men-in-textiles, accessed 10/04/2013.
women in this thesis are ‘typically untypical’ participants, in as far as they stand for ‘the astonishing diversity and uniqueness of all those who participated’ in the research endeavour (Miller 2008:292). My concern is not to emphasise all that can be known of the people with whom I worked, but to draw attention to ways whereby, through their engagement with textiles, women came to understand things about their lives, and by extension make visible the processes and breadth of cultural knowledge production that exist within the folds of their experiences, visual material culture and socio-cultural life.

1.6 Anthropology ‘at home’: Ethnographic engagements in familiar surrounds

My experience of doing ethnographic fieldwork was akin to plying two sets of yarns, a process in which two distinct yet parallel strands of influence converged and, at times, blurred into one, as my focus as a researcher and my longstanding experience as a textile-maker converged and became interwoven in a number of ways. Traditional understandings of ‘doing anthropology’ involve going to the field and placing oneself in an unfamiliar geo-social context and the subject culture, remaining mindful of the sensitivities and protocols when entering a cultural locale different to one’s own. In her presidential address for the American Anthropological Association, with a paper titled ‘Cloth, Gender, Continuity, and Change: Fabricating Unity in Anthropology’, Elizabeth Brumfiel states that:

\[i\]t is the ethnographer's task to report on events and perspectives from the field and to contextualize these events and perspectives within wider processes. Anthropologists bring two assets to this task. One is our status as outsiders, which causes us to inquire about things that local people take for granted: As many have argued, contrasting ourselves to "others" is the bedrock of ethnographic fieldwork (2006:871).

Such an approach infers that the field is a spatially bounded category and somewhere other than one’s home. With distinctions between ‘home’ and away’ in ethnographic fieldwork increasingly blurred however, the idea of going to the field for immersion in surroundings distinctly different to one’s everyday life is no longer a given (Amit 2000), and for me it was simply not possible. My ethnographic region was also my ethnographic region; I was already in the field and had been for some time, with an embedded and tacit knowledge of textiles and fibre practice and an acquaintance with textile practitioners and organisations in various parts of Australia.
Studies that fall under the rubric of anthropology at home (and in one’s own community) include an ethnography of children’s songs and narratives by Caputo (2000) whose research site was in the same Canadian city where she resided at the time. This meant that the field was one in which she was at once at home and away, and Caputo came to reflect upon the fieldwork experience as a ‘juggling act’, involving the ‘continuous shifting’ of roles, partial identities and perspectives between home, work, research field, family circumstances and university life (Caputo 2000:27-9). Moreover, as her research site was incorporated in wider daily experiences, understandings and emotions, Caputo found that that she was never able to completely ‘leave the field’ (2000:28). Other ethnographic studies, including Pink (2000), Colic-Peisker (2004) and Voloder (2008) are grounded in their respective experiences of migration, belonging and research involving acquaintances. For example, Voloder’s experiences of belonging, as a Bosnian woman in Australia, led her to consider her position as researcher in a field and cultural group with which she strongly indentified and felt ‘a sense of insiderness’:

Voloder defines an insider as ‘a highly engaged member of the social world under study’ (2008:28) and the connections she shared with participants within the Bosnian community (some of which preceded fieldwork) meant that her personal, lived experiences of belonging as a Bosnian woman in Australia frequently converged with those of research participants. She writes: ‘the field was my home and I was essentially living my research’ (Voloder 2008:30). Likewise, Pink’s informants included friends and her research developed from ‘a set of social relationships’ stemming from her personal life. This meant that her personal and professional lives were ‘inextricably interwoven into the research’ which, she notes, felt at times to be a somewhat unstructured endeavour (2000:96). These experiences resonated with me.

Turner (1989:13) suggests that the ethnographic field should not be conceived as ‘self-limiting sites’ available for ‘inquiries into everyday life’ but as a space or attitude, understood as ‘clearly articulated expressions’ of the practices of individuals in the socio-cultural context of a society. Cast in these terms, the field constitutes ‘a framing
of the life of actual or potential subjects, a point of view which will force an intersection of the interests of the inquirer and the life of the subject’ (Turner 1989:14). With this in mind, I came to think of the field not as a bounded and spatialized setting but as expressions of a particular cultural practice by individuals within a socio-cultural context and through a focus on ‘particular lives, broadly contextualized’ (Amit 2000:15). Over time, I came to view the ethnographic field, not as a discursive, separate or even a physical location, but rather as moments through which the intricacies and complexity of social life and cultural interactions became increasingly evident.

1.7 The ethnographic ‘self’ in sites of enchantment

The connection with a community and practice familiar to me was without doubt captivating, at times even uplifting; during my undergraduate studies I had partly suspended my textile practice due to a lack of time, finances and a suitable studio space. Returning to surroundings involving tactile making through my research, the experience of doing fieldwork was frequently one of contentment and inspiration, a time in which textiles was in the forefront of my mind as well as occupying my days. In The Comfort of Things, Miller uses the term ‘ethnography as enchantment’ (2008:31) to describe a sense of ‘privileged access’ into peoples’ lives and home environments, and the interaction with familiar, evocative objects of material culture that are deeply meaningful to them. Miller’s description resonated with me; my fieldwork involved visiting participants in their homes and attending group meetings where I was at times welcomed more as a ‘social visitor’ rather than a researcher (cf. Colic-Peisker 2004:88) while I also engaged with a creative medium I am passionate about. Many of my conversations with women inevitably included viewing (and handling) their current textile work and heirloom collections, visiting their studio space, gleaning titles of books, patterns or names of suppliers. Sharing the interests of those I interacted with brought a sense of close association and joy related to time spent in environments that closely resembled that of my own textile-infused spaces at home.

At other times there was a subtle distinction between the private realm of textiles at ‘home’ and the public realms of ‘away’, marked in particular by a radical change from my usual manner of dress (t-shirt and jeans) to more colourful outfits befitting the
event I attended (see figure 1). These were clothes usually stored in a large duffle bag in the attic, and only came out on specific occasions, in particular for use at Fibre Forums where I participated as a member of staff and generally enjoyed a textile-infused-time while also undertaking fieldwork activities in the form of informal conversations with fellow participants at the event.

To illustrate further my experience of doing fieldwork, I also recall a gathering of the knitting group that I had joined following interviews with Trudi and Sue, two of its members. The group met every fortnight for several hours, during which time we worked on our textile projects, sharing tips and techniques, as well as news and stories. Although referred to as a knitting group, people also engaged in crochet, stitching, making string from pre-loved fabrics and just coming along for the coffee, cake and company. Often it was a time for sharing stories, animated chat and friendly banter, and sometimes our meetings would include an excursion. One of these ‘outings’, in August 2007, was to Woolly Latte, a yarn-shop cafe in Perth where we had agreed to meet for a morning of knitting, coffee and cake. Alcira, a member of the group, arrived a little late and observed the jovial gathering that was already underway. She greeted everyone, sat down and soon joined in. Someone told a joke, and we all laughed. After a while, Alcira leant over, winked at me and said ‘so, is this what you call…uumm…research??’ (FN 08/07, figure 2). While I was ‘doing’ research, it did not always feel like that at all. I felt drawn into, and inspired by, the materiality, texture and immediacy of textiles and the encounters and relations that ensued as a result. I very much felt at home and at ease in the field, and there were days I wondered whether I was having too much fun. At times, the feeling of being wrapped up in textile-making, or driving home after meetings with a big smile on my face and a mind buzzing with patterns, I reminded myself that this kind of embeddedness offered a rich setting for ethnographic data too.

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22 During meetings of the knitting group, my fieldwork activities consisted of participation as a member of the group, rather than asking questions or observe people in a semi-formal context.
23 This sentiment was in part informed by conversations with fellow postgraduate students in which they relayed stories of their fieldwork, some of which had included challenging experiences and confronting or uneasy moments and times. For further reading on the methodological challenges that can surface during the course of fieldwork and the uncomfortable fields sites (‘awkward spaces’) an anthropologist might encounter see for example Mulcock (2001); Hume and Mulcock (2004); and Colic-Peisker (2004).
Figure 1
L-R: Martien van Zuilen, Michele Eastwood, Janet de Boer OAM.
Batik Artwork by Mary Edna Fraser. Photographer not known.

Figure 2
L-R: Alcira, Martien, Rosie, Dorothy, and Sue. Photo: Trudi Pollard.
1.8 The bias gauge - making the familiar strange, and writing about one’s own
Alongside a sense of enchantment, it is imperative to consider how my grounded knowledge about textile-making influenced the research process. Was my familiarity in the field an impediment rather than an advantage? Was I too close, gaining enough distance (cf. Abu-Lughod 1991)? Did my insider knowledge enable or inhibit particular insights including ethnographic detail, revelatory moments and data which someone unfamiliar to the realm and jargon of textile-making might have observed as noteworthy and meaningful? In other words, how could I best value the depth in the seemingly obvious ethnographic strands yet remain open to their potentially unanticipated twists?

Ethnographic research that is undertaken by placing the self within one’s own cultural context calls into question the insider/outsider (or self/other) distinction. This distinction, both a celebrated and challenged paradigm in anthropological research (Abu-Lughod 1991; Reed-Danahay 1997; Ryang 2000) became blurred at times as my ‘task’ as a researcher and my immersion as a textile-maker in a community of practice intersected, making a distinction as to what constituted fieldwork (or not) difficult (cf. Voloder 2008). For example, throughout my fieldwork I also was a member of several committees including the Western Australian Fibre and Textile Association (WAFTA) during which time I organized workshops and chaired some of the general membership meetings which research participants attended. From 2008-2012, I was a Board member of The Australian Fibre and Textile Association (TAFTA) and was a volunteer staff member at its annual textile conferences in New South Wales and Victoria. I attended textile-related workshops as a student, and on a smaller scale, but in some ways more intimate and personal, I held a textile studio sale at my home, selling superfluous studio materials and equipment, and my textile works. The sale was attended by well over 100 people including many of the people I had engaged with during my fieldwork. My research activities, textile practice and personal life overlapped, sometimes to the extent that whenever I engaged with anything ‘textile’, it somehow felt to be part of doing research, even when it concerned activities independent of my fieldwork per se. A knowing and being in two worlds in the one place facilitates what Judith Okely refers to as a ‘double vision’ (1996:24) in which one is able to see both local and outsider points of view. In my experience, it also meant that, at times, the two fields of vision became one.
I recall another moment that occurred in a meeting with one of my supervisors during the first few months of my fieldwork, during which we spoke about some of the interviews I had conducted thus far. I mentioned a textile art work that one participant was working on, and that I thought might be of particular interest in light of my research focus. I described the work, which involved machine sewing, using a terminology familiar to me. ‘That is wonderfully rich material’ my supervisor responded encouragingly, ‘but ....what is a “bias gauge”’? I must admit that I was a little stumped, partly as I had (somehow) assumed that others would also know the meaning of this term. Inadvertently, this moment came to symbolise a matter of importance as it facilitated a realisation that knowledge familiar to me did not readily exist for others.

In textile terms, the ‘bias gauge’ is a small instrument used to cut narrow strips of fabric at a pre-determined width and on a particular angle (bias) in relation to the fabric’s woven structure. Particularly useful when cutting soft or slippery fabrics, the gauge is placed upon the point of the scissors with its indicator set at the width required, thus ensuring that the bias strip will be cut at an even width. This kind of strip is routinely used for binding, facing, cording or piping in sewing-work. In a more symbolic way, however, the notion of bias, when thought of as a form of predisposition, nudged me to be (more) attentive to the fine distinction between research enriched by habitual and tacit knowing, and an awareness of seeing the meaningfulness in obvious yet taken for granted knowledge. In other words, an insider perspective as ‘a valuable heuristic tool, a source of theoretical sensitivity rather than a source of bias’ (Colic-Peisker 2004:92), lends itself to more comprehensive ethnographic understandings.

The understanding that experiential knowing and analyses resulting from engagements in the ethnographic field are inherently shaped by one’s subjectivity is well documented in wider anthropological discourse.24 As a textile-maker, I relate to a ‘sense of belonging to a relatively small community that places a high value on cohesiveness’ (Rowley 1992a:6). I also experience firsthand what Carsten (2000) terms a ‘culture of relatedness’ with fellow makers in ways that constitute a social and felt kinship. Such grounded knowledge based on practice arguably speaks to the post-

modern focus on positionality and reflexivity regarding one’s own life experience in ethnographic encounters and comprehension (Rosaldo 1989; Caplan 1992; Kleinasser 2000; Ryang 2000). Addressing the way in which an individual’s socio-cultural position, including gender, occupation, age and experience, influences the process of inquiry, Okely (1996) takes autobiographical reflexivity to be an integral element of ethnographic fieldwork and subsequent analysis, while Kleinasser (2000:155) makes the observation that:

Researcher reflexivity represents a methodical process of learning about self as researcher, which, in turn, illuminates deeper, richer meanings about personal, theoretical, ethical, and epistemological aspects of the research question. Qualitative researchers engage in reflexivity because they have reason to believe that good data result.

On the one hand, situating myself as both researcher and maker within my research topic and site positions me in both fields of engagement as a subject in, and of, the act of knowing. On the other hand, knowing some of the participants prior to fieldwork, and deepening connections with them and others as a direct result of spending substantive time together, potentially placed constraints on how I might employ critical analysis.

Whilst the threads of friendship run strongly throughout the wider textile community, I agree with Rowley (1992a:6) who states that ‘serious difficulties arise for the practice of criticism, and for research and theory from the assumptions of filial loyalty that bind family-like communities’. She argues that such loyalty ‘constrains the capacity for reflection on crafts as a significant form of cultural practice’ and, when lacking in ‘a theoretically informed reflexive consciousness’, is ‘likely to take for granted the assumptions which underpin the interpretation and evaluation of artworks’ in the first place (1992a:6-8). The aim of writing, which includes critical understanding and theory, is to come to a more nuanced understanding about experiential knowledge and its ‘engagement in the world’ (Rowley 1992a:6). Appreciating that engaging in the field can be expressive, ambivalent and constituted in both the listening and the speaking, I suggest that a reflexive use of insider and experiential knowledge, and a consideration of ‘self’ in relation to the ‘other’ ultimately brought a unique position for research grounded in the lives of participants. I firmly believe that my ability to contextualize parts of the women’s narratives was made possible by experiences and relationships I had shared as a maker long before my entry into the field of textiles as
an ethnographer (cf. Voloder 2008). The challenge, in part, was to observe anew the words and things that were seemingly natural and customary to me and to not be indifferent to noticing, to make the ‘familiar strange’ (Okely 1996:5; Pink 2003).

Attending to what Ryang (2000:317) terms the ‘ethnographic “I”’ (as distinct from the autobiographical I), the strength of an insider perspective is that I felt able to contribute to the textile community’s ‘insight into its own relationships and practices’ (Rowley 1992a:6) in ways that acknowledge and account for my narrative and ethnographic self while putting my specific knowledge to creative use (cf. Butler 2005, Okely 1996, 1999). In her study among Australian Indigenous women and their fibre craft, Hamby (2010) endorses a processual approach of partaking in the making process, in order to add meaning and reveal knowledge during the research endeavour. She writes:

“knowing”...increased my possibility of learning about qualities...that are not visible. By participating in the process [of making] one gains the actual experience which is a multi-sensory one. It involves seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and being part of the maker’s practice. The meaning and significance of an object is not obtained by simply asking questions (2010:19).

Ultimately, my experience, interest and duty of care, a consideration always hoped for in anthropological engagements with others, emerged in conjunction with the aim to do justice to women’s stories, works and experiential knowledge through critical engagement in responsible and considered ways. Jefferies refers to this as ‘reflective self-presence’, this being the process of lending a critical voice without removing ‘myself and my self, “I”’ (1997:14). She states that a ‘critical use of self, of the "feminine" and of textile materials and processes’ can come together, constitute and reveal ‘the life of the text and textile and the terrain of the lived’ (Jefferies 1997:17). My premise is that insights gained from ‘insider’ research need not rely on ‘assumptions of shared experiences and identifications between oneself and participants’ alone (Voloder 2008:28) and that such research transcends the notion that it is ‘merely a reiteration of what is already known’ (Okely 1996:ix). Ryang (2000:306) notes ‘the interactive relationship between the author and the subject, the writer and the written-about’. As a maker, I have a ‘presence in the text’ (Evans 1997:120), but I have not turned the anthropological gaze ‘in on myself’ (Okely

25 Elsewhere, Okely notes: ‘Unlike anthropology abroad, fieldwork at home is not a matter of memorising a new vocabulary; only slowly did I realise that I had to learn another language in the words of my mother tongue’ (1996:23).
Like Voloder who undertook ethnographic research in and amongst her own community, I did not set out to draw upon my own experiences as ‘data to inform the analysis of the ethnographic material’ (2008:33).

In sum, while I include personal anecdotes in this thesis it is not auto-ethnographic as championed by Ellis & Bochner (2000) where the researcher is a central figure in the ethnographic text. Rather, as Voloder suggests, I have incorporated elements in my thesis which illustrate that the entanglement of my fieldwork and personal textile practice was, to some extent, inevitable, and I acknowledge my insider knowledge as an ‘ethnographic resource’ in the ‘recognition that my research could be enriched by this closeness’ (Voloder 2008:33).

1.9 Summary and thesis outline

By considering the personal narratives, agency and activities of individuals who work with textiles and fibres and for whom this form of creative expression is important, this thesis investigates the construction of cultural meaning. I consider how such creative engagements are generated and constitute significant aesthetic expressions, and how this informs anthropological understandings about the performative nature of material culture, gender and sociality. The term ‘textile-making’, as I intentionally use it in this thesis, foregrounds attention to practice, and process. I follow Dormer’s adaptation of the terms skill, craft and tacit knowledge and apply them to ‘refer to knowledge that is learned practically through experience and that is demonstrated through practice’ (Dormer 1994:7). Importantly, and without ignoring the final art work, this deflects attention away from the end product or object that might be made, and positions the act and significance of making and the maker herself as central to the research. Drawing on Butler’s (1988, 1994, 1997) discussion about performativity, I position textile making as a signifying speech act using tactile means, which is at once performative, temporal and consequential, in terms of what it reveals about the special-ness of ordinary things and everyday activities, and how it engenders cultural significance for both the maker and her audience, the viewer.

Most of the women I spoke with concurred that the (public) validation of everyday textile making is routinely devalued and stereotyped and they were acquainted with the
persistent paradigm of the art and craft dichotomy in which their practice is placed.  

However, many women also expressed that ultimately this did not affect their choices to engage in textile and fibre practice. One participant expressed it as follows:

Most textile practitioners, I think, would come up against that at some time or another, that you’re in a category that provokes a kind of knee-jerk reaction. ...textiles is still lumped as a slightly weird second cousin to the visual arts. Although, if people take the time to relax about that I think it would open up a lot of new possibilities to them (IN 10/07).

While some women expressed a desire to have their work validated as Fine Art, my grappling to find an appropriate term by which to think and write about textile-making (Is it art? Is it craft?) was echoed by others who chose to not position their work within the realm of fine art, or locate it in the field of decorative crafts. Holly Story put it in this way:

I’m not saying [it] is a fine art, because that’s what I mean, you don’t want to say that. That’s not its history. It’s got nothing to do with that. It comes from a different place. Textiles has its own history and it has its own kind of internal aesthetic. To talk about it you need to talk about it in terms of what it means to the people who make it (IN 10/07).

And that is what happened. And that is what this thesis is about.

In Chapter Two I explore the various bodies of literature by which textile material culture and creative practice have been embedded, validated and (re)presented, including in historical, feminist, anthropological and visual arts domains. I examine the extent to which anthropology contributes to and draws from these ideas. Following this discussion, in Chapter Three I outline the theoretical framework of this thesis. Interweaving works by Butler, Bourdieu, and Bolt in particular, a theoretical approach is presented as a suggestion towards untangling a representational pattern of understandings regarding textile creative practice.

Chapters Four to Six integrate the ethnographic data selected predominantly from the narratives of research participants, fieldnotes and other sensory data. I use this data to elaborate on key themes identified in previous chapters. Participants speak about the time and surroundings in which they learned textile-making skills, extending these through formal tertiary studies in middle age. Foregrounding the narratives of four

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26 See for example Fraser (2006:44).
women in Chapter Five, I detail thoughts about the meaning and relevance of time, place and materiality in their creative practice. In Chapter Six I describe the significance of social networks and groups in light of women’s textile-making and their respective lives more broadly.

In Chapter Seven I explain the ethnographic data and highlight the findings of this thesis. Theoretical material is revisited and the work of Butler, Bolt and others is used to structure the ethnographic material presented in Chapters Four to Six, however, the analysis is also informed by other approaches to the study of textile material culture and practice discussed in Chapter Two.

In Chapter Eight, the concluding chapter, the research is synthesised and situated within a wider ethnographic and theoretical framework. I restate the main points raised in this thesis, conclusions are drawn and the findings of this study emphasised.
An anthropologist does not start from individuals who create their worlds. We start from the historical processes and material order which create those characteristic individuals and their expectations

(Miller 2008: 287)

The materiality of fibre and textiles derails any concept of a blank canvas; instead one is always in the midst of something and engaging with things already in process, making relations that are dynamic and change

(Attiwill 2005:np)
Chapter Two  
Approaches to the study of textile material culture

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore bodies of literature where textile arts and crafts, referred to in this chapter as ‘textiles’\(^ {27} \), have been embedded and (re)presented in public and academic domains. The potential of textiles as a medium of signification is rarely disputed in the literature and other sources that extend across disciplinary boundaries. Textual analysis of relevant sources and sensory data including those emerging from anthropology, underscore an aesthetic validation of textiles by certain categories and markers of which gender is central. Feminist critique, in particular since the 1980s, has been prominent in exposing textile creative practice as a form of feminine activity and ‘women’s work’. In recent years the profile of textiles as an art form has been raised within the visual arts realm, alongside a continuing association as a gendered cultural domain. A critical awareness regarding the validation of textile creative practices, including ways in which anthropology contributes and draws from this dialogue, creates a framework for a more nuanced understanding of textile material culture in specific social, cultural, political and historical circumstances and in theoretical debate.

During research for this thesis, my bookshelves began to overflow with a rich and ever-expanding assortment of books on textiles. The diversity within this collection illustrates that this creative field is difficult to classify in any definitive category. Social inquiry occurs within and across disciplinary boundaries which (like washing on the line) are ‘billowing nicely’ (Mellor 1999:31). The study of textiles spans the fields of archaeology and history (Barber 1991,1994; Soffer et al. 2000; Good 2001; Brumfiel 2006), material culture studies (Lauer 1974; Tilley 1990; Miller 1994, 2008), art and craft studies (Cochrane 1992, 2006; Ioannou 1992a, 1992b; Kaino 1995; Rowley 1992a, 1992b, 1997a, 1997b, 1999; Sanders 2005; Fariello and Owen 2005) folklore studies (Ice 1984, 1993; Schilo 1993; Tobin and Dobard 2000), women’s studies and feminist inquiry (Parker 1984; Parker and Pollock 1981, 1987; Aptheker 1989; Bank 1995; Jefferies 1995; Ice 1997; Barnett 2002; Hardy 2005; Nelson et al. 2005; Floyd 2008), visual art (Barnett 1999; Barnett et al. 1999; Jones 2003; Lawrence 2005), and anthropology (March 1983; Ng 1987; Weiner and Schneider

\(^{27}\) In using the term textiles at this stage rather than, for example textile arts and crafts, one aim of this chapter is to tease out the classificatory and hierarchical applications of the terms art and craft and the effect on the validation of women’s textile-making, including in anthropology.
2.2 The presence of the past in the present

Barber (1994:13) writes that while textile material culture such as artefacts and objects are relatively ephemeral, textual records and cultural representations about textiles and textile-making have been ‘remarkably durable’ and pervasive by way of an enduring logic, including gendered implications and validations. In order to grasp more fully how cultural and anthropological understandings about the gendered nature of textile material culture have come into existence, it is necessary to consider the integral relevance of the past, both as a textual and materials resource and its influence on contemporary discourse.

Archaeological artefacts and research indicate that textiles are amongst the oldest forms of material culture known to humankind. A number of studies have focused specifically on archaeological remains including patterns, materials and tools as historical evidence of a textile-based craft industry (Kiewe 1967, 1976; Barber 1991, 1994; Brumfiel 2006). Others have embedded a more socio-cultural significance, including a gendered perspective, by considering textiles as proof of ‘women’s work’ within socio-political domains and economic contexts (Barber 1994; Soffer et al. 2000). In her book *Women’s Work: the First 20,000 Years – Women, Cloth, and Society in Early Times*, textile historian Elizabeth Barber states that ‘right from our first direct evidence twenty thousand years ago’ cloth has been used to encode and convey cultural and social meanings and intention (1994:148-9). A central premise in Barber’s work is that textile material culture and its practices of production have, throughout time, been validated as women’s work. Transcending the historical-technical development of textile production by focusing on the social aspects of ‘the women who made the cloth’, Barber brings to light women’s fundamental role in pre-industrial societies and, importantly, the nexus of gender and textile material culture as indicators from which details about women’s lives can be deduced (1994:12, also 1991). These indicators include communicative markers and symbolic representations of place, time, cultural life and sociality that are incorporated in textile making by way of patterns, use of colour, techniques, choice of fibre, and rituals that form part of the
very processes of textile production. Of interest is that while archaeological evidence of textile material culture has been scant due to the relatively ephemeral and perishable character of fibre-based artefacts, interpretative readings place these artifacts as a ‘rich representation of larger aspects of social and cultural history, especially gendered identity’ (Burman 2007:364). Furthermore, the likely gaps and assumptions in cultural knowledge about, among other things, levels of technical complexity indicative of class, wealth and prestige, and processes of production has limited social inquiry into epistemological and interpretative concerns (Good 2001:218). In contrast, as Barber (1994) points out, what has been written about textile-making has been grounded in an enduring representational and validating logic. A number of texts from both archaeological and historical vantage points underscore this claim, and emphasize the interpretative link that is made between textiles, time, gender, and women’s work.28

Archaeological interpretations of the iconic Venus figurines of the Upper Palaeolithic era29 indicate links between early textile material culture and gendered meanings and beliefs (Soffer et al. 2000). The technology of fibre-based artefact production evident in the figurines’ iconography and decorations attests to the weaving of cloth, plaiting of string, spinning of raw fibres, and the coiling of baskets. While this establishes the presence of textiles in Upper Palaeolithic cultures, a gendered implication about textile in socio-cultural life is made. In a circular argumentation based on the transference of the social meaning found in decorative artefacts to practices of production, women are linked to textile artefacts as ‘their likely inventors and producers’ as weaving and basketry are associated with ‘gendered technologies’ and ‘imagined stereotypical activities’ in which ‘male involvement is usually minimal’ (Soffer et al. 2000:512, 524, emphasis mine). Positioning end-products and decorations as a symbolic language through which ‘active constructions of social identity’ such as status, ideology and gendered characteristics are constituted and represented (Soffer et al. 2000:517), a gendered discourse is established regarding the relation between the iconography on the female figurines and the assumption that, almost exclusively, women were responsible for textile production.

28 Maharaj (1991:77) refers to this logic as persistent and inescapable ‘handed-down notions of art practice/genre/gender’, something I return to in sections 2.5 and 2.6.
29 Also referred to as the Stone Age.
Brumfiel’s work (2006) on cloth, gender, temporal continuity and change foregrounds the inadequacy of confounding variability and understandings about the past in present-day scholarly inquiry.\textsuperscript{30} Her research into symbolic markers of women’s weaving in one geographical area but across three distinct cultural and temporal contexts spanning some 3000 years\textsuperscript{31}, challenges an implicitly held assumption regarding the ‘striking continuity in women’s work as weavers’ (2006:862, also Brumfiel and Robin 2008:6). What appears to be an unchanging and uniform activity presumed to be practiced only by women, in essence masks diverse and distinct variations of a cultural and gendered nature. These differences, Brumfiel states, are ones that ‘we ignore at our peril’ whether in archaeological or anthropological understandings (2006:862). It contributes to the persistence of certain knowledge claims about textiles and an acceptance of particular perspectives as unproblematic (Brumfiel 2006:862). Her study exemplifies the gendered interpretation of textiles in another way: throughout time men have created and produced textile art and craft objects, yet the connotation of textiles as ‘women’s work’ signifying in particular women’s experiences is deeply ingrained, thereby essentialising the cultural practice and its place in the wider socio-cultural context under investigation (Brumfiel 2006:872, see also Beaudry 2006). In the following section I consider this aspect in relation to understandings about textile-making in Australia.

2.2.1 ‘The D’oyley Show’ and women’s ‘gentle’ arts

The D’oyley Show: an Exhibition of Women’s Domestic Fancywork took place in Sydney, Australia in 1979. Curated by the Women’s Domestic Needlework Group (1979, hereafter WDNG 1979), the exhibition aimed to promote women’s needlework and decorative handicrafts which, in contrast to publicly esteemed art forms such as painting and sculpture, had largely been muted as female leisurely pursuits (figure 3).\textsuperscript{32} 

\textsuperscript{30} While an in-depth discussion on historical and cross-cultural comparisons is not the focus of this thesis. I discuss Brumfiel’s study here to highlight the peril of presuming continuity over time and across cultures regarding practices that are found to abound within particular cultural and temporal contexts. See also Brumfiel and Robin (2008).

\textsuperscript{31} Respectively class in Ancient Maya, gender in Aztec Mexico, and ethnicity in 20th century Mesoamerica.

\textsuperscript{32} The Women’s Domestic Needlework Group formed in 1976 and set out to collect women’s domestic needlework and related artifacts, and amassed approximately 700 pieces. A collective was formed in 1978, to ‘categorise and analyse imagery and prepare the work for an exhibition’ so as to bring ‘an increased knowledge and appreciation of the creative achievements of women both past and present.’ From: http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/collection/database/?irn=369902, accessed December 3 2012. Prior to that, the Australian Exhibition of Women’s Work (1907) was held in Melbourne in 1907. Sponsored by Lady Northcote, the then Governor-General’s wife, it contained 16,000 exhibits from
Figure 3
The exhibition showcased the unique features and ‘complex language of needlework symbology’ (Maines 1974/5:xx) and challenged socially ingrained attitudes towards such ‘feminine’ endeavours, a connotation that automatically positioned these works as culturally marginal and ‘denigrated’ (WDNG 1979:4). The exhibition outlined how the history of textile-making had remained ‘largely divorced from the ‘arts and crafts’ mainstream during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods’ (WDNG 1979:7), and that by the late 19th century legislation had defined certain areas such as creative textile pursuits as women’s work and relegated them to the domestic sphere (WDNG 1979:60).

One section of The D’oyley Show addressed the presence of the first textile industry in Australia which, in turn, was directly associated with penal institutions. Amongst the female convicts who arrived from Great Britain in the late 18th century were ‘milliners, mantua makers, lace weavers, silk weavers, needleworkers, a glove maker and a maker of children’s bed linen’ (WDNG 1979:58). Another section contained original magazines illustrating that where many women lived in relative isolation in the vast Australian countryside, such publications formed an important channel for disseminating information and a source through which ‘[n]eedlewomen received emotional support and advice from other needlewomen’ (WDNG 1979:60).34 However, The D’oyley Show also brought to light the virtual non-existence, until that time, of public records and documentation on the history of needlework made by women in Australia. Almost no catalogues, textile pattern books, or actual works could be attributed to individual designers and makers, and public recognition in the form of historical records was shown to be sincerely lacking (WDNG 1979:7; Isaacs 1988 6-7).35 Nevertheless, the exhibition also highlighted that the making of textiles crossed social boundaries of class and religion, sharing many of the characteristics of so-called folk art, in particular where it concerned ‘the close relationship of its production to everyday life; the collective basis of the work; the expression of the whole community female artists and craftspeople in every state. It showed that needlework was one of the most prominent aesthetic spheres for women within conventional artistic genres. See also Toy (1988).

33 A mantua (from the French manteuil) is a loose gown, bodice or skirt. An article of women's clothing, it was worn predominantly in the late 17th century and 18th century.
34 Such recurrent ‘vogues’, seen in the present day popularity of knitting circles and the like is also evident in the current popularity of pattern and instruction books on knitting, quilting, embroidery, decorative clothing and other decorative textile work for the home and fashion apparel.
35 The main source for ascertaining the history of middle and working class fancywork and popular needlework designs in Australia were needlework pattern books and journals acquired by women at the time. These publications were not deemed to be valuable historical records, and few were kept.
of the work; and the *common language* which does not rely on literacy skills’ (WDNG 1979:4, emphasis mine).

In *The Gentle Arts: 200 years of Australian Women’s Domestic and Decorative Arts* the Australian anthropologist Jennifer Isaacs (1988) surveyed the history of women’s decorative arts and material culture within the context of the 1988 Australian Bicentenary celebrations. Following a national advertising campaign, women were invited to bring out their ‘hidden treasures’, handicrafts and items of material culture held in private collections and cupboards in the women’s homes. According to Isaacs, an ‘avalanche’ of letters, objects and photographs arrived from all over Australia in response, from which she documented the history of women’s textile culture and creativity in *Gentle Arts*. It included reproductions of textile objects such as domestic and church-related needlework pieces, war-time textiles and commemorative banners. Isaacs notes that this was the first extensive survey on work done within the home and states:

> Women’s interest in domestic arts overrides social background and class. Mention the work of a grandmother and the bottom drawers would open - CWA members, participants in the homecrafts section of the annual agricultural shows, feminist theoreticians or contemporary crafts practitioners all reacted similarly – their gaze would soften and with great pride the treasures would be produced. Each person hoped that they would, at last, be able to expose for public praise and recognition the art works, handmade with love by women within their own family (1988:7).

In similar vein, in *The Fabric of Society: Australia’s Quilt Heritage from Convict Times to 1960*, quilt historian Annette Gero (2008) documented a rich and diverse quilt heritage. She writes:

> It covers quilts made by convicts, Governors wives, Gold Rush immigrants, wealthy shop owners, dressmakers, church ministers, WWI diggers, people who were forced off the land during the Depression, WWII Australian prisoners of war, rabbit trappers, artist's wives and finally last, but not least, Mum who made all her children's clothes and never threw anything away. The thread that holds this patchwork of Australian history together is that each story

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36 Textile crafts such as spinning, weaving and sewing were shown to be ‘domestic textiles’ as part of ‘household industry’, however, it also extended beyond domestic realms. In *The D’oyley Show*, hand-sewn and appliquéd banners reflected commemorative occasions of national (and patriarchal) importance, union marches and political affiliations, and war-time items such as socks and caps that women knitted for male soldiers. The influence of Indigenous culture was also evident, with items inspired by Aboriginal motifs, and Aboriginal fibre crafts influenced by the (at times forced) introduction of European techniques and materials (WDNG 1979:25). See also, for example, Schilo (1993), and McLeod (2005).

37 Country Women’s Association.
told includes the making of a quilt. It draws on women's memories, diaries, their letters to relatives, official records, newspaper and magazine articles reflecting the current domestic influences and, of course, the old magazines which provided the quilt patterns.38

Jones (2001) also links textile and text in her research on textiles-making in eighteenth and nineteenth Century Australia and women in colonial and convict times. She states:

Textiles, themselves, and the products created from them, are both a material and an imaginative source frequently incorporated into written texts. Clothing has been described as “a form of unspoken language, even though its signs have no fixed interpretation but a multiplicity of meanings” (2001:386, quotation marks in original, emphasis mine).39

Although only mentioned briefly here, these and other historical publications, including texts pertaining to American society, explore the nexus of textile-making and ‘women’s role and place’ in socio-cultural life (Yocom 1990:86). They include Hedges (1982), Ferrero et al. (1987), Bank (1995) and Cabeen (2007) on the historical narrative of American women in the 18th/19th century who used textile crafts as a means of decorative aesthetics and self-expression, and the documentary Hearts and Hands (Ferrero 1997) about 19th century quilting in the USA. In the latter, diaries, letters, photographs and textile objects such as quilts, lace, clothing and embroideries are used to piece together ‘the primary materials of women’s lives’ (Ferrero 1997:np). Placing women’s textile-making as ‘a vehicle through which women could express themselves’ (Hedges 1982:295), these authors consider personal as well as broader geo-social and cultural circumstance. For example, textiles made for domestic use included quilts sewn by women during the long months that their menfolk were at sea, with quilt patterns symbolising a compass, waves or ships. Women also sent ‘part of themselves off to war’ by way of hand-made quilts which became ‘a talisman’ to sons, sweethearts and husbands who served in the armed forces (Ferrero 1997:np). During war times, sewing circles and church groups were transformed into war-aid societies where women’s contributions included hand-made blankets, socks and shirts to clothe the soldiers. Due to the scarcity of materials, yarn became a valuable ‘currency’ and textiles were valued in the public realm (Ferrero 1997:np). In the 18th and early 19th century, quilts and other textiles reflected women’s experiences of abolition, patriotism, politics, protest and social justice. For example, at a time when popular

39 Here Jones quotes Maynard (1994:41), Fashioned from Penury: Dress as Cultural Practice in Colonial Australia
magazines encouraged women to take up lace-making as a form of socially approved leisure, suffragette leaders urged them to put their needles to use in protest of women’s oppression. In this context textiles formed part of an ‘organising strategy’, seen in union banners, mass knit-in protests in taverns in support of the Temperance Union, and as an expression of non-violent protest in underground resistance movements (Ferrero 1997:np). Elsewhere, Tobin and Dobard (2000) outline the role of quilting as a subversive strategy during the era of slavery in the USA, a time during which women’s handmade quilts were hung over verandas and on clotheslines to signal a safe-house and safe passage for African-American slaves on the run to freedom.  

These texts illustrate the historic presence of textile-making in private and public domains and reflect women’s life experiences, circumstances and events that often remained unknown. Yocom (1990:87-88) notes that ‘[w]hat looks ordinary is not. ...[and] what appears to be “just” women’s quilts or “just” women’s sewing is, indeed, much more’, it shows ‘the presence of women in that history...through needle and thread’. As an alternative to scholarly documentation, textiles gave form to a legacy and became a way to illuminate ‘the lives of the people who made it’ (Bank 1995:11). As Ferrero (1997:np) notes, textile-making was a socially acceptable ‘channel for creative expression’, enabling women to establish connections as ‘friendships had a way of growing as women worked together to finish a quilt’ and, as women stitched ‘they talked out their lives and problems’ (also Bank 1995:63). Importantly, as women’s creative endeavours arose from everyday circumstance in unassuming ways, their textile work was not received as art. Instead, it was sanctioned and codified as being ‘appropriate conduct’ for women, a view which came to shape later validations of textile creative practice, in part ‘because the experiences its draws on are timeless’ (Bank 1995:9).

In her study on historical quilts, Floyd (2008) considers seemingly unrelated meanings of quilt-related narratives in women’s fiction to explore the process by which historical
accounts are constructed and employed ‘to arrange a relationship between past and present’ (2008:39). Drawing on de Certeau’s (1988) considerations regarding contemporary adaptations of historical meanings in literature, Floyd notes that the construction and arrangements of historical narratives regarding textiles determines ‘an order in which they must be read’ (Floyd 2008:38, italics in original). She likens this determination to the making of a patchwork quilt which ‘can be understood in just this way, as histories that “arrange” traces of the past into engaging “curiosities” [and] by stitching together various attractive remnants of the past within a grid’ in order to make an aesthetically pleasing whole (Floyd 2008:38, quotation marks in original).

Narrative, historical and fictional discourses on textiles frequently reflect the ‘shared experience of women and the situation of the woman artist’, but such ‘visions of entrapment’ have routinely ‘limited the questions we ask of [in this case] quilt stories and allowed us to miss some of the associations’ that women, throughout history have assigned to their work (Floyd 2008:39). Importantly, Floyd argues that by placing the presence of the past in a contemporary context in uncritical ways, transpositions of the narrative significance and gendered associations of historical accounts remain unquestioned. As a result, historical accounts, including those mentioned here, can come to affect discursive understandings about the significance placed on textile creative practice, or lack thereof, in contemporary cultural life.

This summation is not to infer that these understandings and particular attention on the material presence of the past are by definition incorrect. As Floyd clarifies, it is imperative to consider how the process by which earlier discourses are applied in contemporary social inquiry is, although frequently unchallenged, inherently politically

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41 Floyd’s reference to ‘dominant understandings’ of the meaning of in particular in relation to gender (Floyd 2008:40-47) also filters through in popular culture, fiction and the media. Non-academic sources, including the recent popularity of textile art and craft magazines and books, attest to the saliency and popularity of hand-made textiles, including in Australia. Examples include Jacobs (2007) on the sociality amongst women in their knitting circle, Murphy (2002) who considers the links between knitting, spirituality and creativity, and Bartlett (2005) who narrates a friendship between a textile scholar and a knitter who as relative strangers connect and through their shared, albeit very different interest in, textiles. March’s (1986) Three Ply Yarn narrates the intertwining life stories of three women in post-war Britain in which weaving-terms such as warp and weft form metaphors representing close-knit networks, relationships and women’s experiences. Snelling (2002) writes about the healing ‘power’ of quilting in her novel about women who gather to raise money for their local hospital through the making of a king-sized quilt, while the movie How to Make an American Quilt (1995) encodes the narrative significance of textiles in relation to individual expression, group formation and collective identity amongst women. Other texts, such as Nargi (2006) and Cornell (2005), illustrate that it is women (and hardly ever men) that are publicly seen to knit, sew, and crochet. These sources highlight a nostalgia pertaining to the ‘specific relationship between tradition and the present’ of an embodied femininity expressed in textile practice (Floyd 2008:47).
and culturally charged. It includes narratives pertaining to cultural memory, identity, and the realm of experiential and gendered knowledge production (Floyd 2008:55; see also Maharaj 1991:77; Glassie 1999; Domanska 2006). Floyd’s work is of interest in the framework of my thesis as it makes visible how earlier discursive understandings about the intersection of textile material culture and gender have come to influence many contemporary narratives and understandings in Australian anthropological thought and practice.42

2.3 The anthropology of material culture

The anthropology of material culture is among the ‘most dynamic and innovatory areas of anthropological research’ (Tilley 2001:286). It attends to the unique contributions that visual culture and objects make; not as an appendix to more ‘traditional’ anthropological approaches, but as integral to conveying individual and collective understandings about culture, identity, and socio-political comment (Banks and Morphy 1997). Csiksenzentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) and Miller (1994, 2008) emphasise that meaning, as a reference to cultural significance and sociality, is inherent in quotidian objects that articulate both epistemological and representational concerns by way of visual matter that brings to light ‘aspects of objectification’ and ‘forms of a cultural process’ (Miller 1994:399) from which understandings about socio-cultural and political contexts and the production of cultural knowledge can be gained.

In a widely referenced text, Appadurai (1986) applies the terms ‘the social life of things’ and ‘things-in-motion’ to denote the agency residing in human-made objects that illuminates their social contexts. This agency, writes Appadurai (1986:6) is ‘inscribed’ by people by way of the objects’ forms, their uses, their trajectories’; the key is to determine how and where in the trajectory of objects meaning and sociality is made and exists. Myers (2004) also considers the social agency in and of objects and suggests that an object obtains meaning by an ‘exploration of the distinctive social contexts of its production and circulation’ (2004:203), whereas Miller proposes a perspective in which ‘material objects are viewed as an integral and inseparable aspect of all relationships’ (2008:286). Miller emphasises that the ‘everyday’ is at once also aesthetic (2008:286-7). He defines an artefact as ‘a means by which we give form to,

42 These are the kind of insights Arnett et al. (2002:7) have referred to as ‘academic pigeonholes’.
and come to an understanding of, ourselves, others, or abstractions such as the nation or the modern’ (1994:397).

As these sources illustrate, a focus on material culture positions people as actively engaged with the production of meaning. A pertinent ethnographic example of the connectedness between maker and objects is provided by Hoskins (1998) in her study of people’s life stories among the Kodi in Indonesia where people spoke about their link and felt connection to material objects as a way of ‘constructing the self’. Material objects thus act not only as representations or products of a technological process, but as ‘meaning endowed objects’ (Seremetakis 1994:7) constituting metaphors of cultural processes that embody memories, personal experiences and narrative. Hoskins’ study considers how people’s identities and objects are ‘mutually entangled’ and fluid, an approach that Tilley (2001:264-7) suggests ‘challenges a view of life histories and people’s identities being somehow self-evident and complete in themselves’. He writes ‘[m]aterial forms are practically, or performatively, as well as discursively produced, maintained and given significance’ (Tilley 2001:260). Glassie contributes to this viewpoint by noting that material culture and artefacts are like stories, akin to a vehicle for thoughts, actions, and meaning in a manner that resists verbal communication (1999:46). He notes:

Were we to call things made of words and things made of earthy bits both texts, we would be reclaiming for material culture a term like many others – line, verse, and stanza, for examples – that was borrowed from the realm of handwork to clarify verbal actions. The text is an entity woven together out of other entities, a textile, and the process by which texts are created, through mental and physical effort in social life, brings material culture and language into connection (Glassie 1997:45).

In similar vein, Gell (1998) also argues that art is a practice of signification, in the sense that beyond the object itself, the process of making conveys significant symbolic and empirical meaning. It makes evident the relevance of the maker in social inquiry, and positions her practice at the heart of creative significations by which cultural meaning is performed.43

43 With reference to Gell, Tilley (2001:260) notes that ‘[f]or Gell, art is not so much a matter of symbolizing and communicating as doing things in the world, creating social effects and realizing outcomes’. Kevin Murray, former Director of Craft Victoria, reflected on the significance of the handmade as follows, when I interviewed him in 2007: ‘I see [it] as a form of material expression. ...what makes [textile] craft distinct is the fact that it is a tactile medium. ...a medium good for experiencing, expressing intimacy and fragility, mortality, more physical kind of ideas…I see the handmade as a
2.4 Textile material culture: The view from anthropology

The 1983 anthropology conference *Cloth and the Organization of Human Experience*\(^{44}\) was pivotal in foregrounding a focus within the discipline on textile material culture. Aiming to ‘document the significance of cloth traditions in the historical development of the world’s societies’, the conference organizers suggested that these traditions were as ‘central as agricultural production’ to social and academic inquiry (Schneider and Weiner 1986:178). The subsequent anthology *Cloth and Human Experience* (Weiner and Schneider 1989) became a key anthropological text with contributions by art historians, historians, and anthropologists on the socio-cultural, geo-political ritual and symbolic properties and significance of cloth in small-scale and industrial societies.\(^{45}\)

In particular, it explored the communicative meaning and temporal significance of cloth and its role in consolidating social relations, including as ritual object, economic commodity, indicator of familial kinship and inalienable meanings, and the symbolic yet tangible threads between ancestors and the living. Elsewhere, Schneider (1987:414-5) has argued that, although the potency of textiles lies in its capacity to ‘say’ things that words cannot, it is problematic to interpret ‘textiles as ‘texts’. She cautions against an ‘overemphasis on the message in cloth’ as this implies that ‘producers and users belong to the same, discrete culture and share in its codes and meanings’. In similar vein, Schneider and Weiner (1986:181) suggest that one cloth can hold multiple layers of meaning and that these meanings can change and transform over time. Although Schneider and Weiner (1989:4) make the important point that ‘the study of cloth can illuminate women’s contribution to social and political organization that are otherwise overlooked’, theirs was ultimately more descriptive than analytical in nature, and recounted a chronological development from the hand-made to more technologically advanced productions of cloth. Such an approach risks a hierarchical assessment pertaining the study of textiles based on methods of production and technical complexity, rather than highlighting the enduring (and gendered) validation placed on hand-made textiles in many societies today, including in Australia. Furthermore, their research focused on textiles as finished products; an emphasis favoured over positioning creative practice as an act of experiential knowledge production from which rich ethnographic data can be gleaned.

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\(^{44}\) Sponsored by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, it was held in Amenia, New York, USA.

\(^{45}\) See also Schneider and Weiner (1986) and Schneider (1987).
The interrelation of gender, cultural practice and textile material culture as a site for contextual analysis is documented in a number of relevant ethnographic studies. March (1983), in her study on weaving, writing and gender among the Tamang in Nepal, links the gendered practices of social exchange, exemplified in roles for women (who weave) and men (who write) to wider networks of descent and the positions of both women and men in a socio-cultural setting in which woven cloth is a mediator of gender and an embodiment of spirituality. She shows that while in cultural practices different gender-marked views and roles exist, women and men operate interdependently within the same symbolic and social order. In similar vein, Ahmed (2002) writes about the tradition of weaving practices among the nomads of eastern Ladakh and the extent to which these reflect the physical, socio-economic and cultural environment in reference to gender, kinship and social relations. She shows that, for the nomadic people weaving and wool-oriented activities touch all aspects of life including the relationship between livestock, social and symbolic structures, and gender is less of a differentiating, yet still noticeable factor as both women and men weave but on a different type loom for cultural reasons related to gender.

MacKenzie’s (1991) study on gendered meanings embedded in the creation and symbolism of looped string bags called ‘bilums’ among the Telefol people in Central New Guinea shows the production of bilums to reflect social networks and relations, and women as central to their creation and cultural practice. Via ethnographic data pertaining to a fibre technique called ‘looping’ which shows the integral contribution of women who ‘loop’ the bags that are subsequently decorated by men, she highlights the complementarity of gender as productive of culture. It includes gendered agencies and interests, roles and competences that position women as ‘an integral part of society and central to it’ (MacKenzie 1991:22); a key point also made by Strathern in *Gender of the Gift* (1988). Ng’s (1987) study of women’s woven textile production in Minangkabau society considers the social value of status and prestige obtained by women in their roles as transmitters of cultural knowledge. Her findings place women centrally in the production of (material) culture and rather than ‘mute symbols’ described through patrilineal systems (Ng 1987:36). Beck (1978), in her ethnography on the position of women among the Qashqa’i nomadic pastoralists in Iran, concludes that women are recognised for their cultural skills and knowledge in weaving highly valued carpets following intricate and culturally significant designs and patterns. Others include Messick (1987) who explores women’s domestic weaving in North
Africa, Kerlogue (2000) on the complex nature of interpreting textiles as a medium of communication and embodiment of culture in Malay Sumatra, and Haji Wahsalfelah (2005) who examines the role of traditional woven textiles in the construction of tradition and national identity in Brunei Darussalam. Boow’s (1986) study on symbols and status in central Javanese batik examines the relationship between practice and symbolism. Largely informed by a theoretical framework that positioned visual categories as an approach to the study of representational systems (cf. Munn 1966), Boow suggests that cultural meanings about, for example, religion and the socio-cultural order were represented in hand-made batik cloths. This emphasis occurred through the abstraction of material world objects into patterns and symbols that reference this meaning.

Sciama and Eicher (1998) present a rich collection of ethnographic studies on the intersections of gender and material culture through the vantage point of beads and bead makers in a number of African communities. Their focus on the trajectories of material culture objects and the significance beads hold to their makers and in socio-cultural life, attends to process and the meaning of making the beads. Ethnographic data by Renne (1995) pertaining to central Nigeria investigates the enduring cloth traditions and dyeing practices as an embodiment of gender, ritual and social connections in the face of social and economic change. Important in light of my thesis is her mention of gender ‘in the making’ and the importance of textiles as symbols expressing collective as well as personal identity. For Renne, tradition is not static but continuously re-defined and evident in material culture and skills passed on through and amongst generations of artisans. Also in Africa, Brett-Smith (1984) researched bogolanfini, mud-dyed cloths and clothes painted by women of the Bamana tribe in Mali. Of interest here is that to the Bamana people, bogolanfini are ‘documents’ which are painted to conceal knowledge rather than reveal it. Concealment occurs through intentionally contained irregularities in the painting process as a means of recording knowledge that is visible to the initiated alone. This practice befits Bamana culture in which direct speech was traditionally ‘frowned upon’ and the act of speaking was ‘to render yourself naked and vulnerable in the face of a hospitable world’ (Brett-Smith 1984:136). Writing, as a suitable method of documenting knowledge was also rejected in favor of applying intricate and impenetrable geometric patterns on cloth, a practice constituting ‘metaphorical and ambiguous speech’ and resulting in a lasting visual sign in a body-covering that transcribed cultural meaning through cloth rather than through
the spoken or written word (Brett-Smith 1984:127-8). That the patterns were intelligible only to insiders made bogolanfini a ‘document’ of further significance and value in the preservation of Bamana culture.

While an exhaustive overview of ethnographic texts relating to textile material culture is not within the scope of this thesis, in anthropological contexts as I discuss them in this chapter, it is clear that the centrality of meaning in and of textile material culture is rarely disputed. A review shows that, resulting from cultural practices grounded in functional means, textile material culture mediates symbolic, socio-cultural and gendered orientations, ideational beliefs and value systems, and brings culture into view as few other forms of material culture do (Borgatti 1983:31-4; Weiner and Schneider 1989). What may appear as a finished product offers a unique vantage point from which it is possible to deduce personal and cultural narratives reflective of agency, complexity and subjectivity, and the performance of gender in socio-cultural life. Maihi and Lander’s (2005) book Every Kete Has a Story exemplifies this point poignantly through the portrayal of a rich store of information embedded in hand-woven vessels made by Maori women. These vessels, referred to as ‘baskets of knowledge’, are imbued with women’s memories, stories relating to familial and social kin networks, and the meaning of making in light of an enduring cultural significance evidencing women’s knowledge transmission.

A number of studies have attended to women’s engagement with textile-making to express their experiences and emotions relating to displacement, belonging and cultural continuity in diaspora communities. They include Peterson (1988) and McCall (1999) among Hmong women in a refugee camp in Thailand and in the USA respectively, who create decorative ‘story cloths’ using reverse appliqué stitch techniques. These cloths are considered to be ‘key texts’ narrating Hmong history, culture and daily life both in, and since leaving Laos (Peterson 1988:6). In the Australian context, Warin and Dennis (2005) show how Persian women, who fled Iran in the late 1970s and 1980s, attribute meaning to ‘their homeland and memory through the everyday practices of cooking and embroidery’. They suggest that for the women themselves making is central in both ‘recalling and remaking a sense of place’, in particular through stitching the symbol of the Cypress tree which represents a ‘continuation of life in place, and the continuation of place in life’ (2005:159).
Through the creation and use of utilitarian items including table cloths, curtains and cushions, the embroidered items engender a specific tactile and sensual engagement by which memory is evoked, embedded, and reproduced. Illustrating the nature of this remembering which is seen as a fluid and intertwined process, and the practice of stitching as an embodied experience, a key participant in their study remarked: ‘I started to sew, with every stitch we forget the sadness’ (Warin and Dennis 2005:162). Important in this study is the idea of sensory engagement with material as a primary tool; by handling the cloth, women not only remember but also engage with more painful memories. Extending the idea of cloth as a receptacle for memory, tactile and habitual engagement in this way constitutes an engaging of the social life of things (cf. Appadurai 1986), a process in which material items are not only finished products but ‘continue to have an active life’ as people engage with them in multiple and meaningful ways (Warin and Dennis 2005:163). Through stitching (and cooking), the social networks in which women were once embedded in Iran are re-created in Australian contexts and provide continuous threads of belonging and sociability in family life, amongst female friends and at communal events.46

The relevance of sociality and the parallels between aesthetic and cultural values are further highlighted in ethnographic studies by Ice (1984, 1993, 1997), Gabbert (2000) and Stalp (2007) who both consider quilting as a gendered leisure activity and pastime for ‘midlife’ women in small communities in the USA. They note that quilting, which constitutes mostly a hobby for the women involved, also enabled significant relationships and sociability amongst quilters and with others in their respective communities. Importantly, in these studies quilts are positioned not as finished cultural objects alone. Rather, the very process of quilting is considered as integral to the whole, as part of a multilayered, temporal and complex process. It involves the creation and use of quilts, the challenges of finding time and creative space for quilting in women’s everyday lives and the relationships that are enabled as a direct result of their quilt making and activities. Stalp (2007:5) writes that quilting is an ‘important

46 Whilst not an ethnographic study, Stitches, -Fare il punto (Vanni 2001) offers a gendered perspective on the material and visual culture of the Italian diasporas, migrant identity and the maintenance of cultural memory. She states: ‘Sewing, embroidering, weaving and crocheting are craft metaphors for the everyday and allude to the act of stitching together diverse, multiple cultural sensibilities and notions of belonging’ (2001:6). Others include Lawrence (2005) Jones (2003) and Mellor (1999) who utilized textile-making to relay diverse narratives of historical connection, colonialism and cross-cultural dialogue amongst women from vastly different geographical, cultural and ethnic backgrounds who participated in community arts projects in textile and fibre arts.
means of autonomy and identity development for midlife women, even as they practice a somewhat old-fashioned process of cultural production traditionally defined (often pejoratively) as “women’s work”. She also notes that women’s everyday and creative activities in the home have largely been a neglected area of study within social inquiry. Her research revealed a ‘hidden social world’ not readily visible to outsiders (Stalp 2007:46-7, 24). Stalp writes: ‘when one looks only at the art/craft distinction within quilting, the women making the quilts begin to disappear, and the finished product emerges as the central focus’ (Stalp 2007:30, see also Ice 1997; Gabbert 2000). This distinction and its associated gendered validation is a matter I consider in the following section, including the impact of the art and craft binary on textile-making, and the influence and contribution of feminist inquiry and critique.

2.5 The entanglement of textiles in the art versus craft ‘dialogue’

The categories of art and craft were once delineated in an equitable manner according to criteria concerning materials and methods of production (Perreault 2005:69; Sanders 2005). However, this changed when, due to the influence of ‘western’ aesthetic forms of social regulation and a subsequent structuralist approach to the ordering of certain artistic principles, an increasingly hierarchical ordering of fine art and decorative crafts came to the fore. For textiles, its inclusion in the realms of decorative aesthetics,

47 In contrast to Stalp’s mention of ‘midlife women’ and their hidden social world, Minahan and Cox (2007) write on the emergence of the so-called Stitch’nBitch movement, involving women who gather to knit in public, ‘third places’ (ie. not home or work), using predominantly new communication technologies to connect. They assert that an understanding of Stitch’nBitch is ‘informed by discussion of the Information Society, leisure and social connectedness, gender and technology through notions of the digital divide and cyberfeminism’ (2007:6, see also Stoller 2003). Whilst in this thesis I assert that textile-making is a form of creative production enabling sociality, connectedness and sociability in places other than women’s homes, a focus that includes detailed considerations pertaining to the explicit use of information technology as a ‘cyber/new way of connecting, is not within the scope of my research. For similar reasons I also do not include textile-making in the realm of community arts and artists working in the public arena (see for example Darlaston 2006 and Lawrence 2005).

48 Although a detailed discussion of the history of the art vs. craft dialogue, including the development of the Art and Crafts movement, the role of art history and the full extent of the influence of craft theory and its impacts in Australia is outside the scope of this thesis, it is imperative to address here the ‘links between aesthetic and historical significance, artistic merit, political and social identity, and an embodied experience of craft’ (Sanders 2005:101) to explicate the extent to which textiles has been entangled in this web and how anthropology has drawn on, and contributes to it.

49 This process bears much resemblance to Bourdieu’s work on the social distinctions of high and low art (1977, 1984) whereby the meaning and validation of objects and their practices of production are derived from the way in which they are embedded and reproduced in social structure. In Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste (1984), Bourdieu examined the persistence of class distinctions in contemporary French society, in particular relating to cultural judgements inherent in forms of prestige and cultural nobility among the middle classes. He states that ‘the distinctive power of cultural possessions practices...tends to decline with the growth in the absolute number of people able to appropriate them’ (Bourdieu 1984:230). This idea can be linked to the popularity and validation of textile practice. Besides attention to scarcity and value, Bourdieu’s work on distinction and cultural
everyday experience and the private sphere finds its origins in the Art and Craft Movement of the 19th century when, due to its ‘sheer accessibility’ to the general public, textile crafts were gradually deemed to be of lesser value than works of fine art (Sanders 2005:90). By the mid 1900s the notion of diversity had been firmly transcended by a hierarchy, and the separation of arts and craft including the devaluation of craft by art history standards was more or less entrenched (Fariello 2005:11-15; Cochrane 2006). As Bowker and Star (1999:319) point out, a classification is not of itself an explanation, and my concern in outlining this synopsis here is not to attempt to define in detail what constitutes art and/or craft, but to emphasize the effects of such classifications with regards to the breadth of cultural and aesthetic engagements, the conditions by which validations are sustained, and why. More specifically, it is important to underscore how ‘each category valorizes some point of view and silences another’, and the taken-for-granted nature of processes by which classifications order human response and interaction in so far that ‘categories are tied to the things people do’ (Bowker and Star 1999:283). This includes the disparities in the appraisal of activities linked to either leisure and non-leisure time, and the cultural, gendered connotation of activities such as textile-making in the public domain (ie. women but not men can knit in a doctor’s surgery).

In The Crafts Movement in Australia: A History, Cochrane (1992:xvi-vvii) outlines how the so-called craft movement developed ‘in tandem with the changing social patterns of the decades’ in the second part of the 20th century, and as part of discourses pertaining to ‘the relationship of the arts to Australian society’. She notes that ‘underlying all strands of art practice is a range of attitudes to processes, skills, materials, function and social purpose’ as well as a ‘particular attitude to a way of making things – an attitude to production’. Craftspeople centuries ago, she writes, ‘did not make “craft” – they applied it: they applied their craft (their skills, knowledge and capital highlights the importance of positionality in spaces that are inhabited by different groups, in particular as to how people and categories are valued and cultural practices are labelled (also Okely 1996:6). I take up this point in Chapter Four. Here I mention that adjudication of cultural capital is never innocent, but embedded in perceptions of the social world which designates value to the ‘objects of aesthetic enjoyment’ (Bourdieu 1984:xiv). According to Bourdieu, it is through a number of features, which function as ‘a system of difference’, that distinction between fields of ‘cultural goods’ are made possible, and as a result of the relational inscription between them, is reactivated in acts of appropriation (Bourdieu 1984:226). Elsewhere, Bourdieu states that ‘the use of words or oppositions that serve to classify, that is, to produce groups, depends on...the function pursued through the production of classes, whether mobilization or division, annexation or exclusion’ (1990:85). It is through the hierarchical divisions ‘between things, between people and between practices’ that a ‘materialized system of classification inculcates and constantly reinforces the principles of the classification which constitutes the arbitrariness of a culture’ (Bourdieu 1990:76).
imagination) to the making of vessels, ornaments, furniture, lengths of cloth – and paintings’ (Cochrane 1992:412). While this emphasises that both art and craft are inherently linked to a similar history regarding ideology and interpretative frameworks, gradually the public’s limited accessibility to expensive fine art forms in contrast to the widely available creative endeavours including textile crafts meant that the two came to be valued differently in socio-cultural life. For instance, objects of fine art such as oil paintings were ranked higher than every day, domestic crafts such as weaving. Textiles, which utilises materials mainly associated with craft became critically devalued as the ‘other’ within art history, art theory and the academe (Tilley 2001:60; Auther 2002; Sanders 2005:91; Fariello 2005:2; Cochrane 1992:49; West 2007:13-4; Ioannou 1992a, 1992b; Hardy 2005).

Writing on craft, creativity and critical practice, Rowley (1999:1) argues that the inherent link of craft to tradition lies at the core of its opposition to, and marginalisation from, art, which has been ‘concerned to break away from the shackles of tradition’ based on its separateness from everyday life and an increased focus on individuality since modernity and beyond. The notion of creativity, in the sense that it denotes practice and performativity will be explored in my discussion on theory in Chapter Three. Here I discuss the relationship of creativity and critical inquiry as it relates to an inequitable value system and the positioning of textiles as the ‘other’. As Jay (1991) reminds us, the problem with the principle of binary thought and dichotomous models is that categories that are mutually exclusive yet exist in relation to and reinforce one another are routinely ordered in hierarchical fashion. As the binary divisions are both the condition and the product of their functioning, cultural meanings and values assigned to one category are inherently grounded in relations of opposition with those in other categories. While the boundaries of art and craft classifications are ambiguous and the capacity for aesthetic experience and expression

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50 In her discussion on gender dichotomies, Jay (1991) refers to the constructed nature of transposable dichotomies such as ‘men to women’, ‘male to female’, and ‘culture to nature’ as the hidden ‘A/Not-A’ structure in social enquiry, by which the opposition to men (who are ‘A’) is taken as the determination of what constitutes womanhood (‘Not-A’) and all associated valuations of femaleness (Jay 1991:98; Ardener 1975:xviii). The encompassment and validation of the category ‘Not-A’, against that which constitutes ‘A’ disables the validation of ‘Not-A’ as an autonomous category (for example ‘B’), which could be valued as equivalent vis-à-vis ‘A’. Her argument is insightful with regards to the classification of textiles as craft, as opposed to what constitutes art, but also in relation to time, as outlined by Adam (1994) where a binary pattern of thought determines that if something occurs not in ‘serious’ or economic time, it is by definition assigned the label of leisure time, thought to contain activities of a recreational rather than of significant cultural value. This, I suggest, has been the case in considerations about textile-making in Australia.
is common to most human beings, it is most important to stress that the process by which this capacity is regulated and authenticated is socially constructed and politically charged. The manner in which creative expression is validated is intricately linked to the way in which they are perceived and understood (cf. Berger 1972) and how Australian society has, over time, arranged its forms of cultural knowledge. Textiles, as a tradition-laden medium with an ‘embeddedness’ in, and attachment to everyday life has routinely been assigned to the category ‘craft’ and, as a direct result, disqualified as a signifying artistic practice and prohibited from claiming a ‘provenance of value’ in artistic realms beyond functional and decorative aspects alone (Rowley 1999:1-3). On this topic, Sanders (2005:88) writes:

In questioning the common beliefs about art and craft it is important to consider the differences in how each maker takes into account her or his lived experience, the objects the maker forms and the material traditions from which his or her works emerge. These indeed are personal and political choices that continue to be undertheorized and/or fail to be discussed in serious art circles. Craft and its aesthetic experience, grounded in human need, are largely trivialized...as lesser art...within studies of art history, aesthetics, or criticism. I argue that separations are in the interest of those seeking to sustain class, race, and gender domination by means of formalist and traditional aesthetic theories that marginalize the craft experience and craft maker’s subjectivity (italics in original).

The link between gender, textile crafts and the validation of creative work involving seemingly trivial time and experience is exemplified by the experience described by Hardy (2005), a practicing textile-maker and educator who returned to university in Great Britain as a mature age student to study visual arts. In an environment she describes as one that privileged particular realms of knowledge over others, her experiential understanding of the potential of textiles as an expressive and aesthetic medium was repeatedly challenged within the academe, because her ‘intensive and extensive experience with cloth’ was not be validated and qualified as ‘tangible’ within a system that privileged certain knowledge claims and discounted others (2005:177). She writes:

The difference between art and craft has traditionally involved the cognitive transcendence of material and function. Craft remains tied to necessity and to the maker’s hand, as opposed to the maker’s intellect. The artist is credible by transcending the particularities of materiality. The craftsperson cannot claim the same transcendence and is therefore denied the same status (Hardy 2005:180).
Hardy argues for the subjective and the experiential as integral components of the construction of critical and creative knowledge. Whereas Stalp (2007) and Doyle (1998) focus on self-identified ‘leisure quilters’, Nelson et al. (2005) consider the gendered validation of textile making through interviews with twenty-five professional female Irish textiles artists. Thematically presented, their paper titled ‘More than just a little hobby’, narrates the women’s affinity with textiles, the gendered learning processes in their youth, the reasons why they engage in contemporary textile practice and how they perceive the recognition of their art in the public domain. Like Hardy (2005), their creative expressions were valued as little more than a craft-based hobby and of little cultural significance in the domains of what constitutes ‘real’ art. This is also a point made by Fariello (2005:17) when considering the historical status of textile objects in relation to the art/craft dichotomy:

The fact that women continued to create craft objects contributed to the perception that the objects themselves were domestic. Their creation in small, private studios, coupled with their subsequent use in the home, fostered an attitude that these were not real-world products after all (italics in original).

2.6 Textiles and feminist inquiry - the politics of ‘a socially approved femininity’

In my discussion regarding the devaluation of women’s textile-making within the paradigms of art history it is important to consider the contribution of feminist inquiry in challenging this devaluation in visual arts and craft discourse. With the 1984 publication of The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine, Rozsika Parker brought to light how embroidery at once functions to inscribe in women a ‘socially approved femininity’ and offers them a medium of signification to negotiate structurally imposed gender roles. Focusing on Great Britain, Parker exposed the contentious ways by which women’s contribution in the arts had not been validated within its proper context and how the intersection of women and textiles had, throughout history, become marginalised and assigned to domestic realms. Sanctioned in the public domain as containing socially approved activities for females, embroidery, which had once been a valued public form of employment practiced by men and women alike, moved ‘in-doors’ with the onset of industrialisation and became ‘indelibly associated with stereotypes of femininity’, this being a ‘social product’ that resulted in and enforced ‘behaviour expected and encouraged in women’ (Parker 1984:2-3).
Parker demonstrates the importance of attending to the reasons and constructs by which some activities are deemed ordinary and, by extension, marginalised in critical inquiry simply because they form part of everyday cultural experience and the domestic rather than public sphere. Outlining the inferior position of embroidery in the context of aesthetic and cultural validations of creative expressions, she notes that ‘[t]he art/craft hierarchy suggests that art made with thread and art made with paint are intrinsically unequal: that the former is artistically less significant. But the real differences between the two are in terms of where they are made and who makes them’ (Parker 1984:5, italics in original). Parker also makes a differentiation that is most insightful regarding the gender-based validation of textile practice, including in Australia. She notes the distinction between (a) the social construction of femininity; (b) lived femininity, this being a lived identity that can be resisted or embraced by women; (c) the feminine ideal, a historically changing concept of what women ‘should’ be; and (d) the feminine stereotype, a collection of attributes imputed to women and against which they, as a group, are measured, negating differences amongst women according to demographics and historical context. In noting this differentiation, Parker argued that ‘there is a significant difference between acknowledging the construction of femininity in the family and its maintenance in social instructions, and accepting the cultural representations of women imposed upon us’ (1984:4).

It is important that Parker’s text be read in the context of the political and social climate of the 1970s and 1980s during which the workings of sexism within societal structures became increasingly scrutinised for their impact on women’s (and men’s) lives, and the intersections of race, class and sex became matters of public discussion more broadly. In the 1970s, the aim of feminist critique pertaining to the arts was to demonstrate ‘that women were there at all’ (Evans 1997:69), to subvert the stereotyped categorization of women’s art (Parker and Pollock 1981), and to render visible women’s achievements in the realm of visual culture. Parker’s feminist analysis, which highlighted societal constraints placed on the meaning and reception of women’s artistic expressions, was grounded in a structuralist framework of investigation, a framework since challenged in social (and feminist) inquiry for its ability to reframe the categories it sets out to defy. Nonetheless, by exposing the degree to which women’s textile-making had been valued (or not) as culturally significant in public and academic discourse, her feminist scholarship exposed the socially approved conditions
of femininity embedded in textile-making and provided an impetus for a more critical examination of the plurality of styles and aesthetic works by women in creative textile practice, be these defined as art and/or craft.

Nearly thirty later, it is of interest to note that Parker’s text still holds relevance for people involved in textile practice; at the time of my research a number of those I interviewed or spoke with, including a lecturer in textile art at a university in Perth, referred to *The Subversive Stitch* when we discussed the present-day status of textile-based aesthetic works in the visual arts and Australian culture. This is not to say that Parker’s text stands alone: Parker and Pollock (1981, 1987), Aptheker (1989), Nugent (1995), Pollock (2003), Deepwell (1995, 2006), and Lippard (1995) are among those who sought to expose rhetorical knowledge claims about art made by women. They steadfastly positioned women’s experiences at the centre of critical feminist inquiry in the visual arts, with the aim to unveil muted assumptions and taken for granted representations. For example, Aptheker (1989:12) writes:

> To name women’s consciousness is to identify its webs of significance...to give examples of women’s cultures, to look at women’s poems, stories, paintings, gardens, and quilts *from this point of view* is to make women’s actions and beliefs intelligible on their own terms. It is to show connections, to form patterns. This is not to invent another theory of women’s oppression; it is to suggest a method of representations, a sounding a making visible (italics in original).

King (1992a: 15) writes that in visual culture and the arts, ‘gender is expressed in the rules about who is allowed to make all the things that surround us daily, about the values assigned to women’s making, and the way women are supposed to respond to artefacts’. She defines feminist art as a form of expression through which ‘women can

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51 Around the time of Parker’s publication of *The Subversive Stitch*, a number of women artists, mainly in North America and Great Britain, started to purposefully employ the textile medium in their work to advocate for a rightful recognition of what they termed ‘women’s art’ and to re-write history through cloth. Citing the work of feminist artist Judy Chicago (*The Dinner Party*) and Helen Shapiro’s art quilts in particular, King (1992b:178) notes that: ‘[t]hey used the materials that damn women’s works as crafts’, utilising traditional female crafts but ‘on that vast scale usually accorded to male monuments’, bridging the space between the realm of the fine art studio and the domestic sphere’. In doing so, they made political statements about the exclusion of women from the higher echelons of art (Cochrane 1992:368-9). It has been argued that the public reception of work that used textiles as a form of ‘alternative culture’ (Jeffries 1995:167) in order to subvert the patriarchal order and ‘communicate a resistant, often feminist perspective’ was neutralized, and in turn reinstalled the stereotypes of women’s worth within the art canon which had marginalized textiles in the first place (Deepwell 2006:78, see also Carson and Pajaczkowska 2000; Wolff 1990:67-82; Rankin 2006; Lippard 1995; Jeffries 1995:167-8). Deepwell (2006:78) notes: ‘The danger is always that this challenge will not be understood and that feminine stereotypes about women’s work will be enforced’. In similar vein, Sanders (2005:95) notes that ‘in seeking recognition for new or undervalued traditions, one always runs the risk of appropriation into the art/aesthetic/commerce mechanisms that have defined [its] marginality in the first place’.
speak their truths from their experience’. It involves art forms ranging from the ‘most prestigiously masculine, in order to make feminist statements’ to using ‘women’s ghettoized arts (normally used to corral the feminine in prettiness and passivity) to state a new womanhood’ (King 1992b:173-5). Similar to Parker’s argument in The Subversive Stitch as to the extent by which the category ‘feminine’ affected the validation of the textile-related work done by women, much feminist art criticism of that era focused on ‘the structural and ideological obstacles’ that existed for women in the arts, and the creation of a separate sphere in which women could be valued and express themselves independent of the dominant culture (Wolff 1990:68). If in the 1970s and 1980s the feminist art agenda was to counter the hierarchical gendering of artistic style and to amend the historical gender inequity by having women’s art recognised within the canon of art history, eventually feminist critique came to largely refute the binary discourse between ‘high’ and ‘menial’ arts, and ‘the segregation, by gender, of producing things’ (King 1992b:176; also Parker and Pollock 1987; Wolff 1995; Broude and Garrard 2005). As Pollock (2003:xxvi) observes in a re-evaluation of her 1988 Vision and Difference, there is a danger in limiting art made by women to a gender-based reading alone as it confines the maker ‘to what is projected onto her as her as her female gender from which derive (circumscribed) meanings in the artwork’. In other words, to say that women make women’s art is a reductive argument. It infers that they make art only relevant to women and that their creative expressions are inherently linked to their gendered identity as if both maker and the work can express or appeal to women’s experience alone. However, by foregrounding the signifying meanings women ascribe to their aesthetic and creative work, feminist inquiry has undoubtedly re-contextualised women’s practices previously relegated to the decorative or domestic margins. In doing so, it has facilitated ‘steady, cumulative effects’ and new insights regarding the nexus of gender and aesthetic expressions, including in social inquiry and scholarship (Aptheker 1989:173). Unlike other movements within the art-history discourse, feminist art focused on content and narrative rather than style, an approach that further also exposed stereotypical categorisations inherent to the art and craft dichotomy. One of the aims of feminist scholarship, as Lippard (2007:78) points out, continues to be the retrieval and inclusion of women’s perspectives, and to seek out ‘ways of bringing the details of daily life into the art context where they can be understood within a broader frame’.
2.7 Betwixt and between? Textile-making and anthropology

Morphy (1994) suggests that the problem of how art and craft is understood and (to be) defined is not new to disciplines dealing with the visual, including anthropology. Neither is the pervasive positioning of craft as ‘other’ to what constitutes art. As I raise in Chapter One, research in Australian Anthropology pertaining to textiles and fibre-based arts and/or crafts predominantly centres on Indigenous culture, involving items such as dilly bags, beanies, beadwork and baskets. Containing social, artistic, educational and economic relevance, these are objects made by Aboriginal women, many of whom share a ‘technical lingua franca’ of weaving, coiling and other techniques across generations and amongst various Indigenous cultural groups (West 2005:57-8). Usually working ‘together in small groups, sharing ideas and assessing each other's artwork’ (West 2005:57-8), women use local materials such as native grasses, emu feathers, seeds, pandanus leaves and natural dyes to craft a rich and diverse range of artistic and utilitarian items. These works, which are innovative and constantly evolving, are variously described as keeping culture strong through the interplay between tradition and contemporary embodied practice in which the act of making is akin to practicing culture and a way in which women ‘strengthen their identity’ and social bonds with each other (Hamby 2010:20). The resulting material culture objects such as baskets, for example, are referred to as a ‘portable canvas’ (Bolton 2011:13) and containers for narrative stories richly expressive of cultural identity, ancestral agency and connection to country. Importantly, women’s creative time and every-day making, described by West (2007:27) as ‘a sociable and culturally confirming way to relax’ is also widely and justly recognised as culturally and aesthetically valuable, including in anthropological research and inquiry (Hamby 2001,

52 The origin of this focus within anthropology may be due in part when, in the 1970s, the Aboriginal art and craft movement in Australia was boosted by substantial funds from the Crafts Council of Australia and the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts for the development of Aboriginal projects in remote communities in Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia. As West (2007:13) states: ‘Customary practices were supported though the emphasis was more on developing “adapted” craft enterprises based on new skills in weaving, crochet, pottery, batik and so on. From this time onwards the craft movement in Australia with its current trends and skills-base became intricately linked with Indigenous practice’. See also Cochrane (1992:240-1).

53 Speaking at the Alice Springs opening of the exhibition ‘Kuru Alala – Eyes Open’ in June 2012, Professor Marcia Langton, Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne, highlighted the significance and effect of the ancient stories that has inspired the fibre art works of the Tjapki Desert Weavers, and made the following remark: ‘This is what we who love art long for: we long for the art that makes the hair come up on the back of your neck.’ http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/grassroots-creativity-weaves-desert-into-life-20120624-20wu.html, accessed 20/12/2012. ‘Kuru- Alala – Eyes Open’ was launched in 2009 at the Gold Coast Art Gallery (which is where I viewed the exhibition) and toured nationally, finishing at the Araluen Arts Centre in Alice Springs in 2012.
2005, 2007, 2010; Watson 2003; West 2005, 2007; Bolton 2011).^54 However, as I have also pointed out, every-day textile-making by non-Aboriginal women routinely continues to be conceived as craft, something women do as ‘just a hobby’ in the domestic sphere involving leisure activities, and as being secondary or peripheral to more central issues in everyday life. Practicing similar techniques and methods, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women are, by and large, engaging in comparable activities, yet their work and making remains categorically valued in different ways for their cultural and signifying value in public and academic domains.

Anthropology and feminism share at times a post-structuralist approach to the destabilisation of meaning and authorship, yet the ‘awkwardness’ in the ‘relationship between feminism and anthropology, as discussed by Strathern (1987) indirectly points to the fact that the discipline ‘continues to ignore feminist anthropology in contemporary debates’ (Cole and Phillips 1995:2). In a paper titled ‘Rethinking the creative space: feminism and the “forgotten” artist’, Rankin (2006:380) notes:

> Every time an individual is consigned in discourse to a particular category or knowledge space, that person is effectively ‘re-created’ according to the perceptions and prejudices of the person doing the consigning...[and] the ‘truths’ that emerge become part of a developing myth that may itself be recreated and distorted with every telling.

Geismar and Horst (2004:5) discuss the ‘saliency of materiality’ in both academic inquiries and everyday life. They situate the study of material culture as ‘a potential bridge between domains of knowledge and experience, and therefore as crucial anthropological tools’. The point here, however, is the manner in which those tools are applied, and to consider how anthropological thought and practice has played a role in maintaining the traditional and value-laden categories of arts and crafts within material culture studies, and the inequitable value system involving women’s production of cultural knowledge through textile arts and crafts. While material culture is increasingly and rightfully recognised as mediating both symbolic and socio-cultural orientations, the structural and ideological problems that have prevented women’s recognition in the arts and muted their presence appears to have continued in certain anthropological discourse in which textile-making continued to be viewed as the

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^54 It must be noted though that within the Indigenous art sector, (women’s) fibre art and basketry remains largely ‘undervalued and less appreciated than paintings’ (Cunningham 2006:9). See also West (2005) and the paper by Acker and Altman (2007) titled ‘It’s all art, but still we have a 'Fibre Problem': economic reality, contested value and Aboriginal arts’.
‘gentle arts’ (Isaacs 1988). I suggest that this occurs not only because of particular theoretical approaches but also by way of frameworks of interpretation and analyses grounded in a representational logic which limit critical questions relating to textiles and its creative practices of production in social inquiry (Rowley 1992a, 1992b; Evans 1997:107). As Rowley (1992a:7-8) points out, for example, while post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonial critiques addressed ‘some of the theoretical concerns in the visual arts about marginality (…) it’s not good enough any more to use postmodern theory to interpret artworks, and then to fall unwittingly back on conventional modernist criteria of merit to evaluate the works’. M’Closkey (1995) also discusses this matter in her study on the devaluation, in anthropological terms, of textiles woven by American Navaho people. She concludes that this devaluation was due to the distinction made between high art and craft (a classification which negated the significance of female Navajo weavers and the value of their work) and which had been transposed from studies using such frameworks of analysis. Important in light of my research is her claim that ‘anthropologists have worked within the framework of this conceptual dualism’ (M’Closkey 1995:113) between art and craft which mutes contributions by certain groups in socio-cultural life.

Writing on artefacts and the meaning of things, Miller (1994:408) notes that:

> [i]n a sense artefacts have a ‘humility’ in that they are reticent about revealing their power to determine what is socially conceivable. Curiously, it is precisely their physicality which makes them at once so concrete and evident but at the same time causes them to be assimilated into unconscious and unquestioned knowledge.

Whereas McCloskey outlines how such a stance impacted negatively on the validation of American Navaho weaving by First American women, I suggest that in Australian anthropology it has affected and muted the recognition of textile-making by non-Indigenous women, whose activities are routinely perceived as ubiquitous and naturalized, devoid of what Bowker and Star (1999:299) refer to as ‘anthropological strangeness’ warranting further exploration from which new forms of knowledge might arise.

Of interest is that in Australian cultural life the popularity of textile-making, alongside a resurgence of the hand-made in general, has seen a steady increase in the last ten to fifteen years. With knitting hailed as the new yoga, Green (2006b:np) writes:
The ability to create with two sticks and a ball of yarn and derive mental peace from the process was once an undervalued ‘domestic art’, derided as ‘women’s work’. But knitting is undergoing a worldwide revival – not only because handknits are fashionable, but because of a resurgence in crafts, creative and stay-at-home activities. That resurgence is part of a move to simple living and a renewed appreciation of handmade goods.

In similar vein, Myzelev (2009:149) observes the increasing role of craft in contemporary popular culture, where activities such as knitting have been revived and rediscovered as a means to provide ‘balance’ between people’s busy lives. This includes the resolve to:

- dedicate some time to themselves. ... Dedicating time to such traditional, time-consuming activities promotes the idea of conscious choice, of being in charge of one’s life and time. Participating in these activities provides an outlet for relaxation, slowing down and taking in life’s simple pleasures (Myzelev 2009:149).

Besides a renewed interest in the handmade, traditional crafts such as knitting and crochet are also increasingly used by (mainly) women as a socially engaged and critical medium of expression and sociality through so-called knitting circles and textile groups, as well as in political and environmental activism including knit-graffiti and urban knitting (Rowley 1999; Minahan and Wolfram Cox 2007; see also Stoller 2003; Aris 2003; Gschwandtner 2007, 2008; Chansky 2010).

According to research by the National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA), ‘more Australians participate in creating visual art than any other artform’ (NAVA 2008:np). Other, government funded pilot studies on women’s participation in the

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55 According to a Craft Council of America survey, one in three US women could knit, while the number of male knitters was not reported (Green 2006b:np). In Australia, a number of public textile art initiatives intentionally blur the division between public and private space. The ‘Yarn Bombing’ movement (Moore and Prain 2009), and ‘Stitch ’n Bitch’ (Stoller 2003) and ‘Stitch and Yarn’ groups have appeared in all major cities over time. A growing number of these groups engage social media such as Facebook and the World Wide Web to promote their goals and activities. Among them are ‘Knitting Nannas Against Gas’ (N.S.W.) who ‘peacefully & productively protest against the destruction of our land and water by exploration & mining of Coal Seam Gas & other nonrenewable energy’ (see [https://www.facebook.com/KnittingNannasAgainstGas/info](https://www.facebook.com/KnittingNannasAgainstGas/info)). Another group is the Melbourne based community organization Yarn Corner, ‘one of the world’s largest yarn bombing groups with over 500+ local and international members, who come together to yarn bomb large projects in Melbourne Australia’ (see [https://www.facebook.com/yarncorner/info](https://www.facebook.com/yarncorner/info) and [http://www.yarncorner.com.au](http://www.yarncorner.com.au)).

56 According to a statement made by NAVA’s Executive Director Tamara Winikoff in a presentation at FEHVA in 2008 in Bangalow NSW, 650,000 people in Australia created some form of visual art while 450,000 people engaged in craft works at that time. In 2013, figures collected by The Australia Council found that ‘almost 2 million adults make crafts like woodwork, jewellery and ceramics,...Creating visual arts and crafts is also the most popular form of creative activity by Australians, with one in five participating’. Source: [http://artfacts.australiacouncil.gov.au/](http://artfacts.australiacouncil.gov.au/), accessed June 12, 2013. The popularity of craft in Australia is also noted in a 2007 report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics: in addition to
arts, including in Western Australia (Rogers, Baldock et al. 1993) and Queensland (Swanson and Wise 1994) have considered organisational, managerial, exhibition, and participatory principles. Concerned with the nexus of art-specific mediums and the validation of art works based on gender, these studies established that women formed the mainstay of arts and cultural industries but that their activities were structurally disadvantaged. It included the realm of textile arts and crafts which was under-recognised, under-valued and stereotyped as ‘an artistic endeavour’ expressing ‘a woman’s voice’ while all too frequently given only ‘domestic connotations’ (Rogers, Baldock et al. 1993:100). The authors emphasized the need for more adequate knowledge about, and critical and theoretical writing on, women’s varied cultural practices by way of small in-depth studies that are art-form and gender specific (see also Cochrane 1992:317). Katter (1995) and Nugent (1995) also discuss the frequent disjuncture between cultural meanings embedded in material culture on the one hand and its validation in the wider society on the other, largely as a result of classificatory systems pertaining to art and craft.

As the literature on, and the popularity of textiles attests, it is not that textile-making as a sphere of cultural activities has been absent. Rather, ‘specific categories and internalised particular circumstances’ have been adopted (Fariello 2005:16), in which both textile makers and objects appear to be objectified in a socially constructed hierarchy whereby, in critical inquiry, ‘classed, raced, gendered and sexualized identifications’ are at once embedded and muted in aesthetic, coded and pervasive forms (Sanders 2005:89; Auther 2002:8; Marincola 1995:38). Sanders (2005:94) states that ‘[t]he devaluing of women’s work (needle crafts, weaving, ...quilting, etc.) has been a way to sustain the dominance of male-controlled visual art production, whereas Auther (2002:8) points out that classification, whilst a feature of human behaviour, is ‘never without consequences’. Rowley’s (1997a:xix) critique of ‘assumptions of significance’ is insightful here in revealing the ideologies underpinning the process of outsider evaluation of artworks in a manner that conflates their classification and validation, placing constraints on a just recognition of, in this case, women’s experiential engagement in visual expressions. Wolff (1990) helps to further extend this analysis, both in terms of the visual arts and the concept of ‘women’s art’, a
concept that has, at times, been lauded within feminist art critique as a liberating notion. The history of most cultural forms, says Wolff, is grounded in the history of men’s work, be this art, music, architecture, and other forms of cultural production that has muted the voices and expressions of women. But, she notes ‘there is no way in which those who are marginalized by the dominant culture can develop alternative cultural forms other than from their basis in that culture, for this is where they learn to speak, where they are socialized, and where they enter culture as gendered subjects with the ability to communicate’ (Wolff 1990:70; see also Ortner 1996; Moore 1986).

Textile is matter, a material and tactile form of culture. Stemming from the Latin word ‘materia’, matter is ‘the substance from which something is made’; in etymological terms it refers to ‘material of thought, speech, or expression’, something ‘to be of importance or consequence’. To conceive of textile as matter and textile-making as a ‘language of materiality’ (Millar 2007:7) is to think of it as a substance of both signification and significance embedded in cultural practices and contexts. Little (2004:1) foregrounds a similar approach when she writes that creative textile-making has ‘evolved from a rich tradition of practice informed by process’, whereas the American textile artist Ann Hamilton has expressed it as follows:

How do we understand what we know but can’t name? We are born into material as we are born into language; they are of each other, yet we inherit a perception of them as separate. It is difficult for words to contain our somatic perception, our senses of touch and smell, yet we are impatient with experiences whose forms aren’t readily nameable. Allowing language to be tactile and knowledge to be felt is the process of my work (in Koumis 2000:18).

Textiles and fibres are unique, ‘doing’ things that other visual mediums, including those used in the arts and crafts, cannot (Story 2004a; Gabbert 2000). In expressive and materials terms, textiles can be cut, dyed, pleated, draped, wrapped, twisted, gathered, stitched, printed, torn and ripped; when folded they conceal; and by unfolding they reveal a surface, expose an embeddedness, invite an engagement, including touch. In its visual, symbolic, tactile and physical manipulations, cloth engenders, it has a vocabulary of its own. While factors such as context, materials, technique, scale, and purpose of the piece have over time influenced its categorisation as either art or craft, I am also interested in the increasingly cross-disciplinary currents that reside in the medium’s folds and appear to be at play. In my conversations with

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research participants, it became evident that for many women the classification of
textiles in either the bounded domains of arts or crafts was not a clear-cut or readily
accepted proposition, such definitions being far from stable or inclusive of their
creative practice which many situated somewhere ‘in between’.

In a thesis that formed part of her practice-based PhD in visual arts, British textile
scholar and artist Polly Binns (1997:9) placed her art work in ‘a zone which in critical
terms lies between Fine Art and Textiles...interwoven and enriched by both
disciplines’ while Cochrane (in Attiwill 2000:34) advocates the invention of ‘a new
terminology through which to address objects that are functional, ceremonial,
decorative or ornamental – as well as those that might be termed personally
expressive’. Others such as Marincola (1995) have commented on a trend within the
visual arts whereby fabric is manifested as fine art in such a manner that it transcends
the traditional categorisation of arts and crafts based solely on materials. Marincola
notes artists’ commitment to ‘stretch the seams’ and ‘explore whatever material seems
appropriate to the articulation of their overall concerns’ in the production of conceptual
works that ‘straddle the gap between high and low, fine and applied art as well as
home and the world’ (1995:36-9). However, she also comments that:

\[t\]he ‘blurring of categories and co-option of “craft” nonetheless retains the
associated prestige of high art. In other words, while a material boundary has
been crossed, a categorical divide continues to assert itself (Marincola

In this context, the work by Perreault (2005) is helpful, suggesting a breaking down of
the categories art and craft by using the terms ‘craftworks’ and ‘craft art’ to reference
aesthetic work grounded in ‘particular material and technical traditions along with
function and/or decoration’ (2005:73). Important in light of my discussion he
comments that ‘[a]t and utility need not be at odds; they may dovetail. The esthetic
[sic] does not preclude the practical, nor the practical the aesthetic’ (Perreault
2005:73). Rather, the dividing line might well become ‘a dotted line’ (Perreault
2005:69), considering that ‘what we call crafts now is different from what used to be
called crafts’ (Perreault 2005:73; see also Attiwill 2000). In Contemporary Art and
Anthropology, Schneider and Wright (2006) consider new possibilities for ‘dialogues’
between art and anthropology. They state that within anthropology ‘there is a history
of apprehending objects and actions of all kinds as if they were texts’ (2006:5). They
advocate the arts as a form of knowledge production rather than aesthetics (alone), and
for its inclusion within anthropological inquiry as an expression of embodied meaning through ‘doing’. ‘The relationship of experience to understanding is vital’ they say, and for anthropology the task is to consider the distinction between ‘the desire to embody the experience of others’, and the discipline’s leaning towards text-based critical analysis. Working in the space where text, embodied knowing, subjectivity and doing meet, is one they refer to as ‘productive tension’ (Schneider and Wright 2006:16-7).58

In The Art of Looking Sideways, Fletcher (2001) envisages the space between things or categories as substance rather than a vacuum or a fraught terrain. To exemplify his point, Fletcher references the Japanese word *ma*, which can be roughly translated as the space between two structural parts, an ‘interval which gives shape to the whole’ but which is neither here nor there in terms of binary thought (Fletcher 2001:369; see also Seiki 1977:16). Originating in music and applied in Japanese culture mainly in relation to wooden architecture, *ma* is much more than an empty space, a pause or an absence; rather, it relates to ‘rhythm’, and constitutes a consciousness of place deriving from an intensification of vision, a space of substance that takes place in the imagination of the people who experience it. Defined as experiential, this concept is not unlike Homi Bhabha’s notion of ‘third space’ (1994), an alternate zone that again transcends the dichotomy of binary thought. Rankin (2006) also suggests an alternative to the persistence of hierarchical constructions and writes that ‘the unthinking acceptance of

58 In a similar approach, albeit in relation to place and nativity, Appadurai (1992) uses the term *polythetic* to denote an approach based on the assumption of ‘resemblances’ between places, involving ‘overlaps between not one but many characteristics’ of their respective ideologies, and thus ‘blurring any single set of cultural boundaries’ thought to exist between them. Without such boundaries, Appadurai argues, the separation that lies at the heart of any binary model becomes ‘impossible (1992:44). In my research, a number of sources exemplify this approach. *Textile: the Journal of Cloth and Culture* (UK), first published in 2003, brings together research in textiles in a dynamic and distinctly academic forum and intersects a number of research foci, including art and craft, gender, identity, and practice as situated within the broader contexts of material and visual culture. In Australia, a number arts-centered conferences, such as The Space Between conference at Curtin University in 2004 and the Cultural Strands/Woven Vision conference in Perth in 2006 have highlighted the increasingly cross-disciplinary nature of critical inquiry and dialogue surrounding textiles, art, anthropology, and social inquiry by way of through papers and presentations by practicing artists, curators, educators and academics advocating the potential of textiles and fibre art as powerful metaphors, signifiers and interpretive tools. *Narrative Threads* (2006), an oral history project involving eight female British artists who employ textile-making as their primary medium in their art offered useful insights in relation to ethnographic fieldwork. Participants in the project spoke candidly about their life ‘with textiles’, and their contribution to developing teaching curriculums, research and scholarship in Great Britain. Via multiple permutations that apply fibre and textile materials as a visual narrative to relate cultural stories, connection to place, sense of identity, and cross-cultural dialogue, sources such as these provided useful background material for my study.
binary constructions, regardless of origin, can lead to a reductive polarisation of
discursive space, negating the possibility of a more accommodating continuum on
which ‘real’ individuals may find a meaningful place’ (Rankin 2006:385). The thought
of a meaningful and experiential place is one I propose for textile-making: not as art
or craft, but as occurring in a space (necessary) to give shape to the fullness of
women’s aesthetic engagements and experiences in textiles, beyond the nature of
boundary making classifications. Such an approach also incorporates research
occurring across disciplinary boundaries, including between anthropology and socially
engaged visual expression, informed by a tactility of material and knowledge through
process, and reflecting the outlook of women.

2.8 Summary
The authors and sources mentioned in this chapter attend in varying ways to the
cultural significance of textiles and their makers through the study of actual textiles,
material culture and literary texts that have been concealed in the folds of their
respective social, historical, cultural and theoretical contexts. It is evident that the
study of textiles and textile material culture is positioned within and across a wide
range of disciplines, highlighting the breadth of interest in social and visual inquiry.
While variables clearly exist in methodology and approach, none dispute the
poignancy and potential of textile material culture as ‘speaking texts’ (Elsley
1995:230). Examination of the literature also brings to the fore the disjuncture between
private endeavours and public and academic validation that exists in relation to textile-
making today. A determined link of textile-making endeavours to tradition, used as a
source of representations in the present, has informed the classification of textile-
making as a decorative craft, while feminist critique in particular exposed how textile-
making has long been validated as a female accomplishment and categorically inferior
to what constitutes art. A focus on textile practice as a research tool and a process
proposes a bridging of, on the one hand anthropology of the visual and, on the other,
visual practice itself. This approach, as a guiding line of inquiry in my research, offers
a shift in focus; transcending the finished product, exhibition display, or visual ‘text’
alone, towards unearthing a more internal narrative and contextual understanding of
processes inherent to the creation of the text. I take up this discussion in chapter Three
where I further situate the role of anthropology in theoretical and methodological
considerations. I suggest a theoretical framework of engagement with creative practice
and the visual as embodied expression beyond representation.
Between the idea and its expression there’s an uncertain gap, and it is in that gap that the work begins to be shaped

(Rowley 1992b:63)
Chapter Three  

Theoretical dimensions and intentions

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I discuss the main theoretical influences that inform this thesis. In addition to concepts and frameworks from a variety of sources examined in Chapter Two, I have drawn on the work of feminist theorist Judith Butler in particular, as well as practicing artist and art theorist Barbara Bolt, social scientist Barbara Adam and, to a lesser extent, Pierre Bourdieu, Sherry Ortner, and Lorraine Code. The theoretical model of performativity, as outlined by Butler, has been applied and extended to cultural forms and social inquiry such as dance studies (Threadgold 1999), visual art (Bolt 2004), and the anthropology of art (Biddle 2007). I discuss these in light of my approach to the meaning of making in women’s creative textile practice.

I begin with Butler, whose analyses provide helpful and critical insights into the concept of performance and of performative acts as domains of cultural intelligibility, including re-significations of discursive representations of gender appropriate practice. In this context, I also consider Bourdieu with regards to concepts of practice and socialisation. How these concepts have been applied by Butler, Bolt and Adam in particular, including via practice as a signifying and emergent mode of inquiry and process of aesthetic communication, furthers theoretical considerations regarding textile-making, and the intersections of process, performativity, agency, materiality, gender, place and time.59

3.2 Judith Butler: Gender as performance and performativity

Butler’s ideas regarding power and discourse, fields of knowledge production and the consequential effects of so-called ‘truths’ extend those of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Writing in the late 1980s, for Foucault the aim was to lay bare the influence of discursive discourses in ‘regimes of practice’ which, although neither true nor false in themselves produce the effect of being accepted as truth. He also sought to bring complexity to social analysis ‘so that the acts, gestures, discourses which up until then had seemed to go without saying becomes problematic, difficult, dangerous’ (Foucault

59 Others who have engaged with and extended Butler’s work include Jagger (2008), Parker and Sedgwick (1995), Threadgold (1999) and Järviluoma et al. (2003).
Butler employs this argument to heighten attention to gender, in particular in the context of queer studies and feminist critique. Culturally constructed and shaped, gender is habitually thought of as a human given. Embedded through the process of socialisation and enacted through behaviour sanctioned as appropriate to one’s (self)-ascribed gender, the performance of gender is both informed and enforced by the socio-cultural framework in which it is located. Butler proposes that to conceive of gender as prediscursive is problematic in a circulatory way as it inscribes cultural practice as ‘destiny’ and/or as ‘natural’ upon passive subjects by way of fixed categories or labels, such as textile-making being assigned to women’s work.

In broad terms, Butler argues that when culture is conceived as determinant of the order of things, the anticipation of cultural practice and meaning is circumscribed, particularly concerning ways by which they are attributed, produced and inscribed in the first place. In other words, when gender is regarded as a cultural inscription instilled to designate ‘the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established’, it creates ‘a politically neutral surface on which culture acts’ (1999:10, italics in original).

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1999), Butler poses a critique of structuralist discourse in which ‘the very thinking of what is possible in gendered life’ (1999: viii) is fundamentally limited by such habitual and pervasive presumptions. Here Butler seeks to counter ‘those views that made presumptions about the limits and propriety of gender and restricted the meaning of gender to received notions of masculinity and femininity’ (1999:viii). Such a restriction is particularly evident in the meanings and instabilities of the constitutive nature of gender categories, whereby certain so-called ‘minority’ gendered practices are marginalised, including in feminist critical inquiry. According to Butler, such inquiry, while challenging the discursive gender systems, has routinely worked with(in) its prevailing parameters (1999:194). Placed within, but critical of feminist literary theory, *Gender Trouble* offered a different perspective as it intentionally aimed to ‘provoke critical examination of the basic vocabulary of the movement of thought to which it belongs’ (Butler 1999:vii).
For Butler, gender is a cultural performance, a staged event, at times enforced, whose structuring discourse affects performativity; that being the process whereby identity is embodied by people and experienced through certain repetitive enactments, including habitual practices and custom. The performative act brings into being or enacts that which it names and by extension marks the constitutive or productive power of discourse (Butler 1993:170-1, 1994:33). Thus, performativity is grounded in ways and means that precede and guide the performance and its performers, while performative acts take place in contexts whereby subjects hold more or less a level of competency and agency in dialectical relationships with others. This aspect of Butler’s work on gender, practice and guiding principles that influence people’s actions, bears some resemblance to certain ideas of the French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu. I discuss these as they help situate the cultural representation of, and discourses about, women’s textile-making as discussed in Chapters One and Two. More specifically, Bourdieu’s work on cultural practice and societal structures that guide and influence the ‘natural’ order within the fabric of cultural life and sociality informs understandings about the extent to which textile-making is a gendered activity routinely understood as a female endeavour.  

3.3 Bourdieu, *habitus* and the field of cultural production

Bourdieu conceives of cultural practice as social conduct grounded in the nexus between societal structures that guide people’s actions on the one hand, and their individual and collective agency to act according to experience and interest on the other. His ethnographic fieldwork in the 1960s among the Kabyle, a Muslim Berber society in Algeria, focused on systems of kin networks, social relations, and the negotiation of public and private spheres according to culturally inscribed codes, of which gender was one (1977). His later research among the middle classes of secular French society explicated the extent to which socialisation, social status and cultural capital were reflected in people’s cultural patterns of consumption and their engagement with objects of aesthetic enjoyment, including material culture. His theory of practice, defined as a ‘dialectic between an organizing consciousness and automatic

\[\text{In Chapter Four I consider this aspect in an ethnographic context, via women’s narrative experiences of textile-making, including the learning of skills, in their respective lives.}\]
behaviours’ (1990:80) proposed a way to explain and account for these and other social conduct and cultural patterns in society.61

For Bourdieu, performance is at once a representation and enactment, a bringing to life (1990:72-3). However, his argument rests on the premise that society is characterised by particular structural schemes and traditions that instil social formations and behavioural patterns through which ‘meaningful practices’ and ‘meaning-giving perceptions’ are generated and maintained (1984:170). A central principle of Bourdieu’s work on practice is the concept of habitus, a disposition of guiding indicators, including those relating to gender, which is principally constitutive and representative of social interaction and cultural life. Including thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions, ‘whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production’ (1990:55), the habitus is ‘constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions’, including the way individuals orient themselves in relation to specific social fields and practices, and the possibility to account for these actions in critical analysis (1990:52).62

If people’s interaction with the social and symbolic order presupposes cultural competence to negotiate this order in the first place, Bourdieu surmises that this competence is instilled through a naturalised process of ‘associated learning’ (1990:67) routinely instilled from childhood onwards by way of ‘sheer familiarization’ (1990:74), such as textile-making as an activity that women tend to learn from female kin. The habitual transference of ideas and skills over time and by way of ‘a slow process of co-option and initiation’ into the socio-cultural field to which it is attuned, flows from an embodied and a ‘taken-for-granted sense’ about the social order of things (1990:68). The essence of this ‘logic’ is charged with meanings and values in such ways that ‘the dialectic of expressive dispositions and instituted means of expression’ tend to bring into being its own confirmation and form durable

61 Bourdieu’s theory of practice, from which I summarise the primary ideas and frameworks relevant to this thesis, are charted principally in Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977) and The Logic of Practice (1990).
62 To illustrate this point, during ethnographic fieldwork in Algeria, Bourdieu observed the extent to which social practice amongst the Kabyle occurred by way of a culturally inscribed social coherence, in that social categories and classification (which in themselves are socially produced) organised people’s perceptions of their world. In light of my thesis, the underlying order to this coherence could be located in every aspect of sociality, including people’s interaction with material culture objects such as household things, dress, and agricultural implements, religious adherences, as well as cultural rituals and everyday activities, how and where to sit, and the division of activities and social spheres according to gender and age.
dispositions (1990:71-4). This is not to suggest that individuals are without agency or creative initiative, however, Bourdieu suggests that agency remains at all times governed by the structuring logic set down in the *habitus* which, as an enculturative mechanism, generates iterable ways of being and doing while keeping in place the social institutions and symbolic order from which their authority is drawn (1977:21; 1990:55). The logic of practice, according to Bourdieu and within the framework I develop below, infers that what we do is ‘always perceived through categories of perception’ (1990:78), configured in the ‘systematic application’ of gendered meanings and values, which in turn generate practices ‘that are organized in accordance with the same rationality’ (Bourdieu 1990:74). This governance of dispositions instils in subjects the inclination to ‘cut their coats according to their cloth’ and, through practice be complicit in processes by which the anticipated becomes realised (1990:65). As a result, gendered workings of practice take on a seemingly naturalised status and are made intelligible, become foreseeable, and taken for granted such that they are routinely not questioned (1990:58).

In the textile framework of this thesis, this latter point is an important one. Transposing the gendered distinction described by Bourdieu to textile-making, the *habitus* of social knowledge which weaves and shapes the ‘natural’ order within the fabric of cultural life and sociality in Australia determines that textile practice occupies a cultural space which is foremost defined by gender. Rarely questioned and only ‘disturbed’ when not adhered to, textile-making is routinely understood as a female endeavour. In Chapter One, I illustrated this with the example of seeing two men knitting and chatting while they both wait for doctors’ appointments at their local surgery, a scenario that is

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63 Geertz has made a similar point in his discussion on socially ‘established structures of meaning’ within socio-cultural contexts (1973:12-3). Guided by these ‘structures of signification’ (1973:9), he notes that people signify the symbolic order and express value systems, which in turn are reproduced by their very actions.

64 To illustrate this point, in *The Logic of Practice* (1990) Bourdieu describes in great detail people’s practices in the management of an olive grove in order to illustrate the ‘natural’ and systematic nature of the application of gendered meanings and values; what men do, what women do; gendered roles and domains, and how inherently naturalized, yet socially constructed these things are. Whilst describing action and practice, Bourdieu does not seem concerned with exploring deviance in behaviour concerning typically ‘female tasks’, or ‘male tasks’. Rather, he states that the conditions of existence and intention of the *habitus* include that it tends to ‘ensure its own constancy’ (1990:60), and ‘the incorporation of the dispositions associated with a particular social definition of the social functions assigned to men and women come hand in hand with the adoption of a socially defined vision of the sexual division of labour’ (1990:76). Domestic tasks are automatically assigned to women, and when women carry out these tasks, they are seen to ‘just do’ them. When men carry out the same activities, however, this is seen as a case of men performing ‘female tasks’ that unsettle the social order (Bourdieu 1990:78).
socially unsettling and calls into question the accumulated information of Bourdieu’s *habitus* (1990:60-1). To see two women do exactly the same thing, however, is an unquestioned cultural scene of two people who are passing the time of day. On the one hand, this example sits well within Judith Butler’s argument of gendered subjects as constituted, and gender performed through ‘doing’ yet it also confirms Bourdieu’s notion of the *habitus* which shapes the ‘natural’ order of things and people’s expectations within the fabric of cultural life (cf. Naji 2009).

A danger with this kind of gendered validation is that it effectively locks practice into an attitude or approach that reduces people’s individual and collective cultural knowledge to a mere descriptive instrument of representation akin to a way of thinking about practice, rather than practice itself. As a consequence, the chance of expressing the very essence of practice can be lost and, intentionally or unavoidably, leave ‘unsaid all that goes without saying’ (Bourdieu 1990:91).

In this regard, the philosopher Lorraine Code (1995) employs the term ‘rhetorical spaces’ to speak of fictive locations, whose imperatives not only structure but also limit the kinds of utterances that can be voiced within them. Rhetorical spaces are sites where the allocation of epistemic authority becomes manifest and sanctions who counts as culturally knowledgeable and what counts as known. Code’s analysis of knowledge claims regarding the signification of culture necessarily encompasses a discussion of representation which, as Butler argues, is a controversial concept. Representation is at once operational and a constraint in the way knowledge and subjects are defined and reproduced by a habitual language, and a vocabulary that is determinant of the expressions that might be made and the questions that might be asked. In this context, it is important to also consider how representations of textile-making are positioned in a variety of contexts including those in which the significance women assign to their creative work has remained muted. Code calls into question the authoritative nature by which the process of muting occurs and women’s epistemic and experiential knowledge is negated. She notes:

The withholding of authoritative epistemic status from the knowledge women have traditionally constructed out of their designated areas of expertise affords a particularly salient illustration of gender politics at work [regarding] women’s accumulated knowledge and wisdom. Its subjugation and trivialization can be explained only in terms of the structure of power and differential authority encoded in the purity demanded by ideal objectivity. This knowledge cannot
attain that standard, the supposition is, because it grows out of experience, out of continued contact with particularities of material, sensory objects – and it is strongly shaped by the subjectivity of its knowers: women (Code 1991:68-9).

Textiles are routinely represented as women’s work which, as I showed in Chapter Two, is traditionally associated with the domestic sphere and leisure time. Such a viewpoint rests on a particular constitution of the socio-cultural world and the implementation of the habitus as performance, in which ‘practices are seen as no more than the acting out of roles’ intended to emphasise the ‘natural’ social order (Bourdieu 1990:52). For Butler (1999) and Code (1991, 1995), any subjects cast within a framework of societal determinants and regulated by the structures of representational discourse are ‘by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures’ (Butler 1999:3). Representation becomes a descriptive as well as a ‘normative function’ which can either ‘reveal or distort what is assumed to be true’ (Butler 1999:2) as a result.

Bourdieu opines that through sustained and repeated rituals, citations and gender appropriate acts, discursive meanings about gendered domains and activities are inscribed and maintained, and in their performance enforce the legitimacy of gendered cultural domains and representations. For Butler, the theoretical crux of the relation between representation and conduct is to untangle the performativity of the acts of representation from hegemonic representations, and to not collapse the distinction (1997:22). To cast this deliberation in the context of this thesis, textile-making is routinely associated with the domestic sphere but to say that women only engage in its practices at home is clearly incorrect.65

3.4 Practice and signification

My contemplation of practice and agency, thus far, builds on previous chapters regarding representation, textiles and gender, including in anthropology, by which both the context and culture of practice are cast in more or less taken-for-granted, rhetorical understandings. Like Floyd’s (2008) argument focused on the influence of past discourse on present-day understandings, Bourdieu notes that the habitus re-produces practices, both individual and collective, ‘in accordance with schemes generated by

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65 Diamond (in Parker and Sedgwick 1995) discusses how ‘women’s performances’ are routinely conceived as ‘performances of femininity’. However, the link should never be assumed. (see Parker and Sedgwick 1995:15-6).
This not only ensures ‘the active presence of past experiences’, but constitutes practice as predisposed and grounded in ‘the principle of continuity’ that functions as a generator of ‘symbolic acts’ (1990:54, 64, 95). Of relevance here is that Bourdieu extends practice to include people’s enduring relationships with material culture when he states that the *habitus* merges ‘the relational experiences and the practice of structured actions, objects, spaces and time’ (1990:79):

one has to situate oneself *within* “real activity as such”, that is, in the practical relation to the world, the preoccupied, active presence in the world through which the world imposes its presence, with its urgencies, its things to be done and said, things made to be said, which directly govern words and deeds without ever unfolding as a spectacle (1990:52 italics in original).

More specifically, a focus on the making of material culture in relation to practice brings to light Bourdieu’s consideration of time and temporality in relation to process:

> Practice unfolds in time... Its temporal structure, that is, its rhythm, its tempo, and above all its directionality, is constitutive of its meaning... In short, because it is entirely immersed in the current of time, practice is inseparable from *temporality* (1990:81 emphases mine).

Of tremendous value to my research is that Bourdieu’s emphases encouraged me to show how the women with whom I worked engaged with material items that embodied significance for them, in a multitude of ways that facilitated connections to making, in place and over time, as individuals as well as a collective.

Butler notes the parallels between her work regarding the ritual dimensions of performativity and Bourdieu’s notion of the *habitus*. She examines the intersections between practice, structure and tradition in epistemological discourse, in particular where practice shapes the subject in terms of the socially inscribed body and corporeal understandings. Furthermore, she locates agency, conceived as the capacity for, and process of, reflexive practice and signification, within the capability of the subject and states that it ‘cannot be isolated from the structure and its associated dynamics of power’ in which it is culturally embedded (1999:195). However, unlike Bourdieu, Butler asserts that agency, which informs cultural identity, is ‘not fully determined by culture and discourse’ but asserted through a process of signification and performance that inevitably becomes naturalised (1999:195, italics in original).\(^\text{66}\) Identity, for

\(^\text{66}\) My concern here is Bourdieu’s emphasis on the overarching structure which always determines practice, and on the *habitus* as an acquired system of generative schemes which ‘engenders all the thoughts, all the perceptions, and all the actions consistent with those conditions, and no others’
Butler, is not a premise but ‘asserted through a process of signification’, and may thus be ‘alternately instituted and relinquished’ according to one’s interest and the ‘purpose at hand’ (1999:196). Where Bourdieu argues that the habitus conditions the possibility of any and all performatives, for Butler, it is the performative that accomplishes ‘an action that generates effect’ (Parker and Sedgwick 1995:2-3). The performative signification (and its effects), Butler notes, ‘is not signified at a given point in time after which it is simply there as an inert piece of entitative language’ (1999:197), but it is open to change.

Butler’s argument for a more performative and process-centred approach to agency necessitates a view of sociality as a more dynamic interaction, taking into account social structure, agency, experiential knowledge and the signifying potential of cultural practice. The model she employs is based on a poststructuralist understanding of subjectivity in which performative acts are understood not only as representing the identity of the actor, but ‘as constituting that identity as a compelling illusion, an object of belief’ (Butler 1988:520, italics in original; see also Jagger 2008:21). That gender is continuously performed points to the radically unstable nature of gender categories that are enforced and shaped through practice (Butler 1999:194). Butler does not deny the categories as such, but challenges the discursive mechanisms that frame the representation of gender categories and legitimate certain gendered behaviour deemed appropriate in cultural life, whilst ‘other’ or ‘marginal’ behaviours are disqualified.

(1977:95, 82-3; 1990:55, emphasis mine). From this it flows that subjective aspirations and motivations, expressed in practice by way of creative initiative, diversity and individual choice remain at all times guided by logic set down in habitus and appear ultimately to emphasise ‘an essence that seems to pre-exist them’ (1990:55). In a sense, Bourdieu suggests that the habitus makes questions of experiential knowledge and meaning about practice redundant, not only concerning the creative expression inherent in practice, but also in the interpretation of creative expressions and works (1990:58).

Other theorists have also attended to the ‘field of the performance’ and its ‘structuring effects’ on performativity. For instance Parker and Sedgwick (1995:15) note that a focus on performativity ‘might permit more nuanced understandings of the relations between what have been blandly, confidently disguised as “text” and “context”’. In cultural life, performance is routinely conceived as a space or interaction which is separate from everyday life; linked to theatre, the theatrical, even the extravagant, and the self-indulgent (Parker and Sedgwick 1995:4-5; Threadgold 1999).

This is also noted by the feminist literary critic Wolff (1990) whose work on the idea of ‘feminine sentences’ critically examined the notion that women’s textual vocabularies can exist in ways outside, and thus not bounded by, structural discourse that routinely marginalises this gender-specific form of expression. Wolff argued that ‘there is no way in which those who are marginalized by the dominant culture can develop alternative cultural forms other than from their basis in that culture, for this is where they learn to speak, where they are socialized, and where they enter culture as gendered subjects with the ability to communicate’ (1990:70).
Like Butler, Sherry Ortner (1996) positions practice beyond a representational and notionally inscribed frame in which subjects structure their social actions without negating a practice-placed social system. Her actor-centred appraisal of practice emphasises the need to consider how people ‘make’ their world and constitute culture (1996:1), and suggests that all people are ‘authorised and knowledgeable social beings’ from which knowledge originates (1996:9-10). Ortner does not dismiss the importance of the role structures play in social actions, or that practice is embedded as part of a wider cultural system which is shaped by historical, political, and socio-economic conditions. Rather, she argues for the need to centre the operation of agency in the mechanisms by which culture is constituted and enacted. Ortner’s focus on agency stresses the notion that social actors ‘enact the game as they simultaneously are defined and constructed by it’ (Ortner 1996:20). The very act of ‘making’, prominent in her use of the term ‘making gender’ (1996:4, 18) infers that people take an active part in the production of cultural knowledge creation and signification, and that social structures are not a given, but produced and re-produced, or indeed transformed over time in, and as a direct result of, practice and social action. Ortner’s appraisal on the performative nature of gender in cultural practice accounts for both the individual and the social, without reducing one into the other. Such an approach is relevant to the ideas and framework of this thesis. It stresses attention to, and recovery of, the subject in the framework of analysis, whilst attending to the representationalist logic and validation of visual knowledge claims, including in anthropology.

Ortner’s work further supports my focus on agency and the performative and emergent elements of practice and signification. The link between enactment and cultural identity can be conceptualised as a positional process, an ongoing practice of emergent articulations concerning one’s sense of origin or belonging within a group or context. It highlights the ‘making’ in practice and the expression of people’s agency in ways that are reflective of their lived experiences rather than being ‘imagined’ and represented in a static and normative way (Anderson 1991; Geismar and Horst 2004).

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69 My thesis is not primarily concerned with identity but it is a concept central to historical and contemporary narratives of (Australian) nationality and culture. Academic writing on culture and identity include Geertz (1973) on an interpretive theory of culture, Rosaldo (1989) on culture as process, Giddens (1984) on identity in the construction of society, Hall (1990) and Hall and du Gay (1996) on cultural identity as a process and a state of ‘being’, and Rutherford (1990) on identity in relation to the notion of ‘difference’ within society. Whilst not addressed directly in this thesis, these and other texts clarified my thinking on the significance of cultural analysis into people’s actual sense of identity through a process-centred approach that accounts for systems of meaning and social organisation.
Importantly, with regards to textile-making, it positions its gendered connotations not as a (foregone) conclusion, but as a starting point of inquiry and analysis, from which other things flow.

3.5 Making as a mode of inquiry - speech acts and the utterance

In Chapter One, I positioned textile making as an act of speaking through doing, a mode of inquiry using tactile means and a visual medium of signification to express meaning and experience. I defined practice as a mode of lived gestation through which understandings between ‘self’ and ‘other’ unfold, and everyday aesthetic engagements are understood, engendered and located. In talking with research participants, the importance of attending to how people make and signify meaning, both in the context of and beyond underlying cultural orientations and represented modes of socio-cultural practice (such as textile-making as a specifically female field of experience) became increasingly apparent. An actor-oriented, temporal and contextual emphasis on the relation between abstract constructs of gendered domains and the actual performative nature of such constructs by individuals, entertains the potential for subjectivity in people’s experiences of the enculturative social ‘text’ (Moore 1986). Such an approach underlines their performative agency in symbolic and creative expressions, of all kinds, in and about cultural life.  

This thesis and the questions that inform it are grounded in the very materiality of textiles, which differentiates it and at times stands in contrast to the fixed nature of text. The versatility of the medium - the materiality of cloth, threads, fibres, bobbins, and tools - and what can be done with it - can be conceived as ‘the corporeality of performance’, a medium through which people speak (Threadgold 1999:63). Butler’s work on signifying speech acts and signification further informs that view.

In Excitable Speech: a Politics of the Performative (1997), Butler examines how the act of speaking, including the use of language, body gestures and symbolic signs, is at

70 In her study on the gendered organisation and use of public and domestic space among the Endo in Kenya, Moore (1986) introduces the idea of the cultural ‘text’ as an instrument of social knowledge which represents the ‘ideal’ or ‘natural’ order of things, such as the delineation of space into ‘male’ and ‘female’ domains and activities. Transcending the enculturative function of the ‘text’ in people’s use (or non-use) of space based on gender, Moore considers how it is enacted or indeed re-signified through people’s practices and over time. In doing so, she highlights the dialectical interdependency of ideational structures which produce the matrix (‘text’) of society, and the ‘signifying representations’ of the ‘text’ by individuals who, as knowledgeable agents, constitute meaning though their actions whilst located within a specific social and structural context (1986:87, italics mine).
once performative and consequential, in particular in discourses pertaining to classifications, normative inscriptions and epistemic authority. Her focus is on the normative heterosexual classifications of gender which are inscribed and brought into injurious effect by speech acts that are grounded in reductionist discourse about ‘other’, so-called minority sexualities and alternative genders. She notes that being named, by way of such speech acts, is ‘one of the conditions by which a subject is constituted in language’ (1997:2). Elsewhere, Butler notes performativity as the power of discourse to produce effects through reiteration, be this through the repetition of speech acts or acting in a discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names (1993:13).

Preceding Butler, the British philosopher and linguist Austin (1962)71 outlined performativity as both linguistic and theatrical in his investigation on the linkage between causality and ontology in language and signification. Austin proposed that in order to grasp what makes a speech act effective and establishes its ‘performative character’, it must be situated with a ‘total speech situation’ or context (Austin 1962:52). Butler translates this emphasis as the need to understand ‘how certain conventions are invoked at the moment of utterance, whether the person who invokes them is authorized, [and] whether the circumstances of the invocations are right’ (1997:3). Butler’s point is that from the act saying something, certain effects follow. Utterances, these being akin to expressions made in and about a certain aspect of socio-cultural life, are repeated in time and their effects assume a sphere of operation that is no longer restricted to the occurrence and moment of the utterance itself; the terms of language thus effect a certain social existence (Butler 1997:3-5). Important in light of my discussion in Chapter Two regarding the validation of textile-making as steadfastly informed by past understandings (Floyd 2008; Parker 1984) is the point Butler makes regarding the temporality of linguistic convention. She notes that the often unanticipated dimension of speech acts is the extent to which those who are spoken about are positioned ‘out of control’; the effect is that such expressions beget misrepresentation. Women’s textile making is recognized as women’s work, but the frequently conventional terms and descriptions conferred make (only) a certain ‘recognition of existence’ possible (Butler 1997:5).

71 Austin’s How to Do Things with Words (1962) was an investigation into the linkage between causality and ontology in speech acts.
Adapting and extending Austin’s work on linguistic performativity, Parker and Sedgwick (1995) investigate how, and to what extent, ‘saying’ is ‘doing something’. Like Butler, they premise their argument on the concept that speaking, while routinely assigning symbolic meanings, has actual effects. The task, they state, is to distinguish ‘what is being said from the fact of the saying of it’ (Parker and Sedgwick 1995:7). Alongside Butler’s work on speech acts, this perspective suggests that whilst acts are performed, the speaker (about those acts), is not necessarily the only performer, yet the performatve meaning, impact and function may be created in and by the act of speaking. Depending on the speaker and the context, words ‘mean’ in different ways and are open to different interpretations. The distinction, between the performatve intention, the constitutive function and meaning, and the subsequent course of an expression in its effect, separates the act, the performer, its uptake, and the audience (Butler 1997:23; Parker and Sedgwick 1995:8-9).

Importantly, Butler also sees in the performatve character of gender the potential for re-signification and ‘the possibility of contesting its reified status’ (Butler 1988:520). Butler conceptualises this potential by emphasising the gap between representations and people’s signifying practices which opens the way for a ‘restaging and resignifying’ of what is represented in previously determinant contexts (1999:23).

Signification, Butler argues, is:

*not a founding act, but rather a process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects. In a sense, all signification takes place within the orbit of the compulsion to repeat; “agency,” then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition. If the rules governing signification not only restrict, but enable the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility ...then it is only within the practices to repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible (1999:198-9, italics in original).

Butler argues that the workings of the performatve ‘always depend on the intention of the speaker’ (1997:24, emphasis mine). For her, language is inherently alive: it enacts and has agency. Naming, a result of the workings of the performatve, enables a social existence yet it may also produce a response in turn, with intention. She notes:

72 Parker and Sedgwick’s (1995) edited volume *Performativity and Performance* also challenges the ‘tacit assumption’ that ‘the most interesting questions to bring to performativity/performance are epistemological ones’ (Parker and Sedgwick 1995:16). The contributing writers, they note, demonstrate a ‘refusal to take any aspect of performatve relations as definitively settled’ and ‘refrain from looking to performativity/performance for a demonstration of whether or not there are essential truths or identities, and how we could, or why we couldn’t, know them’ (Parker and Sedgwick 1995:14-6).
‘language is a name for our doing: both “what” we do (the name for the action that we characteristically perform) and that which we effect, the acts and its consequences’ (Butler 1997:8). It is in the very act of this speaking that Butler sees an opening: the potential for change and the refusal to ‘encapsulate’ the attribution language routinely describes. Quoting the work of author Toni Morrison, Butler states that language should never be a substitute for experience, but rather ‘arc toward the place where meaning may lie’ (1999:9). When put this way, the act of speaking has the potential to break down the binary between matter and language. Butler’s use of the term ‘utterance’ denotes this potential. The utterance is ‘a different kind of performative act’, a response not anticipated, and a re-signification breaking with prior discourse but ‘not in any absolute sense’ as the newly signified context is still always legible ‘only in terms of the past from which it breaks’ (Butler 1997:11-4). While the utterance is inextricably linked to the originating context, intentions and deployment, the act also elaborates a new context for such forms of speech. Butler (1997:14) notes:

The changeable power of...terms marks a kind of discursive performativity that is not a discrete series of speech acts, but a ritual chain of resignifications whose origin and end remain unfixed and unfixable. In this sense, an “act” is not a momentary happening, but a certain nexus of temporal horizons, the condensation of an iterability that exceeds the moment it occasions. The possibility for a speech act to resignify a prior context depends, in part, upon the gap between the originating context or intention by which an utterance is animated and the effects it produces (emphasis mine).

Butler stresses that, rather than collapsing speech into conduct or vice versa, it is imperative to realise that the gap that separates the originating context or intention from later acts and effects has auspicious implications. The interval not only makes repetition possible but when reconceptualised in ways that ‘open up the possibility of agency’ between speech and conduct, it becomes a way to rework and rupture assumed meanings, and restage and re-signify expressions in contexts that transcend those determined in dominant doctrines and discourse (1997:14-23). In other words, a focus on the utterance, including the pause as a space between contexts, explores ‘the space of this ambivalence which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which the subjectivation proceeds’ (1993:124). It explores how ‘saying is doing’, what possibilities are presented in the present context, and the prospect that, through the performative and temporal nature of practice and acts, a re-signification of terms is
ultimately possible and enabled. What transpires through Butler’s work is that the element of an ‘open temporality’ of the speech act and, importantly, its effect ‘opens up the possibility for a counter-speech, a kind of talking back’ (Butler 1997:15). The idea of ‘talking back’ adds value to my discussion as it signifies women’s agency, intentional engagement and creative initiative by which, without disregarding tradition and time-honoured details, they speak through doing, and cut their own cloth in textile creative practice through a revelationary mode of visual expression by which narrative understandings about textile-making emerge.

3.6 Material thinking, beyond representation

In considering Butler’s perceptive thoughts regarding the ‘utterance’ in reference to textile-making, attention to the act of making and to process raises questions for, rather than assumptions about, a tactile performativity. For example, what do things do when they become a matter beyond representation? How does matter speak and how are women complicit in the processes between matter and practice? I think here of the act of stitching or weaving: the handling of a thread or yarn, using a needle that moves through fabric, or a shuttle that one weaves through the warp on the loom. Unlike a continuous line drawn with a pencil, a stitched or woven line is interrupted; the threads surface, and then disappear out of view, only to re-surface a little further on and continue on its material way. Over and under, over and under, visible here, then there. I am thinking of the practice of stitching, and I envisage the individual stitches as a mark-making process. The gaps between the stitches, the intervals, are akin to a moment of rest, a pause. This opening, I suggest, is also a possibility.

As mentioned in Chapter One, I believe that in its symbolic and physical manipulations and materiality, cloth has a vocabulary of its own and the medium is intrinsically part of visual articulations through which patterns of new understandings can emerge, for both the maker and her audience, the viewer. In this context, Carter’s use of the term ‘material thinking’ as occurring ‘in the making of art’ is most apt (2004:xi). It places matter, and its distinctive characteristics, layers and complexity at

73 In the context of this thesis these questions could be changed to: ‘When is doing saying something? And how is doing something saying something? In A Voice and Nothing More, Dolar (2006) positions the voice not merely as an expressive device of meaning, but as an embodiment of both object and subject, a source of aesthetic expression, an opening onto meaning and a lever of thought. When the voice stutters, an opening or break occurs (a gap), which in turns allows for the inconsistent and the surprising to arise.
the centre of the creative process. While material is the physical stuff from which things are made, the idea of material thinking connects thought with the act of making through aesthetic expression, a crafting of meaning in which the material is directly engaged (cf. Sennett 2008; Carter 2004). It merges experiential knowledge and material culture in a network of relationships of mutually affecting entities, social, natural, inanimate, material, symbolic and textual (Threadgold 1999:67; Barnett 1999). The British textile artist Binns (1997) refers to material thinking as a ‘tactile intelligence’, Pajaczkowska (2005:235) calls it ‘knowledge that derives from making’, whereas Duxbury et al. (2008) term it ‘thinking through practice’. For Trudi, a textile artist I interviewed during my fieldwork, it was akin to ‘putting thoughts into stitch, and thinking into textiles’ (IN 11/06).

In ethnographic terms, several studies help contextualise and extend the theoretical concept of material thinking. Following research amongst a group of women quilters in central Idaho, USA, Gabbert (2000) positions fabric as a primary source of inspiration and creativity, and aesthetics as a ‘sensory experience’. She suggests that ‘perhaps creativity happens only after an artist has found materials that for her/him are both appealing and technically manageable’ (Gabbert 2000:149). In a study on the nexus between weaving practices and process of socialization and subject construction in southern Morocco, Naji argues that ‘materiality is not given or finished’, but ‘in-the-making or coming-into-being’ as a result of an embodied engagement with material (2009:47-8, emphasis mine). This engagement, Naji suggests, ‘constructs gendered subjects through performance [and] can be situated in a theoretical tradition that analyses gender as achieved through “doing”’ (2009:47). Providing the means by which women gain agency and self-realisation, it follows that ‘making objects, manipulating matter is a work on the self’ (Naji 2009:65).

Threadgold, in a paper on performativity, theory and performance metaphors, is concerned with the question of performance itself. ‘Where does it begin and end if it is part of “everyday” embodiment?’ and what is it that differentiates performance from text? (1999:63). In a discussion about a theatre play’s rehearsal space and temporality as part of the rehearsal process, she challenges the notion of specific intent embedded in ‘making meaning’. Many of the effects produced and enacted in the play were not scripted but the result of ‘accidental becomings’ in the rehearsal process where
materials, sounds, and bodies came together in unexpected and sometimes unforeseen ways:

…the performative utterance (one which produces the effects of which it speaks) is not, in fact, tethered at all to an originary context, but may produce radically different effects in different contexts (Threadgold 1999:65).

For Threadgold, academic discourse and theory regarding the practice of performance born from materiality (and by which materiality is differentiated from text) needs to be grounded in the question: ‘What does matter do when it becomes expression?’:

The answers are not to be found in setting up oppositions - between theory and practice, between masculine and feminine - but rather in corporeal assemblages and in the folding of gendered bodies into texts and of texts into bodies which is part of the performativity of everyday research process’ (Threadgold 1999:64-5).

This understanding of experiential knowledge, in particular as it relates to my own experience and investigation into textile-making practice is poignantly explored by Barbara Bolt in *Art beyond Representation: the Performative Power of the Image* (2004) based on her 2001 PhD thesis. A practising artist and academic, Bolt conceives of art as inherently performative, an emergent rather than a representational or signifying practice which is inherently limited by the expressions that can be made and determines what can be thought within the frame of its epistemic discourse. Like Butler, Bolt conceives of performance as producing ‘real or material effects’, so that performance constitutes meaning, rather than represents reality (2004:136). In contrast to a representational logic and framework, Bolt understands a work of art as a mode of revealing and transcending whatever it is that comes to stand as its end product: ‘[i]t is not a question of knowing but rather of performing, being in the middle of it’ (Bolt 2001:20).

Bolt suggests that, in the Australian art context, we rarely pause to question the assumption of art as a representational endeavour (2004:11). Rather than discounting representation altogether, the task is to unravel ‘the knot that representationalism holds on our comprehension of the work of art’ (2004:50). She refutes representation for its inability to encompass and articulate the essence of practice and its tendencies to reduce a thing ‘to its identifiable characteristics and no longer see the thing-in-itself’ (2004:96). Art, to Bolt, can be conceptualised as an understanding that emerges in the process and moments of creating, a realising movement involving a process of
becoming and a felt engagement with materials. Process, repetition, and materiality are central. Sometimes referred to as a ‘being-in-the-world’, or working ‘in the heat of the moment’, Bolt conceives of it as ‘working hot’ a working that allows the material and the outcome to emerge (2004: 145-9). Recognizing that in practice we can never predict a final outcome and that it is only by using our materials that they begin to reveal their potential, she notes that ‘brushes and canvas are not the means to an end’ but an integral part of the ‘fuzziness’ of practice, and the work of art as a materializing practice (2004:71, 125-32; see also Rowley 1992b). Positioning the artist and her materials as centrally engaged in creative acts in this way, art is, and happens as, a subject-in-formation.

Elsewhere, Bolt (2007a:29) contends that ‘the concept of material thinking offers us a way of considering the relations that take place within the very process or tissue of making’. In such an understanding:

materials are not just passive objects to be used instrumentally by the artist, but rather, the materials and processes of production have their own intelligence that come into play in interaction with the artist’s creative intelligence’ (Bolt 2007a:29-30).

Material thinking and the making of art originates in and through practice. ‘Although we may have some awareness of the potential’, Bolt writes, in the work of art and the ‘dynamism’ of material practice and thinking, ‘the outcome cannot be known in advance’ (2007b:3). She proposes that creative practice be conceived as ‘a performance in which linkages are constantly being made and remade. Whilst each actor has the same praxiological status, each has its own character and contribution to make as part of the work of art’ (Bolt 2007b:3). Her focus on process, time and materiality in practice foregrounds a way of thinking about textile-making that differs from and critiques a representational paradigm regarding women’s of textile-making and products as merely a decorative craft. If, in the very process of making new ideas ‘throw themselves forward’, this is not to say that textile-makers do not have ‘some awareness of the potential’ of their materials. Rather, our engagement with skill, tools and materials is, according to Bolt (2007b:3) more than ‘a means to an end’. It is an engagement ‘inevitably characterized by a play between the understandings that we bring to the situation and the intelligence of our tools and materials. This relation is not a relation of mastery but one of coemergence’ (Bolt 2007b:1-3, emphasis mine), enabling or bringing-forth something into appearance Thus, practice produces
signification, and ‘tacit knowing and the generative potential of process have the potential to reveal new insights: both those insights that inform and find a form in artwork and those that can be articulated in words’ (Bolt 2007a:31). I suggest that the time-intensive nature of repetition involved in many textile-making methods and techniques suit this tactile intelligence and mode of revealing, a slow motion version of thought in which what emerges as a finished product often does not begin that way. Instead, the idea is within the process and its inherently tactile and material nature.

Reading Bolt’s work was an affirming encounter in terms of the potential of conceiving of art as a performative, embodied and creative practice. It also raised a number of analytical questions, however. What happens when a visual arts perspective is transposed into an anthropological setting? Is it possible to bring textile-making into the conversation in Australian Anthropology and Australian Anthropology into the conversation about textile creative practice? And, if so, what is revealed, about aesthetic engagement, about anthropology, about gender, and about textile-making? How would such an endeavour open up new possibilities of dialogue between different fields of knowledge? And, importantly, what can an ethnographic focus on textile-making as experience and a gradual becoming reveal, and how does it enable thinking perhaps not easily accommodated in anthropological inquiry? What is in the ‘work’ that textiles perform and where do things happen in this form of creative production?

3.7 Time, place and temporality
Any consideration of the agency of both matter and maker, and the work of art as emergent beyond representation requires attention to the temporal aspect of practice. The work of Barbara Adam (1990, 1994) on time and temporality as a mediator of practice, sociality and engagement with place is particularly useful here. Adam suggests that matter and time are in dialogue; the experience of time permeates everyday life and is integral in the creation of meaning. She emphasises that ‘all time is social time’ (1990:42), in that the quantitative dimension of clock-based time is also qualitative in potential and the creation of meaning in social systems and cultural practice. Time does not dilute meaning; rather, it enables sustained focus in whatever we do, including the marks we make via gestures and practice that through time (and repetition) can evolve into rich activities and narratives. As such, Adam argues, repetition is ‘linked to a becoming of the possible’ (1994:521), and meanings emerge
both through ‘events in time’ and ‘time in events’ as temporality is circulated through social processes and relations, and place.\textsuperscript{74}

In an ethnographic study of a New Zealand quilting group, Doyle (1998) uses time and place as a rubric to encompass the quilting experience, and considers how gendered expectations of women shape the temporal and spatial zone in which quilters engage with their practice. More specifically, she notes how quilters negotiate their quilting-time amongst other commitments and create a place for making in order to pursue their interests, keeping in mind the inherently slow nature of making a quilt.\textsuperscript{75} Closer to home, the anthropologist Jennifer Biddle explores a way of thinking about place-centred creative practice, in this case, Aboriginal art in a remote community in the Australian Central Desert. In \textit{Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: Central Desert Art as Experience} (2007), Biddle premises contemporary Aboriginal women’s painting in Central Australia as a direct and bodily experience that stands in contrast to the physical distance from the landscape as experienced in other forms of art that reference country. In Aboriginal art, country is often imagined as though seen from above, whereas in the painterly tradition of European landscape art, a visual distance is implied rather than by way of a wholeness of experience of place. Biddle shows how bodily painting, the painting of breasts in this instance in a manner informed by customary patterns, is an art that actively makes culture ‘into an experience; a culturally distinct way of doing and being in the world, not just a way of “seeing” it’ (2007:14). She places a two-fold emphasis on the body: on women’s body painting ceremonies and, as importantly, the bodily or felt affect on the viewer of art that resides in a realm beyond the discursive or rational. In both instances, it is presented as an ‘affective’ reading’ (Biddle 2007:22), and conceived of as an aesthetic encounter in which knowledge is embodied as practice. Involving the body and the marks made upon it, the notion of materiality is a haptic one, involving the relation between mark and surface in a visual as well as felt sense, in set practices (2007:52). I imagine that textiles can constitute such an experiential realm, offering, amongst other things, a

\textsuperscript{74} For de Certeau (1988), who writes on the practice and signification of everyday life, place is both the lens and location in which people’s experiences happen through the experience of attachment to place and to time.

\textsuperscript{75} Likewise, textile materials, which are often invested with personal and cultural significance and connect people to a particular time and place, are charged and change with time. Considerations of what time signifies and enables for women whilst engaged with making, and by extension the dialectical experience of place and time as practiced space, are aspects I consider in the ethnographic component of this thesis.
knowledgeable memory and a felt experience. Alongside cultural understandings, Biddle argues that landscape comes into being through the act of painting and, like Bolt (2004) also suggests, that the artworks communicate a performance; they do (ie. producing the cultural and social) rather than are.

3.8 Summary

In textile-making, the tactile is paramount and the materiality of textiles registers as a subjective, reflexive approach in the process of making. My discussion in this chapter is intended to clarify my focus on experiential knowledge that emerges as a result of creative and cultural practice. It also signals my belief that the significance of textile-making and its meanings lies, in part, in the process of doing (cf. Pajaczkowska 2005:237). I have provided a theoretical framework for understanding how visual articulations and expressions can be a ‘mode of action’ (Morphy 2009:6), inquiry and signification within the context of one’s socio-cultural world.

Bourdieu proposes that practice is social conduct grounded in the nexus between societal structures which guide people’s actions on the one hand, and their individual and collective agency to act according to experience and interest on the other. He argues that social action can be conceptualised through the analysis of patterns of cultural practices by social actors who are located within a social system. For Butler, gender is always performed. In the very repetition required to instil practice and performance in accordance with the habitus, re-signification is possible. The potential for re-signification (and thus re-presentation) further underscores understandings of performativity – the idea that one might be able to perform oneself and the social differently – or indeed differently in different contexts, on other grounds and in other terms. In reference to textile-making, attention to the act of making and to process raises questions for, rather than assumptions about, a tactile performativity. The idea of speaking through ‘doing’ resonates with Butler’s discussion of the performative utterance which, when conceived as ‘enabling the assertion of alternative domains of cultural knowledge’, can re-signify the effects of which it speaks.

To conceive of textile practice as a mode of inquiry, a speech act involving a tactile performativity engages the intersections of makers, materiality, and temporality and draws together important dimensions of cultural activity, including aesthetics,
meaning, and representation, without discounting the socio-cultural context in which the activity occurs. In textile terms, attention to the process and act of making signals the potential for an inquiry grounded in experiential practice and the meaning of making. Bolt notes that ‘[t]he “re” of representation suggests that to represent is to present again’ (2001:30, 65). Her work on the idea of art beyond representation (Bolt 2004), alongside Biddle’s (2007) research on art as experience, and Adam (1994) on tempo and time, illustrates the potential of conceiving creative practice as a way of emergent and material thinking: a ‘thinking through practice’ and an experiential knowledge that materialises as a direct result of creative engagement. Such an approach provides a pertinent focus for the development of the ethnographic component of this thesis. Having established a way of thinking about what constitutes embodied practice, in the following chapters I describe ways in which women experience and ‘live’ this practice as it relates to their aesthetic and creative expressions in textile-making.
Can you plain-sew? Or do you? It is taken for granted, somehow, that every woman can hem and seam and gather, but between learning a stitch at school and using it afterwards lies a world of difference

(Davison 1935:9)

Someone asked me the other day ‘how long did it take you to make that cardigan?’

I told them: ‘40 years’

(Alcira, FN 12/07)
Chapter Four    Engaging textile creative practice in time and place

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter I explore textile material culture and textile-making from the vantage point of a number of women whom I met, interviewed and worked amongst during an 18-month period of fieldwork between 2006 and 2008. Throughout this time, I sought to gain understandings about their affinity with textiles, and the choices they made to work in this particular medium. Who were these women? What influences played a part in their interest in textile practice, what was the extent of their practice and how was it situated in the broader context of their lives? These were some of the questions with which I set out on my ethnographic journey. My focus, in particular, is on women’s stories and recollections as they relate to the learning of textile-making, and the ways in which their skills and continuing interest in textile-making evolved over time. It is a chapter that speaks about time and place in relation to matter and making. In Chapter Five, my focus shifts to women’s experience of time in direct connection to their creative practice and the ways in which matter, materiality, practice and time are in dialogue, containing ideas about tempo, tactility, place and repetition. While Chapters Four and Five bring to the fore women’s individual stories, in Chapter Six I turn to the significance of community and sociability embedded in and resulting from women’s textile making. It is informed by research with a number of textile groups and my participation at residential textile events.

The people whose stories I recount in these ethnographic chapters were chosen for several reasons. Alongside interviews and conversations with Nalda, Ilka, Holly, Janice, Ruth, Trudi and Michele (whom I introduced in Chapter One), I attended workshops, public talks, and textile related events that they coordinated or took part in. On some occasions I made visual and audio recordings of these events, while additional data was collected from written and audio-visual publications that the women had produced or were featured in, and exhibitions that included their work. Other women, including Julia, Sue, Penny, Julie, Wendy, and Rosemary spoke with me at length and participated in a number of textile groups and events that I attended as part of my research. Most of the women, whose stories are included here, were
members of textile-based organisations, through which they had some level of interaction with, or knowledge of, one another.

4.2 Engaging textile-centred fieldwork: Time and place

In November 2006, during the early stages of my fieldwork, I attended a meeting of the Western Australian Fibre and Textile Association (WAFTA) in Perth.\footnote{WAFTA is a not-for-profit membership based organisation established in 1996 with the primary aim of supporting and advocating Western Australian fibre and textile practice. Run by a committee of volunteers, WAFTA’s activities include regular meetings in Perth where local and visiting artists are invited to speak about their work, visits to artists’ studios, the hosting of workshops with local and international teachers, and exhibitions of member’s work. WAFTA also publishes a regular e-newsletter to keep members informed of current events, exhibitions and general information relating to textiles and fibre arts. In broad terms, the organisation represents and promotes the breadth of textile and fibre arts and crafts and can be thought of as an umbrella organization in Western Australia. In 2006, WAFTA had approximately 110 members (in line with average annual membership numbers) and general meetings took place every two months. In 2010, due to members’ feedback, this was changed to every month. The meetings took place in a community hall in Menora (in Perth’s northern suburbs) which is used by a number of craft groups and guilds for regular meetings and events.} Prior to my anthropology undergraduate studies I had been a member of WAFTA for several years, but due to time and financial constraints related to completing an undergraduate and subsequent Honours degree, I had let my membership lapse. When I commenced my PhD research, I decided to attend regular meetings again in the hope that it would form a worthwhile contribution to my fieldwork activities. As a maker, I was re-acquainting myself with a familiar world and people. As a researcher I attended the November 2006 meeting in the hope to make contact with potential research participants and, if first impressions were to count for something, it felt good to be back in the fold.

The speaker for the evening was Michele Eastwood, a Perth-based artist specialising in contemporary quilts. Michele had recently won the prestigious biennial Wool Quilt Award at the National Wool Museum in Geelong, Victoria, and been invited by the WAFTA committee to speak to the members about her work. The audience consisted of some 30 women, all members of WAFTA, as well as Michele’s husband and their 10-year old daughter. As is customary at the start of every WAFTA meeting, attendees were given the opportunity to make brief announcements, share news, and promote textile events they deemed of interest to others. Sitting in familiar surrounds amongst my peers yet feeling somewhat nervous, I raised my hand when the convenor asked for contributions, and I spoke briefly about my intended research, explaining that I hoped to talk with people interested in participating. By the end of the evening, eleven
women had given their contact details and of those, ten women, including Michele, became participants in my research.

This process, as I describe it above, was repeated a few weeks later when I attended a meeting of the Contemporary Quilt Group at the same community hall, and a further six women expressed interest to take part in my research.\textsuperscript{77} I also contacted several women directly, including Holly Story, Ilka White, and Nalda Searles. I had long respected their artwork and was keen to speak with them about their creative practice. Several months after my initial interview with Nalda, she taught a week-long class at a Fibre Forum\textsuperscript{78} conference in Victoria and, although not a student in her workshop, I was able to be an observer in her classroom on numerous occasions throughout the week, during which time informal conversations took place with the seven (female) students who had enrolled. In the months following the Forum, individual interviews took place with five of these women in Melbourne. Lastly, several women joined my study following a conversation at a textile exhibition opening in Fremantle in 2006.

Most of the initial interviews with these twenty-eight women took place in their home environments, located in what could be described as typical Perth or Melbourne suburban streets within fifteen kilometres of the cities’ central business districts.\textsuperscript{79} A few weeks after I attended Michele’s talk at the WAFTA meeting, I arrived at her inner suburban Perth home, which she shared with her husband and two teenage children. It was a 1970s brick house and, in line with other houses in the street, the exterior building was unremarkable, but having stepped over the threshold I entered altogether different surroundings infused with an abundance of textile objects displayed throughout the house. It provided an immediate and enticing springboard from which to start our 2-hour conversation. It transpired that many of the items were Michele’s own artwork, often representing certain significant moments or connections, including a treasured friendship, the birth of a child, or a wedding anniversary. One such work was \textit{Sarah’s Basket}, a small hand-stitched wall hanging depicting an image

\textsuperscript{77} As a result of interviews I conducted with these sixteen women, invitations were extended for me to join textile groups they belonged to, including a fortnightly knitting circle, and a monthly lace-making group, as well as the aforementioned contemporary quilt group that met once a month. The group aspect of my research will be explored more closely in Chapter Six. My concern here is to make transparent how, by way of my attendance at a number of group events, contacts with a number of individual participants women were established, and interviews eventuated.

\textsuperscript{78} This event is described in more detail in Chapter Six.

\textsuperscript{79} Two interviews took place in participant’s studios in a location separate to their place of residence, and one interview took place over an extended lunch-break at the interviewee’s place of employment.
of a coiled basket filled with ear-ring findings (figure 4). Michele had made this work in 1998, to honour the connection with a close female friend who loved jewelry and who had left Australia to live in Africa, in a region where baskets were made. Artworks such as these, both in the making and the final work, held an aesthetic appeal and constituted a conduit to people and their material objects, as well as events and things Michele held dear.

Throughout my research, I encountered similar experiences when I visited women in their home environment. For example, when I arrived for an interview at Shirley’s home, her front garden bore evidence of drought-affected times. A few rather sad-looking rosebushes and shrubs surrounded the brown lawn. The garden was not so much unkempt as bare, but upon entering Shirley’s home I moved from sparseness to abundance in an instant. Aged in her 60s and widowed, Shirley lived alone in a home where, as she called it, ‘101 projects’ were on the go as textile projects at various stages of completion were spread throughout; on the walls, draped over chairs and couches, on the kitchen bench and flowing over into the backyard. There was a vibrancy of fabrics and colour everywhere. On the dining table a dress pattern was laid out and the fabric partly cut. My voice recorder was placed on top of a pile of fabrics, amongst balls of yarn, sewing pins and scissors. I remember thinking how fitting this was.

Such experiences kindled ideas about Miller’s work on material culture and the meaning of things (1994, 2008), in which he reminds us that objects and things are not separate from people; instead they are endowed with meaning and embody sentiments, values, and ideas (see also Hoskins 1998; Seremetakis 1994; Maihi and Lander 2005). This may include the memory of a family member or place visited, a significant anniversary or event. It places quotidian objects, including textiles, and the houses in which these are situated, as part of a larger fabric that is given shape and relevance in time and by their location in a particular place.

Whereas Shirley had the whole house to herself, others had a designated textile room to call their own within the family home. For instance, Ruth, a full-time homemaker, award-winning quilt artist and mother of three young children, had a sewing room in the basement of the family home. This was where her materials were stored and her
Figure 4

Figure 5
Studio of Ilka White, Melbourne 2008. Partial view, showing large weaving looms, other textile equipment and materials. Photo: M. van Zuilen.
sewing machine was set up, leaving enough space to spread out her designs and fabrics without the need to pack them away at the end of a textile-making session. Although the room served a dedicated studio purpose, part of Ruth’s quilting work also took place upstairs in the communal living and dining room areas where she undertook most of the hand-stitching component of her quilting as she spent time with her young children during the day, and her husband in the evenings. It meant that Ruth was able to engage with her quilting without separating herself from family life. Rosemary worked in a light-filled and open space on the first floor landing of her home in a central location. This was important to Rosemary who, at the time of our interview, cared for her husband who had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease. Her textile ‘corner’ gave Rosemary both physical and emotional room; a space in which to have time to herself by being creatively engaged, yet remain in touch with her immediate surroundings and things that may be happening around her at the time. In the evenings, she would be downstairs and keep her husband company. While they watched television, Rosemary also knitted. ‘That completely absorbs me’, she said. ‘I just work away, every stitch is another line’ (IN 03/07).

Several women, such as Ilka and Janice had a studio space away from their home environments, for reasons of limited space at home in light of their textile equipment and storage required (figure 5). Others had a studio which was physically separate, although within easy reach, from the main house. For example, Michele’s studio space was a converted garage at the back of the property, whereas Julia’s studio in Melbourne comprised a converted granny flat in the backyard (figures 6 and 7). I had met Julia when she was a student in Nalda’s residential workshop in Geelong, Victoria in 2006. The decision to enrol in this workshop was a significant one for Julia as it was the first extended period away from home since being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress which had ended her career as a medical scientist several years prior. Over this time, Julia’s textile practice had changed, from a hobby to something akin to what she termed her ‘therapy’ as well as ‘absolute enjoyment’. The comforting aspect of making is described by Stalp (2007) in her ethnography on the significance of making in women’s lives, including her own. She writes poignantly on experiencing the absence of her sewing and quilting during her studies, and the decision to (re)connect with something familiar and proactive when faced with a personal tragedy in the midst of her graduate research:
Figure 6

Figure 7
One day I dragged my sewing machine from the closet and unpacked it. When I got back into sewing, I was not interested in anything specifically. I just needed to have a creative outlet like sewing because in the past it had been a comforting activity for me. I know I enjoyed doing it, and I also knew that I was good at it, as it is the only creative activity I have done throughout my life. Spending time at this creative outlet was exactly what I needed. ...I needed the emotional benefits from engaging in something creatively challenging, and something I could do with my hands. It made me feel like I was doing something positive for myself, and I was (Stalp 2007:126-7).

For Julia, her studio was where she spent much of her time. It was important to her that this space was physically separated from the main house, thus providing a sanctuary of sorts:

Just even coming into this room, and seeing what I’ve got is enough to put me in a different frame of mind. I can come out here and this is like a sanctuary for me. All ideas flow and everything flows, when I come into this room. And I like to be surrounded by all the things that get that flowing. ...I come out here in the evenings. I have the talking books on, I listen to talking books. And then I fiddle around out here and sometimes it’s just getting ideas and sometimes it’s actually sitting down sewing or whatever, or designing or... I come out here every day. Every day. The house, I get done what I need to get done, but this is where I live, virtually...without this room, I don’t know what I’d do (IN 02/07).

In The Poetics of Space, the philosopher Bachelard (1994) uses the term ‘inhabited space’, to indicate how the activities humans perform in certain locations create a lived experience or felt sense of place. During my research, the significance of this perception became increasingly apparent. I observed the various ways in which space for textile-making was creatively constituted in women’s homes, including how both finished works, and those still in progress, infused and engendered their respective living spaces in varying degrees. It struck me that women routinely shared their creative work with others by attending textile-related meetings, exhibition, public events and workshop, including at so-called ‘show and tell’ events. Such gatherings facilitated valuable opportunities for networking, socialising and sharing ideas, and as such provided a platform for women to bring their textile work ‘out’ in the open.

Having spent uninterrupted time talking with women in the environment where their actual textile-making took place, highlighted a more intimate, and place-centred dimension to women’s creative practice, resonant of Bachelard’s description of ‘inhabited space’ (1994). It also provided insights into how they negotiated and created space and time for making in the context of their respective lives. For many of the women, their textile-making space formed an integral part of their home and familial
surroundings, to the extent that the two realms merged and facilitated one another. In this regard, Yocom (1985:48) notes the relevance of location in the sharing of ‘personal experience narratives’. Whereas she relates this to oral history research, I suggest that such understandings can also be applied to considerations of where women’s textile-making takes place, in direct correlation to women’s lives in general, and their narrative experiences of, and engagement with, creative practice.

In line with how my interviews with these women commenced, in the following section I recount the various backgrounds of their interest in, and learning of, their textile-making skills.

4.3 Making (do), familiarity and skill

I begin with Nalda Searles, who is an elder amongst textile makers in Australia. With a career spanning over 30 years, and her work widely exhibited and documented, Nalda has been described as ‘a living icon of Western Australian art’\(^\text{80}\), and as someone who ‘is respected and beloved Australia-wide as an exemplary maker, teacher and mentor, bridging Indigenous and non-Indigenous art worlds’ (Story 2009:np). Most of Nalda’s artwork is based around her innovative use of Australian plant fibres, found objects and re-purposed materials, with which she creates two-dimensional and sculptural textile and fibre works at varying scale. In the late 1990s, having just moved to Western Australia, I had the opportunity to enrol in one of Nalda’s fibre art workshops at the Fremantle Arts Centre; a two-day doll-making class using natural bush materials and recycled cloth. During the course of the weekend, we struck up a conversation; over the following years we kept in sporadic contact, mostly meeting by chance at exhibition openings and public events. I was delighted when, in 2006, Nalda replied positively to my email and agreed to become a participant in my research.

In an interview published in a local newspaper in 2009, Nalda described herself as a hoarder while the journalist portrayed Nalda’s home as a ‘rambling, clutter-filled house’ with rooms filled with ‘great teetering piles of trash waiting to be turned into treasure’ (Bevis 2009:21). I had arranged to meet Nalda at her home in a semi-rural

\(^{80}\) The full quote is as follows: ‘Nalda Searles is a living icon of Western Australian art. For nearly thirty years she has been an innovator in the use of native plant fibres and found objects from the environment for the production of fibre-textiles, sculpture and installation artworks’. Source: http://arts-events-tourism.ararat.vic.gov.au/ararat-regional-art-gallery/exhibitions/year/2011/month/2/event/175-nalda-searles---drifting-in-my-own-land, accessed 24/11/2011.
suburb on the northern outskirts of Perth. Driving down her street, locating the correct house number, and then pulling up outside her house, there was no mistaking I had found the right place. Starting in the driveway of Nalda’s house, which has native gardens all around, I encountered a setting infused with textiles and fibres: there were bags containing natural bush materials and a vast array of found objects of varying size. Inside the house, every room bore evidence of a life that revolved around her art and a commitment to her creative practice. Two life-size sculptures, which I later learned were in transit to an exhibition, as well as other artworks, dominated her living room (figures 8 and 9). Textile hangings adorned every wall, and Nalda’s work area contained natural fibres, blankets and cloth, eucalyptus leaves and bush-nuts, balls of hand-made string. Shelves were filled with books on topics ranging from art, the environment and poetry, alongside a broad collection of encyclopaedias. In the midst of these material-infused surroundings, there were also places for ‘rest’: an old spring mattress bed in the garden, a day-lounge in the sun-room, a comfortable chair in the kitchen next to a dining table (that doubled as a work surface); places where she could sit and read, stitch or draw, eat and socialize. My first impression, confirmed by a second visit some 6 months later, was that all of Nalda’s home was, to some extent, her studio and her studio was home in every sense of the word. It was a domestic and artistic space in which Nalda was breathing and living her art, a space for contemplation, intense activity, reflection and research in surroundings filled with materials and objects that signified a life-time of making.

4.3.1 All this stuff I make, it’s a familiarity from all my life

Nalda was born in 1945 in the Goldfields area of Western Australia in the amalgamated goldmining town of Kalgoorlie Boulder, an area where, in the post-war era, the riches were underground and poverty abounded above the surface. Her dad was a wood-contractor and miner; her mum ran the household and took on housemaid work in a nearby town. The family lived on a farm and Nalda recounted her early childhood as a time profoundly influenced by the nature of a ‘make-do place’, a bush-life environment in which ‘lots of young women and men were making do, moving around’, in search of work:

We were poor but everybody was, you know. Going out bush with my father who was a wood contractor, walking around bare-footed, hopping around
Figure 8
Living room, home of Nalda Searles, Perth 2007. Showing *Kangaroo Couple* (detail, brown gown) and *Dorothy’s Wild Flowers*. Photo: M. van Zuilen.

Figure 9
amongst double gees and prickles\textsuperscript{81} and jumping from shade to shade, all that stuff. ...The Goldfields were, and still are, stark and stingy in a funny way; it’s a sort of stingy landscape in the Kalgoorlie Boulder. It’s spindly, and skinny and stingy you know? It sounds funny but it is. The veranda posts are skinny and even the shade is stingy. You know there’s sharp stone and [we were] barefooted and all of that, and old tin that you can get yourself cut on and all that. I mean, there’s a lot of millionaires in Kalgoorlie now, but when I was a little girl there wasn’t. So already even right from when I was born we were living in an improvisation of a way. ...And it was that sort of life, of my generation, [which] was quite common...women back then, that life, you had to always improvise (IN11/06).

Living on a farm greatly influenced the extent to which Nalda became skilful in a number of ways at a very young age:

> I learned all the things to do with farming. Milking cows, catching rabbits in traps, wringing their necks [and] skinning them, you know, looking after dogs and pigs and chooks, and other kids. I was a little mother by the time I was four years old, and the rest come along…(IN11/06).

Alongside looking after younger siblings, Nalda’s daily tasks included cooking and washing the family clothes outdoors in an old copper, ‘boiling clothes, rinsing them with a big stick, lighting the fire, hauling them out of the copper, wringing them out by hand’ and mending them, also by hand. She learned textile-making, first at home and later also at school, although she could not recall receiving much encouragement from anyone in particular to develop her creativity in this area; it was something she just ‘had to learn’:

> [k]nitting, crochet, stitchery, mending. We had to do embroidery. All the girls did, at school, you learned embroidery as well as cushions and aprons and potholders. And there were sort of stock things you had to buy from the local store, the haberdashery place, a little tiny place. I don’t know, a cushion cover with a Mexican man, or a flamingo woman dancing with all the whirls, pre-printed, and we would have to embroider that. ...We learned stitchery, we learned crochet, we learned knitting…we became quite skilful. I was thirteen and I was quite skilful in those things, unbeknownst to me (IN11/06).

As a teenager, Nalda wanted to study subjects such as French and Science, but was placed in the secretarial stream of subjects at the local school, a decision that made her feel she was not able to explore her full potential. In her spare time, she did a lot of drawing, and in her father’s shed she created toys from wood and scrap metal lying

\textsuperscript{81} Doublegee (\textit{Emex australis}) is a noxious weed in Australia. The sharp, spiny thorns can injure animals and people walking barefoot. It is also known as spiny emex, three-cornered jack, cat-head, prickly jack, giant bull head, Tanner’s curse, bindii, and Cape spinach [http://www.agric.wa.gov.au/PC_93456.html?s=1001], accessed 25/11/2011
around the place. Following high school, Nalda trained and worked as a psychiatric nurse and later travelled overseas:

I didn’t know about art, [but] because I was on night duty a lot, you crochet or you knit…all the time I was knitting and crocheting… All the time I was travelling I was always knitting and crocheting (IN 11/06).

Having spent extended periods away from Australia during her twenties, Nalda returned home to Kalgoorlie from Africa in the mid 1970s to help look after her terminally ill mother. Around the same time, tragically a number of people in Nalda’s extended family also passed away:

It was a terrible time. So I said to one of my sisters, Suzie, who I’m very fond of... I said, let’s go to TAFE...and do something at night. 82 And she said, ‘ah well, I want to learn macramé’. I didn’t even know what it was! So off we trot...we went to do macramé and I just got set on fire! We went for 9 sessions; every Wednesday night for 9 weeks... That was a turning point for me, when I started to handle string. I bought some of that thick macramé wool and I made a couple of things, and then I found some thin wool or jute...and then I found sticks, and I was up and running then. It was like it pressed a button in there. I know that I was ready for what that gave me. …circumstances led me to it, and once I found this way of communing through picking up [string] you know…I could work in solitary, make my own designs. I could go bush and find things to bring back. So it just suited everything; all together in a little kind of an eruption in my life. ...It was the ability to express something for myself. …I could commune with myself through it, and I think that is one of the important things when you are learning, when you find a thing that you can commune with yourself through, then that’s it (IN 11/06).

With the discovery of macramé, Nalda also tapped into the knowledge and skills instilled from an early age, and she was able to incorporate these into her creative interests, exemplified by the foraging for adaptable materials in her local environment. She ‘could not get enough’ of what was happening, as the following quote illustrates:

I never stopped making things. One thing would be finished and the next thing pulled off my fingers, boom boom boom. And I documented everything, just amazing…not only did I put down how many hours it took me to make something, how many metres of wool I used; when and where I found a piece of metal: where I found it, the size it was. When I sold it, how much it sold for. ...Why I documented stuff, [was] because I couldn’t get enough, of what was happening, it expanded the experience even more. ...I filled books and books. Each one of them is a chapter...every piece was like a new paragraph in the story. Even when it was baskets. And you might say ‘well what’s the story there?’ It doesn’t seem like a stir. But at the time, it must have been for me a

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82 TAFE (Tertiary And Further Education) institutions ‘provide a wide range of predominantly vocational tertiary education courses. ...Fields covered include business, finance, hospitality, tourism, construction, engineering, visual arts, information technology and community work’ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Technical_and_further_education] accessed 06/12/2011
story. One is the materials I used...the form, or whatever, they were like little paragraphs. Every piece was a paragraph...You need to look at it and see it as a continuum (IN 11/06).

In the face of numerous personal challenges alongside work and extended travel over the years, two things continuously sustained and grounded Nalda: the early skills that she had drawn on since childhood, and her enduring connection with country and the bush. Both these things formed part of her being, her make-up or ‘system’, as she explained:

What has taken me through is my skills, that I have developed all my life. And my association with land, I’ve always gone camping, right from living in the bush as a child, and then later on I started to go on major camping journeys. All my life I’ve gone bush, even now I still go bush…I’m getting a bit toe-ie about it now, about being alone in the bush. But I’ve been camping by myself, even just to see the landscape, see the land, see the bush as a resting place, as a sitting down place. A tree, you know, to sit under, and sew, embroider or whatever. It hasn’t been hard for me. It’s part of the system, my system, you know. …All this stuff I make, it’s a familiarity from all my life. I’ve felt a sense of...belonging and ultimately, this is me, without a doubt. It hasn’t been hard for me to think about…can I do this, because it’s simply something that has always been in my life’. …I did it even unaware. I didn’t set out to say ‘well I’m going to become a very good knitter, or sewer’. You just do because you keep doing (IN 11/06).

4.3.2 A lineage of women - stitch(ing) is remembering

A sense and degree of familiarity with making, and the gradual building of skills were shared by other women I interviewed, many of whom recalled the presence of textile making in their lives back to when they were small children. Over half of them grew up in an era when ‘making do’ was the order of broader socio-economic times and individual circumstance. It instilled awareness about the necessity to make-do, for example by carefully re-cycling old items and to make something special out of the seemingly ordinary and easily accessible: scraps of fabric, a pre-loved blanket, a piece of ribbon or some old buttons. Julia was one such woman. The child of Lithuanian parents, Julia was seven when she and her family came to Australia in 1954. They settled in Melbourne, where Julia grew up, went to university, married, raised a family with her husband, and worked as a medical scientist for many years before immersing herself in textile-making full-time. Her earliest memory of textiles related to her mother’s sewing:

My mother was the first person; my mother was always sewing. Morning, noon, and night. She sewed at home, until my brother went to school. And then she went out and worked as a dress designer. And she always worked at home.
When we came out to Australia as assisted migrants, the only thing we owned was a change of clothing each and my mother’s sewing machine. The only thing I remember is my mother sewing (IN 02/07).

Because her mother made all the clothes and other textile necessities for the family, Julia did not learn to sew at an early age like some of the other women did. However, observing her mother working at the sewing machine and handling fabrics and threads almost every day, instilled in Julia a familiarity with cloth and understanding its potential. After she married, she and her husband John had very little money, and Julia reflected how she coped:

I had to sew clothes for myself and for the children. I’d chop up John’s pyjamas and turn them into children’s pyjama’s because the navy [her husband’s employer] insisted on issuing you with two sets of pyjamas a year, and it was really good fabric. And people would give me old sheets and I would chop them up and make bibs for the children. And to make the bibs look better I’d embroider on them so it didn’t look as if it was an old sheet chopped up. That reminds me…when the parents’ sheet got too old, it was chopped up and made into a cot sheet. And when that was too worn you chopped it up and made handkerchiefs. And when they got too worn, you sewed them all together again and made another big sheet. It’s sort of like a story of that time. That was it. It was very, very functional. I had to do it. So yeah, it was practical but I also did…you know, with the practical, it’s like you use the embroidery to make that dull bit of old sheet more attractive, pretty it up. …Coming from the background that I did, of never going out and buying a dress for myself, it never dawned on me to go out and buy a dress. I thought you make a dress at home. So that’s where I really started. I thought, how difficult can this be, sitting at a sewing machine (IN 02/07).

The various sentiments with which women spoke about their experience and memories of learning, struck me, at times, as reflecting a sense of pragmatism, as if to say ‘well, that’s just the way it was’. Shaped by the socio-economic times in which the notion of ‘making do’, mending and thrift was the order of the day. Nevertheless, women made something aesthetically pleasing out of the seemingly ordinary as they re-used materials and re-cycled old items into ‘new’ ones. It was a time when fabrics were cheaper to buy than ready-made garments, so items of clothing were made rather than bought. One woman explained: ‘I didn’t even know you could buy a dress until I was 18 years of age!’ (FN11/06). Others expressed a deep appreciation for female kin who sewed in addition to paid employment and household work.83 Holly’s words exemplify my meaning here:

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83 Out of all the conversations I had, there was only one occasion where someone clearly indicated that she did not enjoy having to learn to knit and sew as a child. The occasion was a 2009 meeting of the Women’s Service Guild (Trust) Committee in Perth where, as a recipient of a scholarship from the
Mum’s a sewer. Well, I discovered she was a sewer, I didn’t know that actually because she had a career, most of my growing up. But before that, she did embroidery, and made clothes. If she made something for me it was always really special, because I knew she was really busy. She’d sit down and whip up a skirt, and that was something really special and I’d just sort of be amazed (IN 10/07).

Like Julia and Holly, other respondents recalled memories of female kin when I asked them how and when they first learned (of) textile-making. For many, working with textiles was ‘just something’ that the women in their family did, and I include some of their recollections here:

It was always there, always there. Particularly one of my aunties, who was a spinster. She taught me to knit, she taught me to sew, she taught me to crochet, all those sorts of things (Sue IN 11/06).

My mother was a dressmaker, and did all the clothes, and knitted all the garments for 4 children. She raised a bit of the money by doing dressmaking for the neighbourhood. She also loved doing embroidery, although didn’t have a lot of time for it. It was very much a thing of necessity, in that it was post-war, and if the women in the house didn’t sew and didn’t make stuff, they just didn’t have it. It’s something that’s instilled there, and that’s really where it all started. I just started making toys for my younger brother and I always made my own dolls’ clothes and my own clothes (Janice IN 04/07).

My mother and my grandmother taught me to sew when I was very little, I was this little tomboy...tennis racket in one hand and bits of embroidery dangling from the other, so that was something that was always there and ever-present. My mother crocheted, and my grandmother knitted, and I never really learned to do either of those, but I was always embroidering...in terms of all sorts of stitching, I’ve grown up with it, it’s been part of my life forever...and it was very much encouraged. I was one of those rare school kids whose primary school sewing experiences were positive rather than negative...I wanted to do my own thing instead of copying these patterns, I made stuff that was different...it was wonderful (Wendy IN 12/06).

As these quotes exemplify, women traced their early encounters with textile-making to their childhood, including a learning process that took place in communal settings involving female elders, mothers, aunts or grandmothers. Learning textile-making
skills was an aspect of their upbringing within a social structure containing gendered guidelines regarding activities and expectations. This ‘doing’ within a socio-cultural structure sits well with my discussion of Bourdieu’s (1977, 1990) theory of practice and the habitus in Chapter Three, whereby people’s cultural practices and socialisation are guided by an acculturative mechanism regarding traditions and customs, and the habitual transference of ideas and skills. Young girls were expected to learn to sew, and older women were expected to pass on their knowledge to the next generation in line with customary ways. Penny explained this experiential socialisation as follows:

In my aunt’s era, if there was a younger relative, her daughter, her niece, her friend, or even a woman her own age having difficulty, let’s say with padded satin stitch, well then, it was acceptable to say ‘Look Rena, I still can’t get it right, show me’. And Rena would probably do one flower, and say ‘well, this is how you do the padding’. ‘No, I still can’t get the top to go flat’, well, you know. ‘Well, here, have a go, look, let me show you, what you’re doing’. That would be normal! I mean, sure there’s pride and competition... but when it came to sewing, I think that most people showed other people (IN 11/06).

Although growing up in vastly different circumstances to most women I spoke with, Trudi learned from an early age to utilise whatever she could find: scraps of fabrics, leaves, berries, and grass. Born to Dutch parents in 1940 in the Dutch East Indies\textsuperscript{84}, Trudi’s early childhood years were spent with her mother in a Japanese internment camp. She vividly remembered certain aspects from that time in relation to fabric and making:

I did have a doll. And it was a doll with a rubber face and a cloth body...the body would wear out and my mother, from scraps and that, would make a new body. And sometimes the body would be very small, with the same head, and sometimes the body would be longer. It was depending on what she could make another body from for the doll. ...And I thought it was the most wonderful, wonderful doll, it was the only plaything I almost had...I was always making things for it...stitching, and put things on, hats and all sorts of things...there was a lot of stitching involved there (IN11/06).

Another of Trudi’s enduring memories related to the colour of cloth. She knew that the soldiers in the camp were Japanese, and later she encountered American army personnel, but found it difficult to distinguish one from the other, as ‘they all wore the same colour uniform’, a khaki colour that, to this day, Trudi never wears herself. Red vermillion, a colour central in the Japanese flag was significant to her too: the ‘memory in red’ constituted a symbol of fear, but also of resistance, pride and survival; combined with white and blue it constitutes the colours of the Dutch national flag and

\textsuperscript{84} Now known as Indonesia.
the three colours were used, defiantly, by Dutch female prisoners in the Japanese
internment camp, as a strategy to mark their presence, as Trudy explained:

Women would literally sew a tiny something, somewhere in their clothing.
Something red, something white, something blue. They would wear it, you
know, it was hidden and sewn underneath. It was a real sign of defiance. It was
the symbolism of fear, and admiration, and defiance (IN 11/06).

A small number of women were significantly younger. Born in the late 1960s or early
1970s, their stories evidenced non-conforming attitudes towards textile-making,
informed by a feminist consciousness that encouraged them to challenge and resist
social norms concerning gendered expectations, including where textile-making was
concerned. Among them was Sharon, who was born in 1972 and grew up on a farm in
country Victoria. With seven siblings and a large extended family hers was ‘an
environment where women made’:

I was fortunate to have grown up with all of my aunties around me, my aunties
and uncles. No-one had really moved too far away, they all lived around...
Most of them were on farms. So I got to see my cousins a lot. Yeah, I guess we
were what you might describe as a connected community. And because of that
I was able to have a connected and strong understanding of the role women
played, and men, in terms of my uncles. I was subjected to a lot of craft things
(IN 02/07).

Emphasising the word ‘craft’, Sharon laughed, and continued:

All our clothes were made. My mum died when I was quite young, I was two,
but dad remarried. And my stepmother was a sewer... I remember all of our
clothes being made. If I think back now, I think it’s a great thing. But at the
time, I didn’t necessarily appreciate it. I just wanted my clothes bought. Like
other kids. But my clothes were made. And my step-mother, she made a lot of
craft. She made dolls, and teddy-bears, and there was always fabrics, and
materials, like boxes and boxes of the stuff everywhere. To the point that I
would call her a hoarder. And I’ve only really learned to appreciate that now,
but at the time...I guess as I became a teenager, I didn’t really respect or
understand the purpose of all this, you know, the desire to sew. But as I started
to make my art work, I became interested in their processes. And even though I
was looking at it from probably a more contemporary perspective, and I was
making different kinds of things, I guess I started to reflect a little bit and
realise that there was value and skill in the things that they would make. [But]
as a young woman growing up on the farm, I didn’t want to be like that, I think
I had other desires and interests...so the craft and the sewing, I didn’t
really see that as part of my journey of growing as a woman. I didn’t really
want to be connected to it at all (IN 02/07).

Similarly to Sharon, Eva came ‘from a long line of makers’. Her family hailed from
Greece, and Eva’s grandmother was the ‘most amazing lace-maker and crocheter’,
creating large curtains and bedspreads. Her other grandmother did needlework, and
both of them made dowry items, their own clothes from hand-woven cloth using wool
spun from local mountain sheep. For Eva, growing up as a girl in a Greek conservative
family setting felt at times restrictive:

part of occupying our time was knitting, or… ‘let’s make this’ or ‘let’s do that’.
I started to feel that it was for another reason other than enjoyment, there were
issues about [the] expectations put on girls (IN 02/07).

As she grew up, Eva wanted to make ‘a political statement’ against what she saw as
the oppression of her mother in a patriarchal system and familial surrounds. These
were the 1970s and 80s, a time when feminism began to gain critical ground and,
rather than sewing, Eva intentionally chose to do ‘boys stuff’. She learned to weld,
much to the disappointment of her mother:

As I got older…I started to really investigate on a personal level the history of
women, and the fact that the history of women and the history of textiles are
interwoven…I already knew that, in some ways…but I went through a period
of time of sort of rejecting what was on offer. In particular when I was little, I
had a preference for what my father did, and spending time with my dad and
most of that was actually welding or doing things in the garage. But
interestingly enough, one time when we were going through mum’s big chest,
and out came this bag of these strangely crocheted, brightly coloured things.
And I said ‘who made these, where are these from?’ and she said ‘your dad
made them’. I said ‘What?!’ Like, not in my wildest dream would I have ever
imagined my dad doing anything, you know, textile-based. He made those in
the army. I don’t know whether this was to fill their time…he was making table
overs and stuff, in the army, which was just really bizarre (IN 02/07).

Whereas both Sharon and Eva had come to appreciate the skill and tradition later in
their lives following a childhood filled with strong misgivings about the gendered
implication of textile crafts, Ilka (who was of similar age) ‘already had a love of cloth’
before she made it her career. For our first interview, we met in her studio in inner city
Melbourne, and I asked Ilka how this affinity with textiles had been shaped:

My mum could sew, although she detested it…she could mend competently,
but that was about as far as it stretched for her. …But mum did teach me to sew,
I credit her with that. But I got a bit more from nanny. And I have to thank
dad’s mum too. Both of them had a love of cloth, and that manifested in
different ways for both of them…from grandma I got the flair factor I guess!
She was not very well off, never was, and collected from op-shops and cut
things up and would join things together and whack something in there, you
know. Whereas nanny was more of a perfect sewer…she knitted and sewed all
of her family’s clothes. She actually wanted to be a seamstress. She wanted to
be tailor or a dressmaker. And her father wouldn’t allow her to train. He
thought that she’d finish up making clothes for her sisters all the time and
prefer she did secretarial studies. Which is what she did, and so that was never
her profession, but it was certainly a big part of her life. I had a lot of knits
from her as a child, and my poor mum had to wear her clothes all the way through her teens. Which wasn’t cool in the sixties! (IN 09/07).

Alongside this strong influence regarding textile-making in her early life, Ilka was keen to emphasise that her affinity with making was not linked solely to textiles but included a wider parental encouragement that instilled and shaped her sense of discovery, a quest for learning, and valuing quality in one’s work, regardless of what that may be. Her father was a former editor of an international permaculture magazine and her mother a singer-songwriter. These and other pursuits had informed and grounded Ilka’s understandings and aspirations about the potential and intention of her own creative engagements.

Returning, for a moment, to the WAFTA meeting that I attended in 2006, one woman approached me at the very end of the evening and, somewhat tentatively, explained that she was very interested in my research but unsure whether she would have something useful to contribute. ‘After all’, Julie told me, ‘I’m not a full-time artist and my work probably won’t be good enough. But I do enjoy being creative’ (FN 11/06).

A few weeks later I was warmly welcomed into Julie’s home that she shared with her husband and, from time to time, her adult son. It became immediately evident that she had gone to great length unpacking some of her treasured textile collection to show me, and a side table in the dining area was filled with boxes in which much of her current textile projects and materials were stored. I spent several hours in Julie’s company and left feeling moved by the experience of listening to her stories about textile items that were of great personal value. They included her grandmother’s silk wedding dress, her great-grandmother’s needle-book, an apron Julie made and embroidered whilst in primary school, Indian fabrics collected by her mother-in-law, a bag full of doyleys, and the first ever quilt Julie had made by herself. Although seemingly shy in the semi-public setting of the WAFTA meeting, in the privacy of her home Julie talked freely and at length about herself and her relatives through the tactile objects that embodied a connection and constituted meaning. Having these items close at hand enlivened the bond she felt with the women in her immediate family. She retrieved some objects out of storage on a regular basis and used others frequently;

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85 With Julie’s consent, our conversation was recorded, and the digital recording was later downloaded and stored on my computer. Due to a computer software virus shortly after, sadly this recording, along with several other interviews with research participants, was subsequently lost. My description of my meeting with Julie, as I include it here, is based on my impressions and field-notes taken immediately following our meeting.
such as the needle-book her great-grandmother made and used. Collectively, and individually, these items provided a felt connection and reflected a significant heritage for Julie, she told me that she felt content and happy when surrounded by these textiles, being able to hold them close: ‘I just love fabrics. I always have’ (FN 01/07).

As becomes evident from these narratives, textiles, both in finished works and materials, infused women’s lives and homes in various ways, be this on display or stored in large wooden chests. The presence of a grandmother’s shawl, a collection of wooden spools, or toys evoked particular memories, as Wendy explained:

My earliest memories of toys are [of] my mother’s button tin, which I now own, and sorting all the buttons and playing with those, cutting out circles of fabric and dressing dolls with them, all that sort of stuff (IN 12/06).

Others were reminded of family members, including Trudi who thought of her mum when she handled her mum’s inherited textiles and tools such as needles, pins and buttons. ‘The things that are hers and [that] I have, it’s kind of a love thing’ she said, ‘it’s like, I remember her by those things, and she’s closer to me’ (IN 11/06). Trudi’s words further illustrated familial connections one may have in relation to certain textile objects, and they struck a cord with me. My own memories of my grandmother are scanty but I do remember seeing her knit and I like to think that I inherited my love of textiles and making from her. Her sewing boxes reside in my textile room and its content, such as hundreds of buttons and sock-mending wool are treasured; these items constitute a tangible link to her. However, not everyone I spoke with had inherited material objects in the form of keepsakes or familial mementos; utilitarian textile items were either used until they were threadbare or deemed to be of lesser value and not passed on as heirlooms in the way silverware or paintings might. For some women, their recollections related to the making of textiles in the company of female kin, a memory that evoked the remembrance of loved ones and times past. ‘When I’m knitting I think of my grandmother’, one woman remarked. ‘When I drop stitches I think of how she used to help me. It was something we used to do together when she was still alive (FN 14/07/09).

4.4 Taking practice into new surrounds - Now I'm off!

If women’s memories of the presence of textiles in their childhood and its enduring relevance in their adult textile-making proved a fruitful starting point for my
interviews with them, it was also a basis from which other insights about their practice emerged: during interviews and conversations, it transpired that a number of women had, later in their life, made the decision to undertake studies in visual arts, often majoring in Textile and Fibre Studies. This was interesting for a number of reasons. I was engaged in fieldwork amongst women who learned textile techniques and skills from an early age by way of socialisation and who were, by all accounts, experienced and proficient in both their skills and accomplishments. As was the case for many of them, they had been making for a considerable number of years. So what informed their choice to go ‘back to school’, and why textiles?

For Sue, who grew up in the 1940s in Perth, textiles ‘was always there, always there’. She was encouraged by her mother to sew and knit as a young girl, rather than to paint or draw, because her mother was ‘the painter in the family’, and Sue and her siblings were actively discouraged to engage with that area of creativity. By the time Sue was in her thirties, she was married with two young children and worked as a marriage counsellor. In her spare time and keen to develop skills in design, she enrolled in a drawing class. One day her teacher told her ‘I’m going to a woman who weaves, and teaches weaving, and I think you’d like that’. It proved to be a life-changing experience for Sue:

[t]he first thing I had to do was weave a tapestry, and I had to design it. And the first day I went on to a loom, I was hooked! It felt like coming home. It feels like being at home at the loom. Even though I’ve branched out…weaving has always, well…it’s felt like coming home (IN11/06).

Over a decade later, when she was fifty, Sue decided to consolidate and develop her interest in weaving and enrolled in a Diploma of Art (Weaving) by correspondence, a decision she reflected upon as follows:

We were trained to not rock the boat, and to put up with crappy behaviour from our spouses, and just to keep going and to keep things going well, and all that sort of thing, ...and I look at all that stuff, and I don’t regret it because I see it as a process. I see it as a process of generations, not just my process. ...I cooked and cleaned for people for 40 years, I took care of them, I did all sorts of things...where I am [now] is a place where I am reclaiming myself as myself, rather than someone’s wife or someone’s mother. So where I am is sort of reclaiming myself as a woman. This is my time (IN 11/06).

Rosemary, who was born in 1934, had been knitting since she was five years old and later learned to weave. She did not consider herself to come from an artistic
background, and although she had always wanted to study art, she had long thought of her textile interests as ‘just’ a hobby. Following high school, Rosemary had been encouraged by her father to pursue a career in pharmacy, providing her with good employment and a steady income. However, having retired at the age of 65 and having raised seven children, Rosemary decided to return to university, attending Edith Cowan University in Perth to do a visual arts degree, majoring in textiles and fibre art. She had finally embarked on what, deep down, she felt she should have done when she was about 18, had the opportunity been there:

[when I was younger] I started off spinning and weaving, ...I’ve done a lot of weaving, but…it’s too structured for me. And I was trying to get out of it, when I was about 48 or 50, I thought ‘this is not what I want to do’ but I couldn’t break away from my responsibilities of education, to do something else. So I just kept my head down and waited ‘til the children were out of home and then I thought ‘now, I’m off!’ (IN 03/07).

This creative initiative and intentional engagement with textile-making in new surroundings and ways sits well with my discussion of Butler on ‘a different kind of performative act’ (1997:11), this being a re-signification of prior understandings and contexts in ways that open up the possibility of reworking and rupturing assumed meanings while opening up ‘the possibility for a counter-speech, a kind of talking back’ (Butler 1997:15).

Women treasured a dedicated place for their textile-making, but they also wanted time. Rosemary spoke of her textile studies with a passion about her immersion in, and quest for creative knowledge. She was ‘hanging onto’ her lecturers’ every word and treasured the time spent in the company of other students. She described it as ‘making up for lost time’ with no time to waste. Whereas her career as a pharmacist had demanded precision and attention to detail in structured ways, she was now relishing the kind of experimentation and playfulness involved with making in an intentionally unstructured way. This experience was different from all the weaving she used to do, which required a certain degree of structure set by the weaving sequence involving a warp and a weft. Returning to study meant that she was able to explore alternate engagements with yarns and fabrics and she felt ‘right at home’ in these new surrounds. Ironically, the act of carving out time for herself through study, her connections with fellow makers, and her textile space at home had become all the more precious to Rosemary since her husband had been diagnosed with Alzheimer’s disease.
While for Rosemary this brought foremost intense sadness about the loss of her ‘mate’ and the intellectual conversations and camaraderie they once shared, it also made ‘her’ time more meaningful, even necessary, not in the least as it offered her surroundings in which she could suspend the daily realities and routines and, for a short time at least, be an individual and submerge herself in a newly found creative realm.

Sue’s friend Trudi went to university as a mature age student when she was in her early forties. Like Rosemary, she too had wanted to do that much earlier on in her life. Her earlier career had been in nursing and later on she had become involved in textile-making alongside operating a ceramic studio whilst running a busy household and family life:

I really wanted to go to art school and become a florist but you had to get a proper job. Then you could do the other stuff, especially in those years. I think it’s easier now for young women, I truly do, than it was for me. You had to justify it to your family and friends. Since feminism, and a new generation of young women, it’s looked upon in a different way. It’s women saying ‘listen to me!’ It’s so true. Hundreds and thousands of women were doing pottery all over the world a few years ago. Every time a man picked it up, he was it! Greg Crow, Ian Dowling, so many potters, men, and they took to it. But they could do it full-time, concentrate and have a house-wife to help them do it. Which woman got that? (IN 11/06).

At this point Trudi sighed, laughed, and continued as follows:

With the woman it was a hobby, keep the little wife happy. His job is important. It’s the same story over and over. So no wonder he becomes a good potter and a good knitter and a good whatever. He’s got somebody backing him up, doing his cooking and his washing and looking after the kids. So he can go for it! It’s his passion, his job. Mine too, but I gotta cook and wash and iron and keep [him] happy too! (IN 11/06).

Trudi graduated from Curtin University in 1986 with a degree in Visual Arts, making good on her resolve ‘to go to university to learn’. Yet she had been a prolific textile maker and potter for several decades prior to her studies, and so I was keen to know what she had envisaged she would add to her existing and extensive skills:

[i]t became more serious. It became part of my life [in a way that] my art became more and more and more important. ...I felt at home amongst the students…ooohh, wonderful! And I was home. I knew the grassroots stuff, and I just needed to bring my soul up more and more and really be convinced (IN 11/06).
In similar vein, Michele was in her thirties and married with two young children when she enrolled in night-time courses in textiles and art history. This, as she recalled it, was the beginning of ‘seeing textiles, seeing fabrics as [something that] could be art’. Michele was working as a pre-primary teacher at the time but felt that ‘the more I taught cloth the more I felt the need to express myself’. Michele gained such pleasure from her courses that she decided to give up her teaching career and apply to Curtin University where she enrolled in a BA Visual Arts, majoring in Textiles:

The best bit was that I felt that I belonged! ...I felt like I had found a whole pile of people that liked the things that I like, and enjoyed the things that I liked, because I hadn’t found that before (IN 12/06).

Fitting her studies around family life, child-care, health issues, and part-time work including costume design for a theatre company, it took Michele 10 years to complete her degree. At the time of her enrolment, her mother had commented on Michele’s choice of studying Textiles by saying: ‘well, why don’t you do painting, I mean that’s real art’. During our conversations Michele reflected on her choice:

I do remember way back, when I chose that, the reason I chose textiles was the textural quality of the materials and the fabrics, and I saw a depth in it that I couldn’t see so much in painting... I loved the textural quality. That you could get a piece of fabric, work into it, and change it, and you have these layers of different levels of colour and depth... I wanted to make work that was relevant for me. I was interested in women’s domestic sewing. How, through the generations women have created anywhere from utilitarian work through to beautiful art quality pieces in textiles but had rarely been acknowledged. It was seen as work that women had to do [through necessity], and they didn’t even value it, themselves, very often. And so, as soon as they didn’t have to do it anymore, like my grandmother, she didn’t do it. They stopped doing it, and that’s not valuing it (IN 12/06).

In 2007, Michele gave a talk for the Contemporary Quilt group to which she belonged, and she expanded on this aspect of her studies:

The inspiration to capture something of my grandmother emerged whilst I was at university in the 80s and there was a lot of feminist background to our learning, about [how] women hadn’t often been honoured and their work hadn’t been honoured and the things that they’d done hadn’t been seen as art. Just seeing it in general society, just even the people I know, just talking about this now, from the people around me, they still see painting as the most, as the higher arts... In my own family my grandmother and mother had both done beautiful embroidery and dressmaking and I wanted to celebrate this work in my artwork. Yeah, it definitely was a choice. And it’s a choice I’ll keep using (REC 07/07).
The perceived devaluation of textiles based on a hierarchical classification of what constituted art and craft, was encountered firsthand by several women when they applied for enrolment at tertiary institutions, and discovered that their previous textile-related expertise was not deemed to be ‘good’ enough to be accepted in a visual arts degree. Among them were established artists Holly Story and Nalda Searles.

Holly grew up surrounded by what she termed ‘wonderful encouragement’ where her interest in creativity was concerned. Of her mother, who worked as a seamstress and had the ability to ‘just whip up a skirt’, Holly remarked: ‘she taught me to embroider… but we never connected embroidery [or] textiles with art, when I was growing up. They were totally separate things’ (IN 10/07). In 1987, when she was thirty-four, Holly applied to Curtin University in Perth to do a degree in visual art and printmaking, an experience she narrated as follows:

I came to Curtin to do my interview to do the course, when I was as a mature-age student. At that time they had the interviews on at the same time as the graduate show. ...So while you were waiting for your interview you were encouraged to go and look. So I wandered around, and I walked into this room that was full of the most amazing textiles! And I just had no idea that you could do textiles as an art at art school. ...I’d applied to do printmaking because that was art, you know...I had no idea you could do textiles. Anyway, by great good fortune the fine art department decided that they weren’t going to accept me because I’d been 10 years a mother and basically they said there’s this big gap in your practice. And I said ‘well, that’s because I’ve had 3 children’! And they said ‘well, we like to see real commitment’. I was really, really so shocked. But then they said, ‘go and take your folio to the craft section. It was divided up like that then, and [the people in the craft department] were absolutely ecstatic [to see my work] (IN 10/07).

As was the case for many women, pursuing tertiary studies allowed them to build on existing skills and previously held knowledge, moving beyond the familiarity of their practice and medium to explore its creative potential in more depth. For Holly, however, it was a direct reminder of the ways in which a woman’s previous life-experience was not validated and the things that they had done creatively were not perceived to be art. Prior to applying for art school, Holly had operated a successful cottage industry which included designing and hand-printing linen tea-towels depicting Australian native flora. She brought some of these along to the interview as part of her portfolio she was required to present. As Holly relayed this experience, she started laughing and remarked, ‘I think that’s probably what put the fine art people off!’ (IN 10/07).
Holly’s experience is not unlike that of Hardy (2005:177) whose felt that her experiential understanding of textile-making was not validated within the academe, as her ‘intensive and extensive experience with cloth’ did not qualify as ‘tangible’ within a system that privileged certain knowledge claims and discounted others. Earlier, I also mentioned the work of Parker (1984) who outlined how embroidery had historically been both an inculcation of women’s ‘socially approved femininity’ and enabled women to negotiate the societal constraints resulting from imposed gender roles. Parker wrote in an era when the feminist aim was foremost to challenge the muted status of women by resisting what were seen as traditional feminine activities, and the following comment by Holly, whose time at university coincided with Parker’s book gaining wide-spread recognition, illustrates this well:

I just found it so exciting, and intellectually incredibly exciting, because at that time, which was...1987, [it] was my first encounter with feminist thought, and The Subversive Stitch, you know. Which I just gobbled up, and I thought ‘yes, this is exactly where I want to be’, I want to talk about women’s practice and the medium of fibre textiles was a political medium at that time. And I really enjoyed that. I suppose particularly in the light of having been told that because I’d been a mother for 10 years I didn’t have sufficient application to be an artist. ...I remember, we watched a very, very serious video with the title, ‘Should a feminist knit?’ And it was a really serious question! But then, suddenly, women started to say ‘no, we need to really proclaim that what we do is important, rather than deny. There was a moment when textiles became almost fashionable, because the marginal was fashionable, you know, it was popular because it was popular to look at things that were marginal. But because it didn’t shift from being marginal, it’s almost like the door shut again and it never got out (IN 10/07).

For Nalda, making things had been an integral part of her life from an early age. Having discovered macramé and basketry in the 1970s, over the next decade she established herself as a craftsperson widely respected for her fibre art, having her work represented in several public collections. Then, in 1989 she applied to Curtin University to undertake a Bachelor of Fine Arts, majoring in painting:

I started to feel...I was mixing in the art world, but I knew that even though I was getting feed-back about what I was doing, it wasn’t the intellectual stimulation that I was needing at the time as I was developing more. I started to buy art magazines...and all that stuff, and also a collection of books. And then I thought ‘I have to get more’. So I ummed and aa-hed, and I thought ‘I’ll go to university’. I decided on Curtin. I went and presented myself with a folio, and it was quite funny really...they accepted me, [but] then I had a letter from someone from the Board saying that my qualifications were more than 10 years.

86 I discussed Hardy (2005) in chapter Two.
old, so they wouldn’t accept me into university, even though...I mean, I was established, my work was in the Art Gallery of Western Australia (IN 11/06).

Eventually the University Board relented and Nalda was admitted to the degree program, something she described as ‘the best thing at that stage, I was ready for it’. She embraced every idea and activity she was presented with, the process of engagement always more important to her than the outcome. She majored in painting rather than textiles, drawn in part by a tutor whose ‘crafting’ skills in painting she greatly admired. Her affinity with the natural environment surfaced in her drawings in which she experimented with plant dyes and ochre pigments. In her spare time, she continued expanding her stitching skills producing numerous fibre basketry works, and took on part-time employment to support herself. ‘I don’t know how I did it’, she said, ‘I had ferocious energy’ (11/06). Professor Ted Snell, one of Nalda’s lecturers at the time, remembered her energy and hunger for knowledge: ‘Not one moment could be wasted, she had waited too long and worked so hard to get there and she wanted challenges’ (Snell 2009:10).

In ethnographic studies amongst women in a North-American and New Zealand quilting group respectively, Ice (1984) and Doyle (1998) consider the extent to which women’s daily lives and obligations, which regulate time according to ‘the rhythms of familial life’ (Doyle 1998:109), come to shape the temporal and spatial zone in which women are able to engage with their creative practice. For a number of the women I spoke with, a sense of urgency existed, not in the sense of feeling rushed, but rather that their creative work was so very important to them, and sometimes there simply did not seem to be enough hours in the day. For Rosemary it was a feeling of not wanting to ‘miss another moment’ of creative learning after a life-time of paid employment and raising a family. For others, such as Agnes, whose days were filled with home-schooling her teenage son and driving him to regular music lessons, time for textile-making was regulated by clock-based time, squeezed into fragmented moments of making in the context of familial commitments:

Sometimes you just feel ‘oh I’ve got an hour’, but what do I do for an hour? So it’s just so much easier to do some little stitching and knitting or something to keep your hands busy if you feel like you want to do something, rather than starting on something big. Yeah, it’s very scattered...I find it very hard to find time, a few hours to sit down and concentrate on my work. ...I do miss the uninterrupted time, because sometimes my head just sort of keeps buzzing, because I have to keep everything, all the family engagements in my head as
well as everything else. I keep a notebook by my bedside and...[I take it with me] whenever I go somewhere where I can sit down, like at [my son’s] music lesson, so I have a means of writing down ideas. But the things I make mostly are things I enjoy making, like knitting, it’s sort of easier, when you just have a limited amount of time, and it still keeps your hands busy. I just can’t sit down and watch television; I have to do something (IN 03/07).

For Agnes and others, working in a medium that was easily transportable and socially acceptable for women to perform in public spaces, it meant that in a creative manner she was able to claim both a place and time for her textile-work, an activity which was an integral part of her sense of wellbeing, albeit that it was squeezed in a necessarily limited amount of hours.

Alongside dedicated and treasured time in their studio or sewing rooms, much of women’s making necessarily occurred in moments slotted amongst and around other daily activities and in ways that did not disrupt family commitments or household routines. Women might stitch and knit whilst alone or in the company of others, such as watching television with their partner or waiting for their son to finish his clarinet lessons. The competing demands on women’s time and the disjointed moments for a refined focus on their textile-making (cf. Winkworth 1988) was further emphasised by Michele whose daily textile-time, like Agnes and Ruth, was regulated by childcare activities and family life. Michele’s daily routines included dropping off her daughter at school in the morning and picking her up in the afternoon, followed by preparing dinner for the family in the evening and other, daily household chores. Adding to this equation things such as grocery shopping and her daughter’s extra-curricular activities including ballet and sport, it became clear that Michele really only had limited hours available for her creative work: ‘yeah...like I’m working in my studio and then I have to pick up [my daughter] from school and my head is just in a completely different space. Time, it’s endless, but really, there’s only between breakfast and tea’ (FN 03/08).

4.5 Summary
Butler (2005) suggests that before it is possible to answer questions about what it is one does, and what this doing signifies, it is necessary to account for the cultural context and social conditions in which actions and practice takes place. In this chapter, I have narrated women’s stories and recollections that signify the place textile-making
held in the context of their lives. Their learning of textile-making skills, often in home-
environments, showed that many referenced a context of socio-economic times and a
textile-making heritage shared with female kin. I recounted how their interest in
textile-making evolved, from learning skills as children to using textiles as a chosen
medium of creative expression later in life. Individually and collectively and in diverse
and distinctive ways, these are stories that reference the temporal and spatial, place-
centred aspects of women’s aesthetic engagements. Using Michele’s remark about the
importance of making the most of the hours between breakfast and tea as a
springboard, in Chapter Five I explore what happens in that time. In particular, my
focus is on the idea of inhabiting time in direct connection to the process of making,
including how matter, practice and time are in dialogue, containing ideas about tempo,
tactility, and materiality.
When thinking becomes visible, it can be inspected, reviewed, held up for consideration, and viewed as a set of data

(Kleinasser 2000:158)
Chapter Five ‘You can count the hours of stitching, but the process is more than the stitches’:
Engaging Time and Materiality in Practice

5.1 Introduction
In the previous chapter I relayed narratives and experiences that signified the place textile-making held for women in the context their lives. I showed that their affinity with making was shaped by a number of influences, including skills acquired at an early age and carried over time to adulthood. This learning routinely took place through the transference of tactile knowledge along female kinship lines, in socio-cultural surroundings that emphasized the art of making do, utilizing materials at hand. I also showed that women referenced the notion of time and place in a number of ways including time spent in their textile studios and spaces, and the decision to undertake formal, tertiary studies in visual arts and textiles later in life. It transpired that textile-making routinely fitted in and around other, daily realities and activities and that time for making was, to some extent, determined by familial commitments, and the clock.

Curator, academic and writer Suzie Attiwill (2005:np) states that textiles are a ‘matter of time’, connecting matter, people, and the temporal. She is careful, however, not to cast textiles solely within concepts such as history, the everyday, and tradition, as this would be akin to reducing the multilayered nature and ‘complexities of the work.’ Furthermore, she proposes that it is ‘only matter that can differentiate time’, in that matter makes ‘apparent change and movement’ in tactile, sensory and material ways that take into account the idea of ‘multiple temporalities’. Attiwill’s reference to this term resonates with Adam’s emphasis on ‘the variability and complexity of time’, in particular in relation to the ‘meanings associated with the experience of time’ beyond its merely quantifiable aspects (1994:510, emphasis mine). Cultural life, according to Adam, engenders time; not only is it important to consider ‘events in time’, as I did in Chapter Four, but also ‘time in events’ (Adam 1994:508).

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87 This is a term Attiwill borrowed from Rowley (1999) whose publication on craft practice contains the following quote: ‘It is useful to think of craft in terms of multiple temporalities. ...Thinking about craft in terms of temporality enables certain suggestive, recurring threads to be drawn between the objects and human (which is to say, mortal and social) lives’ (Rowley 1999:13).
In this chapter, I explore the idea of ‘time in events’, as it relates to textile creative practice. I do so through the presentation of ethnographic data and the textile art of a number of women, in particular Holly Story, Ilka White, Nalda Searles and Michele Eastwood, whom I introduced previously in Chapters One and Four. I chose to foreground their stories as they both highlight and symbolise the essence and threads of my research focus.

My data is based on interviews and conversations with these key participants that took place between 2006 and 2009. It is further informed by data gained from examining publications, and attending exhibitions and public talks that they presented or featured in. A concern in this chapter is to make evident how the experience of time and process permeated their creative practice, and how the interplay of materiality, practice, place and tempo brings into view tactile and aesthetic engagement and cultural understanding. Foregrounding textiles as a matter of time in this way, I consider the reasons why these women chose to work in textile and fibre art. What is it about the medium of textiles that attracts and draws them in? More specifically, what informs their practice, how do they envisage and reflect upon the act of making, and what are the aspects that surface and matter in this process, in material, personal, temporal and social terms? My focus is on the significance and meanings of making, and on creative practice as a mode of inquiry and embodied, emergent knowledge, a knowing that occurs and comes into being ‘in the moment’ and over extended periods of time through tactile and visual practice.

Foregrounding ethnographic data, this chapter is in part also informed by my understandings of materiality and performativity, which I discussed in detail in chapters Two and Three. As a reminder, Miller (2005:2) suggests that material culture and objects help us ‘create our understanding of who we can be’ by ways in which ‘ephemeral and the actual dimensions of materiality’ are central to the way we shape our sense of ourselves. Conceived as such, materiality does more than simply represent the social. By attending to materiality and practice, we gain understandings as to how ‘the things that people make, make people’ (Miller 2005:38). Signifying how people embody this understanding and lay bare the significance of process in creative practice.

88It is not my aim, nor is it within the scope of this thesis to expand on the entire oeuvres of work of these artists. I have selected works within the context of ethnographic data and my research focus. Artworks are included in this chapter by way of digital images they kindly made available.
is akin to the ‘work of art’ (Bolt 2004) and an anthropology that Jennifer Deger (2008:16) has termed ‘a revelationary mode of visual reception, in the everyday’, involving the maker and her audience, the visual and the seen.

5.2 Holly Story

In a paper presented at the 2004 conference *The Space Between: textiles_art_design_fashion*, held at Curtin University in Perth, the artist Holly Story commenced by claiming:

I am an embroiderer. You could say that I have an embroiderer’s temperament. I embellish the facts occasionally and I like the edges of things to be a little hazy, but I also like to examine things closely. Small details catch my eye before I see the whole picture (Story 2004a:np).89

Holly positioned the medium of embroidery in particular, and textile-making more broadly, in its own right in contemporary visual arts practice, referring to it as a ‘sensual medium of signification’ and as ‘an expressive and versatile medium that does things that other mediums do not’ (Story 2004a:np). Elsewhere, she has stated that embroidery provides ‘an endless source of inspiration’, and ‘remains a hugely popular creative pastime in the community’ (Story 2000:2). Holly shares that pleasure, in particular ‘its seductive texture and the meditative growth of rich colour and form across a surface’ (Story 2000:2).

During my fieldwork, Holly and I met on a number of occasions. Our time together included an interview that took place at her home in Fremantle, several public talks she presented at exhibitions of her work, an artist talk at WAFTA, and interactions at other, more general textile-related events such as exhibition openings. During these meetings, I gained a deeper understanding about the relevance for Holly of the everyday aspect of cloth and textiles, and other domestic objects she purposefully incorporated in her arts practice. It included material culture objects that resonated deeply with Holly, they shaped and infused her work for the better part of 30 years, and continued to be integral to her creative practice.

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89 In Chapter Four, I mentioned Holly’s childhood memories of textile-making, including her mother’s sewing and embroidery work. As a child, Holly felt encouraged to develop her textile-making interest and skills, which in her family were considered to be a form of craft rather than art.
5.2.1 Fancywork

Holly Story was born in Zimbabwe in 1953, and went to school in England. Her family lived, as she termed it, ‘all over the world’ (IN 10/07). In 1970, when she was seventeen, the family migrated to Australia. Holly described the experience of arriving in a far-off country as if she had ‘fallen off the edge of the world’, a feeling as if she had been transported to an alien place in which very little was familiar to her. She relayed her sense of displacement as follows:

It is an unknown territory you arrive into. [Before] I came to Australia I thought it’s never cold here, and I gave away all my winter clothes. I hadn’t a clue. I had no idea. ...it was like that for many people, and every arrival repeats this experience. Every person who arrives repeats this experience of being in a place where the flora is unlike any flora on earth. It really is quite unsettling to be somewhere where nothing is familiar. Or it’s got an English name, but it’s not that thing [that you know]. That was really unsettling, you know, magpies are black and white but they don’t look like English magpies. I just thought I’d come through the looking glass.

Some thirty years later in 2000, following an active career in the visual arts as tutor, curator, editor and practising artist, Holly reflected upon her experience of migration and sense of displacement through a series of textile artworks culminating in an exhibition at the John Curtin Gallery in Perth. Titled Fancywork: Embroidery and the Texture of Place, the exhibition showcased Holly’s adaptation of women’s traditional fancywork embroideries, which she layered in stitch over her photographic images of Western Australian landscapes. In textile terminology, the term ‘fancywork’ is used to describe decorative or ornamental needlework, often using iconic imagery. In the exhibition catalogue, Holly explained this kind of embroidery as ‘both traditional and playful...[it] can be bizarre, passionate, nostalgic, devout and downright ridiculous’ (2000:2). These were the kinds of expressive aspects that attracted her to fancywork embroidery style and practice in the beginning.

Holly spoke of the exhibition as a turning point. She had long been engaged with textile practice prior to Fancywork, yet her references to embroidery imagery had often involved prints or etchings on paper, including art works she had produced as part of her graduate studies in visual art during the early 1990s:

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90 See Carroll (1998). The term ‘through the looking glass’ originates from Carroll’s 19th Century novels Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, and What Alice Found There. It refers to looking at things from another perspective, a perspective that radically alters our perception of the way we thought things appeared. For example, when looking at something in a mirror, the image appears as completely reversed.
I was looking at embroidery imagery, but photocopying embroideries and then printing the photocopies. So it was all work on paper, it wasn’t actually embroidery. ...the picture of the thing was seen as an art work...artwork about embroidery imagery, what it stood for, in culture, cultural practice. And then I thought ‘well, they were just [like] the embroideries I had around the house!’ I had no idea I had so many, and each one, when I looked at it, had its own little world. I also looked at some embroideries that my mother had done before she had children...all these flowers she was embroidering while newly married were incredibly luscious, and they were her own designs...I began to see the actual act of embroidering as an expression of women’s desire, [and] I wanted to find out and see what women who newly arrived in Australia, what they were embroidering (IN10/07).

Wanting to contextualise her own experience of migration by linking it to textile traditions of other migrant women, Holly decided to research embroideries held in historical society collections in the southwest of Western Australia, the region where she had lived herself since arriving in Australia. An Australia Council grant in 1997 enabled her to travel throughout the region, from Geraldton in the northwest to Albany in the south:

There are lots of little historical societies in little tiny towns all over the southwest. And they have fascinating collections and they have boxes of embroideries. It was quite overwhelming in fact. I knew that there would be stuff out there...I didn’t know there was so much! (IN 10/07).

Holly quickly discovered the extent to which European embroidery styles varied widely according to country and regional origin. In order to maintain an autobiographical aspect in her research, including her arrival in a place that was completely unfamiliar to her and the challenge of establishing a sense of connection with her new surroundings, she refined her focus to embroideries that resonated with her own cultural background:

I narrowed it down to looking at embroideries done by women who had come out from England and settled in southwest of Western Australia. And then I narrowed it down again to fancywork embroidery because that is pictorial and I just found it really interesting (REC 07/07).

The original embroideries in the historical collections were the pictorial and aesthetic expressions of women’s daily lives and experiences, their dreams and expectations, including their arrival in Australia as migrants; memories of home, their knowledge of textile skills, and the experience of settlement in a new place. A number of iconic
embroidery images turned up time and time again. One of these was the image of Dolly Varden91 which, as Holly remarked, is still popular today:

You can still walk into Spotlight92 and buy a kit with Dolly Varden…she just never goes away! I found this fascinating you know, that in fine arts circles this kind of embroidery is really very unmentionable. But there is something incredibly powerful going on here, and it’s so powerful and so much loved that it’s not something that you can really just ignore. ...The use of cloth undermines a lot of the rhetoric of art. It cuts right through that and goes straight to the heart of the senses and sensibilities of the audience, both men and women (REC 07/07).

With this in mind, Holly set out from the premise that *Fancywork* would explore embroidery as both a traditional and contemporary form of expression; in part her endeavour was to assert a rightful place for it in cultural life. As she researched the collections, it became evident that a number of the women were either still alive or some of their relatives could be located. This presented Holly with a chance to meet with them, an experience she reflected upon as follows:

They often talked about these embroideries as if they were diaries, or wishes, or they had dreams and they put them into these very romantic images. There was *so much* out there that indicated that women…put their dreaming into these embroideries that they did. ...I could just see a story in it so quickly. And where I could, I went and spoke to the women whose work I was using, and they would look at the piece or a picture of it, and remember what they were feeling when they did it. It was loneliness or longing, or wanting to go home or excitement, or [being] pregnant, and [about] hopes...I really felt that in some ways their unconscious desires were coming out. And the act of stitching too, ...I really felt that it was a very embodied practice (IN 10/07).

This understanding of embroidery as embodied practice resonates with Barnett’s use of the term ‘poetics of cloth’ (1999). It references the potential of textiles as an emotive medium and the qualities of cloth akin to a canvas enfolding identity and presence, as I discussed in previous chapters. It also places the act of stitching as performative acts (Butler 1988, 1994) by which women made expressions about their lived experiences

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91 Dolly Varden is a character from Charles Dickens’ 1839 historical novel *Barnaby Rudge*, set in 1780 (Dickens 1901). The image of a characteristic Dolly Varden embroidery pattern is of a woman wearing an outfit that was briefly fashionable in the early 1870s in Britain and America. It generally includes a brightly patterned, usually flowered, dress with a gathered, wide overskirt and a bonnet trimmed with ribbons, and flowers. The enduring presence of Dolly Varden imagery is further exemplified by its inclusion in one of three signature quilts made by some of the 400 civilian female internees in Changi Prison during the first six months of their captivity during World War II. This quilt is held in the collection of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra; reference number AWM REL/14235.

92 Spotlight is the tradename of a chain of fabric and yarn stores located in major cities and large regional towns throughout Australia.
within the cultural confines of gender appropriate and socially habituated practices culturally approved to be done by them (see also Ortner 1996; Bourdieu 1977, 1984).

Another iconic image Holly encountered was that of carrots. The image originated from a set of tea towels that a young girl had embroidered for her mother from patterns in a magazine. For a backing cloth the girl had used recycled flour bag from the Western Australian Dingo flour brand. The girl grew up in a group migrant settlement at Rosa Glen, near Margaret River. Whereas some of the other embroideries referred specifically to the experience of women, this particular embroidery signified a poignant link to the broader socio-cultural context, conveying something about lived experiences of all people in the settlement, and not ‘only’ women and girls. Holly recounted:

\[W\]e now know that a lot of that group settlement scheme experienced hardship. Some of them even didn’t have enough to eat over seasons during those years when they were starting out. So I found it quite an irony that she would choose to embroider carrots, on these Dingo flour bags (REC 07/07).

The seven fancywork images that Holly eventually selected as a source of inspiration for her exhibition work were chosen from both the historical and her own collections. Holly scaled up the original fancywork images and stitched these on cotton twill fabrics which had been silk-screened using photographs she had taken of the Australian landscape, in locations that closely resembled the environment the respective embroiderers had arrived in as migrants themselves (figures 10 and 11). The photographic images on cloth measured 2.2 meters by 1.7 meters each: the resulting embroideries were intentionally very large. The reason for this, Holly told me, was to make apparent ‘the feeling of the whole’, the vastness of the experience, both in the time-intensive nature of the stitching process and in the scale of the landscape she felt had physically and symbolically confronted her when she first encountered it as a seventeen-year old. Another reason to work on a large scale was:

[t]o shift the embroidery away from what people expect embroidery to be, which is very small and neat. It kind of unsettles their preconceptions and I think that’s really important with textile work, because the preconceptions are so strong and so rigid (IN 10/07).

The contrast of the embroidery as an embodied, engaging process and photography as replicating a so-called reality reflected for Holly the tension of how she had perceived the world around her when she first arrived in Australia. It was a key point in the work:
Figure 10
Photo: Robert Frith, Acorn. Private collection.

Figure 11
Photo: Victor France.
the juxtaposition between lived imagination, memory and yearning expressed through embroidery on the one hand, and the reality of the life-size, new and often unfamiliar landscape photographic imagery on the other:

You got this really strange dissonance and that for me was the dissonance on leaving and coming to a new place and being enveloped by it. ...what is more real? Behind the imaginative embroideries are photographic prints which, on the face of it, is the real thing, so-called reality. But if you think about what actually motivates people to act in the world, it’s much more often that internal imaginary realm that’s motivating you rather than the external. In a way it’s much more real than the world that the photograph captures. So there are questions about what is real. ...you know a thing you pick up is real, but how you live your life is determined much more by poetic things...that was a very significant realisation for me. ...And certainly when you come to a place you’ve never been before you spend a lot of time not seeing it (REC 07/07).

The women’s experiences and narratives reflected in the embroideries, and conversations she had with some of them through her research, resonated for Holly in relation to her own memories and experiences. The last embroidery she stitched in the series for Fancywork was titled Rose Banksia, depicting a red English Rose stitched upon a photographic image of the Australian Banksia bush (figure 12). By this stage of the project, as she described it, something symbiotic was happening:

I looked at it and thought ‘that’s actually a self-portrait’. The whole lot took me 18 months or more to get together and at the beginning the embroidery sat on top of the landscape. The last one, by that point I think I was just running on instinct, and I just wanted [the rose] to be on a Banksia, it is sutured on the trees, it became a self portrait. The whole thing shifted; when you talk about how you make work...well, if you make it over a long period of time it shifts. There were significant shifts which I didn’t realize until much later. The first one, you know, the right place matched with the right embroidery. And then the last one, I thought ‘oh look, that one is actually starting to grow onto, into the landscape’. The last one was just...you know, this is me (IN 10/07).

Here Holly’s words highlighted the relevance of time and process in considerations about textile creative practice. The time-intensive nature involved with creating these embroideries was evident in the eighteen months that it took to create the seven embroideries, but in the process of making, something occurred beyond the quantitative dimension of time alone. As Holly’s narrative illustrates, an embodied understanding and insight unfolded and manifested itself over time, and because of time. In line with my discussion in Chapter Three, it highlights art as a practice beyond representation (Bolt 2004) and the relevance of ‘time in events’ (Adam 1994). The physical act of stitching remained largely the same; over the period of making the
Figure 12
Photo: Robert Frith, Acorn. Collection Artbank.
seven embroideries Holly repeated the same movement using needle and thread. But the seemingly simple act of stitching, a repetitive movement that appears to convey sameness and similarity made evident a shift, a visible transformation taking place. Holly had arrived in Australia some thirty years prior to Fancywork, but it was during, and as a result of the physical act of stitching that a felt knowledge about this experience manifested itself and surfaced in her work. This ‘performance’ (Butler 1997), as it relates to making, was embedded in the sense that the embroideries were executed in sequence; it was over time that Holly could see a change occurring, the landscape no longer present as a passive background and the matter of stitching increasingly enfolding her material of thought and aesthetic expression. In this context, Holly’s experience in creating the Fancywork embroideries exemplified an emergent understanding that came into being through doing.

5.2.2 We all know what a blanket feels like

In an interview broadcast on Radio National in 2007, Holly spoke of her art as ‘a way of expressing my relationship with the natural world’. Through conversations with her I gained more insight about the nature of this relationship as it related to Holly’s arts practice, and to visual expression of what could be best described as sensory understandings. Where the sense of displacement that Holly explored and shared with women in similar circumstances provided a momentum for Fancywork, it was during the time of stitching the individual art works over a period of 18 months that her response to, and understanding of, the physical landscape began to shift. This process was profoundly shaped by her increasing knowledge of a particular landscape at Deep River near Walpole, where Holly moved four years after arriving in Australia, and where she and her husband subsequently lived for over 10 years. It was at Deep River that Holly encountered a place where she first felt a sense of belonging and came to lay the foundations for a deepening affinity with, and respect for, the natural environment. She said: ‘When we moved to Deep River, I began to see how beautiful Australia could be. I pressed flowers, bought a flower book and began to learn the names…and to understand the minuteness of the beauty’ (in Goss 2006:12).

94 At the time of writing, Holly continued to spend long periods of time at Deep River, and she maintained a studio site there.
Over time, Holly’s creative practice became progressively more reflective of her felt connection to the landscape, flora and fauna around her. In a public talk during the 2007 *Systems of Nature* exhibition at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery in Perth, which included several of Holly’s works of art, she shared her thoughts about this process, and the context and site from which her artwork had emerged:

I want to talk about the landscape that’s lived in. We’re all in a relationship with living in the land around us, and it’s really important not to forget that. And wherever you live, you’re in a relationship with what’s around you. [For me] it is a particular site on the Deep River on the south coast of Western Australia, where I first started to feel that I belong in Australia, having come here as a school leaver and finding everything extremely foreign. And I realised how much I navigated my sense of belonging by knowing about plants and the natural environment around me. Once I started to be in an extraordinary natural environment, that sense of belonging started to develop, and I’m still developing it (REC 10/07).

To express this outlook through her art was, for Holly, a way to reflect upon and come to an understanding what it ‘felt like’ to belong, and textiles formed an integral part of that expression as it did in *Fancywork*. While she still used print-making and etching techniques occasionally, it was always the textile and fibre medium that provided her with the sensory connection in ways other visual materials, for example paints and ink, did not. This is how she described it:

[textiles] kind of get under your skin because they are like a second skin. Why it keeps drawing me in is that it connects straight to the heart of culture all over the world. I travel a fair bit, and wherever you go, you find a textile practice that’s somehow bound up with the heart of that culture and the homes of that culture...it is so resonant of ordinary lives. I trust that implicitly, that when I use that material, it connects to people, in an incredibly direct subconscious way. That’s what it does for me. ...It goes to the essence of being human somehow. I feel it’s a really powerful thing in that way, because the first sensual memory that your skin has is cloth. And I think that kind of bodily memory is powerful all your life. Although it’s seen as a woman’s practice, men or women, men and women respond very deeply to cloth. Those sorts of things is why I use cloth and stitch and textiles in my work (IN 10/07).

Holly started using blankets, and in particular domestic woollen blankets that she sourced from second-hand shops or received from friends and family members. She carefully hand-dyed the material using plant dyes extracted from indigenous flora

95 While this is not a thesis on anthropological understandings of ‘belonging’ to place, I mention here the work of Cohen (1982) on belonging and the experience of culture, and Vanclay et al. (2008) whose work is insightful with regard to the expressions of place through a variety of senses and lenses, including visual culture, as well as Smith (2009) on the nexus of affective spaces, aesthetics, and the environment.
authentic to the Deep River site, including leaves, roots and fungi she gathered according to the season. She did this with intent, to establish ‘a kinship with the skin of a particular place’ (Story 2007:np), using the dye as an aesthetic signifier of the place it came from. The careful gathering of the plant material, followed by the slow nature of the dyeing processes formed an integral part of the work by which, said Holly, the blankets were ‘transformed by the place as much as I was’ (Story 2007:np). She used them purposefully, as a connective tissue between ‘self’ and ‘other’, the maker and viewer. The visual and tactile understandings of matter in response to place and time connected the sensory experience of the encounter with cloth, seen in Holly’s three works titled Belongings, Offerings, and Harvest (figures 13-15).

Second-hand and previously used, the blankets Holly used were redolent with history and evoked further reflection, for instance where they came from, how they came to be in her possession, what they were made for initially, and how they once might have been used. That the blankets were not new was an intentional choice on her part; they had a history and thus, they had stories attached to them. ‘We may not know those stories’, Holly remarked, ‘but they nonetheless exist’ (REC 07/07). What mattered to her was that the blankets had the capacity to communicate a narrative and sensory experience residing in this particular, yet everyday domestic textile:

I use blankets particularly; because they have such a tactile aura that no-one can pass them by without that kind of sense of ‘oh, I can feel my skin’. ...they are tactile, they evoke, they make the body, they involve the body of the work, ‘cause when you look at them you feel them, even if you don’t touch them, your body resonates to the knowledge of what a blanket feels like (REC 07/07).

Through the use of blankets and a range of domestic objects such as chairs and small benches, Holly placed the folded blankets in a manner she likened to the daily rhythm of household tasks such as folding (in the way one might fold the laundry after washing). She imparted her aesthetic intention, aiming to ‘transform homely chores into rites of replenishment and nurture’(Story 2004b:33). At the same time, she also deliberately referenced an essence of place and nature’s ‘cycle in the process of the making’ (Story 2004b:33). Holly reflected on it as follows:

It’s that sort of moment of that little tiny space you get when things are in their place. And I reckon that a lot of art is about just trying to capture that pause in the rush of stuff. So that you can step outside that and just contemplate something, an idea or a feeling or a colour or a texture. So it’s particularly apt I think, for most women have that really...that ‘buzz’, you know....you’ve done
Figure 13

Figure 14
Figure 15
H 96 cm x W 46 cm x D 42 cm. Photo: Victor France. Collection City of Fremantle.
the washing and you’ve folded it, all the nappies and you’ve stacked them back in the cupboard, and it’s sort like ‘Ha!’ It doesn’t last very long but it’s a beautiful moment...a sense of order (REC 07/07).

Drawing on the material culture of everyday life and the materiality and agency of the visual, the works narrated Holly’s experiential comprehension of landscape redirected to the domestic, and her sense of belonging expressed in matter and time. As was the case with *Fancywork*, concepts of textiles as symbolic text, and making as a visual mode of signification akin to Butler’s concepts of performativity and speech acts (1988, 1994, 1995) were evident in Holly’s later work. It reflected time-honoured skills of the hand, embedded in everyday routines and informed by the tradition of making do, using the materials found in everyday life. Drawing on the material characteristics and possibilities embedded in working with textiles, her work came to fruition, and bore evidence of a lived gestation, aesthetic narrative and development of ideas about social and environmental concerns through a sustained and focused practice. She talked about conveying this intention and meaning in the following way:

It’s that tactile nature of being in the bush that I really wanted to talk about through using blankets. And they’ve become my vehicle for talking about the fact that when you’re walking through the bush you’re not just using your eyes. Your whole body is involved in this thing that we call the environment. Your whole body is involved in a relationship where you are. I use cloth in work that talks about environmental issues, because it’s an environment that has people living in it. It’s about our relationship between the natural world and our world, how we fit. Why textiles is really important is because it reminds people that we’re all part of a whole, and it goes directly to the senses and the sensibility of your audience, men and women (IN 10/07).

Holly conceived of her textile artworks as landscapes, involving a process of paring down and refining focus, gathering and arranging her materials and interpreting the felt presence and influence of a place, merging its natural and cultural history. The use of textiles and natural materials gathered on-site at Deep River were tools that Holly intentionally used to express a wholeness of a temporal experience reflective of and connected to a certain locale. Importantly, by using textiles Holly came to express this in ways different to the visual distance implied by the paint-based approach found in traditional landscape art; in other words, working with cloth and locally sourced natural dyes allowed her to subvert the reigning, painterly narrative found in the European convention in art regarding visual representations of the land. Her art was not representational in terms of depicting a so-called reality; the immediacy of cloth and the tactile nature of making facilitated an experiential sensibility, a lived
experience. Harply (2003:np) remarked that Holly’s understanding of ‘the evocation of a sense of place’ became increasingly evident in her work, transcending a linear development in favour of a process in which she might step forward, backwards, and sideways, keeping in mind always that such movements might become obvious to her at a later stage, both in the sense of time and the experience of making, resulting in new work and understandings.

In *Horizon*, Holly again referenced ‘the possibilities of the home as a place of creation and invention’ (figures 16 and 17).\(^{96}\) She used pre-loved wooden reels which once held a woman’s sewing threads and, using plant dyes to colour silk threads, she wound the newly dyed threads on the reels, following an intentional colour palette and sequence. The spools were positioned in a horizontal line, in two orderly and identical rows, thus creating the effect of a mirage confounding the division of the landscape into earth and sky. In metaphorical sense, it laid bare Holly’s experience of unearthing a connection to a certain location and a felt sense of place. ‘You can “google map” it’, she said, ‘and it is there, but that is not the place I know’ (REC 06/10). In the artist statement accompanying *Horizon*, Holly wrote:

> These works begin with simple domestic forms and materials. In assembling these elements I have used repetition and scale to conjure up the daily rhythm of domestic tasks and the sense of order and rightness that is at the heart of a home - or a place - that nourishes. ...the orderly rows of spools of coloured silks speak of the possibilities of the home as a place of creation and invention. The colours of these ‘landscapes’ come from dyes made from plants collected at a site on the south coast of Western Australia. Walking through the bush, collecting plants and mushrooms to use for colour, drying them, then boiling, dyeing and scattering the spent foliage on the ground again is an important part of the process. It leaves a physical trace of the site in the work and places the body of the artist at the scene of making.\(^{97}\)

Using textiles and domestic objects with purpose, Holly intended her work ‘to read like a poem’, consisting of deliberately selected elements that ‘lead the viewer from a point of familiarity to the contemplation of their place in the world’, while highlighting an understanding that emerged over, and because of, time (Story 2004b:33). This confluence of textural and temporal qualities was further evident in *Heritage (salt rising)*, a work made using plant-dyed blankets a fan that had once belonged to her


Figure 16

Figure 17
grandmother and referenced a European familial influence in Holly’s life (figure 18). She used both the blankets and a stencil cut from the fan, coupled with dyeing and printing techniques, to present a double-edged sense of heritage, of people arriving as migrants in the Australian environment, and the multiple effects and impacts of settlement over time on both people and the land:

the image in the middle is a stencil cut from a fan that belonged to my grandmother. But it’s also, you know, a salt lake, so the heritage is…it’s a double edged sword because you feel for these people, who didn’t come here to wreck the joint. They were acting on advice very often from the experts of the day. But in many cases our agricultural practice has wrecked the joint. So there’s that terrible poignancy of bringing a heritage with you that has caused so much destruction. And yet you also have this kind of sadness for those people who struggled (REC 07/07).

Through her work Holly evidenced that her own vision and understanding of what she observed and experienced came into being through the lens of her cultural background: ‘I felt when I came [to Australia] that I couldn’t in fact see. I couldn’t see the bush other than this warped grey, green prickly stuff which meant nothing to me. So it’s only over time that we learn to see what’s there’ (IN 10/07). Time did not dilute her observations, it distilled them.

In an interview with Holly in 2007, she mentioned that she was in the midst of unpicking an old linen shirt, carefully separating the individual pieces on her studio table. Later, on site at Deep River, each segment of the shirt was ‘subjected to change’; for example, one sleeve was submerged in the creek bed for three weeks, and a front panel of the shirt was buried in the soil for nearly two months. The components of the garment were physically separated and rearranged, imbued with new experiences in a process that Holly later described as ‘taking apart, in order to make anew’ (Story 2007:np, figure 19). Whereas in her earlier blanket-based work she had often cut the blankets into smaller pieces, she came to realise as she worked with materials such as the linen shirt, the importance of ‘working with the whole cloth’ (IN 10/07). In this emergent understanding, that bears resonance with Bolt’s (2004) mention of the ‘work of art’, Holly was ‘still working with the same materials, but they are transformed, involving the business of dismembering and undoing before the transformation’ (REC 10/07). The act of unpicking a shirt and allowing natural forces to act upon the separate pieces in different ways was akin to her own experience of first, unravelling
Figure 18

Figure 19
and of later coming to understand and feeling embraced by the landscape, akin to the process of how she felt the bush had transformed her over time:

I have come to understand that there is a way of working that in *itself* affects a transformation. Not only of materials and objects, although this process is also important to reflect on. But by giving form to intuitive and subjective states it allows them physical presence and agency in the world, which in turn creates the possibility of a transformative dialogue with feelings and ideas for the artist and the viewer (Story 2008:np).

During an artist’s talk for the Western Australian Fibre and Textile Association in 2007, Holly spoke about the broader context of ideas and inspiration for her work. She said: ‘I often get lots of ideas… I get ideas or that sort of “oh god, I know what I want to do thing” from reading, novels and other sorts of readings’ (FN 10/07). One such novel was *Black Mirror*, in which the author Gail Jones describes the moment the main character first encounters the sight of a salt lake in the desert of Western Australia: ‘She had never seen so many horizons at once. Nor this precise pink tone dispersed around the sky. It was another kind of knowledge’ (Jones 2002:73). This reflection resonated deeply with Holly, who likened the intentional use of textiles in her arts practice to ‘another form of knowledge’, an aesthetic and visual mode of signification:

This other kind of knowledge is close to what I am looking for in my work. In embroidery - its sensuality, its place beyond representation, its ‘otherness’ in the recent history of art - I have found a powerful tool (Story 2004a:8-9).

Through the use of tactile materials and natural processes, Holly’s work referenced time, experiential knowledge, and transformation. In our conversations she frequently emphasised the importance of moving ‘slowly’ in the creation of her work, akin to feeling her way around ‘the shape of an intuition’ (Story 2008:np). ‘It is time that makes your sense of where you are, what you belong to’, she mentioned once. ‘It just takes time to know a place. There’s no escaping, there’s no other way’ (REC 07/09).

### 5.3 Ilka White

Like Holly Story’s work, Ilka White’s art frequently lays bare the very time-intensive processes involved in textile work. Ilka started in textiles at an early age, with an affinity for fabric and textile-making nurtured by both her grandmothers. Following high school, she studied Fashion Design for three years, worked in the wardrobe department at the Melbourne Theatre Company for the next two, and went on to complete an Associate Diploma in Studio Textiles in 1996 at the then Melbourne
Institute of Textiles\textsuperscript{98}, where she majored in loom-weaving. Later, alongside her own arts practice, Ilka worked as a free-lance educator, including as a casual lecturer in Textile History and Design at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in Melbourne. Prior to my fieldwork, Ilka and I vaguely knew one another, by way of both of us having been students at the same textile institute, albeit at different times. Over the years, our paths crossed intermittently, sometimes at exhibition openings, or at other textile-related public events in Melbourne, where I lived at the time. At the time of my fieldwork, Ilka moved frequently between houses she was minding for friends and later rented a room in a shared house in Melbourne. These arrangements meant she was able to afford the rent on an inner-city studio that housed what she needed to carry out her arts practice: weaving looms and other equipment, and cupboards full of materials including yarns, fabrics, buttons, and objects and textiles collected during her travels both in Australia and overseas.

Ilka was initially drawn to weaving because of ‘a love of the timber and the tools and the sound of the loom’ (IN 09/07). It nourished her desire to make her own fabric, a practice she felt befitting her aim to live sustainably. As touched upon in Chapter Four, Ilka was keen to emphasize that the influences that had instilled and shaped her affinity with making were not linked solely to her grandmothers and textiles but included a wider parental encouragement regarding a quest for discovery and learning, and valuing quality in one’s work, regardless of what that work may be. These influences informed and grounded Ilka’s later understandings about the potential and drive regarding her own creative engagements:

\begin{quote}
I guess that’s rubbed off, the value of that collection of values rubbed off on me too, and I have a sense of wanting to live sustainable and also self-sufficiently. So maybe that desire to start from the very beginning was another reason why I wanted to weave. I liked that sense of being self-sufficient from the start and being responsible for actually making the cloth (IN 9/07).
\end{quote}

Although no longer predominantly engaged in weaving at the time of our conversations, Ilka continued to primarily use textile techniques and materials in her arts practice, including basketry methods such as coiling, as well as hand-stitching, and the dyeing of cloth. Asked what it was about working with textiles that attracted her, Ilka replied:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{98} Formerly this was known as the Melbourne College of Textiles, a vocational school for Technical and Further Education (TAFE). In 1998 the Institute amalgamated with the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), and is located within the School of Fashion and Textiles.
\end{quote}
One reason is habit. I just started fiddling, ...[and] they were the materials to hand, as a child. And my mum, despite not being into it had a great collection of fabric in the cupboard that I would sort as a tiny child, into all the greens, all the blues, and then into all the patterns and all the plains, all the shinys and all the not. ...Another reason is, I think, a sense of touch, the sense. And it’s not about inviting people to touch my work although sometimes I like to do that. But it has something to do with the bodily response to it. Even if we don’t touch the work, we have a memory of the touch of textiles. We’re swaddled in them, you know, they’re, right from our birth, we’re familiar with them. We have a more wholeness...I think, I feel a more whole body and holistic affinity with the medium than any other medium. It carries a lot of connotations, depending on what textile you choose (IN 09/07).

My question about what Ilka liked specifically about working in textiles was one that I asked all of the women I interviewed. I wanted to gain an understanding of their choices to work with cloth and fibre, rather than, for example, with paint, or clay, glass, or metal. Some women indicated that, simply put, the medium was ‘just so familiar’ to them, while others talked about the tactile nature of cloth, summed up by one woman with the following words: ‘there’s something nice about textiles. I like the feeling of it, looking, touching, and the thread and all that’ (Trudi, IN 11/06). The enjoyment, alongside the tactile immediacy and the satisfaction of seeing something emerge out of one’s own hands, resonated with many of the women. For example, Penny, who had recently retired from an academic profession, reflected:

I think of it in terms of making things. When I took up basketry earlier this year, I identified the pleasure, as the pleasure of making things. You know, just being able to..., [use] your hands. For years, I hadn’t actually done any kind of creative work, of an artistic kind…and I found myself thinking about the pleasure I’m getting out of this, [it] is the smell of the fibres, the feel of the fibres, the total involvemen. ...So I come back to that, I like making things, and I like the feeling of texture (IN 11/06).

As she spoke, Penny picked up and held one of her small handmade baskets and repeatedly turned it over in her hands.

Similar moments to those I experienced with Penny occurred in interviews with other women. What caught my attention was women’s tactile engagement with the medium and material forms; as they spoke about the experience and process of making, their hands would move in a manner akin to the activity they were describing, for instance, the movement of stitching a needle through layers of fabric, or ‘feeling’ the cloth between one’s fingers. This aspect added a sensory dimension to verbal communication and accentuated the meaning regarding the felt sense, tactility and
materiality of textiles, the handling of cloth, yarn, or a basket, or the heirlooms and pre-loved garments which held a resonance through touch. The tactile dimension of textile making was, as women described it, central to their respective choices: it offered a unique capacity for expression that other mediums did not.

5.3.1 Whitework

Similar to the way the Fancywork exhibition marked a process of change for Holly Story, the 2004 solo-exhibition Whitework at the Craft Victoria gallery in Melbourne was poignant for Ilka White. The title of the show referred to ‘whitework’ a broad term given to the use of white thread for stitching on a white foundation fabric, a technique once ‘associated with the traditional making of a woman’s trousseau’ (White, in Murray 2004:np). In colonial Australia, whitework was used for heirloom sewing, including baby clothes, and domestic items such as pillow cases, tablecloths, doyleys, handkerchiefs, baby-clothes and towels. It referenced a domestic tradition linked to the nature of feminine work, the traditional white Anglo-Saxon family structure and the home. The title Whitework also referenced Ilka’s family name, and in this exhibition (and the process leading up to it), Ilka explored the idea of inheritance, family tradition and familial objects, through a personal and contemporary re-evaluation of the symbolism of the traditional trousseau. The genesis came out of a Churchill Fellowship that enabled Ilka to travel to a number of small communities in south-east Asia where textile traditions had endured and remained strong. Ilka was drawn to the unbroken nature of these traditions, in which culturally specific work was made by predominantly female artisans. Upon her return home, she wanted to explore a similar approach, to make work about what she described as her own traditions, including those relating to her family, culture and sense of place, aspects she had not considered in-depth until that time. She said:

I am looking at what I have inherited from my mother and grandmother (habits, expectations, sensibilities, gifts) and making - what do I now make with this inheritance? Here is the work of receiving and culling one’s inheritance. Especially the inheritance in the heart and mind. Old patterns and the work of cutting new ones (in Murray 2004:np).

99 I discuss the relevance of this Fellowship in the context of Ilka’s arts practice in more detail in Chapter Six.
In considering her sense of heritage, Ilka remarked that she had inherited her affinity with textile-making from her grandmothers; from her mother she inherited something else:

My mother is not a maker in a physical way. But I still see her very much, very strongly as part of a lineage. I owe so much of my worldview to her. And, her lyrics were a huge part of Whitework. And the wisdom of her words, the wisdom expressed in her lyrics is the wisdom that I’ve inherited. That’s my inheritance from her. That’s the contents of my metaphorical glory box, she hasn’t given me handkerchiefs, but I see my pursuit as similar to hers, even though she’s a songwriter and I’m a maker. The creative process is common to both of us. So it’s a lineage of *approach* and I guess that’s what I value (IN 09/07).

In times past, the trousseau, also called a glory box, held an expectant presence in the lives of young white women in colonial Australia, as a receptacle for handicrafts that would only be used following marriage, a symbolic promise of married life. By way of her own life experience, Ilka considered what a woman might hope to inherit in her glory box, the way it represented a ‘waiting for the future’, and the seemingly natural societal expectation of women to bear children. Through her artwork, Ilka considered how such expectations mirrored her own life, her hopes, her wishes, and her disappointments; considerations which Ilka described as follows:

[I was] really trying to change internally in the way I thought about the present tense and encouraging myself to stop living for the future and wait for life to begin in the way women used to when they held their glory boxes until marriage. ...I think there were themes in that show too that went beyond me, it was a show to a large extent paying tribute to my grandma, nanny and mum, and looking at their generation, ....the role of women has changed or the view of women has changed, our view of ourselves and wider society’s view of women’s role and place and value and work. And I guess I was questioning how much has actually changed, when it comes to our view of single women in their 30s and 40s and childbearing years, and also our view of ourselves (IN 09/07).

The exhibits in *Whitework* included thirteen floor to ceiling banners, wearable art garments, woven three-dimensional sculptural work and various woven cloths imbued with hand-stitched text (figures 20-23). One of these was a five metre long, narrow satin ribbon on which Ilka had stitched the entire lyrics of a song her singer/songwriter mother had written for her (figure 24). She said:

the song is called *Within*, and it talks about looking within for all the things that we’ve habitually looked without for...all the lyrics are there, but obviously the way it is piled you can’t read all of the lyrics and that in itself leaves the message within (in Murray 2004:np).
Figure 20
Figure 21

Figure 22
Figure 23

Figure 24
Having decided to share, in a public setting, her artworks imbued with very personal emotions, thoughts and words reflective of intimate, familial connections, Ilka felt that she had put herself under ‘a lot of pressure’ (IN 09/07). Added to that was the very time-intensive nature of executing the works, which presented the extra strain to meet gallery deadlines. Yet the decision to ‘do’ Whitework was most important to Ilka, one she narrated in the following way:

[It was] a stand for my independence and my talents and achievements and skills, to deal with a whole lot of issues around inheritance and identity, my own worth and how I viewed my value. A whole lot of quite important central questions that I hoped were universal enough to have wider appeal than me sorting out my own stuff...people speaking to one another about personal things is one of the most important aspects of being human together (IN 09/07).

Evident from our conversations, it was also ‘absolutely necessary’ for Ilka to make the work using the medium of textiles, it being an integral part of the message in that the material matter bore such strong evidence of a woman’s life and work: ‘I was aware of those connotations and I wanted them to be there, because that was what the work was about, bringing in symbols and contemporary text’ (IN 09/07). Her decision to contain the catalogue for Whitework in a small, white cardboard container no larger than the palm of an adult hand, befitted this intention, symbolising the glory-box or trousseau: ‘you open it’, Ilka said, ‘and you have that expectation or that feeling of “oh, what treasure is inside?”’ (in Murray 2004:np).

The poignancy of this sentiment was emerged later on, when Ilka mentioned that the work she exhibits routinely represents only ‘the tip of the iceberg of the process and the experience’ (IN 04/08). Whitework marked the process of making as much as the finished art works; beneath the surface of the eventual exhibits resided a long, exhaustive and reflexive process, an experience Ilka decided to share in public in order to reflect ‘the way I’ve made it, the way I’ve looked at it’ over time (IN 04/08). The Sample Wall (figures 25-27) stretched for some 8 metres along one the gallery wall. It displayed ‘technical trials, sketches, yarn samples, weaving graphs, smocking and embroidery designs, poems, drafts, lyrics, thoughts and symbols relating to the project’s themes’ (Ilka White, email communication 08/13), reflecting a private conversation leading eventually to the finished works. It made visible, as Ilka termed it, that ‘things happen over time that can’t happen instantaneously’; the extensive manifestation and the process of refining her thoughts, emotions and ideas. This process, she said:
Figure 25

Figure 26

Figure 27
[was] so often where all the richness is, and in the living and the making of the work lies the most important message, or content, and so I wanted that to be shared, rather than just sharing the finished work. I think finished work is sometimes separate from the process and the lived experience of making, and I wanted this show to be very much about living in the present...and not waiting for the future. And so, the process is here, and it is unfinished...it is a continuum (White 2005:np).

In conversation, Ilka likened this process to one of gestation, of accretion, slowly growing, incrementally, like lichen on a rock, or coral in the sea. It was an experience she described as:

just as important to me as the outcome, if not more so at times. The process has to have been rich and significant for there to be any worthwhile end product. It’s not about reaching that endpoint; it’s about being in the moment. There is a lot of richness in that [process of] sorting out...you can count the hours of stitching, but the process is more than the stitches (IN 09/07).

The inclusion of the Sample Wall in the Whitework exhibition granted the audience a glimpse of the very essence of Ilka’s considerations in making this body of work: her thoughts and reflections, the experience and evidence of time invested, and the subsequent sharing were closely entwined with the process of making the eventual artworks itself, constituting far more than the visible stitches or the material cloth on a gallery wall alone.

Over the course of several interviews and meetings between 2007 and 2009, Ilka and I spoke about the significance of time in her creative practice; how she conceived this temporal aspect of making and to what extent the notion of time was evident in, and indeed relevant to, her work. For Ilka, first and foremost, time was a qualitative rather than a quantitative matter. ‘Time is important’, she stated resolutely in our first meeting and, following some moments of consideration, continued as follows:

Sometimes I worry that I can’t make fast work. I’d like to be able to sometimes make fast work. But then it is about the process and I can’t...you can’t speed up a birth. You can’t have a child tomorrow, if you’re desperate to have a child. So, it feels like the process for me is always as important as the finished product. If I could snap my fingers and have a piece finished, something in me would feel cheated..., of the experience of the making. But that’s about process. I think in the finished work, for someone just viewing it, because they haven’t been through the process with me, I want them to have a sense of time. And it’s not necessarily just ‘oh heavens, how long would that have taken to make!’ which is so commonplace in textiles. I don’t want my work to be about that, I don’t want that to be the only thing someone can say about the work (IN 09/07).
As she spoke, Ilka pointed to a particular piece that was in progress in her studio at the time:

Take this piece, for example. The manual labour, if you added that up, maybe it took me six hours, maybe four, but in actual fact it has taken months because I’m not ready for the next step and a week goes by and I haven’t touched that particular piece...you have to give it that necessary time (IN 09/07).

In the way Ilka expressed it, the aspect of time was of the essence in her creative practice, but not in the actual hours. What she meant was that as she engaged with her aesthetic practice, time took on a different meaning, shifting from spending time to inhabiting time. She likened it as follows:

[it is an] experiential undertaking, an analysis of subtle knowledge and artistic process and that in a way articulates, or enables articulation of practice. That kind of experiential knowledge, rather than say ‘these are my tools, this is my loom and this is what I am going to make, this is the strategy’ (IN 04/08).

The act of working in a contemplative manner allowed for intentional and necessary pauses between moments of actual making. This ‘sorting out’, as Ilka called it, struck me as being akin to taking a breath, or the rests between musical notes, rests that are an integral part of composition and necessary components of the whole. Without the rests, it could be said, there is no music. Likewise, Ilka’s work came to fruition through a process that included these pauses, extended periods of reflection and sometimes also further experimentation.

5.3.2 *The textile has suited what I’ve wanted to say*

Following *Whitework*, Ilka re-directed her creative focus and practice, informed by time spent in the natural environment. In 2005, she travelled to the Tanami Desert in northern Australia, where she stayed at Newhaven Reserve, a bird and wildlife reserve managed by Birds Australia, so as to gather ideas to commence a series of new works (figure 28).\(^{100}\) The following year, she co-organized and undertook a 250 kilometre walk along the south-west coast of Victoria with eight other artists over a period of three weeks, during which time she recorded her impressions and responses to the environment through which she slowly moved (figure 29). These extended periods of time, and experiences in two very different locales evoked memories of her childhood.

\(^{100}\) The Tanami desert is considered one of Australia’s unique biological areas providing refuge for several of its rare and endangered species of animals and birds. It is located in the Northern Territory. Birds Australia was, at the time of writing, the largest non-government, non-profit, bird conservation organisation in Australia.
Figure 28
Ilka White drawing desert oaks at Newhaven Reserve for Birds, 2006. Photo: John Wolseley.

Figure 29
but also informed new directions in her work and practice through the incorporation of natural and found materials and objects while in situ:

I spent a lot of my childhood stitching leaves together while we were camping. And so...going to the desert and making work, it was all in situ and in response to the place. It was a sense of coming home after a lot of head and heart work in Whitework; the simplicity of the response, feeling and responding to the land, and work about being in the land (IN 09/07).

Desert Life...under, inside, all around... (figures 30 and 31), and Casting (figures 32 and 33) are two of Ilka’s artworks that exemplify this. She created them as a direct result of ‘time spent truly in the world...a direct response to the world that I can touch and see and feel’ (IN 04/08). ‘[It's] about my experience of the world than it is about the world’, she told me; ‘I am trying to communicate my relationship with that thing, rather than the thing itself. I’m making work about my experience of being there’ (IN 09/07). A sense of freedom, as Ilka described it, was evident in these and other works in which she used certain textile techniques such as coiling and stitching, but also by way of the incorporation of found and natural materials collected on site. It was further exemplified by Ilka’s artist statement in the catalogue of an exhibition that showed several of these works:

[The works] record the coast and then the desert. The edge and the centre...I walked the tide line collecting stems coated in the calcium deposits of sea creatures. Then I sat under the cliff weaving and listening to the sea. In the studio the sea grass joined with other treasures. Shell buttons collected from my nannie's button tin, my grandma’s jars, the Muslim markets in old Delhi and op-shops all over Victoria. I handspun tassels like seaweed or weathered sailing rope caught in the rocks (White 2006:37).

Like Holly Story, Ilka’s work engaged her felt connection to the environment through the inclusion of materials sourced locally that spoke to the place-centred nature and influence in their making (figures 34 and 35). Of interest here, in terms of materials and techniques, is that Ilka again chose to work in the textile medium to express herself:

I’m not conscious of the tradition and...sort of allegiance to the textile camp in the way that I was when I was making Whitework. That was a really strong part of Whitework, sort of connecting with that lineage, both my family, literally that lineage, but also the lineage of making from textile and being a woman and those things. But this time, I’m not really conscious of ‘I’m making a textile’ as I’m making it. I’m just...I’m making something. I’m trying to catch this idea; I’m trying to communicate this feeling. That’s really all that’s in my mind at that time, not thinking ‘I am part of a textile lineage’, you know. It’s irrelevant...it doesn’t necessarily have to be textiles. I felt that freedom for
Figure 30
Ilka White, *Desert Life...under, inside, all around...*, 2006. Spinifex, budgerigar feathers, silk, camel hair, cloth, paper, thread. Hand stitched. Dimensions variable, ranging from 3-10cm in diameter each. Photo: Terence Bogue.

Figure 31
Ilka White, *Desert Life...under, inside, all around...* (detail), 2006. Details: see figure 30, above.
Figure 32

Figure 33
Figure 34
Studio of Ilka White, Melbourne 2008. View of wall showing some of Ilka’s textile tools alongside found objects and natural materials gathered in the desert and along the coast. Photo: M. van Zuilen.

Figure 35
Ilka White in her Melbourne studio, 2007. Stitching *Sheath* (using fish scales, silk, cotton thread, monofilament, finished dimension 6 cm x 6 cm x 18 cm). Photo: Trudy White.
some time and yet I am making in textiles. The textile has suited all of what I’ve wanted to say...the medium feels free (IN 04/08).

The long-distance walk Ilka undertook and the time she spent in the desert involved a number of weeks, time measured by the clock. Yet this period of time, reflected in the creative process and work that followed, was infinitely more nuanced than that; the process of making and creating constituting far more than the hours alone. This understanding imbued Ilka’s work with a temporal, immeasurable quality integral to the eventual work, and always present in some form. ‘Inspiration’, she told me, ‘can come in an instant. But the work that eventuates, if it does so at all, can take many months’. She couldn’t rush things. ‘Sometimes I wish I could’ she said, ‘but it’s like a birth, it requires a period of gestation’ (IN 04/08). For Ilka, the artworks came to fruition because of time and over time, through doing. This temporal perspective of matter and materiality sheds further light on the my earlier discussion regarding aesthetic engagements that occur in and over time (Adam 1994) and highlight the significance of making in the moment by which cultural knowledge and understandings emerge.

5.4 Nalda Searles

Multiple temporalities and materiality are also evident in much of the textile and fibre-based work of Nalda Searles, for whom the bush has often been her studio; a place for spending time, engaging and understanding. In Chapter Four I recounted in some detail Nalda’s stories regarding her early experiences in textile-making and her later art studies to illustrate the wider context in which she developed her creative work. Continuing Nalda’s narrative here, I include references to key influences in her practice and skill development over years of focused experimentation with materials and ideas.

Nalda is renowned for seeking to use natural materials and found or re-cycled objects, including things that are routinely discarded and thought of as not having value. Via stitch, knotting and coiling techniques as a way of mark-making, she draws out previous understandings attached to her materials and objects, and embeds new narrative and cultural connotations. Examples include a dress that belonged to her mother and kept by Nalda after her mother passed away in 1976. Thirty years later Nalda put it in a tub filled with plant dyes extracted from puffballs, gum leaves and
fungus, then left the dress submerged for a couple of months, so the colour would fully saturate the fabric. ‘So I thought to myself’ Nalda remarked, ‘it was thirty years in the making’ (REC 09/06). The original garment symbolised another era and context, and marked Nalda’s relationship to that time and with her mother.

In similar ways, other works also came to fruition over long periods imbued with making and gestation, taking shape using found and gathered materials and with the good fortune of friends who gifted Nalda pre-loved blankets, old sheets, a coat or a dress, to use. To first be surrounded by these materials and to then see them change, deteriorate, fade in colour, and transform over time did not constitute a sense of loss, but rather constituted an integral part of Nalda’s approach to the making process. She intentionally drew on this aspect of transformation to materialise her ideas:

I am a hoarder but you just train yourself to see things. If I see something I will go ‘Ah, a twig’, and then I will have it around for maybe 10 years or 20 years or one year or one day. As soon as you turn it into an artwork it becomes an almost sacred thing. It is a transformation of something into something else that needs that mental leap (in Bevis 2009:21).

That this process took up to 30 years in some instances was an integral part of her creative practice; she simply could not have made some of her art works in a shorter period of time:

My work is about ideas. It started when I made baskets. I taught myself the basics, I just taught myself how to do coiling. I just wanted to make forms and use materials, and explore and learn. But once I started to think more in ideas, I started to then answer questions about life, and about growing up in Western Australia. ...I’m interested in the land and camping and bush and everything, [so] straight away I started to mix the technique with found objects right from the very, very beginning. And I kept pushing the next one as different from the last one and so on, and so if you could see a whole row of work I have done over say 30 years or 25 years, you see that there has been a development. And now...now I’m finding that there is a consolidation coming to my work that couldn’t have come if I had not been prepared for the time factor in making. One of the things when you work with fibre is the time element, and you have to take that on board. But really it’s the same with any endeavour. But there is an issue of...you can’t do it quickly, you’ve just got to do it….and build it up...if you’re interested in quick results, you won’t get them in work with fibre. Making gives you plenty thinking time (REC 09/06).

5.4.1 A stitching of words

In June 2009, the John Curtin Gallery in Perth was home to the launch of a major retrospective exhibition of Nalda’s work. Titled Nalda Searles – Drifting in my Own Land, due to tour Australia until 2013 (figure 36). Showcasing twenty-one major
works, it included six large-scale exhibits Nalda created over a period spanning several decades. The exhibition was described as ‘a powerful expression of identity in relation to landscape’, and the artworks as informed by Nalda’s ‘life, memories of her parents and the experience of a number of regionally-based women she has known and researched’.\(^{101}\) These women, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, had influenced Nalda’s emphasis on materiality in her practice and teaching; some of them became her mentors. Among them was the potter Eileen Keys, who was in her mid seventies when she and Nalda met. They became close friends, sharing a mutual respect for their approach to making, coupled with a shared concern and empathy for the natural environment:

I made friends with Eileen Keys in 1983, that’s when I’d been making baskets for four years, and she was a catalyst for me. Because she could see my energy. And even though my designs were not free like her ceramics, my work was really well resolved, well made. I’ve never stinted on anything. And so she could see what I had, and what I didn’t have. And we became friends, and she became my mentor. Eileen had a really powerful influence on me. She always said ‘let your material speak for itself. Let your material do the work’. And I remembered that. Slowly I have started to understand what she meant, allowing the material to speak for itself, and so, that guided me, and then I started to let the materials have their say, and that became an important issue...I think that’s [also] got to do with the commitment that I’ve been prepared for, going that extra distance, commitment and time, to make something (Nalda, REC 09/06).

The relevance of time in Nalda’s creative practice, in ways similar to Ilka White and Holly Story, was further expanded on by her in a DVD that accompanied the exhibition. Titled *Nalda Searles: A Stitching of Words: Interpretations of Making and Making Do* (Searles 2009c) it shows her working both at home and in the natural bush environment at particular sites in Western Australia that have long constituted a making place for her, a place from where she garnered ideas, developed insights, and gathered materials throughout the years. As Nalda reflected on the progression and the breath of her practice, she is seen stitching row after row of a work that eventually became *Red Comforter* (figures 37 and 38). She explained how the idea for the work came to be:

\[^{101}\text{This quote is included in the exhibition publication material and can be also be found on the website of Art on the Move, which provided funding support and management expertise for this exhibition, as it does for the development of touring exhibitions of contemporary art across the state of Western Australia, inter-state and internationally since 1986.}\]

http://www.artonthemove.com.au/content/Exhibitions/Nalda+Searles+-+Drifting+In+My+Own+Land/ [accessed 16/01/2012]
Figure 36

Figure 37
Figure 38
I was given a red blanket by a friend years ago. It had black stripes on it, and green satin stitching around the edges. ...I took the blanket and I stitched Xanthorrhoea\(^{102}\) in seven vines, running up the blanket. I had it hanging out on the veranda for, dare I say, four years, five years. Then I had a look one day and I saw that wherever the Xanthorrhoea was [it was] still strong red, and the rest of the blanket had faded. And I thought ‘wow, this is amazing!’ And then I started to take the Xanthorrhoea off the blanket and as I took it off all these shadow-lines, of the Xanthorrhoea, these seven vines [were] running up the blanket, and it was exciting as anything! And I remembered I had that black and white mattress cover out there in the cupboard, and I got it out, and it fitted perfectly! So then I thought ‘how am I going to put it on the blanket’, you know, ‘do I just tack it on or whatever?’ And I could see what was arising: every black stripe had between it a white stripe. And I thought ‘do I dare?’ So I set out, and I tacked every white stripe on the whole mattress cover; I did a line of tacking, and there’s about 400 or 500 lines of tacking. People tell me ‘you must have so much patience’, but it is not about patience. It’s about starting, working, and completing (Searles 2009c:np).

According to Suzie Attiwill (2005:np) textiles are ‘enveloped in processes of transformations and materialisations’ and ‘the experience of time is the potency of fibre and textiles’. Nalda conceived of this understanding regarding time as a tool, reflective and indicative of the temporal nature of her work. In an article published in the Australian Textile Fibre Forum magazine in 2009, she wrote:

This idea [of time as a tool] came to me when I contemplated how many of my pieces of contemporary fibre textiles have taken a lot of years to become fully developed, up to thirty years in some instances, more generally between five to twenty years. Apart from giving us the opportunity to think, time can also change materials in ways that we can appreciate and manipulate (Searles 2009a:32).

As with Red Comforter, other artworks by Nalda’s also embodied these words. Two that were exhibited, titled When they danced he was transformed and Sweet Desire (figures 39 and 40) evolved after Nalda decided to use an old suit her late father purchased in Boulder, in Western Australia’s Goldfields, on his return from World War II. Her father wore the suit for the next 40 years, to weddings and funerals and ‘the occasional country ball’ (Searles 2009a:32). It was repaired as needed by her mother, and parts of it frayed over time. After her father died at age 86, Nalda hung on to the old clothes. She wrote: ‘They kept me connected, became a way of making sense of how to understand this overwhelming time’; the suit hung in her wardrobe for 6 years, and she would take it out ‘every so often, check the pockets for fragments of notes, perhaps messages’ (Searles 2009a:32). Unrelated to her father’s coat, two cotton

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\(^{102}\) Xanthorrhoea is a genus of flowering plants native to Australia, also known as grass tree.
Figure 39 (left)
Nalda Searles, *When They Danced He was Transformed*, 2008. Man’s tailored suit jacket (circa 1940), cotton netting, dried *Verticordia grandis* flowers, paper, written text, silk thread. Technique: Stitching. H 193 cm x W 65 cm x D 20 cm. Photo: Eva Fernández.

Figure 40 (right)
mosquito nets purchased by the late Pat Vinnicombe in Timbuktu in the 1960s and used by her ‘on many anthropological journeys’ in Africa and Australia, came Nalda’s way in the 1990s ‘when Pat felt she no longer had a need for them’ (Searles 2009a:32). Nalda first dyed the nets. Sometime later, she threaded emu feathers through them, and they were included in an exhibition in 1996. Later still, she combined the suit and nets to bring together different times and locales. She intentionally turned the suit inside out, to show a life-time of wear and the ‘vulnerability of its structure’ and, symbolically, also of its wearer. ‘It’s softer now’, she wrote, ‘the materials are aged, handled carefully, well stitched and offered with much thought’ (Searles 2009a:32).

Nalda’s work embodies story-telling. She likens the act of making as 'a stitching of questions, questions that have many answers' (2009c:np), noting that: ‘I have always been serious about art. It has given me a voice. One can ask ‘how can baskets speak’? It is not the baskets speaking. It is the coiling, half hitching, stitching. Those are the words’ (2009b:30, figure 41). Making with tactile, material fibres was a way in which Nalda was able to make sense of her experiences, memories, meetings, love and loss, politics, and the importance of community. The most important thing, she told me on several occasions, was to let the material 'speak', to listen to one's materials, learn its history; to find the stories in the old dress, learn the nature of these materials, and understand their characteristics, as her words illustrate here:

I still tell people when they try to control something too much: ‘it doesn’t work’. You have to respect your material and try to find the meaning in your material and then let it be (IN 11/06). ...And I always say to people, even when I’m teaching basketry ‘once you make one or two, then make a huge one, make the biggest you possibly can, because then you know you’re capable of it’. And that’s what opens up the awareness, that’s like the story, of making, singing the basket songs, having the time to know what’s possible. That’s very important (IN 11/07).

In conversations with her, and by reading her words, viewing her work, participating in some of her workshops and hearing her speak at public events, I came to think of Nalda’s creative practice as an ontological act: her work and its narrative dimensions was inspired by, and an emergent response to, life-events and experiences. In return, the work cast its effect back into the world, as an intentional comment and observation, affecting and inviting engagement from others through a revelationary and enduring practice. Honouring her materials and having refined her skills and techniques enabled Nalda to narrate a felt story in temporal, personal, material and social terms. Her skills,
Figure 41
Nalda Searles in her home studio, stitching *Loitering at the Dance Hall*, 2008.
Photo: John Parkes.
developed over a lifetime of making, and a felt association with the land right from when she lived in the bush as a child, sustained Nalda as an artist. ‘It’s part of my system, you know’, she told me (IN 11/06), approaching her practice with a focus that had its genesis when she was young and later through the discovery of string-making and macramé:

At age 34, I fell in love with half-hitching. A simple knotting that binds plants into weavings. Threading along, sticks and stones, rags and bones. Hitching, knotting, threads and strings. Obsessed, I was up all night half-hitching. Dreaming, hitching, hatching dreams and plans. Drunk on knots. Lover’s knots (Searles, 2009c:np).

In this chapter, thus far, I have explored the experience of time and place, and the extent to which textiles contain what Miller (2005:4) terms ‘the ephemeral and the actual dimensions of materiality’. Textiles such as blankets and clothes engage the senses; as Holly remarked, we all know what a blanket feels like on our skin even if we don’t touch it. To use these materials in aesthetic engagements to communicate personal and cultural meaning evokes this sense. Their capacity, both material and symbolic, is to tell a story; women use this, draw on it, and from it, intentionally, thoughtfully. Where it involves pre-loved or recycled textiles, they embed meaning in the material through threads of connectivity and social relationships with the people who owned and used the cloth before, and by engaging with the material in new ways. The work of Michele Eastwood further illustrates this important point.

5.5 Michele Eastwood

In Chapter Four I recounted my attendance at a meeting of the Western Australian Fibre and Textile Association (WAFTA) where Michele presented a talk on her textile art. Michele had been drawn to textile-making, and in particular clothing, from a young age. During her Visual Arts degree at Edith Cowan University she decided to focus on embroidery and the dressmaking traditions of previous generations of women, an aspect she felt had not received its due cultural validation in times past. This is how she explained it:

I wanted to talk about women who work in textiles but quite consciously use things from their own lives, imagery, or memories, and use things that are thought of as quite domestic, or are sometimes thought of as feminine things, or female things. How we can use that to look at how we express ideas in the wider context...[for example], to use blankets and hankies...everyone has a connection to it, it’s not only women by any means (REC 07/08).
Michele chose to incorporate pre-loved blankets and other fabrics in her work based on the technique of quilting, a process by which individual pieces of fabrics are pieced together, layered and stitched to form a larger whole. Stitching was done by hand, by using a sewing machine, or both. A signature concept Michele explored through in making her art-quilts was her family history, using original photographs depicting family kin. From the photographic images, Michele made elementary tracings emphasising mainly the outline of the person’s shape and in particular the specific garment they wore, such as a coat or dress. Michele then used these tracings as a template for stitching a tactile replica of the image outlines onto the background cloth, using a so-called running stitch, creating an effect akin to that of a line. As can be seen in the detail image of *A Coat of Memories* (figures 42 and 43), a work that may appear elementary but was months in the becoming, the stitch effects that Michele achieved varied from continuous to interrupted, elongated or condensed, depending on how close together she placed the individual stitches in accordance with the intended effect.

Right from the beginning in her quilt practice, Michele was keen to place her family’s history within broader historical Australian times through the lens of textile-making. She decided to research Australia’s traditional quilt history and this led her to the National Quilt Register where she was especially taken by the history of the so-called wagga quilts. At a talk she presented in 2007 at the Contemporary Quilt Group, Michele showed images of her art-quilts resulting from her research, including *Dressed in Memories 4* (figures 44 and 45), a work that illustrated her use of a contemporary textile technique to reference the tradition of the quintessential Australian quilt. Upon the quilted fabric, she layered, in stitch, poignant memories of family members by depicting the garments they had worn, an approach she worded as follows:

> I was going to make this quilt that had images of all the clothes of my family: grandma’s, mum’s, mine, my father’s, my brother’s. And I did a sample in

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103 The running stitch (also referred to as straight stitch) is an elementary stitch in sewing and embroidery. The stitch is worked by passing one’s needle in and out of the fabric in a continuous line. Typically more of the thread is visible on the top of the sewing than on the underside and the individual stitches can vary in length.

104 The National Quilt Register is ‘a major initiative of the Pioneer Women’s Hut, a museum located at Tumbarumba at the foothills to the Snowy Mountains in southern NSW, Australia’ ([http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/nqr](http://www.collectionsaustralia.net/nqr)) accessed 20/02/2012. During the Depression in the 1890s, wheat bags from the Wagga Wagga flourmill were hand-sewn together into rudimentary quilts made by men who had experience with stitching from sewing the tops of wool bales and wheat bags. For more info on wagga quilts in the context of Australia’s quilting history, see Rolfe (1987, 1988, 1998).

Figure 44

Figure 45
Michele Eastwood, *Dressed in Memories 4* (detail), 2006. Details: see figure 44, above.
really fine stitches. But the idea of making hundreds of small stitched dresses overwhelmed me. Then, somehow, the idea came: What if I did one image life-size? I placed an image of my mum’s dress, and placed it on top of a photo of an old Australian quilt I had cut out at least twenty years ago. From this, I made a log cabin quilt from my family’s fabric collection. My mother’s dress symbolised the next generation of domestic women’s work: home dress-making. Layering this image on top of the wagga, I felt that I was telling the story of domestic women’s work through the wagga and the dress. I had been wanting to make things that were relevant to my family and their long Australian heritage and this was the start, of trying to place the memories of my family into the greater context of Australian histories and memories (REC 07/07).

5.5.1 *The fabric held within it all this knowledge*

The stitching of the dress was the beginning of a new idea for Michele. Starting from an old photo depicting her mother, she used the image of the dress that her mother wore and made when she herself was in her teenage years, and stitched the outline of the dress’s shape on a backing quilt consisting of pre-loved fabrics Michele had gathered and arranged over time. The dress symbolised a memory, an ephemeral image that reminded her of the things that had been relevant to members of her immediate family and, by extension, were significant to her. Over time, particular fabrics became increasingly significant:

> I use the fabric to express...the era, the ideas, the feelings. The fabric is the memory itself, back to me, and that memory I suppose relates to the person. I try to relate the fabric and the memories to the person. ...And sometimes they’re actually the fabrics that belonged to the people, if I can get them. Sometimes they’re fabrics that I found that are of an era. For example, I got my mum’s scrap bag, I collected the fabrics. I have got my stepmother’s fabric and her mother’s fabric, and I’ve got my mum’s scrap bag, and I’ve got my grandmother’s dresses. I’ve got her old dresses. And my great aunts old dresses too, I have them too (IN 12/06).

The passing of fabrics along familial female kin was something other participants also spoke about. Mostly this involved them receiving fabrics from others, but one person explained how she had earmarked some of her precious textile possessions to be passed on to her granddaughter: ‘I have fabrics that are fifty years old. And I have a bag with a quilt in it with a note that says “this is for Celia, when she turns 18”…or before, I guess, if I die before that time’ (FN 02/07). For Michele, the fabrics of her family members provided her with a connection to ‘her’ people by way of affiliations embedded in the cloth. Some fabrics dated back several generations, up to 60 years old. Extending the performative potential of materials and materiality is the idea that
craftspeople believe that ‘their materials have a memory’ (Kapitan 2011:94) which they engage to elicit and embody emotion, connectivity and intent. This was something that resonated with Michele, evident in her comments about one of her quilts in which she used fabrics that had belonged to her grandmother:

This time the fabric told the story. [It] had been one of grandma’s best dresses, worn on special occasions. It represented her. But it also represented an idea and a time, just through the fabric itself. The fabric itself told a story. That led to my realisation that there was a story that the fabrics themselves held. They talked of a time, the garment it might have been, the place it might have been worn, the age of the person wearing it. The fabric held within it all this knowledge (REC 07/07).

Using the ‘old’ garments and cloth that contained traces of memory within its threads and folds, the making resembled an act of recollection and provided Michele with a tangible conduit to keep ‘alive’ memories of times past and people across generations. As she put it, she was ‘representing an idea through the fabric itself’, and, in the case of Dressed in Memories 3 (figures 46 and 47), the image of the dress ‘appears and disappears according to the background fabrics, a bit like memory that comes and goes’ (REC 11/06). While she altered the fabrics’ original garment shapes, cut into them, and stitched them together in reconfigured ways, the memory was present in material and temporal form. It constituted a tie to her family members and aspects about their lives in a tactile manner and this, over time, encouraged Michele to consider using photographic images of other family members, including herself.

For example, during a meeting with Michele in 2008 she showed me Memories of a Childhood (figure 48) that she had planned to submit for an exhibition several months away. It was the first time I had seen Michele use an image of herself in her work, and in conversation it transpired it was something she had only just started to do. She showed me the small photograph of herself, taken when she was three years old. Having traced the outline of her image, she then transferred this outline to fabric using fragments of pre-loved fabrics and hand-stitching, resulting in a diptych consisting of two small quilts directly inspired by the original photograph (figures 49 and 50).

Sometime after our conversation, this particular work appeared in an on-line format with the following artist statement, written by Michele:

A child is formed by the words and experiences of their parents and family – the good, the bad, the positive and the negative. The language of fabrics surrounds me; the soft muted colours, the woollen blankets and the floral
Figure 46

Figure 47
Michele Eastwood, *Dressed in Memories 3* (detail), 2003. Details: see figure 46, above.
Figure 48

Figure 49
Baby Michele. Photo courtesy of Michele Eastwood.

Figure 50
upholstery were very much the memories of my early childhood and grandmother. 

Whereas most of Michele’s work referenced and honoured the women in her family, the realization that men had once performed a central role in the creation of an Australian quilting tradition led her to explore the memory of her father through her quilts. She explained that she ‘wanted to honour the memory of him’ (IN 07/08). In a triptych textile work that is expressive of this intent, Michele used three photographic images of her father taken at different times in his life and made tracings of his body shape (figure 51). Using small and finely executed stitches, she then hand-stitched these outlines on three of her grandmother’s hand-sewn white handkerchiefs and embroidered the initials D.A.D. on another three that she hung underneath the stitched images of her dad (figure 52). Titled *A Man’s Life*, Michele explained the significance of this work and its layered temporalities in the following way:

> I was thinking how, when boys are little, they’re sort of ensconced in this female environment, and looked after. And then they turn into men and they have to walk out into the world. And my dad was a really sensitive kind of fellow too and life, I think, he found really hard. I wrote D.A.D. as the initials, embroidered, in tiny little buttons. See how my dad got bigger as he got older?  (IN 07/08).

According to Kuhn (2002), our interpretations and memories are guided by ‘certain knowledges’ which take into account context, time and social history. Memories evoked by the visual, she writes, ‘do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext, of discourses that shift between the past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments’ (Kuhn 2002:14). For Michele, the use of materials invested with personal significance constituted an autobiographical recollection grounded in a familial connection. The very engagement with particular fabrics and the act of stitching constituted an active act of remembering, a practice she clearly enjoyed. She remarked: ‘The needle and thread going through the fabric, that’s it. I never tire of it. The rhythm is meditative, I just go and stitch; it must be the tactile thing of stitching and doing’.

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Figure 51
Michele’s Father (three photos). Photographers unknown. Tracing by Michele Eastwood, from photographic image (left). Images courtesy of Michele Eastwood.

Figure 52
Photos of individual works: Michele Eastwood.
For Michele and others, this very materiality of textiles facilitated a surface for mark-making in actual and symbolic ways. By engaging its tactile vocabulary, visual articulations were made through which patterns of new understandings emerged. In this process, the very pace of textile making allowed the meaning of the work to evolve over time, and the focused nature of making was as important to women as the end product. ‘The care in the making’, Holly told me, ‘is part of the offering, not just what you end up making’ (IN 10/07). The performative aspects of making, akin to enactment, attends to women’s intentional aesthetic engagement and to where and how in the process of making their experiential knowledge and intention is embodied and expressed. It also places central the unique potential of their medium and makes the ephemeral and aesthetic meaningful in reconfigured ways.

5.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have explored the idea of ‘time in events’ (Adam 1994), as it relates to textile creative practice. Through a focus on women’s narratives about the embedded and everyday nature of their aesthetic engagements, I have shown that material culture is not given or finished, but rather ‘in-the-making’ constituted in, and reflective of, people’s ‘being in the world’ by way of their relationship with things and people, and the physical materiality and cultural significance of fabrics, textile-making tools and yarns. It places creative practice as a mode of inquiry in personal and public ways, a form of material engagement through which women express themselves; an embodied form of knowledge production on the visible surface of cultural life. In this context, the notion of ‘time in events’ is at once a reflection and a conduit: the women’s stories illustrate that through intentional engagement with specific materials, understandings emerged over time and because of time about aspects of their lives, for instance their sense of displacement and belonging, connection to country and a certain locality, and familial connections. This temporal dimension of textile as a creative practice further exists as a direct result of engagement with particular materials that in their physical and symbolic form have a capacity to perform and, like a basket or a song, constitute a keeping place and conduit for personal and cultural knowledge.

While my focus in this Chapter has been on four women makers in particular, in interviews and conversations it transpired that the experience of textiles as a mode of inquiry was one that resounded for many women, creating a sense of kinship and connection with fellow makers, a network of connecting threads. In Chapter Six, I
consider the relevance of this ‘getting together’ for those who meet, and the communal aspect of ‘time in events’ that is first and foremost enabled through a shared interest in textile-making and fibre art.
What a heavenly job for a woman who can sew – doing embroidery all day and chatting to her heart’s content!

(Auld 1957:7)
Chapter Six  Three stitches of separation and many connecting threads: The social fabric of relative strangers

There was a point in time where I thought ‘I’m not belonging to those groups because they’re all old ladies’. But actually, I actually really enjoy that networking. And I enjoy it, because they do bring a history, and they bring what they’ve learned, and done. It’s that connection with [the] past and valuing women and valuing what they do. And I thought ‘I love being in there’ and I enjoy it now. ...And I think it is that thing where textiles is seen as women’s stuff and also, not valued out there in the bigger community and the art world, and it’s good to have that support you know, for women. And to value their work, whether they’re being artists or whatever they’re being. Whatever they’re doing with it (Michele IN 12/06).

6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I detailed women’s narratives with regards to how they conceived their creative practice. Interpretations of these narratives showed the engagement with materiality and the experience of time to shape the very essence of their creative process. With this I mean not only the hours of stitching, but how time enables an experiential approach to be embedded in textile-making, engaging tempo, tactility, and materiality in practice. Foregrounding textiles as a matter of time in this way, I positioned textile-making as an embodied knowledge, a way of thinking and understanding, and a knowing that emerges through material engagement in temporal ways.

Nalda Searles notes that ‘coiling, stitching, knotting is a solitary pursuit’ (2009b:30). Her words reflect the sentiments of others I spoke with, many of who worked on their own, and treasured textile-time to themselves. Nonetheless, over the years much of Nalda’s activities with textiles and fibre art also involved engagements with other makers, through her teaching and collaborative or communal projects, including her involvement with a number of groups and events. Likewise, for Michele, the networking environment and support found in the Contemporary Quilt Group to which she belonged, was a key reason for being a member and partaking in the meetings and activities of this group. Alongside valuing dedicated time in studio surroundings, they and others I interviewed emphasised the significance of a kinship and felt connection with fellow makers, and actively welcomed the opportunities to meet. In this chapter, I consider the meaning of this meeting, conceived as a ‘getting together’ foremost enabled through textile-making. Guided by the sentiment of a participant at a textile
event who told me ‘it’s not about the art, it’s about the gathering’ (FN 09/06), my aim was to tease out the significance of this engagement in the context of women’s individual textile practice and time.106

Foregrounding ethnographic data, this chapter is in part also informed by my understandings of the social dimension of ‘time in events’ (Adam 1994), sociability (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012), and ‘cultures of relatedness’ (Carsten 2000). Carsten uses the term ‘social kin’ to indicate people’s relatedness in socio-cultural and emotional rather than genealogical terms, and which is formed in a specific cultural setting or through a shared activity or interest. In using the term sociality, I follow Vergunst and Vermehren (2012:128) who define it as ‘the experience of immersion in a shared world of meaning and understanding, most readily and richly apparent in consociate relations’. Informed by the work of Schütz (1972), they define consociates as ‘people who gain a sense of shared understanding and meaning by way of directly experiencing social reality’ (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012:128, emphasis mine).

While the shared and relational space where such activities take place could be seen, in anthropological terms, to engender distinct forms of sociality, the authors argue that it brings about sociability by way of ‘immersion in the flow of social experience’ (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012:134). Citing previous research on walking in north-east Scotland as an example, they note that many people walked ‘as a way of being sociable, a practice of sociality and its experiential reality’ (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012:135). The significance of sociability, in this case, was evident in that the act of walking in company did not reflect general ‘social relations’ so much as ‘create an ability to get on with someone through a shared rhythm of movement’ (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012:135, emphases mine). In this chapter I explore the relevance of these social relations through textile gatherings, a social and temporal event amongst relative

106 In Chapter One, I shared some of my background in textile practice and the unique insights and challenges this offered for doing research in a field with which I was closely familiar. Since the late 1980s, my involvement with groups and events has formed a significant part of my textile calendar and activities. For instance, in Melbourne I was a member of the Handweavers and Spinners Guild of Victoria, and in 1995 I founded the Victorian Feltmakers group. Upon moving to Perth in 1998, I joined the Western Australian Fibre and Textile Association (WAFTA) and travelled regularly throughout Australia to attend residential textile events, including national Fibre Forums as a student, and later as a teacher, artist-in-residence and member of staff. During my ethnographic fieldwork, my attendance and participation at such events allowed me to interact and speak with women in communal settings about the significance of such gatherings and processes of connectivity. As a fellow maker, I shared an additional, first-hand affinity and experience which provided rich ground for conversations and positioned me as one who belonged.
strangers (Carsten 2000, see also Aris 2003). I begin with two fieldwork ‘snapshots’ which contextualise my meaning.

6.2 The shared rhythm of textile practice

In Melbourne, Australia, I attend the Annual Quilt and Craft Fair, a large public event of exhibitions, workshops, trade stalls, and public talks. The Fair, which in similar format takes place in every major city of Australia throughout the year, runs over four days and is attended by thousands of predominantly, though not exclusively, women. Quite by chance, I happen to be in Melbourne to conduct several interviews for my research, and grab the opportunity to visit the Fair. Around nine a.m., I catch a tram from my lodgings. As I get closer to the Exhibition Building where the Fair is held, I discern an increasing number of women on the streets, all heading in the same direction. By the time I reach the venue, it feels as if a march is happening; so many women are walking at a steady pace, a pace that indicates an eagerness to get there. In the foyer, I join the queue, buy my ticket, enter the vast hall where well over a hundred traders display their wares, there are exhibitions to view and numerous classes are taking place. It’s a real ‘buzz’! I manage, within minutes, to immerse myself in fabrics, yarns, beads, tools and books. Several hours later, I find a spare seat in the cafe area, at a round table at which five others are already seated; a weaver, a spinner, two quilters and an appliqué artisan. A friendly exchange of greetings quickly unfolds into a lively discussion on purchases and patterns. It transpires that all six of us live in different parts of Australia, some in Melbourne, some interstate, others 4000 kilometres apart. None of us appear to know one another. But quickly, surprising connections emerge, and we establish that, in this company of outwardly strangers, each of us can trace a connection to at least 2 others seated at that table! Really, there were only three stitches of separation amongst us and, what’s more, many connecting threads based on a shared knowledge and understanding of the medium and language of textile creative practice, through which we could trace our social connections (FN 02/07).

‘There’s a Quilt Convention on in the city and they have really nice art quilts. So, I would have gone on Thursday but I’ve got to baby-sit. So I’ll go on Saturday. And [my husband] said ‘Oh, I think I’ll come with you’. And he enjoys it, he doesn’t just go because he thinks he’s going to keep me company ‘cause he knows I don’t need that.'
Because I will bump into a million friends while I’m there...and if I don’t, I’ll still always talk to anybody and everybody. Because there’s something in common. You see that’s the thing. You go along to a place like this, well fair enough I do bump into people I know but, even if I don’t, the people that you talk to, you can talk to as if they are your friends, because they understand the language you talk. You know, I can start a conversation and then I’ll be standing around and we’ll all be trying to decide on what buttons they should use or whether that looks better with a bit of yellow in it or a bit of blue. And the next thing you know there are six women around giving somebody else advice about what they reckon...you know...we’re all on the same wavelength’ (IN 02/07).

These snapshots are of the same event in Melbourne in 2007. They illustrate the ease whereby women (myself included), made connections and interacted, often as relative strangers, based primarily on a shared interest in a specific creative medium.107 Of the twenty-eight women I interviewed, all but two were active members of at least one local textile group, and often more than one. A contemporary quilt group, a lace-making guild, a knitting group, several mixed media textile art groups, and state-wide textile and fibre associations were amongst these. Two women were, at the time of interview, not actively involved in textile-specific groups, but nonetheless partook in their own networks of colleagues and fellow makers. At exhibition openings and other relevant events, research participants would meet, and connect with others in the relatively close-knit textile and fibre art community.

6.2.1 A time for knit-working, and a sense of coming home

On a Thursday morning in December 2007, the knitting group gathered at Trudi’s studio for its regular, fortnightly meeting and a pre-Christmas shared lunch. I had joined the group earlier that year following interviews with Trudi and Sue, who were both members, and had immediately been struck by the camaraderie that the members of the group displayed, and the care they extended towards one another. The group consisted of a core of seven women who, almost without fail, attended every meeting, and another five who attended whenever work, family, and other commitments allowed. Beside the ‘regulars’, some women left the group for several months due to

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107 Similar experiences were encountered at other, large-scale textile events I attended. These included annual Fibre Forums, the annual Beanie Festival in Alice Springs in 2006 and 2007, and the Anglicare Knit-in in Perth, the Bothwell International Highland Spin-in in Bothwell, Tasmania, and the Airing of the Quilts in Northampton, Western Australia in 2007.
work commitments, while others joined in. Numbers fluctuated and this meant that some weeks there would be six or seven women around the table, and at other times as many as twelve. The fortnightly gatherings were very informal: we would start arriving around nine in the morning and usually stay until early afternoon. Women would bring their latest project, often knitting, but other things too, including crochet, string-making or hand-stitching. There was no set routine or program, although most sessions contained a show and tell; much sharing of ideas and patterns, and cups of tea. We would exchange ideas, encourage, chat, knit, laugh, listen, admire, support, share and enjoy each other’s company. Trudi’s studio lent itself for that kind of meeting and informality; it was spacious with large windows offering expansive views over the Perth hills and native bushland. The main, large room contained a large table, around which we could all gather, and a range of comfortable chairs and couches, grouped around the room. In winter, a wood-fire provided warmth, and more often than not, someone brought home-made cake or other treats. In the context of conducting fieldwork, this was a most relaxing site to be, and many a day I left the knitting group feeling contented, with a new textile pattern in my bag, or a creative idea to happily ponder upon on the long drive home. In describing the atmosphere during the group’s meetings, the following terms come to mind: supportive, relaxed, mutual interest and an affectionate exchange grounded in a creative interaction. One participant expressed it in the following manner:

I see a lot in this group, and it is that common connection that holds it all together, it’s the knitting thing, it’s the textiles thing. People are free to be themselves, no holes bared, warts and all. And if I had to use one word, to describe it, it would be that it feels like home (Rosie, REC 12/07).\textsuperscript{108}

The women in the knitting group varied in background and in age. Several were born overseas and came to Australia in their twenties to mid thirties, with English as a second language; while our host Trudi was born in the former Dutch colony (now known as Indonesia), as I recounted in Chapter Four. She shared the studio-space with her daughter Helena, they often worked closely alongside one another, providing a mutual sound-board and collaborating on projects and ideas. Helena, who was in her mid-forties, also attended the knitting group on a regular basis, something she enjoyed, as her words illustrate:

\textsuperscript{108} Rosie intentionally used the words ‘no holes bared’ here, rather than the more generally used expression ‘no holds barred’.
It’s a really nice group. I was thinking the other day, it’s not often that you get to be a part of a group naturally, and be creative. Different dynamics, different people, and it does feel like it means a lot to people. It does feel like it is actually a place people want to come every other Thursday, and contribute. And you oldies, you have just taught me so much! (REC 12/07).

Amongst the camaraderie and humour, the affectionate exchange and the care expressed within this group of women is best illustrated by the following example. Not long after I had joined, mid-way through one of the meetings, Dorothy, whom I had not yet met, arrived. Visibly unwell, I subsequently learned that she was undergoing chemotherapy for secondary ovarian cancer. Aged in her 60s, Dorothy had been driven to the meeting by a friend and, although looking grey and somewhat fragile, clearly rejoiced in being amongst those in the group she considered close friends. She was warmly welcomed in return, after which she chose a comfortable spot on one of the couches near the fire from where she showed a keen interest in what everyone was working on, and how they had been since she last saw them. After a little while, Elaine, another member of the group, sat down next to Dorothy and quietly began to massage her feet. It was an interaction not easily expressed in words but my recollection as to how I felt in that moment is clear: ‘this is a good space; here are people that clearly care about and look out for one another’, and they showed it (FN 03/07). At other times this care and the importance of the group to its members, was symbolised and appreciated by way of humour, silliness and laughter, as Sue D. explained:

I give up things to come to this group. The number of things I have given up, because I want to come to this! ...This group is my sanity, because you can be crazy in this group, and you can be stupid and dorky and dippy and all of those things. And also, I got confidence through this group. And if I didn’t have this group, I would be much more miserable (REC 12/07).

A few months prior to making this remark, Sue was getting ready to go on an overseas trip, and arrived at the Thursday meeting looking slightly frazzled, relaying stories of last-minute preparations. She was asked by someone whether she was looking forward to her time away. Sue replied positively, and named some of the places she and her family intended to visit but then, looking around the group, she said: ‘can I just say, this group is as good for me as a holiday!’ (FN 05/07).
The knitting group had been formed quite by chance and in an organic fashion, several years prior to me joining the group. In an interview with Sue J., she relayed the story of its inception as follows:

We started because Trudi saw a lady knitting somewhere who had this jacket on that you can wear upside down. And the woman said to Trudi that she could have the pattern. Well, Trudi couldn’t work it out, so she gave [the pattern] to me. And I couldn’t work it out, so I gave it to my sister. And my sister, who is a wonderful knitter, she worked it out. And I took it up to Trudi and never thought any more of it. Meanwhile, Trudi is going around showing everybody and wearing it and that sort of thing and everybody is saying they want to knit one, they want to learn to knit one. And Trudi says ‘ah well, Sue will teach you how to knit one and it will cost you $50!’ (IN 11/06).

Familiar as we both were with Trudi’s indomitable enthusiasm at times, we burst out laughing at this last remark, and Sue continued:

So that’s what happened. It was over in 4 weeks or something, and everybody enjoyed each other’s company. I mean, I met people I didn’t know. And the people who hadn’t been to Trudi’s studio before, and had discovered it...we decided this was so much fun. And that’s how it happened; we got together once a fortnight...we just put two dollars in the bowl for the use of Trudi’s studio and that’s how it happened and that’s how it continues to this day (IN 11/06).

For Sue an important element of this group was the sharing that took place amongst the women, this being the sharing of knowledge, skills and materials, in conjunction with what she termed ‘the support that we give to each other in bad times, and good times’(IN 11/06). She remarked on the depth of the relationships she had established with the other women, ‘because we have shared so much over such a long period of time. In terms of textiles, our art, our personal relationships, and in terms of how we’re going’ (IN 11/06). Likewise, for Alcira the social contact and interaction of the knitting group was the thing she loved the most: ‘It’s so nice. I mean, I’m not my husband’s wife – when I go there, I am me, my own person. That’s very important to me, to have that independence, do my own thing, you know. We just come together and just knit’ (FN 11/07). On another occasion Alcira remarked to the group:

I have to say that Thursday is a very good day for the knitting group, so don’t you ever change it ‘cause that’s the day I talk with my dad. And my dad is 97, and unfortunately he’s becoming a bit of an old, sad, man. So it has helped me tremendously to know that when I hang up, I am going to mix with this crazy group. It is nectar for my soul. It has been very good for me in that regard. You all, give me...your company, I treasure it a lot more than you would perhaps think (REC 12/07).
If, as I suggest in this thesis, art is a ‘mode of action’ (Morphy 2009), my data illustrates that making holds meaning for women in both an individual or self-contained sense as well as through their participation in groups. Reflections by those in the knitting group indicated that the social aspect enabled by the group setting and the nature of knitting, was a means of crafting a nourishing space, for making and for enabling friendship.\textsuperscript{109} The wish to learn a particular knitting technique had brought these women together on a fortnightly basis, and through my conversations with them it became evident that in their respective lives and commitments, the knitting group was important in the sense that it provided a time and place for inspiration, creativity and support as well as facilitating time-out from other, regular commitments and home environments. The creative interests formed the impetus, but equally important was the enjoyment and comfort women gained from being in the company of others who make. The group setting was not a place to talk about one’s problems per se, rather, through the shared activity of knitting it provided a window of time to meet others and through creative engagement and interactions with one another women ‘recharged their batteries’, for example to get over the phone-call to dad, and cope as best as possible with serious illness. For many, it was also important that the knitting group consisted of only women, as Trudi explained:

\begin{quote}
It’s the humour, the jokes, the being together. Deeper stuff too. And sometimes, when you’re really sad, just a hug. Or the feelings, and with certain people it’s lovely to share, and with other people you don’t. It depends. Or discussing something. Somehow it just doesn’t happen with men. I just find it so much easier with women. It’s like, much easier to talk, and they know what you’re talking about (IN 11/06).\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

Futterman Collier (2012), Kapitan (2011) and Gandolfo and Grace (2009) write about art-making with fabrics and fibres from the perspective of art-therapy and wellbeing.

\textsuperscript{109} In this context, the following artist statement, written by a textile group consisting of nine Melbourne-based women, and accompanying their work at a textile exhibition at the National Wool Museum in 2007 reflect this well: ‘The repetitive nature of knitting can for many people provide stress relief with some knitters believing that their state of mind is evident in their work: when they are relaxed their work is smooth or even, but if they are tense the work shows an uneven quality. Alternatively, knitting is a social activity that, when done in groups, provides opportunities for swapping patterns, sharing yarns and friendship.’ (FN 04/07).

\textsuperscript{110} Trudy’s words resonated with others, myself included. At the pre-Christmas meeting mentioned, all of us reflected on the significance of the group that past year, and I recalled an event that had taken place some months earlier that symbolized this significance for me: ‘This has always been a welcoming place. What marked the moment for me personally, when it became clear that it was more than research, was on a Thursday earlier in the year. We had a knitting group, and it turned out to be my birthday. But the night before, I received some rather unsettling news on a personal level, and I woke up the next morning and I felt so sad, and for a moment I was in two minds whether to come to knitting. And I thought: ‘I’ll go anyway’. It was the best decision; ‘cause when I walked in here, I thought to myself: ‘this is good’, and it was good to be amongst you all when I was feeling down’ (REC 12/07).
They concur that a ‘therapeutic intervention’ and self-expression through textile-making facilitates an ‘emotional coping’ for individuals, and the suspension of negative feelings through a creative intervention can assist people in meeting ‘the demands of life’ (Kapitan 2011:95). Comments by members of the knitting group indicate that, to some extent their participation in the group performed this function when they felt somewhat unravelled in other aspects of life. While knitting and other textile projects were the initial reason for their participation and these activities were found to be relaxing and creative, for many in the group it was the social aspect and their engagements with fellow makers that benefitted their individual sense of well-being in multiple ways.111

During my 18 months field research with the knitting group, Dorothy attended whenever she was well enough to do so. After her chemo-therapy and other treatments, she went into remission although it was increasingly clear to everyone that she was not well or going to get better. In November 2007, she loaned me a knitting book purchased when briefly in Melbourne to view an exhibition she had wanted to see; she was someone who squeezed the most out of every moment she was given. ‘I know where it is, if I need it’, she told me as she handed me the book. ‘At the moment I can’t deal with patterns. You use it. And if I don’t need it again, it’s yours’. Sadly, in 2009 Dorothy died. Her book is in my safe-keeping, serving as a reminder of her generosity and presence in the group, and of her words at the pre-Christmas lunch when she told her knitting friends: ‘this group has been like a strand. Somehow, being here has been like coming home. I’ve felt it as such’ (FN 12/07).

111 Another example of the role textile-making can play in women’s wellbeing is seen at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, home to the busiest breast cancer service in Perth (http://www.breastscrganz.com). The Breast Centre’s waiting room has a table with knitting needles and balls of yarns, available to women awaiting further tests after abnormal mammogram results. Clinical nurse consultant Kay O’Driscoll notes that ‘they were usually very nervous and looked for an activity to provide a diversion. ...It is something relaxing that patients can do to occupy their minds’ (Advocate 2007:29). The knitted squares are sewn together into patchwork blankets ‘with so many stories journeys and emotions behind each square’ (Advocate 2007:29). Besides serving as an ice-breaker to establish conversations among women, it offers them what Gandolfo and Grace term a ‘creative fidgeting’ (2009:16). The activity aims to shift the focus from being sick onto ‘something that other people could identify with and share in as well’ (Gandolfo and Grace 2009:44). Women take up this opportunity, as a friend relayed to me in a phone conversation. Not a knitter herself, she described the experience of accompanying a friend and sitting in the waiting room amongst other women, and watching them gravitate towards the wool and needles, entering in conversations with relative strangers as they proceeded to knit. The activity of knitting facilitated and eased these conversations. She told me: ‘there was a process underway, the knitting generated discussion amongst women. They were knitting squares and joining them together...the needles were clacking the whole time I was there – I was the only one with a book!’ (FN 06/07). See also Gschwandtner (2008) on the social spaces implied by handcraft materials and techniques.
6.2.2 And that’s what going to the quilt group does for me!

Alongside the group meetings I attended as part of my research, I also asked those I interviewed individually about the relevance of the group(s) they belonged to. What was it about the groups and gatherings that made them significant? How did they differ from other settings where women might come to meet?

Many responded that it was important to see what others were doing in their textile work and learn new things. Some women valued being able to share their creative work in a supportive environment, to glean information on exhibitions and events, and to network with others (FN 07/08). For a number of them, it was important that the groups consisted of mainly women, for example, Michele mentioned that ‘that’s such an important part of it really, women supporting one another’ (FN 12/06). Others mentioned how the groups kept them going, in the sense that it provided a source of inspiration that energised them in their own work which often took place in more solitary settings. One woman talked of having had a ‘good yarn day’ after attending her local spinning group, meaning that besides the spinning, she had shared some good yarns in the form of chats and stories with her textile friends (FN 09/06).

For Julia, the groups she belonged to and the networks this provided were integral to her life as a textile-maker. Speaking at length when we met at her home in Melbourne in 2007, Julia observed:

One of the biggest bonuses of working in textiles is the groups that I work with. There’s nothing better than to sit down...and I mean [my husband] is rather envious of that, I think, of how women can just all get together. And all just sit down and be working on their stitching. It’s a wonderful bond. ...I love working by myself as well though. I need to be able to work by myself. When I’m by myself, I can formulate my ideas better, or experiment or that sort of thing. And when I’m with others, I can share a lot of the knowledge. And for me, it’s fundamental that they are women. When I worked in my paid life, in my other life, there was half and half men and women... And I can’t say that I actually formed close and meaningful relationships on that level, even though I worked very, very well with people when I was working...and I was entirely happy. But the bond that you have with women who, like are sewing or stitching or whatever, knitting...it’s a little bit like there’s no hierarchy, as you find in jobs. It doesn’t matter what you’ve done or where you’re situated in whatever profession you’re in, somehow it doesn’t matter. ...The women I’ve been associated with have always shared their knowledge. And that’s one of the greatest things. ...And one of the good things is that it’s a very sharing environment...never a feeling of competition. ...For me, it’s a feeling of belonging really. To belong into a community that is huge, vast (IN 02/07).
Julia’s words illustrate the meaning ascribed by Vermehren and Vergunst who, in their study, note the significance of ‘sociability’ evident in the act of walking. Their use of the phrase ‘an ability to get on with someone through a shared rhythm of movement’ (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012:135) resonates strongly with, and parallels the act of textile-making involving an activity that is both rhythmic and ‘in the making’ through the act of doing. In conversations, women recounted how textile-making is an activity ideally suited to do in the company of others as its techniques do not, by definition, require intense concentration. This meant that while their hands were occupied there was also room for conversation, to be engaged with others. This may involve people who are family or friends, or those who, having met each other for the first time at a group or at a workshop, are contemporaries ‘by virtue of their involvement’, and ‘could become closer as a result of spending time together’ whilst engaged with making (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012:134). This was certainly the case for the women in the knitting group, where a bond had been established and firmed over time. It was also an observation evident in Julia’s words.

According to Cohen (1982:6), a sense of belonging or what it means for people to belong, is evoked and promoted by the use of language, the sharing of knowledge and skills, humour and solidarity. Whilst support for this notion is reflected in many of the women’s comments, a sticking point as Cohen opines, is that in representations and idioms about belonging, people’s ‘reality of difference is continually being glossed by the appearance of similarity’ (Cohen 1982:13, italics in original). Instead it should be recognised that the individuals who gather and ‘brought into association may be diverse’ (Edwards and Strathern 2000:150; Cohen 1982). My interactions with Ruth, a quilt artist from Perth, illustrate this point.

I first met Ruth at the Contemporary Quilt Group in Perth in 2007, and we subsequently met at her house for an interview. Ruth grew up in a very creative environment, with a mother who was ‘always busy making something out of nothing. ...She also made quilts [using] scraps, old clothes, and curtain samples from a friend’s curtain shop’.112 Ruth joined the Contemporary Quilt group in 2005 and found the meetings valuable, helping her to develop and extend her designs and techniques further than what she otherwise might have done. At some point in our conversation about Ruth’s creative work, we embarked on the art versus craft conundrum and I was

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curious to know how Ruth considered textile-making to be placed within the context of these terms. The following is a brief extract from the interview transcript:

**Ruth:** The thing with classifying textiles as art is that people might compare them, you know, like a textile piece to a painting without understanding the process, or the craft behind it, [that] the textile piece is worth so much more when it’s the same size, and people might not see that. That might be a problem.

**MvZ:** Some people have said that we shouldn’t try and be equal to fine art,... we should say it is a craft, and claim that with a pride, rather than trying to live up to a benchmark, because whose benchmark is it, and who determines that? How do you feel about that? (IN 10/07).

It was sometime later, as I reviewed the recording, that I realised I had unconsciously used the term ‘we’, thereby counting myself as a fellow maker and an insider rather than a researcher looking vicariously in. This experience happened on several occasions, including in response to the names of stitches as Ruth described her particular quilting technique and other, textile-related jargon with which I was familiar. On another level, however, our lives could hardly have been more different. Ruth was married with three young children under the age of five, and she and her family were active members of the Free Reformed Church in Perth. Although she had been quilting for quite a number of years, she had only joined the Contemporary Quilt Group in the year prior to our meeting. Ruth recounted this decision as follows:

It’s been a big thing for me to join the group. But I think that’s what has helped me to see myself more seriously as a quilt maker and textile artist, I suppose. It is getting to know other people that are either interested in textiles, or serious about their textile work, that’s been really interesting for me. Just to see where you could possibly take your quilt making. ...Everyone is willing to share what they are doing. ...It’s a very supportive group (IN 10/07).

As became evident from my interactions with Ruth, her religious beliefs deeply influenced her creative work. In an artist statement she wrote that her quilting:

> [s]tems from my passion for God's creation and from my ever-increasing awareness of the glory of God, as it is evident in His design, creation and preservation of the natural world. ...Each work leads me to a deeper knowledge and appreciation of the greatness of my God, the Creator. I hope that those who view my quilts may have a similar experience.

Ruth’s openness in talking about the inspiration for her artwork to her fellow quilt-makers, none of whom were openly religious, exemplifies how people from very...
different walks of life converged and interacted based on a shared enthusiasm for, in this case, the making of contemporary art quilts.

In 2007, one of Ruth’s quilts won Best of Show in *Quilt West 2007*, a national touring exhibition. The winning quilt, titled *Not Even Solomon*... was inspired by a reference in the New Testament stating that ‘not even Solomon in all his magnificence could array himself like one of these’ (figures 53 and 54). Later that year, Ruth gave a presentation to the members of the Contemporary Quilt Group in which she spoke about the source of inspiration for her work to the group. She later reflected on that experience and on what her involvement with the quilt group and the friendship with its members meant to her:

> The group has a whole range of people, from all different interests. There’s a few people that have said ‘Oh I’m a Christian too, how nice to see that in your work’, and for other people it’s just received as that’s me I suppose. I haven’t noticed that anyone takes offence by it. It is the one environment that I’m in that’s not mostly Christian people. All my friends seem to be from church, and yet we have a lot to learn from the quilt group as far as treating other people, accepting other people for what they are, and just being so positive towards other people. ...And that really stood out to me too about the quilt group, that it’s just...people are so positive. ...And what I find interesting is the fact that going to the quilt group is the one point where I find other people who are passionate about textiles like I am, whereas in all my other circles, I don’t, other than my mum I suppose. But yeah, within the circle of friends and family and church there are people who do work with textiles but I don’t know of people who are as passionate about it as I am. And that’s what going to the quilt group does for me (IN 10/07).

As this paragraph illustrates, Ruth valued greatly the network with other quilters and connection with others that emerged from a shared interest and first-hand understandings of her creative work. Sharing the language of a medium and techniques in this way, her experience highlights a dimension of textile-making and aesthetic engagements that further exemplifies and makes evident the diversity amongst research participants, and textile practitioners more broadly.

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Figure 53

Figure 54
6.3 Fibre Forum – setting and event

My concern, thus far, has been to explicate the significance, for women, of their individual participation in specific textile groups. These were mostly groups located within their respective cities and familiar surroundings, and involved regular attendance and activities that fitted in and around daily life, social calendars, work and family commitments. Another aspect of my fieldwork, however, involved attending a number of residential textile gatherings including Fibre Forums. In the following section I describe my experiences at one of these Forums held in Geelong Victoria in 2006. A primary aim for attending was to elicit data regarding the worth of such week-long gatherings to the women who attended, and in particular for the students who had enrolled in a class with Nalda Searles. I begin by explaining what a Fibre Forum is, and who attends.


Sunday early afternoon. I am sitting in the registration area of the annual Fibre Forum, held at Geelong Grammar School. It’s the school holidays, so things appear quiet, but soon this site and its buildings will be transformed into a week-long textile fest full of colour, people and sound. Over 200 women are arriving this afternoon, for week-long workshops with national and international tutors. Some are arriving as I write. Many of them will have travelled from far and wide, by car, train and plane (I arrived yesterday from Perth, a day early to help set up as I am also working on staff this week). This registration area is also the ‘meet & greet’ area, where participants are welcomed and shown the way to their sleeping quarters, and classrooms.

...A quite moving thing just happened. While I was at the registration desk, a seasoned Forum participant arrived. Having travelled 1200 kilometres from her home in northern New South Wales, she entered the foyer, dropped her luggage on the spot, and proceeded to hug whoever was in sight. Then, with tears in her eyes, she exclaimed: ‘I’m home! Oh...it’s so good to be amongst my mates again!!’

At the time of my fieldwork, Fibre Forums were week-long residential textile events held twice a year on the east coast of Australia; in New South Wales in Autumn and in Victoria in Spring\(^{115}\). Organised and promoted through the Australian Forum for Textile Arts (TAFTA), each Forum was run by a volunteer staff of about six to eight people, who were themselves practising textile-makers, and attended by 200-250 participants per event\(^{116}\). Each Forum offered an extensive program of about 15 week-

\(^{115}\) During the period of my fieldwork, similar events were held in other regions of Australia, including Queensland, Western Australia, and Tasmania. Though relatively small, these regional Forum-like events still attract up to 150 people at a time. My concern here is not so much to describe in detail the structures of these events; my focus is on the significance women assigned to networks and gatherings of fellow makers.

\(^{116}\) The Forums are traditionally held during school term holidays and take place at schools which have boarding facilities and a vast array of teaching quarters and halls which makes it ideal for such an event.
long workshops, several exhibitions, trade stalls, art installations, and daily slide presentations by leading international and Australian teachers and artists in their respective field. Each participant enrolled for one workshop with a tutor in a class with a maximum number of 15 students. Participants routinely arrived on Sunday afternoon and left, hopefully creatively saturated and inspired, the following Saturday afternoon. The last evening of a Forum was traditionally party-night complete with impromptu dress-ups, fashion parades of wearable work made by students during the week, and often much dancing too. In all, in the residential surroundings and distinctive qualities that a Fibre Forum provided, it offered participants a week of in-depth learning along with a celebration of the full spectrum of the textile and fibre arts, and an opportunity to meet others in a creatively charged atmosphere.

Those who attended the Forums were predominantly non-Indigenous women with widely varying occupational and cultural backgrounds. Most belonged to textile-groups in their home environments, but what distinguished a Fibre Forum event is that it occurred away from these home environments, and offered women round-the-clock immersion, extended time for textile-making and creative engagement with others. As a result, in the physical spaces of the venue and in daily workshop routines, women’s everyday responsibilities appeared to be suspended: all meals were provided and no household chores had to be done. Textile-making took centre stage and attendee comments make plain the value of such times and events:

‘For a whole week, I get to talk textiles, and nothing else. What a treat!’ (FN 09/06),

‘I don’t have to be responsible for anything for a whole week!’ (FN 07/07),

and:

‘Oh, not to have to cook for a whole week, I don’t have to please anyone but myself’ (FN 09/07).

The group of over two hundred women included craftspeople, hobbyists, artisans, self-ascribed ‘fibre-holics’ and professional artists. Regardless of how the participants defined themselves, against a background of many years of familial and/or work commitments, many commented that this period in their lives was ‘their’ time, in which they had more actual clock-time to devote to textile-making and the sociality that came from spending time with other makers. A key observation was that most appeared to enjoy that Forums prompted almost exclusive women-centred domains: relishing time with ‘just’ their female friends, being able to do as they pleased, dress
up if they wanted to and at times act silly, including during meal-times in ways they felt could not happen at home. One woman told me: ‘As I get older, I increasingly appreciate the company of women’ (FN 01/08).

In line with social implications of the Internet, and an increase in digital forms of communication that have blurred the boundaries of social time and space (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012), textile-makers in Australia, as elsewhere, have progressively connected with fellow-makers through the World Wide Web. What distinguished Fibre Forums and other residential events in this regard, is that it facilitated a physical meeting place for a large group of women from all over Australia, enabling a connectivity in an intimate, bounded setting for a week.

At the five Fibre Forums I attended during my fieldwork, most of the classes on offer had attracted the maximum number of students, many of whom had travelled long distances to attend, and I was keen to know why they had done so. In dialogue with women, it transpired that long-distance contacts and communications such as email, on-line forums and blogs, while immensely valuable, simply did not offer the kind of interaction a face-to-face event engendered, a point particularly relevant in textile-making where the tactile element of the medium is paramount. Attending and participating in Forums was felt by many as essential to getting new ideas and encouragement in a supportive and ‘real-time’, place-based environment. For some, it was a way of breaking what they termed their ‘fabric block’ (as distinct from ‘writer’s block’). One woman said: ‘I don’t really mind which particular workshop I end up doing, I just need to be amongst it all!’(FN 09/06). The stimulus provided in the creative environments inspired by women who gathered to make and meet was

117 This statement is informed by my attendance, as a core member of staff, at twice yearly Fibre Forums during 2006-2011. It is important here, for a moment, to emphasise the particular geographical circumstance of Australia in comparison to countries where similar textile gatherings take place, such as the U.S.A. and the United Kingdom. Australia is a vast country with a relatively small population. It is roughly the same size as the USA and 60 times the size of the United Kingdom, yet its population is a ‘mere’ 21.5 million (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011 Census QuickStats). In the U.S.A., residential textile gatherings take place in many states on a regular basis, and in the U.K. distance is relatively speaking, less of a consideration than in the Australian context where many textile makers are geographically disconnected from their peers. This means that, in order to attend a Forum, some participants must travel long distances so that they can be part of the face to face and interactive environment that Forums provide. For instance, I first attended a Forum in 1989 and drove from my then home-town of Melbourne to the Forum in Wollongong, a return journey of some 1600 kilometres. Since 2006 I have attended Forums as a member of staff, after previously also participating as a tutor and installation artist at these events. As I had moved to Perth in 1998, it meant that I crossed the Australian continent to attend these Forums on the east coast.
particularly relevant for those who lived in isolated areas, as one participant, who lived four hours drive from the nearest major town indicated:

Working in isolation is...you need that to work things out. But connections are vital - that’s where you meet people. The most important thing is the networking, not just the learning. It’s the contact with others, get inspiration. And it’s also about support. People are supported here, they can nurture self-esteem about their work in ways they might not receive otherwise (FN 04/08).

Another participant, a farmer in rural north-western Victoria, an area that had endured 11 years of continuous severe drought conditions, disclosed that she was in substantial debt due to thousands of dollars worth of outstanding bills for stock-feed and water. ‘No, I don’t really have the money or the time’ she told me,’ but if I don’t get away and come here, I’d go mad. I simply need the break’ (FN 09/07). 118

On the whole, participants might have found themselves at a stage in life when they experienced what can be described as having more ‘free’ time on their hands. However, this did not automatically mean that getting to Forums was easy, rather, it frequently required creative and resourceful organisation. This form of invisible planning was brought to the surface during informal conversations with participants over breakfast or en-route to classrooms. Besides the frequent mention of preparing pre-cooked and frozen meals for husbands and family, it included arranging alternative childcare arrangements (not for their own children but for grandchildren that many women helped care for), organising respite care for elderly parents or ill partners, rearranging voluntary work commitments, taking unpaid leave from employment or foregoing income if self-employed, and raising the considerable finances needed for travel, workshop fees and full lodgings 119. One participant remarked: ‘You know in my class, there is a woman in her 70s; now she actually works to pay to come here. She’s a postmistress in a post-office. I was quite shocked, a woman of her age’ (FN 04/07).

Amongst the wide variety in both the classes on offer and women’s diverse specialisations in their respective fields of practice, participants undoubtedly relished

118 In her ethnographic study amongst members of a quilting group in the USA, Ice (1997:221) also discusses the extent to which the social aspect of textile-making can take ‘precedence’ for women over the end product – the quilt. See also my discussion in Chapter Two on the relevance of sociality amongst textile-makers (Ice 1983, 1984, 1997; Gabbert 2000; Stalp 2007).

119 In 2006 the cost to enrol in a Forum workshop, including full residential lodgings and meals was approximately $710. This did not include travel to and from the venue, or any additional expenses for extra materials or supplies bought at Forum, and personal expenses.
the inspiration from being with, what might appear on the surface, like-minded others within a collective, supportive and connective space. A comment, submitted by a participant following her Fibre Forum experience in 2009 expanded on this:

The 2009 Geelong Forum was so fantastic (as always!) and more than ever I felt as though I was in my right self while I was there doing those things. It’s hard to explain to people who haven’t experienced it - what it is like to be free of responsibilities (except to your artwork). Mostly though, to meet other people from the perspective of what your passion is - not what you do as a job, not your family situation, not how much money you have or where you come from.\footnote{http://www.tafta.org.au, accessed 09/11/2010.}

Time at Forums, and thus time away from everyday routines, was a period that allowed for extended periods of making in ways rarely realised in home environments. The significance of this relative isolation became paramount; offering women uninterrupted time and focused creative engagement, yet in such a way that interaction with, and time amongst others was not only possible but valued for the contribution made to regaining a sense of self. One woman expressed it most succinctly: ‘It’s funny you know, but I come to be amongst 300 people in order to feel like an \textit{individual} again!’ (FN 09/07). Her comment reminded me of what Alcira had said, in a very similar manner, about her participation in the knitting group in Perth which made her feel more like her ‘own person rather than [her] husband’s wife’ (FN 11/07). Rendering connections visible through textile-making, the friendships and networks were vital to women who cherished the opportunity to connect with others who not only shared, but more importantly understood their affinity with, and interest in their creative work. Some found it difficult to explain this significance to outsiders, as the following words of a Forum participant illustrate: ‘I did, I \textit{used} to explain it, but I don’t anymore. Now I take the energy and use it creatively in my work. It is something you share with the people here’ (FN 09/07). Someone else simply told me: ‘I have a Forum life, and another life’ (FN 09/06).

What this last remark illustrates is that Fibre Forums involved a setting in which women spent time away from the things that they felt defined them in their daily, home environments. Being at Forum offered them a sense of identity through a connection with a social space and like-minded others. This was especially the case for women who were financially dependent on their husbands: their attendance at Forums offered a legitimate way to have time away from home. The expense involved in attending a
Forum could be justified as ‘useful’, related to their hobby or art in the way a holiday in Bali with female friends (but without their husband) could not. The social connections at Forum affirmed women’s individuality and friendships in a community of their own. As such, and in the face of personal differences, and intersections such as geographical location, ethnicity, sexuality, religion and age, women’s connections at Forums were first and foremost enabled through textile-making, and a language of communication that women felt was shared and understood by others there. ‘It’s wonderful’, one participant told me: ‘all these different women and we all speak the same language’, while someone else remarked: ‘it doesn’t matter where you come from, what you do, how much money you make or how many degrees you have. We’re all equal, through our interest in textiles’ (FN 09/07). Under different circumstances participants might not have met, whereas at Forums they formed a bond through a shared activity (cf. Vergunst and Vermehren 2012). My experiences in Nalda’s class expand on this, in the following section.121

6.3.1 Sociability amongst relative strangers - Nalda’s class

Much like the participant whose joy upon arrival I described earlier, I felt an immediate rekindling of connectivity with fellow makers arriving at the Fibre Forum event in 2006. I had participated as a student in the past but this time I was a member of the staff team responsible for hosting the Forum. This position aided my fieldwork as I was visiting class-rooms as part of doing daily rounds to make announcements to teachers and students alike. One of the teachers was Nalda Searles, whose stories and work I recounted in previous chapters. Her week-long workshop called ‘Strategies with Fibre’ involved the use of dried hay (also called fodder) and elementary stitch to create three-dimensional objects and free-form, small fibre sculptures.

121 My focus in this chapter, thus far, has been to foreground what textile-making enables in processes of connectivity and sociality. However, it is important at this point to also make clear that Forums are a type of event that do not by definition appeal to, or cater for, everyone, as the following remark from a research participant illustrates: ‘I have been [to Forums], as a student, a participant. ...I feel as though for a lot of people Forum is a big social event, and [it] has a very strong sense of community that people belong to and enjoy being part of. I don’t feel myself like a member of that community as strongly as it seems like other people do. ...I’ve never really felt like I was in my element there, it feels very extrovert. Aside from the fact that I am making textiles and so does everyone else there, I don’t have a lot of links with other people. I have been, when I’ve been particularly interested in a workshop that’s been offered. ...The wider environment of Forum...I am really glad that it exists. I really love the spirit of it, in that it’s very inclusive and welcoming, but I don’t feel as though it’s quite my tribe. It looks to me like a lot of people who come to Forum live for it...it’s like this special week. Whereas for me, I feel like going there is socially, as an introvert, it’s socially difficult, it expends energy rather than feeding me (IN 09/07).
When Nalda and I met in Perth before the Fibre Forum, she agreed that I would visit her class at regular intervals during the week, to observe and perhaps talk with students in the context of my fieldwork. Eight women had enrolled in ‘Strategies with Fibre’ and Nalda began her class with an introductory talk, in part to communicate to students her thoughts and ideas about working with fibre. She commenced in the following manner:

First of all, thank you all very much for booking into the workshop and I’m grateful that you’re all here and that we shall spend time, all of us together this week. ...One of the things when you work with fibre is the time element, and you have to take that on board...you can’t do it quickly, you’ve just got to do it, and build it up. So...if you’re interested in quick results, you won’t get them with fibre. ...I’ve been making things since 1979...and I’m finding that there is a consolidation coming to my work that couldn’t have come if I had not been prepared for the time factor in making (REC 09/06).

Emphasising the significance of time, this being spending time together and the time factor involved in fibre and textile-making, Nalda also mentioned the fibre art made by Australian Indigenous women which includes woven fibre mats, dilly-bags and baskets using techniques and methods dating back some 40,000 years:

[t]hat gives us some indication that we are standing on special ground, for fibre construction. ...What’s good is that fibre crosses cultures beautifully, and you can sit with a group of women, which I do quite often, and we sit and we all make things and we laugh and shout and, you know, then also whisper. And people getting ideas, and this one takes this idea, and this one happens and so on, and that’s the nature of collaborations when you have the pleasure of sitting around and making things (REC 09/06).122

Here Nalda’s words again highlighted the relevance of time, in the way the relatively slow nature of textile-making facilitates a sociability amongst women whilst they are engaged with textile-making, and the pleasure she gained from making connections with women from different cultural backgrounds, as they gathered, sat, talked, and made.

Following a discussion and ‘Show and Tell’ about some of Nalda’s recent work, including documentations of her collaborative work with community groups and fellow artists, she asked everyone to briefly introduce themselves to the group.123

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122 The sociality and collaborative aspect of fibre art by Australian Aboriginal women is mentioned in detail by Hamby (2005, 2010) and Biddle (2007).
123 In the introduction that follows, statements made by students were recorded by me with the permission of everyone present. Where verbatim statements are included, the data reference is (REC 09/06).
Penny was a recently retired academic who, despite a life-long affinity with fibre work, ‘only just had started making basketry items’. She had previously intended to enrol in one of Nalda’s classes, but simply lacked the time. Eva, who was in her mid forties, had worked for 18 years in conservation and curatorial work, including managing a municipal gallery in Melbourne which involved handling textiles from ‘all sorts of different cultures’. A spinal cord injury several years prior had dramatically changed Eva’s life and work circumstances and, although often in pain, she had grabbed the opportunity ‘to come here and start to let the hands work again.’ Melanie was a textile artist who made a living from her textiles through a diverse portfolio of products and high-intensity, full-time production, whereas Alicia was a florist who had travelled from Sydney to work specifically with Nalda as she wanted to learn to incorporate specific natural fibres and plant materials in her floral arrangements and sculptural work. Sharon was, at age 34, the youngest of the group. Growing up on a farm in rural Victoria with a large extended family, as a child Sharon was surrounded by women who ‘created and stitched and made everything around me’, something which she had only recently learned to fully appreciate: ‘at the time...as I became a teenager, I didn’t really respect or understand the purpose of all this desire to sew...the craft and the sewing, I didn’t really see that as part of my journey of growing as a woman. I didn’t really want to be connected to it at all’. Although as a teenager Sharon experimented with sewing, this had been done in a decidedly free-form fashion, intentionally breaking free from what she had perceived as conventional and out-dated rules. Now employed at a Koori124 organisation in Melbourne where she coordinated a digital community archive and oral history project, Sharon had enrolled in Nalda’s class because she wanted to get ‘back into creating forms again’. Next to Sharon was Esther, who was born in Russia where she had lived for over 50 years. A teacher and textile artist, Esther’s husband had died three years earlier, since which time she had lacked the motivation to be creative. ‘Where do you get motivation’ she said, ‘I have a work room, and it is very messy, because there are materials, there are strings, there is rope, everything...and it is talking to me “go, do something with me”’. A chance visit to the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney led Esther to learn about the Fibre Forum and she decided to take the plunge and enrol: ‘I decided I am going to learn. And I am so

124 The term Koori is used to refer to the Aboriginal people of Victoria, parts of New South Wales and Tasmania, describing the Indigenous people’s own word they use themselves.
happy to have chosen [this workshop], I don’t know why but it sounds right to me’.

Next to introduce herself was Julia, whom I mentioned earlier and in Chapter Four:

I wanted to learn something that might give my work structure. I work with stitch, I love fibre, but I love to create texture in that stitch, and I suppose it is [about] wanting to convey the essence of things. ..I don’t really know what I’m going to do, but I’m here to try and learn how I can create textures that I haven’t done before. I’ve done just about every texture you can do with needle and thread ...but I’ve never done anything with basketry or weaving...I look forward to exploring it (REC 09/06).

The last in the group to introduce herself was Janice, a textile artist from Melbourne:

I’m at that fun part of my life where I’ve done children and all that sort of thing, and now I have my own studio, stitching and fibre, and now it’s just my all-time passion. And I’ve got all these ideas in my head, wanting to put them together in expression, and I’m looking for skills to create what I want to say. [This] workshop, it’s come at exactly the right time! (REC 09/06).

Recognizing that this brief description does in no way adequately reflect the depth and breadth of experience, skill, and interests that brought this particular group of women together in Nalda’s class, I include it here to draw attention to the diversity that became immediately evident in this group of women. Their backgrounds varied, most obviously in age, country of birth, and employment sector, and in their level of experience in crafting objects using fibre-based materials and techniques. Aside from pre-existing friendships between Janice, Melanie and Eva, had it not been for their affinity with fibre and textiles and the Forum setting, it is unlikely that such a group of women would have crossed paths and moreover, spend the next 5 days working, and being together in the one room.

6.3.2 Chatter, is not mere chatter

During the days that followed, I visited Nalda’s class on several occasions and observed the women working on various individual projects. I spoke with some about their interests and creative explorations that were taking shape. The atmosphere was congenial, and informal chatter ensued while work was underway. There were quiet times too; an atmosphere of absorbed interest where the hum of immersion filled the classroom space, and a sense of amiability amongst this diverse group of women became evident.
However unobtrusive I tried to be, and however quiet I managed to be, I was aware that I was an outsider, popping in from time to time rather than sharing the week as a fellow participant in their midst. Made to feel welcome, I remained a visitor in their space and time together. It was surprising therefore that, after only a relatively short period of time, several women disclosed to me what appeared to be deeply personal experiences that had taken place in their respective lives. For Julia, the experience of coming to Fibre Forum was cathartic. A few days into the workshop, she mentioned how four years prior she had been diagnosed with post traumatic stress. While not divulging details, the act of sharing how the trauma preceding this diagnosis had affected her ability to function in daily life signified a ‘big step’ for Julia; to let relative strangers into an aspect of her life that had been deeply harrowing and remained intensely affecting at the time. For Julia, textile-making had taken on a somewhat therapeutic role in her life; it helped her to make sense of the trauma and how it affected her. It aided her ability to express emotions through working with fabrics rather than talking to others about the details of events (figure 55). Julia belonged to a number of textile groups in her hometown of Melbourne and mentioned that rather than fitting her textile practice into her life, she fitted her life ‘around textiles’, including the friendships she had formed through these groups. Her attendance at Fibre Forum was the very first time she had ventured out on her own overnight and for any extended period of time. She shared with me that being in Nalda’s class, and participating in the week at Forum was ‘better than years of therapy’ (FN 09/06).

On another day, in conversation with Janice, I asked her what she had meant when, in her introduction she mentioned that this workshop had come at ‘exactly the right time’. The conversation that followed formed the start of a number of interviews and exchanges over a number of years, but on that particular day Janice told me that in 1998, having been married for 26 years, her husband shared with her his need to wear women’s clothes in order to feel ‘whole’ as a person. In that instant, Janice said, her relatively carefree and seamless existence was turned inside out as her ‘conventional’ marriage slowly unravelled. Eventually, her husband decided to undergo gender reassignment surgery. In the face of immense and irrevocable changes to her personal life, and with an intense feeling of loss, Janice nonetheless had made the decision to remain in an emotional and life-relationship with her partner, albeit in a vastly reconfigured arrangement in which they moved from a married couple to separate individuals who still shared a home and remained best of friends. Over time, she had
Figure 55

Figure 56
become an advocate for raising public awareness regarding gender-reassignment and trans-gender issues, in order to highlight the lived experiences of trans-gender individuals and their partners in Australian socio-cultural life. For quite some time, Janice’s textile arts practice had been a way for her of ‘getting things out’ without writing them down and without talking about her lived experiences. Working in textiles became the main avenue of expression by which she was able to let out her emotions and, in this context, Forums had provided Janice not only with an opportunity for networking and learning, but a ‘safe place to be’, where she felt she could be totally herself and ‘enmeshed in that whole scene’ (IN 04/07, figure 56). She felt she had now reached the point where she no longer had an interest in making ‘pretty things just for the sake of making’ (IN 04/07); her intention was to work towards a solo exhibition about her personal experiences surrounding transgender issues. With Nalda’s help she hoped to further develop her skills, concepts and ideas to bring her intended exhibition to fruition and into the public’s view.

What was it about these conversations that signified them as being noteworthy? I was intrigued to know more about the reasons why both Julia and Janice had chosen to disclose information of a very personal nature to others in the workshop who, by all accounts, were relative strangers, myself included. Some five months following the Fibre Forum conference, I met with both Julia and Janice in Melbourne for interviews as part of my research. In subsequent conversations I learned more about their respective textile practice and personal backgrounds. I asked them about their experiences at the recent Forum and my conversations with them at the time. Both women responded in a very similar manner; namely that they perceived the shared environment of creativity and making to be a ‘safe’ one, in that it had generated an ambience where they felt at ease to share with others personal information. Independent from one another, both Julia and Janice remarked that this disclosure took place as a direct result of ‘doing’. With this they meant that their engagement in a shared activity, in an uninterrupted environment and over several days, created a sense of sociability that had eased and indeed facilitated the unfolding of more intimate conversations.

My own experiences in attending Fibre Forums during this time brought to my attention that the chance of finding oneself in a workshop with people who might
present very different ways of being was a real possibility, This was not something unique to Forums per se; for example Julia mentioned that had it not been for her involvement in textile-making groups, she would likely not have connected with a number of women she now counted amongst her close friends. This was, as she said, because their lives had seemed, on the surface at least, so very different to her own:

I used to belong to a stitching group, that was largely a quilting group but really I think it was a chatting group. We used to all sit there and get together once every two weeks for a few hours. And people felt a certain freedom to discuss personal problems. One woman came in and the first thing she said was ‘well, my husband is going to prison tomorrow’. And we all sort of gulped. I thought ‘Oh, what do we say to that?’ and I said ‘Oh wow, you know, that’s certainly stopped us in our tracks, that must be terrible for you!’ She said ‘oh no, I’m so pleased’. And it turned out that he’d gone to court because he had sexually abused one of their children. ...And her life just sort of fell to pieces but she was so pleased that finally he was in that way paying for it. But you see she felt she could say that. Nowhere else can she...she wouldn’t have done that at work! But somehow that communion of women, and really that’s what it is when you’re together like that, people begin in the quietness of the moment sometimes, not that it’s quiet, but you know what I mean...it’s not a political situation, it’s not a competitive environment, you don’t have to keep your guard up, people feel that it invites them to, not just share knowledge, but to feel more in tune with the other women. And to somehow feel that that was safe. And knowing that they would get support, ...that’s another thing, the supportive environment of women like that. I might be feeling as if there’s nothing creative happening in my mind. I’ve struck writer’s block, so to speak, and they will then sort of build you up again. And that’s what I mean by supportive [too]. Somebody will say they’re having a terrible time and it could be at home or with a child or whatever, and I have always found women supportive (IN 02/07).125

In groups and at Fibre Forums, textile-making performed, taking on a socialising function through which women created time and space as individuals and for meaningful connections with others who also made. The experience of doing something together and feeling validated, coupled with the aspect of time that Nalda had referred to in her introduction to her class was central to the nature and social aspects of textile-making, and became the agent from which other things flowed. In this context, Yocom (1985:52) writes:

125 In similar vein, Nalda Searles made the following comment at the 2006 Fibre Forum: ‘It’s interesting, I’ve just read a book on alchemy, and there’s one page where it talks about this king who has a lot of wives and he sort of got suspicious of what they were doing all the time sitting in there, talking and weaving. So he got one of his eunuchs, and he said ‘I want you to go in there and I want you to write down everything everybody says, so I know what they are talking about’. And the poor eunuch, for two weeks, he just wrote and he came out and he said to the king: ‘they don’t talk about anything, they just talk about anything!’ And that’s exactly right, you know, weaving and talking, women have done it for probably 60,000 years, and we’re part of that tradition’ (REC 09/06).
The private sphere of women’s personal experience narratives...does not depend on physical location, sexual exclusivity, type of material, or the number of participants. It is a mode of social interaction, a space where none need fear ridicule or embarrassment, where handwork often accompanies talk, where participants all feel that they share several bonds, where narratives emphasize those bonds, and where each participant is seen as equally capable of and willing to contribute personal information (emphasis mine).

What set Forums apart from the groups that women belonged to in their home environments and attended on a regular basis, was the element of uninterrupted time for making in the company of others who shared their interests. The importance of time was expressed by Julia in the following way:

I think what it is, is that for a certain time, whether it is at a workshop, or sitting down [and] talking about...for example, I sometimes help out at the library at the Embroiderers Guild, which is how I met this lady, who is a knitter. Now, I probably wouldn’t have picked her as somebody [I like]. Now she’ll probably remain a friend. She’s been out here for lunch and she wants us to go out to her place. And now there have been others that have been like that. And one person in particular, who I’m quite close to, and had I met her in another context, she would definitely not be my friend. But what stitching does, if you’re sitting down, in a workshop, and you’re together for umpteen hours, you’re allowing a fair bit of time, in a confined environment. And, sometimes you look at a person and you say to yourself ‘no, I don’t like that’. But, after a while you realise there’s something more behind that person than what they’re giving out. And when you’re in a stitch environment, what it actually does is give you that time to view that person a little bit differently. The conversations that go on, and all of a sudden you know, that person isn’t like that. That’s just the outward show. And two or three days in a stitching group and believe it or not, you see a different side. And sometimes that is enough to be the clinching thing with friends (IN 02/07).

Facilitated by the tempo and nature of making embedded in textile practice, and without the directness associated with an intense, face-to-face conversation, women related and engaged with others on a personal level, including relative strangers. Sharing an interest and meeting whilst making, they made connections across seemingly distinct communities and backgrounds, and entered into other conversations which went well beyond the surface of sharing patterns and ideas alone.

My concern, thus far, has been to convey a sense of what it meant to women to participate in textile groups or a residential event, and in particular how they experienced what Carsten (2000:17) terms a ‘relatedness through everyday practice’. A sense of appreciation regarding the friendships women experienced with like-minded others is a common denominator in people’s descriptions of their reasons to
belong to a social group, however, my conversations with Ruth and the experiences of Julia and Janice at Fibre Forum exemplifies that through textile-making (and meeting), women from very diverse walks of life interacted in ways that are unlikely to occur had it not been for textile-making. In other words, cultural markers (for example age, religion, class, sexuality) that tend to classify and differentiate people in socio-cultural life, and which might have been reason for women to not interact were suspended in textile-making times and places. It made visible sociability not routinely experienced outside their textile environment (cf. Stalp 2007:4). As their textile interests were validated by their peers, women observed that any perceived differences between them and others became vastly less relevant. By way of a shared and temporal rhythm of movement (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012), their experiences illustrate Carsten’s reference to a kin-related sociality based on social rather than familial connections, and foregrounds ‘the permeability of boundaries between objects, persons, and types of relations’ (Carsten 2000:24). In the last section of this chapter, I consider this permeability in relation to textile-making traditions and in particular the notion of transference of textile skills through a lineage of women.

6.4 Tradition and kin, continuity and change: A (hidden) lineage of women

Ilka was one of only two research participants who at the time of my fieldwork did not, in an active sense, participate in a group. However, the notion of community was integral to her work. It included a felt connectedness to a lineage of makers and an aesthetic approach in her work through which she recognised textile’s time-honoured traditions:

I think community is an essential part of all life...it’s what sustains us, emotionally, and stimulates us mentally, and reminds us that we’re all nothing if we separate ourselves from others. ...It gives me that sense of belonging, that’s the word. And that was what I was seeking with becoming a weaver too, being part of something larger than just me. That collection of all unique little components but together they make something bigger and integrated (IN 09/07).

In 2000 Ilka successfully applied for a Churchill Fellowship, in order to ‘observe and learn from craftspeople practicing traditional weaving methods’ in localised and small communities across Indonesia, the Philippines, India and Bhutan. She felt ‘drawn to the unbroken nature of those traditions’ and the culturally specific and place-centred

nature of the work (White 2005:np). Ilka’s Fellowship report *Pattern and Place* (White
2000) outlined her experiences during her seven months trip and in particular her
observations about enduring weaving traditions to craftspeople in different locales:

I went particularly to places where [there was] weaving specifically, because I
was looking at handloom weaving, but I also came across dyeing and printing.
I went to places where that tradition was a *central* part of the workings of the
community, and where that had been unbroken, where it was not a craft revival,
but it had never gone, and where it was an important part of everyone’s, in the
community lives (IN 09/07).

What struck her was that ‘[w]eaving is just a part of their lives, like washing clothes,
sifting rice or decorating a camel’ (White 2000:15). Ilka returned to Australia with a
wish to adopt that sense of connectedness in her own approach to creative work,
through an exploration regarding her understanding of what it meant to belong. She
wrote:

> I am realising how much of my sense of self is tied to my culture, my place and
its languages; speech, gesture, thought patterns, allusions, education.
...Certainly my choice to be studio based in Australia rather than work within
industry comes from a need to link myself closely with tradition and so feel
part of something larger and older than myself (White 2000:8-11).

In conversation with her, it transpired how the Fellowship experiences directly
influenced Ilka’s decision to explore and create work about her own traditions, her
family and culture. She was intent on seeking and expressing this significance by using
textile techniques and materials that reflected her own sense of place within a universal
lineage of textile but also her own lineage in familial terms, including notions of
continuity and change. Her 2004 solo-exhibition *Whitework*, which I described in
detail in Chapter Five, was a direct result of this exploration and when we met in 2007,
Ilka reflected on this:

> Any society needs to have its elders and it needs to have wisdom passed on, or
we’re reinventing the wheel every generation. ...[I hold] respect for elders as an
important tradition to continue. But every generation is going to cut their own
cloth as well, you know, and there’s a story in *Whitework* about that too. One
of the pieces is a panel, that has pattern pieces all over it, which were cut from
my nanny’s actual pattern pieces that I inherited in a hatbox of brown paper
pattern pieces. In amongst that hatbox I found a piece which didn’t carry her
handwriting and the piece was a yoke\(^\text{127}\) for a black caftan. And my nanny
would never have made a black caftan! And so, I recognised the handwriting as
my mother’s, she had herself in her uni years when she was still at home, made

\(^{127}\) The yoke is a design element of a pattern, located at the top of a shirt, skirt, pants or shorts, and is cut
separately to create a pieced illusion. A yoke is sometimes cut on the bias or cross-grain to define a
particular style.
herself a black caftan. Which probably sent my nanny...you know...she was probably aghast that mum would wear such a thing. So that was a point of departure. And I’ve made my own points of departure from mum. But my mum loved her mum and I love mine, so it’s not about...it’s not a felling of the whole of what went before, it’s just...I think it’s important to differentiate yourself. ...there’s something about individualism that I love, but there is a lot about the collective and the communal that I value more highly (IN 09/07).

The collective and communal aspect Ilka valued came to the fore several years after *Whitework* when, in 2006, she took part in *The Presence of Things: Sense, Veneer and Guise*. This was an exhibition involving thirteen invited artists and the historical artefacts collection of the Embroiderers Guild in Victoria, based in Melbourne.\(^{128}\) The participating artists were encouraged to delve into the collection’s artefacts and each choose two pieces as a starting point and inspiration for designing new works of contemporary embroidery art. The reasoning behind the initiative was summed up in a review of the exhibition, as follows:

> Victoria’s craft guilds are an under-acknowledged repository of knowledge, skills and traditions, guardians of ancient crafts but also comprising practitioners eager to engage with the 21st century and to apply their skills - knitting, embroidery, spinning, weaving, lacemaking - in a contemporary way (Green 2006a:np).

Ilka made two pieces for the exhibition. One of these, titled *Life Blood*, reflected her intention to acknowledge the centrality and importance of community, and the lineage with which she associated herself in textile terms. Described as ‘simple but highly effective’ (Green 2006a:np), *Life Blood* was a wall hanging, the backing cloth being a gabardine fabric onto which she had stitched an image used a large variety of pre-loved, collected red buttons. Measuring almost 2.5 metres high the image depicted the Australian Boab tree, various parts of which traditionally provided food, medicine, water storage and shelter for local Aboriginal people from the Kimberley region of north-western Australia (figures 57-59). For Ilka the tree was a poignant symbol: its life-giving qualities were akin to the importance of community found in the Embroiderers Guild; the red-coloured buttons represented the Guild’s members who are its lifeblood and its strength, necessary for the Guild’s wellbeing and survival.

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\(^{128}\) The exhibition was launched in Melbourne and later toured to a number of venues throughout Victoria.
Figure 57
Figure 58

Figure 59
Life Blood was inspired by two of the Guild’s historic textiles: a late 18th Century Italian bobbin lace strip of ornamental fabric with a vine-like pattern, and a fragment of a Moorish textile, boldly satin-stitched using red silk threads. Ilka’s interpretation, as stated in the catalogue, illuminated her aesthetic narrative that clearly speaks to an influence found in the natural environment and Indigenous culture alongside her recognition of the meaning of a community of makers:

A hand stitched textile work, Life Blood also makes reference to the Embroiderers Guild of Victoria. It pays tribute to the Guild’s members and their extraordinary embroidery and lace archive. ...I have a great appreciation for folk art. Old hand-making techniques and craftsmanship have also assisted my understanding of colour, texture and production values. This lends its own aesthetic theme to my work. ...Life Blood is designed to be hung on a place that allows us to see both the front and back of the work, as the stitching process (and its embodied time-energy) is most evident from behind. I believe that the sustainability of our wellbeing, now more than ever, depends on our ability to take things slowly. I also found myself thinking about the future sustainability of the Embroiderer’s Guild itself, run as it is by ageing volunteers. I love the members’ patient dedication to their craft and to the task of preserving their collection. I observed with great curiosity the collaborative nature of the Guild’s administration, likening its systems to that of an ant colony or a bee hive. Eventually I settled on the analogy of a vascular network as I see the members exemplifying the life of the organisation like the blood of a body or the sap of a tree. I guess the hundreds of individual buttons in Life Blood could be seen as the members of the Guild, each one individual but together they become more than the sum of the parts and form a strong community.129

Textile-based practices such as embroidery and needlework, quilting, lace-making, fibre art, knitting and crochet, are routinely perceived as skills that are passed from one generation to the next through female kin, be this a grandmother, mother or aunt, connecting elders and their traditions and skills to the younger generation. For example, Gandolfo and Grace (2009:16) put it as follows:

Craft traditions in families connect women with each other, and often with traditional craft practices. Many of the women in our study have treasured memories of being taught craftwork skills by their mothers, grandmothers, aunts and one woman by her father. They remember being encouraged and motivated by the activities of the adult craftsmen and women in their families.

The women’s recollections of learning textile-making skills, as discussed in Chapter Four and resonant with Bourdieu’s theory of practice in Chapter Three reflect this understanding, in accordance with a ‘lineage of women’. They related stories of

129 These sentences are from the full artist statement Ilka White wrote for the exhibition and, whilst not included in the catalogue, she kindly provided me with a copy of this statement in 2007.
learning lifelong textile skills when young, such as sewing and knitting, suggesting that skills are passed on from one generation to the next with new elements inevitably being integrated with the old. These were also skills which later formed the basis for a deepening understanding and appreciation of the creative potential of stitch and cloth, and through their participation in groups, classes and Forums, women built on those skills in new and contemporary ways.

Through her arts practice, Ilka actively acknowledged the significance and contributions of previous generations yet, as her creative works and words indicate she also took flight with the knowledge imparted to create new and contemporary work built on and informed by traditional skills. Evident from our conversations and through my interactions with other research participants, including at Fibre Forums and other group gatherings it became apparent that the conventional notion that textile skills are passed down, in vertical fashion, to the younger generations alone does not hold. Rather, women’s lineages of learning and the sharing of skills travelled in multiple directions; with younger people, including tutors, passing on skills, expertise and knowledge to (their) elders, inspiring them with new ideas (figure 60).

This reconfiguration regarding the temporal dimension of textile-making traditions and understandings is what I came to think of as a ‘hidden’ lineage of women; it foregrounds the dynamics of experiential knowledge production and sharing through processes of learning and exchange in which the transference of skills occurs in multidirectional ways. It is an understanding that ‘comes to the fore when we focus on process’ (Adam 1994:510), including the relevance of time and sociability in practice and in events. For instance, at Fibre Forums women frequently enrolled in workshops with tutors considerably younger than themselves, or they might have joined a knitting circle that brought women from various ages together. Ilka herself had, in the past, taught workshops for the Hand-weavers and Spinners Guild where many of its members are senior in age. Another interviewee, Joy, had been a member of the Embroiderers Guild in Perth since 1971, and belonged to three other groups including one of which she was granted life-membership in 2007 at 80 years of age. Joy delighted in the exchange of knowledge and skills between women of all ages, and the manner in which older women were inspired by the work and skills of younger generations:
Figure 60
Eva (L) and Nalda at Fibre Forum, Geelong Victoria 2006. Photo: P. Lee.
I think it’s marvellous when that happens. I think it’s good. That’s why I love a lot of these workshops. Because you’re getting a young view on certain things. And whilst it may be something that you’ve already done many years ago I think it doesn’t hurt at all to renew that education with whatever you’re doing. It’s lovely. I love workshops for that reason, because you all get in there and there’s no-one that’s ahead of you usually, you all just sit around, have a few laughs, make mistakes, that’s how you learn (IN 04/08).

This intergenerational dialogue between generations of textile-makers, which occurred in dynamic, processual, and creative surroundings, stands in contrast to what Adam (1994) terms the ‘unidirectionality’ of time. It positions the younger generation not merely as recipients of, but as active contributors to cultural knowledge production, and the continuity of textile-making traditions in multidirectional ways.

6.5 Summary
Considerations of ‘time in events’ coupled with the understanding that ‘all time is social time’ (Adam 1990:42), underscores the temporal nature and relational significance of textile-making. It shows the experiences and meanings of relatedness between women who make to be constituted and facilitated in the nexus between practice, place, materials and time. Textile creative practice is the impetus and the vehicle through which this relatedness is constructed, as women come to meet and interact, often as relative strangers who share a language of textile-making, in networks of social kin (cf. Carsten 2000). At the same time, these networks mediate a self-representation where women are individually recognised and feel valued for their knowledge, creative artwork and skills. It highlights textile-making as a social experience, and the temporal aspect of making facilitates personal interactions and sociability through making that is central to women’s lives. A relational process, in which a communal doing is paramount, extends women’s shared interests and sociality through which, in turn, they extend and share their textile making skills and ideas. The thought of shared interests amongst women textile-makers may create an impression of similarity. I have shown that their socio-cultural background is varied and diverse, including a broad spectrum of values, beliefs, characteristics, attitudes, and priorities, including professional ones. The tie that binds them is textiles, through which women met and interacted with others, be they relative beginners, experienced makers or elders in their field. In the next chapter I further discuss this and other aspects of the ethnographic component of this thesis, taking into account my theoretical approach in
Chapter Three and the main lines of inquiry pertaining to the literature on textile-making in Chapter Two.
Theory, writing and ethnography are inseparable material practices. Together they create the conditions that locate the social inside the text

(Denzin 1998:406)

Even now, it still seems unbelievable to me that by pulling together a motley collection – the soft yarn, the sharp needles, the scripted pattern, the smoothing hook, the intangibles of creativity, humanity, and imagination - you can create something that will hold a piece of your soul. But you can

(Jacobs 2007:n.p)
Chapter Seven  Gathering the threads:
The meaning of making and time

7.1 Introduction

In September 2011, I attended a Fibre Forum conference in Geelong, Victoria. During the week Wendy Lugg, a Perth-based quilt artist, presented a talk based on an artist-in-residency that she had completed at the Royal Western Australian Historical Society earlier that year. At the conclusion, an audience member asked Wendy about one of the artworks shown during her talk: ‘How long did it take to make?’

This is a question many textile-practitioners know well and frequently encounter; after all, we work in a creative medium that is frequently conceived to be time-intensive, in reference to the amount of hours involved in making a piece of finished work. Wendy considered for a moment and then replied:

Textiles are embedded with memory, nothing happens in isolation. By the time I am stitching I am on the home-straight, I am nearly there. The gestation period, however, working out ideas and designs...that might have taken six years, and will have involved many months of serious thinking. It is a process of collecting, arranging, re-arranging and getting the combinations right. There are lots of beginnings. You allow the work to guide you (FN 09/11).

Arguably, Edward Said knew it well when he wrote that the beginning is ‘the first step in the intentional production of meaning’ (1975:5). He regarded a beginning as ‘the point at which, in a given work, the writer departs from all other works’, while simultaneously acknowledging and establishing relationships with that which has gone before (1975:3). At Wendy’s talk, another person asked her: ‘You have spoken about the beginnings, and about the design process, from idea to resolution, concept to composition. But what are the endings? How does one know when to stop? How does one end a work?’ (FN 09/11).

As my preamble indicates, in this analytical yet purposefully open-ended chapter I bring together the various thesis strands by interpreting the ethnographic data and

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130 Wendy’s talk, titled ‘Stitching Art and History Together’, outlined the artist-in-residency Wendy undertook, during which time she explored the collections of both the Society and the State Library of Western Australia for stories and objects that resonated with her family memories and current arts practice. The residency culminated in Mapping Memories, an exhibition at the State Library of Western Australia, Perth, April 9th - July 10th 2011.
drawing together study implications. I also consider the theoretical material presented in Chapter Three, and approaches to the study of textile material culture in Chapter Two. Firstly though, and in light of Said’s words about the intentional production of meaning, I return to the concept of representation.

As discussed in Chapter One, representation connects meaning to culture through language and signification. Hall (1997b:np) states that something ‘does not exist meaningfully until it has been represented’. Similar to Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* (1977, 1990), Hall observed that the process of representation is routinely reliant on, and shaped by, processes of habituation by which cultural meanings are learned and assimilated in socio-cultural life. Such an analysis includes the validation of cultural activities based on certain categories, of which gender is one. Concerned about the extent to which meaning can be erroneously thought of as fixed and possibly limiting, Hall questions who or what is silenced or muted in the workings of representation, as well as the agency, narratives, experiences, and emergent significations as expressed by people in cultural practice and visual material culture. He also reminds us that as cultural meanings can never be predetermined or guaranteed, representations can be ‘unfixed’, become loosened and ‘fray’ (Hall 1997b:np), an emphasis I have adopted throughout.

### 7.2 Cultural continuity and performativity: Matters of time and place

I chose time as a lens to explore the meaning in and of making. In Chapter Four, I recounted how women came to learn their textile-making skills, including the context in which this learning took place and the gradual development of their textile-knowledge and creative interests over time. A familiarity and felt affinity with textile-making was something many with whom I worked traced to their childhood, growing up in surroundings where women created and mended textiles for their families, especially clothes and household items. For many, ‘making do’ was the order of broader socio-economic times and individual circumstance, which meant that old garments and fabrics were recycled into ‘new’ items, and the materials used were at hand or affordable. Women spoke with a degree of fondness about what would have undoubtedly been challenging times. For example Julia who, as a young married woman had no money to purchase new linen, creatively mended the increasingly threadbare sheets and then sewed handkerchiefs from the final remains. Reflecting
vastly different circumstances, Trudi spoke of her childhood years spent in a Japanese internment camp where she made dolls and toys from scraps of fabric, sticks and leaves. Like others discussed throughout this thesis, both women recalled these experiences as shaping their inventiveness to make something aesthetically pleasing from everyday and seemingly ordinary things, a skill they creatively utilised in later years. Women’s recollections further illustrated that their textile-making skills had been learned from female kin, a lineage of women including mothers, grandmothers, and aunts.

Narratives about learning textile-making skills sit well with Bourdieu’s ideas regarding customary social structures that inform and shape people’s gendered and habituated cultural practice. Bourdieu (1990) suggested that people’s social actions and choices are guided by the *habitus*, the guiding principle through which cultural continuity is instilled and reproduced in socio-cultural life. Grounded in a structuring logic and shaped by learning processes that assume a naturalised social order, activities assigned to being female or male result in the confirmation of social constructions of gender and these, in turn, govern and inscribe the enactment of activities in daily life. Importantly, Bourdieu considered practice to be inseparable from temporality when he stated that ‘practice unfolds in time’, thereby positioning the temporal aspect of practice as inherently constitutive of cultural representation and meaning (1990:81). Butler (1993, 1994) extends this view, by stating that gender is always performed, involving a process whereby people’s identity is embodied and experienced by them through certain repetitive enactments, including habitual practices and custom.

If women’s recollections of learning textile skills in childhood proved a fruitful starting point, it also offered insights about the temporal nature of textile-making. Here I draw on Nalda’s words of ‘all my life’ and ‘keep doing’, mentioned in Chapter Four, to illustrate how women’s creative practice evolved as a direct consequence of an enduring and steadfast engagement with making. Extending their familiarity with material and skill in this way, their creative practice transcended technical excellence alone and became a revelationary process reflecting experiential understanding, visible in work that emerged over time. It revealed a tacit knowledge acquired at an early age and refined over decades which, for a number of women, included formal tertiary studies in visual arts.
The adult decision to undertake formal study in textile and fibre art practice further indicated, in various ways, the significance of time and of place in the lives of women who make. For some women, the decision to do a degree in Visual Art was an affirmation of having their skills recognised in a formal manner and setting. For others, such as Rosemary, it marked the fulfilment of a long-held wish following a professional career in pharmacy and raising seven children. Their attendance at university signified a time for ‘self’ as much as it encouraged women to extend their skills. For others, such as Trudi and Sue, it also signified an immersion and engagement with making in ways they had previously not felt possible or accessible. In such circumstances, familial and marital commitments expected of women when they were married, regularly got in the way of their creative endeavours.

Having learned the language of textiles at an earlier age, through their immersion in study, women prioritised their art anew. They gained inspiration to utilise their skills in the conceptualisation and materialisation of an idea, and relished the opportunity and the dedicated surroundings shared with other makers and artists for classes and workshops. Some described the learning experience, intellectual stimulation and, importantly, the sociality with other makers as if a button was pressed inside of them, a ‘coming home’. It enabled a much-cherished personal space for their creative work and, by extension, for themselves.

Within the context of time and place, it became evident that creative practice and textile-making formed an intrinsic part of the women’s lives: it was central to how they identified themselves. Time for making was precious and treasured. Spending time in women’s home surroundings generated further insights as to how their making fitted into daily routines, or rather the extent to which they managed and accommodated their making in and around other activities, commitments and priorities, such as household chores, child-care, illness of loved ones, family life, and social engagements. Alongside dedicated hours in their studio or sewing rooms, much of the actual making necessarily occurred in amongst other activities, but in ways that did not disrupt or indeed threaten household routines. Some women felt that their making-time had to be squeezed into their already busy days, poignantly symbolised by Michele who commented, as raised in Chapter Four, that ‘time is endless, but really there is only between breakfast and tea’.
To some extent, temporal constraints resulting from women’s domestic lives allowed, encouraged and enabled their textile-making to occur. Working in a medium that is easily transportable and picked up during the short periods of time available to many busy with the demands of family, women could make the most of every available moment. As a medium socially acceptable for women to do in a public space, they were able to engage with textile-making pretty much anywhere; they could stitch and knit whilst alone in their studios, camping in the bush, or in the company of and engaging with others, including watching television with their partner, babysitting grandchildren, passing the time on a flight from Perth to Melbourne, or waiting for a doctor’s appointment: engagement with making could happen anywhere. As such, women marked both a place and a time for textile-making in a myriad of creative ways and locations. Their creative practice was not separate from their everyday lives and routines, but rather, central to it such that I came to think of them as living tactile lives: lives infused and affected by tactile experience, materiality, aesthetic expression and skills acquired and extended over a lifetime of making.

Adam (1994:508-10) is analytically helpful here. She notes that meanings embedded in people’s experience of time places the temporal beyond its quantifiable aspects. Observing that cultural practice engenders time, she argues that it encompasses not only ‘events in time’ but, notably, also ‘time in events’, a matter I explored in-depth in Chapter Five, where the significance of time embedded in the very processes inherent to textile-making was paramount in the women’s narratives.

Ilka captured this significance poignantly when she remarked that the process of making the work was ‘just as important as the outcome’, it marked the place ‘where all the richness is ... in the making of the work lies the most important message’ (White 2005:np). Nalda’s insights further contribute to this theme. She treated time as a tool, noting its effect on her materials such as the ‘ageing’ of cloth, an implication Michele also recognised in her use of fabrics imbued with memory and stories and affecting familial and embodied knowledge. Foregrounding the confluence of the textural and temporal qualities of cloth, for Holly time was paramount both in her materials and in the tempo of an emergent process by which she came to express her felt appreciation about her sense of belonging, and affinity with and connection to place.
Naji notes that ‘materiality is not given or finished’ (2009:47), while Miller suggests that our engagements with materiality and material culture objects offer a ‘profound understanding of what we ourselves are’ (2010:5). For the women I spoke with and observed, the enduring value of textiles was not necessarily found in the end results but in their engagement with materials and the process of making, a ‘being in the moment’, as Ilka commented (see Chapter Five). Foregrounding tacit knowledge and emergent understandings underlying their material and tactile practice, my data shows that while time was of the essence, this was not counted in a linear way or in terms of the hours it took to complete the work. The point is that the engagement with making and materials facilitated an aesthetic process that in turn enabled the articulation of an experiential and emergent undertaking beyond technique-based engagements alone.

Whereas other life activities were by and large organized around clock-based time, in women’s tactile engagements it took on an altogether different realm of meaning. The temporality of making, or ‘time in events’ (Adam 1994), shed light on the relevance of process as a revelatory mode of inquiry, where the focus was on an emergent meaning rather than the objects made, without negating the time-intensive nature of textile-making techniques. In other words, and alongside a familiarity and aesthetic enjoyment that came from handling cloth and yarns, my data shows that women primarily engaged with textiles as a medium of expression: to understand things about their respective lives, such as a sense of belonging, their connection to a certain locality, familial and intimate life relationships, and the significance of their connection with other makers.

In its symbolic and physical manipulations, the materiality of textiles facilitated an experiential, tactile and unique vocabulary that women engaged with to articulate their lived experience and experiential, evolving understandings. Within the frame of Butler’s (1997) ideas on performance, performativity and speech acts, and Bolt’s (2004) approach to the work of art beyond representation, this ethnographic insight positions textile-making as a mode of reflective inquiry and a form of speaking through doing; an incremental act in which ideas are revealed and work comes into being through ‘doing’. Intentionally utilising the symbolic and physical characteristics of the materiality of textiles, women generated and embedded personal and cultural meanings and narrative dimensions to their work as it was being made. As a result,
experiential understandings surfaced, for both the maker and her audience, the viewer. To use Nalda’s expression, making was a way by which women ‘commune’, firstly with themselves and, through their aesthetic work, with others. Carter (2004:5) notes that when it ‘emerges in this way it constitutes material thinking’. Women I spoke with likened it to putting their thoughts into stitch, and thinking into textiles. Aptly, the Canadian textile artist Dorothy Caldwell has expressed it as follows:

The balance between what stitches do – patch, repair, connect, and hold layers together – and what stitches can become as narrative elements is a key to understanding the artistic expression of the women. ... Art is the expression of one’s life experiences and having others respond to that expression. It all comes down to communication (1999:29).

7.3 Repetition: An absence of closure, a becoming of the possible

The words stitch, weave, coil, and knit indicate both a product and a verb, the latter referencing a process involving repetition prevalent in most textile techniques. Characteristically, such techniques involve a quantitative dimension, such as the necessary number of rows required to produce a hand-knitted garment, or the time to make and finish a hand-sewn quilt. The technical workings involved with the execution of, say, a particular stitch, often hundreds of times and row after row in a seemingly static fashion, are routinely conceived to require of the maker a degree of patience. In conversation, women remarked that the repetitive nature of textile-making was compelling, even enjoyable. Rather than a negative focus on the patience and time required, it positively offered them time for reflection, alongside an aesthetic exploration in a manner that opened up creative potential for new directions in their work. Rowley (1992b:66) supports this analysis by suggesting that art is an open-ended process in which repetition begets an ‘absence of closure’; an outlook that resonates with Adam (1994:521) who observes that the very act of repetition indicates an orientation to change, growth and accretion, a ‘becoming of the possible’.

There is something compelling about repetition, connecting the narrative content and material agency of the work of art. My ethnographic findings indicate that, conceptualised as the tempo embedded in textile-making (cf. Adam 1994:515), repetition mediated agency in both materiality and practice, not only signifying the becoming of its process but an incremental act by which meaning came into being through ‘doing’. The pace of making allowed meaning to evolve over time, attached to the work of art when it was being made. Holly’s embroidered works in the Fancywork
exhibition exemplifies this: over an eighteen month period she created the seven large embroidered landscapes using similar techniques, yet the artworks that emerged over that period of time changed, from reflecting an observation about the landscape to a felt experience of belonging and connection to place. Similarly, Nalda’s retrospective exhibition *Drifting in My Own Land* contained work she had made over a period of 30 years. If we were to look closely at the stitches by which these works were created, a similarity would be visible: the techniques that Nalda first used over thirty years ago to coil her baskets were also evident in her later work. Yet the works she created over that time-span had changed, conveying different ideas and stories over time. While her textile techniques indicated a degree of sameness involving a mark-making process over and over (and over) again, it harboured an agency embedded in an affirmative mode of making that came to inform and constitute the finished works of art.

Naji (2009:61) notes that ‘[t]he work of transformation of matter consists of reinforcing it’. Nalda had learned the language of textile-making through a sustained and enduring practice spanning over thirty years; she had come to trust the process inherently which, in turn, enabled the work to emerge. For Holly, time was also of the essence in her making: ‘[i]t is time that makes your sense of where you are, what you belong to. ...There’s no escaping, there’s no other way. ...’ (REC 07/09). ‘We come to know and deeply understand things best’, she wrote, ‘by repeated experience and reflection’ (2006:18). This ‘doing’ as a mode of revealing is a central premise for Bolt (2004, 2007a), for whom art is a materializing practice through which the work of art reveals itself, beyond representation. It is a process that evolves as a result of a dynamic dialogue involving the artist, her materials, material thinking, and the intrinsic qualities of time.

Butler further supports my data in this regard. For Butler, cultural practice is both performative and consequential. The processual element inherent in repetition brings into play the possibility of change, through an agency that is ‘located within the possibility of variation on that repetition’, enabling ‘the assertion of alternative domains of cultural intelligibility’ (1999:198-9). In her work on speech acts and the utterance (1997), Butler notes that the very act of signification holds the potential for alternative perspectives to become apparent:
The interval between instances of utterance not only makes the repetition and resignification of the utterance possible, but shows how words might, through time, become (...) recontextualized [by way of] the possibility of agency (1997:15).

Just as the gaps in between stitches are integral to the overall design, Bolt’s insightful premise regarding the work of art as a revelatory mode of inquiry grounded in materiality and practice, and Butler’s idea of the utterance as an experiential and performative act, signify an auspicious potential for textile-making. Where needles pierce fabric in small, repetitive and experiential gestures, patterns emerge. Understanding this performative and process-centred potential of practice as a gradual becoming, the space between the stitches become analogous to ‘[t]he gap that separates the speech act from its future effects’ (Butler 1997:15). It brings to the surface new insights regarding the possibility for creative adaptations of a medium’s traditional forms (cf. Rowley 1999) and, by extension, understandings in anthropological thought and practice about textile-making as a signifying cultural and gendered performance.

Using time as an engaged reflection of lived experience, as I have done in this thesis, women’s making is shown to be at once performative and consequential, in terms of what it reveals about the special-ness of ordinary things and everyday activities; how these engender the cultural significance of making and meanings of place, and of time in all its variegated and nuanced dimensions. As their narratives attest, textile-making is their medium of choice, through which women convey an understanding of their lives, and their connections with social, familial, and place-centred surroundings through a practice that reflects experience and emerges in visual works beyond representation. Their creative practices are grounded in time-intensive and time-honoured skills and techniques. While routinely conceived to be unchanging, repetitive and timeless, women’s narratives clearly demonstrate a contemporary interpretation, approach and intention. Building on a long-term affinity with the medium, and acknowledging time-honoured traditions, they speak through doing, using textile-making to convey their sense of self and being in the world.

7.4 The significance of sociability: Social kin and a lineage of women
Where in Chapters Four and Five I considered the value of making for women in an individual and self-contained sense, in Chapter Six my focus was on the meaning of sociality through women’s participation in textile groups and events. Seemingly contradictory, a key finding was that women created time and place for themselves
while in the company of others. It became evident that textile-making performed a socialising function through which women created time and space as individuals and meaningful connections with others who also made.

Spending time with fellow makers offered women a variety of benefits: a sense of belonging, support, inspiration, and an ease of being in the knowledge that those around them shared their interest and were interested in their work. Whilst identifying some of the obstacles women overcame to attend, for example, a Fibre Forum, such events also offered women a legitimate reason to claim time and space with other makers, described by some as a welcome respite from home routines and demands, and akin to ‘time-out’ with friends. This was especially the case for those financially dependent on their life-partner: their participation in a workshop setting could be justified whereas a holiday without their partner but with female friends may not have been as well supported.

Time at Forums, and away from everyday routines, allowed for extended periods of making in ways rarely realised in home environments. The significance of this relative isolation became paramount: it offered women time uninterrupted by domestic and other demands; it facilitated and focused their creative engagement. Rendering connections visible through textiles, the friendships and networks became vital to women who cherished the opportunity to connect with others who understood the significance of making in the context of their everyday lives.

The sociability experienced and contributed to by women who met as relative strangers at textile events was informed by a ‘shared language’ of understanding, and a validation of their interest in textile-making. While this may have created, to an outsider, the impression of similarity and like-mindedness amongst them, my research also showed that through a common interest, women from diverse backgrounds, such as varied age, religion, sexuality and location came together in ‘real-time’ settings and in ways these same cultural markers might otherwise have been a reason for them not to interact. In these interactions, the tactile element of the medium and the significance of time were paramount. While meeting through a shared activity is certainly not unique to textile-making alone, the significance in this instance is embedded in the nexus of practice, tempo and materiality. These facilitated a ‘shared rhythm of
movement’ (Vergunst and Vermehren 2012:135) for extended periods of time and from which other things flowed. In a supportive and connective space, women shared companionable silences or they could talk whilst doing and over time: they came to share personal aspects of their lives. Women talked, but they did not idly chatter. Through an engagement with textiles in a creative and supportive environment, and without the intensity that a face-to-face conversation might entail, the sharing of stories and life-experiences regularly permeated creative spaces. The experience of doing something together and feeling validated, places textile-making, including its temporal and material dimensions, at the centre of a relatedness amongst women, a social agent through which connections and possibilities for community were created.

In Chapter Two I discussed the extent to which understandings about the cultural meaning of textile-making are informed by historical accounts (Barber 1994; Floyd 2008; Parker 1984). In the ethnographic chapters that followed, I showed that women relayed stories of learning textile-making in accordance with a lineage of female kin through which skills were transferred from one generation to the next, allowing for new applications that were invariably incorporated along the way. In the context of a cultural continuity regarding the social aspects and expectations associated with women’s textile-making, learning from elders regularly emerged.

However, while women clearly indicated a respect for their elders, my findings unveiled a previously hidden lineage regarding the mutual sharing of knowledge and skills between generations, in a manner different to an exchange along familial and generational lines alone. Groups and events facilitated a platform for learning and the sharing of knowledge. This involved women from all ages in an exchange that took place in multiple directions rather than in a linear fashion from one generation to the next. For example, older women appreciated the knowledge and inspiration they gained by spending time in the company of younger women, including those who facilitated workshops and who, by all accounts, embodied the ‘next’ generation of makers.

7.5 The meaning of making: Textile creative practice within a cultural text
Locating women’s narratives within a broader socio-cultural context, places my discussion within a dialogue regarding the gendered validation of creative and artistic
expressions in Australian cultural life. In Chapter One, I discussed the concept of a cultural ‘text’, this being the instrument of social knowledge which informs and shapes the seemingly natural order of things (Moore 1986), such as the delineation of what are deemed to be male and female activities in everyday life, including the creation of material culture. The constitution of meaning through cultural practice cuts two ways. Textile-making, while open to creative and original input is evidently guided by tradition. In an apparent contrast, the women’s narratives that I recorded refute any notion that tradition is something of the past, and that time-honoured skill and contemporary works of art are inherently different. However, as a cultural mechanism informed by the gendered implication intrinsic to textile-making, cultural continuity also serves as a ‘reminder’ to people regarding where and how this activity is located and valued in the wider societal context.131

Feminist scholars Parker (1984), Parker and Pollock (1981, 1987), Gordon (1997), Lippard (1995, 2007), and Deepwell (1995, 2006) are among those who have explicated how the classification of the aesthetic objects created by women has persistently been linked to a gender-based devaluation. In Chapter Two I discussed Parker’s *The Subversive Stitch* (1984), a text that outlines how textile practice has historically been assigned a devalued status in the realms of art and marginalised as a socially approved feminine endeavour. During fieldwork I was interested to learn how women conceived of the muted space assigned to textile arts and crafts. Some women, including those who had studied textile and fibre art at university in the 1980s and 1990s, credited Parker and other feminist scholars and artists with raising the profile of textiles through critical feminist inquiry and their advocacy for women-specific art. On the other hand, it also became clear early on in my fieldwork that they and other women I spoke with did not label their art-work or practice as constituting a subversive statement, or fitting within an overtly feminist discourse or critique. Seemingly at odds with a feminist agenda, women I spoke with chose to partake in an explicitly feminine endeavour in the midst of everyday life and, as such, appeared to embrace rather than subvert its culturally inscribed status and role.

Ortner (1996) and Butler (1997) note that gender is constructed and performed in cultural life. The act of ‘making’ that Ortner refers to in her use of the term ‘making

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131 In this context, Ardener’s model of ‘muting’ (1975, 1978), discussed in Chapter One, is also relevant to further explicate how women’s contributions in public and cultural life are frequently marginalised.
gender’ (1996:4), accounts for both the individual and the socio-cultural, without reducing one into the other. It attends to the subject in the framework of analysis, whilst not losing sight of the cultural text, context, and validation of, in this case, women as (re)producers of significant cultural knowledge in perceptible, visual and aesthetic form, reflective of shared wider social understandings and contexts. Transposing this appreciation to another anthropological context, Geertz (1973) likens the production of meaning through practice to spinning ‘webs of significance’. In this thesis I have noted the difference between the validation of textile-making in cultural representations and its significance as recounted by the women amongst whom I worked. To follow Geertz’s analogy, a consideration of the actor’s perspective in the spinning of the webs has been foremost in my intent and focus regarding the wider cultural value and significance of women’s creative textile practice.

For Parker and Sedgwick (1995:15), the ‘promise of a focus on performativity is that it might permit more nuanced understandings of the relations between what have been blandly, confidently disguised as “text” and “context”’. They argue that a performative analysis demonstrates ‘how contingent and radically heterogeneous, as well as (...) contestable’ the relation between any subject and any utterance can be, indicating an ‘estrangement’ between the [ascribed] meaning and people’s performance of a cultural text (1995:3-14). Their emphasis is valuable for its challenge to conventional understandings of cultural practice, it also offers an insightful perspective for understanding the cultural and gendered validation of textile-making, including and especially in anthropological discourse.

In this context, Moore (1986) and Watkins (1996) highlight the relation between gender and explicit cultural forms or symbols and their underlying cultural orientations which are expressed in socio-cultural practice. They note that while people’s cultural activities may vary according to gender in real and expected terms, their knowledge is not drawn from or applies to the sexes separately in that female-associated activities would be meaningful only to women, and male-associated activities only to men. This is exemplified by the work of several women whose work I discussed in Chapter Five. For example, Holly noted that her main reason to use blankets, cloth, and stitch in her work was that it went ‘straight to the heart of culture’. Although textile-making is seen as ‘a woman’s practice’, she remarked, textiles are meaningful to everyone in cultural
life: ‘[textiles] connects to people...cause everyone knows what a blanket feels like...women as well as men respond deeply to cloth’ (IN 10/07).

The cultural assumptions entangled with textiles, women’s work and so-called ‘feminine’ endeavours, frequently carry a negative and reductive connotation, rather than an expansive potential of the utterances that can and are voiced by the women who make. My focus on women’s textile-making as an act of speaking through doing and their intentional engagement with specific materials, has made visible a grounded and embodied practice through which women visualise experience and create cultural knowledge in the continuum of everyday socio-cultural life. Partaking in the fabric of cultural practice in this way, they also mediate seeing and re-contextualise who counts as knowledgeable and what counts as known. None of this subverts the feminist agenda, but rather privileges the subjective and the experiential, these being central components of a feminist epistemological framework of analysis and expressing the ideas and discourses that feminism has rightfully claimed should be validated. In other words, whilst the two might not always articulate one another explicitly or comfortably, I suggest that in moments of lived femininity, moments of feminism occur. In turn, by way of ethnographic understandings about the significance of making and the connection between meaning, time, materiality and process, it sheds significant experiential insights on the relevance of creative engagement to the women who make.
The ‘re’ of representation suggests that to represent is to present again

(Bolt 2001:30)

You can’t keep your garment on needles forever; eventually it’s going to have to exist on its own, supporting itself. The trick is looping the stitches across each other so they can be pulled away from the needle without coming all apart

(Jacobs 2007:369)
Chapter Eight  
Casting off

So you’ve knit a good, long strip and you want to get it off the needles and secure it so it doesn’t unravel. This process is called casting off. 
(Percival 2002:25)

In this thesis I have explored the significance of process, time, and materiality within the folds of textile creative practice. I did this through an Australian ethnographic study involving non-Indigenous women who actively engage in textile-making. My aim, when setting out on the research journey, was to explore how and to what extent participants ascribed and communicated meaning and value in their aesthetic engagements, and what they hoped to express (or not) through their creative work.

In Australian cultural life, textile art and crafts are understood to be a predominantly female accomplishment. As a textile practitioner and educator in the visual arts, I was acutely aware that the gendered dimension of textiles is rarely questioned. Women’s engagement with yarns and needles is habitually perceived to be a leisure activity, a pseudo-significant past-time devoid of economic or serious cultural relevance. Perhaps it would be relatively easy to critique such taken-for-granted discursive spaces, however, it is necessary to understand why and how they occur in the first place. Rather than critiquing the presupposed gendered links and validations of textile-making, I positioned it as an ethnographic entry point, and as a site from which cultural, gendered and experiential narratives could be distilled. Important in this consideration was Pink’s emphasis on the known and familiar, through a ‘narrative strategy as a way of communicating knowledge about the unknown by creating resemblances to the familiar, thus offering audiences a framework through which to understand and incorporate new knowledge’ (2003:181).

My premise, from the outset, was that if art can embody social and cultural meanings then it could be treated as a form of language within the ‘text’ of socio-cultural life (Moore 1986). With this emphasis in mind, it transpired during and beyond my fieldwork that a thematic approach, which casts textile-making in a framework of representational logic, did not reflect women’s narratives and how they conceptualised and enacted process, time, and material aspects of making. Butler’s work on performance and performativity (1988, 1994, 1997), in particular, provided a
framework to explore women’s tactile engagements as a medium of signification and an act of speaking using visual means. In Chapter Three I followed a theoretical logic that outlined, firstly, Butler’s ideas and secondly, theoretical others including Bourdieu and Bolt, who both helped me to analyse and articulate thesis process and findings. Through a focus that is specifically material, temporal and performative, and transcending the tenuous link between representation and cultural meaning, the women’s narratives shed light on their aesthetic engagements as authentic, individual, diverse and processual modes of inquiry. Attending to women’s grounded and aesthetic practice in this way positioned their making as a form of embodied knowledge production by which women transmitted emergent understandings about their lived experiences. Interconnected emphases included the significance of tradition and belonging, their sense of connectedness to a certain locality, relationships of intimacy, and of family, and the relevance of sociality with fellow makers.

For Bolt (2001), the ‘re’ of representation involves an act of presenting again, an aesthetic experience that is different from the original, reflecting an impression of a moment in time. To position textile practice as making the cultural rather than representing it re-presents women’s aesthetic engagements as a ‘sensory way of knowing’ and a socially situated and distinctive process which exists in a manner akin to, but different from, the written word. This approach, in turn, re-signifies what women make as a matter beyond representation and the finished visual product alone. Moreover, as my research illustrates, claims that women enjoy textile making as a hobby, a way to provide comfort, time for self and relaxation, are muted and incomplete.

Women stitch, quilt, and knit, but they are not just stitching, quilting and knitting. They perform a kind of knowing and revealing through a tactile and material engagement that differs from a representational paradigm in which the process and moments of making are obscured. Visual diaries hold inspiration, fabrics are arranged, and patterns emerge, in a practice that privileges temporality. Ideas might come in a moment, an instance, but the actual work often evolves during and because of time. Throughout such a process, textile-making skills learned in childhood are utilised while new ideas are formed, recorded, questioned, instilled, and transmitted in tactile and observable form, through an agency that resides in subjects, materials, tools and
time-honoured skills. It is a mode of inquiry that women likened to a material thinking: putting thoughts into stitching and thinking into textiles.

The idea of thinking through practice, as I have conceived of it in this thesis, centres on the notion of cultural knowledge that exists in, and as a result of, a process that is actively autobiographical, temporal, material, cultural and political. The performative aspect of making, as an enactment, attends to the intentionality of its makers and where and how, through their creative practice, knowledge is made. It also draws on the unique potential of the medium itself: it makes the ephemeral and aesthetic meaningful in new ways. As I have shown, for the women whose words and works appear in this thesis, their material matters: they choose to work in a distinctive medium that ‘does things that other mediums do not’ (Story 2004a:np). It offers them a unique vocabulary, and while textile-making is routinely perceived to be a field of female experience, paradoxically it is a medium that women and men can engage with and relate to in everyday life in ways I describe in Chapter Five.

Through their creative practice, women reveal the special-ness of ordinary things and everyday activities, and engender the cultural and temporal significance of making. In the context of ethnographic engagements, textile practice is a cultural mirror of the intimately familiar and a cultural lens through which to make visible and re-signify some of the folds within the fabric of anthropological understandings. Textile makers reveal this potential, and pierce muted representations about their practice with needle and thread. By way of intentional engagement and creative agency, they speak by doing, and re-present who counts as knowledgeable and what counts as known. A focus on women’s narratives about the embedded and everyday nature of their creative practice necessitates a re-signification of the familiar to encompass a re-presentation of textile-making in cultural life. Furthermore, by placing an everyday activity in an ethnographic context from which to explore situated, experiential and material knowledge, I have shown that the production of material culture is not merely a skill in itself, or a pleasurable pastime or hobby, but a practice and site from which in-depth information about cultural and experiential narratives can be distilled. It places textile-making at the centre of relationships and temporal processes by which individual and collective meanings are performed. It also marks the social and relational aspects of
textiles as meaningful and calls for a shift in focus from the fabric of a culture to the cultural in fabric.

Cultures are always in the making: they are fluid, complex and changing. The idiom of textile practice, however, is conceived as grounded in time-honoured, time-less and unchanging skills, involving a process of a repetition symbolised by seemingly endless rows of knitting and countless stitches, time after time, same after same. To some extent, the women I spoke with located and defined their medium of expression within a rich tradition and lineage of women. Yet, as I have also shown in this thesis, it is exactly through the practice of repetitive acts over time that ideas are conceived and new understandings emerge.

According to Adam, the act of repetition references growth and accretion, enabling transformation and a ‘becoming of the possible’ (1994:521), whilst for Butler (1995, 1997), the very act of repetition brings into play the possibility of change. This is particularly evident in Butler’s discussion of the speech act and performative utterance which, when conceived as enabling the assertion of alternative domains of cultural knowledge, can re-signify the effects of which it speaks. The idea of speaking through ‘doing’ resonates with textile-making. The notion of repetition calls up the idea of sameness enabling a quantitative growth in textile work but, importantly, it also indicates the passage of ‘time in events’ (Adam 1994). A focus on this performativity illuminates the structuring effects in and of performance, how women’s textile-making continuously evolves. The actual stitches may remain the same, but over time and with each of those marks and repetitions, a shift occurs in the moments of making and through an enduring practice itself.

I have argued that creative knowledge is inseparable from process, time and materiality. Linking particular and individual narratives to a broader cultural text and context, this thesis forms part of a wider dialogue regarding the validation of gendered, creative and artistic expressions in Australian society and anthropological inquiry more broadly, realms in which textile creative practice has held a narrow window of credibility in the past. Rowley (1992a:7) notes that ‘[t]oo frequently do crafts practitioners grizzle about being “marginalised” and assert the claim to the barren status of “Art”: too rarely do they insist that what they do makes any differences to the
world and to our lives’. Placing an everyday activity into an ethnographic context as I have done in this thesis, and transcending a binary classification of art and craft whereby the cultural meaning and value of women’s textile-making is frequently still cast as categorically inferior to other cultural and artistic realms, I have not so much rejected as refracted the discursive spaces that have previously identified and muted women’s textile-making in Australia’s cultural fabric. In the process, I have disclosed some of its threadbare folds. The production of textile material culture is not ‘merely’ a process resulting in objects. Rather, it forms an avenue of expression by which women textile-makers make their presence in cultural knowledge production and diverse understandings known. Through a vantage point that makes evident materiality, tempo, process and embodiment, they collectively change the pattern and achieve a voice (cf. Carter 2004:177).

Carter (2004) notes that it is not always easy to present in academic form a medium’s ephemeral products that originate in the process of making and emergent practice. To consider textile-making in social analysis presented challenges, foremost of which was to keep the aesthetic, performative and tactile nature of textiles alive. As a textile maker engaged with anthropological fieldwork, I embarked on my research with a tacit understanding about handling yarns and cloth. At the same time, I was reminded by Bolt (2007b:3) that although it is possible to have ‘some awareness of the potential’ of one’s medium, in the very process of material practice and thinking, ‘the outcome cannot be known in advance’. And so it has been with my research, exemplified by experiences during fieldwork that illustrate Bolt’s compelling point. Among them is an interview with Sharon in Melbourne, during which she asked me how my research was ‘coming along’. I considered her question for a moment, and replied: ‘it’s interesting, you know, what I set out to discover isn’t what I ended up doing’. Sharon nodded, smiled, and then responded:

That’s art for you. Whatever I set out to do isn’t what comes out at all. Once you understand that, you can really embrace that, and enjoy the journey. So that you yourself are going to be surprised at the end of it. That’s a very special part of it (IN 02/07).

Textile-making is a process involving movement, a mark-making that goes with the hand, an incremental and creative speech act by which artworks come into being through doing and over time. We may view these works from a distance, for example on a gallery wall or via rhetorical representations in cultural life, but when we come in
for a closer view a different image emerges. By seeing the mark we see the time of the maker and her aesthetic engagements, bringing to the surface a revelationary view, an embodied and emerging understanding materialised and brought into focus through the eye of a needle.

In the end, it was Michele who found the words for it: ‘that’s what I love about stitch, how it can make - a mark’.
Loose ends

This is a space of fragments, a space of the incomplete. But it is not a lack or a failure. Why tie up loose ends? Penelope knew it well - weaving by day, undoing by night, a “secret work always begun again”\(^ {132} \), and all the richer for this double action (Barnett 1999:31)

Having reached this stage of the process, I realise more fully that one of the challenging aspects of a project of this nature is the ‘letting go’. It is a feeling not unlike what I experience when I am about to release my textile-work into the public space of an exhibition. Both actions require trust, a sense of adventure and some courage too; to let go of something in which much has been invested. Questions arise. Have I done enough? How will people respond? Will they like my work? Is it really finished?

As a maker, I take joy in the intricacies of crafting, of feeling drawn into the creative possibilities of my medium and the expression of ideas. As an anthropology student, I started this research with the aspiration to explore the meanings embedded in textile material culture and to engage anthropological inquiry in a field that I am passionate about. What followed became an experiential undertaking and this thesis materialised as a result.

The act of writing, like the act of making, is a personal and often solitary one. Both are meaningful to me in their own right. But unlike making, crafting this thesis involved writing about others, others I know. And so the work and the letting go mattered in added ways; more than I had thought possible when I embarked on the journey.

During my research, I spoke with people. They trusted me with their stories and reflections. I started writing in the knowledge that by the time this thesis surfaced, their creative engagements would have evolved in the manner meaningful practice does over time. What they shared and what I wrote presents a snapshot in time, an insight into how and why women weave the aesthetics and sensibilities of their lives using visual and tactile means. I spoke with people. They told me that the significance of their practice is the engagement with an ever-evolving process, a gradual, creative becoming, never finite. And so it is with this body of work. Completed, for now...

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