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Rereading and revising: Acknowledging the smallness (sometimes) of craft

Abstract

Attention to the power of craft has come to dominate craftivism discourse. This article is interested in disrupting some of the claims of craftivism with a reminder that craft can remain powerless compared to the scale of the social problems that surround it. My interest in smallness is driven by a desire to make reasonable claims on behalf of craft's power in an era when modest impact feels like an unwelcome truth in academic research. Craft research is perhaps ill positioned to expose itself as small. To see past this blind spot, I look to examples of craft practice described in novels and short stories from Chile, India and Zimbabwe: Isabelle Allende's *The House of Spirits* (1985), Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996), Yvonne Vera's short story collection *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992), Tsitsi Dangarembga's *The Book of Not* (2006) and Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009). I propose that craft, in the contexts discussed here, accrues meaning through its limitations. This close reading has required me to revise the importance that I had placed, particularly on textiles in Zimbabwean fiction, in the past and instead recognize that what craft is unable to repair and recover are also components of its identity. As craft scholarship as a discipline expands, I find it increasingly important – amidst the many sincere efforts to proclaim what craft can do – to also voice what it is unable to change as a legitimate component of craft's identity.

Keywords: craft, craftivism, small, fiction, postcolonial, impact

Craft has long made a direct impact on society – be it a desire to reclaim labour as meaningful or redirect value to material qualities impossible to mass produce. While these sentiments and the contradictions that they involve (e.g. William Morris's ideals were not particularly affordable) are certainly not new, attention to the *power* of craft often dominates contemporary discourse. Commitment to the various ways in which the production of craft may empower both individuals and groups is apparent in a number of books published over the last decade. Faythe Levine and Cortney Heimerl's *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design* (Levine & Heimerl 2008), Betsy Greer's *Knitting for Good! A Guide to Creating Personal, Social and Political Change, Stitch by Stitch* (Greer 2008) and *Craftivism: The Art and Craft and Activism* (Greer 2014) and Sarah Corbett's *Little Book of Craftivism* (Corbett 2013) and *How to be a Craftivist: The Gentle Art of Protest* (Corbett 2017) celebrate the power of craft to bring about political change. Betsy Greer, often credited with coining *craftivism*, acknowledges that the term 'came about thanks to a few phenomena occurring simultaneously, mainly frustration at the rule of materialism, the continuing quest for the unique, and the rise of the Internet' (2011: 178–79). But as Julia Bryan-Wilson observes, 'if figures like Morris looked to handmaking as a contrast to the alienation of the assembly line, craftivism arguably remystified craft by proclaiming for it special, and romanticized powers of disruption' (2017: 31).

I am interested in recognizing that alongside celebrating how craft can empower there are other valid identities of craft. In addition to popular discourse that focuses on craft's power, there exist countless occasions when craft remains

powerless to the scale of the social problems that surround it. While far less popular as an identity to acknowledge, the smallness of craft is also an aspect of its identity. I understand that my interest in what may not hold much power may feel perverse. Academic research often encourages key and core and big and mighty questions that face society today. But I fear that this pressure is distorting the full identity of craft. To counter this, I am interested in remembering instances where craft is impotent to bring about meaningful change. I fear that if we do not hold open space for these alternative versions of craft's identity, we risk perpetuating what David Gates (referring to the literary theorist Jean-François Lyotard) observes: 'writings on craft have generated […] a core of Grand Narratives, lenses through which craft is viewed and projected' (2013: 59). Gates seeks alternative research methods in the analysis of dialogue between practitioners as a route to challenge the emergence of craft's Grand Narratives. I also want to resist fixing craft discourse and have found my examples in novels and short stories where the crafts – once noticed – are not infrequent contributors to fiction. I discuss examples from three geographic regions. Isabelle Allende's *The House of Spirits* (1985) and Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1996) are novels set in unspecified urban and rural locations in Chile and India, respectively. I also return to three authors from Zimbabwe whom I have written about previously: Yvonne Vera's short story collection *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992), Tsitsi Dangarembga's *The Book of Not* (2006) and Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009). These examples include depictions of the production of ceramics, quilting, knitting, crochet, wood carving and shoe making.

Reading depictions of craft in literature offers a way to see the crafts through the perspective of another discipline. Fiction authors who include descriptions of the production of craft in their writing are unlikely to have had the emerging discipline of craft scholarship in mind when writing. We can presume that craft makes an appearance in their writing because of its ability to communicate tangible narrative details. I find this absence of a craft agenda in writing by fiction authors refreshing. Reading lived experience through fiction can fall to studies in the sociology of literature. Fritz Gaenslen, for example, writing about examples of conflict resolution found in literature, defends the role of fiction by noting that 'social processes not easily studied in their natural settings or in the laboratory may be more readily observed through fiction' (1982: 380). If craft research conducted in the workshop is ill positioned to expose itself as small and craft scholarship in general motivated, as I have previously been, by a desire to show others the importance of craft, literature may provide us with a version of craft's image that is uniquely objective.

My recent reading and rereading has required me to revise the importance that I had placed, particularly on textiles, in the past (Hemmings 2008, 2010). Instead, I now recognize that what craft is unable to repair and recover also deserve acknowledgement as part of the identity of craft. Attention to smallness, as I attempt in this writing, is a far from new research strategy. The field of microhistory, for example, attends to a very focused subject such as a single person or event. Jeffrey Goldfarb in his study of micro-level political activism observes that 'grand accounts of our historical circumstances have served us so poorly. The complexity of the human condition has been ignored and even repressed by such accounts, often with fatal consequences' (2006: 3). Goldfarb sees that 'the politics of small things has long been with us, yet in a sense it is a startling and revolutionary innovation of our times' (2006: 8). Smallness also appears in oral history. Eleanor Flegg, for example, writing about the history of the Cork Craftsman's Guild in Ireland, defends her recourse to the insights of trauma studies to shed light on the demise of one modest craft

organization (2013: 114). Flegg acknowledges that the organization was 'marginal in the aesthetic and economic hierarchies' (2013: 113) but concludes: 'Craft activities, which rate low in aesthetic and economic hierarchies, tend to slip away unnoticed, leaving scarcely more than a ripple in the historical record' (Flegg 2013: 121).

Studies of small things often show how small things are not that small after all. Instead, they tend to be driven by a desire to expose under-acknowledged power. Here I am less interested in examples of under-acknowledged power and instead want to focus on the danger in over-claiming the power of craft. The literary examples that I have chosen to discuss are each set in what Goldfarb has described as 'postcolonial backwater[s]' (2006: 68). This turn of phrase lacks the political correctness that decolonizing studies have now made familiar, but I am interested nonetheless in our postcolonial relationship to the identity of craft and Bryan-Wilson's concern about 'romanticized powers of disruption' (2017: 31). I hope that my readings creatively heed Bryan-Wilson's warning that, 'in the context of early twenty first century discussions about the supposed evaporation of handmade things, it is essential to ask questions about whose handiwork, exactly, is at issue' (Bryan-Wilson 2017: 28).

Isabell Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

Chilean-American author Isabell Allende's *The House of the Spirits* traces the lives of four generations of the Trueba family. The final chapters of the novel recount the 1973 *coup d'état* that overthrew Socialist President Salvador Allende and brought General Pinochet to power. (Salvador Allende remains unnamed in the novel but was in life Isabell Allende's relative.) During General Pinochet's dictatorship of Chile (1973–90), *arpilleras* stitched by women's groups documented the 'disappeared' (Agosin 1987: vii). These pieced and quilted textiles, some including short passages of text, were 'smuggled out of Chile and used by Amnesty International to help build public and political pressure to bring down Pinochet' (Corbett 2017: 8) before conventional media widely reported these stories. Bryan-Wilson acknowledges that today *arpilleras* are 'so often invoked – they verge on becoming "craftivist canon"' (2017: 29). Her recent extensive writing on *arpilleras* works to rectify this by bringing far more complexity and detail to their reading, but she concludes, 'as textile objects they are "in the fray" – unsettled and unstable in attempts to pin them down' (Bryan Wilson 2017: 176).

I would like to suggest that Isabell Allende's *The House of the Spirits* reminds us of still other realities of craft. Allende's writing is often categorized as magical realism, and *The House of the Spirits* follows the Trueba family members including those with clairvoyant talents and mermaid hair. The novel ends with the chilling conclusion that the cycle of violence and retribution felt across the family generations is destined to continue.[1] But long before we are introduced to this fateful inevitability, Allende describes Old Pedro Garciá, whose family has lived and worked on Tres Marías, the hacienda owned by Trueba family, for generations. He shows Blanca, Esteban and Clara Trueba's daughter, how to throw clay on a potter's wheel to distract her from a 'terrible migraine' (Allende 1985: 173). Old Pedro Garciá 'without warning dropped a ball of clay into her lap' and 'spent that afternoon teaching her

[1] The day my grandfather tumbled his grandmother, Pancha García, among the rushes of the riverbank, he added another link to the chain of events that had to complete itself. Afterward the grandson of the woman who was raped repeats the gesture with the granddaughter of the rapist, and perhaps forty years from now my grandson will knock Garciá's granddaughter down among the rushes, and so on through the centuries in an unending tale of sorrow, blood and love. (Allende 1985: 431–32)

how to shape the clay into pieces of kitchen crockery' because Garciá 'shared Clara's notion that hands were meant to be used' (Allende 1985). When Blanca grows 'bored making utilitarian objects' she turns to creating crèches that include 'a whole miniature world of household animals and people engaged in every trade: carpenters, laundresses, cooks, each with his or her own tiny tools and furniture' (Allende 1985). Blanca's indomitable father, Esteban Trueba, derides the crèches but tolerates her 'mania for clay' as a 'form of amusement for a proper young lady' (Allende 1985: 174). He draws the line at business, refusing to allow her work to be sold at the risk (ironically considering his rape of numerous young female farm labourers) of damaging the family name (Allende 1985).

When Blanca's father discovers that she is pregnant he forces his daughter to marry a visiting European of somewhat dubious royal heritage. The father of Blanca's child, Old Pedro Garciá's son, is driven from the hacienda not only because of their love affair but also his political convictions, which include teaching the farm's labourers about collective action. In contrast, Blanca's new husband Jean de Satigny is easily bought – a homosexual seeking the cover of marriage as much as Blanca's father is seeking to legitimize his daughter's pregnancy. For the few months that they live together in the north of the country Blanca learns that her husband is also a smuggler and trader of antiquities. The couple's home fills with stolen hordes unearthed from the desert.[2] Allende sets the skills of past potters in stark contrast to Blanca's making. Ironically, the Indian antiquities find their monetary value when they are smuggled out of the country, presumably sold on the black market.

In contrast Blanca's 'multitudinous crèches became a tourist attraction […] especially as she did not charge for them' (Allende 1985). Her work exists in what Siún Carden has described as 'a position common to items endowed with "folk" souvenir status, at the intersection of conflicting expectations about capitalist economic processes versus the romanticized (and derided) realm of "native" handicrafts' (2014: 272). Allende heightens this tension by setting Blanca's production against the pillaged goods that her husband traffics. Blanca feels that it is 'impossible to compete with the ancient pottery of the Indians' (Allende 1985: 254) but when her economic circumstances eventually force her to return to her work with clay, Allende does not romanticize the labour. The novel's narrator foreshadows the hardship to come by explaining, 'The old man [Old Pedro Garciá] could not know that he was giving Blanca something that would later be her only means of survival, as well as her sole comfort in the sad hours to come' (Allende 1985: 173). Blanca's family are wealthy, but her refusal to submit to the values of her father, who as a Senator has become politically powerful, means that she must live by the income that her craft produces.[3]

In addition to the 'wretched income' her crèches eventually earn her when marketed, Blanca also teaches students from 'the best families' who 'had nothing to do and had taken up the fashion of ceramics, which was more elegant than knitting

[2] Magnificent ceramic jars, green with the patina of time, began to arrive at his house disguised in Indian's bundles and Llama saddlebags, quickly filling the secret places that had been set aside for them. Blanca watched them piling up in the rooms and was astonished by their shapes. She held them in her hands, caressing them as if hypnotized, and whenever they were wrapped in straw and paper to be shipped to a far-off, unknown destination, she was grief-stricken. This pottery was just too beautiful. She felt that the monsters from her crèches did not belong under the same roof. For this reason, more than for any other, she abandoned her workshop. (Allende 1985: 255)

[3] Blanca was a very poor woman. She had money only when Clara gave her some or when she sold one of her crèches. She earned a wretched income […] Her poverty contrasted with the embroidered dresses and custom-made shoes in which the Senator dressed his granddaughter Alba. Her life was hard. She rose at six every morning, winter and summer. Then, dressed in a rubber apron and wooden clogs, she lit her kiln, prepared her worktables, and pounded the clay for her classes, her arms up to her elbows in the coarse, cold mud. This was why she always had broken nails and cracked skin and why, with time, her fingers grew deformed. At that time of day she felt inspired, and since there was no one to interrupt her, she could start her day by making extraordinary animals for her crèches. (Allende 1985: 279)

for the poor, as their grandmothers had done' (Allende 1985: 280). Her teaching also involves children with Downs Syndrome, fulfilling but exhausting work that 'wore them out' (Allende 1985). 'Blanca invariably had a migraine' after teaching, the same symptom that years earlier her introduction to the pleasures of the potter's wheel had cured (Allende 1985: 281). Her health continues to suffer. Blanca's hands 'had been ruined by household chores and clay' (Allende 1985: 302) and 'Whenever it rained, she put on a pair of gloves to relieve the arctic cold that had seeped into her bones from the damp clay she used' (Allende 1985: 303). These descriptions of craft do not feed our recognition of the value of craft production or offer much in the way of empowerment. Instead we face a reminder of other far less savoury realities that place the maker's compromised physical health and meagre financial compensation alongside the pleasure sought in creativity.

Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

Mahatma Gandhi's use of the textile as a protest tool in the ultimately successful Indian independence movement is an often-cited example of the power of craft. Anthropologist and art historian, Susan Bean, notes that 'From 1908 on, these two elements – the economics of cloth and the semiotics of cloth – united in Gandhi's thought' (1989: 359). Creating and wearing *khadi* became a powerful instrument of resistance as Bean explains, 'English cloth had become the most potent symbol of English political domination and economic exploitation' (1989: 364). Bean reminds us that Gandhi's choice of dress to communicate his political values was of crucial importance to a nation with multiple languages and high illiteracy rates, which made visual (rather than written or spoken) communication all the more vital (Hemmings 2012: 234).

But another identity for the textile appears in *A Fine Balance* – impotent against the mass sterilization policy implemented by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who declared a 21 month 'Emergency' across the nation between 1975 and 1977. Indian-born, Canadian author Rohinton Mistry sets the novel in unspecified urban and rural locations during 1975 and briefly concludes the novel in 1984, when Indira Gandhi is assassinated. Just as Isabell Allende does not name President Salvador Allende or General Pinochet, Mistry only refers to Indira Gandhi as 'The Prime Minister' (Mistry 1996: 5) while Mahatma Gandhi is referred to on a plaque marking a statue as the 'Guardian of Democracy' (Mistry 1996: 191). The central characters in Mistry's novel, uncle and nephew Ishvar and Omprak, are first introduced to the reader as they travel from the countryside to seek work as tailors in the city. Ishvar and his brother Narayan had navigated 'the unthinkable: abandoned leather for cloth' (Mistry 1996: 133).

The move away from the family's traditional role as cobblers and leather tanners from the Chamaar caste was intended to improve future prospects (Mistry 1996: 95, 118, 134) but when Narayan demands to cast his own vote rather than allowing his thumb print to be allocated in a rigged election he is tortured and hanged and the family home is set alight, killing six members of their family (Mistry 1996: 145–47). Competition from a pre-made clothing shop eventually brings an end to a need for Ishvar's skills locally and the men move to the city (Mistry 1996: 150, 519). In the city, Ishvar and Omprak take up piecework (Mistry 1996: 9) for the widow Dina Dalal, who has been forced to seek tailors and instead oversee quality as a middle broker for Au Revoir Exports because of her deteriorating eyesight due to years of embroidery work (Mistry 1996: 57, 65, 605). Their covert cottage industry in her

home is contrasted with the smell that Dina Dalal believes comes from the factory made cloth that she collects from the export company for their work: 'something acrid suspired from the bolts, stiffening the air, clouding it with thoughts of dingy factories, tubercular labourers, bleak lives' (Mistry 1996: 193).

References to menstruation and by association fertility that none of the main characters will enjoy appear throughout the novel.[4] But as the novel unfolds, we learn that Om will in fact never marry: 'If time were a bolt of cloth', said Om, 'I would cut out all the bad parts. Snip out the scary nights and stitch together the good parts, to make time bearable' (Mistry 1996: 310). 'The Emergency' does not improve the fortunes of the central characters. Their slum room is bulldozed (Mistry 1996: 295) as part of the city beautification programme. They are then arrested for sleeping rough in a shop entrance that they have rented from a night watchman and are sent to a forced labour camp (Mistry 1996: 325). In the labour camp, uncle and nephew become friends with Shankar, a beggar whose 'Professional modifications' to ensure his career include amputated limbs (Mistry 1996: 456). When Beggarmaster, essentially the grand pimp of the begging community, purchases their release from the labour camp Om and Ishvar use cloth remnants to make functional clothing for the disabled man.[5] The design challenge foreshadows what will became Ishvar's reality.

Ultimately, Ishvar and Omprak undergo forced vasectomies (Mistry 1996: 534); Om is also castrated (Mistry 1996: 536) after spitting at a village member of a higher caste, Thakur Dharamsi, who years earlier had ordered his brother's torture and family's incineration. Because the medical equipment is not properly sterilized (Mistry 1996: 533) infection from his vasectomy eventually leads to the amputation of Ishvar's legs (Mistry 1996: 542). By the novel's end Dina decides that the quilt must remain unfinished, 'there was nothing further to add' (Mistry 1996: 573). When we next see the quilt, it is 'dirty and fraying, folded to the size of a cushion' for Ishvar, the 'legless beggar', who now uses a platform to manoeuvre as Shankar had before (Mistry 1996: 608). The gross brutality of the begging industry and government sponsored sterilization have resulted in the same outcome. From preparations for a lifetime's menstruation Dina, Om and Ishvar do not have children. Instead the textile is used as a tool for survival, at best, but also for suicide when a newspaper reports three sisters who hung themselves with their sari cloth.

> The three were sisters, aged fifteen, seventeen, and nineteen, and had hanged themselves while their parents were out of the house. They had written a note to explain their conduct. They knew their father was unhappy at not being able to afford dowries for them […] they could see no alternative. (Mistry 1996: 594)

[4] We learn, for example, that 'The sewing produced snippets of fabric every day, and Shirin Aunty [Dina] suggested collecting them. […] She quickly demonstrated by making a lumpy sanitary pad' (Mistry 1996: 56) Several chapters later 'The little snippets of fabric continued to accumulate in great quantities. Enough, she thought, to make sanitary pads for a convent of nuns' (Mistry 1996: 80). Later still, 'Place was found in the trunk on the trestle for her stock of homemade sanitary pads and snippets' (Mistry 1996: 194). Dina recognizes there is an excess of accumulated cloth, but assuming Om will soon have a young wife she decides to keep all the fragments:

> She dug her arms in and out tumbled the mountain of fragments, making her laugh aloud. Not even another fifty years of periods would use up so much cotton filling. She stocked a bag with a reasonable amount and prepared to get rid of the rest. Then she thought of Om's wife again. Surely her youth and vitality could use a healthy lot of it. Better save it for now, she thought, happily pushing the shreds back onto the shelf. (Mistry 1996: 511)

[5] Ishvar […] described the problem to Dina: the amputated lower half, where nothing would stay put, neither loincloth nor underwear nor pants, because of his constant squirming and manoeuvring on the platform. And once the garment had slipped off his waist, he was helpless until Beggarmaster came on his rounds. (Mistry 1996: 403)

Zimbabwe

In this final section I consider several Zimbabwean short stories and novels written by Yvonne Vera, Brian Chikwava and Tsitsi Dangaremba. Zimbabwe gained independence from British colonial rule in 1980, one of the last remaining colonies of the British Empire. The years subsequent to and before independence brought violence to the region and in 1965, when Prime Minister Ian Smith's white minority government issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence from Britain, the country sank into civil war. In Vera's early collection of short stories *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* (1992) craft offers an escape from hardship and temporarily provides her characters with a chance to dream. *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* includes a story that shares the book's title and describes wood carving and 'The Shoemaker', both stories with male protagonists whose crafts offer a respite from the grief of their everyday life. One specific craft – knitting – appears in Brian Chikwava's novel *Harare North* (2009) and *The Book of Not* by Tsitsi Dangarembga (2006). In Chikwava and Dangarembga's writing craft grounds otherwise fantastical stories occupied by unreliable narrators told via nonlinear narration.

Both Chile and India offer examples of craft, as Bryan-Wilson acknowledges of *arpilleras* (and I would add *khadi*), that are 'so often invoked – they verge on becoming "craftivist canon"' (2017: 29). Comparable examples from Zimbabwe are less frequently cited. But the Weya appliqué project started by Ilse Noy, who was employed by the German volunteer service (Noy 1992: 8), offers one comparison. Textiles made with the Weya appliqué project are acknowledged to have allowed women to communicate otherwise taboo topics such as prostitution (Noy 1992: 154 55). The textiles share some aesthetic and practical elements with Chilean *arpilleras* such as sewn pockets that include handwritten text (Bryan-Wilson 2017: 161 and Schmahmann 2000: 9). Brenda Schmahmann writes that,

> The appliqués do not of course literally 'reflect' social conditions in rural Zimbabwe, but they have enabled women to express opinions, desires and fears that they would normally leave unspoken […] many of the themes selected by Weya needleworkers allow for a questioning of inequalities between men and women that are commonplace in rural Zimbabwean communities. (2000: 60)

As we will see in the writing I have selected from Zimbabwe, craft can also occupy a less empowering aspect of characters' identities.

Yvonne Vera: *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals*

The central character of the namesake short story in Vera's collection *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* is a man whose meagre existence is earned 'outside the gates of the Africans-Only hospital, making models out of wood' (Vera 1992: 71). Vera positions the wood carver alongside a painter: both men work and sell their creations together. In the story, the painter asks the woodcarver 'Why don't you carve other animals?' (Vera 1992: 72). before going on to suggest that he carve lions and chimpanzees, even rats because of the familiarity that the township residents would have with the rodent.

Vera's narrator explains that the woodcarver's main frustration is the lack of life he can bring to his carvings.[6] Even though his creations trample the newspaper headlines – presumably a fiction in their own right – the carver's craft provides little solace, burdened as it is with the challenge of bringing life to wood. The painter is wrong to suggest that he should depict animals closer to home. The purpose of the wood carver's craft is to take him away from reality. Vera chooses to close this brief story by confirming the escapism that woodcarving offers the man: 'The carver has never seen the elephant or the giraffe that he carves so ardently. He picks up a piece of unformed wood. Will it be a giraffe or an elephant? His carving is also his dreaming' (Vera 1992: 73). The woodcarver needs his craft to remain focused precisely on what is not real, to allow a small moment of mental escape.

'The Shoemaker', also included in the same collection of short stories, describes a visit by two young women ostensibly to drop off shoes for repair. We learn that the girls have interrupted the shoemaker's journey – taken in his mind's eye – to visit his family's village. There is no need for his journey to take place in anything other than his mind's eye because his family's village and his entire family living in the village (much like Ishvar and Omprak's experience in Mistry's novel) no longer exist.[7] Two girls interrupt the shoemaker's mind travel inside his shop/home with its 'walls made of zinc' and red shoes, his repair job of choice, laid on his bed (Vera 1992: 32). One of the girls insists that it would be better for the shoemaker to work outside in the sunshine (Vera 1992: 32). Even mid-conversation the shoemaker 'left the girls for his travels', his mind attempting to wander home while trapped in the present. 'The war, however, made it difficult to think of the village before its devastation' (Vera 1992: 33).

The precocious questions of the shoemaker's visitors stand in contrast to the wisdom that he imparts. As a character, he takes satisfaction from repairing the material world, while also managing to remain free of much requirement of material comforts. In response to the girls' entreaties to sit outside and conduct his repair work, he explains: 'But this is not your shop' (Vera 1992). The girls 'looked at the shoemaker who was threading his needle, surprised that he would invest such pride in a shoddy place like this' (Vera 1992). Then they press on with their questions: '"Why don't you live somewhere, in a house? With relatives or friends. Why do you live in your shop?" the tall girl asked' (Vera 1992: 34). In response the shoemaker explains, 'My relatives are buried. I like it in my shop' (Vera 1992). Two small statements encapsulate the enormity of his loss. All his relatives are buried and his craft offers small comfort. Vera concludes the story on a similar note to that of *Why Don't You Carve Other Animals* by making craft occupy a necessary but small role:

> 'All burned, burned, burned,' the shoemaker said, as though to banish the image that forced itself into his mind. He threw the paper onto the bed and picked up the red shoe. It was easier to deal with an old shoe than with an old memory. (Vera 1992: 34–35)

[6] Through the elephants he carves, and also the giraffes, with oddly slanting necks, the sculptor brings the jungle to the city. His animals walk on the printed newspaper sheets, but he mourns that they have no life in them. Sometimes in a fit of anger he collects his animals and throws them frenziedly into his cardboard box, desiring not to see their lifeless forms against the chaotic movement of traffic which flows through the hospital gates. (Vera 1992: 71)

[7] The shoemaker had not inconvenienced himself with a curtain. When his privacy mattered, he put an old newspaper against the pane. And that was only when he went away for a few days, to visit his relatives in the country. To do that he lay on the small creaky bed in the dark, and travelled through his mind. He always arrived […] It was easier than digging up graves, he said. His relatives had died in the war. (Vera 1992: 31–32)

In Vera's stories craft is written as a benign activity, a source of temporary mental distraction that provides little more than small gestures of repair. These are necessarily modest references because the writing craft sits within alludes to the violence of Zimbabwe's recent history. Incapable of stopping war or bringing the dead to life, craft instead offers small comforts that help to communicate the enormity of loss faced by Vera's characters.

Revisiting 'Knitting in Southern African fiction'

In 'Knitting in Southern African fiction' (Hemmings 2010)[8] I referenced Betty LaDuke's description of crochet (and by extension knitting), which she describes in her study of visual art in Zimbabwe as 'passive creativity' (1997: 117). At the time, I concluded that 'knitting is written as an object of action far more complex in associations and meanings than the "passive creativity" previously assigned to the craft' (Hemmings 2010: 62). But I am no longer sure that I was correct to name craft in these contexts as an object of action. Returning to Chikwava and Dengaremba's novels I now reconsider how the act of knitting not only disrupts traditional associations with the passive role craft can play, but perhaps also deserves to be better acknowledged for the modest roles that it occupies. I have come to see that the smallness of these actions is a decisive identity in their own right, not 'passive' but equally inappropriate to read as capable of bringing about significant change.

The voice of knitting in Chikwava and Dangarembga's novels is far from consistent. The Harare North of Chikwava's novel is London, a reference to the real number of Zimbabweans living in London for economic and political reasons. (Johannesburg, another city populated by Zimbabweans is, colloquially, known as Harare South.) The pages that refer specifically to knitting occur on the night of the narrator's 22nd birthday and are set in italics to suggest a dream sequence or aside the narrator takes the reader into. The narrator's voice here changes significantly to remind us that English is not his mother tongue and that the culture and language now surrounding him in London are not fluent to his ear. Chronological impossibilities give Chikwava's narrator away: the promised completion of unfinished knitting by his late mother and the jarring fact that his mother, the knitter of domestic doilies and red hens, died of a drug overdose (Chikwava 2009: 16). It is hard not to conclude that Chikwava's decision to refer to the craft of knitting in what is essentially a story of an anti-hero indulges in the stereotype of knitting's innocence.

Chikwava's unnamed narrator is moving away from something far more sinister: allegiances to the long time leader of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, and his connections with a notorious youth militia named the Green Bombers, who are loyal to Mugabe. The unsettling subtext of violence palpable in *Harare North* is also present in Dangarembga's *The Book of Not*. Whereas *Harare North* includes passages that could be explained as dream sequences, *The Book of Not* confronts the brutality of war described by the violence inflicted on human bodies that we wish could be written off as dream sequences, but we know are not. Dangarembga opens

[8] 'Knitting in Southern African fiction' (Hemmings 2010) considered a number of depictions of knitting in fiction from southern Africa: the South African short story 'Knitting Gloves' by Floss M. Jay (1983), and Zimbabweans' Brian Chikwava and Tsitsi Dangarembga's novels *Harare North* (2009) and *The Book of Not* (2006), respectively. These three examples share a number of qualities. In each, the narrator who knits or describes knitting is shown to be unreliable. This unreliability is confirmed through chronological impossibilities within the storyline, references to drug or alcohol use that suggest a distorted perspective or questionable accuracy in the recollection of events or the use of fantastic imagery. In each case the narrator is our only source of information – their account cannot be corroborated against voices from other characters within the story because their version of events is the sole perspective revealed to the reader. Knitting remains solid and real, if peculiar, within these stories that are fraught with memories of violence.

The Book of Not by animating a severed limb. Like *Harare North*, *The Book of Not* is written in the first person, leaving the reader solely reliant on the voice of one narrator, Tambudzai, or Tambu, an academically gifted black student at the prestigiousYoung Ladies College of the Sacred Heart. Set in pre-independence Zimbabwe, Southern Rhodesia, the predominantly white school has five black students studying in what reads as a token gesture of charity. The campus remains as racially divided as the nation at the time; Tambu's significant academic achievements go unmentioned within the school where the list of class honours only acknowledges white students.

But Tambu is a naively driven character. The violence of civil war in the decade before independence is described throughout the book in imagery of severed body parts.[9] Against this backdrop of violence and racism, Tambu seems willing to do anything to gain acceptance and make progress. When the Swanepoels, white twin sisters at the school, are orphaned because of a brutal attack on their parents a knitting group is started to make 'comforters and gloves for the troops' (Dangarembga 2006: 130). Tumbu is either unable or unwilling to see that her act of knitting for the white Rhodesian soldiers is in no way innocent. Her black roommates (all five students share one cramped dormitory, essentially segregated from the other students) accuse her of being a 'sell-out' (Dangarembga 2006: 137). In return, she claims that she had hoped her efforts would somehow 'help' the now orphaned sisters (Dangarembga 2006: 138).

For Dangarembga, knitting signals allegiances during a time of internal national conflict. But much like the previous examples that I have discussed, Dangarembga does not let craft do much. In fact, Tambu's excuse that she hoped her knitting would help the sisters is hollow enough to show that her own motives for acknowledgement, success and friendship have put her in an impossible position of internal conflict. Curiously, the knitting described represents some of the most tangible moments of each story. Time may no longer be linear, truth and fact may be hard to separate from fiction, but there is little reason to doubt the presence of knitting.

Conclusion

Arpilleras from Chile, Mahatma Ghandi's use of khadi cloth during the Indian independence movement and the Weya appliqué project in Zimbabwe offer examples of craft that has brought about empowerment – albeit to varying degrees. But in an effort to avoid contributing to discourse that 'remystified craft by proclaiming for it special, and romanticized powers of disruption' (Bryan-Wilson 2017: 31), I have instead drawn attention to a number of novels and short stories where empowerment created by the production of craft remains brutally limited. Craft is allowed to do little to alleviate the troubled lives of the characters created by Allende, Mistry, Vera, Chikwava and Dangarembga. In these stories, throwing clay crèches, sewing quilts, carving wood animals, repairing shoes, knitting and crochet often represent tiring labour compensated by, at best, meagre financial remuneration.

The crafts are not without purpose, but the purpose of crafts in these examples remains small. This smallness offers a marker against which narrative details can be measured. To see the role of crafts in these particular examples as

[9] Early in *The Book of Not*, Tambu's sister's leg is described more like a balloon floating in the sky than a body part of a family member: 'up, up, up the leg spun. A piece of a person, up there in the sky' (Dangarembga 2006: 3). 'Legs and other limbs you knew of tangled in heaps as they fell, tramped through my thoughts like a too heavy armed force' (Dangarembga 2006: 132).

more than this, as I have in my enthusiasm claimed previously, fails to acknowledge that craft is not always able to bring about change. Our understanding of the complex contribution that craft makes to contemporary societies benefits from acknowledgement that an additional identity of contemporary craft is the meaning that it accrues through its limitations.

As craft scholarship matures as an academic discipline, these small and limited versions of craft also deserve acknowledgement. To overclaim the power of craft, as I fear my earlier writing attempted, distorts the identity of craft. I assumed that the claims of my research a decade ago had to be large to be significant enough for academic inquiry. I now suspect that I was not alone in feeling this particular weight of academic expectation. But I also see that not only was I wrong, but that craft discourse, its values and claims are ours to shape. For craft to benefit from its still relatively new inclusion within academic discourse the full identity of craft – including instances of the small and limited – deserves recognition. Without this complete picture we run the risk of creating an academic version of craft that with time may be unrecognizable to those outside academia.

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