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NEEDLEWORK AS POLITICAL AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NOVEL

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Abstract

Handcrafts like quilting, knitting, sewing, and cross-stitching have traditionally been viewed as a "woman's thing," a gendered leisure time activity. However, women's handcrafts when read as texts can yield multi-layered narratives. With the coming of the second wave feminism in the US in the 1960s, many feminist scholars, critiques turned to study literary texts in which women's handcrafts yielded political and/or cultural meanings. In fact, there is a bulk of scholarly literature on the representations of needlework in American literary tradition. The aim of this research paper is not to offer a comprehensive study on the representations of women's handcrafts in American literary tradition but to bring attention to three contemporary American novels, *Mama Day* by African American feminist author Gloria Naylor, *Four Souls* by Native American Louise Erdrich, and *Flight Behaviour* by Barbara Kingsolver. the study of which, I believe, will bring a new breath to the already existing scholarship on the topic

Keywords: *Women's handcrafts, culture, identity, Barbara Kingsolver, Louise Erdrich, Gloria Naylor*

* This article is generated from the first author's doctoral thesis.

** Because of the particular use of the term, it is preferable to use the other as the Other.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Women's handcrafts have been considered as insignificant domestic activities by the established cultural and social norms of any given society. In a society where the labor force is gendered, male achievements in the public sphere are generally valorized, whereas women's lives are restricted to the domestic sphere are largely defined by unpaid and invisible household tasks as child-rearing and caring, homemaking as well as handcrafting. In the context of American culture, quilting has acquired a special place with its differing connotations and symbolic meanings. Undeniably, the United States has held a special place in the rootedness and development of quilting as a cultural material production since colonial times. It is generally agreed that even though "[p]atchwork and quilting as forms of needlework have been known for hundreds of years [. . .] it was left to the women of North America to develop them, in ways which had never been known before, into a unique art form" (Betterton 1976: 5).

Especially with the rise of the Cult of True Womanhood in nineteenth century America, the gender ideology which strictly drew the lines between the public sphere and the domestic sphere, and thereby relocated women more than ever before into the household. In this cultural context, women, as Barbara Welter (1966) aptly argues, were required to possess the cardinal virtues of domesticity, piety, submissiveness, and purity. women's handcrafts such as quilting, sewing, knitting, and embroidery have acquired multiple meanings. At a time when literary artistic creation was a male dominated activity, women had little artistic outlets for self-expression. However, as Alice Walker (1994) writes in "Search for Our Mothers' Gardens" actual quilts have been used as texts by American women who were barred from the written text and had few other channels of self-expression available to them. Walker writes:

> For example: in the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., there hangs a quilt unlike any other in the world. In fanciful, inspired, and yet simple and identifiable figures, it portrays the story of the Crucifixion. It is considered rare, beyond price. Though it follows no known pattern of quilt making, and though it is made of bits and pieces of worthless rags, it is obviously the work of a person of powerful imagination and deep spiritual feeling. Below this quilt I saw a note that says it was made by 'an anonymous Black woman in Alabama, a hundred years ago.' If we could locate this 'anonymous' black woman from Alabama, she would turn out to be one of our grandmothers—an artist who left her mark in the only materials she could afford, and in the only medium her position in society allowed her to use. (1994: 407)

What Alice Walker wants to tell us is that the quilt of this anonymous black woman has far more complex meanings than that of a simple bed covering. The needle in the hands of this enslaved, oppressed black woman becomes the agent to "psychic survival" and of "physical, spiritual, emotional liberation" (Hedges 1991: 354). Likewise, Elaine Hedges (1986) in "Small Things Reconsidered: Susan Glaspell's *A Jury of Her Peers"* draws attention to how quilts have taken on lives as political as well as artistic statements:

> Quilts were utilitarian in origin, three-layered bed coverings intended to protect against the cold weather. But they became in the course of the nineteenth century probably the major creative outlet for women—one patriarchally tolerated, and even approved, for their use, but which women were able to transform to their own ends." (1986: 102)

Apart from giving voice to women's silenced stories in a patriarchal society, the needle arts such as quilting, embroidery, sewing and knitting were also utilized to build communities. For example, black feminist scholar and essayist bell hooks mentions her grandmother as a "dedicated quilt maker" (2009: 155), whose quilts connect black women through generations:

> Together we would examine this work and she would tell me about the particulars, about what my mother and her sisters were doing when they wore a particular dress. She would describe clothing styles and choice of particular colors. To her mind, these quilts were maps charting the course of our lives. They were history as life lived. (2009: 160)

Again, Harmony Hammond (1977: 67) draws attention to this aspect of women's handcrafts as follows: "For women, the meaning of sewing and knotting is 'connecting'-connecting the parts of one's life and connecting to other women-creating a sense of community and wholeness." Therefore, literary representations of quilting, sewing, and/or knitting have provided female writers with a novel outlet for self-expression, community-building and an opportunity to write (her) stories in a male dominated society.

Feminist scholars such as Elaine Hedges, Rozsika Parker, Nancy K. Miller, Laurel Thatcher Ulrich among others took the opportunity to incorporate various aesthetic techniques, as piecing, weaving, and stitching incorporated into the jargon of feminist discourse to refer to multiple aspects of identity (de) construction. In their attempt to vivify women's literary works undervalued by the male-dominated mainstream literary canon and to call attention to women's culture, feminist scholars appropriated "[t]he repertoire of the Victorian lady who could knit, net, knot, and tat" and transformed it into their own theoretical discourse, brimming with "metaphors of text and textile, thread and theme, weaver and web" (Schowalter 1986: 224). It is within the context of this feminist revival that the textile was textualized resulting in a new critical approach to and a new understanding of the literary representations of women's handcrafts. With the adoption of the pieced quilt as "one of the most central images of the new feminist art lexicon" and of the act of piecing as "the metaphor for the decentered structure of a woman's text," feminist critics and scholars equated pieced quilts with women's writing (Showalter 1991: 161).

With the ascendancy of women's needlework into the literary arena, a prolific corpus of scholarly writings and criticism flourished. Yet, most of these studies have focused upon almost the same literary texts to discuss quilting, sewing and/or knitting with the multiply layered meanings they are intended to convey. Amongst this literature on women's handcrafts and their symbolic meanings, Ayşe Lahur Kırtunç's *İğnem İpliğim Diktiğim Kimliğim* (2000) is one of the most comprehensive studies focusing on the literary representations of the American quilts. Kırtunç provides an extensive study of the symbolic meanings of women's handcrafts beginning with Anne Bradstreet and extending to the Aids quilts of 1980s America.

Susan Glaspell's widely anthologized story *A Jury of Her Peers,* which is also explored by Kırtunç in her book, proves how one can create a text, a (her)story with needlework. In "A Jury of Her Peers," women's handcrafts are just trifles according to the patriarchal order represented by the sheriff and the county attorney, who are looking for evidences in the now jailed Minnie's house. In fact, Minnie has left behind many clues: the dirty towels and pans, the sticky jars in the kitchen and her quilt are all signs of Minnie's nervous breakdown. Not only the clues in the kitchen but also Minnie's quilting is immediately dismissed as insignificant. However, Minnie's unfinished quilt has much to say about Minnie, who expertly pieced the scraps of fabric except for the last piece that "looks as if she didn't know what she was about!" (Glaspell 1978: 386). What Minnie left behind is actually a text, a story of her own to be read. And it is only the sheriff's and the County Attorney's wives, who could read this text left behind by Minnie. Minnie could no longer stand her oppressive marriage that sucked life out of her. While the male camp in the play leaves the scene with empty hands, the women have already solved the murder by piecing the clues from Minnie's kitchen and her unfinished quilt. Minnie's quilting which the male characters make fun of as trifles is the key to the murder of the husband.

A Jury of Her Peers chosen from early twentieth century American women's literary writings constitutes a very little portion of the bulk of study on the symbolic uses of women's handcrafts in American literature. It is not within the scope of this study to offer a comprehensive study of literary works that have utilized the image of needlework for a variety of purposes. Neither does this study aim to re-discuss or make a survey of the already existing literature on the symbolic uses and meanings of women's handcrafts in American literary tradition. Rather, it aims to make a scholarly contribution and bring a new breath to this literature by focusing upon three American novels that have barely attracted attention in the wide array of studies on the representations of women's handcrafts in American literature: *Four Souls (2005) by* Louise Erdrich, *Mama Day (1988) by* Gloria Naylor, and *Flight Behaviour (2012)* by Barbara Kingsolver.

2. LOUISE ERDRICH'S *FOUR SOULS*: SEWING TO SECURE AND CONTINUE THE COMMUNAL WEB

Native American author Louise Erdrich's *Four Souls* (2005) takes up the story of Fleur Pillager where her 1988 novel *Tracks* left off telling the story of her fictional Ojibwe reservation in the aftermath of the allotment policy and the widespread logging of woodlands. *Four Souls* is part of a series of novels by Erdrich that intertwine characters or members of their families. In these novels, Erdrich covers more than a half-century of the lives of four Ojibwe families who live on or near a reservation in North Dakota. When *Tracks closes*, we learn that Fleur Pillager is heading to the east leaving behind her newborn baby Lulu and her reservation. She walks from her Ojibwe reservation to the cities of Minneapolis seeking revenge on the lumber baron John James Mauseur, who has stripped her reservation.

A devout Ojibwe Indian, Fleur never relinquishes her ties to her land, her community and her past even in the face of the steady advance of white civilization. When Fleur understands that she cannot save the

sacred forest from white men's destruction, she conjures a wind that destroys the woods surrounding her cabin, thereby making them useless to the lumber company. From then on, things take on a different turn for Fleur Pillager. Although the tribal elder Nanapush, who is also her adoptive father, warns Fleur not to leave the reservation to take revenge on the lumber baron, Fleur does not listen. Although Fleur leaves her reservation to avenge herself on John James Mauseur, she becomes his wife and bears him a son. As Nanabush narrates, "She was snagged. She would be dragged along the bottom. She would be weakened and changed. His desire would exhaust her, and the high life temporarily fascinate her with its rich swirl of hilarious chimookomaanag doings and foods" (Erdrich 2005: 74). And the worse was the liquor: "[Fleur] had survived the sicknesses that destroyed the rest of the Pillagers," but "the whiskey got hold of her. As it has with so many of us [. . .] the liquor sneaked up and grabbed her [. . .]" (Erdrich 2005: 75). What has happened to Fleur has actually happened to the whole circle of her people who are central to her sense of self. Her story is the tribe's story, a tribe whose future is clearly tied to Fleur's and her daughter Lulu's selves and stories.

Therefore, when Fleur, years later, returns the reservation she is a total stranger in her white suit and veiled hat. She is no longer that Fleur, who took the roads to Minneapolis in her makizinan with her braided hair and a blanket around her shoulder. To the reservation people, she is no less than a ghostly appearance. Fleur, as Nanapush narrates in the opening chapter "The Roads," took "unmapped, trackless, unknown" roads to the east only to become unmapped in the tribal web, trackless of her tribal past and unknown to her people (Erdrich 2005. 1). Fleur must be rewoven into the timeless web of her community, each thread of which is central to the health and survival of her Ojibwa people. And this task is overtaken by Margaret Kashpaw, who spends days and nights to sew the Medicine Dress for Fleur Pillager, now a total stranger to herself, to her children and her tribal community.

The details of Margaret's sewing are given in the chapter titled "Medicine Dress." When Margaret narrates the chapter "The Medicine Dress," she weaves Fleur and all those before and after her into the making of her medicine dress. In her dream-vision, Margaret sees her great-grandmother, the old lady Medicine Dress, who tells Margaret that she must sew her own medicine dress. Therefore, Margaret "began where all things begin-with the death of something else" (Erdrich 2005: 176), "she talked as she sewed," telling "the dress all about who [she] was as a child" (Erdrich 2005: 177). When Margaret tells the dress about the days when tribal children were separated from their families by the government agents to be educated at white schools and about how she was spared from forced separation by hiding under her great-grandmother's skirt where she saw back all the women before her, she connects all Indian women "reaching back into the darkness" within the interconnected, circular pattern of communal past and present:

> Time opened for me. I saw back through my gitchi-nookomisiban to the women before, her mother, and the woman before that, who bore her, and the woman before that too. All of those women had walked carefully upon this earth, I knew, otherwise they would not have survived… I saw my great-grandmother every night after that. She was my school. She told me all about the women reaching back into the darkness. (Erdrich 2005: 178)

Margaret also tells the medicine dress about the arrival of the priests who changed their tribal names into "Catherines," "Jeanne[s]," or "Marie[s], and hers into "Margaret." But Margaret "had already seen far back in time by then. [She] knew who [she] was in relation to all who went before" (Erdrich 2005: 179). Therefore, Margaret was not harmed; she neither forgot her spirit name nor her language. The communal memory Margaret magically envisions under her great-grandmother's skirts is stitched onto the medicine dress. So just like every piece of material that goes into the making of the medicine dress, each person's story goes into the making of a communal sense of self. "We salvage what we can of human garments and piece the rest into blankets," says Margaret and adds, "Men don't understand this. They see the whole but they don't see the stitches" (Erdrich 2005: 176) but the stitches have so much to say: "Sometimes our stitches stutter and slow. Only a woman's eye can tell. Other times, the tension in the stitches might be too tight because of tears, but only we know what emotion went into the making" (Erdrich 2005: 176).

The whole, whether it be a blanket, a quilt or a medicine dress, is the timeless web of communal memory; the stitches are the individual stories that go into the making of the whole. Therefore, Fleur's multiply narrated story must go into the making of the tribal "blanket," whose pattern will constantly change. Each new pattern and new stitch that shapes the blanket will add to the resiliency and continuity of Ojibwa heritage, to immediate survival with an appreciation of the connections between varying experiences.

Fleur's homecoming can only be realized with her re-inscription into the larger circles of tribal and historical

identification. As Margaret instructs Fleur, she must wear the medicine dress, and fast "eight days and nights with all of her memories and her ghosts" on the rock by Matchimanito, "where [her] mother's people have suffered and cried out and fasted and begged for mercy from the spirits" (Erdrich 2005: 204-205). If Fleur can make it through the eight days, Margaret will give her "the name that goes with [the dress]. For the dress has its own name, which it told [Margaret] while [she] was making it" (Erdrich 2005: 206). Like Margaret, Fleur must connect to her timeless, communal past inhabited by ancestral ghosts and spirits to replace her "empty, angry, lost, devouring, last soul" with the spirit name that the medicine dress will give her (Erdrich 2005: 205-206). Fasting near the home of her guardian manitou, the Underwater Manitou, Fleur will also ask for the spirit's forgiveness for having usurped her powers to destruct herself. Only then will Fleur be "recognized here upon the earth" (Erdrich, 2005: 207). The Medicine Dress Margaret sews for Fleur Pillager will secure and continue the communal memory of her tribe; the dress will weave Fleur back into communal web, thereby securing resiliency and continuity of the Ojibwa heritage.

3. GLORIA NAYLOR'S *MAMA DAY*: QUILTING TO SUSTAIN AND TRANSMIT MATRILINEAL HERITAGE

Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1989) resorts to magical realist narrative techniques to rewrite and reinscribe an African-rooted past, myths, cosmology and cultural practices into the contemporary realities of African Americans so that they could be continuously reconstructed, resignified and transformed in accordance with the exigencies of the present. *Mama Day's* setting is the sea-island of Willow Springs, located between the borders of South Carolina and Georgia. Unmapped and uncharted, Willow Springs is in no state, no map, connected to the mainland by a wooden bridge that is rebuilt by the islanders after every big storm.

The mythical roots of Willow Springs are traced back to the maternal ancestor Sapphira Wade, the founder of Willow Springs. The slave woman Sapphira Wade, great-grandmother of Mama Day, the matriarch, the shaman, the conjurer of Willow Springs, is said to have killed her master Bascombe Wade, father of her seven children, forced him deed the whole land to his slaves, and returned Africa walking across the ocean. All these mythical events are "marked back to the very [mythical] year" 1823, which is still well and alive in the mundane realities of Willow Springs people (Naylor 1989: 3).

According to the family tree Naylor provides at the beginning of the novel, Mama Day and Abigail are granddaughters of Sapphira Wade's seventh-son John Paul, with Cocoa, being Abigail's granddaughter and Mama Day's grandniece, representing the last member of the matriarchal lineage of the Day family. A direct descendant of the legendary Sapphira Wade, Miranda, whom the islanders call Mama Day, represents the last of a line of conjurers dating back to the legendary mother Sapphira Wade. Therefore, the double wedding ring quilt Mama Day and her sister Abigail create for Cocoa has far more complex meaning than that of a simple bed cover: Cocoa is to continue the line of Day women descending from Sapphire Wade not only biologically but also culturally. Mama Day chooses the double-ring pattern for Cocoa's wedding quilt, which is, as Mama Day herself admits, a complicated task: "From edges to center, the patterns had to twine around each other. It would serve her right if it took till next year, and it probably would" (Naylor1989: 135). When Abigail tells Mama Day that Cocoa "did finally say she'd settle for a simple pattern," she outright rejects Abigail's suggestion and reminds Abigail that the quilt "will be passed on to my great-grand nieces and nephews when it is time for them to marry. And since I won't be around to defend myself, I don't want them thinking I was a lazy old somebody who couldn't make a decent double-ring quilt" (Naylor 1983:136). Therefore, Mama Day is sewing herself into the quilt by way of her perseverance and tenacity in quilting a double-ring wedding quilt. Although it is implied that quilting with more women is a common practice on Willow Springs especially on cold winter days, Cocoa's quilt is sewn by Mama Day and Abigail only: Given that Mama Day and Abigail are the direct descendants Sapphire Wade, the history of all Day women must be stitched onto the quilt:

> Down and up, a stitch at a time. She's almost knee deep in bags of colored rags, sorted together by shades [. . .] The overlapping circles start out as golds on the edge and melt into oranges, reds, blues, greens, and then back to golds to the middle of the quilt. A bit of her Daddy's Sunday shirt is matched with Abigail's lace slip, the collar from Hope's graduation dress, the palm of Grace's baptismal gloves [. . .] corduroy from her uncles, broadcloth from her great-uncles. Her needle fastens the satin trim of Peace's receiving blanket to Cocoa's baby jumper to a pocket from her own gardening apron [. . .] [t]he front of [Cocoa's now deceased mother's] gingham shirtwaist [. . .] Put a little piece of her in here somewhere. (Naylor 1989: 137)

Nobody is spared from the double- ring wedding quilt. There is no hierarchy in the piecing of the

scraps of colored fabrics; there are no borders between the center and the margins of the quilt but just overlapping: "she pushes the needle through and tugs the thread down—tugs the thread up," and creates a cultural web of (her)stories to be passed through generations. Sewing, Mama Day momentarily thinks of leaving her mother out of the quilt because Abigail finds childhood memories of her unhappy mother so painful. Yet, Mama Day incorporates a piece of "Mother's gingham shirtwaist" into the quilt: "I'll just use a sliver, no longer than the joint of my thumb. Put a little piece of her in here somewhere" (Naylor 1989: 137). As she understands, everyone must be included in this quilt even tormented figures such as Grace and Cocoa's great-grandmother Ophelia.

> Could she take herself out? Could she take out Abigail? Could she take 'em all out and start again? With what? Miranda finishes the curve and runs her hands along the stitching. When it's done right, you can't tell where one ring ends and the other begins. It's like they ain't sewn at all, they grew up out of nowhere. (Naylor 1989: 137)

Miranda's craftsmanship at stitching reminds us that of Margaret Kashpaw in *Four Souls*, who had sewn a dress for Fleur from old scraps of cloth: In the texts Margaret and Mama Day wrote with textiles, everyone's story is connected to everyone else's. Therefore, as Mama Day states above, it is not possible to take any one of them out of the quilt. Otherwise, it would be no different from both the white official accounts of history that have always excluded black women and the black historiography which has viewed black women's struggles unimportant and irrelevant, and thus silenced their voices. Therefore, the importance of the double-ring quilt being sewn for Cocoa's wedding is twofold: First, because Cocoa is "the last of the womenfolk come into the Days," she is paramount to the reconstruction and re-historicizing of Day women's (her)stories. Second, the quilt connects black women across space and time. Cocoa is the medium for the transmission and continuity of this matrilineal, cultural memory having its roots in their maternal ancestor Sapphire Wade, and in the 18&23, the mythical date when Sapphire Wade killed, according to the legend, Bascombe Wade, the white slaveholder, and got all the deeds to the land.

The quilt Mama Day meticulously sews for Cocoa is but one of the ways of ensuring the transmission as well as the transformation of a communal past that will sustain and empower black women through temporal and cultural changes. The quilt also weaves the past, the present, and the future, and hence constructs an active, constantly evolving text to be cherished and passed onto the future generations.

4. BARBARA KINGSOLVER'S *FLIGHT BEHAVIOUR*: KNITTING FOR CLIMATE CHANGE

A s contemporary art is increasingly held equal to Climate change: A global issue afflicting all countries around the world; needlework/quilting: a mainly female medium of expression both literally and symbolically. How can they be juxtaposed in a literary text? There is in fact a rising trend in the United States to raise consciousness in matters of global warming through quilting. Ayşe Lahur Kırtunç writes, "the Aids quilts of the 1980s were started as a project by Cleve Jones, who was the first to sew an Aids quilt in memoriam of his friend Marvin Feldman, who died of Aids." (2000: 112). Unlike Aids quilts however, we have no specific information about the lead person or institution who initiated quilting as a consciousness-raising activity to draw attention to the dire consequences of climate change all over the world.

In Education and Climate Change, Darlene E. Clover and Budd L. Hall (2010: 162) argue that it has been all the more important in recent years to work with both formal and non-formal educational processes that "dramatically strengthen participatory democracy, collective voice and energy to work for change" and underlie the importance of "The Positive Energy Quilts: A Visual Project," as [an] art-based environmental and social movement learning project undertaken by a group of women artists and activists to oppose the construction of the new pipeline and the power plant on Vancouver Island, Canada. Clover and Hall state:

> With needle and thread, these women created an important space to unravel consent and help people speak out creatively and collectively as concerned citizens [. . .] the encouragement of collective creativity, voice and agency through an arts-based participatory process and gentle but persistent public acts of defiance and dialog that helped to defeat a major development Project. (2010: 162)

Clover and Hall further argue that "throughout the world art-based environmental learning is used to bring diverse sectors together such as unions and environmentalists, give a new creative voice to people's environmental concerns, transform consciousness, and challenge processes of development that embattle the planet" (2010: 163). The Positive Energy Quilt Project was actually initiated by the fabric artist Kristin Miller, who came up with the idea of using

fabric craft to make their voices heard. Kristin argued that "women were used to tackling problems with needle and thread," therefore, "quilts could be a medium through which a community could express its thoughts and feelings about the proposed plant" (Clover & Hall, 2010, p.167). Defining these climate quilts as "subversive and highly political" stories which "deconstructed and undermined the 'promise' of development" (Clover and Hall 2010: 171-172), Clover and Hall (2010) summarize the triumph of the Positive Energy Quilt Project over the plant power project as follows:

> The story of the positive energy quilts is an example of the power of the contemporary environmental adult and social movement learning as a critical component of the criticism, action, and creation to mobilize and support citizens in moving an agenda of sustainability and social justice [. . .] (172)

In 2015, a travelling exhibition of 26 quilts called "Piecing Together a Changing Planet" started to tour around the United States to draw attention to the effects of climate change and other anthropogenic impacts on America's national parks such as coral bleaching across the country (Ward 2015). Rebecca Onion's February 8, 2020 dated article in the magazine Slate titled "The Quilters and Knitters Who Are Mapping Climate Change" is about quilters, knitters, cross-stitchers across the US who sew climate change blankets and quilts. The Tempestry Project, which was founded in Washington in 2017 in order to make the ongoing effects of climate change more visible through knitted or crocheted handcrafts, now has many chapters across the US dedicated to climate crafting. In 2019 "The Tempestry Project's Emily McNeil told *The Philadelphia Inquirer* that the group came into existence "after hearing about scientists and archivists who were preserving climate-related research data before the Trump inauguration in early 2017" (Onion 2020: para.9).

Sewing temperature changes into their climate crafts, these quilters, knitters, cross-stitchers in fact materialize what Rob Nixon (2011) defines as "slow" environmental violence in his Slow *Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor:* "'slow violence,' a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." (2011: 6). We have the same environmental "slow violence" in Barbara Kingsolver's cli-fi novel *Flight Behavior*, which revolves around the extinction of the monarch butterflies due to climate change.

Due to seasonal changes from climatic warming, monarch butterflies' migration patterns have considerably changed, bringing them to Feathertown in Southern Appalachia. "Monarchs have wintered in Mexico since they originated as a species, as nearly as we can tell. We do not know exactly how long that is, but that is many thousands of years" (Kingsolver 2012: 150), explains Dr. Ovid, the entomologist, who has travelled all the way up from Mexico with his scientific team to conduct an on-site research in rural Tennessee. Ovid Byron links the monarchs' presence in the Appalachian Mountains to "a bizarre alteration of a previously stable pattern" of migration that points to a "continental ecosystem breaking down" caused by anthropogenic climate change (Kingsolver 2012: 233).

Suddenly, this small rural Tennessee town becomes a site of attraction for tourists as well as the media. The media's coverage of the monarch butterflies is no different from the usual scripts of climate change denial. What the television reporter Tina Ultner wants to hear from Doctor Ovid is some piece of sensational news to improve the ratings. But when she is explained the dire consequences of climatic change on a planetary level, Tina responds, "I can't do anything with this without a visual" (Kingsolver 2012: 374). Tina's insistence for "tangible" evidence underlies Rob Nixon's righteous argumentation of "slow violence," a violence out of sight. What challenges Doctor Ovid is to make visible the repercussions of environmental damage on a global basis "[have accumulated] […] for a very long time" (Kingsolver 2012: 285). In response to the prevailing view that "seeing is believing" (Kingsolver 2012: 286), Doctor Ovid comes up with the following argument to explicate the specific workings of climate change:

> You don't believe in things you can't see? [. . .] A trend is intangible, but real [. . .] A photo cannot prove a child growing, but several of them show change over time. Align them, and you can reliably predict what is coming. You never see it all at once. An attention span is required. (Kingsolver 2012: 285-286).

The local townspeople's understanding of the presence of the monarch butterflies in their land as the mysterious ways of Lord also leaves no room for scientific research and data to change their perceptions of risk. In the middle of this total denial of planetary

risk, a group of British activist women knit figures of butterflies as their chosen form of resistance to climate change. By posting updates about their knitting activities on social media, they attempt to raise awareness about the butterflies' plight due to anthropogenic climate change. These women "sit up there [in the mountains near the study site] all day and knit little monarch butterflies out of recycled orange yarn. They hang them all over the trees. It looks kind of real" (Kingsolver 2012: 305). Upgrading their posts on the Internet on a daily basis, these activist knitters, who call themselves "Women Knit the Earth," use knitting as a symbolic act of making the "intangible" tangible. In other words, through knitting, these women bring to the attention of the world a local phenomenon which has serious global implications. These British activist knitters' journeying all the way up from England to a far corner town in the Southern Appalachia also resonates with the transnational turn in environmental studies: the borders between the local and the global are blurred with the aberrant migration pattern of the monarch butterflies, which is in fact indicative of a worldwide breaking down of eco-systems. Furthermore, the activist knitters' "campaign of asking people to send in their orange sweaters to help save the butterflies," mobilizes people all around the world to join the protest by sending "boxes and boxes of sweater" (Kingsolver 2012: 305). The use of knitting not only celebrates the power of the feminine but also claims this "domestic" handcraft as a source of solidarity.

The environmental sociologist Marie Kari Norgaard (2011) in her study on public attitudes towards climate change in Norway and the United States argues that there has been a constant tendency to deny the reality of climate change. The importance which an environmental sociologist like Norgaard attaches to cultural traditions, constructions of identity, and the symbols, stories and rituals through which they are conveyed as factors shaping the perception of risk from climate change directly correlates with the act of knitting as a cultural product which encodes messages of environmental risks on a global basis.

The Positive Energy Quilt Project in Vancouver, Canada, the travelling exhibit of quilts called "Piecing Together a Changing Planet" touring around the United States, The Tempestry Project, dedicated to climate crafting, and the activist knitters in Flight Behaviour have all sewn, stitched, woven issues and concerns of climate change into the very mosaic of their publicly sewn handcrafts. More importantly, they, through handcrafting, have attempted to materialize "the slow environmental violence," a continuous violence of delayed results (Nixon,2011).

5. CONCLUSION

This study has brought into its focus three contemporary American novels to elaborate upon the varying uses of women's handcrafts as symbolic acts generating multi-layered meanings, whether they be cultural or political. The uniqueness of this study stems from its choice of literary texts that have not found their way into the bulk of literature on the literary representations of women's handcrafts: *Gloria Naylor's Mama Day*, Louise Erdrich's *Four Souls*, and Barbara Kingsolver's *Flight Behaviour*. While in *Mama Day,* sewing/quilting appears to be an act of (her)story writing, connecting the past, the present, and the future of the Day women to a seamless historical web of community, sewing in Four Souls comes off as a recuperative, healing act that will ensure the survival of Fleur Pillager and her Ojibwe people in times of loss and hopelessness. Sewing the Medicine Dress means to create a timeless communal web of the Ojibwa people, every single thread of which is essential to the survival and health of a people stricken with diseases, uprooting, and wars. In *Flight Behaviour*, knitting is the medium through which a global issue is addressed and materialized by a group of British activist women: climate change and the resultant global warming. This time, women's handcraft is mobilized to bring worldwide attention to the dire consequences of the Anthropocene Age. Furthermore, women's knitting in *Flight Behaviour* materializes what Rob Nixon (2011: 6) has called "slow violence." Since global warming is not an instant disaster like the eruption of a volcano or an earthquake, the effects of which could be instantly recorded and experienced, it is all the more important to draw attention to the disintegration of the global eco-systems which tolls the bell for a future fraught with uncertainty.

In the three contemporary American novels explored in this study, women's handcrafts such as quilting, sewing and knitting shed light on important aspects women's relations with their handcrafts. Mama Day, Margaret Kashpaw and the British activist women draw upon needle arts as a framework for creating texts dense with multiple meanings. Like the anonymous black slave woman whose quilt is displayed at the Smithsonian Institution and Minnie in "A Jury of Her Peers," they generate narrative worlds with their threads and needle. Minnie and the black slave quilter transform via needlework their domestic and marginal spaces of femininity into sites of intervention where they can articulate their suppressed voices within the imposed institutions of patriarchy and slavery. Mama

Day's thread and needle become tools of writing black women's history which has been silenced in white as well as black historiography. The double wedding quilt she sews for Cocoa will ensure the matrilineal transmission of black women's voices and experiences to future generations. The Medicine Dress is a documentary which records Ojibwa people's losses and sorrows in the face of an oppressive white culture. The knitted butterflies also constitute a text to be read against the backdrop of the silences surrounding issues of climate change. All in all, the needle arts in these novels are not trivialized, domestic activities relegated to the margins of patriarchal, capitalist societies. Rather, they stand out as dynamic and active tools in the hands of women who persevere, claiming their craft as a source of political and cultural resistance, of solidarity and community.

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