Out of the Scriptorium: De-writing the Journeywoman, Re-Wilding the Domestic and Making Space

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This thesis represents partial submission for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the Royal College of Art. I confirm that the work presented here is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

During the period of registered study in which this thesis was prepared the author has not been registered for another academic award or qualification. The material included in this thesis has not been submitted wholly or in part for any academic award or qualification other than that for which it is now submitted.

Abstract:

This practice-research redraws literary and natural landscapes via an original entanglement of geopoetics, feminist and literary theory, walking, and geometry. The project is translated through a process-orientated, materially-driven methodology. Using fresco, assemblage, domestic arts, biomaterials, sound and printmaking, the research dissolves literary texts in a process neologised here as 'dewriting'. By testing the archetypal properties of paper, ink, and milk, the project creates imaginary libraries, books conceptualised as 'desemic' texts, 'pages' made of laser-etched milk, and frescoed objects Using these methods and materials, I extract fictional and nonfictional women from their original stories, both from my past and from works by George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and Virginia Woolf. I focalise these women as art objects, reconfiguring them in new, communal narratives. The catalyst for all four women is my invented character known as May who has walked the natural landscape for hundreds of years. May is a composite woman; she embodies both the Medieval life-writer Margery Kempe, myself as a literary scholar, and the spirit of women who have walked the earth for centuries. May, who moves conceptually across wild terrain with her distinctive travelling library, creates a space that is enabling and unbounded for the women characters who come after her. She is both repository and synthesis. The central research question is whether May and her library can configure limitless, newly-readable possibilities for entrapped female characters travelling unfamiliar territory.

Taking the form of a legend, this research dewrites restless, oppressed and neglected Maggie from *The Mill on the Floss,* Rhoda from *The Waves*, Lucy from *Villette,* and Susie, my impoverished great aunt born in 1899. In dissolving the literary and familial texts that hold these characters up, the project asks whether women can be re-embodied in new and mutually sustaining ways; what role might excavation (of both self and landscape) play in decoding and rewriting women as they walk without their texts? What might emerge from their newly materialised and reconfigured life stories? How can these re-visualised narratives draw attention to women's ongoing struggle for intellectual enrichment?

This inquiry uses a 'seeing' frame of the strange loop, a geometric form with a logic-defying ability to continually rise in height whilst returning to where it started. It is a democratic and equalising construct and, as such, is a leveller. A strange loop is infinitely expandable and, like a library, can be filled with new women and new texts, *ad infinitum*. The

research assesses whether the self-referential construct of a strange loop can produce a new visual language for women in the landscape and address a series of political questions about their entitlement to walk unhindered and unjudged.

Life-writing, with its infinitely flexible scope, extracts the project from the confines of the more rigid terms of 'autography', 'autobiography', or 'abridgement'. In an original contribution to the interdisciplinary fields of life-writing and visual storytelling, characters are liberated from their fictions, dewritten, and entangled via visual-art. The work looks through and beyond the surfaces of past and future landscapes, giving space to fictional bodies and new narratives. It dewrites and rewrites a visual legend of potential inclusivity.

Key words: visual life-writing, feminist art practice, craft histories, dewriting text, narrative art

Contents:

List of figures:

List of submission components:

1. Thesis, including documentation and analysis of my practice.

2. Body of practice (this is for supplementary ease of reference and can be looked at after reading the thesis).

3. MP3 sound file *Choral Symphony* (duration 20 minutes). This soundscape accompanies the paper, ink and steel installation of the same name, documented in detail in Chapter 3.

Acknowledgements:

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And, finally, heartfelt thanks to Kit Nevile, Mia Nevile and Emma Lee-Potter for being so enthusiastic about this project from the start and for cheering from the sidelines, even when the research was particularly truculent or my methods and materials (especially the litres and litres of milk) were reluctant to cooperate.

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Prologue:

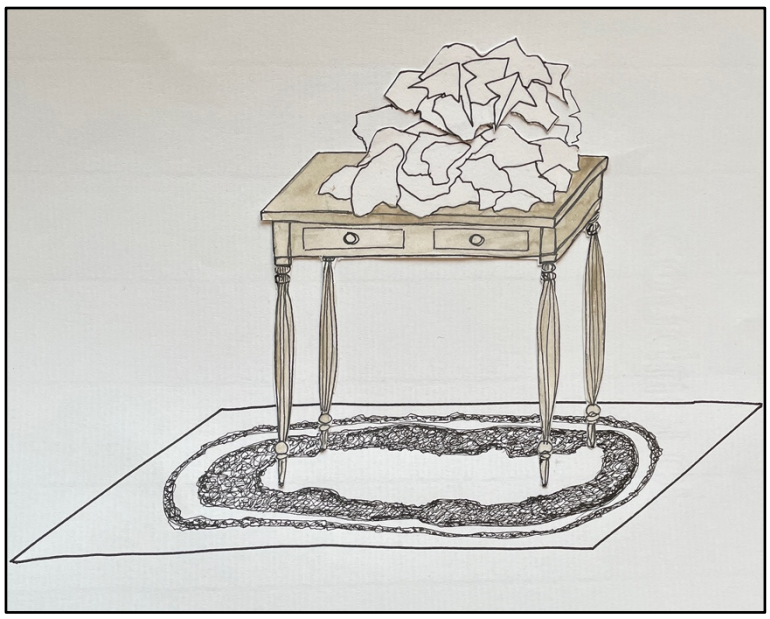

Figure 1. Design for *Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk,* wood, etched milk.

[Storytelling] does not aim to convey the pure "in itself" or gist of a thing, like information or a report. It submerges the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus, traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to a clay vessel.[1]
Walter Benjamin

To say, as some do, that the self must be narrated, that only the narrated self can be intelligible and survive, is to say that we cannot survive with an unconscious.[2]
Judith Butler

'Out of the Scriptorium' redraws literary and natural landscapes in an original entanglement of geopoetics, walking, feminist theory, and geometry.[3] Using so-called 'domestic arts', biomaterials, printmaking, sound, performance, and assemblage, I dissolve the texts of both real and fictional women, including characters from works by George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë and Virginia Woolf. On freeing Maggie of *The Mill on the Floss*, Lucy of *Villette* and Rhoda of *The Waves* from their pages, I have sent them conceptually out into the open air to walk. In their new sphere, these fictional women meet nonfictional Susie, my impoverished great-aunt, and are bound together by my hybrid, transformational character May. It is a process I call 'dewriting', explained later in this prologue. As these women emerge from the confines of their texts (and from the textual itself), their life stories start to merge and overlap in my art practice. All four women, aside from May, are neglected on their pages (both real and imagined ones), enduring combinations of intellectual and/or emotional starvation, fear of

[1] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), p. 92.
[2] Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 65.
[3] A scriptorium is a 'place for writing', a room in medieval monasteries where manuscripts were written and copied, often by women scribes. I use the term 'natural landscape' here as a form of scene-setter. Nevertheless, I clarify the risks of coloniality and misogyny attached to 'landscape' later in this prologue, explaining my choice of the word 'inscape' instead.

burial, drowning, isolation, self-denial, surveillance, entrapment in a form of psychic attic space, and a craving to escape. May, drawn partly from the creative mind of medieval writer Margery Kempe and partly from myself, is their translator, their facilitator, their container space.[4] Together, Margery/May/Me are a trio of story-tellers and fable-makers, trying to conjure new visual, melded narratives.

The project began as my own solitary, long-distance walk using geometry and embedded memory as my guides, but a foot injury put an end to that. My original approach researched the concept of *fotminne*, the Swedish neologism translated as 'foot memory.'[5] I had planned to walk in geometric shapes the length of the longest ancient, continuous footpath in the UK for a totemic 365 miles, to test the psychic and physical mark made on a journeywoman as she marks her steady, rhymical, geometric encounter with wild landscape. What new stories could she write? After my injury, wondering whether it was legitimate to visit only individual points on the route instead of walking the full distance, I realised I would merely be a day-tripper and the research focus of sustained, continuous, long-distance walking would be lost. The breakthrough came when I decided to send literary characters out walking instead of me, dissolving and dewriting their existing narratives and moving them into unexpected, entangled relationships. It became an act of labour, rinsing texts of their words and phrases and reconfiguring them as visual acts of resistance. My long walk would become a dewritten, re-fictionalised journey, in an imaginary place, with materiality at its heart. Using my deep knowledge of literature, and using paper, yarn, thread, printmaking and etched milk, I would blur the boundaries of what a text can be.

My positionality:

My research position springs from my life's work, first as a BBC foreign correspondent, documentary maker, and radio and television news presenter, and then as a writer and university lecturer teaching life-writing and nineteenth and twentieth-century literature. My trajectory has been to move through careers reporting on war, natural disasters, terrorist attacks and politics, which all displace women so painfully and yet often so silently, into the world of literary structures, meanings and forms. I draw on my deep engagement with these

[4] I explain in Chapter 3 that, in using the term 'container space', I am drawing on the nurturing, communal space envisaged by Ursula K. Le Guin in her essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'. As I note on the following page, there is no religious dimension to this project, despite Margery Kempe's devotional fervour.
[5] The word 'fotminne', devised by Kerstin Ekman, is 'a network of paths, walking veins, memory vessels [...] Remembering with your feet.' Kerstin Ekman, *Blackwater,* trans. by Joan Tate (London: Picador, 1996), p.403.

diverse elements, folding them into the project to visualise feminist problematics through materiality and image. Susie, Maggie, Lucy and Rhoda emerge from a scriptorium built of words, but can space be made for them, and what does a dewritten text do that a written one cannot? Is there a redemptive quality to the de-textualisation of these disadvantaged women? Audre Lorde argues that 'for women, the need and desire to nurture each other is not pathological but redemptive, and it is within that knowledge that our real power is rediscovered.'[6] Can that rescue be visually and poetically realised? What role might beauty and craft play, both in confronting that social and gender-based isolation and in paying attention to women who have never been given enough space? These are questions I address in the following chapters.

I teach Maggie's, Rhoda's and Lucy's texts to students in the specific context of the girl protagonist who, as she grows into adulthood, is oppressed both by society and, ironically, by her own female author.[7] Other novels I teach in this context include Toni Morrison's *Sula*, Ali Smith's *How to be both*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Willa Cather's *My Àntonia*, Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*, E. M. Delafield's *Consequences* and Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*. There are some echoes of these texts in this project too, but my decision to focus on Maggie, Rhoda and Lucy is vested in the shared landscapes they inhabit. My research began as a lone encounter with coast and seascape, walking from the south coast to the east coast of Britain. Even though the project's topography and topology are more conceptual than physical now, the idea that these women can be made more spatially present through allusions to river and sea still flows through the work. Maggie, Rhoda, and Lucy all dwell in, and are physically or emotionally extinguished by, water. Lucy's text, *Villette,* is dominated from the start by references to the threat of drowning (as is Maggie's). At the novel's conclusion, Paul Emmanuel, whose return Lucy has been longing for, drowns in a ferocious storm at sea. The names of Maggie's and Rhoda's texts - *The Mill on the Floss* and

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[6] Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 17. Lorde's work addresses gender, race, identity and sexuality, but she is often speaking from her specific position as a queer, black woman and about other women of colour. I draw on her ideas here to reflect on the experiences of disadvantaged and oppressed white women in literary fiction and my family, but I respect the complexities of intersectionality and privilege. Lorde offers an inclusive way for me to think through what I am proposing. In speaking about disadvantaged women, it is important to give space to someone who has fought these battles. I would note that the term 'redemptive' does not confer religious connotations.

[7] Kate Millett highlighted the irony that George Eliot allowed herself greater freedoms than she did her female protagonists, Maggie and Dorothea: 'George Eliot lived the revolution… but she did not write of it. She is stuck with the Ruskinian service ethic and the pervasive Victorian fantasy of the good woman who goes down into Samaria and rescues the fallen man – nurse, guide, mother, adjunct of the race.'
Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* [1969] (New York: Doubleday, 2000), p. 139.

The Waves - are drawn from river and sea, the prose is suffused with references to death by water, and both women ultimately drown. Virginia Woolf's suicide by drowning is, of course, notorious.[8] I have read Lucy, Rhoda and Maggie's pages countless times, but in dewriting and reconfiguring them visually, I excavate the idea that women's spaces can be made communal, that reparation can be made, solidarity found, and that text itself can be dewritten, unwritten, overwritten, underwritten and rewritten in visual form. In this project, these three fictional women are joined by Susie, whose real-life story of neglect I explain more fully later in this prologue. Susie, too, was stifled, hemmed-in and figuratively drowned. Sententiously, the philosopher Gaston Bachelard sequestered women like Maggie and Rhoda, claiming that 'water is the true element of the really feminine death.'[9] To objectify women still further, he declared that 'water, which is the natural home of living nymphs, is also the natural home of dead nymphs.'[10] This project attempts to configure other stories.

The mobilising agent for all four drowned or drowning women is my hybrid character, May. She is a portmanteau - a container, a carrier, a composite woman.[11] She is embodied in this project as a travelling library on wheels, a refuge for all things and all knowledge. May is a synthesis both of myself as a literary scholar and of Margery Kempe, the medieval mystic credited as the first woman in history to write and publish her life story.[12] Margery, a contemporary of French writer Christine de Pizan who also has a presence here, is the original, prototype, non-fictional woman writer. She dictated her own life story in more ways than one: she was a fearless, independent traveller but, as a life-writer, had to recount her story to an amanuensis since she could neither read nor write. It means that her story, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, is told in the third person and she names herself the

[8] The drowning of women is a familiar, punitive trope in literature: Eustacia Vye in Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*, Edna in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, Alex in E. M. Delafield's *Consequences* and Rosanna Spearman in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*. D. H. Lawrence drowns Diana and Dr. Brindell in his novel *Women in Love*, but insists that both deaths are Diana's fault. D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love* (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), p. 189. George Eliot returned to the motif of water and the drowning woman in later novels, although only Maggie actually dies by water. Mirah in *Daniel Deronda* is saved from drowning; the eponymous Romola intends to drown but Eliot allows her to survive. Dorothea at the end of *Middlemarch* is conceptualised as a wide river but, tellingly, one which is dispersed and diminished in strength. George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. 785.

[9] Gaston Bachelard, *L'Eau et les Rêves* (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1942), p. 96. Trans. for this project by Charlie Lee-Potter.

[10] *L'Eau et les Rêves*, p. 96.

[11] The word 'portmanteau' is resonant here, describing a large, travelling hold-all, classically divided into two sections, as well as denoting the power of words to contain more than one meaning.

[12] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. by Barry Windeatt (London: Penguin, 1985).

'poor creature'.[13] In conceptualising herself in the third person, Margery effectively made herself the art, as I do to the 'she' and the 'me' that her new incarnation as May represents. Yet, although I position my hybrid woman May/Me in the third person too, she is a collective presence rather than an individual one and she melds a chorus of women walkers, realised via her travelling library and a strange-loop, fixed verse soundscape of inscribed paper collars which I analyse fully in Chapter 3.[14]

Margery and May/Me have a profusion of words in their lexicons in contrast to Susie who had virtually none and Rhoda, Maggie and Lucy who tried to limit and ration theirs. May/Me is these women's activist, creating room for them where there was none before. I am not, of course, telling literal stories, but crafting an *imaginarium* in which real and fictional women can run wild. As Jeanette Winterson phrased it so shrewdly, 'Art must resist autobiography if it hopes to cross boundaries of class, culture, and sexuality.'[15] Invention, embroidered tales, and speculation are perhaps more powerful than a literal account and this project's art practice makes a virtue out of such ambiguity. May, unable to read and write as Margery Kempe, becomes the imaginary creator of a series of fixed-verse villanelles which unite the other women's stories. These nine villanelles form part of the travelling library I have created for May, exploring the idea that interconnected, collective stories can take the place of lone tragedies. In finding a new way to tell these interwoven fables, and in creating a watery/spoken soundscape to perform the villanelles, I signal the importance to women of oral histories. I explain the construction and significance of the villanelle form in Chapter 1.[16] As I note in Chapter 2, women have far too often been denied the pen with which to write their own accounts, but they can still say and act them aloud.

Margery Kempe visited the Holy Land, Assisi, Rome and Santiago de Compostela on foot, an extraordinary feat of determined insistence for a fourteenth-century woman. In dewriting and reshaping her, along with Maggie, Susie, Lucy and Rhoda, I am making my own

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[13] Margery Kempe's use of 'poor creature' and my choice of 'she' as a self-referential term for my composite character May/Me, differ from writer Annie Ernaux's deployment of what she calls the 'trans-personal I' as a way of protecting herself from intrusive accusations that she was plundering details from her own life. https://www.annie-ernaux.org/texts/vers-un-je-transpersonnel-2/ trans. by Dawn M. Cornelio [accessed 10 September 2023].

[14] There are other historical traditions of women walking, including the medieval pilgrimage and Aboriginal women's role in enacting 'songlines'.

[15] Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 106.

[16] My villanelles appear where appropriate throughout the thesis but are also grouped together as a sequence in the separate document, Body of Practice.

embedded knowledge of literary texts visual and multi-dimensional. In the slow, laborious spinning and re-weaving of women's words, time is counted, centuries of women moving across terrain are read, and a landscape of the mind is made real. Medievalist Carolyn Dinshaw cleverly elides Margery Kempe's body with Margery Kempe's text, arguing that her 'self and experience *are* her *Book* and, further, are themselves imitations of written saints' lives.' She goes on to say that this 'textuality' may explain why Margery's book uses the Latin word '*textus*' interchangeably with 'fabrics', arguing that Margery identified powerfully with the fabric of things.[17] Janis Jefferies notes this interconnection too, as does poet Susan Howe, observing that the 'English word "text" comes from Medieval Latin *textus* "style or texture of a work," literally "thing woven," from the past participle stem of *textere:* "to weave, to join, to fit together, construct."'[18] In my reincarnation of a multi-form, hybrid Margery, the new name I have given her - May - is deliberately in the subjunctive mood, suggesting possibility, fluidity and mutability but never certainty: she may or she may not. Intriguingly, Carolyn Dinshaw argues the case that a form of role-playing, which she calls '*imitatio*' and 'somatic manipulations', is already in action in Margery's original text:

> She replays Christ's life in hers; she replays the Virgin Mary's, too, and Mary Magdalene's, and Saint Bridget's; and she hears Christ say he has given her to others as just such an example. She spreads her arms wide in her participatory drama of the Passion, imitating Christ's crucifixion.[19]

As the portable space for imagined literary descendants, can May provide them with new, redemptive possibilities? Can their reconfiguration as interwoven, visual embodiments release a new kind of non-verbal conversation between them? Does my assemblage *May's Travelling Library*, with its vitrines of biomaterial objects, artefacts made under timed conditions, frescoed 'blooks' (objects that look like books), trapped books, and bookbinding paraphernalia, act as a transformational, nurturing container for the knowledge that lies inside a text (fig.2)? In my artworks *For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair* (fig.3), *Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk* (fig.4), *Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed* (fig.5) and *Walking, walking on alone*: *Lucy's Carpet* (fig.6), I create the context for these women's isolated status and resultant neuroses: namely, Rhoda's panic that she will fall through her bed at night into nothingness; Maggie's intellectual starvation expressed through hacking off her

[17] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 169.
[18] Janis Jefferies, *The Handbook of Textile Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 98 and Susan Howe, *Spontaneous Particulars: Telepathy of Archives* (London: W.W. Norton & Co., 2020), p. 19.
[19] Dinshaw, p. 157.

hair; Lucy's craving that she might one day receive a letter, and the bleak loneliness of her creator Charlotte Brontë, now the only sibling still alive, walking around the dining room table each night trying to conjure Lucy to life.

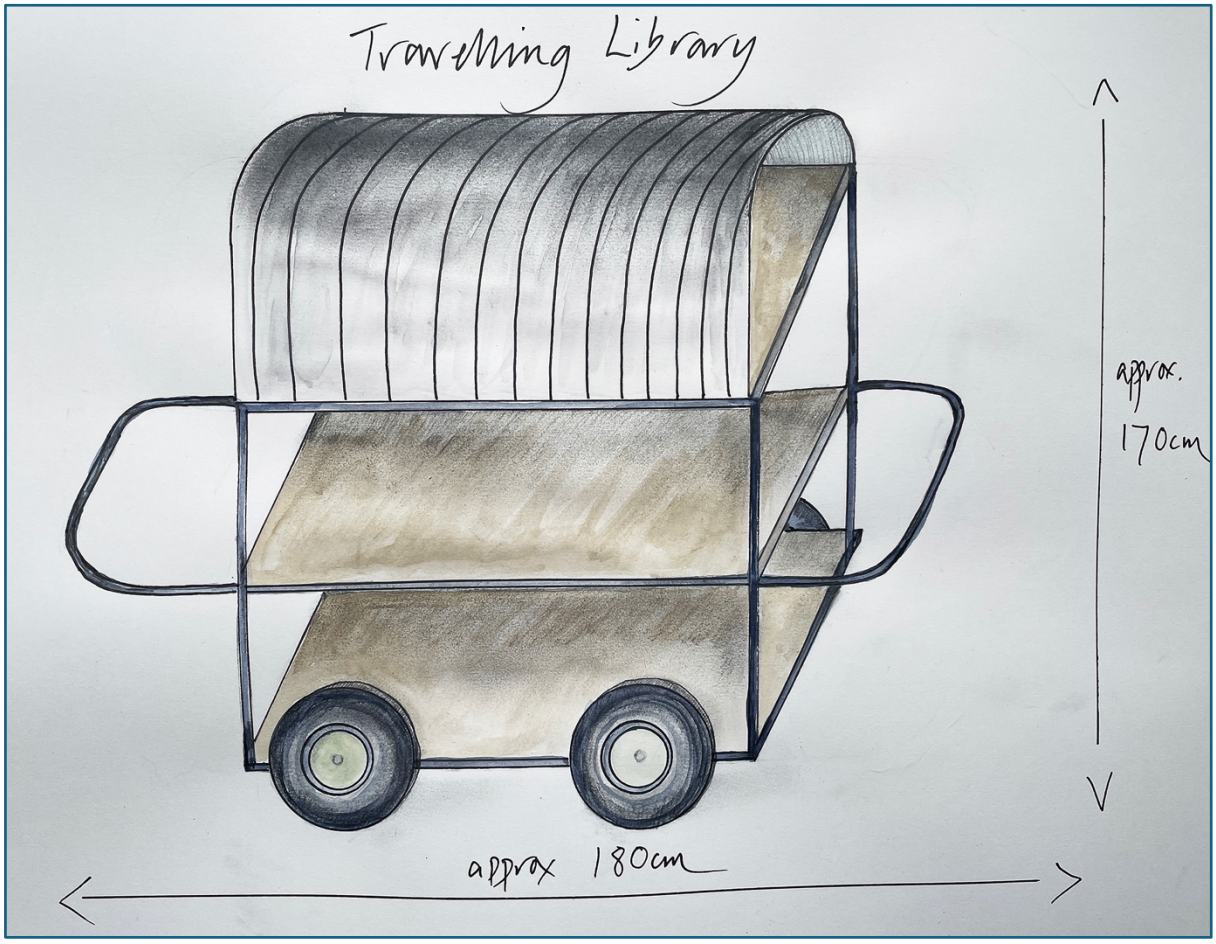

Figure 2. Early design for *May's Travelling Library*, steel, paper, wood.

Figure 3. For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair, crocheted paper, bookbinder's sewing frame, 90x140x40 cm.

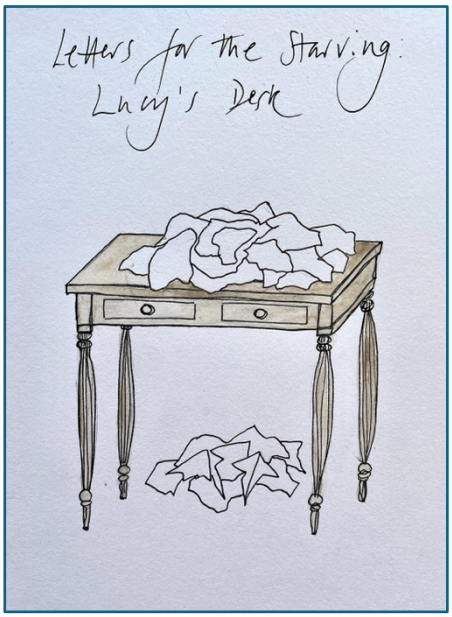

Figure 4. Alternative design for *Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk,* wood, laser-etched milk.

Figure 5. *Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed,* crocheted paper, milk, screen-print, 92x192x105 cm.

Figure 6. Walking, walking on alone: Lucy's Carpet, recycled milk bottles, wool, dye-sublimated text, 400x100x20 cm. I hand-printed a complete copy of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* onto the recycled milk-bottle fabric of the carpet and rag-rugged it into the needlepoint, along with fragments from Emily's *Wuthering Heights* and Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The three Brontë sisters walked around their table each night, talking to summon their ideas to life. When her sisters died of TB, Charlotte continued to walk around the table alone, struggling to finish her novel about isolated, stifled Lucy. In the background, *For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair*, crocheted paper, bookbinder's sewing frame, 90x140x40 cm.

The 'domestic' arts and crafts which form part of the research are both subject and method here. There is a deeply embedded reason why I am trying to 'rewild' the domestic arts or, in other words, to release them from the restrictive confines of home. It is because I was taught knitting, crochet, lace-making, tatting, smocking, sewing, spinning and weaving by the Great Aunt Susie of this project who looked after me when I was a child. She felt trapped by these skills of hers and never enjoyed any of them. I need to acknowledge the position expressed by Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker in *Framing Feminism*, in which they stated that 'We cannot be detached. We are evidently partisan.'[20] I am not detached. I am using the visual languages taught to me by someone who was denied the formal education she craved and I received. Susie was introverted and taciturn, like Rhoda and Lucy. She never valued her talent for making things because, to her, it was a symbol of the tiny space she was ever allowed to occupy. Domestic crafts were the skills she was forced to learn at school, as many impoverished girls were. What she craved was to read, write and travel. As the eldest girl in her family, she was forced to leave school at 11 to take care of her siblings when her mother died giving birth to yet another child. Her father, my great grandfather, was a coalminer who expected Susie to 'keep house', a sinister double-phrase which meant she had to keep the house functioning whilst keeping to its oppressive confines.[21] That tension between two states of 'being at home' resonates in Sara Ahmed's observation that feminism should, but often does not, operate within the home: 'every room of the house can become a feminist room.'[22] Ahmed points out that '[f]eminist housework does not simply clean and maintain a house. Feminist housework aims to transform the house, to rebuild the master's residence.'[23] I extend those doubled ideas in this project, arguing that a text and an art practice, too, can be places of shelter, rather than their obverse: places of surveillance. When Susie was sent

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[20] Griselda Pollock, Rozsika Parker, *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970-1985* (London: Pandora Press, 1995), p. xv.

[21] Emanuele Coccia argues the ancient Greeks devised the term 'oikonomia' to encapsulate the 'order and management of the home.' Since then, he suggests, philosophy 'dismissed the domestic space from the horizon of its concerns' with the consequence that 'the home has become a space in which wrongs, constrictions, injustices and inequalities have been hidden', with particular consequences for women. Emanuele Coccia, *Philosophy of the Home: Domestic Space and Happiness* (London: Penguin Classics, 2024), p. 7.

[22] Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 4. On p, 5, Ahmed of Flavia Dzodan.'
Flavia Dzodan, 'My Feminism Will Be Intersectional or It Will Be Bullshit', *Tiger Beatdown*, October 10, 2011. http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/10/my-feminism-will-be-intersectional-or-it-will-be-bullshit/ [accessed 28 June, 2024].
This project works from an intersectional position and although I would never claim that it is universalising, in its act of feminist un-doing to re-make, it is a collectivising act of radical sympathy.

[23] Ahmed, p. 7.

out to work at the age of 12, it was to a cotton mill in Warrington.[24] I suspect it was Cockhedge Mill, since it was the largest textile mill in her home town and was in operation at the time Susie would have worked there, but she always refused to talk about it (fig.7).[25] As Sheila Rowbotham has noted:

> [e]mployers were quick to find that women and children were easier to subdue than craftsmen, proud of their trade and tradition. The existence of this reserve of cheap labour led factory owners to employ them – sometimes in preference to men – while congratulating themselves on not tempting women out of their traditional sphere because they paid them less than the men.'[26]

For an account of the job's physical demands, it is chilling to read Constance Maud's 1911 novel *No Surrender*:

> The pandemonium is such that no voice can be heard even when raised to a shriek. The weavers, when obliged to speak with each other, make signs and lip-read, an art in which they are adepts. The air is full of fine flakes of cotton fibre and the dust from china clay. Ventilation, in spite of inspectors and laws, is of the meagrest and most primitive description. The air, when dry, is moistened by steam lest the thread should suffer, but the lungs of the workers are not so carefully considered.[27]

Figure 7. Cockhedge Mill, c. 1918.

[24] The Factory and Workshop Act of 1901 allowed Susie to work part-time from the age of 12. She took up a full-time job at 13. Cockhedge Mill has now been transformed into a different money-making enterprise: a shopping centre.

[25] Pennina Barnett highlights the vital role of women in the textile mills of the North West. In curating the exhibition 'Women and Textiles Today' she pointed to Anne Lydiat's work *Ironing out the Wrinkles* which 'compares her grandmother's experience in the Lancashire cotton mills with her own in the Sheffield steel mills.' Jennifer Harris, Pennina Barnett, *The Subversive Stitch* (Manchester: Cornerhouse and Whitworth Art Gallery, 1988), p. 43.
The Global Slavery Index estimates that, today, almost 50 million people are in slavery worldwide, many in the textile and garment-producing industries. <https://www.walkfree.org/global-slavery-index/> [accessed 15 May 2024].

[26] Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight Against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1977), p. 29.

[27] Constance Maud, *No Surrender* f.p. 1911 (London: Persephone Books, 2011), p. 3. Other notable chronicles of working in a cotton mill include Elizabeth Gaskell's 'Condition of England' novel, *North and South*.

If Susie had seen Anne Wilson's 2012 performance piece *Walking the Warp Manchester*, its participants simulating the operation of cotton mill machinery and the winding of invisible bobbins, I imagine she would have hated being reminded. I was two-years old when I was first introduced to her and it is not surprising that she was already so deaf that she could barely hear me. By the time she died at the age of 101, she only understood me by lipreading.

Figure 8. Susie (right) aged 11, my grandmother Peggy (left) and my great uncle Billy (centre). All three are wearing clothes borrowed from the photographer, c. 1910.

We called Great Aunt Susie 'Dooey' because, tiny as we were, we could not say her name. I do not think she minded the name-change, but she rarely spoke so it is hard to know. Our compression of her name seems appropriate now. She was always 'do-ing', rarely 'say-ing'. Like an anchorite, she seemed to have exhausted her capacity to speak and her main language was forceful gesture, narrowed eyes, compressed lips. When I try to recall words to attach to her, there is only one phrase and one word. She would flick her chin towards the solid brick of wholemeal bread she made each morning. She meant, I knew, to ask what I would like on it.

"Anything's fine", I replied to the unvoiced question.

"Anything has to be got", she snapped back.

And the word –

"Shape!" Her North West accent gave it two syllables instead of one - "Shay-ape"

She would shout it if I wasn't getting dressed for school fast enough.

"Shay-ape!" if I dropped a stitch of my knitting.

"Shay-ape!" when I walked too slowly to the bus-stop.

She meant it as a verb. But I think, now, that my fixation on the shape of things, the geometry of things, the structure of things, comes from translating that brusque verb into a kinder noun. "Shape!" is no longer an order but a way of looking.

I should stress that Susie's frustration with the domestic arts had nothing to do with 'stitch-hating' feminists of the 1970s so derided by the patriarchal establishment. Such societal mockery was cited with an exasperated sigh by Rozsika Parker:

> Where embroidery was concerned, feminists of the time were described as rejecting and spurning women's traditional crafts and skills. The ambivalence we experienced in relation to embroidery – our understanding of the medium as both an instrument of oppression and an important source of creative satisfaction – was repeatedly misrepresented as blanket condemnation.[28]

Susie would simply rather have been doing something else. Of course there is irony to the fact that I loved the skills she taught me, but then I did not have to choose between sewing and reading, and I did not have to use my needlework skills in a cotton mill. This project is an experiment in bearing witness to the limitations placed upon Susie, Maggie, Lucy and Rhoda,

[28] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), p. xii.

expressed in my crocheted paper, rag-rugged text, needlepoint, milk-laced fabric, and newly-dissolved and reconfigured life stories in which all four women are de- and re-fictionalised. Susie and Maggie, in particular, were oppressed by their lack of education. Rhoda, on the other hand, was traumatised by hers. Rhoda's creator, Virginia Woolf, was able to rise above the fact that she did not attend school, but Susie and Maggie were not afforded that power. As Alexandra Harris points out, '[a]lmost everything [Virginia Woolf] wrote as an adult is shaped in some way by the fundamental fact of her not having been to school or university, She would come to fashion herself defiantly as an "outsider", exploiting the unorthodox vantage points it gave her.'[29] Class and wealth may have played a part in Woolf's ability to turn her patchy education into strengths. Certainly, it is John Carey's view that Virginia Woolf's cruel depiction of impoverished tutor Doris Kilman in *Mrs Dalloway* is evidence of Woolf's own class-based discrimination, the kind Susie experienced all her life: 'the social prejudices of an upper-middle class intellectual prove stronger than feminism, and Miss Kilman is depicted as a monster of spite, envy and unfulfilled desire. She is plain and middle-aged; she wears a cheap green mackintosh; she perspires.'[30]

The books my dewritten women emerge from are ostensibly imprisoning structures, and a fundamental question I ask in this project is: how can women write themselves out of entrapping mechanisms and write themselves into new embodied forms? Can a classic text be made 'desemic' (one of my neologisms which I explain later in this prologue) in order to produce new, meaningful entanglements between invented women who are, in the originals, hemmed in. Life-writing, with its infinitely flexible scope for ambiguity, extracts the project from the confines of the more rigid term 'biography' and 'autobiography', or the 'autography' favoured by Jeanne Perreault. 'Life-writing' has a kinetic force to it, particularly, to borrow from Barthes, if one reads it as a 'doing' intransitive verb rather than simply a noun. In this project, women are constantly being made and remade, separated from their original creators. Barthes warned that '[t]he explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author "confiding" in

[29] Alexandra Harris, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2024), p. 33.
In fact, Woolf took several courses at King's College, London, but not until she was 15. She was restricted to what was known as King's Ladies' Department in Kensington and did not take a degree.
[30] John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 19.

us'.[31] Rebecca Solnit noted that 'pretenses [sic] at authoritative knowledge' are, in fact, 'failures of language: the language of bold assertion is simpler, less taxing, than the language of nuance and ambiguity and speculation.'[32] This project is an attempt to engage with what Solnit called 'patches of darkness, those nights of history, those places of unknowing' and, in doing so, to draw new textures out of the textual by turning single voices into a newly conjured chorus; it is an attempt to give texts different bodies back.[33] Jeanne Perreault's preferred 'autography' presents 'a writing whose effect is to bring into being a "self" that the writer names "I", but whose parameters and boundaries resist the monadic.'[34] Perreault conceives of the term as absorbing 'subjectivity, textuality, and community' or, to put it more simply, allowing for invention. However, I prefer life-writing which I believe allows for even greater flexibility and multiplicity. While autography may be anti-monadic, I decline it here because I resist the first person pronoun too. Margery Kempe calls herself 'she' and, in dewriting, rewriting and making material my fictional and non-fictional characters, 'I' does not seem adequate. The use of 'I' has historically been beset by difficulties for women writers and artists. Janis Jefferies points out that traditional views on autobiography are 'grounded within the idea of the "I" of self-identity as reflective self-presence.' This, she argues, tends to denote a 'universal, singular self – linked with the thinking, rational subject of eternal human nature. Historically this has been codified as male.'[35] For women, the spaces of the autobiographical 'I' are, she says, 'profoundly problematic since the struggle to be the subject of and in discourse, incurs gendered readings which both legitimates the potential of a female speaking subject and yet at the same time fixes a conception of autobiography as the feminine self-portrait par excellence.' For the woman who is both artist and writer there is a 'double dislocation: woman/autobiography and woman/textiles.'[36]

Transmuted materials are critical to my research: milk becomes paper and paper becomes fine, crocheted thread for a blanket. Rhoda's blanket and Maggie's hair are a tangle

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[31] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 143.
[32] Rebecca Solnit, 'Woolf's Darkness', *Men Explain Things to Me And Other Essays* (London: Granta, 2014), pp. 81-82.
[33] 'Textures' here specifically include the paper and ink textiles and bed linen I made for this project, drawing in the Barthesian idea of the 'rhapsodic quilt'. I assess his concept in the coda.
[34] Jeanne Perreault, *Writing Selves: Contemporary Feminist Autography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p.2.
[35] Janis Jefferies, 'Autobiographical Patterns', issue 4, *n.paradoxa: international feminist art journal,* ed. by Katy Deepwell, republished January 2010, p. 14.
[36] Janis Jefferies, 'Autobiographies, Subjectivities and Selves', in Juliet Steyn, *Writing Art* (London: Pluton, 1995), pp. 60-61.

of desemic loops and knots, potentially readable as fictional objects. Rhoda is held in bed by a paper quilt (fig.11), while Maggie's chopped and sliced hair is visualised as a distorted, snagged, cut triangular panel of paper-thread crochet, stretched out of shape by the bounds of a reclaimed bookbinder's frame (fig.12). The panels are fine and delicate and the internal, crocheted patterns follow the fine lines of ordered geometric shapes or desemic writing. But their ragged, trailing edges evoke both the deckled edges of handmade paper, and the torn, wild hair which Maggie hacks at in her frustration and fury. I needlepointed my four-metre work *Walking, walking on alone: Lucy Snowe's Carpet* with wool-roving in shades of ink and paper, wool which was spun within two miles of the Brontës' home in Haworth. I rugged and knotted a complete copy of Charlotte's novel *Villette* into my needlepoint, having first hand-

Figure 9. Detail, *Walking, walking on alone: Lucy's Carpet;* recycled milk bottles, wool roving, rag-rugged, dye-sublimated text, 400x100x20 cm.

printed the text onto fabric made from recycled plastic milk bottles (fig.9). My plaster 'blooks' (book-like objects) are printed with a fresco method I developed using photopolymer plates (fig.13). Biomaterials such as a found honeycomb, abandoned by a bee swarm, are crocheted with fine thread (fig.10). Materiality, layers and textures are always present. Each work took time, an important gesture in this project. In making the crocheted frame for the honeycomb work, *Time Trial with Bees: 12 Hours 48 Minutes*, for example, I worked without stopping for the precise amount of time the bees had taken to build their structure. In this research, the counting and giving of time is an act of solidarity to generations of women makers and their methods.

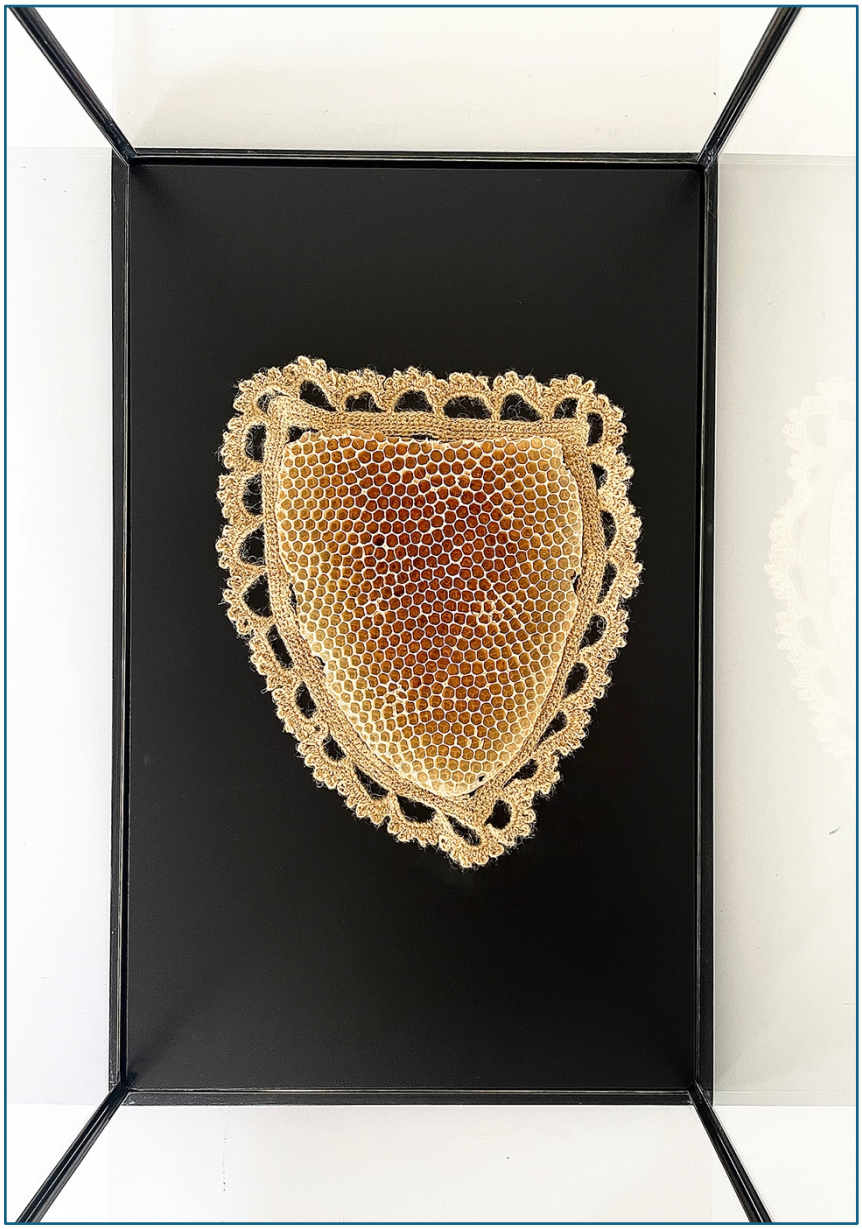

Figure 10. Time Trial with Bees: 12 hours 48 minutes; honeycomb, crocheted wool, vitrine, (part of *May's Travelling Library*), 42x27x42 cm.

Figure 11. Detail from *Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed,* crocheted paper, folded, screen-printed log-cabin paper quilt.

Figure 12. Detail*, For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair,* crocheted paper, bookbinder's sewing frame, 90x140x40 cm.

Figure 13. Frescoed 'Blooks', Safehouse Gallery, 2023, part of *May's Travelling Library.* In this configuration, 100x180x28cm.

Methodology and method:

In dewriting text through an art practice, I have used materials which might build connections between fictional women: paper, ink and milk became the substances which could unite them and act as a unifying material language. Milk features in each of my assemblages in the form of laser-etched milk substrates - it becomes paper to write on. Milk is fabric, milk is bed linen, and milk forms part of my performance pieces. It becomes a connective fluid or membrane, acting as a form of powerful, shared communication between the works. I use brittle, milk substrates for my laser-etched villanelles in vitrines; sharp-edged milk-transfers on bed linen for the work *Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed*; and milk artefacts for the assemblage*: Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk* (figs.14,15,16).

Figure 14. Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk, wood, laser-etched milk, approx. 91x46x96cm. In this work I imagine that isolated Lucy, so desperate to receive a letter, would start writing to herself. I discuss this in more detail later in the thesis.

Figure 15. Detail, *Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk,* wood, laser-etched milk, approx. 91x46x96cm.

Milk is the liquid in which I float my poetry, the text becoming displaced and aleatory as the ink dissipates, for my performance piece *Running Away with Herselves* (fig.17a,b,c,d). During each live performance I soaked my hand-written villanelles in bowls of milk and tore each sheet into fragments. On rearranging the fragments, I performed a new version of the reassembled verse in front of the audience. The physical dismantling of my own poetry acted as an alternative form of dewriting and milk seemed the most powerful agent to enact that dissolution. As David Prieto Serrano and Alejandro Alonso Diaz put it, 'Milk is neither a transhistorical fact of nature, nor purely a cultural construct or metaphor; it needs to be acknowledged as a hybrid assemblage in which these things are entangled.[37] As I explain

Figure 16. Detail, Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's bed: milk, pillow, 92x192x105 cm.

[37] *Microbiopolitics of Milk*, ed. by David Prieto Serrano, Alejandro Alonso Diaz, Fernando Garcia-Dory (London: Sternberg Press, 2022), p. 16.

Figure 17a,b,c,d. Running Away with Herselves: live 'dissolving' poetry performances at Espacio Gallery, 2023, and Beaconsfield Gallery, 2023.

more fully in Chapter 2, milk is political, troubled, nourishing, problematic, associated with the body and yet co-opted by the machine, identified with the natural world but appropriated dangerously as a racist symbol of purity.[38] In this project, I see milk as a substance vested in Stuart Hall's idea of 'conjuncture' in which historical conditions and circumstances mix with present day assumptions. Milk's power is active and hybrid, as is May's.

The first, tentative iteration of this dewritten project was an abstract painting I created to accompany an academic paper I delivered on William Faulkner's 1930 modernist novel *As I Lay Dying*. I argued that Faulkner was trying to transact the textual as the visual, using two-dimensional geometrical shapes, all the while attempting to achieve the apparently impossible: simultaneity on the page.[39] My painting, filled with squares, triangles and lines, tracked brothers Jewel and Darl as they walked across a field of cotton (fig.18). I coaxed Jewel to stride through the open window of the square cotton-house and out the other side Simultaneously, I nudged eccentric Darl to walk around the building, before reuniting the two brothers as they walked towards the field's far edge. The painting was not designed as

[38] My dewritten characters are starved of intellectual and emotional nourishment, but I do not use milk to engage with anorexia or eating disorders. Artists such as Hannah Smith and Judith Shaw work in this field and texts include Emily L. Newman's *Female Body Image in Contemporary Art: Dieting, Eating Disorder, Self-Harm, and Fatness* (Abingdon: Routledge), 2018), Isabelle Meuret's *Writing Size Zero: Fighting Anorexia in Contemporary Literatures* (European Interuniversity Press, 2007) and Laura Freeman's *The Reading Cure: How Books Restored My Appetite* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2019).

[39] Faulkner's novel follows the Bundren family to Jefferson, Mississippi as they seek to bury mother Addie, whose decaying corpse they carry. My project questions Faulkner's aim to freeze time in writing: 'The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life, by artificial means and hold it fixed so that 100 years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life.' William Faulkner, *Lion in the Garden: Interviews with William Faulkner 1926-1962*, ed. James B. Meriwether and Michael Millgate (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 253. Faulkner's desire for immaculate preservation runs counter to the fluid, transmutational aims of my research project.

an abridgement or an adaptation but as an abstract, flat, geometric simulcast in which everything happened at once. Simultaneity is the Holy Grail for any novelist, a desire expressed with such longing by Ali Smith in her novel *How to be both* and by José Saramago in *The Stone Raft.*[40]

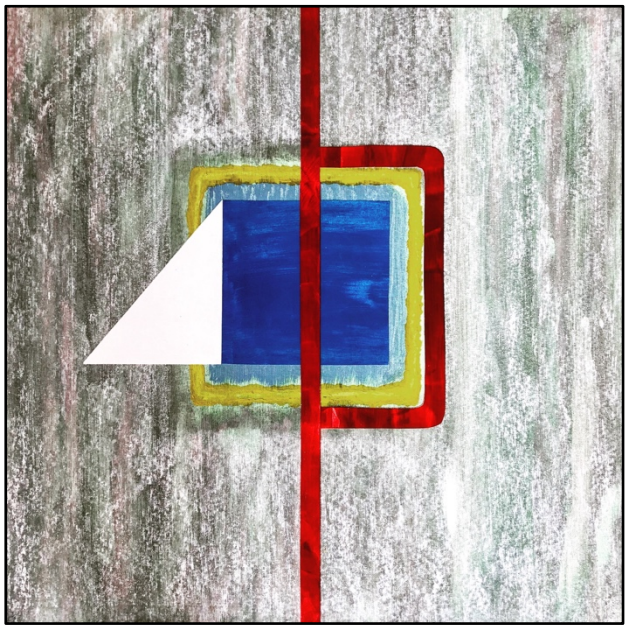

Figure 18. Faulkner's Geometry, mixed media, 2019, 90x90 cm.

'Out of the Scriptorium' is a more ambitious, considered research project than my Faulkner experiment and uses an extended methodology. The artworks which form part of my research are created from the stuff of books themselves: ink, glue, stitch, thread, paper, bookbinding frames and tools, as well as the all-important hybridity of milk.

In the case of paper, I cut, spin, weave and crochet it to reconfigure and transform new narratives, as in the crocheted-paper blanket and paper screen-printed log-cabin quilt for *Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed* and the skeins of paper which I cut and hand-spun from the pages of *The Waves - Desemic Rhoda* (figs.19, 20, 21). In the case of milk, I

[40] José Saramago in *The Stone Raft* was frustrated that he could not write in a way that showed everything happening at once. Ali Smith noted in her novel *How to be both* that if a writer tries to denote that everything is happening simultaneously, 'it'd be like reading a book but one in which all the lines of the text have been overprinted, like each page is actually two pages but with one superimposed on the other to make it unreadable.' Ali Smith, *How to be both* (London: Penguin, 2015), p. 10. Famously, Laurence Sterne included an overprinted, black page in his 1762-1767 novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and Jonathan Safran Foer experiments with the overwritten, unreadable page in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). Cy Twombly's inscribed, yet wordless, blackboard paintings share a similar impulse.

turn it from a liquid into a printable, tactile surface, or use recycled milk bottles in the form of a reconstituted, printable textile, as in Lucy Snowe's textual, textural carpet.

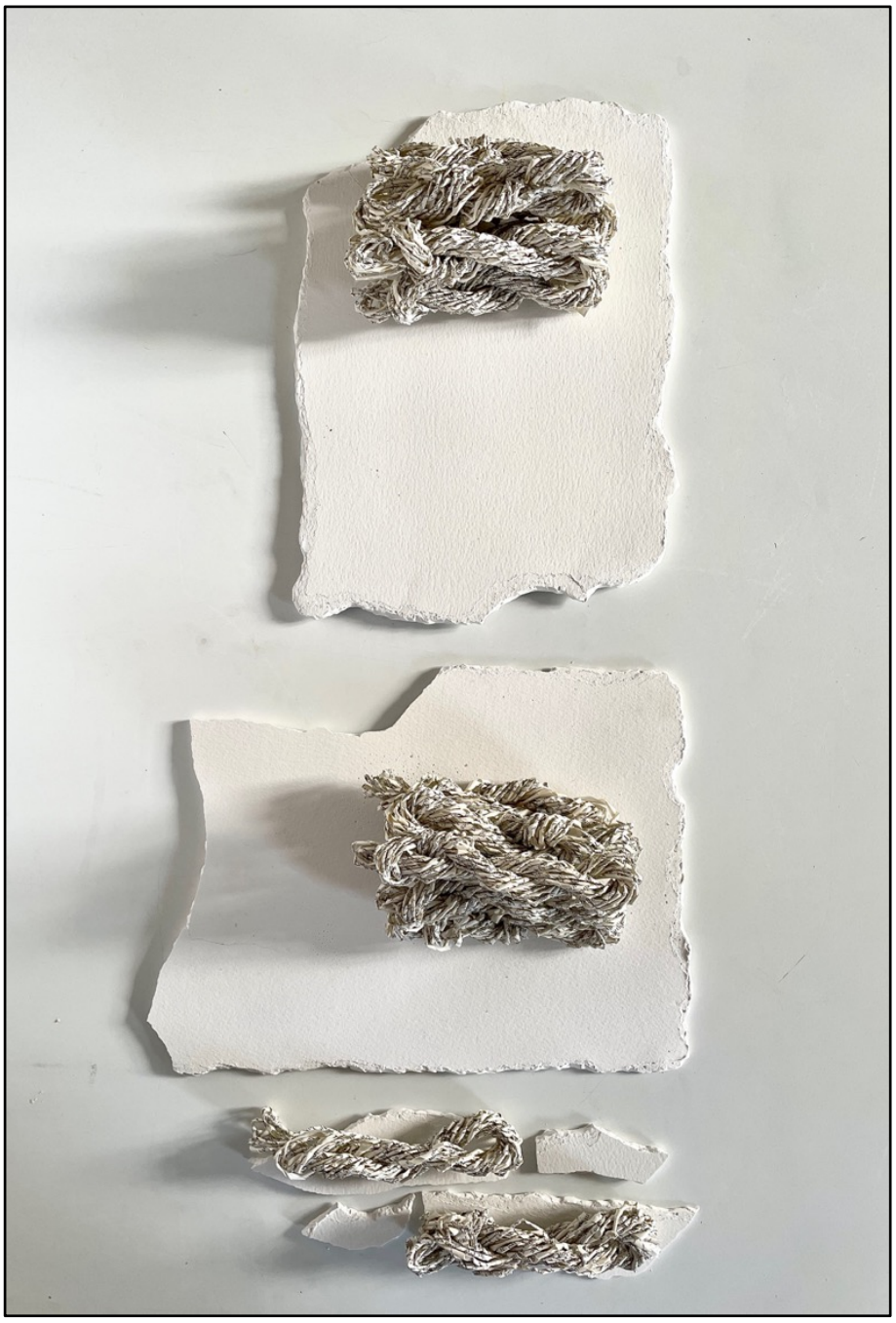

Figure 19. Hand-spun novel on cast Jesmonite 'paper', each skein approx. 15x3x3 cm.

Figure 20. Hand-spun novel on cast Jesmonite 'paper', each skein approx. 15x3x3 cm (part of *May's Travelling Library*).

Figure 21. Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed, crocheted paper, screen-print, milk, 92x192x105 cm.

A desemic, dewritten approach:

My specific purpose in devising the terms 'dewriting' and 'desemic' is to make my method of excavating fictional and nonfictional women from their existing narratives more lucid. 'Asemic' literally means to neutralise the 'seme' or sign. Text is unreadable while retaining its

visual roots as writing. According to Peter Schwenger, there is a 'cognitive dissonance' in asemic text. It seeks to 'preserve the linear organisation of conventional writing', but we are simultaneously 'estranged from it.'[41] My neologism 'desemic', on the other hand, expresses the creative drive of this research which is that text is not simply made asemically unreadable, but that it is actively deconstructed. We are not 'estranged' from text so much as reintroduced to its pure material form. It may be a twisted carpet, a distorted crocheted embodiment of Maggie's hair, bed linen made of milk, a nineteenth-century medical text realised in milk bottles or laser-etched desiccated milk 'paper'. It is a dewritten art practice. The women of my project are the first inhabitants of a new, interwoven legend, but it is a fluid, flexible, desemic one which is capable of welcoming limitless women in. By dewriting both a real character, Susie, and fictional women at the same time, I realise that I am working in separate fields simultaneously: life-writing and literary deconstruction. The two methods cannot be precisely the same. But they run in parallel and the flow between them is coherent and cogent. Having chosen my fictional characters, I integrated Susie into my dewritten narrative through the visual languages she taught me. She has enabled my methodology of dewriting-through-practice and she *is* the language. In my essential ethics of care towards Susie, I have taken time to faithfully show her labour, sacrifices and social context, and how these are central to her identity and to this desemic project. In offering my emotional and physical labour in exchange for hers, my hands suffered from the complex iterative processes I used. In the making of *Lucy's Carpet*, for example, my hands bled as I fought to tame, knot and stitch four metres of rigid, wide-gauge, tapestry canvas. But my echoing, desemic tribute is an act of homage which is itself a gesture of reciprocity.

Figure 22. Parastou Forouhar, *Written Room,* Art Gallery of Saarbruecken, 2011, © Parastou Forouhar.

There is a difference between my use of desemic dewriting as a way of dissolving text from the notion of 'postprint' devised by N. Katherine Hayles which 'untethers [text] from any specific material support, making it accessible through a variety of interfaces.'[42] The 'interfaces' she has in mind are digital ones, which are not my concern here. My use of desemic writing is more aligned

[41] Peter Schwenger, *Asemic: The Art of Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), p. 7.
[42] N. Katherine Hayles, *Postprint: Books and Becoming Computational* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2020), p. 3.

with the approach taken by artist Parastou Forouhar. Her deliberately dewritten text in the ongoing work *Written Room* is both illegible to those who do not speak Farsi, but also too fragmented and illegibilised to be available to those who do (fig.22). She describes her work as 'simultaneity of beauty and harm'.[43] It is a powerful exercise in creating 'pure ornament' since, as Alexandra Karentzos points out, '[v]iewers entering the rooms are surrounded by patterns, forcing them to give up their sovereign, distanced standpoint.'[44] It is an approach which I discuss both in the context of the use of beauty in Chapter 1, and in Chapter 3 in my analysis of my tests for the construction of *May's Travelling Library*. In my early experiments I constructed shelves covered with translucent Japanese paper and inscribed with my own form of dewriting: a language from my past. It is written in my adapted shorthand, an essential skill for writing at high speed when covering court cases as a BBC news journalist. Over time, it has evolved into an eccentric method which is perfectly legible to me but to no-one else. I write about it in more detail in Chapter 1 and analyse where such unreadable language might fit into a project with dewriting at its heart (fig.23). I wrote the first villanelle, 'Walking through a Fresco' as a gesture to women like Susie and Maggie for whom time was devoured by things they did not wish to do. I play on the word 'entitled', not as a means of defining them as women with privilege – they were/are anything but that – but as a way of defining the limitations placed upon them by the prescriptive titles and texts of their original fictions.

[43] Parastou Forouhar interviewed by Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 29 September 2017, Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/29/art-iran-parastou-forouhar-family-revolution-artist> [accessed 18 March 2024].
[44] Alexandra Karentzos, 'Written Room', <https://www.parastou-forouhar.de/portfolio/written-room/> [accessed 18 March 2024].

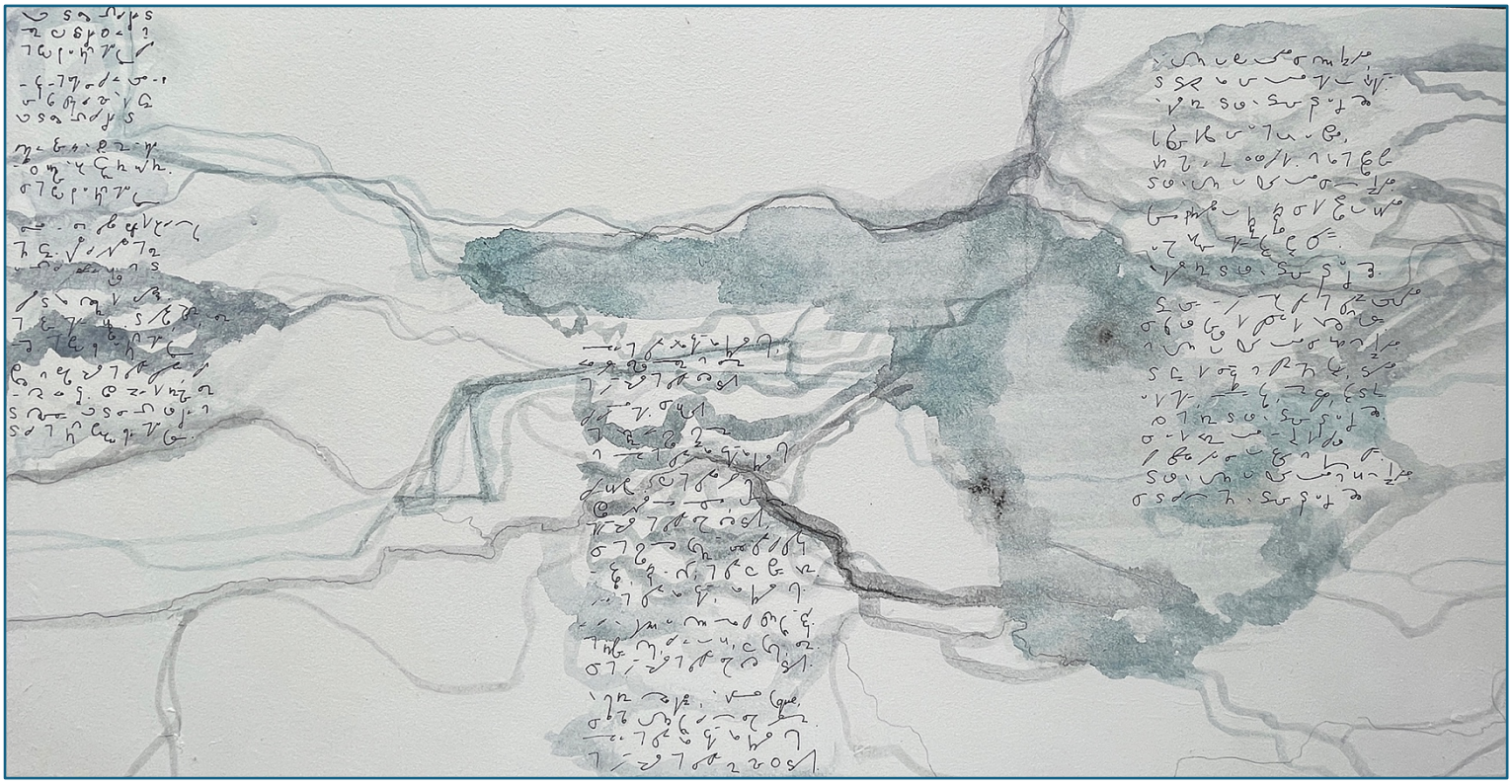

Figure 23. Shorthand transcriptions of my villanelles, left to right, 'Walking through a Fresco', ‘Map of Legends and Tree of Signs’, and 'Wrong Side of the Fabric'. Japanese paper, gansai pigment, ink, 60x30 cm.

Walking Through a Fresco

When she says time is passing, she
doesn't know she's passing by it. And
the slow seep of pigment through plaster, free

to leach to the other side if it wants to see
what lies beneath, is not at her command.
When she says time is passing, she

imagines it coiled in a basket, trained to agree
to be unspooled, compliant, hand over hand.
But the slow seep of pigment through plaster

stains surface's sousface; her will is more plea
than command. Verso is reverso, the sand
of time is perversely sifting upwards and she

fears she has misspent her currency.
Coiled thread uncoils. She recoils, a strand tightens.
The slow seep of pigment through plaster

blooms and swells across the surface; fresco, free
to make its choice. Because, taking her entitled stand,
she misunderstood when she said time was passing and
she is the pigment slowly seeping through plaster.

The place of practice here is to dewrite old stories and make powerful, new connections between them, thereby releasing familiar lines from old certainties and fixed text. It is (a) moveable type. A narrative emerges between the four women and their transformational 'container' character May, so that a new, interconnected, paper fable arises from the coils. In dewriting these stories, and reconfiguring them as an interwoven legend via fixed verse, the project takes the form of an anticipatory, alternative legend. Its key research questions ask whether women travellers can be embedded in new and mutually sustaining ways. What role might excavation (of both self and land) play in decoding and de/re-writing them? What teleological function might such an experiment serve?

As I have suggested, my research field lies at a multi-disciplinary intersection between life-writing (both visual and textual), walking, feminism, geopoetics and geometry, all translated through an art practice. The methodology is a Barthesian one in which subjects and objects unmake and remake themselves. It draws, too, on Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance,* with its sense of fluctuating, deferred, fluid meanings which are both textual and non-textual. The methodology is both a way of carrying out the research, as well as a way of being the artworks. In other words, the methodology is itself embedded in the practice and each work is a 'nested metalanguage' for the one it sits alongside. Unlike an 'ordered metalanguage', a nested metalanguage is one in which each stage or iteration includes elements of the language from which it emerged. May's assemblage of her travelling library and her villanelle narrative written on a strange loop of paper collars (fig.25), is a meta-meta language, holding within it all the languages and stories of the others. Each assemblage is itself movable, since all are fixed on wheels, and so each can figuratively communicate with whichever one it happens to find itself alongside and of course each one can be moved - and indeed added to - a limitless number of times. I like to think this early example of a 'perambulating' library on wheels from Susie's home town of Warrington is one which she herself might have borrowed from, such was her love of books.[45](fig.24).

Figure 24. Perambulating Library, Warrington, *Illustrated London News*, 1860.

[45] The Public Libraries Act of 1850 started the move towards free public libraries, away from expensive circulating libraries.

Figure 25. Detail from May's installation of paper collar villanelles, accompanied by poetry soundscape, *Choral Symphony,* (dur. 20 minutes), paper, gansai pigment, ink, buttons, steel, approx. 200x100x50cm.

Key terms:

Geometry and the strange loop

The territory of geopoetics, originated by poet Kenneth White, is important to this project, since it demands a multi-disciplinary approach to, as he puts it, 'opening up the possibility of radical cultural renewal'. The fluid purpose of geopoetics in 'creatively expressing the Earth'

is to seek the very plurality my research project investigates: 'oral expression, writing, the visual arts, music, geology, geography, other sciences, philosophy, combinations of art forms and of the arts, sciences and thinking.' As the 'Inaugural Text of The International Institute of Geopoetics' declares:

> [G]eopoetics provides not only a place [...] where poetry, thought and science can come together, in a climate of reciprocal inspiration, but a place where all kinds of specific disciplines can converge, once they are ready to leave over-restricted frameworks and enter into global (cosmological, cosmopoetic) space.[46]

One of the ways I coax my project out of any such 'over-restricted framework' is by the introduction of geometry, specifically the fluid, endlessly expandable strange loop devised by Douglas Hofstadter which forms the mutable, overarching shape and conceptual 'thinking' framework of this multi-disciplinary research. The strange loop has the logic-defying ability to continually appear to rise in height whilst still returning to where it started, making it an entirely democratic geometrical form.[47] It is continuous, non-hierarchical, and can be infinitely expanded a limitless number of times without disrupting its integrity. The loop emerged from Douglas Hofstadter's study of logician Kurt Gödel's *Incompleteness Theorem*. Gödel established that there will always be true aspects of mathematics which cannot be proved, much to fellow mathematicians' shock. There is an appealing mutability to such certain uncertainty. Hofstadter extrapolated from the theorem and created strange loops to illustrate that we can use our own sense of being conscious to think about our own consciousness: it enacts the brain thinking about how the brain is thinking. As Hofstadter phrased it, 'there is a shift from one level of abstraction (or structure) to another, which feels like an upwards movement in an hierarchy, and yet somehow the successive "upward" shifts turn out to give rise to a closed cycle. That is, despite one's sense of departing ever further from one's origin, one winds up, to one's shock, exactly where one had started out'.[48] The loop, then, is both a geometric form and a philosophical concept. It is the intellectual drive behind this project, uniting as it does disparate women across seven centuries without ever privileging one over another. I co-opt the strange loop, not to study or witness the process

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[46] Kenneth White, 'Inaugural Text of The International Institute of Geopoetics', 1989. <https://www.geopoetics.org.uk/what-is-geopoetics/> [accessed 16 September 2023].
[47] The function of a strange loop is the subject of my podcast recording with mathematician Marcus du Sautoy. 'Strange loops and walking as thinking, with mathematician Marcus du Sautoy', 21 November, 2021. <https://insideamountain.podbean.com/e/strange-loops-and-walking-as-thinking-with-mathematician-marcus-du-sautoy/>.
[48] Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am A Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2007), pp. 101-102.

of conscious thinking, but as a political expression of feminist inclusiveness. My women characters, and the artworks themselves, walk in strange loops; it is a form of democratic, inclusive, open walking in which the circle can be endlessly expanded to include other women, other lands, other experiences. There are no limits to the number of women who can be invited into this magic circle, an idea that responds to Janis Jefferies's suggestion that, using feminism and craft, we can 'engage with continuous working and re-working, making and re-making, crafting and re-crafting experience as a means of care.' A new ethical approach can be 'reconfigured through exchanges of knowledge and lived experience.'[49] It is the essence of my strange loop and my villanelle, 'Playing the Loop', part of *May's Travelling Library*, uses Gödel's and Hofstadter's mathematical findings to explore the fact that although the loop appears to have a hierarchy it does, in fact, always remain at the same height, is infinitely enlargeable, and everyone is equal.

Playing the Loop

If I place one life on another, which is the victor?
The strangled life beneath, smothered but first?
Or the life above, higher, better, sleeker, slicker?

I could shuffle the pack, play at pitcher,
place above below and make beneath the worst.
If I stack one life on another, am I the victor?

It's hard to fight the game of tricked and tricker.
We're trained to sort, to choose the fittest.
The life on top must be higher, better, sleeker, slicker.

Gödel finished his mathematical stricture
to prove not everything can be proved. At its simplest,
If I stack one life on another, there's never a victor.

Still, we keep trying, sure there must be a stricter
way of choosing who wins the game of strongest, weakest.
Surely, the fragment on top, higher, better, sleeker, slicker?

They're the wrong questions - Hofstadter got there quicker
Just loop the loop and neither above nor below is cursed.
If I stack one life on another, no-one's the victor.
Above *and* below are higher, better, sleeker, slicker.

[49] Janis Jefferies, 'Crocheted Strategies: Women Crafting their Own Communities, *Textile*, Volume 14, 2016, Issue 1, June 2016, p. 30.

In celebrating my project's ambiguity, I have tried to remain focused on the journey, not on a fixed outcome. Susie, Maggie, Rhoda and Lucy were denied the luxury of this contingency, but in deploying the intellectual fluidity of the strange loop in my practice, these women are reconfigured in new, potentially liberating spaces. It is also helpful to invoke queer theorist Eve Sedgwick's use of the discipline of spatialisation here. She rejects what she regards as the familiar distancing terms of 'beneath', 'behind' and 'beyond' in favour of a more companiable 'beside' in which there need be no 'subject versus object' or 'cause versus effect' or even an 'excluded middle'.[50] The word 'beside' allows for a companionable, communal, interconnected circle.

In thinking through my hermeneutical approach, I made more than 100 miniature sugar lift, aquatint and photopolymer etchings, and constructed a three-dimensional representation of strange loops from them (figs.26-27a, b, c). Building its all-important

Figure 26 Strange Loops, sugar lift, aquatint, photopolymer, etching, 62x60x16 cm, (each individual etching approx. 4x3 cm, (part of *May's Travelling Library*).

[50] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 8.

overlapping prints into three interconnected strange loops, was a way of fully immersing myself in the loop's power and making visual my democratic women's chorus in a new, dewritten/rewritten fable. It now sits within *May's Travelling Library* as a powerful totem of possibility.

Figure 27a,b,c. Details from *Strange Loops,* 62x60x16 cm.

In coming to the strange loop as my 'thinking' system, and before my foot injury, I walked many miles to think through my project. In that walking/thinking process I created a series of folded and woven drawings and screen-prints of trees, branches and fragments of bark. They were speculative, propositional drawings which I used as a way of thinking through the properties and qualities of wild, natural territory and what such land might mean to the woman walker in particular (figs.28-33). I was drawing while observing the process of walking, with no destination or preconceived route. What I did not realise as I drew was that the images would eventually manifest to me as aerial views of imaginary rivers, landscape and sedimentary rock. Not only did they become representations of navigational charts and maps, they also provided the inspiration for another of my library's villanelles, 'Map of Legends and Tree of Signs'. In this villanelle I envisage a transformational walk for my women characters during which they use gnarled bark as their alternative map. Their journey is neither competitive nor prescriptive and they require no certainties or outcomes from it.

Map of Legends and Tree of Signs

Tracing the bark as chart, as pioneer's map,
its raised sinews torsioned and strained,
the route across the surface seems sharp

for creatures there. But unwrap
the ancient eye-glass, gaze trained,
and trace the bark as chart, as pioneer's map

for yourself. Now the bark's rough nap
becomes river's dry tributary, water drained.
The route across the surface still seems sharp,

but the glass turns legend to odyssey, bark from burlap
to colossus, inch to mile; the bark now bloated, veined.
Reading the bark as chart, as pioneer's map,

is a journey of many days, from benign plain to icecap.
The unfolded map, if it were one, now limp, stained.
But the route across the surface still seems sharp.

A map's end marks prizes, a victor's plaque,
but this woman's plan is more subtle, restrained.
Tracing the bark as chart, as pioneer's map,
the route across the surface need not be sharp.

Figure 28. Giant bark drawing in graphite, ink, pencil, pastel, watercolour on Japanese paper, 200x120 cm.

Figure 29. The same drawing hung in woods, floating in the breeze, graphite, ink, pencil, pastel, watercolour on Japanese paper, 200x120 cm.

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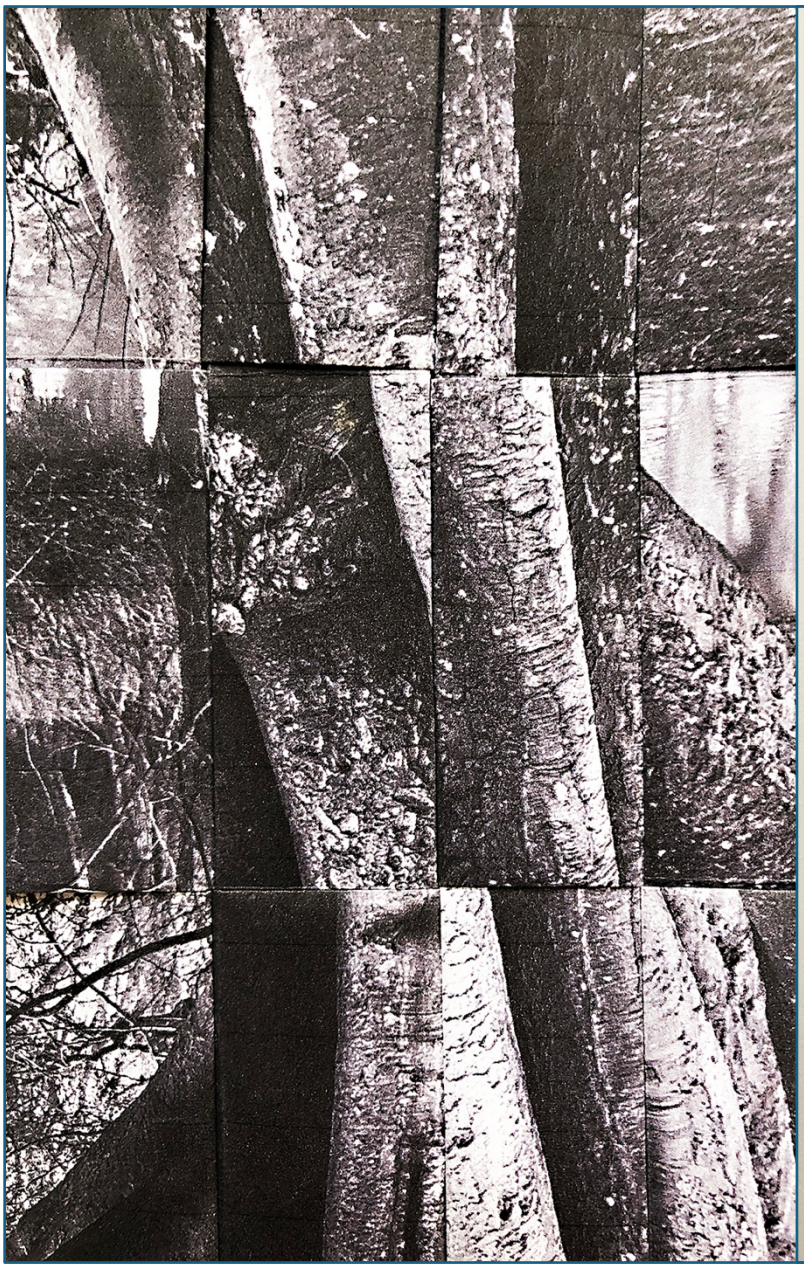

Figure 31. Folded paper experimental drawings which I used to speculate on ways I might interweave my women characters, before settling on the strange loop. Digital print on woven paper, 44x27 cm.

Figure 30. Digital print on woven paper, 21x15 cm.

Figure 32. Bark as Chart 1 and 2, pastel, ink, gansai pigment, graphite on paper, 35x26 cm.

Figure 33. Bark as Chart 2, screen-print, 89x60 cm. This large four-colour screenprint became part of the paper quilt for *Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed*. All six drawings and screen-prints shown in figures 28-33 emerged from my speculative thinking/walking process. The ideas they provoked are threaded through the text of my villanelle sequence.

Geometry, which has a greater connection to literature than may be immediately apparent, can be a lucid way of dewriting a text.[51] In her preface to *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit*, another novel which introduces an isolated and entrapped girl, Jeanette Winterson asked readers to see it as a book that 'you can read in spirals.' She explained that 'the spiral is fluid and allows infinite movement. But is it movement backwards or forwards? Is it height or depth?', adding that 'I really don't see the point of reading in straight lines.'[52] It is also significant in the context of this project that Winterson later rewrote this fictional version of her life, turning *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* into her far bleaker memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Winterson believed that fables could be places of greater safety, kindness and imaginative possibility, saying that 'to read ourselves as fiction is much more liberating than to read ourselves as fact.' *Oranges,* she said, was 'the cover version' of her life.

> I suppose the saddest thing for me, thinking about the cover version that is Oranges, is that I wrote a story I could live with. The other one was too painful, I could not survive it.[53]

The fable/parable provides a more imaginative framework for this research too, particularly when combined with the doubled timeframe of the strange loop. Just as the loop allows a limitless number of women characters to enter the charmed circle, so too does it permit a kind of imaginative cross-century time travel. I am attempting to create a community of women who, to borrow from Carolyn Dinshaw, make 'affective connections [...] across time.'[54] Amy E. Elkin's intermingling of the disciplines of making and writing has a kind of dynamism here, too. My project rinses words out of their formal arrangements and turns them into craft, before rewriting/reshaping them as new conceptual communities. Elkin's sense that craft is simultaneously a 'practice woven from the threads of its physical reality' at

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[51] Miriam Schapiro made a connection between quilting and geometry in her essay, 'Geometry and Flowers', *The Artist and the Quilt*, ed. Charlotte Robinson (Bromley: Columbus Books, 1983), p. 26. The idea of absorbing a text via movement through space was vividly enacted by the open-air walking project Incandescent, organised by Bernice Donszelmann, Lucy Gunning and Helen Robertson in 2017. Participants, including artists Jo Stockham and Cath Ferguson, walked in threes around the Grand Square of the Royal Naval College in Greenwich, reading Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* to each other. The participants reported that 'the text became rhythmic and live' and its politics 'made itself felt in an acute and bodily way' <http://www.outsidearchitecture.org/?page_id=669> [accessed 5 April 2024]. Similarly, Dee Heddon and Misha Myers launched *The Walking Library* in 2012, inviting walkers to choose which text they might read to each other as they walked. Dee and Myers describe the project as a 'library that carries books by foot.' https://walkinglibraryproject.wordpress.com/ [accessed 14 July 2024].

[52] Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (London: Vintage, 2001), pp. xiii-xiv. Sometimes I give students oranges and ask them to peel the skin in one, unbroken spiral to see if the dissolution of the fruit's spherical integrity into a linear, spiralised shape releases new ways of reading a text.

[53] Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* (London: Vintage, 2011), p. 6.

[54] Carolyn Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), p. 11.

the same time as having 'conceptual flexibility' is realised in this project as a flickering, affective energy which brings fictional and nonfictional women together as a kind of community.[55] It is a polyphonic narrative.

While Rhoda, Lucy and Maggie are imaginary constructs, Susie of course is not. However, I always read her as fictional, even when I was a child. She seemed ancient when I was two and met her for the first time, and her silent demeanour was so puzzling. Today, she feels as invented to me as Rhoda, Maggie and Lucy. I think of her in Keatsian terms as 'leading a posthumous existence' in my mind.[56] She is somehow meta-fictional. But imaginary stories have redemptive possibilities, a quality I examine in this project, and in that redemption lies my research - leavening my sometimes forlorn-seeming artworks with aspects of the beautiful or consolatory, a conscious choice I analyse more fully in Chapter 1. Just as *Oranges* is spiralised, my project is looped and can be read in endlessly expandable circles. There are overlaps here between my use of geometry and land artist Agnes Denes's use of mathematics. Her view was that mathematics allows for an unsullied, constant, reassuring form of language, saying that it was an '*extra* way to say things.' [my emphasis]. Maths, she said, is

> [a] non-erratic additional language, another dimension: malleable, unemotional and perfect. I can use it as a canvas that I stretch and pull in any direction, wrap around my concepts in a multitude of ways, yet they remain perfect in any form I give them.[57]

This research draws on such 'extra' languages - geometry and geopoetics most of all. Both terms have a sense of place and space embedded in their etymology. In using them as generalised principles, I argue that this landscape/lifescape project has space and place too. There is, however, an alternative term to 'landscape' which I prefer to use: inscape.

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[55] Amy E. Elkins, *Crafting Feminism from Literary Modernism to the Multimedia Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 1. In choosing the word 'flickering' here, I am reminded of Marlow's line in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* that 'we live in the flicker', or a state of contingency. Woolf, too, often drew on the fragile possibility of the word flicker/flickering. It appears 11 times in *The Waves* alone. (Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 106.

[56] John Keats, Letter to Charles Brown, 30 November 1820. This was Keats's final, surviving letter. I discuss his idea of 'posthumous existence' in my podcast episode with Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, 'How To Read A Life'.<https://insideamountain.podbean.com/e/how-to-read-a-life-robert-douglas-fairhurst-and-his-memoir-metamorphosis-a-life-in-pieces/>.

[57] 'Mathematics in My Work – Perfection and Beauty (1968-2005)', *The Human Argument: The Writings of Agnes Denes,* ed. and with an introduction by Klaus Ottmann (Putnam, Conn: Spring Publications, Inc.), 2008, p. 213.

Inscape and instress:

The term which I believe 'contains' the territory of the project most capaciously and precisely is 'inscape'. Because of the very particular fictionalising approach to landscape that I am taking, and because I am reinventing real women while defictionalising imaginary ones, I prefer to use the term 'inscape', devised by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. He defined the 'inscape' as the particular, embedded quintessence of a thing: in other words, its haecceity rather than its quiddity. Inscape can be used as a noun or verb and it might express the essence of a landscape or creature in the natural world, or a person. The particular energy that produces this unique, powerful 'inscape' is its 'instress', again used as verb and noun. It is the instress of an inscape that captures its defining vigour. A useful example would be Hopkins's description of a bluebell's inscape:

> The head is strongly drawn over backwards and arched down like cutwater drawing itself back from the line of the keel. The lines of the bells strike and overlie this, rayed but not symmetrically, some lie parallel. They look steely ...the shades lying down between the bells and behind the cocked petal-ends and nursing up the precision of their distinctness.[58]

The origin of Hopkins's inscape and instress was his alertness to beauty, a quality I examine in the context of my practice in Chapter 1. An additional reason why I prefer 'inscape' to 'landscape' is because landscape and the sublime are problematic territories as far as women are concerned. As James Elkins noted, the trouble with landscape is that we assume we know it inside out: 'Like the body, landscape is something we all feel ourself to be inside. It's our subject, but we're also part of it: we help make it; we live in it.'[59] But in claiming it as territory we know or somehow 'own', the dangers of appropriation are clear. Rebecca Solnit put the dangers even more directly: landscape, she warned, is often about renewal through the expulsion of others:

> [it's a place] where nature is Eden regained, where the woodsman with his axe is Adam himself, a really fucked-up Adam who is about to lay waste to the forest. [...] That is part of the huge problem of landscape imagination in America. Through the

[58] Gerard Manley Hopkins, journal entry, 11 May 1873.
[59] Taken from transcription of *The Art Seminar*, 17 June 2006, attended by Denis E. Cosgrove, Rachael Ziady DeLue, Jessica Dobow, James Elkins, Michael Gaudio, David Hays, Róisín Kennedy, Michael Newman, Rebecca Solnit, Anne Whiston Spirn, Minna Tórmä, Jacob Wamberg. *Landscape Theory*, eds. Rachael Ziady DeLue, James Elkins (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p.88.

> sinister auspices of the environmental movement – John Muir, Ansel Adams – the American vision yields an image of a world entirely outside of human agency , which ends up, for example, excising Native Americans.[60]

In Chapter 3, I explore the dangers to women walkers in particular, of the sublime obsession with Adam rather than Eve, and the often exclusive and exclusionary nature of wild landscape.[61] In the face of landscape's potential exclusions, inscape in this project is a place of escape, ventilation, rewilding, inclusivity and potentiality. It is the territory of 'making space' where none existed before.

Original contributions to knowledge:

The work makes original contributions to knowledge in its activation of 'dewriting' as a research methodology. It offers a feminist rewriting of reading and, using the textual and material, it braids affective communities of women across the centuries. The work activates ambivalence, conflict and difference, while engaging with togetherness, solidarity and community. It dewrites what it means to read and to author. Its feminist rethinking of creativity is an act of undoing to remake in ways that are both spatial, multi-dimensional and diachronic. I deliberately use a complex array of processes, methods and references which, as they intersect and interweave, excavate multiple worlds and accumulate embodied time. These overlapping paths are not intended to confuse or complicate, but to create a rich and creative 'thinking system'. My time-consuming methods are a form of inscape-building or time-trial, allowing me to journey through the works themselves as I create them, as in my many hours of unbroken endeavour in creating my piece *Time-Trial with Bees: 12 Hours and 48 Minutes,* which effectively became a single-page book (fig.34). (Etymologically, the word 'book' derives from beech, or a piece of wood, so the notion of a single-page book is not such a stretch.) My research emphasises the non-linguistic, at the same time as drawing on

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[60] Rebecca Solnit, *Landscape Theory*, ed. by Rachael Ziady DeLue, James Elkins (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 98.
[61] I use the terms 'wild landscape', 'wild' and 'rewilding' in very specific ways. Drawing on the work of Sylvia Wynter, and Jack Halberstam, I use wildness as a freeing mechanism rather than, as Halberstam puts it, that 'imperial order of man dependent on a series of foundational hierarchies all organized around an exaggerated sense of the power of colonial masculinity.' He, like George Monbiot in *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea and Human Life*, cites Daniel Defoe's character Robinson Crusoe as the archetypal white, male coloniser of wild territory. When lecturing on *Robinson Crusoe* I ask students to note there is only one substantive reference to a woman in the entire text. On the novel's final page, and in fewer than two lines, Crusoe meets a woman, marries her, has three children and his wife dies. As Katrine Marçal notes, 'Crusoe is rational, selfish and divorced from his environment. Alone on an island or alone in society. It doesn't matter. There is no society, only a mass of individuals.' Katrine Marçal, *Who Cooked Adam Smith's Dinner* (London: Granta, 2015), p. 26. Crusoe is the counter model to my chorus of women.

my own deep knowledge of literature and books to dissolve expectations of what a text might be. The project is a paratext.

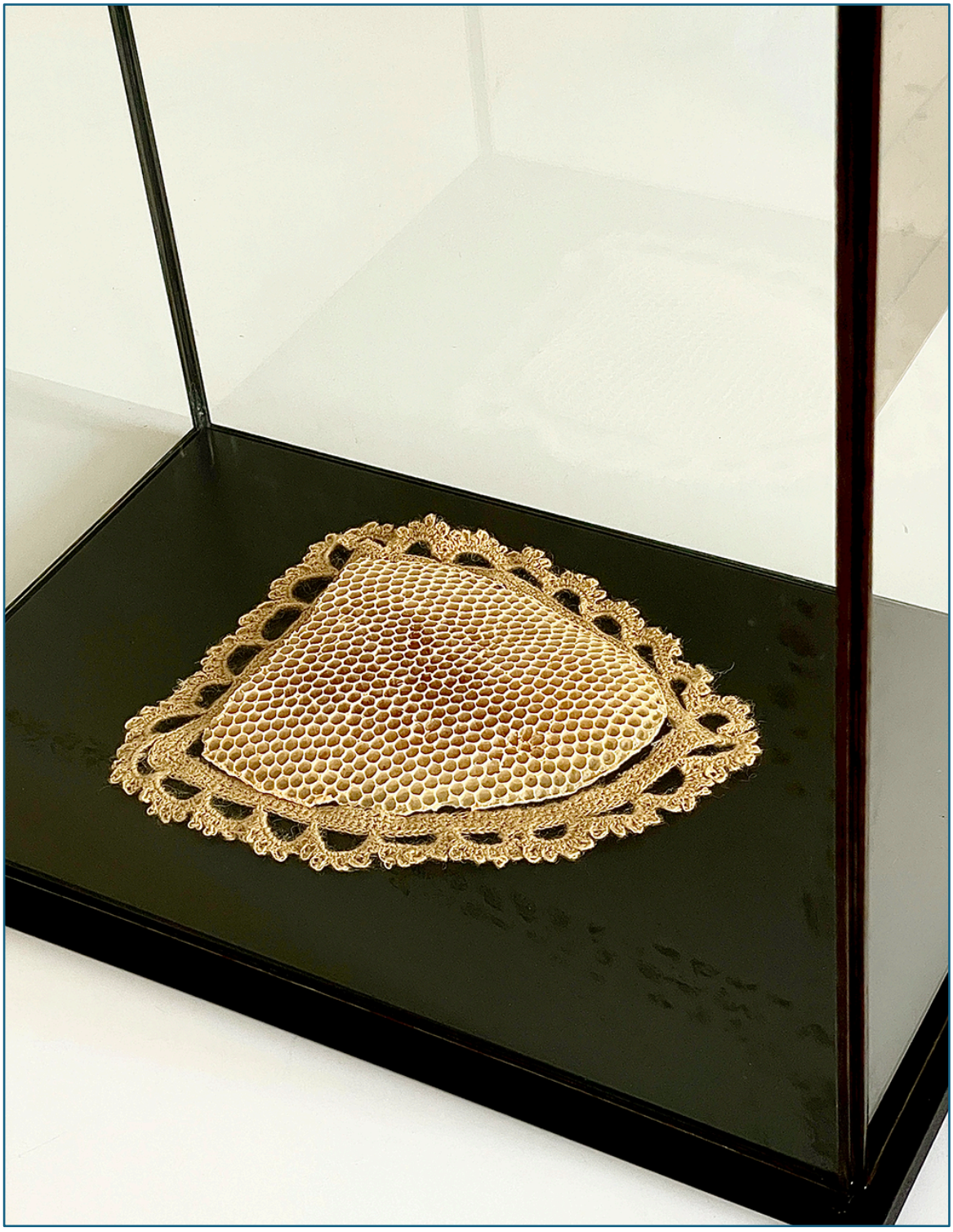

Figure 34. Time Trial With Bees: 12 Hours and 48 Minutes, wool, honeycomb, vitrine, 42x27x42 cm.

An additional aspect of my project's original contribution lies in its use of (life)-time and experience as ethical and conceptual tributaries. Having worked as a news journalist for so long, I have encountered other people's stories countless times in real life, shaping and re-materialising them in sound, image, speech and text. That sense of time and experience as excavational devices is translated by iterative walking and making, which allow for a kind of time-travel or enjambement backwards and forwards. (So too does the villanelle, with its repeated, interlinked lines which move backwards and forwards throughout the poem.) It is a methodology of reflection and anticipation through the memory of past, and the re-enactment of future, parables.[62] Anticipation necessarily introduces uncertainty, and the practice is a deliberate articulation of that. My original contributions to knowledge lie in the decoding and dewriting of apparently fixed and rigid literary forms to make them mutable and flexible, thereby giving different access to women's voices. Part of that decoding comes from the original and interdisciplinary use of the geometric strange loop to create a community of infinitely-expandable, fictional, invented, hybrid and nonfictional women spanning seven centuries. I use the enabling mechanism of a conceptual travelling library, filled with uncanny, book-like objects, to stretch the boundaries of what a text might constitute and who might be allowed access to it. I have produced an original research output – my innovative walking podcast, *Inside A Mountain* - to curate a series of voices with diverse responses to moving across landscape. In a series of 'soundscape chapters', I have recorded the original insights of artists, writers, musicians and mathematicians whilst blending the sounds of the territory we have walked in. Almost all the walks have taken place by rivers, streams, canals, reservoirs and the sea, in line with my own particular focus on watery inscapes. My sound chapters form an original library of ideas which turn walks and creative thinking into iterative, atmospheric aural encounters and which supplement my conceptual travelling library. Episodes include sound walks with writer Sally Bayley, artist Anna Koska, international cellist Natalie Clein, musicologist Kate Kennedy, mathematician Marcus du Sautoy, writer/mudlarker Tom Chivers, poet Ian McMillan, walking anthologist Duncan Minshull, literary academic Robert Douglas Fairhurst, memoirist Noreen Masud, hermit Jade Angeles Fitton, artist Jake Tilson and walker/printmaker Fungai Marima. New ideas emerge about beauty, poverty, geometry, exclusion, music, embodiment, trauma,

[62] The term 'parable' is particularly resonant here since it derives from the geometric form the 'parabola' or u-shaped curve. If the curve is folded in half from top to bottom, the two halves are symmetrical.

feminism, literature, and the power of movement which feed directly into this research project. It is walking as thinking, writing as space-making, making as writing.[63]

There is a deliberate mutability to this project's speculative proposition. I am handling time by working at a nexus of the visual, textual, aural/oral and geometric, using the interwoven processes of dewriting text, making it visual, aural and multi-dimensional. Having dewritten the intertextual accounts of and by women, I make their work newly visible and 'seeable' as a way of building a new, limitless, affective community. May/Me is a disassembler and reassembler. Like Lily, the artist witnessed at work throughout Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*, May/Me is an intradiegetic narrator or witness who writes and makes visual a parable in the form of fixed-verse, circular villanelles with their complex numbered system of repeats and lines. [64] As I have explained, the villanelle, with its nineteen-line repeating phrases, is realised in this project as a nine-poem sequence presented as a visual and aural strange loop via paper collars, text and a sound installation. It is a time-taker, a time-maker and a time-counter, realised through material time trials, using neologisms to define the project more precisely and creatively. I cannot replicate the work that Susie and other women like her had to put in at the mill or factory, but I can offer my labour in return.

My own neologisms are important to the project and form a different aspect of desemic writing. I hope to prise open new dialectical territory in which invented words do some of the work. Words which are already stored with meaning are not always enough. The writer and ecologist Robert Macfarlane, for example, imagines language as a form of geology, and grammar as having an 'underland', concepts particularly appropriate to this research:

> Grammar is […] where meaning sediments over long periods of time and becomes ideology, effectively. Single words are obviously actions; they're choices made on the surface; they have deep histories – they have roots, in that sense. But grammar is the sedimented version of many forms of choice made by cultures and individuals over many years.[65]

Virginia Woolf presented an earlier version of this idea when she said that English words 'have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields, for so

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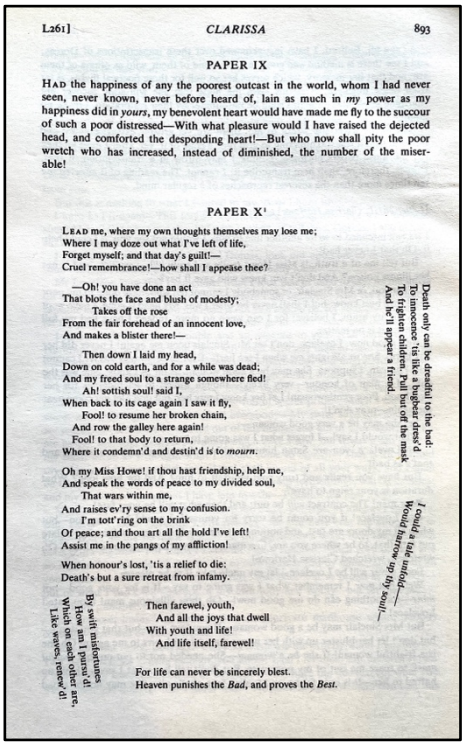
[63] Charlie Lee-Potter, *Inside A Mountain.* All twelve episodes can be found at: <https://insideamountain.podbean.com/>.
[64] An intradiegetic narrative, as opposed to an extradiegetic one, operates from within the world of the story. It is a form of fully immersed story-telling, eschewing the coolness of the all-seeing exterior observer.
[65] Robert Macfarlane, Emergence magazine, 30 May 2019, p. 58. <https://emergencemagazine.org/interview/speaking-the-anthropocene/>[accessed 15 September 2023].

many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today - that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages.'[66] My creation of neologisms, including 'sousface', the 'prescriptorium', 'dewriting' and 'desemic writing', differs from both these examples. It attempts to deconstruct the very concept that words, or indeed images, are inevitably 'stored with meanings'. Sometimes, new words are needed. A key aspect of my work springs from my neologism 'sousface' and its interaction with surface. I explain this more fully in Chapter 3.

An important aspect of my project is to demonstrate what written text cannot do (although it is obviously awkward to express this point in words.) The first innovators of the modern novel were already wrestling with typographical interventions to say more than words alone might, as of course were the originators of concrete poetry. In the 1740s, Samuel Richardson, a printer by trade, arranged for lines of text to be tipped and tilted on the printed page to signify the mental distress of his eponymous protagonist, Clarissa (fig.35).



L261] *CLARISSA* 893

PAPER IX

HAD the happiness of any the poorest outcast in the world, whom I had never seen, never known, never before heard of, lain as much in *my* power as my happiness did in *yours*, my benevolent heart would have made me fly to the succour of such a poor distressed—With what pleasure would I have raised the dejected head, and comforted the desponding heart!—But who now shall pity the poor wretch who has increased, instead of diminished, the number of the miserable!

PAPER X[1]

LEAD me, where my own thoughts themselves may lose me;
Where I may doze out what I've left of life,
Forget myself; and that day's guilt!—
Cruel remembrance!—how shall I appease thee?

—Oh! you have done an act
That blots the face and blush of modesty;
Takes off the rose
From the fair forehead of an innocent love,
And makes a blister there!—

Then down I laid my head,
Down on cold earth, and for a while was dead;
And my freed soul to a strange somewhere fled!
Ah! sottish soul! said I,
When back to its cage again I saw it fly,
Fool! to resume her broken chain,
And row the galley here again!
Fool! to that body to return,
Where it condemn'd and destin'd is to *mourn*.

Oh my Miss Howe! if thou hast friendship, help me,
And speak the words of peace to my divided soul,
That wars within me,
And raises ev'ry sense to my confusion.
I'm tott'ring on the brink
Of peace; and thou art all the hold I've left!
Assist me in the pangs of my affliction!

When honour's lost, 'tis a relief to die:
Death's but a sure retreat from infamy.

Then farewel, youth,
And all the joys that dwell
With youth and life!
And life itself, farewel!

For life can never be sincerely blest.
Heaven punishes the *Bad*, and proves the *Best*.

Death only can be dreadful to the bad:
To innocence 'tis like a bugbear dress'd
To frighten children. Pull but off the mask
And he'll appear a friend.

I could a tale unfold—
Would freeze thy blood, make thy two eyes, like stars,
Start from their spheres, thy knotted and combined locks
To part, and each particular hair to stand on end,
Like quills upon the fretful porcupine.

By swift misfortunes
How am I pursu'd!
Which on each other are,
Like waves, renew'd!

Figure 35. Typographical experimentation in Samuel Richardson's 1748 novel *Clarissa*.

Much later, the OULIPO writer Raymond Queneau produced 100,000,000,000,000 perfectly rhyming sonnets out of just 10 poems (10^{14} when expressed mathematically), by slicing along

[66] Virginia Woolf, 'Craftsmanship', BBC Radio broadcast, 29 April 1937.

the paper beneath every single printed line, making each one an independent, miniature, turnable sliver of a page (fig.36a, b).[67] Impossibly, the sonnet's complex rhyming scheme works in every permutation, whichever strips are combined. Meanwhile, Jonathan Safran Foer took Bruno Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*, cut hundreds of small windows into each page and produced an endlessly variable and re-readable story which we peer through,

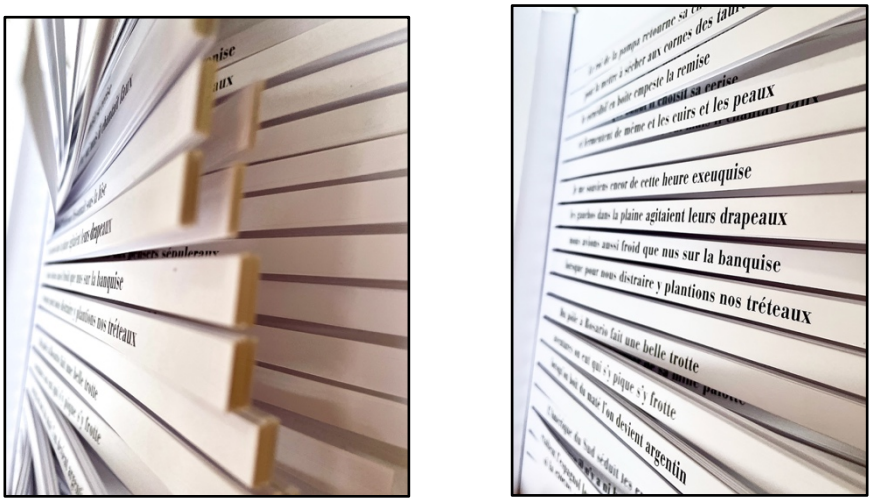


*Figure 36.*a.b. Details from Raymond Queneau's *Cent mille milliards de poèmes* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1961).

renamed with the partial anagram *Tree of Codes* (fig.37). Olafur Eliasson describes Foer's text as a 'book that remembers it actually has a body'. It is a neat phrase, although I would argue that it is, in fact, a book with an author who wishes that it did. My point is that a writer's quest for textual dimensionality and the elusive quality of simultaneity is destined to fail. But if that text is combined with sound, image and spatial exploration, a generative form of symbiosis occurs, a miniaturised Latourian critical zone in which each is dependent on the other, a condition Tim Morton might describe as 'coexistentialism'. But it offers even more than this: the central point of my argument is that we should find new ways of avoiding the nostalgic, retrospective engagement with landscape/inscape in which all has already been lost. Whilst we do not know what the future might hold, it may be possible to reach an accommodation with it, or make that commitment to Roy Scranton's 'apophatic futurism', the 'commitment to a future existence which by definition cannot be described'.[68] It is what the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl would call retention and protention. Retention holds

[67] OULIPO, *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle* or Workshop of Potential Literature, was formed in France in 1960 by Raymond Queneau and the mathematician François Le Lionnais.
[68] Roy Scranton, 'Beginning with the End', *Emergence Magazine*, 24 April 2020.

in our minds an act, image or event which is no longer in front of us. Protention anticipates an event with a fluid sense of what it might or might not look like. [69]

Fine art, text and narrative all have spatial quotients: the space occupied by the text;

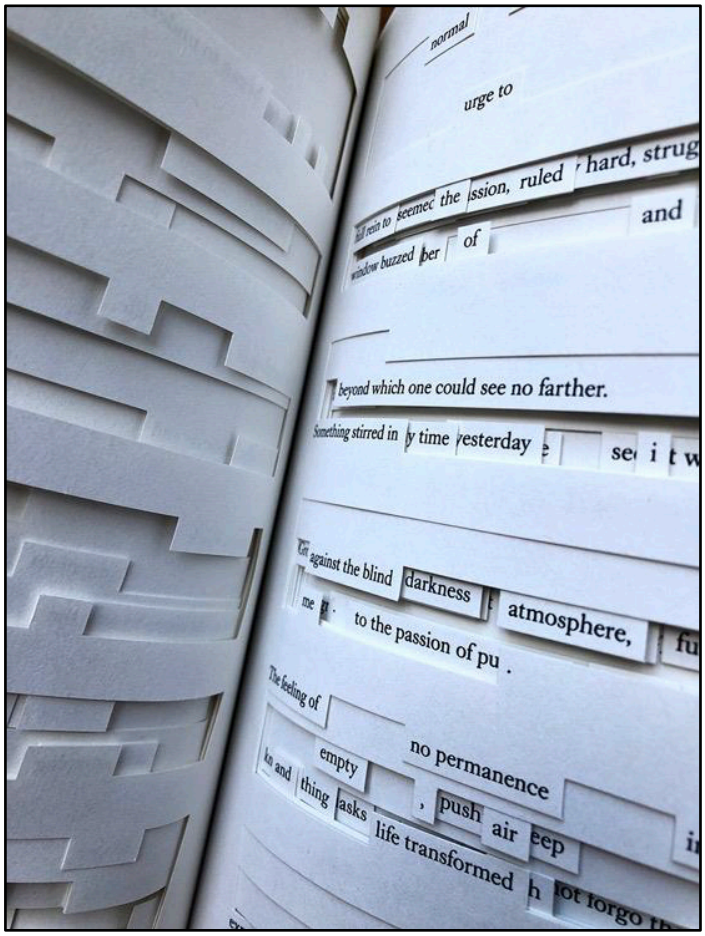


Figure 37. Jonathan Safran Foer, *Tree of Codes* (London: Visual Editions, 2010).

the paratext, or material other than the text; the uncoiling of the story; the parameters within which the narrative is recounted. The geographer Doreen Massey deployed a specifically narratological frame to express this, arguing that space is not a walkable, flat substrate but is braided with time and story. She used story to describe someone speeding past on a train and spotting a woman through the window:

> [H]e speeds on and forever in his mind she's stuck in that moment. But actually, of course, that woman is in the middle of doing something, it's a story. [...] I want to

[69] Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time* (1893-1917) trans. by John Barnett Brough (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991).

> see space as a cut through the myriad stories in which we are all living at any one moment. Space and time become intimately connected.[70]

Massey draws an all-important spatial component into her sense of time, but I am just as interested in her geological stratification of narrative as a series of cross-sectioning layers. Like Jurassic cliff formations, and like the manuscripts of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë and Charlotte Brontë, her representation of space has both horizontal and vertical axes.[71] Browning, the Brontës and Austen wrote both across and down the page, snipping out sections of paper with scissors, and patching manuscripts with pinned or sewn-on extra corrective layers - partly because they had limited supplies of paper and partly because, if the document was to be sent through the mail, it would save on postage to use fewer sheets. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's interpolated manuscript for her 1819 poem, 'The Battle of Marathon', has a new paper patch stitched on top of the words which lie beneath (figs.38-41).

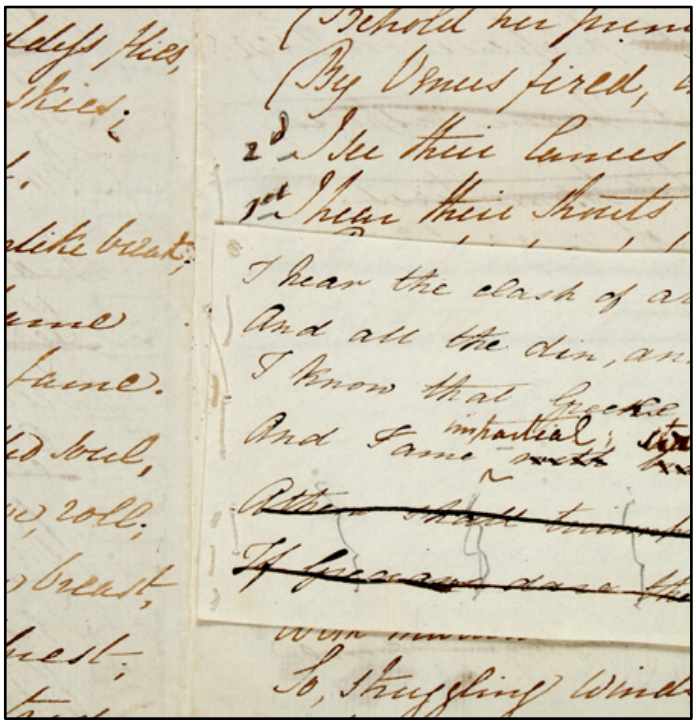


Figure 38. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sewn, interpolated manuscript of 'The Battle of Marathon', 1819, © Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin.

[70] Doreen Massey interviewed on *Social Science Bites* podcast, pub. by Sage, January 2013 <https://www.socialsciencespace.com/wp-content/uploads/DoreenMassey.pdf> [accessed 17 September 2023].

[71] Jane Austen's first draft of 'The Watsons' featured three correctional paper patches which she pinned to her manuscript as an alternative to her original text.
Charlotte Brontë excised 71 sections from the manuscript to *Villette* with scissors, sometimes removing pieces as small as 1cm in size. Ileana Marin, 'Charlotte Brontë's Busy Scissors Revising Villette', *Brontë Studies, Vol. 39* No. 1, Jan. 2014, pp. 42-53, p. 42.

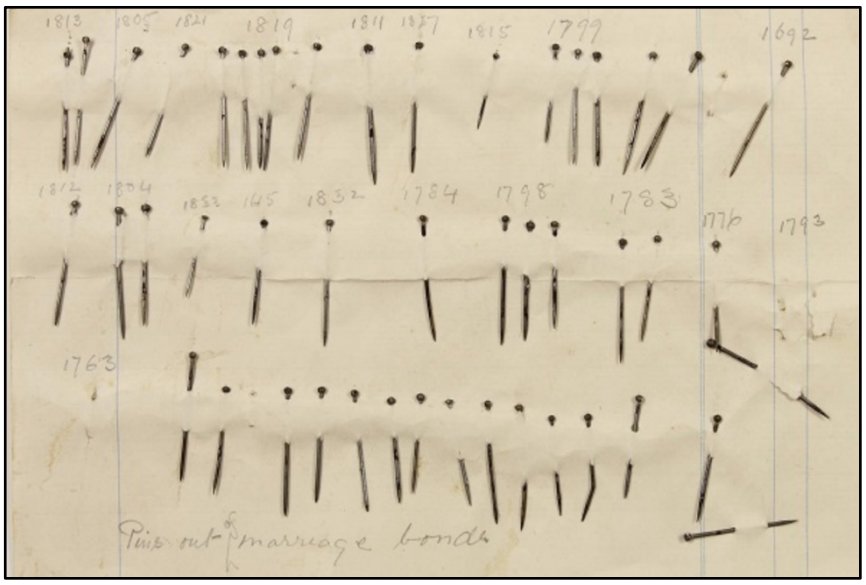


Figure 40. Pins from Jane Austen's manuscript of 'The Watsons'. Oxford Bodleian Libraries [MS. Eng. e. 3764, booklet 3, pp. 1-2].

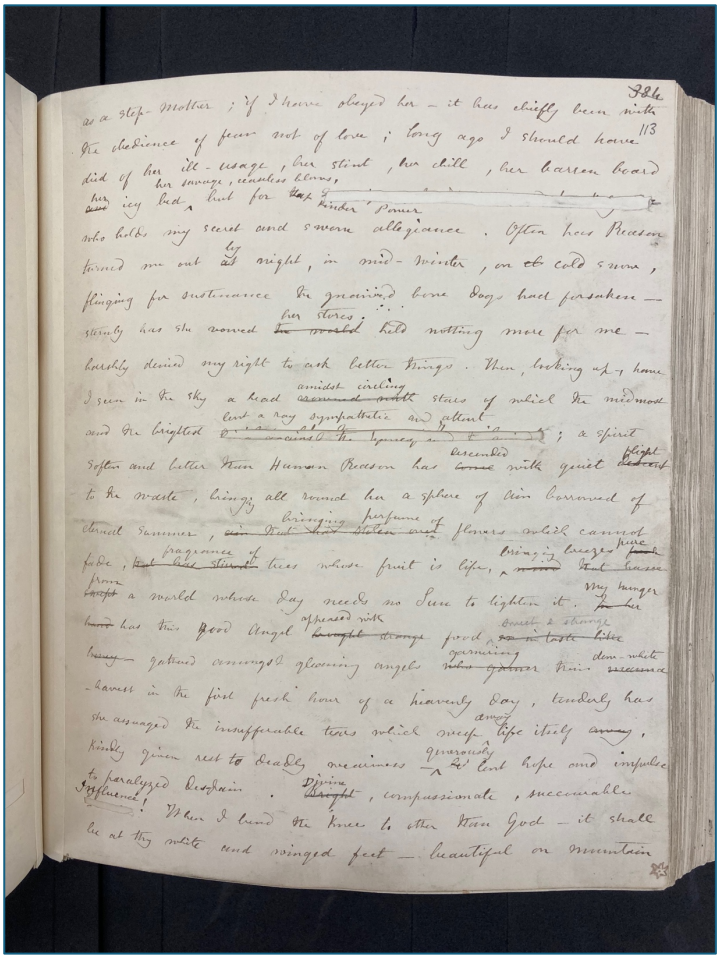


Figure 39. Excisions in Folio 113 (initially 382) from the manuscript of Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. From the British Library Collection: Add MS 43481.

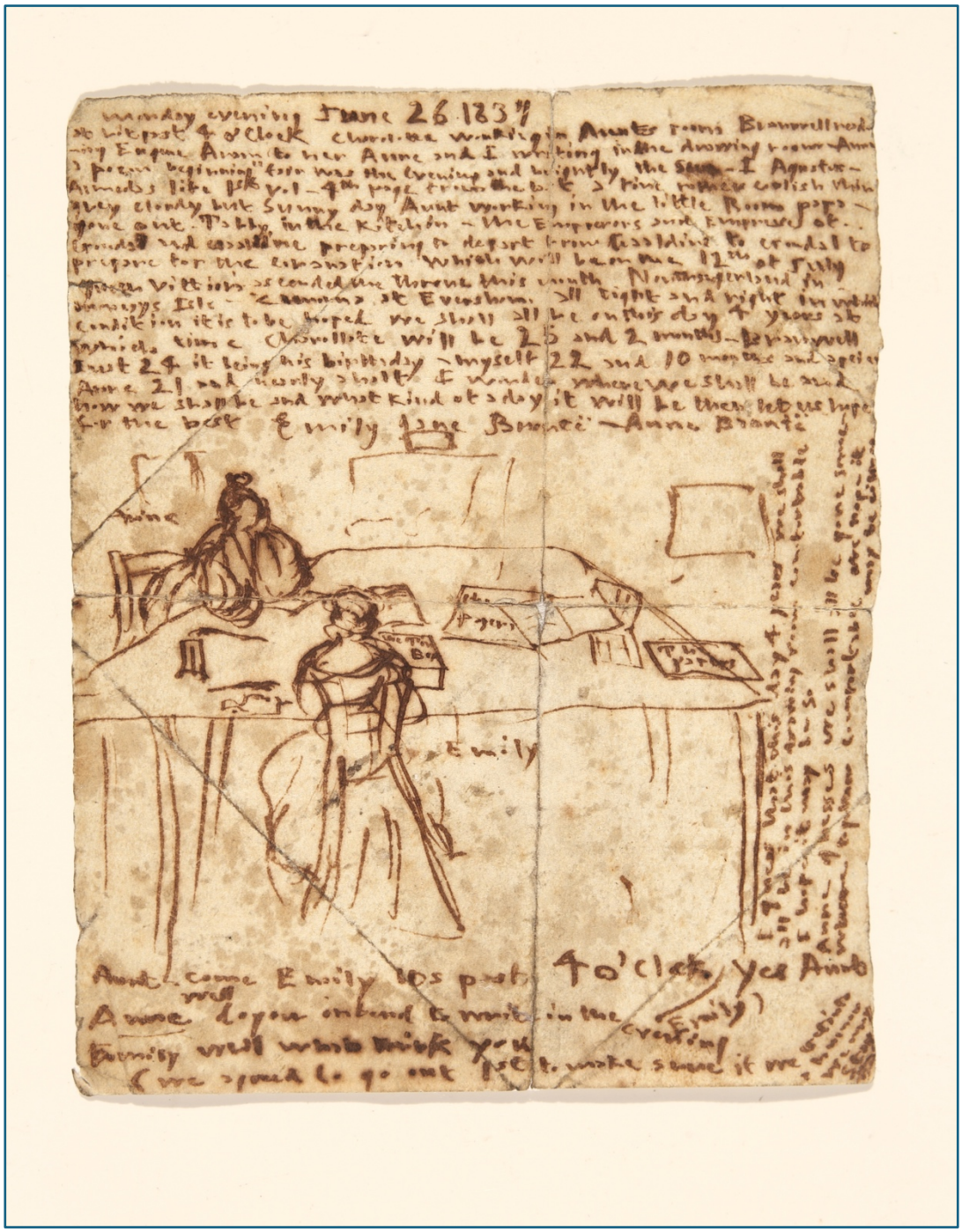


Figure 41. Drawing from Emily Brontë's diary, June 26, 1837 with multi-directional text and an image of the sisters writing at the table together. BS-105 © The Brontë Society. The sisters walked around this table each night, summoning their fictional ideas.

These are all manuscripts which have imaginative and literal depths, linking them to Massey's sense of 'cut-through' myriad stories. There is a generosity to Massey's description of time and space which, like a strange loop, is infinitely expandable. Geographer Philip Ethington, like Doreen Massey, argues for a spatial element in landscape, settling on the indivisible term of 'spacetime.' He points to John Lewis Gaddis's 2002 lectures drawing a comparison

between the past and landscape. But he has an objection: 'Gaddis convincingly shows that the production of historical knowledge is very much 'like' that of a cartographer [...] But, when Gaddis freely admits that he is only offering a simile, he begs the question of what the object of that simile is: if the past is only *like* a landscape, then what is it?[72] [emphasis mine]. When I embarked on my research, I had a strong sense that the practice should be more than mere metaphor or a way of saying that something was simply 'like' or 'suggestive' of something else. I wondered if it could *be* the thing. I am always conscious of Rhoda's anguished words in *The Waves*: '"like" and "like" and "like" – but what is the thing that lies beneath the *semblance* of the thing?'[73] [emphasis mine]. It strikes me now that Ethington's objection to metaphor, expressed via an imaginary excursion into time travel, is another way of striving for 'the thing' I am testing. Yes, I am devising a 'future legend' which one could argue cannot be 'the thing' at all, since conceptually and in Deleuzian and Guattarian terms it is only in the process of becoming and may never exist at all. But applying Ethington's experiment with the impossibility of time travel is revelatory, as I will explain:

> Either the entire planet goes backward, or nobody does. [...] Memories—stored in the neurobiological complex of the brain—would be unmade as time went backwards, and remade as time went forward again. A different 'present' might result, but no one would be able to remember the original 'present.' [...] Natural or cosmic 'time' cannot be a container or background of any spatial sort, in which to travel. Time is travel. All matter is in motion.[74]

If all 'matter is in motion', and 'no individual could break free of the network of energy and matter to visit an earlier state of that network'[75] or indeed a later one, then a future legend becomes not a metaphor for the future but a genuine version of it. It has potentially 'become' after all. It is a strange loop of potentiality and contingency.

Ethington and Massey cut against the ideas of Henri Bergson, with his sense of time as somehow dislocated from space. Bergson believed that it was impossible 'to distinguish between the duration, however short it may be, that separates two instants and a memory that connects them, because duration is essentially a continuation of what no longer exists

[72] Philip Ethington, 'Placing the Past: Groundwork for a spatial theory of history', in *Rethinking History* (London: Routledge, 2 May 2008, 11:4), p. 469.
[73] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 107.
[74] Ethington, 2008, p. 472.
[75] Ethington, 2008, p. 472.

into what does exist.'[76] Tim Armstrong describes Bergsonian time as 'a rolling accumulation of traces of previous time, taken up into the body and bound up with intentions directed at the future.'[77] There is, indeed, a proleptic drive to this project, however the sense of time as a kind of flow (Bergson's famous *'la durée'*) has a place here in the form of a constantly moving and evolving loop. Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner and James Joyce were enticed by the possibilities of *la durée*. Woolf, a great walker, saw her writing as a kind of 'spacetime' experiment which, yes, had Bergsonian temporal flow, but which also moved in space. How appropriate, then, that novelist Jeanette Winterson, in her preface to *The Wave*s, envisaged Woolf's writing itself as a form of walking, an idea which is critical to my research:[78]

> Her method was not the method of the nineteenth century, where a boat could be put out, and a course decided, and everyone on board securely taken to the Captain's destination. She wanted something riskier, more intimate, but she still needed to keep control. She chose to walk. She put language under the soles of her feet and she walked.[79]

Rather than the slightly clichéd idea that 'walking is a kind of writing', this is 'writing as a kind of walking', a form of exploratory expedition in which the walker/writer/creator can place one image/word/idea in front of another and hike imaginatively between them, in search of 'the thing'. What I am attempting to explore in my art practice is a means of finding a fluid nexus point where a myriad of fictional and non-fictional texts and stories might be entangled and absorbed into image and in which the non-linguistic is emphasised; it is not, seemingly, a form of reverse-ekphrastic experiment but it is helpful to view it through Johanna Malt's analysis of what ekphrasis might be capable of. As she explains, if we 'approach it in what W. J. T.. Mitchell calls the indifferent mode' we end up with visual imagery which 'becomes an absence around which another system – that of language – temporarily organises itself'. But, crucially, she points to the infinite flexibility in Jean-Luc Nancy's reading of ekphrasis: 'In Nancy's thought, signification and presence, the readable and the visible are articulated in a relation of mutual touching and withdrawal which is lateral, metonymic, and

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[76] Henri Bergson, 'Duration and Simultaneity, With Reference to Einstein's Theory', trans. by L. Jacobson and M. Lewis, in *Key Writings*, eds K.A. Pearson and J. Mullarkey (New York: Continuum, 2002), p. 208. I find it striking that this description – 'two instants and a memory that connects them' - is exactly how Virginia Woolf described the three-part structure of her novel *To the Lighthouse*: 'two blocks joined by a corridor' in which the corridor section has the title 'Time Passes'.

[77] Tim Armstrong, *Modernism: A Cultural History* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), p. 13.

[78] There is a long tradition of writers walking their ideas into existence. Alan Garner, for example, explained that the physical act of walking across an Iron Age hillfort summoned his novel *Treacle Walker*. Alan Garner interviewed, *Today*, BBC Radio 4, 7 September 2022.

[79] Jeanette Winterson, 'Introduction' to Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Vintage Classics, 2004), p x.

works in both directions.'[80] This question of 'touching' is particularly resonant in two important respects. The first, a more literal one, concerns my use of fresco for the 'blooks' in *May's Travelling Library'*. I developed my method of frescoing photopolymer etching into wet plaster as a deliberate way of suffusing substrate with image so that it is impossible to detect the reverberating point of contact. Johanna Malt's description of Nancy's version of ekphrasis is important here, in which she describes the 'signifying surface and its non-signifying other' as being 'turned towards one another in a non-appropriating embrace'. It seems to capture my dewriting of text-to-image powerfully.[81] 'Touching and withdrawal' highlight important aspects of my dewriting process, too: my real, imagined and fictional characters operate in a visual field of approach and retreat in which I am constantly drawing them towards each other, whilst allowing them to operate individually. My *Choral Symphony* soundscape of poetry, geophonic sound, percussion and music combines the characters as a single symphonic voice whilst allowing them their own individual stories. It is dewriting as a mode of speculative dissolution and reconstitution, all the while conscious of the difficulties which inevitably arise when one is trying to capture 'the thing', either in words or in image. It is text/textile/image/sound/text again, a variant of what Janis Jefferies means by 'play[ing] with the mobility of textile signs to conjure a messy game'. In this fluid game of text, textile, print and plaster, the outcome 'sputters over the boundaries of formal closure in an anxiety of uncertainty.'[82]

Virginia Woolf was deeply conscious of the flaws and limitations in the writing process and its inability to capture 'the thing'. In the summer of 1926, she wrote (how ironic that she always had to use words) of text's impossibilities:

> Suppose one could catch [one's thoughts] before they could become "works of art"? Catch them hot & sudden as they rise in the mind [...] Of course one cannot; for the process of language is slow & deluding. One must stop to find a word; then there is the form of the sentence, soliciting one to fill it in'.[83]

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[80] Johanna Malt, 'Ekphrasis/exscription: Jean-Luc Nancy on thinking and touching art', *Ekphrastic Encounters: New Interdisciplinary Essays on Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed. David Kennedy and Richard Meek (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), p. 233.
[81] Johanna Malt, p. 234.
[82] The Handbook of Textile Culture, ed. Janis Jefferies, Diana Wood Conroy, Hazel Clark (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), p. 99.
[83] Virginia Woolf, *Diary vol. 3* (London: Granta, fp. 1980, 2003), p. 126.

She tried to explain two extreme reactions to the inadequacies of words in her memoir essay, 'Sketch of the Past'. Woolf was only 13 when her mother died and she recalls lying in the long grass in Kensington Gardens, reading from a poetry anthology: 'I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them'.[84] It is as if the arrangements of words on a page have slipped their chains and become a single, non-textual object resonant with collective meaning. Yet, 'dressed in unbroken black' and mourning with her siblings, she also remembers the obverse: being 'made to fumble for words that we did not know'.[85] It is also worth noting that in the early draft of her first novel *The Voyage Out* she was dissatisfied with the comparative eloquence she had granted her protagonist, Rachel Vinrace. In the finished text Rachel is made inarticulate and her fiancé, would-be writer Terence Hewett, announces absurdly that he is trying to write a novel called *Silence*.[86] In a 1919 essay, Woolf argued that fiction should have 'no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style.'[87] As Woolf became more experimental in her writing, she was so enticed by the allure of escaping entrapping sentences that she even asked plaintively in her diaries whether she could fill *The Waves* with noises rather than words. On 23 June 1929, while working on the manuscript, she expressed her yearning to write in pure sound:

> The unreal world must be round all this – the phantom waves. [...]
> Could one not get the waves to be heard all through. Or the farmyard noises. Some odd irrelevant noises.[88]

In some ways it was despair at the inadequacy of language in the face of the primal nature of sound or longed-for 'transparency of words'. Just a few months before, in June 1928, she had expressed disgust at her own easy facility at producing heaps of sentences: 'I detest my own volubility. Why be always spouting words?'[89] That repugnance had been building for years. In her 1920 essay, 'Pictures and Portraits', she was already despairing: 'words, words! How inadequate you are! How weary one gets of you! How you will always be saying too

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[84] Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', *Moments of Being* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 103.
[85] 'Sketch of the Past', p. 105.
[86] Although Rachel dies of fever rather than by drowning, she is borne to her death by sea and contracts tropical fever while travelling by steamboat along a South American river. It is a voyage out by water with no return.
[87] Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction' April 1919, *The Common Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and co, 1925), p. 212.
[88] Virginia Woolf, *Diary vol. 3* (London: Granta, fp. 1980, 2003), p. 302.
[89] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (London: Persephone Books, [fp. 1953], 2012), p. 129.

much or little! Oh to be silent! Oh to be a painter!'[90] Nevertheless, I would argue that in the symphonic construction and flowing voices there is an underlying, insistent soundtrack to *The Waves*, even though words are the transport on which they travel. It is an idea which the choreographer Wayne McGregor explored in his three-part ballet *Woolf Works.*[91] At times, certainly in the opening *Mrs Dalloway* section, there is a turn towards straightforward adaptation which I attempt to avoid here, but the fluid, abstraction achieved in the ballet's rendition of *Orlando* and *The Waves* rejects simple abridgement or translation to powerful effect. Katie Mitchell's multi-media production of *The Waves* shares a similar impulse, allowing the audience to enter the minds of the characters on stage through the use of hyper-zoomed video imagery and live stage action.[92]

Artists in the field:

Translation is the act of 'carrying across' etymologically. My project is more a case of transmutation – changing the text in form, substance, and nature – as an act of reparation and of making newly pellucid. My art practice, with its infinitely elastic encyclopaedia of plaster works, travelling library, walks, poetry laser-etched into milk substrates, soundscapes, and creative time-trials has become such a construct. There is of course a straightforward artistic connection here to paths walked by artists and writers such as Sumi Perera, Janet Cardiff, Rebecca Solnit, Richard Long, Hamish Fulton, Jaspar Joseph-Lester, and Francis Alÿs amongst others. There are also links to recent scholarship on women as walkers, including Lauren Elkin's *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (2016), Annabel Abbs's *Windswept: Why Women Walk* (2022); and Kerri Andrews's *Wanderers: A History of Women Walking* (2020) and *Way Makers: An Anthology of Women's Writing about Walking* (2023).Tribute must be paid, too, to the second-wave feminist artists who fought to create more space for women, including Su Richardson, Monica Ross, Miriam Schapiro, Judy Chicago, Susan Hiller, Sally Gollop, and Kate Walker, Judith Shea and Maureen Connors.

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[90] Virginia Woolf, 'Pictures and Portraits', 1920, *Oh, To Be a Painter!* (London: David Zwirner Books, 2021).
[91] *Woolf Works*, choreographed by Wayne McGregor, music by Max Richter. Premiered Royal Opera House, 11 May 2015.
[92] *The Waves*, directed by Katie Mitchell; designed by Vicki Mortimer; video design by Leo Warner. Premiered Cottlesloe Theatre, 16 November 2006.

Figure 43. Su Blackwell, *The Brontë Parsonage,* 2017, © The Brontë Society/Su Blackwell.

By using books in an art practice, artists such as Su Blackwell have drawn out new imagery from text and the textual (fig.42). Her work is technically astonishing and it articulates a sense of place, but the imagery itself is often a more literal gloss or précis of the original narratives. Anselm Kiefer recently drew on literature too, in *Finnegans Wake*, his 2023 encounter with James Joyce's complex and challenging 1939 novel. As Brian Dillon noted, 'The novel seems to contain all words, all thoughts, all histories.' In translating the novel, Kiefer wrestled with the conundrum of when to stop piling up yet more material in order to somehow capture his elusive prey (fig.43). Jonathan Jones noted that the vast, sprawling, spectacular show 'is like a parallel text: Kiefer's art and Joyce's words side by side.'[93] In my view, it is more competitive howl than 'parallel text', since in attempting to outdo and outshout Joyce, Kiefer's experiment loses the immersive, everyday intensity of the original. In many ways, Kiefer is seeking recourse to the Baudrillardian idea of the simulacra and the hyperreal, since his audacious copy is more spectacularly vast, showy, loud and attention-seeking than the original ever was. Where Kiefer is attempting a kind of hyper-translation, I am engaging in a form of transmutational lexicon in which my art practice acts as a form of object language and store. It is not replica, simulacra or hyperreal and each metalanguage or work is an element of a strange loop which might or might not be in the process of temporarily closing the circle until a new element is inserted. My point about Kiefer's *Finnegans Wake* is that to make an artwork an impersonation of the thing it represents is inevitably self-defeating for the artist. You might ask yourself, why not just

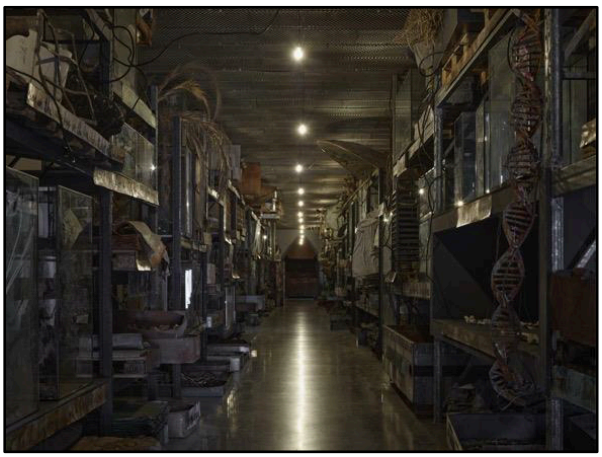


Figure 42. Anselm Kiefer, *Finnegans Wake,* White Cube, Bermondsey, 7 June-20 August, 2023, © Anselm Kiefer. Photo © White Cube (Theo Christelis).

[93] Jones noted, too, the recourse to the sublime which, as I explain in Chapter 2, is a mode I find problematic. Jonathan Jones, interview with Anselm Kiefer, *Guardian*, 8 June 2023 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2023/jun/08/anselm-kiefer-finnegans-wake-bombed> [accessed 14 September 2023].

read the book? I have had to question my own work closely on this question. Why not just read Woolf, Eliot, Brontë *et al*? My considered answer is that in the apparently paradoxical act of making text newly accessible by rendering it literarily (and literally) inaccessible is a way of converting one form of attention into another. I have moved from Woolf's disgust at her 'own volubility', to a form of practice which is more of the body, the hand, the instinct.[94] In emphasising the non-linguistic, I have produced work which is speculative and propositional, deliberately allowing the space for ambiguity. It is not a question of sieving a text for greater clarity, but of opening it up to new forms of reading and responding. It is, to borrow from Donna Haraway, not a project which focuses on 'separating the good scientific sheep from the bad goats of bias and misuse', but one which celebrates contingency and 'situated knowledges'.[95]

Book artist Jonathan Callan thinks through the idea of embeddedness, deletion, and un/readability, signalling the influence of Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning*. To that extent there is a connection with my work, but he describes his deconstructed books as analogue, visual attempts to signal his encroaching deafness, experimenting with the gesture of enacting illegibility to demonstrate silence. He obscures, slices, and closes-off his books. For his 2018 works *The First of Terry T. Sullivan* and *The Last of Terry T. Sullivan*, he acquired

Figure 45. Jonathan Callan, *The First of Terry T. Sullivan, 2018,* paper, screws, synthetic resin, 48x50x17.5cm. © Jonathan Callan.

Figure 44. Jonathan Callan, *The Last of Terry T. Sullivan, 2018,* paper, screws, synthetic resin, 53x64x16.5cm, © Jonathan Callan.

hundreds of books on the death of a voracious book collector. Callan screwed scores of them together into a sinuous, tightly-bound bundle of illegibility, encasing the whole in an imprisoning overlay of resin (figs.44,45). It would be easy to interpret this as an act of

[94] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (London: Persephone Books, [fp. 1953], 2012), p. 129.
[95] Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1988), p. 578.

Figure 46. Rachel Whiteread, *Untitled (Book Corridors)*, 1997, Photo © Tate (Joe Humphrys) 2017 / Kunstsammlung, Nordrhein_Westfalen, Dusseldorf, Germany.

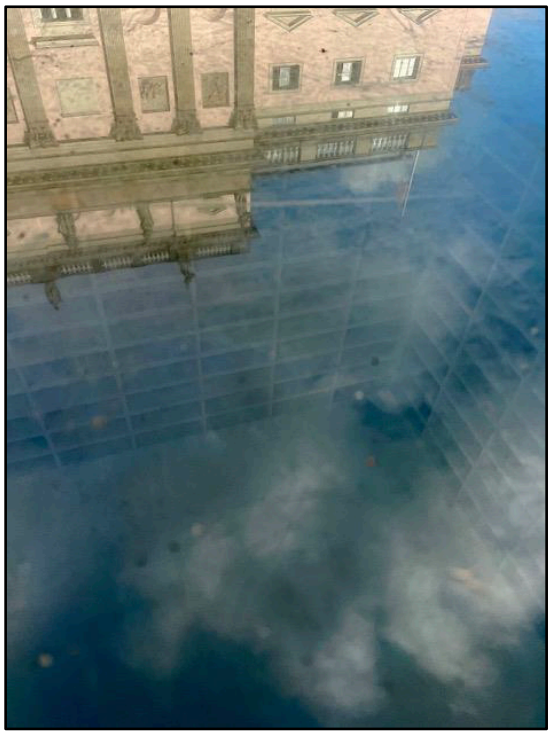


Figure 47. Micha Ullman, *Bibliothek*, 1995, © Micha Ullman. Image © Charlotte Lee-Potter, 2024.

cultural vandalism, a nihilistic flourish to destroy text. Yet, of the more than two thousand works, very few of them had even been opened before Callan intervened. His act of deliberate illegibilising brings more oxygen to the works than Sullivan's compulsive desire to own them ever did. However, this locking-up of texts makes them permanently impossible to read, even though it draws attention to them, just as the books of Rachel Whiteread's *Untitled 1998* are made visible only by the negative space they leave behind (fig.46). The idea of destroying books is dangerously affiliated with autocratic, populist and dictatorial regimes; my intention is to celebrate narrative whilst making it readable in new ways, not to silence it. While my art practice dismantles, cuts and spins literary texts, it is important that it would be theoretically possible to reassemble them; the words are available, if hard to catch. Book destruction is not an accusation I lay at Callan's feet, but it is an important point of difference. Emma Smith's work *Portable Magic: A History of Books and their Readers* explores the grotesque politically-motivated drive to burn or destroy books.[96] Her text includes reference to Micha Ullman's 1995 work *Bibliothek*, a library of absence, sitting beneath a glass window set into the cobbled street of

[96] Emma Smith, *Portable Magic: A History of Books and their Readers* (London: Allen Lane, 2022).

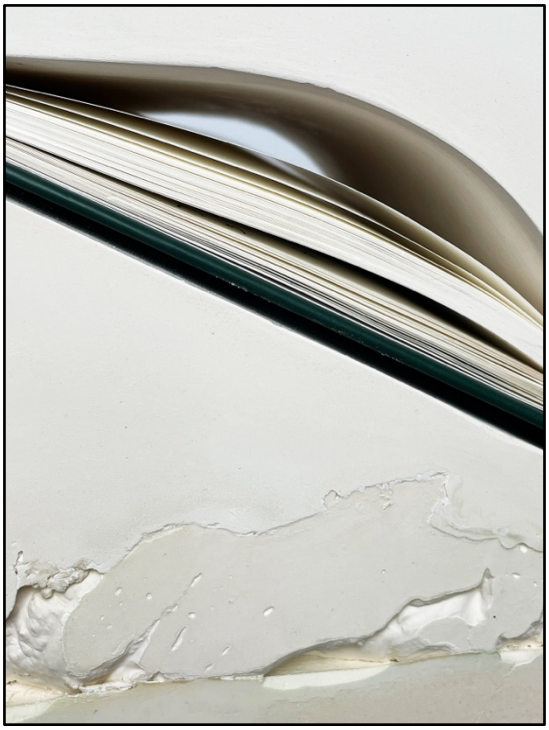
Bebelplatz in Berlin, the empty white shelves denoting the 20,000 books burned by the Nazis on 10 May 1933 (fig. 47).[97]

Callan has a fluid sense that words can be exchanged for objects and vice versa, describing his fascination as a 'preoccupation with christening words as things'. As I touched on earlier, I have a similar love for the materiality of neologisms, etymology and the infinite flexibility of contranyms or Janus words, as a way of imbuing words with more meaning, more spatial and temporal possibility.[98] Callan likes to create a space where a word once was and replace it with an illegible object. He describes the impulse for his 2001 work *On The Photography of Flowers* like this: 'The page was a description of a photographers [sic] preferred method of taking pictures of plants. I removed most of each word as a single block and then extruded silicone rubber through the spaces'. The white rubber takes on the appearance of multiple, fleshy petals; it is simply readable in new, imaginative ways although it does subscribe to Peter Schwenger's definition, which I disputed earlier, of asemic writing as preserving 'the linear organization of conventional writing.' My work *La Cité des Dames*

Figure 48 La Cité des Dames, frescoed plaster, Jesmonite, book,

[97] On a recent research trip to Berlin, I walked to *Bibliothek*. A group of American tourists was standing on the glass panel embedded in the ground. One asked me if I knew where the famous artwork was.
[98] Contranyms appear in my villanelles: to cleave; to cling to and to break apart, for example. Other examples of contranyms include: to bolt, as in to flee and to secure; fast, as in to be swift or to be stuck; and overlook, as in to neglect and to supervise.

(assessed more fully in Chapter 3) in *May's Travelling Library*, takes an alternative route (fig. 48).It enacts the process of illegibility by placing a handwritten, handmade book inside a heavy, moulded, book-like, architectural object. But it can be made newly legible by lifting up



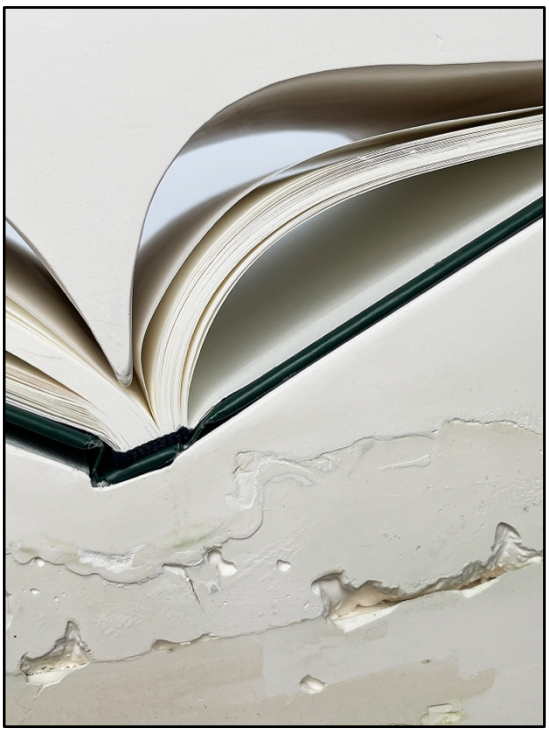


Figure 49 a, b. Details*, La Cité des Dames,* frescoed plaster, Jesmonite, book, 31x29x35 cm.

the top layer of chiselled and frescoed plaster and Jesmonite, to reveal the book inside. (figs.49a,b). While Callan consciously hinders the act of reading, I am inviting the possibility.

As I have touched on, there is a consciousness to the laborious nature of my methods, including the slow art of bookbinding. Once I had abandoned my original 365 mile walk, I started to provide an exchange of labour: meticulous, time-consuming, hand-made processes to take the place of countless footsteps. There is an onerous, physically demanding quality to Callan's work too. He has spoken of the constant threat of repetitive strain injury as he cuts, slices, removes and adds. My fascination with the intense labour of iterative work draws me to the work of Wolfgang Laib. He works with biomaterials such as beeswax, pollen, and milk, producing serene installations of sieved pollen which rest in monolithic shapes on the floors of large gallery spaces. The particular fascination for me is his ability to make an intensely personal encounter with his materials both a cool-headed ontological study as well as a resonant phenomenological one. His work is 'weathered' in the sense that it is the work

of years to collect sufficient pollen to fill a space, and the work of concentrated, painful hours to measure it out into mounds. Yet the work itself is not autoethnographic. It appears to float above the ground, governed by universal principles, entirely free of ego and yet completely dependent on Laib's life experiences. To that extent, it has connections with my definition of the democratic strange loop. Laib first started collecting pollen in 1977, from the same small village in southern Germany each time: 'It's something I do for hours and hours, days and days,' he says. He holds up a jar of vivid yellow dandelion pollen; a paltry two centimetres of it sits in the bottom of a single glass jar. 'It's not much', he admits, 'but it took me three weeks at least.' Even the idea itself is the process of time, as he explains:

> [It's] pollen as the beginning of life. [...] This pollen jar is the concentration of all these 27 years. The essence of all your experience is coming into an artwork.[99]

Figure 50 Wolfgang Laib sieving pollen, © Kunstmuseum, Stuttgart.

There is something powerful about such an exhausting, exhaustive encounter with the territory of his materials. The shaped arrangement of Laib's pollen, laid patiently onto the floor with the simple tap of a metal spoon onto the side of a cloth-lined sieve, forms a kind of *gestalt*, or transformative shape, encouraging the viewer to look not just at it, but through it, into it and beyond it (fig.50). The materials themselves are the simplest, the most fundamental, determined by season and time. It is weathered art/artist in all senses. Laib's work with milk, seen in his 1978 work, *Milk Stone*, is similarly serene. A small, flat rectangle of Carrara marble has an almost indiscernible indentation made across its top surface. Laib pours milk into the dip, the liquid's surface tension camouflaging it against the white marble. He described it as 'participating in something that is independent of myself and yet has universal meaning'.[100] It is both of him and not, it holds everything and nothing, it is ontological for him and yet phenomenological to us.[101] In Chapter 1, I analyse the risks of allowing beauty or serenity to creep into my own art practice. Interestingly, the use of beauty as a conscious methodology is an accusation levelled at women rather than men. I am not aware that Wolfgang Laib has ever been criticised for such a thing.

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[99] Wolfgang Laib, *Pollen from Hazelnut*, dir. Karen Fischer, MoMA, 2013.
[100] Wolfgang Laib, *Milk Stone*, Museum of Modern Art, New York <https://www.moma.org/audio/playlist/50/754> [accessed 12 September 2023].
[101] I detail my specific use of milk as an etched substrate or textile in Chapter 2.

In constructing a new conceptual house of stories for my women characters, I am drawn to the possibilities presented by fibre arts as a construction method. Faith Wilding's *Crocheted Environment (Womb Room)* (1972), is architectural in scale, its lacey, tent-like walls crocheted from rope, wool and twine. As Julia Bryan Wilson points out, Wilding uses crochet 'to create porous "walls"'. Wilson notes the rich etymology of the word 'fabric' drawn from the Latin word *faber,* making clear the work's 'resonance with fabrication, construction, building.'[102] My project, however, is an art of deconstruction, followed by a radical act of rebuilding. As I explain in Chapter 2, my work is deliberately bodyless. It is a decision which resonates with the bodyless work of Rosemary Mayer; she too draws on the scholarship of Christine de Pizan, naming her 1972 work *Semiramis* after one of the women in Pizan's fictional *City of Ladies*. Constructed of nylon, netting, wood and cord, the work is an evocation rather than an embodiment of the legendary Assyrian queen of the classical age. In some respects, Mayer's methods overlap with Shola von Reinhold's use of the term 'transfixions' to summon characters from the past.[103] My work differs in that it is in the specific interweaving of fictional and nonfictional characters that the frictive power lies. Judy Chicago, too, conjures Christine de Pizan in *The Dinner Party*, first shown in 1979, which represents 1,038 historical women. 39 have their own place settings at the table, including de Pizan and Virginia Woolf. There is a grandeur and stasis to Chicago's statement which I am not reaching for in this project. It is, however, noteworthy that she started work on *The Dinner Party* with beauty in mind, arguing that 'the function of beauty in art is to help us look at aspects of reality that would be too painful to confront if they were not presented beautifully.'[104]

Outline of chapters and objectives:

In the following chapters, I outline how these entangled, interwoven methods and methodology combine to create new ways of seeing and reading a woman's text.

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[102] Julia Bryan Wilson, *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 24.
[103] Shola von Reinhold, *Lote* (London: Jacaranda Books, 2020).
[104] Judy Chicago interviewed by Torey Akers, *The Art Newspaper*, 3 November 2023 <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/11/03/judy-chicago-the-veteran-artist-backing-great-forgotten-women-and-creating-beauty-from-pain> [accessed 29 June 2024].

Chapter 1: Ariadne's thread: the journeywoman, beauty, and the strange loop explores the role and risks of beauty in an art practice, and builds connections between yarn, loops, and string, assessing the strange loop as a means of expressing time itself. I have touched on the role of strange loops and villanelles as shaped forms in the prologue, but in this chapter I analyse them in closer detail,. I also explain my use of the term 'journeywoman'. The chapter offers a detailed analysis of the ways that the domestic arts and crafts could be entrapping for those women who craved other sources of creative thought.

Chapter 2: Milk, ink, and paper: force-feeding the bodyless girl examines the role of milk as a biomaterial in the context of my milk books, fixed-verse performance piece *Running Away with Herselves,* milk fibres and bed linen made from milk. I analyse why there are no bodies in my research practice and why intellectual craving is often expressed as a form of hunger. The chapter includes an examination of Lucy's, Susie's, Rhoda's and Maggie's places in the world, via their assemblages which circle each other on wheels. It assesses the impact, for example, of trapping the paper construction for *Maggie's Hair* inside the constraints of a bookbinder's sewing frame.

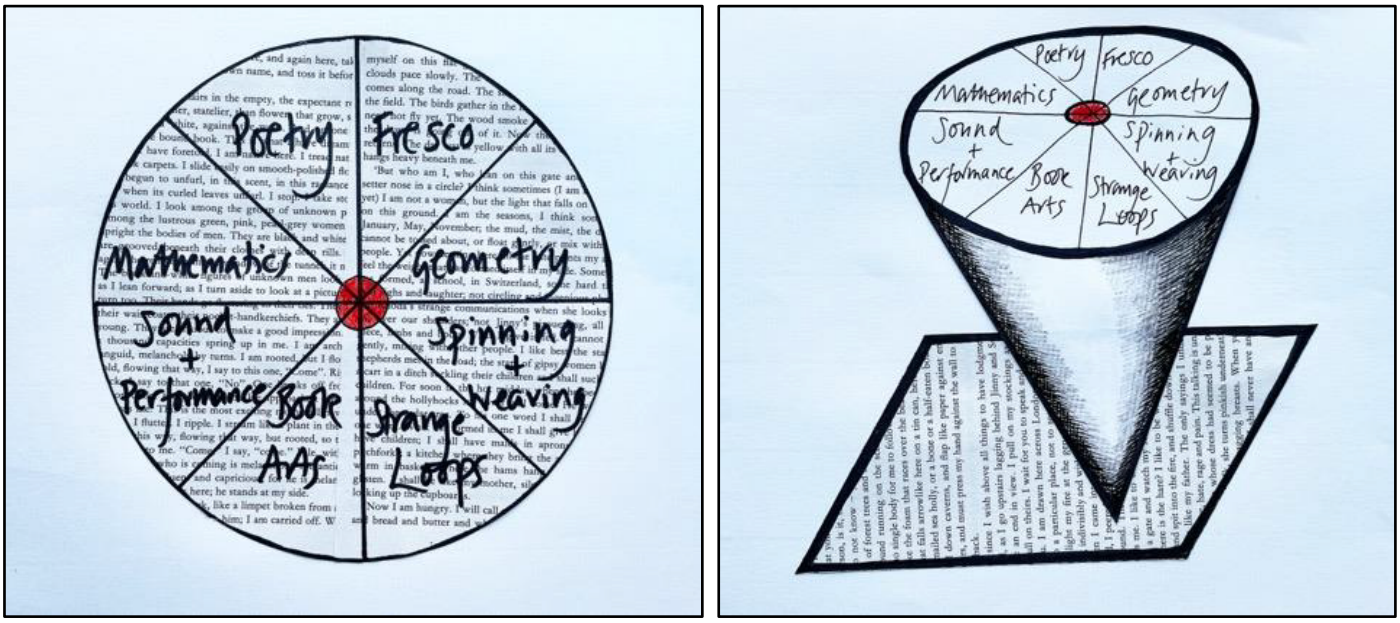
Chapter 3: May's travelling library: container space and cabaret uses the talisman or totem of 'the library' as a container for women's lives. I specifically use the idea of the container as a freeing, nurturing space, drawing on Ursula K. Le Guin's idea that fictionalised territory should be a kind of capacious bag in which solidarity and succour can be found. I analyse the outcomes of my assemblage *May's Travelling Library* and its contents, drawing on Richard Mabey's observation that a library is 'a kind of landscape', but one which 'edges towards the rampant wildness of an ecosystem, with an agenda of its own.'[105] This chapter explores surface and my neologism 'sousface' via the surface-defying art practice of fresco and establishes whether such excavation can be expressive of the walker herself. I also analyse my installation of paper collars inscribed with fixed verse.

Coda: I prefer the more open-ended form of the coda to the finalising constraints of a conclusion, particularly in the context of the iterative, looped, interwoven, fluid movement of lone women walkers. The coda reflects on the findings of my research and assesses the

[105] Richard Mabey, 'The Library as an Ecosystem', *Slightly Foxed*, Issue 47, 1 September 2015.

original contributions to knowledge. It draws on the strange loop and the narratological ideas of Roland Barthes to define this project's original findings.

A clear objective of this research project is to break down the boundaries between academic disciplines, generating unexpected crossovers and new, shared knowledge within hybrid territory. I conceptualise these methods and elements of practice as a focused, attenuated interpretive system to navigate this territorial fusion. I visualise that system as a rich exchange of ideas which span the disciplines of the humanities, social sciences and



Figures 51a, b. Diagrammatic visualisations of the project's intersecting disciplines which coalesce to focus the project.

formal science, beneath which sits a nested subset of fields combining linguistics, literature, visual art, geopoetics, geometry and materiality (figs.51a,b; 52). In an original interchange between literature, art and sound, I use words, numbers, spatial systems, geometry, surface/sousface, and temporal visualisation to excavate the physical landscape and the interconnected inscape of the mind. I bring to bear my methods and languages onto the inscape of the project – the life of the mind as the walker moves across territory which is both real and imagined. It is a physical and psychic geography field trip, producing a body of work in which the fictive is made material. Whilst acknowledging my own deep immersion in writing and literature as academic and professional disciplines, I turn them into new forms and, in doing so, attempt to walk from the scriptorium.

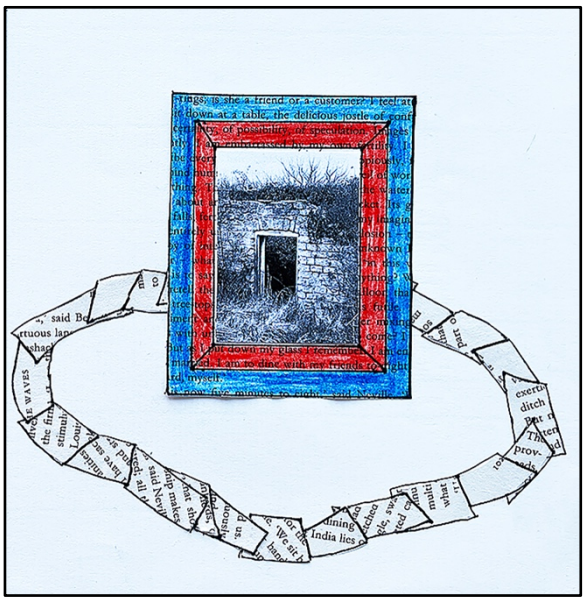
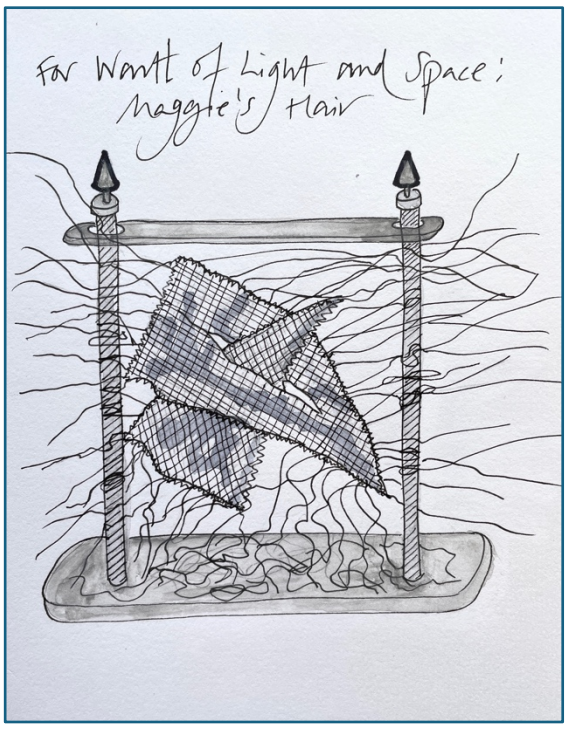


Figure 52. The overlapping components of the non-hierarchical strange loop deployed in this research as thinking, walking and seeing frameworks.

Chapter 1:

Ariadne's thread: the journeywoman, beauty, and the strange loop



Poised midway between the unvisualizable cosmic vastness of curved spacetime and the dubious, shadowy flickerings of charged quanta, we human beings, more like rainbows and mirages than like raindrops or boulders, are unpredictable self-writing poems – vague, metaphorical, ambiguous, and sometimes exceedingly beautiful.[106]
Douglas Hofstadter

Writing is about setting ideas in lines, for unwritten ideas, left to their own devices, run in circles. This circling of ideas, where any idea can turn back to the previous one, is called mythical thinking.[107]
Vilém Flusser

Figure 53. Design, *For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair.*

Beauty in unexpected places:

In the Spring of 2024, a contemporary art critic briefly studied my stitched and knotted work *Holding it in, letting it out*, which combined *walking, walking on alone: Lucy's Carpet*, alongside *For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair* (figs.54-56). He held a copy of my text, a component of the piece, which offers a connective narrative thread. I have reproduced it here:

> *Holding it in, letting it out* consists of two works: *walking, walking on alone: Lucy's Carpet* and *For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair*. It is a materialised conversation between isolated, fictional Lucy from Charlotte Brontë's novel *Villette* and Maggie from George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*. Eliot repeatedly references the vigour of

[106] Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am A Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 363.
[107] Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, trans. by Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 6.

Maggie's hair, judged inappropriate in a woman. "'I think the gell has too much hair'" announces Maggie's vituperative aunt. "'I'd have it thinned and cut shorter, sister, if I was you: it isn't good for her health.'"[108] Before anyone can take the scissors to it, Maggie slashes it herself in a fit of temper, thinking it will make her look more intelligent and thus qualify her for the education only her brother has received. The crocheted paper artwork fights the confines of its own fiction, twisting and resisting the constraints of a bookbinder's frame.

The companion piece, a 4-metre carpet, is knotted with a complete copy of *Villette*, Brontë's portrait of introverted, isolated Lucy Snowe. The text, printed on recycled milk bottle fabric, pours out of the rug's canvas, revealing fragments of Charlotte Brontë's sisters' novels, *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* too. The carpet is needlepointed with wool-roving which was spun in a mill close to the Brontës' home. The work embodies all three Brontë sisters' unique methods of summoning their characters by walking around their dining-room table together, intoning phrases and sentences. When Emily died of tuberculosis, Anne and Charlotte continued their nightly walks. But Anne died from the same disease five months later and Charlotte had to complete her portrait of Lucy by walking alone. Her isolation at this point was noted by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte's biographer, who wrote a letter to John Forster in which she transcribed what the Brontës' maid had told her:

> "'For as long as I can remember [...] Miss Brontë [Charlotte], Miss Emily and Miss Anne used to put away their sewing after prayers, and walk all three one after the other round the table in the parlour till near eleven o' clock. Miss Emily walked as long as she could; and when she died Miss Anne and Miss Brontë took it up, – and now my heart aches to hear Miss Brontë walking, walking on alone." Elizabeth Gaskell added her own reflections at this point of the letter: 'on enquiring I found that after Miss Brontë had seen me to my room, she did come down every night and begin that slow monotonous incessant walk in which I am sure I should fancy I heard the steps of the dead following me. She says she could not sleep without it.'[109]

The critic ignored the companion text.

"What is it?" he asked, looking at the installation.

I got as far as mentioning *Villette* and Charlotte Brontë's circular walks before he interrupted:

"Haven't the Brontës had enough attention already? And why's the work beautiful?

Why haven't you made it disgusting?"

They were phrased as questions but delivered as statements. His reaction was ironic in the context of building a chorus of silenced women, but it also forced me to consider the role of beauty and the consolatory in my research practice.

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[108] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 67.
[109] Letter from Elizabeth Gaskell to John Forster, after 29 September 1853. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends, Vol. 3, 1852-1855*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. p. 201.

Figure 54. The installation commented on by the critic: *Holding it In, Letting it Out:* an installation in wool, paper crochet, dye-sublimated text on recycled milk bottles, approx. 60x200x400cm. The installation is composed of two works: back, *For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair* and, front, *walking, walking on alone: Lucy's Carpet*.

Figure 55. Detail*, walking, walking on alone: Lucy's carpet;* wool, paper crochet, dye-sublimated text on recycled milk bottles, approx. 100x20x400cm.

Figure 56. Detai*l, walking, walking on alone: Lucy's carpet;* wool, paper crochet, dye-sublimated text on recycled milk bottles, approx. 400x20x100cm.

I have not made work which is beautiful in the conventional sense of a completed, precise piece of craft. Susie, for one, would have been appalled by the deliberately unstitched, bald patches of *Lucy Snowe's Carpet* and the slivers of text bubbling up from the surface in uneven ripples of frayed fabric; she would have wondered why I deliberately slashed and distorted the crocheted-paper piece, *Maggie's Hair* (fig.56). The milk paper of *Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk*, more akin to rough, worn skin, would have horrified her and she would have been mystified by the rough, milk edges of the bed linen on *Rhoda's Bed*. But I would argue that I am the sympathetic witness to the dewriting of text in these works – they are dissolving and de/rematerialising before my eyes – and what beauty there is in the works can be found in the deliberate, calm restraint of the monochromatic colour palette of all the works, the conscious stillness of the assemblages and installations, and the deliberate spirit of solidarity that unites them.[110] Beauty, if indeed there is beauty here, is not an aesthetic choice but an assertion of defiance and strength in the context of powerlessness. Like many women, Susie, Lucy, Maggie and Rhoda had neither beauty nor power in their lives and the realisation of stillness in my work is a gesture of command on their behalf. Tellingly, the novelist Willa Cather commented on beauty in the context of her own fictional girl, impoverished Ántonia, arguing that in a life where there is so little, beauty must be snatched in tiny moments. Something as apparently uncreative as taking a bath, she said, is a way of developing an aesthetic sensibility when there is not much creative joy to be found. Lucy's enforced self-denial is devoid of beauty; Rhoda, tormented by doubt and anxiety, obsessively peers into her basin of water on which flower petals float like mythic ships, seeking signs of comfort. Writer Sally Bayley, subject of the first episode of my research podcast *Inside A Mountain*, observed the same drive. As a girl brought up in the care system, she told me that beauty was "painfully absent", other than in the books she hungrily retreated to in the public library.[111] For that reason, she has always sought beauty in tiny gestures or fragmentary moments. Memoirist Noreen Masud expressed the same sentiments in another of my podcast episodes. As we walked along Severn Beach discussing her abusive childhood and diagnosis of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, she said simply: "I crave beauty and its use is a criticism that only women receive."[112] Academic Christina Sharpe, visiting her dying mother

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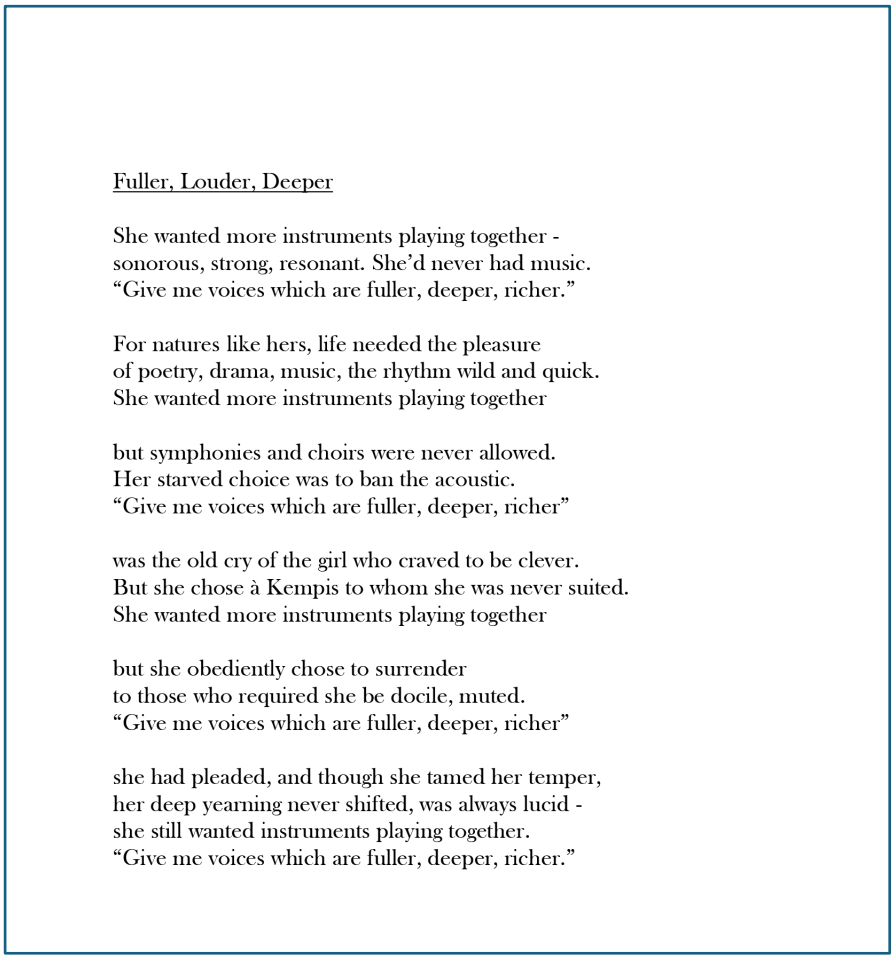
[110] I have tried to be a sympathetic witness even to my own making. In the creation of *Lucy's Carpet*, I worked 14-hour days, 7 days a week, for over a month. I began to feel as though the carpet and I were not just in dialogue but in combat. But in the carrying over of hours of labour, I have tried to take on/take in the years of labour paid out so painfully by Susie and her peers. It is a small act of sympathy.
[111] Sally Bayley: 'Landscapes of the Imagination', *Inside A Mountain*. <https://insideamountain.podbean.com/e/landscape-of-the-imagination-sally-bayley/>.
[112] Noreen Masud, 'The Flat Places of Noreen Masud', *Inside A Mountain*

and moved by finding her old, carefully-handmade Christmas ornaments, framed beauty as 'Attentiveness whenever possible to a kind of aesthetic that escaped violence whenever possible.'[113] For George Eliot's Maggie, the lack of beauty became so unbearable that in the end she chose a different course of action: total renunciation and asceticism: "'I was never satisfied with a little of anything'", she says. "'That is why is it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether… I never felt that I had enough music – I wanted more instruments playing together – I wanted voices to be fuller and deeper.'"[114]Her plea became the thread of my villanelle 'Fuller, Louder, Deeper'.



Fuller, Louder, Deeper

She wanted more instruments playing together -
sonorous, strong, resonant. She'd never had music.
"Give me voices which are fuller, deeper, richer."

For natures like hers, life needed the pleasure
of poetry, drama, music, the rhythm wild and quick.
She wanted more instruments playing together

but symphonies and choirs were never allowed.
Her starved choice was to ban the acoustic.
"Give me voices which are fuller, deeper, richer"

was the old cry of the girl who craved to be clever.
But she chose à Kempis to whom she was never suited.
She wanted more instruments playing together

but she obediently chose to surrender
to those who required she be docile, muted.
"Give me voices which are fuller, deeper, richer"

she had pleaded, and though she tamed her temper,
her deep yearning never shifted, was always lucid -
she still wanted instruments playing together.
"Give me voices which are fuller, deeper, richer."

Elaine Showalter observed that 'Maggie is the progenitor of a heroine who identifies passivity and renunciation with womanhood, who finds it easier, more natural, and in a mystical way more satisfying, to destroy herself than to live in a world without opium or fantasy, where she must fight to survive'[115] (fig. 57).

<https://insideamountain.podbean.com/e/series-2-episode-si6-the-flat-places-of-noreen-masud/>.
[113] Christina Sharpe, 'Beauty is a Method', *Brick: A Literary Journal*, Winter 2020.
[114] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 341.
[115] Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (London: Virago, 2014), p.107.

Figure 57. Detail, *For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair,* crocheted paper, bookbinder's sewing frame.

It is an all-too familiar story. Scholars, including Virginia Moore and Katherine Frank, have speculated, for example, that Emily Brontë denied herself food and medical treatment towards the end of her life. Writing to her publisher about Emily's funeral, Charlotte described her sister's 'wasted mortal remains' being 'taken out of the house'.[116] Caroline in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* chooses self-denial, and martyr Helen Burns in *Jane Eyre* walks smiling to her grave: "I am very happy, Jane; and when you hear that I am dead, you must be sure and not grieve: there is nothing to grieve about. We all must die one day, and the illness

[116] Charlotte Brontë, letter to W. S. Williams, 25 December, 1848, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.159.

which is removing me is not painful; it is gentle and gradual: [...] By dying young, I shall escape great sufferings."

Beauty is not the same thing as perfection. Fragmentary beauty has agency while I would argue that perfection has stasis. Grayson Perry puts it slightly differently – perfection is dull: 'I'm in awe of some people's craft skills, but as an end in itself, it's a bit dead. Perfection is unlovable: the language and style of any artist are the mistakes they make.'[117] My carpet is deliberately unfinished, crumpled, overlapped and twisted. *For Want of Light and Space: Maggie's Hair* is sliced, distorted and taut. The works are consciously imperfect although those imperfections are set into work which is deliberately technically proficient. This forms another layer to the beauty/perfection dynamic which I will explain. Susie staged her own vigorous protest by making her work technically perfect. She would have poured scorn on Grayson Perry's strictures because her prowess, her displays of skill, were her only powers and, to her, consummate skill was her form of assertion. Added to which, she had to make a living from her craft and imperfection did not go down well in the cotton mill or the seamstress's workshop. She took fierce pride in what her work looked like from the side that most people never see – the back. That, she said, was where the real power and beauty lay. She would have found my four-metre-long carpet and distorted paper crochet a riot of misguided confusion: "Neither use nor ornament", she would have said harshly. But the gaps in the canvas, the torrent of hand-printed text, the cuts in the crochet, the creases and folds, are a deliberate evolution of perfection into an aesthetic which is privileged enough to allow for flaws. The *pentimenti* on the canvas are her traces flowing into mine. Her marks were deliberate perfection, mine are imperfect beauty. Both take a stand. This research project is not a solipsistic howl of protest - it is not my lived life. But it is a lived-*with* life: my life growing up with Susie, a life built from books, a life constructed from thread.

I took Susie to see Kaffe Fassett's retrospective at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1988. She was almost 90 years old and indifferent to everything in the exhibition except, ever truculent, the reverse of everything. "I want to see the *sewings*," she kept saying. She accented the word with a sibilance that meant business. Each time she grasped a quilt firmly with both hands to see how neatly the threads were finished off at the back, she was asked to stop touching the exhibits. She obeyed briefly before doing it again. When we were finally

[117] Grayson Perry, *Crafts*, Autumn/Winter 2023, p. 14.

asked to leave, she was mystified that anyone could object to her looking at the hidden part of the work where the power lay. To her, perfection was not Grayson Perry's "dull"; it was mastery. It is a powerful sign of the heft of Susie's 'sewings' idea that the novelist Willa Cather should have used it too, to describe the way she created eccentric, impoverished Ántonia. 'Sewings' become a form of narratology:

> If one is going to do new business the old patterns cannot help […] My Ántonia [...] is just the other side of the rug, the pattern that is supposed not to count in a story. In it there is no love affair, no courtship, no marriage, no broken heart, no struggle for success. I knew I'd ruin my material if I put it in the usual fictional pattern.[118]

Susie's sense that the 'wrong' side has a secret, frictive power became the germ for my villanelle 'Wrong Side of the Fabric'. Like the other villanelles in my nine-poem sequence, I use slight manipulations in the repeated lines to signal other possibilities, other futures, other stories.

Wrong Side of the Fabric

A woman with few words but many hazards,
she shrank as what words there were evaporated.
At era's end, she was a shadowed shape of past tenses

who elbowed herself out of the way of ballads,
even though I had songs for her. And as the syllables fled,
she was a woman with fewer words, but more hazards.

Paltry phrases were pinched inches; her skills were yards
of tulle, velvet, thread, lace silk-braided.
At era's end, she was a shadowed shape of past tenses.

She'd wanted to write, travel, face the breeze windwards
but her life was airless, her fabric poor, ambition wasted.
A woman with fewer words but even more hazards.

She counted her stitches and found them lacking, shards
of poor thread, tattered loops, darned cuffs, lace she hated.
By the end she was a shadowed shape of past tenses.

But I have kinder words to hook her forward
from fabric's wrong side where colour and pattern faded.
She was a woman with fewer words and yet more hazards,
but to me more than a shadowed shape of past tenses.

[118] Interview with Willa Cather, *New York World*, 19 April 1925, sec. 3, pp. 1, 6, cols. 4-5. <https://cather.unl.edu/writings/bohlke/interviews/bohlke.i.21>[accessed 2 March, 2024].

It is notable that Susie's appropriation of a tiny space for perfection came just before, Griselda Pollock and Rozsika Parker argue, references to women artists started to dry up. The 'trickle of references to women artists in the sixteenth century grows by the eighteenth century to become a flood in the nineteenth century.' But, they point out, 'works of women artists dwindle away precisely at the moment when women's social emancipation and increasing education should, in theory, have prompted a greater awareness of women's participation in all walks of life.'[119] Not only does silence descend, it seems to swallow up references to those who came before. Pollock and Parker cite John McEwan's objection to women artists when he reviewed an Arts Council exhibition in 1978. He might have been looking at one of Susie's quilts. McEwan sneered at the 'needle-threading eye and taste for detail that is so peculiarly the bug bear of women artists when left to their own devices; a preoccupation that invariably favours presentation at the expense of content.'[120] It is a wilful misunderstanding of why 'perfection' or 'presentation' may have been their own revolutions, particularly for those whose class and social standing were so precarious.

There is a close link between writing and stitching for women writers. The poet Emily Dickinson stitched her poetry into dozens of hand-sewn packets known as 'fascicles'. After her death, the fascicles were carelessly dismantled, although a little of the thread is still extant. There is an intimacy attached to Dickinson's act of stitching stacks of her poems together; it is a statement of private self-publication, although how much better it might have been if she had found an audience other than herself before she died. She wrote almost two thousand poems but only ten were published in her lifetime. Sewing her work together has added to her reputation as an eccentric introvert, but domestic arts or skills are so often co-opted to patronise a woman writer.[121] Henry James spoke of Jane Austen, for example, as an 'unconscious' writer, as though she had somehow tripped over and fallen at random into a half-decent pile of sentences not of her own making:

> [she] sometimes, over her work basket, her tapestry flowers, in the spare, cool drawing-room of other days, fell a-musing, lapsed too metaphorically, as one may say, into wool-gathering, and her dropped stitches, of these pardonable, of these precious

[119] Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), p. 3.
[120] John McEwan, 'Beleaguered', *Spectator*, 9 September, 1978. Cited in Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2013), p. 7.
[121] Judy Chicago created a plate erupting with frothy, pink lace for Emily Dickinson as part of *The Dinner Party*. Criticised for this cloying choice, she maintains it was to demonstrate Dickinson being 'smothered' by her life and times. *The Dinner Party: A Tour of the Exhibition,* directed by Donald Woodman, Serpentine Gallery, 2024.

> moments, were afterwards picked up as little touches of human truth, little glimpses of steady vision, little master-strokes of imagination.[122]

Figure 58. Vanessa Bell, *Virginia Woolf,* 1912, oil on board, 40 x 34 cm. National Portrait Gallery. Photograph, © Charlotte Lee-Potter, 2024.

James then goes on, in the same article, to accuse the Brontë sisters of only attracting attention because their lives were so 'dreary'. Their 'tragic history, their loneliness and poverty of life' were the only things that marked them out: 'dreary, their tragic history, their loneliness and poverty of life.'[123] In more positive mode, Virginia Woolf, too, visualised her writing through the language of beauty, thread and fibre: 'What sort of diary should I like mine to be?' she asked. 'Something loose knit, & yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace anything, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes to mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all.'[124] She loved to knit, saying to Leonard in 1912 that 'knitting is the saving of life'. At around the same time, her sister Vanessa painted her leaning into the corner of a tall-backed armchair, knitting with rust-coloured yarn (fig.58). Deep in thought and with eyes almost closed, she seems immersed in the kind of associative thinking that comes most readily when we are contentedly engaged in a repetitive and creative task. It is no surprise that to Woolf the very act of thinking and remembering is the equivalent of a domestic art:

> Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. Memory runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting, like the underlinen of a family of fourteen on a line in a gale of wind.[125]

Sewing, stitching and knitting metaphors came easily to Woolf. She seemed to have more difficulty in configuring the gesture of the painter on the page. In describing the portrait being created by Lily Briscoe, the diffident, self-critical artist of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf

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[122] Henry James, 'The Lesson of Balzac', *The Atlantic Monthly*, August 1905, p. 168. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1905/08/the-lesson-of-balzac/637441/> [accessed 15 May 2024].
[123] James, p. 168.
[124] Virginia Woolf, Diary, April 20, 1919, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 1, 1915-1919* (London: Granta, 2023), p. 342.
[125] Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2015), p. 48.

struggled to render in words the creative act of painting; what might colours, shapes and shadows look like when expressed in words? That trajectory is one which I reverse in my research: how might words look when expressed in colours, shapes and shadows? As a research experiment, I designed a LAHP-funded writing workshop for King's, RCA, UCL and Royal Central School of Speech and Drama doctoral students[126] (fig.59). I gave attendees the closing lines of Woolf's text and asked them to paint Lily Briscoe's image from the description. I then asked them to swap the image they had created with a neighbour and to re-write the text from the new, unfamiliar painting. The experiment produced a consensus that visualising the words and then retextualising the images resulted in a deeper understanding both of the prose, which they had initially found puzzling, and the fluidity of movement and intensity of purpose present in the painting. In some respects, the workshop experiment became an illustration of a 'closed system' in which ideas seep and flow but in which matter cannot be lost. But, more precisely, what they had all created was a strange loop, the schematic, organisational principle of my research, in which ideas and images move between people and are remade communally.

Figure 59. Dewriting Virginia Woolf: LAHP-funded workshop at the Royal College of Art, 14 June 2022.

The strange loop:

The strange loop is so important to this research that it is worth examining its transformational qualities in greater detail. It is beguilingly perverse: continuous but overlapping, non-hierarchical and yet apparently capable of rising in perpetual ascent. It has no twists, unlike the showy Möbius, but it performs an equal kind of magic. Each individual component of the layered loop rests on top of the element which precedes it, and in doing so apparently begins the loop's incline. Yet the loop always returns to the point where it began and the starting points themselves are limitless. It has abstract qualities too: the strange loop is a cyclic structure which holds spatial, dimensional, temporal and even experiential properties. By ascending/descending the loop we encounter both what has gone before and, impossibly, that which is yet to come. It also has the important symbolic heft in my research in that its non-hierarchical system stands powerfully for equality and diversity

[126] London Arts and Humanities Partnership 'practice-through-writing' workshop.

and it is infinitely expandable and adaptable: a myriorama.[127] The strange loop is an allopoietic system: it produces more than the sum of its parts, conceptually at least. Douglas Hofstadter, deviser of this curious topological form, uses the strange loop to explain the ways we use the locus of our own consciousness - the brain - to analyse consciousness itself: the brain thinking about how the brain is thinking.[128] Mathematician Marcus du Sautoy captured the strange loop's labyrinthine appeal as we walked in experimental loops around a north London park for my research podcast episode 'Strange Loops and Walking as Thinking': 'There is a moment when enough complexity has been reached', he said. 'The encoding in the brain is complex enough, that it can formulate in that code thoughts about itself…. thoughts about thoughts.'[129] In Hofstadter's words, the strange loop combines 'ideas, hopes, images, analogies, and finally consciousness and free will', with the result that 'the top level reaches back down towards the bottom level and influences it, while at the same time being itself determined by the bottom level.'[130] To clarify further, he argues that what he calls 'the crux of consciousness', the creative, thinking, self-aware self, 'comes into being at the moment it has the power to reflect itself.'[131] It is for these reasons that my deployment of the strange loop as a translational medium in my feminist practice is so rich in potential.

One of the ways I have captured the strange loop in my practice is via my 'library' of miniature paintings which I call 'glints'. Their number stands so far at 100 and the idea behind them is that each should be a snatched impression of the natural world as it fixes itself on the mind's eye in an instant. Each painting captures a flicker of time and all 100 can be arranged as a charged, mutable strange loop. In creating them, I was reminded of Virginia Woolf's description of herself as a kind of photo-sensitive surface, a 'porous vessel afloat on sensation; a sensitive plate exposed to invisible rays'.[132] Rebecca Solnit described Woolf's method as letting 'her imagination roam farther than her feet.'[133] All my glints have been either printed *en plein air* using my miniature, 3-D-printed etching press which I carry in a

[127] I do not use the strange loop in the sense of the geometrical abstraction of concrete art, espoused for example by artist Sophie Taeuber-Arp. I deploy geometry as a conceptual and spatial seeing frame.
[128] Hofstadter formalised his idea having studied mathematician Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems of 1931 which essentially established that not all true mathematical theorems can be proved to be true.
[129] Marcus du Sautoy interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, *Inside A Mountain* podcast, 21 November, 2021 <https://insideamountain.podbean.com/e/strange-loops-and-walking-as-thinking-with-mathematician-marcus-du-sautoy/>.
[130] Douglas Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid* (London: Penguin, 1980).
[131] Douglas Hofstadter, p. 709.
[132] Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p.138.
[133] Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust* (London: Granta, 2014), p. 187.

rucksack, or painted in ink and pigments, again whilst out walking. When arranged as a strange loop, the tiny glints are utterly democratic in nature in that it is possible to slip another and another into the cycle, whilst still maintaining the loop's status as non-hierarchical; it is an infinitely-expandable open system (figs.60,61). These glints, gathered over many months and many miles of walking, have a potent role in my practice. Not only do they appear in *May's Travelling Library*, and as enlarged substrates for my shorthand transcriptions of villanelles, they also act as the research practice for my paper collar installation and soundscape, *Choral Symphony*. Each painted collar emerges from one of my glints. (figs.62,63).

Figure 60. 100 Glints enlarged and arranged digitally as a consecutive strange loop and printed on dye-sublimated fabric, 400x150 cm.

Figure 61. The same, original 100 *Glints*, overlapped as a non-hierarchical strange loop, ink, pigment, crayon, monoprint, drypoint on paper. Each painting and print, 3x6 cm.

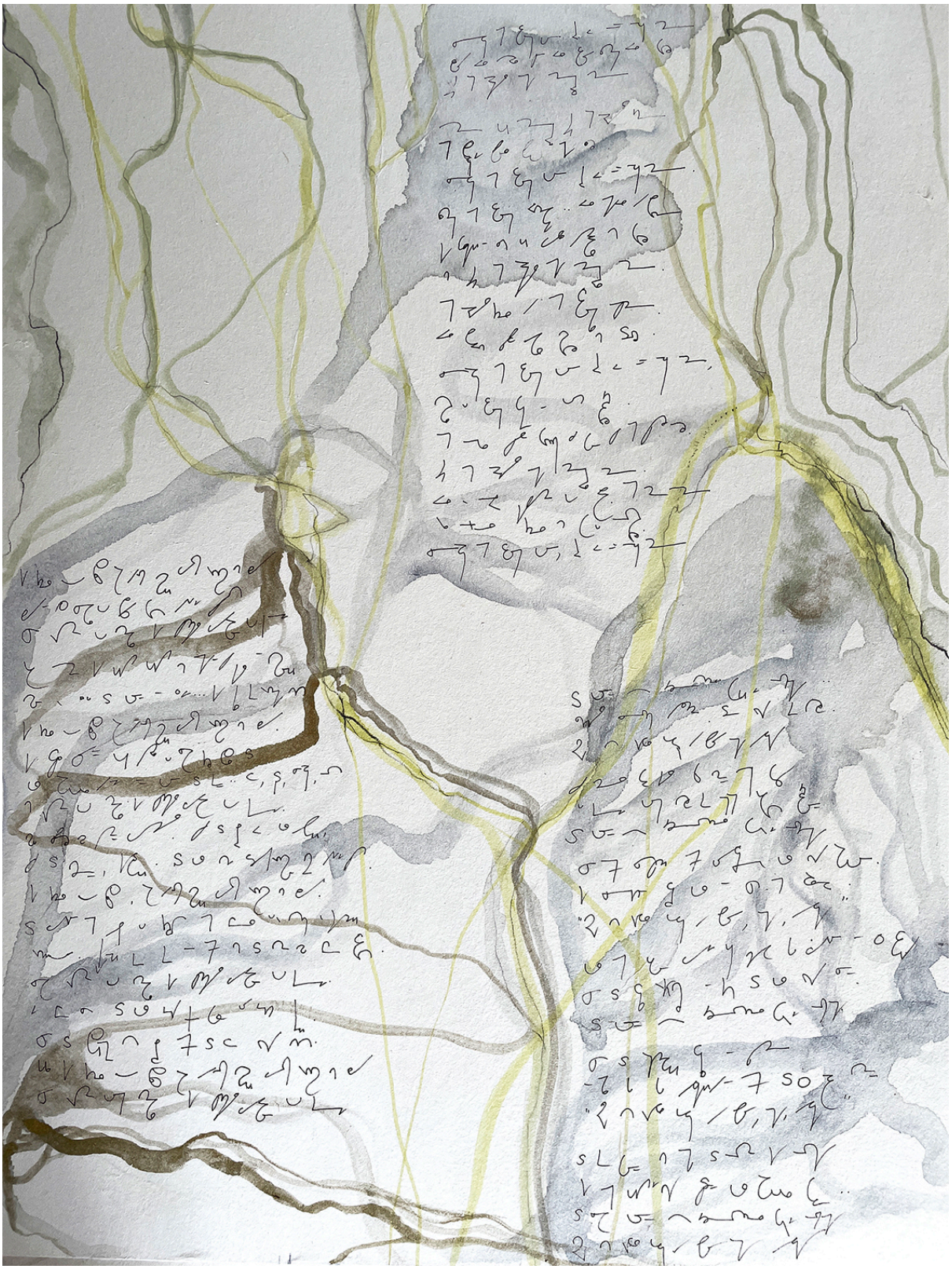

Figure 62. Glint as the source for the substrate for three of my villanelles: ‘Brought Up By Hand’, ‘Tender Hooks’, ‘Fuller Louder Deeper’, ink, gansai pigment, Japanese paper and board. 60x40 cm.

Figure 63. Using my 100 *Glints* as the source for creating my paper collars for the installation and soundscape *Choral Symphony.* The completed cut and painted collars have my villanelles concealed on the inside edge as a form of 'care label'.

Unlike the closed system of thermodynamics which does not allow the transfer of matter, my open system of strangely looped paintings permits infinite expansion. My installations and assemblages, on their wheels, are endlessly flexible, as is the series of villanelles I have written for May and which are written onto the inside edge of my paper collars[134] (fig.64).

[134] I analyse these collars in more detail in Chapter 3.

Figure 64. Detail, *Choral Symphony,* ink, paper, gansai pigment, steel, approx. 200x100x50cm.

Marcus du Sautoy deployed Hofstadter's loop in his mathematical play, *I is a Strange Loop*. (I discuss the play with him in my podcast episode) and there are precedents for the strange loop to be deployed in ecological mode, too. Timothy Morton uses it as a narrative device to define the human species as both planetary police-officer and felon. His definition takes on the guise of an inexorable, catastrophic bedtime story:

> The darkness of ecological awareness is the darkness of noir, which is a strange loop: the detective is a criminal. In a strong version of noir the narrator is implicated in the story: two levels that normally don't cross, that some believe structurally can't cross. We "civilized" people, we Mesopotamians, are the narrators of our destiny. Ecological awareness is that moment at which these narrators find out that they are the tragic criminal.[135]

But Morton's vision of the strange loop is in many ways a counsel of despair. I would define his loop as a calamitous funfair ride in which the sleuth/villain drives the cart ever faster whilst pleading to get off – a kind of stagflation of time and motion. Mark Fisher, on the other hand, views strange loops with an existential slant: 'What should be at an ontologically "inferior" level suddenly appears one level up (characters from a simulated world suddenly appear in the world generating the simulation); or what should be at an ontologically "superior" level appears one level down (authors interact with their characters).' Ultimately, he says, strange loops have a 'sense of wrongness: levels are tangled, things are not where they are supposed to be.'[136] I do not read strange loops in Fisher's way either, since they are explicitly not 'tangled' even if we find them puzzling, and where, in any case are they 'supposed' to be anyway? What if, rather than seeing the strange loop as the embodiment of 'wrongness' and confusion, or signifying the criminal detective's blind race to ecological disaster, we use the loop as a questioning, imaginative device? By accepting its possibilities as a cyclic structure which is more than the sum of its parts, I mobilise the loop as a form of fixed verse in which the circularity of the text, the formal lines of the complex poetic structure, and the haunting echo of the poem's repeated lines can pose a series of questions about what a future, potentially-accommodating, landscape might look like for a chorus of fictional and nonfictional women. There is no limit to the number of women who can be invited in over time, without disrupting the loop's integrity. Such a loop might allow us to

[135] Timothy Morton, *Dark Ecology: For a Logic of Future Coexistence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), p. 9.
[136] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2016), p. 45.

conceptualise our own position in a latent, new ecological hierarchy, as well as embedding the woman walker's inscape. In other words, by using the strange loop's logic-defying ability to continually rise in height whilst returning to where it started, the project can engage with larger questions of our understanding of what our place in a new landscape/inscape might be. There is a powerful fixed-verse form which, etymologically, emerges from its roots in georgic verse and which is uniquely constructed to allow such questions to emerge, since it too is, I would argue, a strange loop: the villanelle.[137]

The villanelle:

The villanelle is rich with the totemic power of the number nineteen. It has nineteen interwoven and repeated lines; nineteen also happens to be the area of the brain, known as Brodmann area 19, where we distinguish visually between what something is and where it might be. That nexus point seems full of possibility in the context of a project about navigating new forms of territory for women. Nineteen is also a prime number, one of those numbers that 'instil a sense of wonder; [they are] timeless numbers that exist in some world independent of our physical reality. They are Nature's gift.'[138] The formal villanelle, with its complex arrangement of repeated lines, emerged in the early-seventeenth century. Etymologically, it derives from the Latin word for peasant and its subject was traditionally rural. A villanelle is composed of five tercets and a final quatrain. The first line of the first stanza acts as the final line of the second and fourth stanzas; the third line of the first stanza is repeated in the final lines of verses three and five; the last two lines of the final quatrain are a combination of lines one and three of the first stanza. Lines 1, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15 16, 18 and 19 rhyme with each other, as do lines 2, 5, 8, 11,14 and 17. Celebrated examples include Dylan Thomas's 'Do not go gentle into that good night', Sylvia Plath's 'Mad Girl's Love Song' and W. H. Auden's 'If I Could Tell You'. The form's rural themes have morphed into a generalised sense of despair, yet the rustic still lingers in the roses that 'really want to grow', the decaying leaves, and the run-away brooks. The strangely-looped verse registers absence and loneliness, but also solidarity in the face of loss. I have written nine villanelles for this research project, using the mantle of mournfulness that clothes the form to register some of

[137] I expressly use the term 'rustic' rather than 'pastoral' since the villanelle form, appropriately for this project, tends to the melancholy and thoughtful, rather than the bucolic.
[138] Marcus du Sautoy, *The Music of the Primes: why an unsolved problem in mathematics matters* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004), p. 5.

the challenges that my characters face. Yet, finally, I subtly transmute the repeated lines to signal a sense of possibility and of communality. My villanelle 'Brought Up By Hand' is drawn from the brisk, taciturn upbringing by Susie and it signals the lessons she taught me in making things by hand. My title is taken from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*; the child Pip is said to have been 'brought up by hand' by his older sister. It is harsh code for the fact that she subjected him to brutal corporal punishment. In my title choice, I have rescued the phrase to hold an alternative meaning – the sense of knowledge, craft and skill handed on by women to future generations, their hands marked and worn by their decades of hard labour.

Brought Up By Hand

Her hands were bluffs: ridge, gulley, crag, angle and scree,
scored by battles with slubber, loom, roving frame.
But armed with needles, her fingers crackled with poetry

which turned her yarn and thread from prose to melody.
Not a song she wanted to sing - her hopes had another name.
Her hands were bluffs: ridge, gulley, crag, angle and scree.

Her cuffs bristled with steel ranks of pins because she
was primed to do what she hated – to cut, stitch, tame.
Armed with needles, her fingers crackled with poetry

But there were no rounded corners. She spoke roughly,
gestured harshly. Her sharp angles were her only fame
and her hands were bluffs, ridge, crag, angle, scree.

She craved the rasp of pencil, contours of a map, a journey.
But poverty put paid to that and she made no counterclaim.
Still, armed with needles, her fingers crackled with poetry.

Her battalions of pins never fought for her victory.
But she bequeathed me space she could never name.
Yes, her hands were bluffs, ridge, gulley, crag, angle and scree.
But armed with needles, her fingers crackled with poetry.

In some ways my villanelle series and dewritten art practice act as a form of future legend, drawing both on the age-old art of narrative in the form of a convention-defying reimagined future. A legend is traditionally a tale from the past which is passed on, through

time, generation to generation, often orally/aurally. It may have elements of the magical and the nonhuman/more-than-human. However, legends conventionally warn against the presence of the lone, powerful or independent woman, as in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* for example, and are often vested in the idea of male conquest or domination. Contrary to Nan Shepherd's advice to seek a mountain's spiritual inside, they inscribe a story in which a mountain peak is conquered rather than its inverse found. As part of my gynowalking research, I have created forms of future legend in performances of my fixed verse, reversing both the convention of a story handed down by tradition from earlier times and the notion popularly accepted that the legend is historical. The stories are still handed down (or handed on), in the sense that they are oral performances, yet the legend I am passing on is a future one. In reversing the trajectory of time, and circling it back on itself, the project engages in a form of inverted strange loop: a feed-forward loop. In one other respect the 'legend' is rich with potential for this project: it has resonant meaning as a decoder of maps: a list of symbols which miniaturise, translate and decipher real, physical features represented on paper. It is simultaneously a reader, a reading and is read.

As I have explained, the villanelle is full of possibility as a literary strange loop. There is, counterintuitively, something imaginatively liberating about submitting to the constraints of fixed verse, particularly a form as labyrinthine, potentially imprisoning and endlessly repetitive as the villanelle. As the reader and writer circle back to the final two lines with which the first stanza begins, there is an irresistible urge to return to the start to see if yet another loop through its laced structure will prise open an additional reading or interpretation. Like a strange loop, the villanelle is a poem which is thinking about itself thinking; like a map legend, it flaunts its workings and its codes. It is constraint as choice and, rather than being a confining mode, the villanelle loop is imaginatively-freeing. I am drawn to poet Paul Muldoon's definition, cited by writer Tom Chivers, that form is 'a straitjacket in the way that a straitjacket was a straitjacket for Houdini'.[139] As Chivers puts it, a poem is 'something like an illusionist's trick, and its form describes the organising principles by which this trick is performed. In Muldoon's analogy, form is a kind of willing restraint: an instrument of control wielded by the poem against its author.'[140] In my experience, the villanelle frees the creative spirit from shackles in the act of imposing constraints. And how can a poem be

[139] *Irish Times*, April 19, 2003.
[140] Tom Chivers, *Adventures in Form: a compendium of poetic forms, rules and constraints* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2016), p. 10.

said to either start or conclude, when it is an unbroken loop that can be begun at any point in the circle and that 'goes on to infinity'? That last phrase, of course, comes from Gilles Deleuze's *The Fold*, which also has its part to play in this imaginative construct. Deleuze envisaged the fold, in the context of the work of Leibniz, as a 'labyrinth of continuity', not as an amalgam of separate entities:

> [It is] not a line dissolving into independent points, as flowing sand might dissolve into grains, but resembles a sheet of paper divided into infinite folds or separated into bending movements, each one determined by the consistent or conspiring surroundings.[141]

I am obviously not claiming that Deleuze was referring to the villanelle when he wrote this. Nevertheless, the folded nature of the interlaced, repeated lines and complex rhyming scheme of a villanelle have elements of an infinitely-pleated sheet of paper and, without question, each individual poem is composed of lines which are 'determined by the consistent or conspiring surroundings.' There are feminist principles at work here; what might the interconnectivity of the villanelle allow in terms of future equalities for women? As John Wylie puts it, does the word landscape 'describe the mutual embeddedness and interconnectivity of self, body, knowledge and land', or is it 'better conceived in artistic and painterly terms as a specific cultural and historical genre, a set of visual strategies and devices for distancing and observing?'[142] My research suggests that the former is infinitely richer territory for women; one of the inherent risks of historicising or distancing landscape is the risk that we overlay it with a nostalgic veil or shroud in which we have already conceded that it is a place of loss, a 'lieu de memoire' as Pierre Nora would describe it. Here, once again, Deleuze's fold and its embodiment of the infinite is useful:

> The problem is not how to finish a fold, but how to continue it, to have it go through the ceiling, how to bring it to infinity. It is not only because the fold affects all materials that it thus becomes expressive matter, with different scales, speeds, and different vectors (mountains and waters, papers, fabrics, living tissues, the brain), but especially because it determines and materializes Form. It produces a form of expression, a Gestaltung, the genetic element or infinite line of inflexion, the curve with a unique variable.[143]

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[141] Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. by Tom Conley (London: Continuum, 1993), p. 6.
[142] John Wylie, *Landscape* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.
[143] Deleuze, p. 39.

In the context of the villanelle, the infinite fold has a powerful quality. Like a strange loop, it is in endless dialogue with itself. It is double-sided and although one side of the fold is apparently in the ascendency, the opposite is true if the image or paper is viewed from the reverse. It is speaking to itself whilst refusing to impose any form of hierarchy. In this sense it is, indeed, a strange, self-referential loop in which the unfold is 'not the contrary of the fold, nor its effacement, but the continuation or the extension of its act, the condition of its manifestation.'[144]

My future ruin is itself a strange loop in which it is possible to start the loop's non-hierarchical ascent from a fluid point which has not yet arrived. This might be ideologically or intellectually challenging and yet it is conceptually possible aesthetically and imaginatively. Ali Smith brings a helpful sense of that in her strange, hybrid work *Artful:*

> even if we were to find ourselves homeless, in a strange land, with nothing of ourselves left – say we lost everything – we'd still have another kind of home, in aesthetic form itself, in the familiarity, the unchanging assurance that a known rhythm, a recognised line, the familiar shape of a story, a tune, a line or phrase or sentence gives us every time, even long after we've forgotten we even know it.[145]

There is comfort to be had in the thought that a strange place of 'after' might have sufficient pre-echoes of the imaginative 'now' to be endurable, liveable. That pre-echo leading to the post-now is an aspect of the fluid strange loop leading onwards towards the thing which is yet to happen. Its ambassador is May, my journeywoman.

[144] Deleuze, p. 40.
[145] Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp.73-74.

The role of May the journeywoman:

I use the word 'journeywoman' in this project to characterise May/Me, in the sense that she is a sympathetic container space, moving from one place to another as craftswomen did, weathered by her encounters. There is a resonant temporal quality embedded in the word itself, marking the journeywoman out as someone who measures time. 'Journeywoman' is derived from the French word for day, *journée* – someone who is paid by the day perhaps for a specific task or for piecework (fig.65). May the journeywoman may be a time-measurer, but she is not a metaphor. She is an active character, my troubadour, and I am giving her lines to sing. I am her interlocutor and she acts as a nested framework in which my other characters sit. (To that extent I could argue that the project is a form of steganography: the concealment of one system within another. But it is not a question of swapping one means of communication for another since original thought does not lie in a simple trade-in of that kind.) I am arguing instead for a form of ideological fluency (using all the word's Latinate etymology of fluidity, flow, liquidity and nimbleness) to enable a form of re-imagining and re-imaging a lifetime of walking through fictionalised women. In re-reading or reading-through from one lexicon and one woman to another, I have found a companion system of moving across literary landscapes in which women have repeatedly attempted to write themselves into new narratives, to write themselves out of old ones, to seize the pen, dictate the story, in the face of provocation, denial, criticism and even derision. But in our literary map-reading and navigation, women have found agency. We are the 'self-writing poem' cited by Douglas Hofstadter.[146] This research offers a new form of map-reading, inscape-seeing, territory-claiming, making a visual, personalised journey across seven centuries of women's writing. The deep embeddedness of these texts in my creative imagination allows them to act as the chalk bed over which the stream of my art practice runs. In literally spinning these texts into

Figure 65. Piecework: dolls' clothes being made by an entire family, New York, 1912.

[146] Douglas Hofstadter, *I Am A Strange Loop* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), p. 363.

material hanks, I am establishing a navigational lodestar, whilst drawing on a whole series of narratological and historical connections. Using the Japanese *shifu* technique, I am able to turn a page of text into one, fine, unbroken thread, ready for spinning (fig. 66). There is the important aspect that some of the pages of text I have spun are my own teaching editions, marked with pencil and pen. My spun hanks effectively have a form of 'rogue's yarn' in them: the coloured threads that were surreptitiously slipped inside a tangle of cordage in the nineteenth century to embed the identity of the true owner, should there be a theft. My marks and annotations are unseen and unseeable but like my 'illegible' plaster works which I write about in more detail in Chapter 3, and like the psycho-marks left on me as I walk, they are nevertheless present even if they are not visible.

Figure 66. By using a series of folds and *shifu* technque, I can cut a page of text into one continuous 'thread' of paper.

Thread:

Many have highlighted the powerful metaphors drawn from thread, fibre, and textiles. Claire Wilcox points to the language of 'devastation and disintegration' which emanates from them. 'We talk of shattered silks [...], fugitive dyes [...], erosion [...], perished objects [...], tired pieces'.[147] Pennina Barnett and Claire Pajaczkowska note the agency of string, which is 'always *doing* something: wrapping, winding, tying, attaching, *connecting* – being *active*' [emphases in original].[148] Despite the latent energy of thread, there is still a battle to be fought over its role in art. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock point out that writers such as Patricia Mainardi defended needlework as 'the one art in which women controlled the education of their daughters and the production of art, and were also the critics and audience. [...] it is our cultural heritage.'[149] (I can just imagine how Susie would have rolled her eyes with contempt at Mainardi's suggestion.) As Parker and Pollock note, there are inevitable consequences to retreating so willingly to the side-lines: 'Women's practice in art has never been absolutely forbidden, discouraged or refused, but rather contained and limited to its function as the means by which masculinity gains and sustains its supremacy in the important sphere of cultural production.'[150]

Threads can be treacherous things for fictional girls. 'Weaving' and 'spinning' are both words vested in narratology, as is the phrase 'a string of sentences' but, as so often, the term 'spinster' has been reappropriated to define an isolated, lonely woman, when its original intent was to define a highly-skilled and well-paid woman who could pay and live her own way. As many artists and writers have documented, thread, yarn and spinning themselves were historically deemed to be women's territory, often with a familiar male reappropriation once success was guaranteed. What is not always appreciated is that women were once employed on the same basis as men to produce needlework, just as they acted as scribes alongside men, producing manuscripts in the medieval scriptorium. As Rozsika Parker points out, in the Middle Ages '[b]oth men and women embroidered in guild workshops, or in workshops attached to noble households, in monasteries and nunneries.' Not only that, but

[147] Claire Wilcox, *Patch Work: A Life Amongst Clothes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), pp. 4-5.
[148] Pennina Barnett & Claire Pajaczkowska, 'Introduction', *Textile: Cloth and Culture*, vol. 5, 2007, issue 2, pp. 109-113.
[149] Patricia Mainardi, 'Quilts: The Great American Art,' *Feminist Art Journal* ,Winter 1973, p.58. Cited in Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2013).
[150] Rozsika Parker, Griselda Pollock, p. 170.

'[e]mbroidery was considered the equal of painting and sculpture.'[151] But there are far more references to thread as a kind of controlling mechanism for women. There is a sinister misogynistic overlay to fables about spinning, such as *The Sleeping Beauty* or the Brothers Grimm tale of *The Six Swans* in which a young woman is forced to remain silent for six years whilst spinning shirts from nettles for her brothers – she gets to do the labour *and* to keep quiet. Quilting is a form of entrapment for Maggie in *The Mill on the Floss*: 'It's foolish work," said Maggie, with a toss of her mane, – "tearing things to pieces to sew 'em together again.'"[152] Charlotte Brontë's character Rose in the novel *Shirley* complains that domestic life in Briarfield rectory is a 'long, slow death' in a house like a 'windowed grave'. Ordered by her mother to pick up her sampler, she rails against the futility of her work:

> "[I]f my Master has given me ten talents, my duty is to trade with them, and make them ten talents more. Not in the dust of household drawers shall the coin be interred. I will *not* deposit it in a broken-spouted teapot, and shut it up in a china closet among tea-things. [...] I will *not* prison it in the linen press to find shrouds among the sheets."[153]

Lucy Snowe describes the nursing and sewing duties forced upon her as companion to the 'rheumatic cripple' Miss Marchmont as a kind of death-by-smothering: 'Two hot, close rooms thus became my world. [...] Her service was my duty – her pain, my suffering – her relief, my hope – her anger, my punishment – her regard, my reward. I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an ever-changing sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick chamber.'[154] Jane Carlyle, wife of essayist Thomas Carlyle, described by Woolf as a superlative letter writer, was never a published author. By all accounts she loathed the sewing, housework and household management that were her responsibility, describing the house as 'a sort of battle of Waterloo – and when I lie down at night it is with something of the same feeling Napoleon must have had when he went to

Figure 67. Jane Carlyle's étui, silver, © National Trust/Geff Skippings.

[151] Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), p. 17.
[152] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 16.
[153] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 385.
[154] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 97.

sleep [...] under the fire of the Enemy's cannon!'[155] Her thimble, carried in a silver étui or sewing case around her waist, was inscribed with the weary words: 'Ah me' (fig. 67). She might have grimaced wryly if she had known that the etymology of *étui* derives from the Old French *estui* or 'prison'). Writer, Mary Lamb wrote a caustic essay 'On Needlework' in 1814, in which she argued that '[n]eedlework and intellectual improvement are naturally in a state of warfare.' In cleverly-argued rhetoric, she states that women who do not need to earn a living from their needle are 'chain[ed] down' by such 'self-imposed slavery.' Leave sewing to women who need to be paid for it:

> [I]t would prove an incalculable addition to general happiness and the domestic comfort of both sexes, if needle-work were never practised but for a remuneration in money? As nearly, however, as this desirable thing can be effected, so much more nearly will woman be upon an equality with men as far as respects the mere enjoyment of life.[156]

Susie would have agreed with her. Like Mary Lamb, Susie had to earn a living and domestic crafts were all she knew. Mary Wollstonecraft's view on the inadvisability of girls being taught to sew is slightly different and is often misinterpreted. Yes, she says that needlework for girls 'contracts their faculties more than any other that could have been chosen for them, by confining their thoughts to their persons.'[157] But she goes on to argue that 'Many poor women maintain their children by the sweat of their brow, and keep together families that the vices of the fathers would have scattered abroad.'[158] She is making Susie's case for her, except that Susie was only 12 when she was forced into it.

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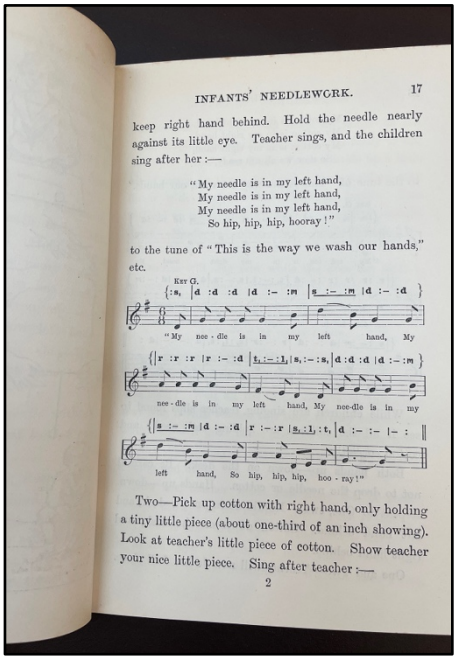
[155] Letter from Jane Carlyle to Susan Stirling, 25 November 1846; DOI 10.1215/lt-18461125-JWC-SS-01 <https://carlyleletters.dukeupress.edu/volume/21/lt-18461125-JWC-SS-01> [accessed 16 July 2024]. More than a century later, Lucy Lippard made just such an argument: 'quilting, along with crocheting, rug-hooking, and needlepoint) came back into middle-class and upper-class fashion in the 1970s, in part on the apron strings of feminism. What was once women's *work* has been transformed into a pastime for the well-off.' Lucy R. Lippard, 'Up, Down, And Across: A New Frame for New Quilts', *The Artist and the Quilt*, ed. Charlotte Robinson (Bromley: Columbus Books, 1983), p. 33. Janis Jefferies puts it more pithily: 'have you bought your tapestry cushion to embroider from the Sunday supplement?' Janis Jefferies, 'Text and textiles: weaving across the borderlines', in *New Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. by Kary Deepwell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 165.

[156] Mary Lamb, 'On Needlework', *The Lady's Magazine or Entertaining Companion for the Fair Sex, Appropriated Solely to Their Use and Amusement,* April 1815.

[157] Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 147.

[158] Wollstonecraft, p. 148.

Wondering what kind of schooling Susie might have received in knitting and needlework, I searched the archives for possible sources. The pamphlet *Needlework and Knitting Drills for Infants* by Alice Murrow and published in 1900 is too well-heeled for the kind of school Susie went to. The illustrations show immaculate children learning the correct way to thread a needle and put on a thimble, along with jaunty knitting exercises set to the music of well-known nursery rhymes such as 'This is the way we wash our hands' (figs.68-70). *The Warleigh musical drill* by Henrietta F. Warleigh, published in 1751, instructs children how to knit by singing lyrics such as 'Put the needle in, Place the cotton round'. Much more likely for Susie and girls like her would have been the pamphlet *Plain Knitting: Directions for plain knitting: with additions and corrections for the working classes and schools* by Rachel Jane Carlow, published in 1847. (It is hard not to think that the 'corrections' might have included



INFANTS' NEEDLEWORK. 17

keep right hand behind. Hold the needle nearly against its little eye. Teacher sings, and the children sing after her :—

"My needle is in my left hand,
My needle is in my left hand,
My needle is in my left hand,
So hip, hip, hip, hooray!"

to the tune of "This is the way we wash our hands," etc.

Key G.

"My nee - dle is in my left hand, My nee - dle is in my left hand, My nee - dle is in my left hand, So hip, hip, hip, hoo - ray!"

Two—Pick up cotton with right hand, only holding a tiny little piece (about one-third of an inch showing). Look at teacher's little piece of cotton. Show teacher your nice little piece. Sing after teacher :—

2

Figure 69. Knitting song from *Needlework and Knitting Drills for Infants* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1900).

Figure 70. 'How to put on a thimble': *Needlework and Knitting Drills for Infants* (1900).

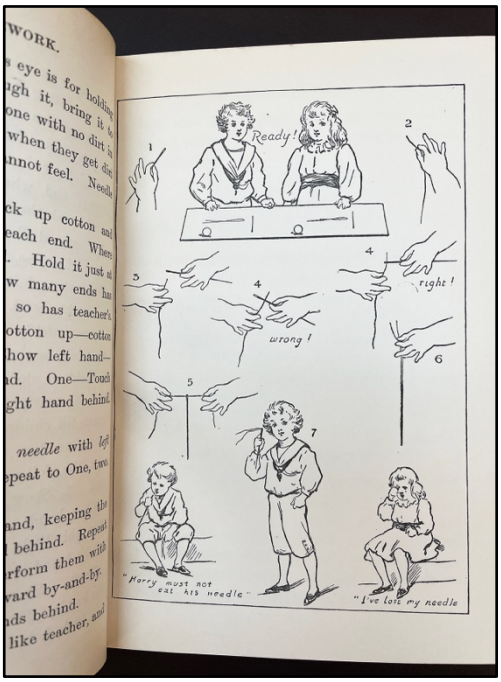
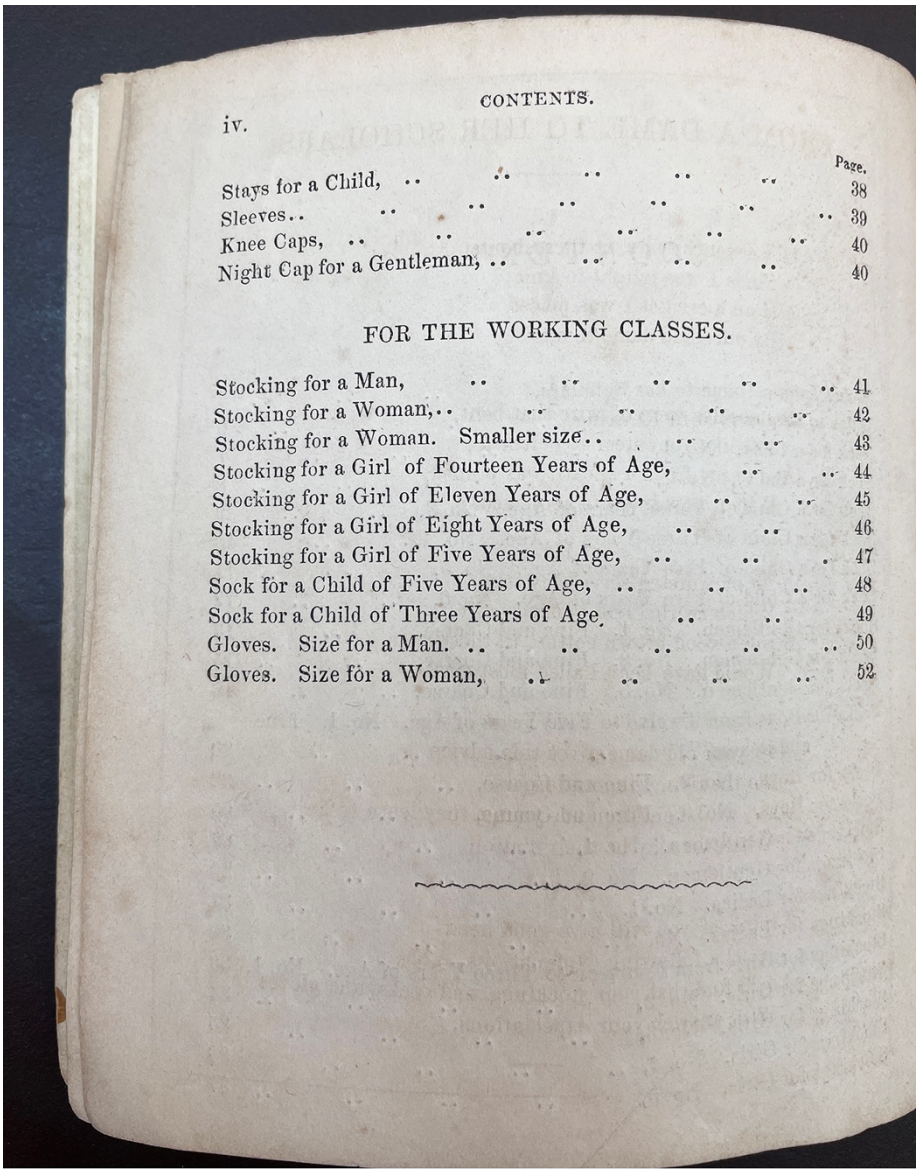


Figure 68. Alice Morrow, *Needlework and Knitting Drills for Infants* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1900).

corporal punishment as well as adjustments to knitting technique.) The book contains 27 patterns for the well-to-do, followed by a separate section with 11 patterns 'for the working classes'. The first set of stocking patterns for 'Ladies' and 'Gentlemen' are made from merino or fine lamb's wool. The second, for a 'Man' and 'Woman', are knitted from 'coarse wool, worsted, and brown cotton for the working classes' (figs.70-71). Susie would definitely have been doing her knitting drills in brown.



CONTENTS.

iv.

FOR THE WORKING CLASSES.

Figure 71. Rachel Jane Cattlow, *Plain knitting with additions and corrections for the working classes and schools* (London: Darton and Clark; Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1846).

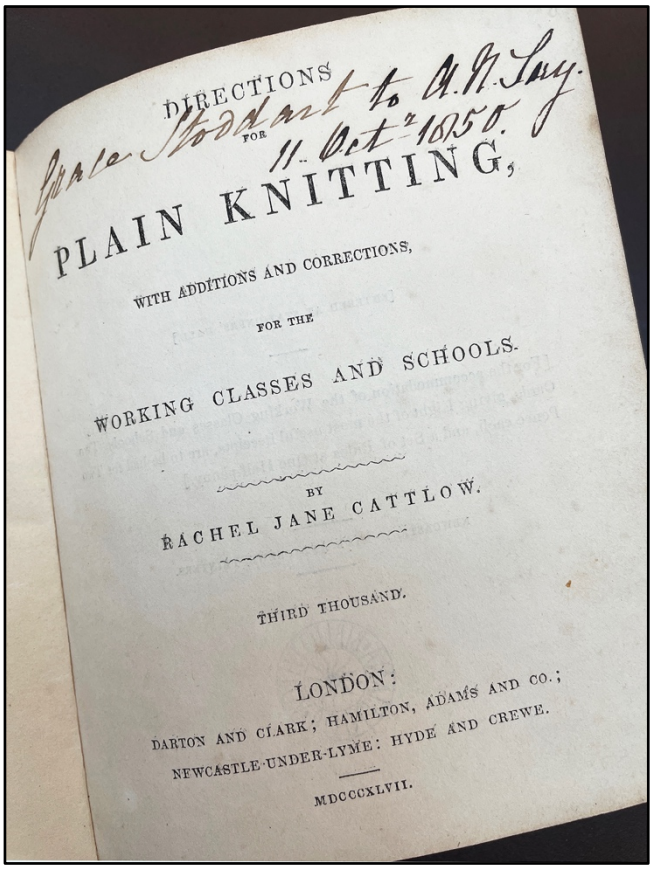


Figure 72. Rachel Jane Cattlow, *Plain knitting with additions and corrections for the working classes and schools* (London: Darton and Clark; Hamilton, Adams and Co., 1846).

George Eliot's appetite for knitting and needlework is not clear, but she was certainly competent. The needlepoint footstool she is believed to have made is proficient and neat (fig.73). Her sewing case or reticule is well-used, although its limited contents (buttonhook, crochet hook, thimble, bodkin, scissors, penknife and file) confirm that she was one of those women Mary Lamb despised who did not actually need to sew (fig. 74). Compare Eliot's sewing case to a nineteenth-century professional seamstress's case. More like a leather briefcase, it houses 'two bone crochet hooks, bone tatting shuttle, netting tool, mirror, needlecase top, tweezers, unpicking tool, scissors, four knitting needles, buttonhook, three tambouring hooks, needlecase, comb and comb case' (fig.75). While Eliot clearly knew how to sew, it is clear what she would rather have been doing. In an essay called 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', she manages to combine her criticism of amateur women writers with amateur women stitchers. They write, she says, 'the frothy, the prosy, the pious, or the pedantic', producing a kind of text/handicrafts hybrid which she sardonically called 'the *mind-*

and millinery species' [emphasis in original].[159] Eliot's derision leaves us in no doubt what we are to think of her character Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch* who is the 'flower of Mrs Lemon's school [...] where the teaching included all that was demanded in the accomplished female – even to extras, such as the getting in and out of a carriage.'[160]

Figure 74. George Eliot's reticule, © Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery.

Figure 75. Leather workbag with needlework accessories, c.1875-1899, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 73. George Eliot's needlepointed footstool, © Nuneaton Museum and Art Gallery.

Germaine Greer wrote a provocative, if poorly-reasoned, article in 2007 in which she slated fibre arts, asking what was 'the point of such an exercise in futility' in making a picture 'out of bits of old fabric'. Women, she said 'have frittered their lives away stitching things for which there is no demand ever since vicarious leisure was invented'.[161] Simone de Beauvoir, citing Blaise Pascal, gave textiles for women short shrift too: 'With needle or hook, woman sadly weaves the very nothingness of her days'.[162] Novelist Angela Carter is more subtle. In her little-read short story/memoir 'The Quilt Maker' she points out that the 'household art' of quilting is 'neglected, obviously, because my sex excelled in it - well, there you are; that's the way it's been, isn't it? [...] it took a hundred years for fine artists to catch up with the

[159] George Eliot, 'Silly Novels by Lady Novelists', *The Essays of George Eliot* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), p. 178. ed. Nathan Sheppard and transcribed from the 1883 edition by David Price. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/28289/28289-h/28289-h.htm [accessed 15 May 2024].
[160] George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 96.
[161] Germaine Greer, 'Making pictures from strips of cloth isn't art at all – but it mocks art's pretentions to the core', Guardian, 13 August 2007 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/aug/13/art> [accessed 3 March 2024].
[162] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* fp.1949, trans. by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (London: Vintage, 2011), p. 648.

kind of brilliant abstraction that any ordinary housewife used to be able to put together in only a year, five years, ten years, without making a song and dance about it'.[163] Greer's more dismissive thesis ricochets wildly in all directions, but in fact Maggie might have concurred, as might Charlotte Brontë since she too found sewing exasperating. There is no doubting Charlotte's skill; she made this accomplished sampler at the age of only six (fig.75). But, like Susie, she did not want to be good at it.[164]

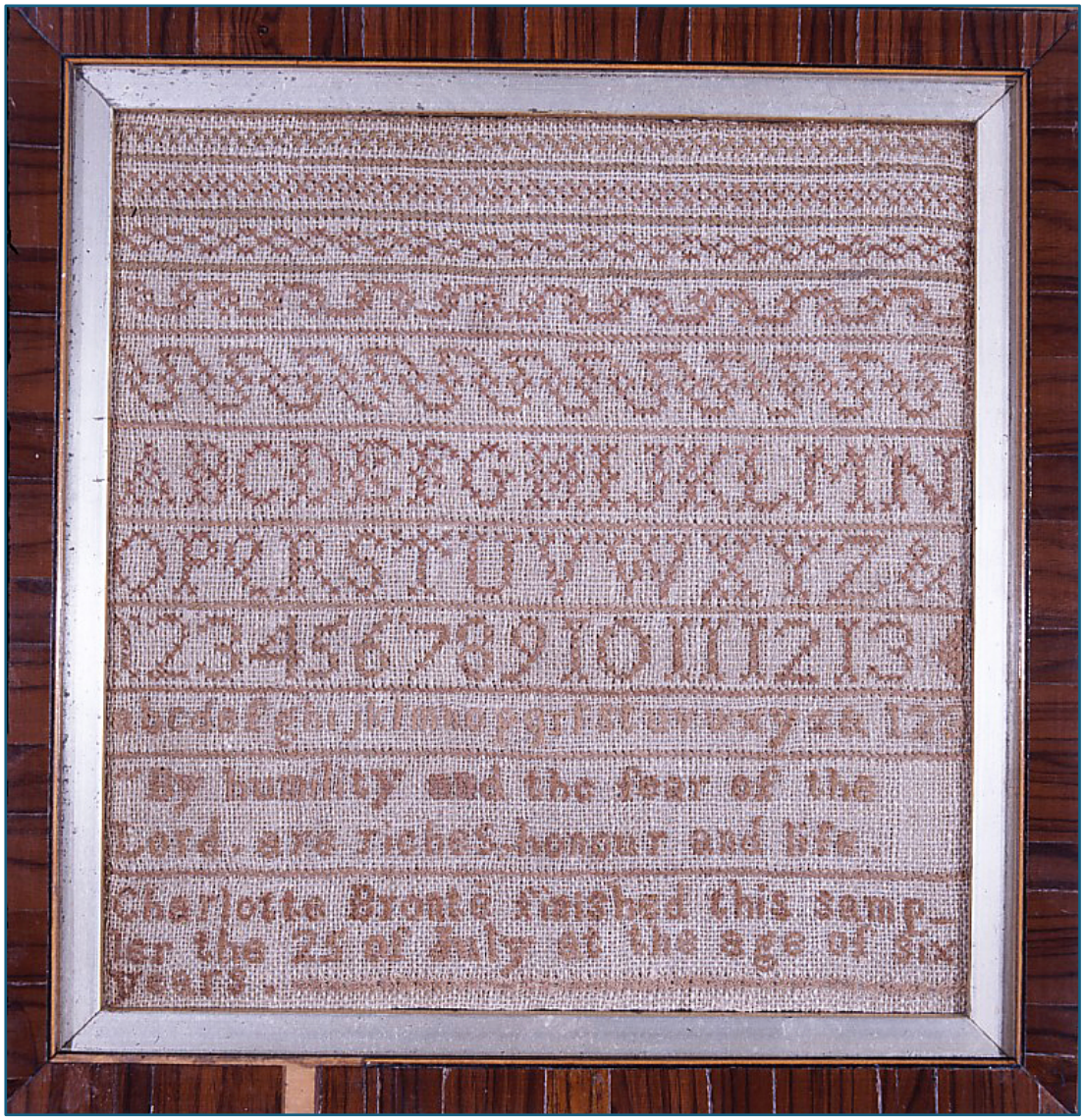


Figure 76. Sampler made by Charlotte Brontë, six, in the collection at Haworth Parsonage, © The Brontë Society.

[163] Angela Carter, 'The Quilt Maker', *Burning Your Boats: The Collected Short Stories of Angela Carter* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), pp. 443. I draw further on Carter's and Roland Barthes' use of the quilt metaphor in my coda. Lucy Lippard's view of quilting as 'the prime visual metaphor for women's lives, for women's culture' is well known. Lucy Lippard, 'Up, Down, and Across: A New Frame for New Quilts', *The Artist and the Quilt*, ed. Charlotte Robinson, p. 32.

[164] Judy Chicago describes samplers as the art of teaching young girls 'how to think small' to prepare them 'to deal with tedious tasks.' *The Dinner Party: A Tour of the Exhibition*, (Serpentine Gallery, 2024), directed by Donald Woodman.

In her quest to be a published writer, Charlotte wrote to Poet Laureate Robert Southey in 1836, asking him for advice. He replied three months later with the infantilising, quasi-medical counsel that '[t]he daydreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind'. Southey pointed out that as an unmarried woman she has yet to be called to her domestic duties, but 'the more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for [writing], even as an accomplishment & a recreation'. He adds that 'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life: & it ought not to be' and once she gets married she 'will then not seek in imagination for excitement'.[165] The implication is that future wifely duties will be thrilling enough. Charlotte's reply is a beautifully disguised exercise in sarcasm which Southey no doubt failed to spot:

> You kindly allow me to write poetry for its own sake, provided I leave undone nothing which I ought to do, in order to pursue that single absorbing exquisite gratification. [...] Following my Father's advice,—who from my childhood has counselled me just in the wise and friendly tone of your letter—I have endeavoured not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil, but to feel deeply interested in them. I don't always succeed, for sometimes when I'm teaching or sewing I would rather be reading or writing; but I try to deny myself; and my Father's approbation amply rewarded me for the privation. Once more allow me to thank you with sincere gratitude. I trust I shall never more feel ambitious to see my name in print; if the wish should rise, I'll look at Southey's letter, and suppress it.[166]

Sewing in the Brontë household certainly seemed a joyless exercise. Ann Dinsdale, principal curator at Haworth Parsonage, described it as a form of 'discipline' for the sisters. Elizabeth Gaskell reported that the girls' Aunt Branwell insisted they apply themselves to sewing charity clothes because "'It was proper for them to do it.'"[167] In a letter to Gaskell, Charlotte's friend Mary Taylor recalled that Aunt Branwell 'made a great favourite of [Charlotte's brother] Branwell', but 'made her nieces sew, with purpose or without, and as far as possible discouraged any other culture. She used to keep the girls sewing charity clothing, and maintained to me that it was not for the good of the recipients, but of the sewers.'[168]

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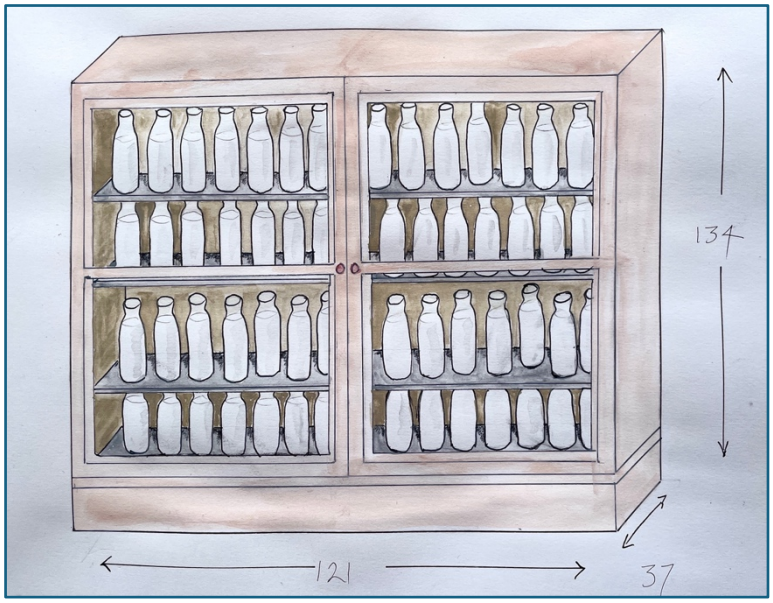
[165] Robert Southey to Charlotte Brontë, 12 March 1837. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë with a selection of letters by family and friends, Volume 1, 1829–1846*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp. 165-167.
[166] Charlotte Brontë to Robert Southey, 16 March 1837. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë with a selection of letters by family and friends, Volume 1, 1829–1846,* ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: OUP, 1995), pp. 168-169.
[167] Ann Dinsdale, 'Domestic Life at Haworth Parsonage', *The Brontës in Context*, ed. Marianne Thormählen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 23.
[168] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 95.

Sewing was not the only thing used for women's own 'good'. In the following chapter, I examine the role of materiality in this project, specifically milk. I assess its political function in force-feeding 'hysterical' or depressed women, Virginia Woolf and Charlotte Perkins Gilman amongst them. I assess my own use of milk as an art material and how it might be used as a form of connectivity between the women in this project.

Chapter 2:

Milk, ink, and paper: force-feeding the bodyless girl



Milk is neither a transhistorical fact of nature, nor purely a cultural construct or metaphor; it needs to be acknowledged as a hybrid assemblage in which these things are entangled' [169] David Prieto Serrano, Alejandro Alonso Diaz

Figure 77. Design for *A Week's Supply,* cabinet, etched glass, bottles, milk.

Milk: sustenance, solidarity and punishment

Milk is the archetypal source of nourishment and nurture, usually the first liquid to touch our lips, and deeply embedded in our culture. In my practice, milk is extruded, woven and crocheted; milk is performance, milk 'paper' sheets are etched, recycled milk bottles become fabric, milk is liquid, solid, powder, protein; it is an expression of fundamental nourishment and limitless potential. It is the essence of sustenance, the stuff of metaphor, both a verb and a noun, fluid in interpretative power, and endlessly milked for meaning. In a1926 diary entry, Virginia Woolf likened writing to 'milk[ing]' her brains.[170] The artist Peter Blegvad was so captivated by milk's mercurial properties that he compiled an entire book with 342 milk quotations, covering 'light, smell, writing, mothers, fathers, colour, nothingness, regression,

[169] *Microbiopolitics of Milk*, ed. David Prieto Serrano, Alejandro Alonso Diaz, Fernando Garcia-Dory, 2022 (London: Sternberg Press).
[170] Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf,* ed. Leonard Woolf fp. 1953 (London: Persephone Books, 2012), p. 95.

gender, race, food, cattle, ectoplasm, anti-matter, the moon, sex and insanity amongst other things.' He wanted, he said, to collate the thoughts of poets who 'hallucinated milk.'[171] There are some strange choices, although I am fond of Clifton Fadiman's contribution: 'Cheese: milk's great leap for immortality'.[172] In my research practice, milk is both material and metaphor, metonym for nourishment yet vexed symbol of bodily control exerted by others. It is not an obedient material, often shrugging off the intentions I have invested it with.

In the context of this research, I am working with cow's milk, rather than any other source. This is not a project which intersects, for example, with Scarlett Carlos Clarke's *Cow,* Jess Dobkin's *Lactation Station*, Janine Antoni's *to quench*, or Jill Miller's *The Milk Truck*. While Joanna Wolfarth takes an art historical perspective in her book *Milk: An Intimate History of Humanity's First Food,* she focuses on breastfeeding, as does Doireann Ní Ghríofa in her novel *A Ghost in the Throat*. Incidentally, it is impossible to forget the scene at the end of John Steinbeck's 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath* when Rose of Sharon breastfeeds a starving man, but it is not the focal point here.[173] Mark Kurlansky takes a socio-political view in *Milk: A 10,000-Year History*. Melanie Jackson and Esther Leslie focus on milk more precisely in the way that I do, as liquid narrative:

> To perceive the shapes within milk [...] is to give oneself up to its minglings, its combinations and recombinations with myth, social norms, social fantasy, and cultural practices. It means to conceive its expressibility, its capacity to be images, to seep into language [...] never settling, always spilling somewhere else.[174]

As it has spilled, milk has also been co-opted as a political substance, a punitive liquid, an instrument of hegemony. Jackson and Leslie highlight milk's industrial potential, interpreting it as a geometrical experiment composed of sharp angles, corners, squares and crisp edges.

> To conceive milk operations as enmeshed in the geometry of the grid is to imagine the precision of the bottling plant, and the clear-cut configurations of cubes or triangles of butter and cheese. The grid produces geometric forms, and the more all

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[171] Peter Blegvad interviewed by Anna Russell, 'Saturation Job', *New Yorker*, 27 November, 2023.
[172] Peter Blegvad, *Milk: Through a Glass Darkly* (Axminster: Uniform Books, 2023), p. 33.
[173] Representations of breastfeeding is a significant area for arts research, as well as in the cross- disciplinary field of postcolonial studies (Nottingham Trent University's Postcolonial Studies Centre project, Formation: Milk – Global practices) and in photography (Kenneth Hayes' *Milk and Melancholy*). Rather than concentrating on motherhood, gender and identity, I focus on milk as a medium and central element in storytelling.
[174] Melanie Jackson and Esther Leslie, 'Deeper in the Pyramid: Journeys of Lactic Abstraction', *Microbiopolitics of Milk,* ed. David Prieto Serrano, Alejandro Alonso Diaz, Fernando Garcia-Dory, 2022 (London: Sternberg Press), p. 38.

> is standardized the sharper the angles, the more platonically ideal the shapes. In testing butter, penetration and compression tests deploy a range of geometries: cone, needle, cylinder, sphere, and plate. Tetra Pak added an additional geometry with its white tetrahedral milk packs and their hexagonal geodesic supermarket stacks.

It is important to register that the whiteness of milk was notoriously drafted in by Herbert Hoover as a vile, racist weapon when he spoke to the World's Dairy Congress in the 1920s: "'upon this industry more than any other of the food industries, depends not alone the problem of public health, but there depends upon it the very growth and virility of the white races.'"[175] It is an appropriation of milk as politicised bigotry. Milk as a substance is nothing if not complicated.

In my installation *A Week's Supply*, I examine milk's role as a quasi-medical instrument in the emotional and intellectual control of women. Who is not struck with dread by lines in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 novella, *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, once their meaning becomes clear? Tormented by postnatal depression and locked in a strange room by her husband, the unnamed protagonist frets at her entrapment: 'John says if I don't pick up faster he shall send me to Weir Mitchell in the fall.' Apparently innocuous, her words refer to the frightening rest cure for 'hysterical' women designed by the American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell. He argued that intellectually-active women were prey to hysteria, but that his regime of confining them to bed and force-feeding them milk would bring them back under control: 'At first, and in some cases for four to five weeks, I do not permit the patient to sit up or to sew or write or read, or to use the hands in any active way except to clean the teeth' he insisted.[176] Perhaps most shocking was his use of milk as women's sole food, instructing a nurse to force-feed it to them every two hours (while still lying flat) until, by the end of each day, they may have consumed almost a gallon. Under Mitchell's system, a woman was 'put to bed and taught complete submission; even her arms and legs were moved for her. Every orifice was invaded – by vaginal douches, enemas and milk feedings. Then when she was fatter and ruddier, she was told what to think and how to express her thoughts'.[177] As Elaine Showalter observed, 'Mitchell insisted on isolation both as a way of removing the patient from the sympathetic collusion of her family and as a way of maximising his own semimagical

[175] 'Proceedings of the World's Dairy Congress', Vol. 1, US Department of Agriculture, 1924, p. 15.
[176] S. Weir Mitchell, M. D., *Fat and Blood: an essay on the treatment of certain forms of neurasthenia and hysteria* (London: J. B. Lippincott, 1885), pp. 58-59.
[177] Ellen L. Bassuk, 'The Rest Cure: Repetition or Resolution of Victorian Women's Conflicts'? (Tel Aviv: Porter Institute for Poetics and Semiotics, Poetics Today, 1985-01, Vol. 6 (1/2). p. 252.

influence over her.'[178] Charlotte Perkins Gilman could write with authority on Mitchell's use of milk as a form of control; she had been subjected to his regime herself. So too was Virginia Woolf who was treated by Mitchell's British disciple Sir George Savage in the early 1900s.[179] He ordered that she be banned from the agitating effect of London life and fed the familiar, punitive milk diet. In 1910, after she had already tried to kill herself, she was institutionalised in a nursing home for women with 'nervous disorders'. The effect of the incarceration and forced diet is painful to read in the letter Woolf wrote to her sister in July 1910. By this time she had been trapped in bed for an entire month.

> I shall soon have to jump out of a window. The ugliness of the house is almost unbelievable. [...] Then there is all the eating and drinking and being shut up in the dark.
> My God! What a mercy to be done with it.[180]

There is a pitiful compliance and obedience to the way she eventually closes her letter: 'I will be very reasonable.'

During her incarceration, she was not even allowed to knit, much though she loved it, and it is hard to overstate the punishment for her of being denied pen and paper, or even so much as a book to read. The medical interventions were grotesque. The force-feeding regime in Burley Park Hospital, Twickenham would increase Woolf's weight by three stone. On one occasion, it was judged wise to extract three of her teeth and have 'the "microbes" from their roots injected into the arm.'[181] My installation, *A Week's Supply*, confronts the 42 pints of milk that one of Mitchell's or Savage's female patients could be forced to consume in just one week, while lying flat (figs.78-82). It is a spatialisation of the grotesque drive to control women's minds and bodies. I have placed the five and a quarter gallons in glass bottles in a medical cabinet whose glass doors I have etched with Silas Weir Mitchell's sinister instructions, a painful counterpoint to the reality that this was not a curative treatment at all, but a subjugating, humiliating one.

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[178] Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 139.
[179] Readers need only witness doctors treating shell-shocked Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* to be clear about Woolf's disparaging views on the medical profession.
[180] Letter from Virginia Woolf to her sister Vanessa Bell, 28 July 1910, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf: Volume 1, 1888 – 1912*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Hogarth Press, 1975), p. 432.
[181] Alexandra Harris, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 73.

Figure 78. A Week's Supply, wood, etched glass, bottles, milk, 121x134x37 cm.

Figure 79. A *Week's Supply*, wood, etched glass, bottles, milk, 121x134x37 cm.
'Milk to be given at least every two hours at first, in quantities not to exceed four ounces, and as the amount taken is enlarged, the periods between may be lengthened, but not beyond three hours during the waking day, the last dose to be used at bedtime.' Silas Weir Mitchell.

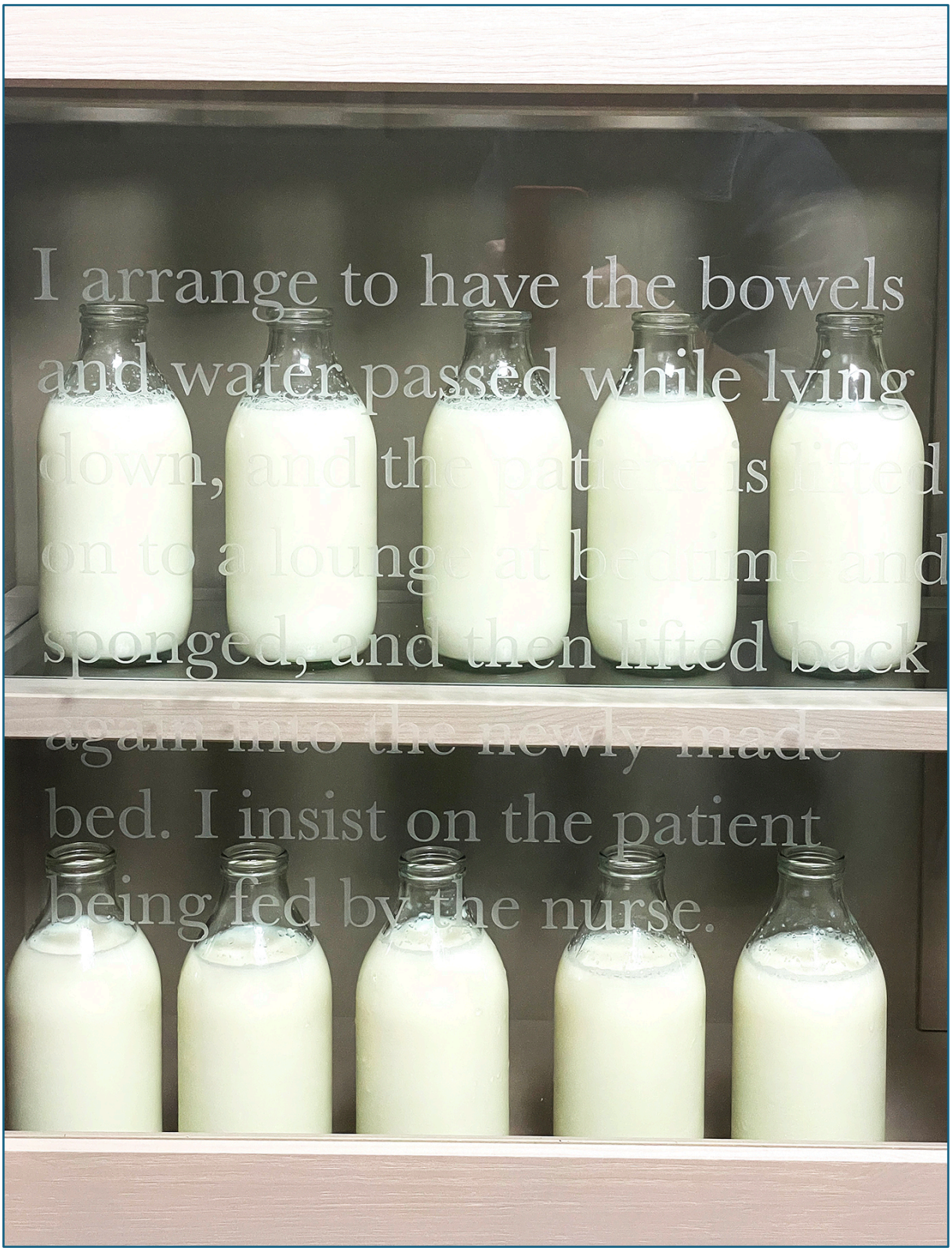

Figure 80. *A Week's Supply*, wood, etched glass, bottles, milk, 121x134x37 cm.
'I arrange to have the bowels and water passed while lying down, and the patient is lifted on to a lounge for an hour in the morning and again at bedtime, and then lifted back again into the newly made bed... I insist on the patient being fed by the nurse.' Mitchell.

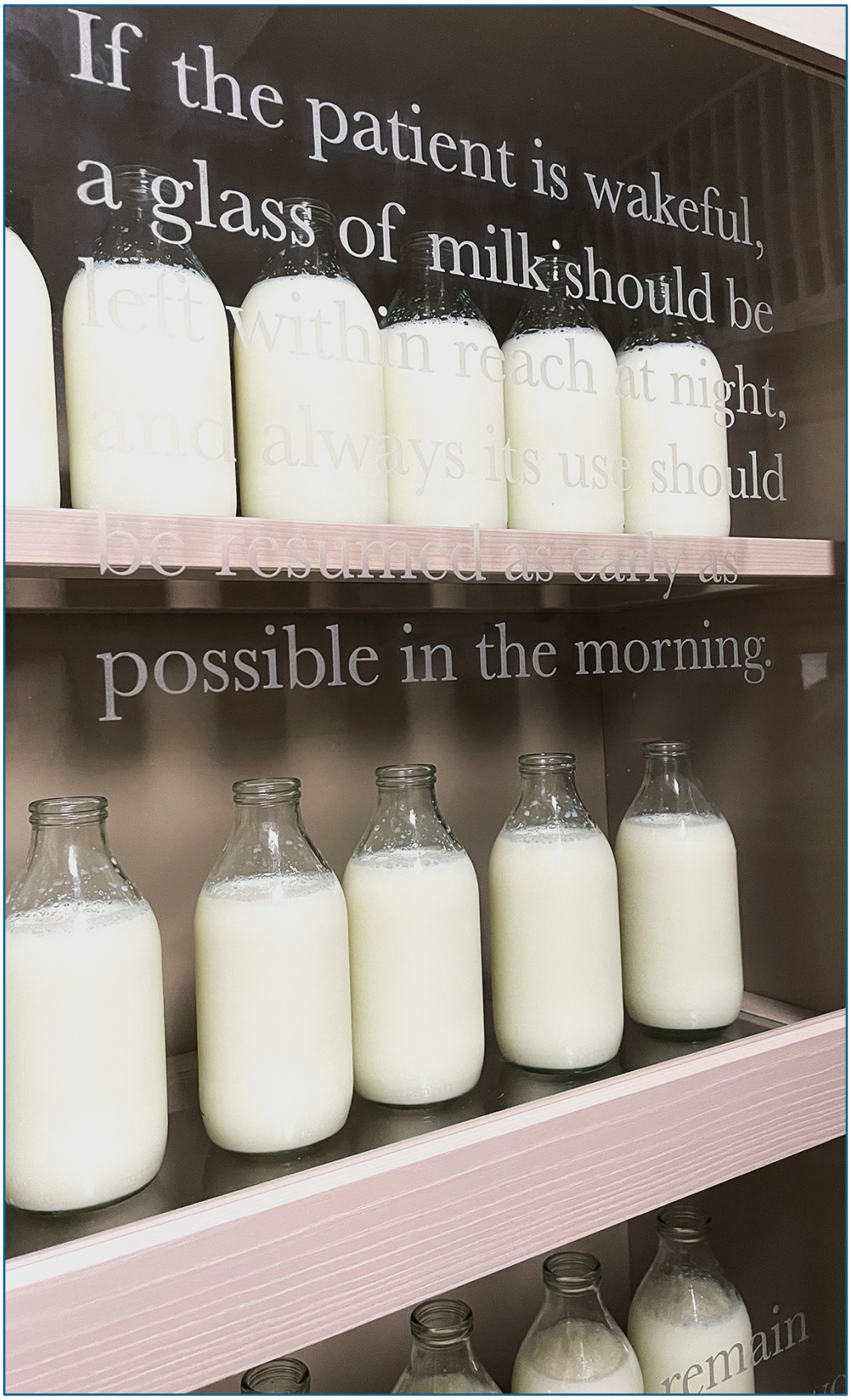

Figure 81. A Week's Supply, wood, etched glass, bottles, milk, 121x134x37 cm.
"If the patient is wakeful, a glass of milk should be left within reach at night, and always its use should be resumed as early as possible in the morning'. Mitchell.

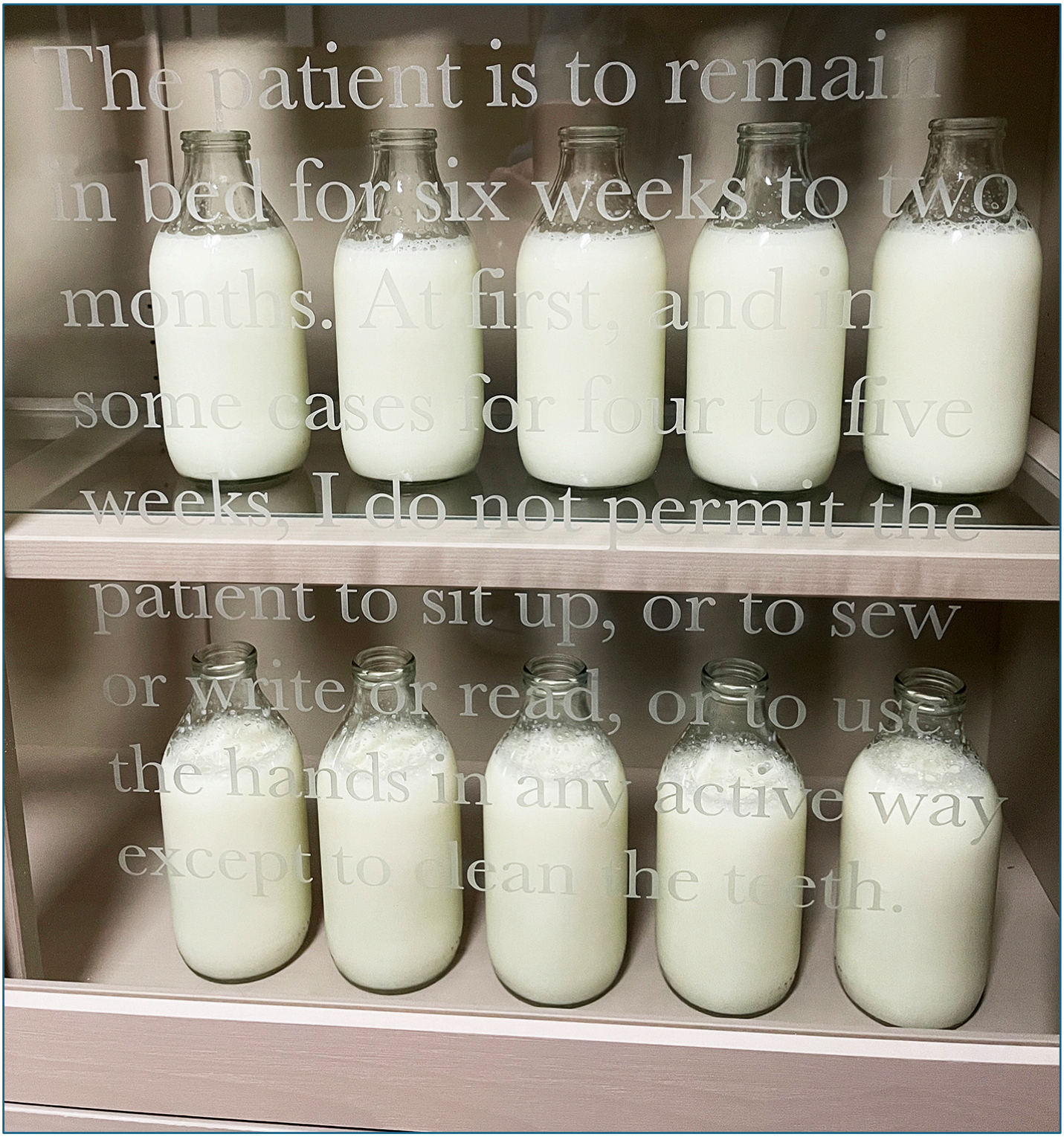

Figure 82 *A Week's Supply*, wood, etched glass, bottles, milk, 121x134x37 cm.
'The patient is to remain in bed for six weeks to two months. At first, and in some cases for four to five weeks, I do not permit the patient to sit up, or to sew or write or read, or to use the hands in any active way except to clean the teeth.' Mitchell.

As Hermione Lee points out, '[t]here is no doubt that the development of [Woolf's] political position, her intellectual resistance to tyranny and conventionality, derived to a great extent from her experiences as a woman patient.'[182] Incidentally, it is clear from an entry in Leonard Woolf 's diary that Savage was eventually partly responsible for ordering Virginia Woolf to remain childless:

> she was continually suffering bouts of intense worry and insomnia, and every now and again from the headache which was the danger signal of something worse. From time to time Sir George Savage was consulted, and some time in the spring it was at last definitely decided that it would not be safe for her to have a child.[183]

Woolf had already associated childlessness with being a failure as a novelist, writing bleakly to her sister in 1911: 'to be 29 and unmarried – to be a failure – childless - insane too, no writer'.[184] Hermione Lee notes that 'In her deepest plunges into "melancholy" or a sense of failure, she always uttered the words "children"'.[185] The connection in Woolf's mind between Savage's treatment, childlessness and failure must have been compounded by the forced consumption of pint after pint of baby food - milk.

The artist Gwen John refused to succumb to others' instructions, but such rebellion came at a price: she frequently starved herself to pay for the models essential to her work. Her biographer Alicia Foster recounts a scene when John met the poet Jeanne Robert Foster: '[John] "arrived 'wildly – half dressed, her face drawn and colourless'… [she] had eaten next to nothing."'[186] Gwen John's willing starvation makes the disgusting women's food Virginia Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own* seem epicurean by comparison. But here, too, food was an instrument of control in which women were always the losers. Woolf describes the feasts in the men's college of fish in 'the whitest cream', partridges with 'all their retinue of sauces and salads' and a pudding which 'rose all sugar from the waves'. But the women's college serves 'plain gravy soup', 'stringy beef', and prunes 'exuding a fluid such as might run in misers' veins'.[187] It is telling, in the context of my focus on milk as a material

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[182] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 184.
[183] Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911-1918* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), p. 149.
[184] Virginia Woolf to Vanessa Bell, June 1911.
[185] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 334.
[186] Alicia Foster, *Gwen John: Art and Life in London and Paris* (Thames & Hudson, 2023), p. 159.
[187] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 13 and p. 22.

and on Woolf's own vexed relationship with it, that Woolf compares the bodies of rats fed with different grades of milk:

> [S]urely it is time that the effect of discouragement upon the mind of the artist should be measured, as I have seen a dairy company measure the effect of ordinary milk and Grade A milk upon the body of the rat. They set two rats in cages side by side, and of the two one was furtive, timid and small, and the other was glossy, bold and big. Now what food do we feed women as artists upon? I asked, remembering, I suppose, that dinner of prunes.[188]

Woolf seems to hate milk, whilst conceding its essential nourishing function. Once again, milk is demonstrating its contested, vexatious nature.

Rhoda, Woolf's tormented, self-conscious, anxious character from *The Waves,* is perhaps the most like her own creator in temperament, so vulnerable to being 'knocked against and damaged' and endlessly reflecting that, unlike everyone else, she has 'no face'. She vows to 'stretch my toes so that they touch the rail at the end of the bed; I will assure myself, touching the rail, of something hard. Now I cannot sink; cannot altogether fall through the thin sheet now.'[189] I had thought, when creating my work *Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed* from crocheted paper, ink and milk, that the tight paper bed clothes, the crocheted-paper blanket, the screen-printed and folded paper quilt, and pillow made from dehydrated milk might act as a protective shroud, dewriting and rewriting Rhoda's narrative. The nurturing act of 'tucking someone in' was in my mind. Could the materials of fiction itself – paper and ink - offer some reparative gesture to the fragile, bodyless woman so terrified of falling into nothingness that she would smash her head against something hard to bring back her physical form. The answer is that the tightness of the bedclothes on the bed did not recall a child securely in bed at all, but evoked a lonely, single bed more redolent of Clarissa Dalloway's. Clarissa cries 'narrower and narrower shall my bed become' as she rests in the attic on the instructions of her repressed, conventional MP husband Richard. It was Clarissa's bed I had made, not a protective cocoon for Rhoda (fig.83).

> Like a nun withdrawing, or a child exploring a tower, she went, upstairs [...] The sheets were clean, tight stretched in a broad white band from side to side. Narrower and narrower would her bed be. The candle was half burnt down and she had read deep in Baron Marbot's Memoirs. She had read late at night of the retreat from

[188] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2008), p. 68.
[189] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Penguin, 2019), p. 19.

> Moscow. For the House sat so long that Richard insisted, after her illness, that she must sleep undisturbed.[190]

Clarissa's isolation emanates from the tight paper bedclothes and milk pillow of my bed for Rhoda. I devised a handmade-paper-making process to create the milk pillow-slips and, as the deckled milk dried and contracted on the taut cotton, it produced broken, sharp shards on the surface. Sleeping on such a painful pillow has its own mournful quality.

Figure 83. Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed, paper, milk, screenprint, crocheted paper thread, 92x192x105 cm.

My subsequent research trip to Virginia Woolf's home, Monk's House in East Sussex, revealed yet another forlorn single bed - the narrow one the author slept in on the ground floor, while Leonard slept upstairs (fig.84). It merges in the mind with Clarissa Dalloway's self-

[190] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2009), p. 26.

condemnation for frigidity as she lies in her narrow bed: 'she could not dispel a virginity reserved through childbirth which clung to her like a sheet [...] she had failed him.'[191]

Figure 84. Virginia Woolf's bedroom at her home, Monk's House, East Sussex, © National Trust, Image/Caroline Arber.

[191] *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 27.

Tellingly, and perhaps harshly, Vanessa Bell said of her sister that 'she never had understood or sympathised with sexual passion in men.'[192]It is, I believe, in the placement of Rhoda's bed alongside *May's Travelling Library*, Maggie's torn hair, and Lucy Snowe's carpet and milk letters where the redemptive connection lies. They are rewritten and reconfigured by the uniting force of the paper collars, villanelles and soundscape which flank them protectively. This has become a feature of the research; the placement of works in a kind of symphonic chorus brings a new sense of reparation. That restitution is less apparent when the works are viewed as single entities and without the uniting, consoling force of the library and the collars.

Hélène Cixous extrapolated from some of the historic frustration experienced by women, fictional and nonfictional, who were starved of the ability to express themselves. She expresses that starvation through bodylessness, a concept I discuss later in this chapter: 'Woman must write her self: [sic] must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies – for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement.' And, powerfully in the context of my research, Cixous drew a line between women, mothers, milk and creativity: 'There always remains in woman that force which produces/is produced by the other – in particular, the other woman. In her, matrix, cradler; herself giver as her mother and child; she is her own sister-daughter.' And, most resonant of all, that mother/sister/daughter 'writes in white ink.'[193] Milk as a form of ink permeates much of my practice. The writing is deliberately made desemic but the white ink expresses itself all the same. Cixous voiced some of my women characters' frustrations, expressing incidentally the same exasperation voiced by Anne Elliot in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*. "'if you please, no reference to examples in books. Men have had every advantage of us in telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove anything.'"[194] Anne

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[192] Letter from VB to Clive Bell, 27 December 1912, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, ed. Regina Marler (London: Bloomsbury, 1994), p. 131.
[193] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Feminisms: An Anthology,* trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (Rutgers University Press, 1991), P. 339.
[194] Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 188.. Later in this passage, Anne objects to the claim of 'women's inconstancy'. Her words that 'All the privilege I claim for my own sex [...] is that of loving longest, when existence or when hope is gone' (p. 189) bears a strong resemblance to Mary Wollstonecraft's admonition in her proto-feminist *A Vindication of The Rights of Woman*: 'A mistaken education, a narrow uncultivated mind, and many sexual prejudices, tend to make women more constant than men'. Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 97.

is part of a long line of fictional women to question their own enforced limitations as literary constructs. They are, of course, ventriloquising for their real-life forebears. An actual account of a nonfictional woman speaking for herself was very rare, one such being fourteenth-century Frenchwoman Christine de Pizan, possibly the only medieval woman to earn her living as writer. In the prologue of most famous work, *La Cité des Dame*s, she asks why women 'should be worse than men since we were also created by God'. Like Anne Elliot and the Wife of Bath, Christine de Pizan says it is because men have always commandeered women's stories and, defiantly, she constructs an imaginary building 'in the shape of a walled city, sturdy and impregnable' to which only women will be admitted.[195] Such a structure is referenced in my work *La Cité des Dame*s, housed in May's library (fig.85). In constructing the frescoed, two-part plaster and Jesmonite structure, I created an object that has architectural yet readable qualities. It is only legible when the cuboid 'house' is entered.

Margery Kempe, from whom I draw my character May, suffered at the hands of her fictionalisers too. As Barbara Tuchman notes, 'Fixed as they were in the pattern of female

Figure 85. La Cité des Dames, frescoed plaster, carved Jesmonite, book, 31x29x35 cm.

nature conceived for them by men, it was no accident that women often appeared among

[195] Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 11.

the hysterical mystics. In the uncontrollable weeping of English Margery Kempe there is a poignancy that speaks for many.'[196] Yet, however Margery might have been demeaned, in my incarnation of her as May she, like Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia* contains, frames, houses and, in many ways, shields the women characters in her imaginary care, just as my chorus of collars does (fig. 86).

Figure 86 Piero della Francesca, *Madonna della Misericordia,* 1460-1462.

All the real and fictional women in my infinitely-expandable strange loop were denied things they wanted: education, attention, letters, confidence, careers, contentment, liberty. Often their yearning is expressed via hunger and starvation. Maggie, attempting to educate herself without the benefit of teachers lavished upon her brother, is simultaneously fed and yet cruelly starved in the attempt:

> the poor child, with her soul's hunger and her illusions of self-flattery, began to nibble at this thick-rinded fruit of the tree of knowledge, filling her vacant hours with Latin, geometry, and the forms of the syllogism, and feeling a gleam of triumph every now and then that her understanding was quite equal to these peculiarly masculine studies. For a week or two she went on resolutely enough, though with an occasional sinking of heart, as if she had set out toward the Promised Land alone and found it a thirsty, trackless, uncertain journey.[197]

[196] Barbara Tuchman, Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century (London: Penguin, 2017), p. 233.
[197] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), p. 299.

In an extension of the food metaphor, and using it to reinforce her isolation, Rhoda fixates on the repulsive meatiness of food, the fleshiness of bodies, imagining faces on Oxford Street as greasy bowls: 'faces and faces, served out like soup-plates by scullions.' If she joins a queue of people at Hampton Court she fears she would 'smell sweat, and scent as horrible as sweat; and be hung with other people like a joint of meat among other joints of meat'. She imagines eating 'beef and pudding' and being 'gorged with food, torpid in the heat' and 'swollen but contained in slippery satin.'[198] Her fluid thoughts take her to the repulsive image that she, and everyone else who has eaten, 'cluster like maggots on the back of something that will carry us.' She holds a bunch of commemorative flowers and concludes her tormented reverie by throwing the 'withered violets, blackened violets' into the river, as she will, later, her own body. Rhoda, Maggie, Lucy, Susie - all were childless, all motherless (or at least saddled with an unsympathetic and foolish mother, as Maggie was), all unmarried; most either died young, or survived when hope itself had died. Susie, motherless from the age of 11, lived until she was 101 which enraged her. On her 100th birthday, she received a birthday card from Buckingham Palace, as all centenarians automatically do. She was as angry as I had ever seen her. She demanded to know who had told the Queen, before tearing the card in half and tossing it onto the ground. To her, it was a patronising gesture of pity. At Susie's funeral in Leigh Parish Church in 1999, there were just five of us – not enough to fill even one of the 60 pews. When I stood to deliver the eulogy, I found I could not speak. She had taught me so much, yet had said so little. Her taciturnity became mine and it was impossible to put her back into words. She had always been so angry, so frustrated - and I was bereft.

What orphaned and friendless Lucy Snowe craves above all are letters, with a yearning expressed through starvation and appetite: 'I suppose animals kept in cages, and so scantily fed as to be always upon the verge of famine, await their food as I awaited a letter.' A letter finally arrives but it is a poor, thin affair. What, I thought, would someone so desperately lonely do, in the face of such a famine? I imagined that Lucy would have been so hungry for communication that she would write and post letters to herself. *Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk* is a vast pile of milk 'paper', laser-etched with some of Lucy's own words (fig. 69). By creating paper out of the original, nourishing food - milk - I address questions both of longing and also of ongoing starvation: this desiccated milk cannot be consumed. I

[198] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 106.

experimented with various methods of extracting milk protein using different concentrations of vinegar, sieving the protein using handmade paper-making techniques, drying the sheets in sunlight, before finally removing moisture from the sheets in a culinary dehydrator. Once again, the milk has a mercurial effect, unexpectedly taunting Lucy with its inedibility (fig.88). The crisp, rigid milk protein, burned with her own words, is no more nourishing than the absent paper and ink letters of her hungry imagination. And even when her genuine letter does come, the banquet she has hoped for turns to mere milky froth:

> The poor English teacher in the frosty garret, reading by a dim candle guttering in the wintry air, a letter simply good natured – nothing more - though that good nature then seemed to me god-like, was happier than most queens in palaces.
>
> Of course, happiness of such shallow origin could but be brief; yet while it lasted, it was genuine and exquisite: a bubble – but a sweet bubble - of real honey dew.

Figure 87. Starving for a Letter: Lucy's Desk, wood, etched milk, 91x46x96 cm.

Cleave

Her first name was Frost, her second was Snowe
(there's no doubting the icy design of her writer).
She cleaved to the text, but cleaved from the shadow

and hoped for sovereignty tomorrow
when the shades would be brighter.
Her first name was Frost, her second was Snowe

and she swam through shipwrecks, floods, overflow
from oceans of melancholy that only grew wider.
She cleaved to the text, but cleaved from the shadow

and kept breasting the waves, determined to row
to the haven on the other side, always a fighter.
Her first name was Frost, her second was Snowe.

The storms grew wilder but she chose to follow
her own valiant course carved for an outsider.
She cleaved to the text, but cleaved from the shadow.

In those glacial years, the land lay fallow,
frozen like her name. But time's called on winter.
Though her first name was Frost, her second Snowe,
she cleaved from the text and cleaved from the shadow.

Charlotte Brontë first chose the surname 'Frost' for her frozen character Lucy, before opting finally on 'Snowe'. Her intentions were clear, and that choice became the starting point for May's villanelle 'Cleave'. But, as I have explained, this project not only dewrites and dissolves texts, it also makes play with neologisms and with so-called Janus words. 'Cleave' is just such a word, meaning to break away from, as well as to move towards or to cling. My villanelle uses the flexibility of language to rewrite a story for Brontë's frozen Lucy. She is obedient to her prescribed text at first, whilst trying to turn away from the bleakness that has always clung to her. But, ultimately, the villanelle suggests that she rejects her punitive narrative.

Just as Rhoda's/Clarissa's bed recalls to our imagination their creator's own narrow bed, Lucy's loneliness is so painfully evoked because Charlotte Brontë knew what such starvation felt like too. Elizabeth Gaskell described her as 'shy and silent from the habit of extreme, intense solitude', adding that the only events which punctured her isolation

'consist[ed] in the small changes which occasional letters brought.'[199] In a letter to W. S. Williams, following the deaths of siblings Branwell, Emily and then Anne, Charlotte described her isolation in painful detail: 'I am free to walk on the moors – but when I go out there alone – everything reminds me of the times when others were with me and then the moors seem a wilderness, featureless, solitary, saddening.' Every 'fern, bilberry leaf, lark and linnet' reminds Charlotte of Emily, while Anne comes to her mind when she looks at the horizon: 'The distant prospects were Anne's delight, and when I look round, she is in the blue tints, the pale mists, the waves and shadows of the horizon.' She confesses that it is too painful to read their poetry now, and terrible visions of her siblings' final hours come to her: 'Many people seem to recall their departed relatives with a sort of melancholy complacency – but I think these have not watched them through lingering sickness nor witnessed their last moments.'[200] In a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey on 25 August, 1852, as she is trying to complete *Villette*, she confesses her loneliness is savage. Some words and phrases are stridently underlined, as though she is trying to force herself to bear it:

> I am silent because I have literally nothing to say. I might indeed repeat over and over again that my life is a pale blank and often a very weary burden – and that the Future sometimes apals [sic] me [...] The evils that now and then wring a groan from my heart – [...] not that I am a single woman and likely to remain a single woman – but because I am a lonely woman and likely to be lonely. But it cannot be helped therefore imperatively must be borne.[201]

Charlotte's desperation is painfully apparent. By now, she had lost all five of her siblings. In 1825, her elder sister Maria had died, aged 11 and Elizabeth just six weeks later, aged 10. Once again, it was TB or consumption which had claimed them. In her letter to W. S. Williams, immediately after the death of Anne, Charlotte turns on herself: 'Papa has now me only – the weakest, puniest, least promising of his six children. Consumption has taken the whole five.' On the day that Anne died, Charlotte recorded that her sister's final meal was of 'boiled milk'. Little was understood about the transmission of the TB bacterium at the time, although poor sanitation, overcrowding, and increasing industrialisation were thought to be possible contributary causes. Certainly, in Sarah Sharp Hamer's *Diet and Cookery for Common*

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[199] Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume 2*, p. 58.
[200] Letter from Charlotte Brontë to W. S. Williams, 22 May 1850, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends, Vol. 2, 1848-1851*, ed. Margaret Smith, p. 403.
[201] Letter from CB to Ellen Nussey, 25 August 1852, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: With a Selection of Letters by Family and Friends, Vol. 2, 1848-1851*, ed. Margaret Smith.

Ailments, published in 1894, milk or what is described as 'slop dietary' was recommended for invalids and no mention is made of it being boiled first. It is clear from the archive at the Brontë Parsonage in Haworth that Charlotte's father Patrick was interested in public health. He had various medical texts in his library, including an annotated copy of Thomas Graham's *Modern Domestic Medicine* of 1826. The entry on 'tubercular consumption' states that 'The object here is to nourish without stimulating, and all kinds of milk, with fresh eggs, are advisable.' Ann Dinsdale, principal curator at the parsonage, told me that it is possible 'Branwell brought the disease into the house. When the Parsonage inmates lived so closely together, even sharing beds, infection would have been highly likely. The fact that at the time of Anne's TB diagnosis, Ellen Nussey was advised to return home, suggests some knowledge of the infectious nature of the disease'.[202] It is not known if Anne's milk was boiled because it was deemed more fitting for an invalid, or whether there was at least an instinctive understanding that milk could make people ill. Certainly, there was a well-established tradition particular to the north of England at the time, that invalids should be given what were called 'pobs': pieces of bread soaked in warm milk. Whatever the case, it was far too late to protect Anne from an infection which had already claimed her. Four hours after her breakfast of boiled milk, she was dead. There is a cruel irony in the fact that milk was both a medication for TB sufferers as well as a transmitter of the disease itself. Milk's cunning hybridity was at play once again.

My villanelle for May, 'Ink, Paper, Milk', deploys my key neologism 'sousface' in which I imagine the surface over which women walk as having an underside. Rather than above 'sur', it is below 'sous'. But in that potent pedosphere I conceptualise my women characters as meeting to form a powerful chorus rather than walking in isolation, alone. I also draw on Hélène Cixous's idea that women 'write in white ink', imagining milk as a form of fluid to be drawn up into a pen to transcribe new stories.[203]

[202] Ann Dinsdale in conversation with me, May 2024.
[203] Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 1976-07, Vol. 1 (4), trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen (Chicago: Chicago University Press), p. 881.

Ink, Paper, Milk

Milk pools on the paper's surface, glossy, taut, tactile.
Beneath, on the sousface, ink seeps, staining the underlayer.
Pierce *sur* to meet *sous* for inscape's face where women file

in line, one overlapping the other, choral, steadfast, agile,
spinning parables, future legends, myths of higher air.
On the paper's surface milk pools, glossy, taut, tactile,

nourishing, giving succour, each to the other, while
those not there yet walk towards the circle, eager to share.
Pierce *sur* to meet *sous* for the inscape where women file,

telling their stories of resist, repel, repeat, revile,
to build a circle where no-one need forbear.
On the paper's surface milk pools, glossy, taut, tactile,

daring the pen to draw it up and write a new style
of story in which there's no revenge, no savagery, no despair.
Pierce *sur* to meet *sous* for inscape's face where women file.

When they glide to the cool, shaded glade they merge while
they count their number. Five so far but more will come, aware
that on the paper's surface milk pools, glossy, taut, tactile.
Pierced *sur* meets *sous* – inscape's face where women file.

Out of herself: the bodyless girl:

There are no bodies in my research practice, apart from Maggie's synecdochic shorn, wrenched, crocheted-paper hair. These women are deliberately bodyless. While Rhoda's shimmering, vivacious friend Jinny has blood which is 'bright red, whipped up, slapping against my ribs' and '[a]ll is rippling, all is dancing; all is quickness and triumph', formless Rhoda has to crack her head against a door to bring herself back to her elusive body.[204] So

[204] *The Waves*, (London: Penguin Classics, 2019) p. 33.

unsure is she of her physical self that she is terrified to step over a puddle (just as Virginia Woolf was).[205] In finally daring to stretch her foot across, she is 'drawing myself back into my body over the grey, cadaverous space of the puddle.'[206] She fears that '[u]nless I can stretch and touch something hard, I shall be blown down the eternal corridors for ever. What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? And so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely'.[207] Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë's eponymous girl, describes being '*out* of myself' [emphasis in original] after a violent, impassioned physical fight with her cousin John.[208] Maggie's lack of body derives from her ascetic self-denial. The girl with the flourishing profusion of luxuriant hair, who is 'never satisfied with a little of anything' opts to deny herself everything, including a sentient body: "'it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether,'"[209] she says, before signing up to the extreme bodiless asceticism of Thomas à Kempis (referenced in my villanelle 'Fuller, Louder, Deeper') who recommends that followers should 'Forsake thyself, resign thyself, and thou shalt enjoy much inward peace.'[210] Maggie is thrilled by this call to abandon her body and 'she sat in the deepening twilight forming plans of self-humiliation and entire devotedness; and in the ardor of first discovery, renunciation seemed to her the entrance into that satisfaction which she had so long been craving in vain'.[211] Later, she compounds her starvation diet by simultaneously ingesting Thomas à Kempis while doing what she loathes - sewing:

> she was too ardently learning to see all nature and life in the light of her new faith, to need any other material for her mind to work on, as she sat with her well-plied needle, making shirts and other complicated stitchings, falsely called "plain,"—by no means plain to Maggie, since wristband and sleeve and the like had a capability of being sewed in wrong side outward in moments of mental wandering.

Her mother looks on approvingly, amazed by how 'good' Maggie now is: 'That new inward life of hers, notwithstanding some volcanic upheavings of imprisoned passions, yet shone out in her face with a tender soft light that mingled itself as added loveliness with the gradually enriched colour and outline of her blossoming youth.'[212] Knowing how much George Eliot admired the Pre-Raphaelite painter William Holman Hunt, it is not too much of a stretch to

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[205] Virginia Woolf, 'Sketch of the Past', *Moments of Being* (London: Pimlico, 2002), p. 90.
[206] *The Waves*, p. 47.
[207] *The Waves*, p. 120
[208] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 12.
[209] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 341.
[210] *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 302.
[211] *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 303.
[212] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p.306.

imagine Maggie as the enraptured, radiant figure in his 1853 painting *The Awakening Conscience*, moving towards a reformed life of asceticism and denial (fig.88).

Figure 88. William Holman Hunt, *The Awakening Conscience,* 1853, oil on canvas, 76.2 x 55.9 cm © Tate, presented by Sir Colin and Lady Anderson through the Friends of the Tate Gallery, 1976. CCBY-NC-ND 4.0 DEED.

The writer and mountain walker Nan Shepherd provides a variation on a girl's bodylessness, using walking as a form of imaginative philosophising in which she is so deeply inside herself that she becomes more spirit than body. As she walks the Cairngorms, she asserts that she is 'beyond desire. It is not ecstasy [...]. I am not out of myself, but in myself. I am. To know Being, this is the final grace accorded from the mountain.'[213] Her simple observation that 'a mountain has an inside' inspired the title of my podcast and, serendipitously I discovered that when I wrote the title as an acronym it formed the resonant words I AM. With an exquisite turn of language, Robert Macfarlane shapes

[213] Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2014), p. 108.

Shepherd's sense of living in the present tense into a powerful mode for being - a different form of I AM:

> This is Shepherd's revised version of Descartes' cogito. I walk therefore I am. The rhythm of the pedestrian, the iamb of the 'I am', the beat of the placed and lifted foot.[214]

Macfarlane transmutes the idea of simple iambic pentameter into a manifesto in which he likens Shepherd's evocation of mountains' topology to the land art of Andy Goldsworthy. But it is not the 'I AM' of the solipsist. It is the liberated, narratological, spiritual 'I AM' that writer Olga Tokarczuk spoke of in her 2019 Nobel lecture. She described her mother's ability to take that 'I am' and free her child from the confines of clock time, releasing her into timelessness: 'I understood then that [...] even if I were to say, "I'm lost," then I'd still be starting out with the words "I am" – the most important and the strangest set of words in the world. [...] My mother gave me something once known as a soul, thereby furnishing me with the world's greatest tender narrator.'[215] But the problem, as she sees it, is that we are now confronted by a 'reality of polyphonic first-person narratives, and we are met from all sides with polyphonic noise.' It is a variation on Kathleen Jamie's objection to overuse of the first person pronoun in nature writing: 'The danger of this writing style is that there will be an awful lot of "I". If there is a lot of "I" [...] then it won't be the wild places we behold, but the author.'[216] Her cutting phrase from the same essay, 'the lone enraptured male' has become famous. It is important to note that the 'I' in nature writing and walking is, all too often, male. Alastair Robinson, analysing the work of Hamish Fulton and, in particular, Richard Long's *A Line in the Himalayas* (1975), warned of the risk of 'being seduced by the sublime, panoramic, powerful scene' which, inevitably, places it 'within a pseudo-Romantic, epic-heroic tradition.'[217] Robinson's warning is a variation on Rebecca Solnit's strictures about the 'fucked-up Adam' which I cited in my prologue. [218] Christine Battersby, too, has powerfully laid out what dry, unwelcoming territory the sublime is for the woman

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[214] Robert Macfarlane, 'Introduction', Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2014), p. xxxi.
[215] Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 2019.
[216] Kathleen Jamie, 'A Lone Enraptured Male', *London Review of Books*, vol. 30 no. 5, 6 March 2008.
[217] 'Walk On: from Richard Long to Janet Cardiff – 40 Years of Art Walking, 2013', curated Cynthia Morrison-Bell and Alastair Robinson in collaboration with Mike Collier from Sunderland University's WALK Research Centre. Cited by Venda Louise Pollock, 'Land, art', *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies* ed. Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton, Mick Atha, 2018 (London: Routledge), pp. 215–226.
[218] Rebecca Solnit, *Landscape Theory*, ed. by Rachael Ziady DeLue, James Elkins (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), p. 98.

artist/writer.[219] As Tokarczuk points out, to see the world through such a perspective merely offers an experience which is '[i]ncomplete and disappointing, as it turns out that expressing an authorial "self" hardly guarantees universality.'[220] Male individualism does not provide an adequate roadmap. Here, critically, is the heart of my research – the future, inclusive legend in which 'I' becomes 'we'- although it is work I embarked on before Tokarczuk's lecture:

> What we are missing – it would seem – is the dimension of the story that is the parable. For the hero of the parable is at once himself, a person living under specific historical and geographical conditions, yet at the same time he also goes well beyond those concrete particulars. [...] In this demanding psychological operation, the parable universalizes our experience, finding for very different fates a common denominator.[221]

This research, with its organising principles of May as container space, with Susie, Rhoda, Lucy and Maggie as her fabled chorus, is a future legend told for present times which attempts to escape 'polyphonic first-person narratives', avoiding the heroic epic, whilst retaining May as the 'tender narrator'.

In the following chapter, I address May/Margery Kempe's travelling library filled with 'blooks' (or book-like objects), embroidered biomaterials in vitrines, dematerialised texts and the talisman of a library as a container for women's lives. The chapter examines the idea of reading as travel, Barthesian narratology, and the mysterious power of illegibility. I also analyse the role of my soundscape walks in *Inside A Mountain,* along with my neologism 'sousface'.

[219] Christine Battersby, *Gender and Genius* (London: Women's Press, 1987) and *The Sublime, Terror and Human Difference* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007).
[220] Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 2019.
[221] Olga Tokarczuk, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 2019.

Chapter 3:

May's travelling library: container space and cabaret

In all our individual states, we are always communal. There is always a point where a hand reaches out to another hand.[222]
Ali Smith

In books there were people who were always agreeable or tender, and delighted to do things that made one happy, and who did not show their kindness by finding fault. The world outside the books was not a happy one, Maggie felt.[223]
George Eliot

Figure 89. Final design for *May's Travelling Library.*

A bag to carry things in:

In my labyrinthine tale of defictionalising and refictionalising, writing and dewriting, there is no space for a conquering hero. Instead, there is a nurturing container, a library, a chorus, a community of women. The idea of an energised, invigorating, translational container space is important conceptually. The fantasy writer Ursula K. Le Guin, in an essay speculating about the origins both of humans and of fiction, proposed that our ancient ancestors' finest

[222] Ali Smith interviewed by Alex Clark, *Guardian*, 6 September 2014 https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/06/ali-smith-interview-how-to-be-both [accessed 30 June 2024].
[223] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 247.

invention was not the stone spearhead, but the carrier bag. In a wonderfully fluid and persuasive torrent of words, she convinces the reader that the spear, the knife, the axe, the 'indispensable whacker, grinder and digger', were of no use without anything to lug ones prey home in. The bag had to come first. From there it is but a small leap of logic across one of Virginia Woolf's puddles to Le Guin's idea that fiction itself is a capacious bag. Rather than tell stories of 'mammoth hunters' which are about 'bashing, thrusting, raping, killing', she envisaged a new story, one which carried things and people, and in which the hero was not welcome:

> [T]he hero has decreed [...] that the proper shape of the narrative is that of the arrow or spear, starting here and going straight there and THOK! hitting its mark (which drops dead). [...] I would go so far as to say that the natural, proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag. A book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle.[224]

The hero does not look good in a bag: 'He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, or a potato', Le Guin said persuasively, puncturing her prey with mockery rather than one of his pointy spears.[225] In this context, Donna Haraway has devised the term 'sympoiesis' rather than 'autopoiesis', objecting to what she regards as the 'fantasy' that women are 'self-made'. 'Sympoiesis', on the other hand, is a form of nurturing container in which women collectively help make each other and in which (like the strange loop of this project), the work is always inclusive and never completed. It is a form of sustaining 'ongoingness' which celebrates the 'finicky, disruptive details of good stories that don't know how to finish. Good stories reach into rich pasts to sustain thick presents to keep the story going for those who come after.'[226] My dewritten characters flourish inside their animating carrier bag of villanelles, words, libraries and milk objects. I have always been hyper-alert to the mercurial power of a container – for good and ill - because it was with just such an object that I was punished and humiliated: with the carcass of a hand-stitched soft toy.

In Year 3 needlework lessons at school, I had been told to make what was called a 'gonk' – a stuffed animal with long, spindly limbs, startled eyes, and a plump, egg-shaped body

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[224] Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, fp 1988 (London: Ignota, 2019), pp. 33–34.
[225] *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, p. 35.
[226] Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 125.

the size of a hot-water bottle.[227] I stitched mine on Susie's ferocious, treadle-operated Singer which sat in the corner of her bedroom. Once I got the heavy foot-plate going, the machine was always in charge, moving my seven-year old calves up and down like pistons. Like the girl in Hans Christian Andersen's grotesque tale 'The Red Shoes', once I got the Singer started, it was very difficult to make its racketing, clattering motion stop.[228] I sewed my seams and stitched the extruded, dangly arms and legs into place. The gonk was ready for stuffing. My teacher, the unlovely Miss Nightingale, had said we must buy Kapok fluff for this part of the job, but Susie rolled her eyes. She opened the drawer of the drab, deal cabinet she kept her clothes in and pulled out a primrose-yellow, acrylic cardigan with splayed cuffs and elbows worn thin and pale. I suggested cutting it into pieces to try filling out the gonk's contours better, but she said it would be a waste. I obediently folded the cardigan into a flat, limp parcel, posted it into the side opening, and stitched him up. I could feel the hard outlines of the white, plastic buttons inside.

The next day, we laid our handicrafts out on our desks. Twenty-nine plump, perky gonks and one poor, starved creature who was so flaccid that his head flopped onto his spaghetti-thin legs like an exhausted toddler. Miss Nightingale picked mine up and called me to the front. "What's this monstrosity?" she asked, dangling him upside down by one of his long, thin legs. She had a way of speaking which drove flecks of spit to the corners of her mouth. I smiled nervously. She reached into her pocket and pulled out her pointy, little sewing scissors. Snip, snip, snip. Up the side seam. She was enjoying herself. She eased her plump, dimpled hand into the creature's stomach and drew out his faded, primrose-yellow innards. The class shrieked with mocking laughter as the tired cardigan emerged. Miss Nightingale waved the gonk and the cardigan in ugly triumph, each of them by a wrist. "You are a disgraceful, lazy girl", she shrilled and gave me detention with relish. Susie shrugged when I got home with the gonk's empty skin and her cardigan. She simply folded it up again and put it back in her drawer. I shuddered afterwards whenever she wore it. I can still see it now, and feel those hard, little white buttons.

[227] Etymologically, the word 'gonk' appears to be drawn from Nordic mythology and tales of the goblin.
[228] Christina Sharpe describes a battle with her mother's Singer sewing machine too: 'She tried, over many summers, to teach me how to sew: needlepoint, applique, cross-stitch, slip stitch. She failed. We failed together.' Christina Sharpe, 'Beauty is a Method', *Brick: A Literary Journal*, Winter 2020.

The gonk, empty of his pale yellow cargo, was now a hollow vessel, an empty body of loose skin. But he had been a container space for public humiliation, co-opted by a cruel teacher for public entertainment. In her memoir, the writer Linda Hogan conceptualises her own, sick, damaged body as just such a flawed, yet navigable container. She fantasises about doing what Miss Nightingale did so gleefully. My teacher had wanted to punish me with her impromptu surgery, but Linda Hogan craves to reach inside her body to cure it, rather than cause it pain:

> Sometimes I see the dress of muscle and flesh worn by these bones, and wonder why I can't heal myself, why I can't change the body clothing as some believe, and let the bones be free, why I can't journey into the matter of my own body and touch the organs, loosen the ligaments where they hold things together.[229]

In this project, I explore the idea that a container space can be a site of infinite and redemptive possibility, even if its origins are the domain of the cruel. An example of the power that even the simplest of containers can hold, is shown movingly in the Smithsonian's exhibit *Ashley's Sack* (fig.90). The stained, cotton bag is embroidered with ten lines in red, green and brown thread:

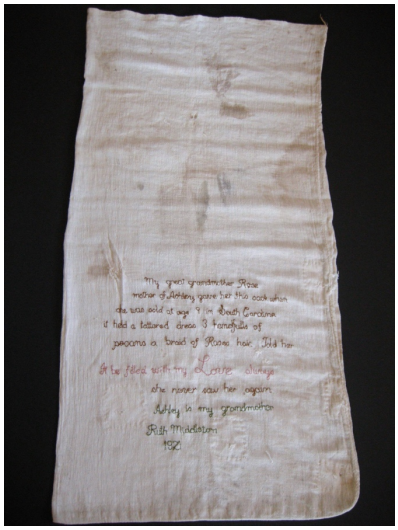

Figure 90. Ashley's Sack: cotton, thread, 1850s, embroidery added 1921. © The Middleton Place Foundation, Charleston, South Carolina

My great grandmother Rose
mother of Ashley gave her this sack when
she was sold at age 9 in South Carolina
it held a tattered dress 3 handfuls of
pecans a braid of Roses hair. Told her
It be filled with my Love always
she never saw her again
Ashley is my grandmother
Ruth Middleton
1921

Ashley and her granddaughter Ruth's story is told in *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake* by historian Tiya Miles. The sack is a profoundly moving object which is testimony to the powerful human emotions that a fragile bag can hold.

[229] Linda Hogan, *The Woman Who Watches Over the World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

A container may contain traces of the body, such as the delicate, curved and scooped, bowl-like plaster structures moulded by sculptor Maria Bartuszová (fig.91). Or it may offer a source of power by which the 'containee' is infused with a protective force. The writer and contemporary of Virginia Woolf's, Sylvia Townsend Warner expressed her connection to the Essex countryside in exactly this way, describing it as a 'mysterious sensation of being where I wanted to be and as I wanted to be, socketed in the universe, and passionately quiescent'[230] A 'socketing' container space need not be so precisely engineered. It may simply be the shallow grooves pressed into the

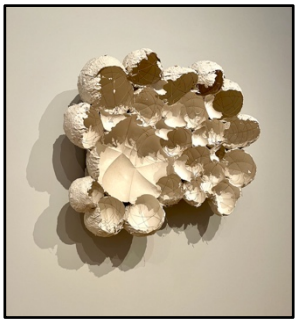

Figure 91. Maria Bartuszová, *Untitled,* 1985, plaster. Photograph © Charlotte Lee-Potter, 2023.

Figure 92. Fungai Marima creating indentations with her hair on soft-ground etching plate for her work *Passage,* 2022, © Fungai Marima.

soft ground of a steel plate by printmaker Fungai Marima. She is the subject of one of my research podcasts in which she explains that she is trying to make manifest the invisible wounds we hold in our bodies. For her work *Passage*, she lay full-length on the plate as it was wheeled into the roller of a vast etching press, trapping her hair as far as her scalp and leaving scooped channels in the soft ground. (fig.92). Magdalena Abakanowicz's vast and uncanny woven sculptures, rich with the smell of burlap and horsehair, hold the speculative promise of containment and comfort. A container need not be a physical object, of course; it

[230] Sylvia Townsend Warner, 'The Essex Marshes', *With the Hunted: Selected Writings of Sylvia Townsend Warner*, ed. Peter Tolhurst (Black Dog Books, 2012), pp. 29-32.

can be the drawn circle on the ground of Bertolt Brecht's play *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* that encloses Natella, Grusha and the child Michael; it might be the rectangular mark that Lily paints on her canvas at the conclusion of *To the Lighthouse*, a mark that seems to hold the entire creative endeavour of the novel within its form; the 'triangular purple shape' which contains Mrs Ramsay reading to her young son James and, later, that same triangle which somehow *is* Mrs Ramsay as she 'knitted her reddish-brown stocking';[231] it might be the looping form which Ali Smith achieves in her novel *How to be both*, in which the reader is repeatedly compelled to return to the beginning each time in order to somehow fully absorb or 'capture' a novel which takes a different shape depending on which edition the reader holds in her hands.[232] In my podcast walk with cellist Natalie Clein she explained that she thinks of the ground itself as a kind of container, holding her feet and the pin of her instrument while allowing her mind and arms to roam imaginatively. Crucially, a container can also be a strange loop, holding my cast of characters within its nurturing confines; and, perhaps most importantly of all, it can be a library, a place and container of wonder. The writer Sally Bayley, subject of my first podcast episode, explained that as a child she escaped to Littlehampton Public Library, recognising it as a nurturing space, a holdall that contained everything she needed, far from the strains of years in the care system. For the sound recording, we visited Littlehampton and the library together, the first time she had been back to the town in many years (figs.93-95). Like my memory of those hard, little white buttons, Sally's memory was visceral. It was a sound - the squelching noise her sandals made as she tried to traverse the parquet floor from the children's section to the adult shelves, without the librarian spotting she was too young to make the crossing. It was in the library's adult section that the treasure was held: Agatha Christie, Charlotte Brontë, William Shakespeare, Virginia Woolf, whose characters she has talked to all her life, like friends. Her striking fictional-biographies, *Girl with Dove, No Boys Play Here* and *The Green Lady*, along with the forthcoming *Pond Life*, ventriloquise aspects of her life through the experiences of a third-person girl who finds a place of safety both in books and in books' container - the library.[233] Sally explains in the podcast episode that there was another important container – the

[231] Mrs Ramsay with her knitting is a potent source of material for artists, including sisters Christine and Irene Hohenbüchler in their 1995 exhibition *We Knitted Braids for Her*.
[232] Ali Smith requested that half the copies should start with the historic narrative and the other half with the account of contemporary girl George.
[233] There are many books about libraries, including *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland*, Matthew Battles's *Library: An Unquiet History* and James W. P. Campbell's *The Library: A World History*.

hollow of a tree in Lobb's Wood, close to the library, where she would take her treasure trove of books and settle in to read.

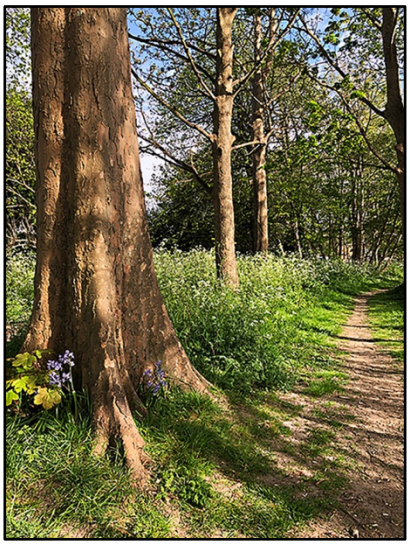

Figure 93. The tree hollow in Lobb's Wood where Sally Bayley hid to read her library books from the age of five.

Figure 94. Littlehampton Public Library.

Figure 95. Sally Bayley returns to Littlehampton.

There are countless examples of libraries as places of solace and wonder.[234] Sometimes their mythic status is only amplified by the fact that they have been destroyed or if they were only fictional in the first place. The lost library of Alexandria and Jorge Luis Borges's fictional 'The Library of Babel' are amongst the most celebrated.[235] Borges's library is a conceptual space in which every book ever written, would be written or could be written is housed:

> the minutely detailed history of the future, the archangels' autobiographies, the faithful catalogue of the Library, thousands and thousands of false catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of those catalogues, the demonstration of the fallacy of the true catalogue, the Gnostic gospel of Basilides, the commentary on that gospel, the commentary on the commentary on that gospel, the true story of your death, the translation of every book in all languages, the interpolations of every book in all books.[236]

It is a container of limitless depth and breadth. In some respects it is a ludicrous exercise, but William Goldbloom Bloch tried to calculate how many books Borges's library might hold. The calculations are complex and labyrinthine, but the answer is a staggering $25^{1312000}$. Even when Bloch reduced the size of each book to one millimetre across - the size of a grain of sand - he found the entire universe is still too small to contain all of them. Having then shrunk the books to proton size, he did the maths to see if a librarian could at least walk past all the books on the shelves in a lifetime:

> a vigorous, long-lived librarian who managed to walk a little over 60 miles – about 100 kilometers – every day for 100 years would cover somewhat less distance than light travels in two *minutes*. To cross our universe, which is incomprehensibly dwarfed by the Library, light would have to travel for at least 15 billion *years*.[237] [emphases in the original].

It is the kind of mathematical calculation I find entrancing in its absurdity. But there is a serious point here, too. Goldbloom Bloch concludes that such a library 'although easily

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[234] John Sutherland speculates enticingly about the effect of the Reverend Patrick Brontë's library on his daughters. Sutherland describes the contents as 'stultifyingly Christian', apart from one volume: 'Byron's *Don Juan*, acquired in 1835. [...] One can make much of that volume, and the sisters' cultivation of the Heathcliff-Rochester Byronic antihero.' I would add *Villette*'s Paul Emmanuel to that antihero number.
John Sutherland, 'Literature and the Library in the Nineteenth Century', *The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History*, ed. Alice Crawford (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 126.
[235] There is disagreement as to when, how and why the library was destroyed. It is possible that having been partially destroyed by fire in 48BC it was rebuilt, only to be lost again.
[236] Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Library of Babel', *Labyrinths*, trans. by James E. Irby (London: Penguin), pp. 81-82.
[237] William Goldbloom Bloch, *The Unimaginable Mathematics of Borges' Library of Babel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 22.

notated, is unimaginable.'[238] I disagree: a library is a container of such limitless, soaring possibility that it challenges any limitations we might impose upon the imagination. It is infinitely imaginable. A library can never be completed and, like the strange loop, it always has room for more.[239]

Nature writer Richard Mabey's observation that a library is 'a kind of landscape', but one which 'edges towards the rampant wildness of an ecosystem, with an agenda of its own' reinforces the idea that a library is a lithe, dynamic entity, with spatial as well as temporal properties.[240] To borrow from Mabey a little, a library is a cabaret of knowledge.[241] The word 'cabaret' has a satisfying seventeenth-century etymology: a small salon or wooden structure where writers, composers and artists might meet to discuss their ideas. It, too, is a container space for the creative mind. Like George Eliot, with her 'quarry' notebooks, Mabey argues that libraries have an inbuilt sense of time as well as space. They have navigable paths, 'geological layers, cliffs, niches, ante-chambers':

> if you gaze at the spines of your books for long enough, you absorb the contents by a kind of chiromancy. I'm often tempted to give up any pretence of order, and arrange the whole lot by free association, so that the library would become a leaf-space as vivaciously mobile as a rain-forest.[242]

It is advice that would perhaps have cheered William Goldbloom Bloch, so desperate to find ways for a librarian to at least try to navigate all the books in Jorge Borges's limitless library. It would certainly captivate the artist Shubigi Rao, a self-confessed devotee of Borges's work.

Shubigi Rao deals in vast, uncountable, unimaginable quantities of books too, although she hopes "'enough people understand that the softer, quieter things are really important.'" To be quiet, she says, is "'much more powerful and enduring than the bombast and spectacle and the noise.'"[243] Her work *Pulp: A Short Biography of the Banished Book*, is the first in a five volume examination of censored texts. It is, she says, a project about 'the history of book

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[238] Goldbloom Bloch, p. 22.
[239] Walter Benjamin's famous 1931 essay 'Unpacking My Library' captured why a library can never be completed: the true book collector will always crave more volumes.
Walter Benjamin, 'Unpacking My Library: A Talk About Book Collecting', *Illuminations,* trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books), 1986.
[240] Richard Mabey, 'The Library as an Ecosystem', *Slightly Foxed*, Issue 47, 1 September 2015.
[241] Richard Mabey, *The Cabaret of Plants* (London: Profile Books), 2016.
[242] Richard Mabey, 'The Library as an Ecosystem', *Slightly Foxed*, Issue 47, 1 September 2015.
[243] Shubiji Rao interviewed by Andrew Russeth, *Financial Times*, 18 March 2023.

destruction, censorship and other forms of repression, as well as the book as symbol and resistance.'[244] It is a collection of ideas and experiences and is, as yet, unfinished. How, in any case, is it possible to ever complete a library? An archive's mutability is what makes it a lithe, latent, evolving myriorama of ideas rather than a locked chamber. Rao's libraries are, I would argue, an unconscious extrapolation from my reading of a strange loop. Yes, they have coherent identities as collections of texts and marks, but they are also capable of infinite expansion, as every library is. Not only do they reinvigorate censored texts, they also stake a claim for an archival collection which operates outside official systems and categorisations. The artist Yinka Shonibare CBE's *The War Library* (2024) and *The British Library* (2014), housing thousands of books covered in Dutch wax print cloth, continue to evolve too, with new texts being added. Like Yinka Shonibare CBE, Lubaina Himid uses Dutch wax print as a substrate on which to write new histories. Her recent installation at the Holburne Museum in Bath, *Lost Threads* (2024), overlaid the false assumptions about this colonial-era fabric with a new, ethical narrative. With serendipitous timing, I recently chaired an event at the museum discussing the role and manipulation of the domestic in art and literature, with part of Lubaina Himid's Dutch wax fabric wreathed around our table. It was a new, visual story being written on top of another new story (fig. 97).

Figure 96 Persephone Books Festival, Holburne Museum, Bath, 2024, set amongst Lubaina Himid's fabric installation which encircles the room at floor level. Left to right, chair, Charlie Lee-Potter; panellists, writer Jane Brocket, museum director Dr Chris Stephens, art historian Laura Freeman. Image: © Suzy Slemen.

[244] Shubiji Rao, <https://www.shubigi.com/pulp-vol-i.html>[accessed 1 April 2024].

Figure 97 Yinka Shonibare CBE, *The War Library 2024,* hardback books, Dutch wax printed cotton, gold-foiled names. Photograph © Charlotte Lee-Potter, 2024.

A state of contingency, of being unfinished, of resisting resolution, are the keynotes of this project because open-ended or circular stories practise refusal. Scheherazade told Shahryar unfinished stories in the tale *One Thousand and One Nights* to save her own life, knowing that an incomplete narrative is the epitome of women's defiance and endurance. It is why I have experimented with just such a container for May. Hers is a travelling library on wheels which she adds to as the centuries go by. Its vitrines of delicate, laser-etched milk; the honeycomb I crocheted around in a form of time trial; *La Cité des Dames* - the book trapped in frescoed plaster, frescoed 'blooks' in plaster and iron-oxide; the trio of etched and aquatinted strange loops; all find their places on its shelves. In a bodyless project, it is a body of knowledge, a body of thought, a body of work. It continues to gestate, it takes detours, and, like the fluid narrative of milk, it resists the idea that a journey is from A to B. The current iteration of *May's Travelling Library* contains the following contents but, like any library, it is a work in progress:

The evolving contents of *May's Travelling Library*:

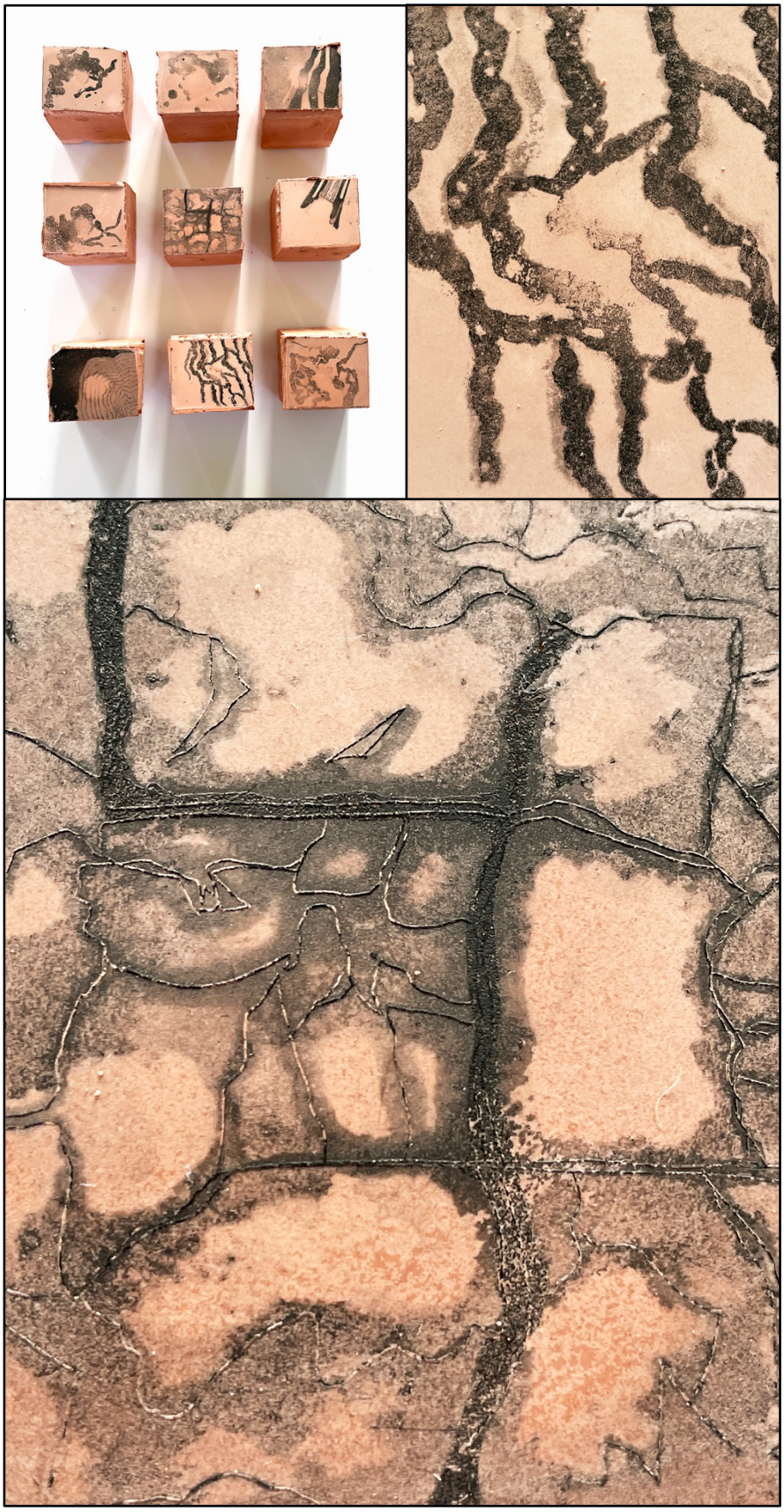

Figure 98a,b,c. Miniature, etched, frescoed 'blooks', iron-oxide pigmented plaster 6x6x6 cm, part of *May's Travelling Library.*

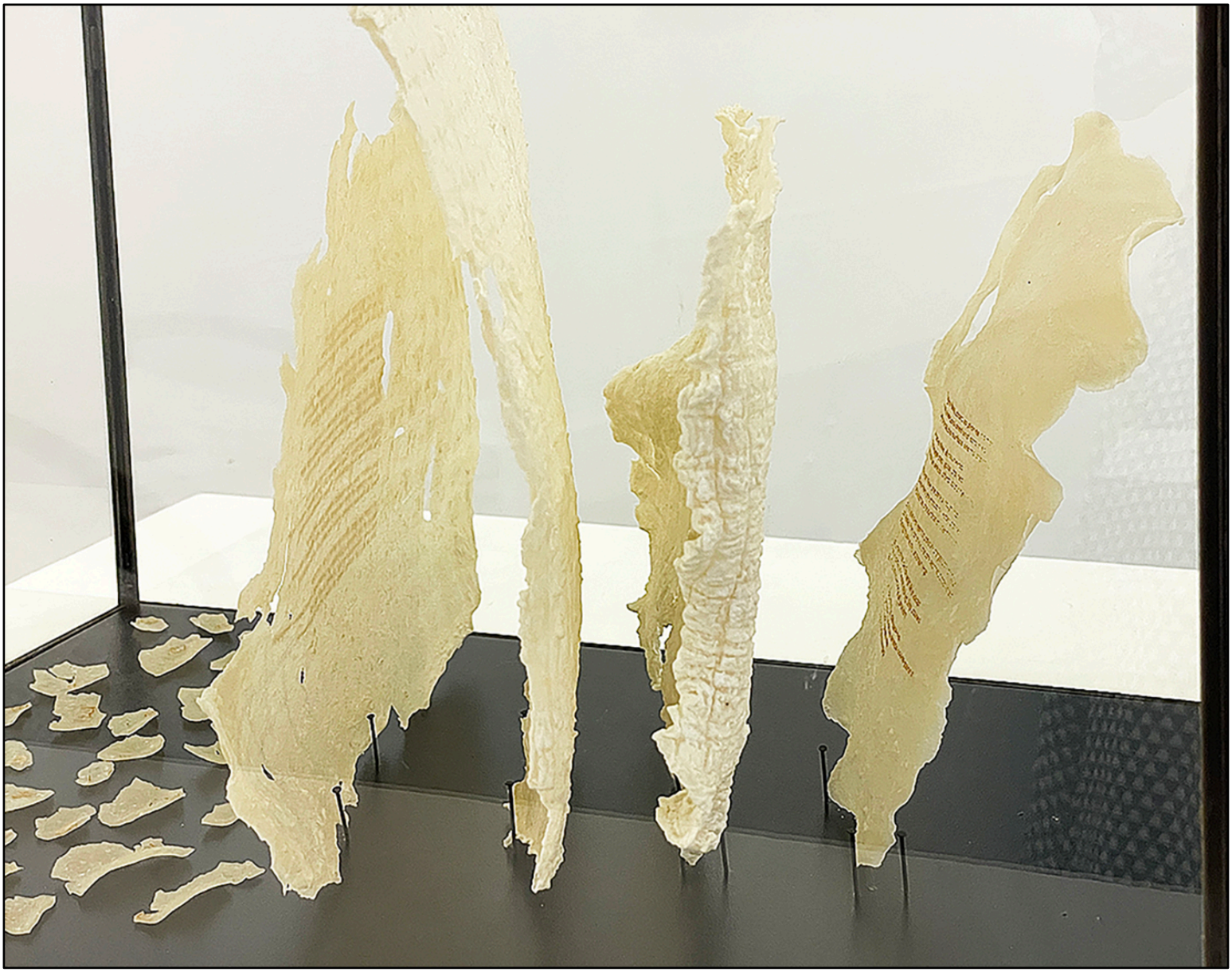

Figure 99. Laser-etched milk villanelles in vitrine 42x27x42 cm.

Figure 100. Laser-etched milk villanelles in vitrine 42x27x42 cm.

Figure 101. Laser-etched milk villanelles in vitrine, 42x27x42 cm.

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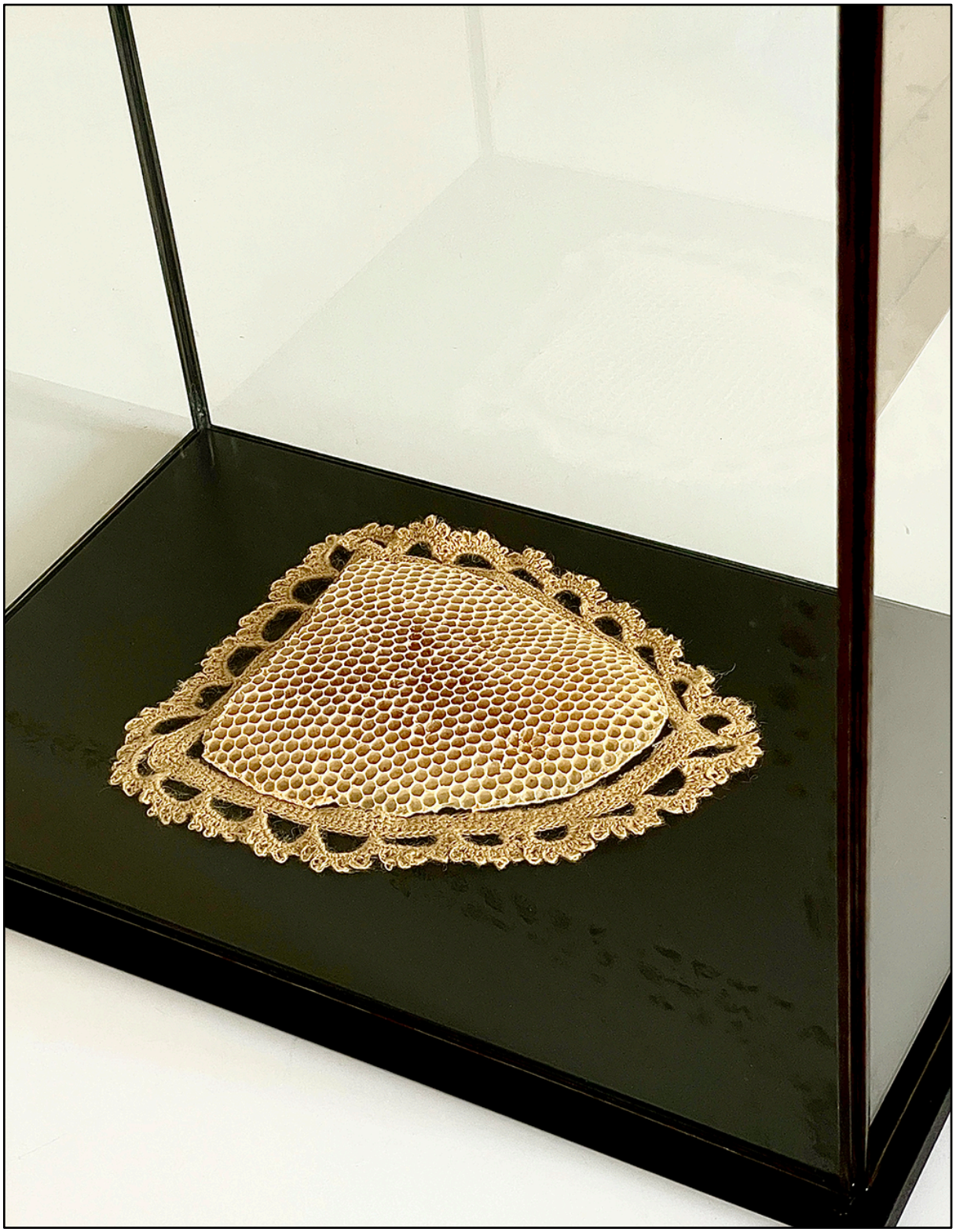

Figure 102 Time Trial With Bees: 12 hours 48 minutes, wool, honeycomb, vitrine, 42x27x42 cm.

Figure 103. Strange Loops, aquatint, etching, photopolymer, sugar lift on paper, 62x60x16 cm, part of *May's Travelling Library*.

Figure 104. My frescoed *'Blooks,* Safehouse Gallery, 2023, part of *May's Travelling Library*.

Margery/May/Me/Herselves:

Margery Kempe, the medieval source for my character May, was always a work in progress and her account of her life had a gestation period of centuries. She stopped dictating her life story in 1438 and, although a few fragments were published in the early 1500s, it was not until 1934 that the manuscript was found in a private library and eventually published in full (fig.105). The text's unique status as the first work of life-writing by a woman has only been augmented by the eccentric way Margery focalised herself. By naming herself in the third person as 'poor creature', she conducted a curious literary autopsy on herself.[245] She is the original, flexible, objectified woman, in literary terms at least, and, as such, holds a special status in this project. In my incarnation of Margery as May she has become a kind of portmanteau or Platonic Khôra[246]. She is both spectacle and experiencer simultaneously; she both holds everything and is held herself. As Anna Beer points out, there was something else which marked her out: she was a traveller, unlike her more famous female contemporary, Julian of Norwich: 'Margery Kempe travelled and Julian remained enclosed in her cell. The upshot is that *The Book of Margery Kempe* is as much a travelogue as it is a work of devotion.'[247] Almost by sleight of hand, Kempe used her self-made status as a documenter of God's own words to give herself permission both to travel and, just as importantly, to write. On a pilgrimage to the River Jordan, she found that her fellow travellers would rather she had stayed at home. The solution was simple:

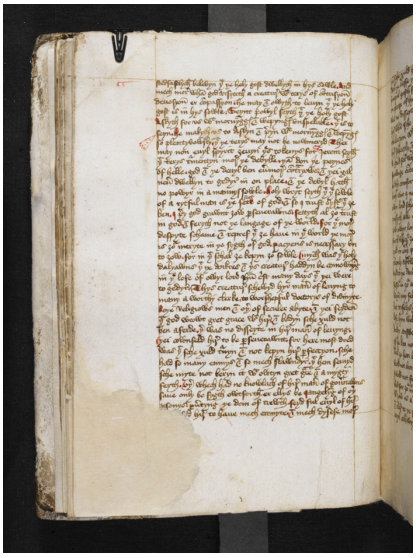

Figure 105. The Book of Margery Kempe, courtesy British Library, MS 61823, England, c. 1440 f.1r.

> Another time, this creature's companions wanted to go to the River Jordan and would not let her go with them. Then this creature prayed Our Lord that she might go with them, and he bade that she should go with them whether they wanted her to or not. And then she set forth by the grace of God and didn't ask their permission.[248]

[245] The etymology of 'autopsy' means 'to see for oneself', although its later usage suggests an examination of a dead body.
[246] My reading of the Platonic Khôra borrows from Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva's later interpretations: a Khôra is a holder of all things, a space giver, and a sieve through which things are filtered.
[247] Anna Beer, *Eve Bites Back: An Alternative History of English Literature* (London: Oneworld, 2022), p. 25.
[248] Margery Kempe, *The Book of Margery Kempe*, trans. by B.A.Windeatt (London: Penguin, 2004, fp. 1436-1438), p. 110.

For a woman determined to be a writer at that time, no greater authority could be found than God himself. Yet it is clear from her book that she faced accusations of fakery, hysteria and even demonic possession. She is certainly overwhelmed by powerful bursts of weeping on many occasions, for which she was derided. It is perhaps because of her refusal to stay at home or to comply that, as Anna Beer notes, she has 'been co-opted into a tradition of queer reading and writing, as in Robert Glück's 1994 novel *Margery Kempe*, republished with an introduction by Colm Tóibín and described by one reviewer as an embrace of pulp gay erotic fiction.'[249]

It is satisfying that books written before the year 1500 should be called 'incunables'. The word is drawn from the Latin word 'incunabulum' which means 'cradle', so it turns out that Margery's own text is literally a container too. The travelling library I have devised for May is, similarly, a hold-all in which limitless objects, experiences, and knowledge can be stored, removed, replaced. It operates like a peripatetic cradle of potentiality. Like a strange-loop catch-all, it is a talismanic, totemic container for women's lives. I experimented with many different incarnations of May's library, including one whose shelves I covered with Japanese paper and inscribed with texts written in my own form of shorthand. The uncanny, compressed and conflated strokes which stand in for letters of the alphabet are a store of knowledge, just as the library is (figs.106-109). But the newly-configured words make a fluid transition between letter and image, standing in that liminal ground of visualised, yet unreadable language. The act of writing such visual language is a complex enactment of a strange loop. The hand, as it writes, is fed by the brain which is simultaneously dewriting those words into vowel-less, compressed shapes. Enacting that fluid loop between brain and hand is a high-speed, instinctual one, allowing the writer to capture 140 words per minute instead of the standard 38 to 40.

[249] Anna Beer, *Eve Bites Back: An Alternative History of English Literature* (London: Oneworld, 2022), p. 56.

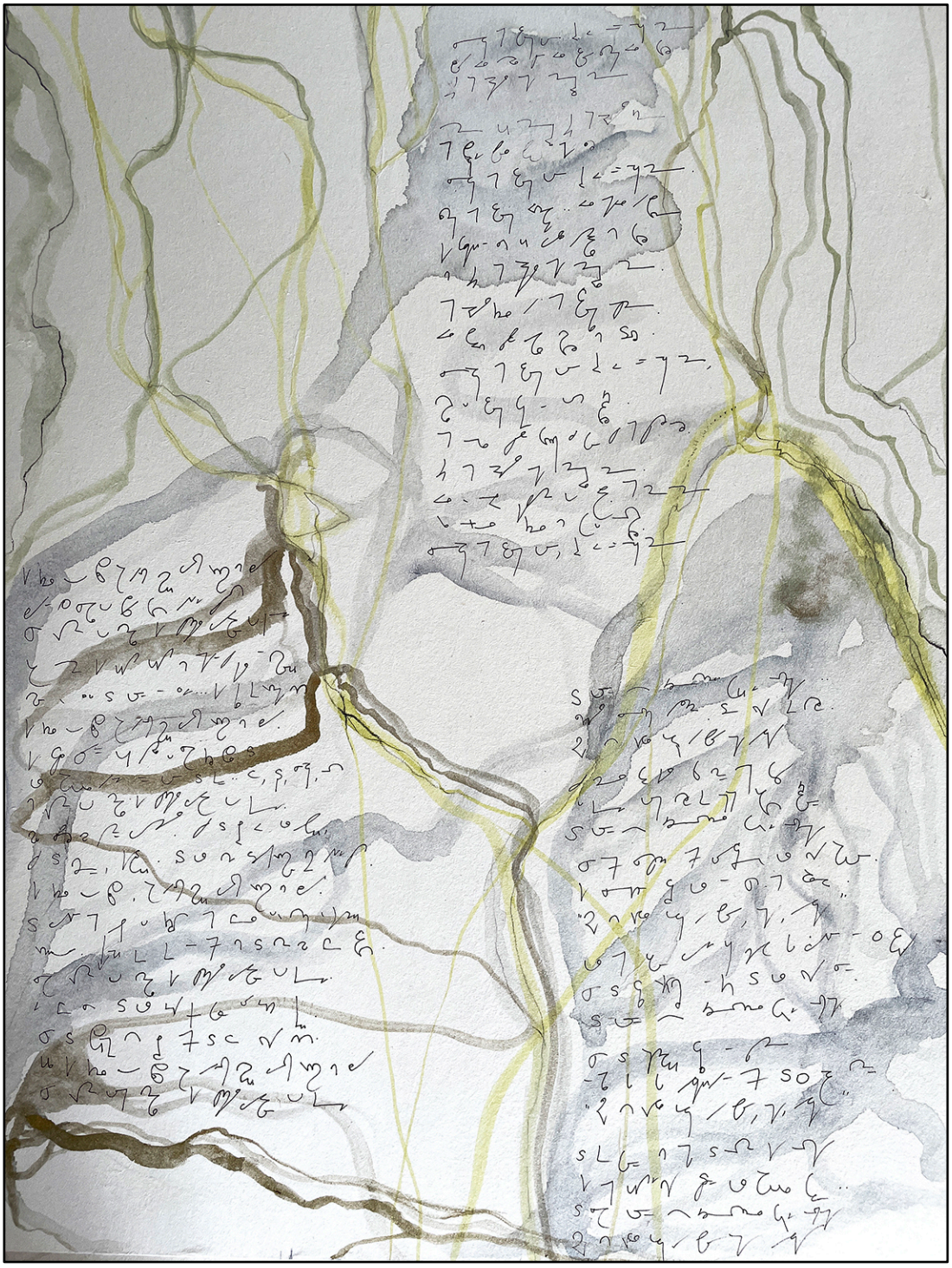

Figure 106. My villanelles handwritten in ink on gansai-painted Japanese paper and transferred to the shelves of a prototype structure for *May's Travelling Library*. Once again, my 'glint' paintings form the imagery. The three villanelles transcribed here are, left to right : 'Brought Up By Hand', 'Tender Hooks' and 'Fuller, Louder, Deeper', 60x40 cm.

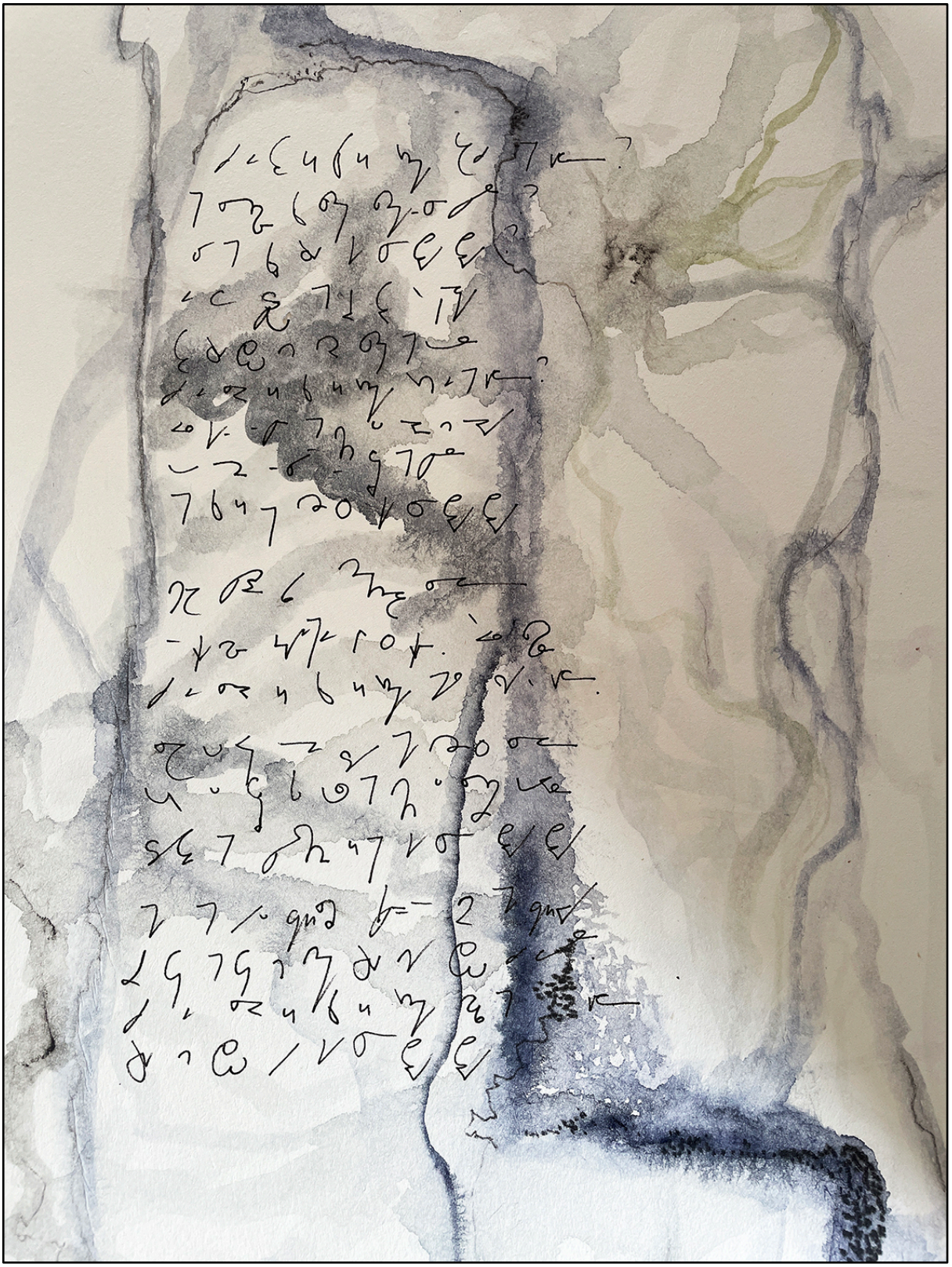

Figure 107. The villanelle, ‘Playing the Loop’, ink, gansai pigment on Japanese paper, 60x40 cm.

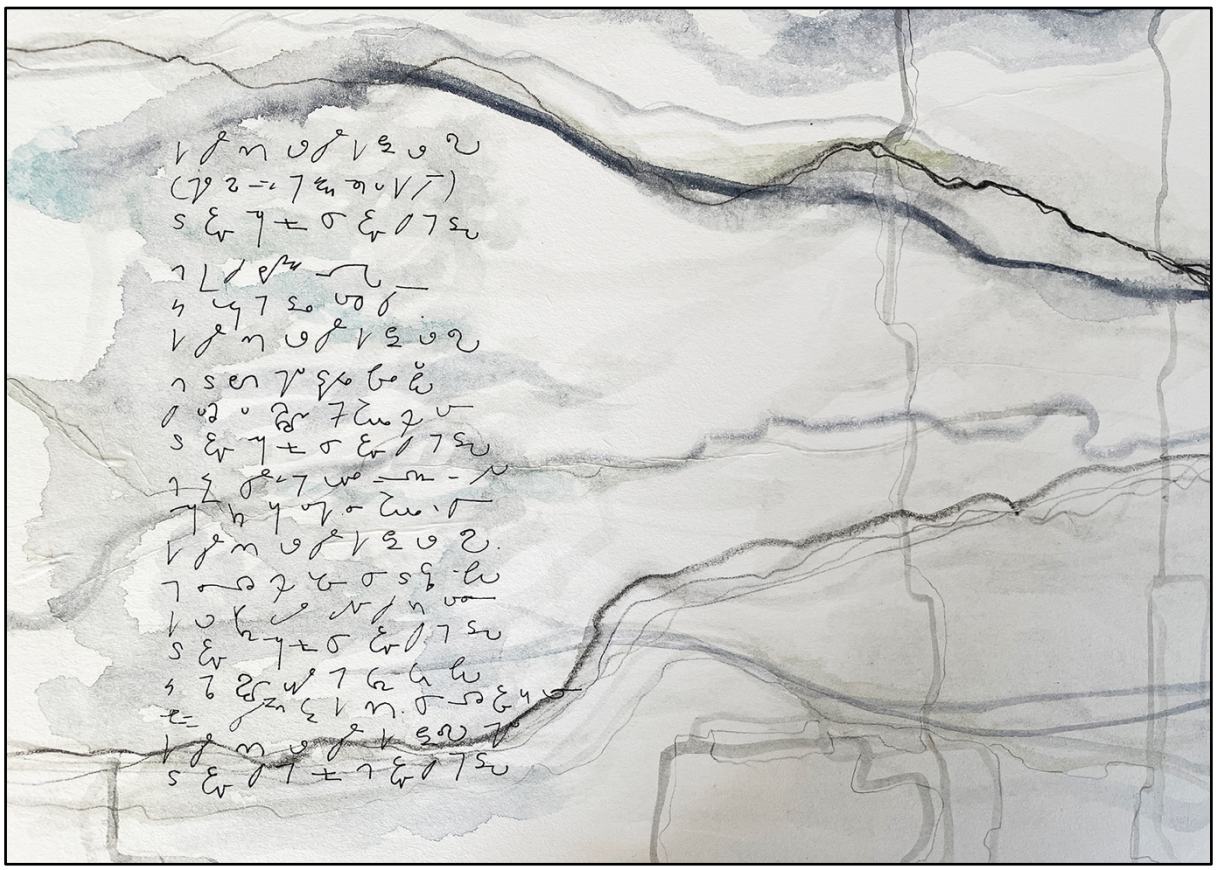

Figure 108. The villanelle 'Cleave', ink and gansai pigment on Japanese paper.

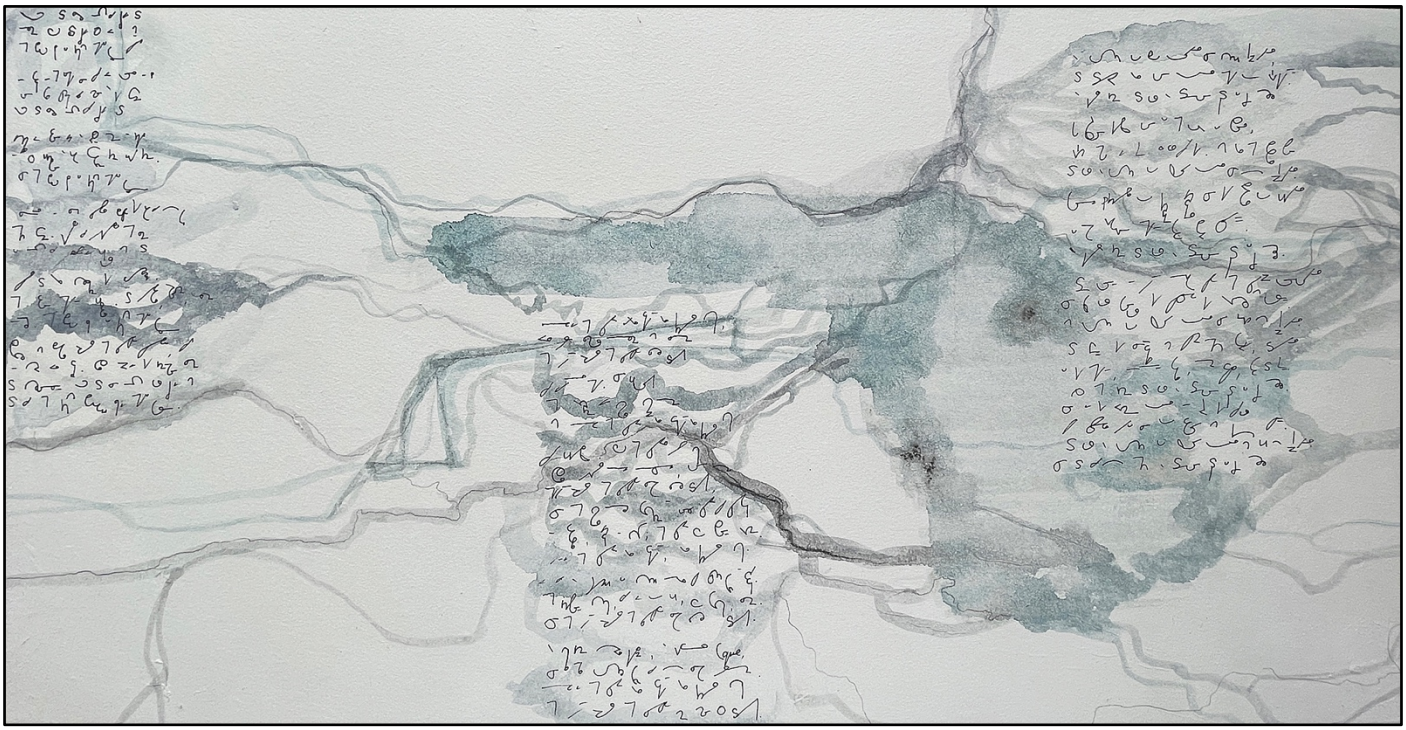

Figure 109. Left to right, the villanelles 'Walking Through a Fresco', 'Map of Legends and Tree of Signs', 'Wrong Side of the Fabric', ink and gansai pigment, 60x40 cm.

To house the shelves papered with my painted and inked shorthand, I designed a powder-coated, steel frame on wheels, but its metal skeleton seemed prosaic and lacking in the imaginative potential to house limitless objects and infinite ideas (figs.110,111).

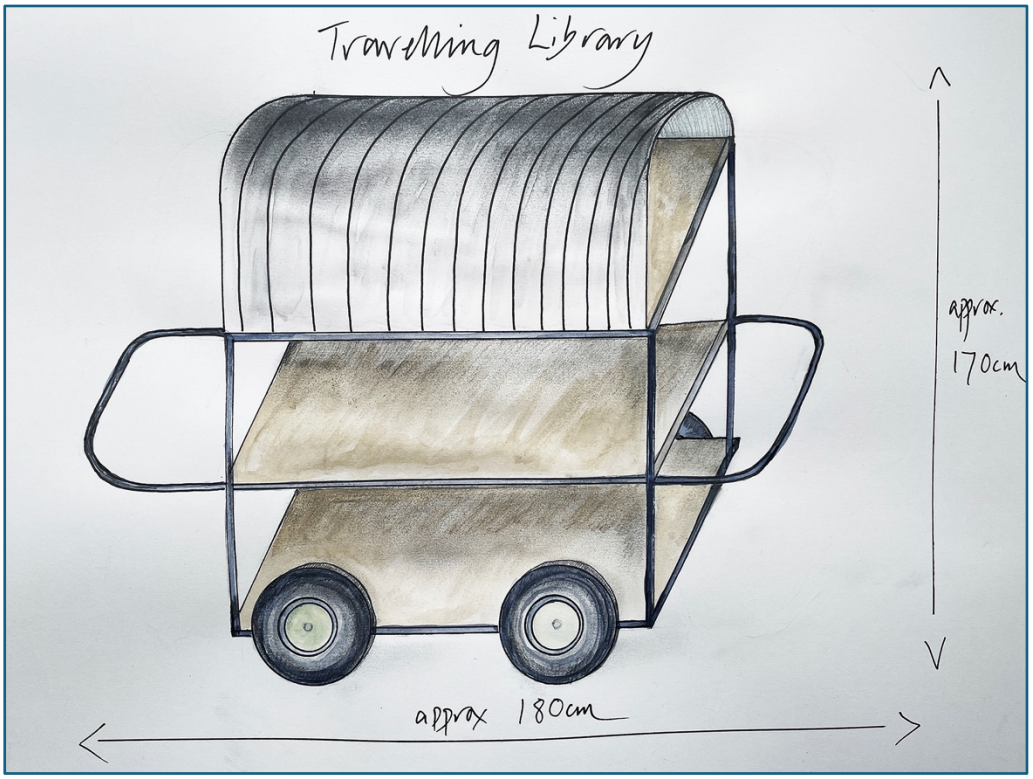

Figure 111 Prototype drawing for *May's Travelling Library*, designed to house the 'shorthand' shelves
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Figure 110 The process of constructing a library prototype in the metal workshop. I rejected this interpretation.

Ultimately, it proved more resonant to house May's imaginary library in a piece of historic furniture with an evocative story of its own. I have formed it from two Globe Wernicke bookcase stacks, reclaimed from an architectural historian's library and designed in 1899, the year of Susie's birth.[250] With their glass fronts which lift and slide inside the structure, they were specifically created as 'peripatetic' shelves for those who did not stay in one place for very long. Each slice in the multi-layered structure can be removed, one at a time. An internal handle inside each layer allows it to be carried from place to place, with the contents still inside. Ultimately, this structure, which has its own embedded story of travel and which travelled to me via a complicated path, seemed to resonate with potential, both symbolic and real. I have housed the structure on a heavy-duty factory trolley once used to move wood (figs.112-116).

Figure 112. Front view of *May's Travelling Library,* wood, glass, vitrines, books, strange loops et al, 114x173x70 cm.

[250] The modular design of the Globe Wernicke shelving system had an important narrative function in the Mexican film *Roma,* directed by Alfonso Cuarón. The father's decision to leave is represented by his removal of the many Globe Wernicke bookcases, leaving all the family's books stranded on the floor.

Figure 113 Front and side view of *May's Travelling Library.*

Figure 114. Detail, *May's Travelling Library,* etched-milk villanelles, 42x27x42 cm., *Time Trial with Bees: 12 hours 48 minutes,* 42x27x42 cm., *La Cité des Dames,* 31x29x35 cm.

Figure 115. Back view of *May's Travelling Library,* 70x114x173 cm.

Figure 116. Detail, back of *May's Travelling Library.*

Like May, this travelling library is designed to move, and the shorthand Japanese paper panels which I had created as shelves for an earlier prototype have become part of the library's own catalogue of objects. May, custodian of the library, is deliberately mythic, a status I felt

she needed if she was to be the fearless defender of my cast of women characters, Susie, Maggie, Rhoda and Lucy. I was also mindful of the reasons why Virginia Woolf gave herself a new identity when she wrote *A Room of One's Own*. It was because women who wrote about and through themselves were accused of egotism. Woolf's solution was to make herself imaginary.

> I forced myself to keep my own figure fictitious; legendary. If I had said, Look here am I uneducated, because my brothers used all the family funds which is the fact – Well, they'd have said; she has an axe to grind; and no one would have taken me seriously, though I agree I should have had many more of the wrong kind of reader, who will read you + go away + rejoice in the personalities, not because they are lively and easy reading; but because they prove once more how vain, how personal, so they will say, rubbing their hands with glee, women always are.[251]

The moral philosopher Iris Murdoch had a different solution to the outrageous accusation of egotism: she called it the 'unself'. As a third-person imaginary object, I conceptualise May as the realisation of what Iris Murdoch called 'unselfing', in which the 'fat, relentless ego' is let go. Murdoch affiliated this quality of 'unselfing' with our response to nature and to great art. By immersing ourselves in nature, we encounter 'a perfection of form which invites unpossessive contemplation and resists absorption into the selfish dream life of the consciousness.'[252] She warns, of course that '[i]t is an empirical fact about human nature that this attempt cannot be entirely successful', but it is worth the attempt. Murdoch's notion of nature being the conduit to the 'unself' is an alternative mode of thinking to the much showier sublime landscape which, as I conjectured in my introduction, can be dangerous, phallocentric territory for the woman traveller. Jane Marcus suggests that Woolf wrote 'topographically' as a form of anti-phallocentric territory-marking. In such topographical writing, Woolf seeks to rescue Rhoda from her terror of stepping over puddles: 'Woolf works topographically against the patriarchal and genealogical imperative, the strength of whose dicta we see in her own remembrance of the inability to step over a puddle.'[253] Marcus uses the image of a 'linked chain' to suggest the solidarity that must be found between generations of women, although I prefer the strange loop: 'Abandoned, motherless daughters must find new mothers, real and historical, a linked chain of sisterhood over past

[251] Virginia Woolf letter to Ethel Smyth, June 8, 1933, The Letters of Virginia Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1975-1980), p.195.
[252] Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis, 2013), p. 83.
[253] Jane Marcus, *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1988), p. 78.

time in present space, and rescue and redeem their own mothers' lives from compromises with the patriarchy.'[254] My proposal is that if women are to plot a modus operandi for living equitably and inclusively, continuity between what we do now and where it might lead us is vital. Are we helpless spectators watching a kind of sentimentalised and endlessly-repeated History play in which we and our inscape continue to dematerialise. Or is it more dynamic and pre-emptive to imagine ourselves as symbiotic inhabitants of territory in which there is at least something still to play for? There are feminist principles at work here; what does that symbiosis allow in terms of future equalities? As John Wylie puts it, does the word landscape 'describe the mutual embeddedness and interconnectivity of self, body, knowledge and land', or is it 'better conceived in artistic and painterly terms as a specific cultural and historical genre, a set of visual strategies and devices for distancing and observing?'[255] My research suggests that it must be the former (even though, as I have explained, I prefer the term 'inscape'). One of the inherent risks of historicising or distancing landscape is the risk that we overlay it with a nostalgic veil or shroud. It is here that my neologism 'sousface' has a role.

[254] Jane Marcus, 'Thinking Back through Our Mothers', *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: The Macmillan Press, 1981), p. 21.
[255] John Wylie, *Landscape* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p.2.

Sousface, surface, sul:

Ink, Paper, Milk

Milk pools on the paper's surface, glossy, taut, tactile.
Beneath, on the sousface, ink seeps, staining the underlayer.
Pierce *sur* to meet *sous* for inscape's face where women file

in line, one overlapping the other, choral, steadfast, agile,
spinning parables, future legends, myths of higher air.
On the paper's surface milk pools, glossy, taut, tactile,

nourishing, giving succour, each to the other, while
those not there yet walk towards the circle, eager to share.
Pierce *sur* to meet *sous* for the inscape where women file,

telling their stories of resist, repel, repeat, revile,
to build a circle where no-one need forbear.
On the paper's surface milk pools, glossy, taut, tactile,

daring the pen to draw it up and write a new style
of story in which there's no revenge, no savagery, no despair.
Pierce *sur* to meet *sous* for inscape's face where women file.

When they glide to the cool, shaded glade they merge while
they count their number. Five so far but more will come, aware
that on the paper's surface milk pools, glossy, taut, tactile.
Pierced *sur* meets *sous* – inscape's face where women file.

'Surface' is etymologically derived from the seventeenth-century French word sur-face, or above/on the plane. Why should there not, therefore, be an under-plane or 'sous-face'?[256] My neologism 'sousface' forms the conceit behind my villanelle 'Ink, Paper, Milk', in which I imagine the point at which sur and sous actually join. I imagine it as rich, fertile, communal territory where women walk to discuss their ideas:

[256] The Greek word 'chthonic', meaning something that is under or beneath the earth, does not serve a useful function here since it has morphed into a more cultist or deistic definition of beings which reside in the underworld.

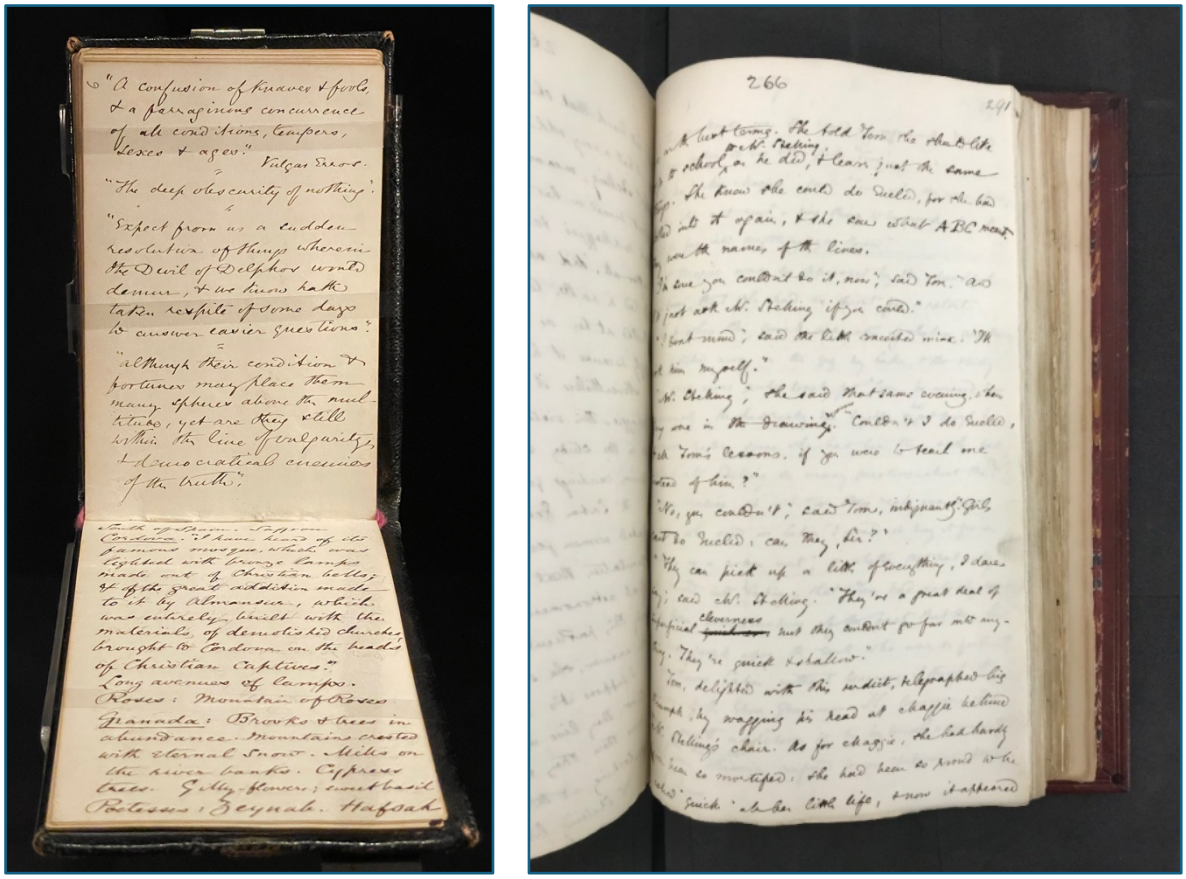

Figure 117. 'Quarry' notebooks of George Eliot, Bodleian Libraries, Oxford, MS. Don. G. 8. *fols. 1-2.*

My idea of 'sous' or what lies beneath is imaginatively resonant and is allied to George Eliot's use of 'quarries' to describe the small notebooks in which she wrote ideas for fiction[257] (fig.117). There are, too, frequent references in Woolf's diaries to digging 'tunnels' in her writing, or seeing 'for miles beneath my feet' or even to her sense that puddles have frightening, unfathomable depths.[258] Audre Lorde, too, writes of the 'woman's place of power within each of us' as being 'neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep'.[259] This seems very much the territory of the woman traveller, the woman thinker. Such a phenomenological approach has its dangers, of course. Timothy Morton complains that there can be an easy, self-indulgent privileging of the 'hidden side':

[257] 'Quarry' notebook of George Eliot, Oxford, Bodleian Libraries, MS. Don. G. 8. fols. 1-2.
[258] Virginia Woolf, 15 October 1923, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume 2,* 1920-24, p. 340.
[259] Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 2.

> Phenomenology is in danger of reifying the difference between the hidden and the unhidden side, turning it into a thing-like, solid, independent, and "real" fact. [It] often opposes a more rigorous application of its insights into how hidden dimensions structure meaning. Ecophenomenology urgently wants to assert that walking, for instance, is a stronger, more virile form of reading.[260]

I baulk at Morton's term 'virile' and I also go further than he does in disputing the familiar, even clichéd idea that walking is a kind of writing. That concept seems to me to be a denial of the more-than-human, suggesting that the ground is simply a willing and receptive surface, waiting docilely to be inscribed by the human walker. This project consciously takes issue with the familiar, well-trodden territory of the sublime and the exclusive/excluding trope of 'unpeopling' the landscape. Crucially, it disputes the familiar argument that walking is a kind of writing on the ground. I gravitate more towards Tim Ingold's desire to avoid the idea of the 'earth as flat, one-dimensional substrate' and expand the territory or zone in which the walker moves. Ingold speaks of launching a kind of 'protest against psychologistic approaches to "grounded cognition"'.[261] He recommends, instead, the idea of the 'dwelling perspective' where landscape is 'the homeland of our thoughts', but not a place that grinds privileged, or exceptionalist views further into the ground.[262] Morton's interpretation seems particularly androcentric; Deborah Thien and Divya Tolia-Kelly's views resonate more powerfully. They warn that freedom to move across landscape is not available to those who fear racial and/or sexual attack. Emma Waterton adds, that such freedoms are particularly denied to those faced with 'the chains of childcare,' and with 'economic constraints."[263]

In considering my concept of 'sousface' with its historical, dimensional and temporal qualities, it is helpful to draw on the spatial humanities and the idea of deep as opposed to thin mapping. In Les Roberts' view, deep mapping has both ontological and phenomenological slants:

> [V]erticality and depth denote a comparative absence of limitations. The deeper you go the more layers you accrue. The problem becomes how to hold it all together: how to "frame it as a map. […] The "map" is lodged in the more immaterial spaces of the body and imagination. Its performativity is made flesh in the way the walker

[260] Timothy Morton, 'Deconstruction and/as Ecology', *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism*, ed. Greg Garrard (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), online edn, 16 Dec. 2013, np. [accessed 17 September 2023].
[261] Tim Ingold, 'Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010, Vol. 16 (s!), pp. Sa122.
[262] Tim Ingold, 'The Temporality of the Landscape', *World Archaeology*, October 1993, vol. 25, No. 2 (London: Taylor & Francis), p. 152.
[263] Emma Waterton, 'More-than-representational landscapes', *The Routledge Companion to Landscape Studies*, ed. Peter Howard, Ian Thompson, Emma Waterton, Mick Atha (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), p. 97.

> inhabits and dwells within the space that both map (book) and walker conjure into being.[264]

This seems to address the problem of Morton's difficulties with the 'hidden side'. Psychogeographer Sonia Overall extrapolates from the depth of 'deep mapping' to produce what are called 'thin places', places so imbued with former histories that those earlier worlds seem to seep through. She calls such territory 'a thin space, an in-between-worlds place, more than the sum of its parts'.[265] However, in my podcast recording with mudlarker Tom Chivers, he rejected the idea of 'thin places', preferring instead to call them 'thick places, thick and charged.'[266] I share his view that these resonant landscapes which hum with accrued memory seem to be more powerfully described as thick rather than thin. Les Roberts, too, rejects the idea of 'thin' places, certainly as they relate to mapping. The thin map (if, as Roberts puts it, 'we can accept, for a moment, this oppositional conceit'), is merely a representation of a location or coordinates on a map. Here, a vital distinction opens up for me, which permits temporal, spatial , visual and narrative components simultaneously and which reinforce my concept of sousface. Roberts understands deep mapping to use 'literature, performance, and the visual arts to evoke the warp and weft of materials, perspectives, and temporalities that "make up" a place.'[267] To 'make up' combines qualities of constructing, inventing, coming together, and storytelling. If, as I propose, landscape/inscape is to be invested with proleptic possibilities rather than retrospective nostalgia, and if it is to be peopled by dewritten fictional and nonfictional characters from past centuries, it will need, for ballast, a sense of being made up anew. To test out what 'thick, charged places' and deep, as opposed to thin, mapping might look like, I experimented with video and multi-layered, folded imagery of the natural world in which the viewer has to peer into the surface (figs. 118-120). There is an animism between such territory and my 'made up' women walkers. Their textual dissolution forms a future archaeology of dewritten words, experiences, space and time measured through narrative, text, and layered inscape.

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[264] Les Roberts, 'Deep Mapping and Spatial Anthropology', *Humanities 5 (1)*, 5 (London: Verve Publishing, 2016).
[265] Sonia Overall, *Heavy Time: A Psychogeographer's Pilgrimage* (London: Penned in the Margins, 2021), p. 53.
[266] 'Going underground: seeking London's lost rivers with Tom Chivers, author of *London Clay*', *Inside A Mountain*, 13 February 2022. https://insideamountain.podbean.com/e/going-underground-seeking-london-s-lost-rivers-with-tom-chivers-author-of-london-clay/.
[267] Les Roberts, 2016.

Figure 118.a,b. Inscape soundscape, video stills. This formed part of the library of ideas I built to create my women characters, through iterative, long-distance walking/thinking and recording.

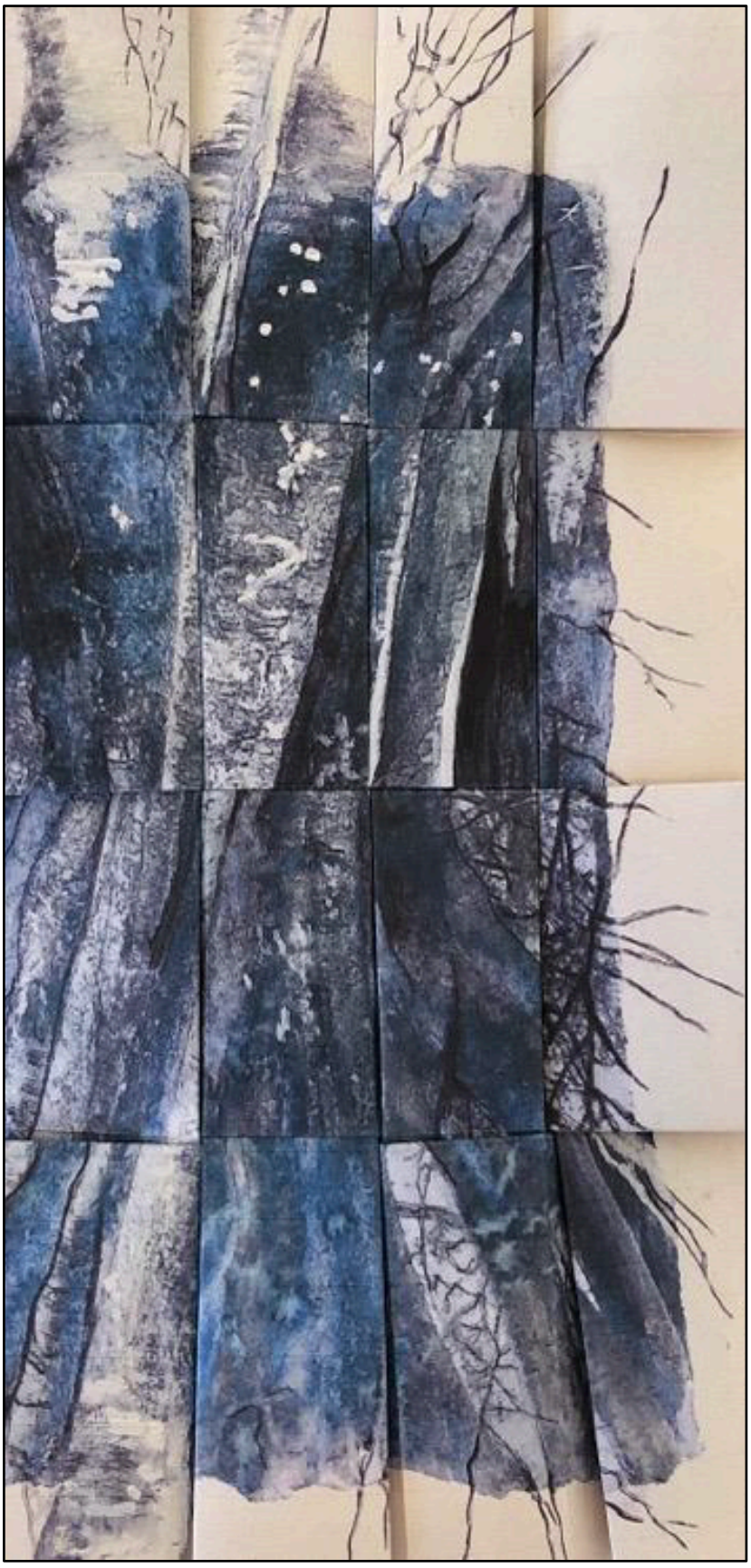


Figure 119. Inscape 1, ink, pastel, pencil, gansai pigment, screen-print on woven paper 40x30 cm.

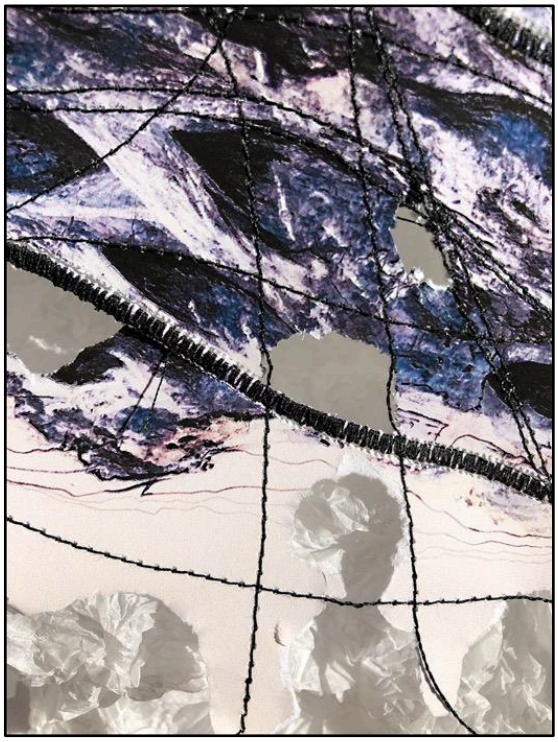


Figure 120. Inscape 2, screen-print, stitch, ink, onion paper, 30x30cm.

'Sur' and 'sous' are part of the same construct, but one is above the plane and the other is beneath it. They are divided by an invisible barrier and yet, together, they represent a form of double-sidedness in which each is dependent on the other for its existence. Conceptually, the foot engages with the ground, but so too does the ground engage with the foot. The ground leaves its mark, the foot leaves its mark or its sul and neither is dominant. In microcosm, the circular villanelle with its folds and its under-folds is engaging in the same practice: sur, sous, and sul. (So too were my folded, enlarged bark drawings which I analysed in the prologue.)[268] It is helpful to refer here to Johanna Malt's analysis of prehistoric handprints on rock which argues against the familiar idea that these marks are 'gestural and appropriative, as testaments of presence and acts of ritual communication'. Rather, she argues, it is an enactment of 'the creation of a space, the delineation of a distance of showing.'[269] My idea of 'sur' and 'sous' is not simply a question of the ground being the receiver and the foot being the deliverer. Johanna Malt argues that, to avoid the fixity of

[268] Rebecca Solnit calls it 'shul', the 'scarred hollow in the ground where a house once stood, the channel worn through rock where a river runs in flood, the indentation the grass where an animal slept last night. [...] the impression of something that used to be there.' *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate Canons, 2017), p. 51.

[269] Johanna Malt, 'La Main négative: Limit-Case and Primal Scene of Art', *Paragraph*, Vol. 44 Issue 33, Edinburgh University Press, 2021, p. 356.

appropriation, the moment of the hand touching the cave wall must be 'predicated on a distance, on a letting go. After all, once touch becomes sticking and agglomeration, there is no longer touching of one thing or one being *by* another.'[270] Each page, drawing, etching, villanelle has its above and its below: one is the story and the other is the understory, but both operate contemporaneously, symbiotically with each other. That is not to say that they represent individual, accretive moments in current time, ('clock-time' as Bergson would describe it), but rather that they operate on the Bergsonian level of *la durée* or durational time. *La durée* is a vital part of the strange loop – it has spatial and temporal qualities, just as a walk does. It is not a series of events, but a flowing continuum of folds and surfaces in which the present moment slides out of the past whilst morphing simultaneously into futurity, rather as a strange loop might. As Keith Ansell-Pearson describes it, durational time or *la durée* offers a 'flux, an interpenetration. We can't think of time as discrete components. They're just markers, they don't account for the passing of time.' He adds, crucially, that the past 'progresses into the present.' Without such fluidity, time is merely 'discrete linear progress or perpetual presence.'[271] Viewed another way, extracting those 'discrete' moments which are effectively trapped in an endless present tense and restoring them to a new, generative fluidity is a vital aspect of experimental narrative and women's stories. As Ali Smith phrased it, commenting on her devotion to Modernism, 'I loved the way they asked of me to make a text come together even if a text seemed to be in pieces. You are present at the making of a text.'[272] This project makes a fluid, circular text from pieces too, whether it is in the form of double-sided, translucent, infinitely folded pages, in spun and woven text, in overlays of translucent paper on which Letterpress villanelles appear and disappear, in manipulations of the speed of a naturalistic soundscape, or in frescoes in which the image is embedded in the plaster thereby asking the question - what is surface or sousface, top and bottom, first or last, past, present or future? In a circular, looped nod to the time-defying properties of *la durée,* the villanelles endlessly circle back on themselves. The ultimate aim of my villanelle cycle is that it should be a looped, reparative parable in which my characters' lives and experiences should be referenced but in which there is a prevailing story of collective, choral care. My added challenge was to assess how best to represent the villanelles physically. I experimented with formal Letterpress books, but in a project

[270] Johanna Malt, p. 357.
[271] Keith Ansell-Pearson on Henri Bergson, *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4, 9 May, 2019.
[272] Ali Smith, interviewed by John Wilson, *This Cultural Life*, BBC Radio 4, 9 April 2022.

concerned with dewriting desemic fables, such a confined, traditional format seemed inadequate. I found other ways, as I will explain.

The villanelles written as part of this research draw on the idea of sul, using the concept as a way of registering what may no longer be there, yet once was. Rebecca Solnit's tribute to the art of being lost is resonant here. We cannot, as she puts it, 'find our way back again by the objects we dropped, like Hansel and Gretel in the forest, the objects reeling us back in time, undoing each loss, a road back from lost eyeglasses to lost toys and baby teeth'.[273] Rather than mapping our way from B back to A to find our milk teeth, this project with its looped villanelles, recommends a more circuitous route in which braided, labyrinthine roads can be found. It is the antithesis of the sublime obsession with Adam rather than Eve which I analysed in my prologue. This is an experiment in making space where none existed before and the principal role of the villanelles is to act as a reparative, new narrative, linking my characters together in a nurturing strange loop. I experimented with different ways of presenting the villanelles: I set them in Letterpress and printed them on paper which I hand-spun into skeins; I laser-etched them into milk; I made resin moulds of the text and created beeswax 'pages' of them; I spoke them aloud, while simultaneously dewriting and rewriting them during my performances of *Running Away with Herselves* (fig.121). The method I settled on, finally, was to arrange them as a 'chorus', written on the inside edges of a series of paper shirt-collars I made (fig.122).

Figure 121. Live performance of *Running Away With Herselves,* Copeland Gallery, 2023.

[273] Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (Edinburgh: Canongate Canons, 2017), p. 186.

Figure 122. Preparing the collars for the installation and soundscape, *Choral Symphony.*

There are various rationales for this, some benevolent and others not. There is a longstanding tradition that garments can be imbued with protective words or signs, or that they can hold code words readable only to a few. (much like shorthand). There are Punjabi phulkari and Japanese senninbari traditions of sewing particular stitches or patterns as a form of protection for the wearer. Islamic tiraz textiles held by the Ashmolean in Oxford have been written on to 'honour or protect the wearer'. The Metropolitan Museum in New York is the keeper of a sixteenth-century talismanic shirt marked with protective symbols (fig.123). But such words can be bold statements of protest or covert signs of fury. Isabella Rosner

Figure 123. Talismanic Shirt, 15th-early 16th century, cotton, ink, gold, 63.5x98.4, Purchase, Friends of Islamic Art Gifts, 1998, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

documents the story of Agnes Richter who embroidered tiny words into her own jacket, including the poignant 'I wish to read'. How poignant Susie would have found that and how Virginia Woolf, denied books in her nursing home, would have identified with the plea[274] (fig.124). Stitched words can act as a coded manifesto, confessional or political statement. Annie Parker's sampler, embroidered using single strands of hair as thread, seems to be a plea for salvation from a woman who spent much of her life in prison (fig. 125). Pennina Barnett points to the coded system of coloured threads Mary, Queen of Scots used in her embroidery to register the cruelty of her treatment: 'In one, a ginger cat with a small crown on its head stares at a mouse. For those who knew how to decipher it, the message was clear: Mary was the mouse, and the cat, her famous red-headed cousin and jailer, Queen

Figure 124. . Agnes Richter's jacket, 1895, Prinzhorn Collection, © University of Heidelberg.

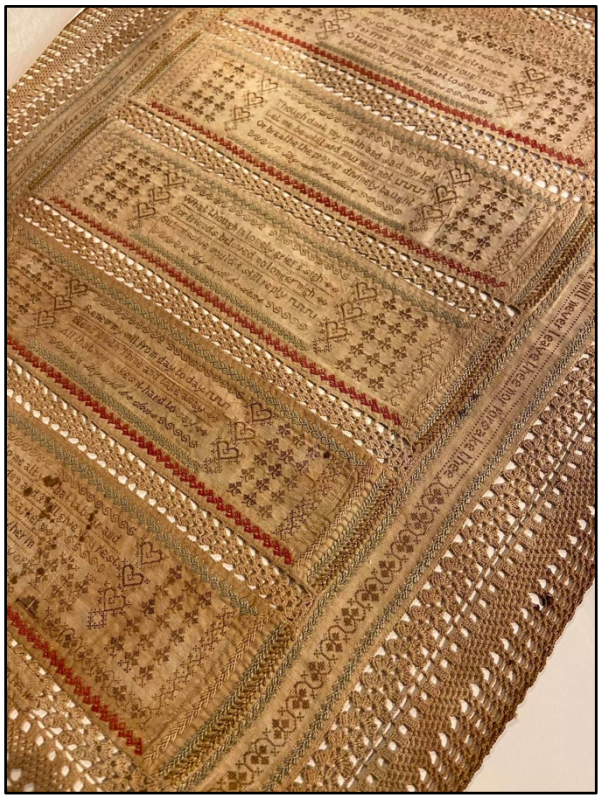


Figure 125. Annie Parker's hairwork sampler, c. 1879, private collection.

Elizabeth 1.'[275] Paul Thomas Anderson's 2017 film *Phantom Threads* tells the story of a couturier who sews a lock of his mother's hair inside his coat and buries embroidered words into the hems of his wedding gowns as forms of protection[276].

[274] Isabella Rosner, *Stitching Freedom* (Common Threads Press, 2024), p. 7.
[275] Pennina Barnett in Yinka Shonibare, *Criminal Ornamentation*, with additional contributions by Tanya Harrod, Beth Hughes, Michelle Kuo (London: Haywood Gallery Publishing, 2018), p. 46.
[276] *Phantom Thread* dir. Paul Thomas Anderson, 2018, Universal Pictures.

There are more sinister examples of words or protective symbols being stitched into fabric or garments. Madame Defarge, Charles Dickens's terrifying tricoteuse of the French Revolution, knits a secret, coded stitch for each person destined for the guillotine: 'She tied a knot with flashing eyes, as if it throttled a foe'[277]. Despite the malevolence of her designs, there is power to be found in the fact that a garment or piece of craft can contain remnants or traces of a person. My eventual decision to write my villanelles in ink into the inside of collars is a reparative gesture to the women of my project, as well as to a limitless cast of women trapped within their texts. In many cases, necklaces as well as collars choke or bind their victims. In George Eliot's *Daniela Deronda*, Gwendolen's abusive husband Henleigh Grandcourt orders her to wear the necklace of diamonds he had previously given to his mistress Lydia Glasher. The punishment is designed to wound both women. The scold's bridle, devised to make it physically impossible for a victim to speak, was exclusively used as a punishment for women. Just such a bridle is held in the collection at Craigievar Castle in Scotland. The metal cage was placed over a woman's head, the flat lozenge of protruding metal was wedged into her mouth to hold her tongue down, and the device was locked into place (fig. 126). According to the National Trust for Scotland which has responsibility for Craigevar, the decision as to which women should receive such punishment was the exclusive preserve of men who sat on 'town councils, kirk sessions and barony courts in Scotland'. Their decisions seemed to be arbitrary affairs, but when the men had made their ruling and 'once the bridle was placed on the woman, she was then led through the streets by the beadle or chained to the market cross.'[278] Just as disturbing is the horrific collar in Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*. Aunt Margaret, struck dumb with horror by her ordeal on her wedding night and forever afterwards only able to communicate by chalking words on a blackboard, is forced by her husband, the vicious, sexually abusive Uncle Philip, to wear a tight necklace of his own design and manufacture for tea every Sunday: 'The necklace was a collar of dull silver, two hinged silver pieces knobbed with moonstones which snapped into place around her lean neck and rose up almost to her

Figure 126. The Craigievar scold's bridle. From the Craigievar Castle Collections, © National Trust for Scotland.

[277] Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 185.
[278] National Trust for Scotland <https://www.nts.org.uk/stories/hold-yer-tongue> [accessed 31 March 2024].

chin so that she could hardly move her head.' She has already been robbed of her voice; the necklace denies her the ability to eat:

> all she could do was to sip painfully at a meagre cup of tea and toy with a few shoots of mustard and cress. [...] Uncle Philip broke the armour off a pink battalion of shrimps and ate them steadily, chewed through a loaf of bread spread with half a pound of butter and helped himself to the lion's share of the cake while gazing at her with expressionless satisfaction, apparently deriving a certain pleasure from her discomfort, or even finding that the sight of it improved his appetite.[279]

Could I kidnap Uncle Philip's collar and transform it into a nurturing, interdependent system of caregiving between my chorus of women characters? I use Audre Lorde's word 'interdependent' here since, as she observes, '[i]nterdependency between women is the way to a freedom which allows the I to *be*, not in order to be used, but in order to be creative. This is a difference between the passive *be* and the active *being*'[280] [emphases in the original]. I have created paper shirt collars, arranged in a communal grouping, each one at approximate heights of girls and women. Each one is inscribed on the inside edge with lines from my interconnected villanelles, as a form of 'care label'. The poems are a more nourishing form of care-giving than tags printed with washing and drying instructions. The collars tell a new, interwoven, intersectional story of protest, objection, resignation, inclusion, collectivism and community. Susie is there, along with Rhoda, Maggie and Rhoda and a limitless cast of other potential women. The soundscape I composed to accompany the collars takes the form of a spatial, biophonic symphony of villanelles and voices. It is a tentative, redemptive chorus, a new salving necklace. The inscribed collars form a new 'tender narrative' and are a container space for new, possible storylines which flank and enclose the other artworks of the project (figs. 127-131).

[279] Angela Carter, *The Magic Toyshop* (London: Virago, 2013), p. 113.
[280] Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin, 2018), p. 17.

Figure 127. Choral Symphony, soundscape, paper, text, gansai pigment, buttons, steel, approx.200x100x50 cm, soundscape duration 20 minutes.

Figure 128. Choral Symphony, soundscape, paper, text, gansai pigment, buttons, steel, approx.200x100x50 cm, soundscape duration 20 minutes.

Figure 129. Choral Symphony, soundscape, paper, text, gansai pigment, buttons, steel, approx.200x100x50 cm, soundscape duration 20 minutes.

Figure 130. Choral Symphony, soundscape, paper, text, gansai pigment, buttons, steel, approx.200x100x50 cm, soundscape duration 20 minutes. Image © Chris Lee.

Figure 131. Choral Symphony, soundscape, paper, text, gansai pigment, buttons, steel, approx.200x100x50 cm, soundscape duration 20 minutes. Image © Chris Lee.

Coda:

Figure 132. Design for *Now My Skin Will Not Fall Through: Rhoda's Bed*.

We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence.[281]
Virginia Woolf

Languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways[282]
Mikhail Bakhtin

The connections between and among women are the most feared, the most problematic, and the most potentially transforming force on the planet.[283]
Adrienne Rich

May's 'Rhapsodic Quilt':

This research project began as a lone woman's exploration of wild seascapes, analysing the geometric shapes she might move in as she walks. However, it evolved into a choral, dewritten, rewritten, visualised poem, focalised by an imaginary journeywoman, in which dewritten fictional and nonfictional characters were invited to walk together. I have made original contributions to knowledge in my reconfiguration of these real, fictional and invented hybrid women, creating a new, interdisciplinary narrative translated through fine art, text, materiality, literary manuscripts, geometry, etymological study, poetic writing and structural analysis. By knitting and stitching my characters into new, conceptual fabric via strange loops, I have brought a new fluidity to apparently fixed narratives. It is a cousin of Donna Haraway's interdisciplinary 'cat's cradle', with its 'patterns and knots' which 'can be

[281] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 73.
[282] Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 291.
[283] Adrienne Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected prose 1966-1978*.

passed back and forth on the hands of several players.'[284] This project is deliberately, consciously, open-ended for several key reasons. Building a library is inevitably an unfinished and unfinishable exercise. The entire project is wreathed in a deliberately mutable air of contingency. By removing my cast of characters from their often-punitive, fixed narratives and pre-planned outcomes, an air of possibility wreathes the project. Just as Christine de Pizan created an allegory for *The City of Ladies* in which the book itself becomes the house within which her women characters reside, my dewritten cast of female characters live in my new house of stitched, printed, needlepointed and crocheted stories, culminating in their choral narrative of looped paper collars. The observation I made in the prologue, that Susie was forced to 'keep house' as a child, as well as 'keep *to* the house' has found a new expression here. Not only do we need new words, we need new houses. Elaine Showalter's observation that 'anxieties about space' seem to permeate the lives of nineteenth-century women, is pertinent - they still do. As she puts it, it was not just female characters who were made to feel stifled, the dread emanated directly from their female creators:

Figure 133. Christine de Pizan in her study (detail), writing 'Cent Ballades', 1410-1414. From the archives of the British Library, Harley 4431, f4 © British Library.

> From Ann Radcliffe's melodramatic dungeons to Jane Austen's mirrored parlors, from Charlotte Brontë's haunted garrets to Emily Brontë's coffin-shaped beds, imagery of enclosure reflects the woman writer's own discomfort, her sense of powerlessness, her fear that she inhabits alien and incomprehensible places.[285]

Susie buried her ambitions in silence, Maggie stifled her desires in ascetic observance. Stifled, buried Lucy Snowe, created by lonely Charlotte, is literally made to enact a burial of her emotions: she inters the letters from golden-haired Dr John she has craved, finally admitting that the sentiments they hold are only 'marble' on his side, although 'life' on hers. Never has there been such an elaborate, drawn-out act of funereal smothering. Lucy wraps the letters

[284] Donna Haraway, '2 A Game of Cat's Cradle: Science Studies, Feminist Theory, Cultural Studies', *Critical Digital Studies: A Reader,* ed. by Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), p. 66.
[285] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2,000), pp. 83-84.

in a 'winding-sheet' of oiled silk, ties them with twine, places them in a bottle, and seals it so that it is airtight. She clears ivy from the base of a pear tree, digs a hole, places the bottle inside, covers it with a large slate, heaps cement on top, covers that with black mould and finally replaces the mass of ivy. Nevertheless, even after all that, she is unsure whether she has really managed to smother the letters after all: 'Sometimes I thought the tomb unquiet, and dreamed strangely of disturbed earth, and of hair, still golden and living, obtruded through coffin-chinks.'[286] There is a deep sadness to the fact that not only is she a buried, smothered woman, she is driven to cooperate and take part in that burial herself. The same goes for Rhoda, Maggie and Susie; such were the limitations placed upon their lives, they sought escape through taciturnity. I would argue that the new, original configuration of these women, with the *Choral Symphony* soundscape and care-labelled collars, offers an ambiguous, equivocal yet potent disinterment. My journeywomen have been given more space. It is tentative, liminal space, yes, and I am deliberately claiming the ambiguity of the artworks which consciously emphasise the non-linguistic. I have used my deep knowledge of literature, paper and books to blur the boundaries of what a text is and in doing so I have confronted the paradox of making the accessible inaccessible. I have converted one kind of attention into another. In other words, I have not aimed for objective clarity but for the opening up of ambiguous, powerful, affective, potentially inclusive space.

The hybrid qualities of milk have helped sustain the fluidity of my approach to this enigmatic project. I have used milk in new ways, while the ink, paper and cloth tie the artworks to the origins from whence they came: the literary text. Throughout the process, I have conceptualised the artworks through the frame of life-writing, drawing on the metaphor of the quilt from Angela Carter's short story/memoir 'The Quilt Maker' and from Roland Barthes' 'rhapsodic quilt'. Such a quilt for Barthes was a thin, patchwork covering which allowed for the expression of a patchwork self and a patchwork narrative. 'Out of the Scriptorium' is a patchwork self and a patchwork narrative, transacted through a visual-arts methodology. I would argue that Barthes' quilt notion is a variation on the words of Virginia Woolf at the start of this coda: 'we are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence.'[287] The text in which the quilt appears, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, is an 'anti-autobiography', subverting expectations

[286] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (London: Penguin, 1979), p. 451.
[287] Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 73.

of a narrative and lacking a beginning, middle and conclusion.[288] It is, arguably and thrillingly, a strange loop. In a later work, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, Barthes clarified further: 'I cannot write myself. What after all is this "I" who would write himself? Even as he would enter in the writing, the writing would take the wind out of his sails, would render him null and void - futile.'[289] At the conclusion of my research, it strikes me that there are formal overlaps between Barthes' rejection of the 'I' in favour of the 'he' as an object, and my own decision early on to co-opt Margery Kempe's sense of herself in the third person. Strikingly, some way into my research, I noted that Barthes' desire to produce life-writing rather than the more literal, even prosaic, biography has close connections to my thinking frame of the strange loop. In Chapter 1, I explained Douglas Hofstadter's desire to use the brain to think about how the brain is thinking and Marcus du Sautoy told me that 'there is a moment when enough complexity has been reached, the encoding in the brain is complex enough, that it can formulate in that code thoughts about itself…. thoughts about thoughts.'[290] Re-reading 'The Death of the Author', I was struck by Barthes' desire to create a form of fragmentary writing that would inscribe 'the hand as it writes' into the text, in which there would be 'a pure gesture of inscription'.[291] Startlingly, that is, in fact, the definition of a strange loop, not that Barthes would necessarily have been aware of that. The hand writing the hand that is writing the hand is just another way of saying that the brain is having 'thoughts about thoughts.'[292] Ultimately, what I have created is an anti-narrative narrative in which the solidarity between the fictional and nonfictional women I have dewritten is presented via a communal bodyless 'she' and expressed by a community of collars in which their words blend and coil in the care labels that the collars hold. In that disassociation from the self(ish) I have created a redemptive, unselfed community.[293] In the decoding and dewriting of apparently fixed and rigid literary forms to make them mutable and flexible, I believe that I have given a different kind of access to women's voices. The strange loop which has been my thinking frame throughout has taken on even greater heft as this project has progressed since it has helped solidify my instinctual sense that text can be excavated, stretched, coaxed

[288] Roland Barthes, *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes,* trans. by Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2020),
[289] Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 19878), p. 98.
[290] Marcus du Sautoy interviewed by Charlie Lee-Potter, *Inside A Mountain* podcast, 21 November, 2021.
[291] Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), p. 146.
[292] It is possible Roland Barthes had seen M. C. Escher's famous 1948 drawing of a hand drawing a hand which is of course another strange loop.
[293] It is a familiar trope that women should embrace selflessness rather than selfishness. I deliberately use the word self(ish) here to mean the powerful communality that emerges for women who combine their forces.

into different shapes to create a community of infinitely-expandable, fictional, invented, hybrid and nonfictional women spanning seven centuries. May's travelling library adds to that infinite flexibility since, by its very nature, a library can never be completed. If it can never be completed, it can continue to invite new ideas, books, objects, women, histories in.

The insights from my research podcast library *Inside A Mountain* have fed into the project as an original sound archive. In turn, the podcast embodies the project. As my own source of primary material, the interviews I have carried out have produced revelations about the strange loop (Marcus du Sautoy); about the power of the imagination to construct alternative fictional worlds (Sally Bayley); about mental illness and its punitive treatments (Kate Kennedy); of the dangers and rewards for women of walking at night (Duncan Minshull); about the visceral power of seascape (Anna Koska); the primacy of music and the sense of being embedded in the 'container' of landscape (Natalie Clein); of the effect of iterative walking in the same place (Jake Tilson); the communal power of walking (Ian McMillan); of the restorative effects of allowing one's mind to wander, even when the physical ability to walk is affected (Robert Douglas-Fairhurst); the power of beauty (Noreen Masud); the need for silence (Jade Angeles Fitton); and the reparative effect of walking for the wounded body (Fungai Marima).[294] All these insights have fed directly and indirectly into this project, providing rich insights and an imaginative library from which to draw.

Myth, story-telling, narrative, life-writing and parable have underpinned this project throughout. However, the overarching drive has been to materialise ideas, encounters, characters, and experiences. Having done so, I have reconfigured these women's experiences in a communal narrative of sound, verse, paper, milk and ink. I have made materially manifest the isolation of Lucy Snowe with her pathetic pile of fictitious milk letters, the frustration of Maggie in the slashing of her paper hair, the entrapment of Rhoda in her tight bedclothes of sharp milk and screen-printed paper, and the torment of all those real and fictional women force-fed milk. I believe that I have been Susie, Lucy, Maggie and Rhoda's 'tender narrator', to borrow Olga Tokarczuk's phrase, and in dewriting and rewriting their stories I have given them different voices back, expressed via the villanelles which, finally, unite them. I have not given them bodies, but my visual and aural strange loop of paper collars, text and composed *Choral Symphony* soundscape has granted them a form of expression which, when combined,

[294] Links to all episodes appear in Appendix 1.

swells to a louder chorus than these women have ever experienced alone. Maggie's heartfelt words of self-denial that "'it is better for me to do without earthly happiness altogether'"[295] have been met in this project by an orchestra of sound and welcome. The women have become a choral ensemble, rather than single voices of anguish. The villanelle which concludes my composition *Choral Symphony* and which dewrites, rewrites and finally unites these fictional and non-fictional characters most acutely is 'Tender Hooks'. It takes the word 'tender', used by Olga Tokarczuk, but also by Maggie Tulliver who wonders why real life is so cruel when the world of books is a place where 'people were always agreeable or tender'.[296] My poem draws on the tradition of groups of women who would gather together from the fourteenth-century onwards to stretch and hook newly-woven, damp lengths of woollen fabric onto large wooden frames known as 'tenters'.[297] As the cloth dried in the 'bleaching fields', the sun would fade its imperfections and smooth its surface. To be a tenter was to share in a vital, communal, creative, unifying task.

[295] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 341.
[296] George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, p. 247.
[297] The tradition of tenters in the bleaching fields formed the root of the phrase 'to be on tenter hooks'.

Tender Hooks

Stretch the cloth wide, hook it tight to the tenter,
scour its marks, fade its colour, smooth its lines.
Join the tuckers, their tenterhooks tender.

Tender your tenterhooks, join the tuckers, enter
the bleaching fields, follow their signs.
Stretch the cloth wide, hook it tight to the tenter.

Smooth the cloth kindly - its threads are slender.
Pour liquid sun on creases, wrinkles and lines
and join the tuckers, their tenterhooks tender.

The tuckers' hands are the cloth's defender.
Its silken surface ripples, gleams and shines.
Stretch the cloth wide, hook it tight to the tenter,

miles of cloth, looped to wooden inclines.
The day's first length is pulled from the tines.
Join the tuckers, their tenterhooks tender.

It's a task performed with skill. The tender tenter
has dextrous hands and long timelines.
Stretch the cloth wide, hook it tight to the tenter,
join the tuckers, their tenterhooks tender.

In constructing my new choir, I believe that I have made a claim for compassion, solidarity and generosity. It could of course be argued that such a project makes no difference to the fictional women who never existed, or to real women like Susie who are no longer here to appreciate the effort. I would counter that by saying that I have paid homage and there is heft in that. It is *in memoriam* for isolated women who have come before. It has been another kind of time-trial, a methodology which has been one of this project's keynotes. The entire research project also acts as a gesture of solidarity towards

centuries of women-makers and their methods. I have not only drawn in texts from other times, I have also drawn in objects, artefacts and artworks which speak in very different ways.

I have often been surprised by the mournful qualities of the works which, when completed, seemed more forlorn than I had expected or intended. But with that poignancy has come an emanation of empathy, while asking questions of viewers/readers who simply read a story – visual or textual - to find out who does what to whom. In my view 'what happens next' is infinitely less interesting than why it does and how it does it. This project is an expression of that complexity. If we simply want to find out what happens in a novel, for example, we need only read a swift synopsis. This project is anti-synoptic and, as I have stressed throughout, the intention was never to devise a closed or conclusive system of thinking, but to open up questions about what it means for silenced women to find a shape in the world. The shift in the project from my original intention to walk alone along 365 miles of coastal path was inevitable after my injury. However, the choral notes which have emerged seem infinitely richer than solo sounds. Maggie's repressed desire for 'more instruments playing together' has been materialised after all. My methods initially were more concentratedly focused on printmaking. However, my decision to use a craft methodology, which seemed instinctual rather than planned at first, is another aspect of this project's search for empathy. In expressing my research through the methods taught to me by Susie, I believe that I have made another gesture of solidarity. She would have enjoyed reading what I have had to say, even if she would have rolled her eyes at the amount of time I have spent on crochet, patchwork, needlepoint and rugging. She is present throughout this research. I plan to continue evolving the idea of dewritten women's voices as the year-long writer-in-residence at Wytham Woods in Oxford, beginning in October 2024. I am planning a book-length, dewritten, rewritten and visual narrative of fictional and nonfictional women who have lived and worked in woods and forests through history. I also have further episodes planned for my research podcast which will continue to feed into my art practice.

This seems a good moment to conjure one final neologism - a new word to add to my new house. I would argue that in releasing women from their fictions and nonfictions, I have allowed them to walk freely and lightly from the '*pre*scriptorium'. It is a radical act of sympathy. I conclude with an image of the original table at Haworth Parsonage where Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë wrote their novels. This table is my project's powerful, apotropaic object. As I have explained, the sisters walked in an energised loop around this table every night, intoning their literary ideas as if summoning them from the air. Even after Emily and then Anne died, Charlotte continued to walk alone as she created frozen Lucy Snowe. It is, in microcosm, a powerful mobiliser of my thesis – women walking in a totemic, invigorated, communal loop and talking their stories into life. Vitally, the energy of the loop remains, even when the women are gone (fig. 134).

Figure 134. The original table at Haworth Parsonage where Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë wrote their novels, including *Villette*, the text which is so central to this project. Image © Charlotte Lee-Potter, 2023, with permission of The Brontë Society.

THE END

Appendix:

Inside A Mountain research podcast:

All photographs by the author

'Landscapes of the Imagination: Sally Bayley'
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-1-episode-1-landscapes-of-the-imagination/id1563188647?i=1000517228298

'Walking the South Devon coastline with artist Anna Koska'
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-1-episode-2-walking-the-south-devon-coastline/id1563188647?i=1000523284410

'Tracing the footsteps of Ivor Gurney with Kate Kennedy'

https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-1-episode-3-tracing-the-footsteps-of-ivor/id1563188647?i=1000527417126

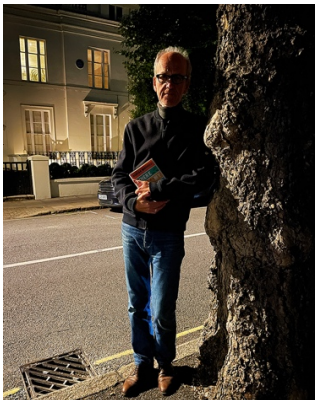
'Walking the Jurassic coastline with international cellist Natalie Clein'
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-1-episode-4-walking-the-jurassic-coastline/id1563188647?i=1000535323474

'Strange loops and walking as thinking, with mathematician Marcus du Sautoy'
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-1-episode-5-strange-loops-and-walking-as/id1563188647?i=1000542601531

‘Going underground: seeking London’s lost rivers with Tom Chivers, author of London Clay’
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-1-episode-6-going-underground-seeking-londons/id1563188647?i=1000550951565

‘Telling stories with poet Ian McMillan’
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-2-episode-1-telling-stories-with-the-poet/id1563188647?i=1000567701651

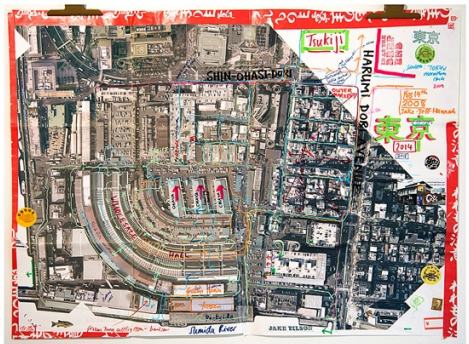
‘Night walking with anthologist Duncan Minshull’
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-2-episode-2-night-walking-with-anthologist/id1563188647?i=1000569551154



‘How to read a life: Robert Douglas-Fairhurst and his memoir Metamorphosis: A Life in Pieces’
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-2-episode-3-how-to-read-a-life-robert/id1563188647?i=1000612075111

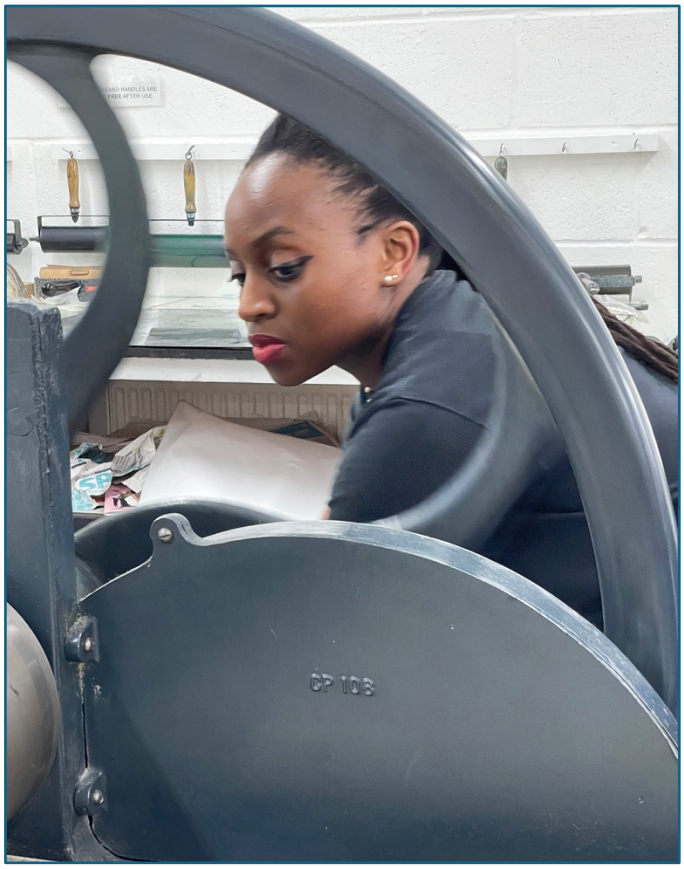
‘Jade Angeles Fitton: Escaping to silence’
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-2-episode-4-jade-angeles-fitton-escaping-to-silence/id1563188647?i=1000621229596

‘Turning seafood into art: Jake Tilson’s 12-year walk around Tsukji fish market’
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-2-episode-5-turning-seafood-into-art-jake-tilsons/id1563188647?i=1000625542488



‘The flat places of Noreen Masud’
https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/series-2-episode-6-the-flat-places-of-noreen-masud/id1563188647?i=1000654586417

‘The body’s story: walking with printmaker Fungai Marima’
https://insideamountain.podbean.com/



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