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Living Rooms: Domestic Material Culture in Fiction by Joan Barfoot, Marion Quednau, and Diane Schoemperlen

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Abstract

My dissertation provides the first full-length study of representations of domestic material culture in contemporary Canadian women's fiction. The first chapter presents two metaphors, the elephant in the living room, and the open secret, and indicates their usefulness in explaining the cultural and critical tendency to overlook the meanings communicated by contemporary domestic material objects and spaces. Drawing on cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken's research into the role of consumption in the preservation of hopes and ideals, the second chapter examines gendered patterns of consumption in Joan Barfoot's first two novels. I suggest that Barfoot's female protagonists reject their suburban homes out of an awareness of the ways these spaces function as repositories of values with which they can no longer live. In the third chapter, I situate my discussion of the Hardoy, or "butterfly chair," in Marion Quednau's novel of the same name, against the backdrop of twentieth-century design debates between modernists and traditionalists. The chair is the object in which the novel's main tensions, which relate to notions of comfort, history, and authority, are embedded. In the fourth chapter I maintain that the central concerns of Diane Schoemperlen's fiction are couched in her representations of domestic material culture. Interpersonal relationships

are consistently represented in her fiction as mediated through domestic objects and spaces. Her characters' struggles over issues of control, and the ambivalence characteristically associated with these struggles, often materialize in their manipulations of their domestic environments. Such manipulations make explicit the process of self-fashioning via material culture which every individual engages in on a daily basis, albeit at the level of the tacit.

Résumé

Ma dissertation se veut la première étude approfondie des représentations de la culture matérielle et domestique dans la littérature féminine contemporaine canadienne. Le premier chapitre présente deux métaphores, à savoir l'éléphant dans le salon et le secret de Polichinelle, métaphores qui démontrent à quel point la critique et la société ont tendance à ignorer les significations communiquées par les objects et les espaces domestiques contemporains. Inspiré des recherches de l'anthropologue Grant McCracken sur le rôle que joue la consommation dans la conservation des idéaux, le deuxième chapitre examine les normes de consommation représentées dans les deux premiers romans de Joan Barfoot. Je propose que les protagonistes féminins de Barfoot rejettent leurs maisons de banlieu lorsqu'elles se rendent compte de la façon dont ces espaces fonctionnent, c'est à dire comme des répertoires des valeurs avec lesquelles elles ne peuvent plus vivre. Dans le troisième chapitre, mon argumentation se concentre sur la chaise Hardoy (surnommé «papillon») représentée dans le roman de Marion Quednau intitulé *The Butterfly Chair*, et ce dans le contexte du débat entre les modernistes et les traditionalistes qui a marqué ce siècle en design. La chaise est l'objet dans lequel s'enfoncent les tensions principales du roman, tensions qui se rapportent

aux notions de confort, d'histoire, et d'autorité. Dans le quatrième chapitre je prétends que les préoccupations centrales dans l'œuvre de Diane Schoemperlen se retrouvent dans ses représentations de la culture matérielle et domestique. Chez Schoemperlen les rapports personnels sont constamment representés et négociés à travers les objets et les espaces domestiques. Les difficultés qu'ont ses personnages avec l'autorité, et l'ambivalence qui en résulte inévitablement, se répercutent dans leurs interactions avec leur environnement matérielle et domestique. Ces interactions rendent explicite le processus de creation de soi à travers la culture matérielle, un processus auquel chaque individu participe quotidiennement, quoiqu'au niveau du tacite.

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Several people assisted me in my research on the Leveridge cabin, depicted in *The Butterfly Chair*. Marion Quednau shared with me, in telephone and email conversations, her memories of the place; Carson Cross and Elizabeth Mitchell of the Hastings County Historical Society, Luke Hendry at the *Bancroft Times*, and Cate Giroux at the Wollaston & Limerick Public Library undertook searches and made queries on my behalf; and Richard Trounce, a descendant of the Leveridge family, very generously shared with me information about, and photographs of, the Leveridge homestead. Warm thanks to all. Many people at McGill have offered me terrific support and opportunities, making my time here very rewarding. I am therefore happy to thank Maggie Kilgour, Dorothy Bray, Gary Wihl, Nathalie Cooke, Brian Trehearne, Michael Bristol, and Peter Gibian.

This dissertation is dedicated to 26 Brisco Street, Brampton, Ontario, because, in the words of Eudora Welty, "A place that ever was lived in is like a fire that never goes out" ("Some Notes" 186).

Contents

Introduction

the objects we possess
may tell the stories of our lives
more accurately than we ourselves could.

— Bronwen Wallace, "Benediction" (44)

In this dissertation I employ the tools of material culture analysis to examine representations of domestic interiors and their component parts in fiction by Joan Barfoot, Marion Quednau, and Diane Schoemperlen. My title, "Living Rooms," is a loose play on words meant to emphasize the dynamic, reflexive aspect of domestic material culture, to draw attention to its capacity to both reflect and shape the attitudes, beliefs and behaviour of those who encounter and engage with it. Each of these women writers pays special attention to the material specificities of the domestic environment as a space in which the politics of gender are played out, where furnishings and interior décor express not only personal aesthetic preferences, but where these preferences are in turn understood as expressions of one's relation to larger ideological formations. Each represents domestic spaces and the objects that furnish them as places in which various struggles are focussed, where these struggles may simply become manifest, or are

temporarily resolved and otherwise made liveable.

This dissertation is not a survey of home interiors in contemporary English-Canadian fiction. As Marc Denhez reminds us, "[t]he very name 'Canada' means 'the place of houses'" (2), so it is perhaps not surprising that domestic built forms are so widely represented in Canadian fiction—probably as often as the landscapes and topographic images that have long been a focus of critical attention.[1] Given the sheer number of novels and short stories that feature detailed depictions of domestic spaces, it is beyond the scope of this project to catalogue them all, or even all of those "located" in a specific region, for instance Southwestern Ontario. It has been necessary to set limits on what I can meaningfully comment on in the present work.

In Chapter 1, "The Elephant in the Living Room," I develop readings of the chapter's titular metaphor and of Alice Munro's metaphor of the "open secret," using them to explain the cultural and critical tendency to treat the meanings communicated by domestic material culture objects as given. Since, as Bronwen Wallace puts it, "the objects we possess / may tell the stories of our lives / more accurately than we ourselves could," we tend to let them, opting to remain silent about the ways that social meaning is embedded in and communicated through everyday objects, about the ways we are reflected and constructed in our encounters with such objects. In this chapter I define my use of the term "material culture," and also present a review of the recent literature on material culture and literary critical

approaches to representations of domestic spaces in fiction. Finally, I place Barfoot's, Quednau's and Schoemperlen's fiction within specific historical, literary, and cultural contexts.

Chapter 2, "Possessions and Dispossession in Fiction by Joan Barfoot," examines gendered patterns of consumption in Barfoot's first two novels, *Abra* and *Dancing in the Dark*. Barfoot's work demonstrates an awareness of the ways in which practices of consumption are a powerful determinant of personal identity, and position individuals within the family as well as within ideology. The critical framework of the chapter's first section develops from the work of cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken on the role of consumption in the preservation of ideals. This section presents the argument that purchasing consumer goods initially as "bridges" to their husbands' hopes and ideals, rather than to their own, leads to consumer rebellion in Abra and to "consuming despair" in *Dancing in the Dark*'s Edna Cormick.

In the second section, I suggest that Barfoot's female characters reject their suburban homes because they ultimately perceive these domestic spaces to be repositories of patriarchal values in conflict with their own. The values that they reject are given form in the suburban houses that each of them for a time lives in, and lives to maintain. The levels of awareness and agency on the part of the women protagonists differ dramatically in each of these novels; Abra refashions her self by refurbishing a cabin in the country, while Edna ends up dancing in the dark of an anguish of her own

making.

Chapter 3, on *The Butterfly Chair,* is very specifically concerned with the cultural and ideological resonances of a particular piece of material culture, the Hardoy/"butterfly chair," which is something at once familiar and strange to most of us, a kind of open secret that Quednau evokes to tell the story she has to tell about domestic abuse and feminist resistance. In this chapter I demonstrate that, when the butterfly chair in Marion Quednau's novel is interpreted qua chair—that is, as a material culture object—its meanings in the novel become even more densely layered and extensive. I situate my discussion of material culture in the novel against the backdrop of twentieth-century design debates between modernists and traditionalists, and collate some of the larger meanings associated with the butterfly chair with the personal meanings attached to it by the novel's protagonist. The chair is the object in which the novel's main tensions, which relate to notions of comfort, history, and authority, are embedded.

In Chapter 4, "'The Power of Rooms': Domestic Material Culture in Diane Schoemperlen's Fiction," I argue that the central concerns of Schoemperlen's fiction are couched in her representations of material culture. Interpersonal relationships are consistently represented in her fiction as mediated through domestic objects and spaces. Her characters' struggles over issues of control, and the ambivalence characteristically associated with these struggles, often materialize in their manipulations of their domestic environments. Such manipulations make explicit the

process of self-fashioning via material culture which every individual engages in on a daily basis, albeit at the level of the tacit.

The conclusion further demonstrates the value of a material culture approach to studying representations of domestic material culture in contemporary Canadian fiction, by referring to my late-breaking discovery of the source of one such representation, a discovery made possible by this approach. The conclusion opens up, formally speaking, to highlight the capacity of such a research perspective to expand the possibilities for discovery of covert meaning built into fictional representations of domestic spaces. Fictions "focused on buildings often seem to use them as a code by which to bury their main meanings," remarks Robert Harbison in the chapter titled "Books of Things: Architectural Fictions," in his book *Eccentric Spaces* (73). Not only are the fiction's chief concerns, or open secrets, likely to be contained in and communicated through such representations; so are larger cultural patterns discernible in depictions of domestic spaces, products and practices.

I should clarify that I use the term "contemporary" in the title of this dissertation, and in phrases such as "contemporary interior" or "contemporary décor," in opposition to "period," which refers to the décor, either authentic or reproduced, of a past historical period—for example, the Victorian period or the Edwardian period. What we now call Victorian period décor was once contemporary décor to the Victorians, because it originated and existed coevally with them. By "contemporary interiors" I

mean to refer to spaces furnished with elements originating in or assembled together in the era in which we are currently living. But I narrow my use of the term further; "contemporary interiors" in the context of this dissertation refers to interiors that are represented in fiction, and that are contemporaneous with the writers who depict them, i.e. of their time. And since all of the fiction I examine in the chapters that follow was published in the last twenty-five years, I take "contemporary" to refer to cultural forms produced in the last twenty-five years.

Come into the Foyer

In the form of three creative/theoretical texts written in a genre that I have called the "foyer" and installed between chapters, I supplement and situate the research that I present in each of the dissertation's chapters on individual writers' work. Thus one passes through a foyer en route to the individual chapters on Barfoot, Quednau, and Schoemperlen. Taking my cue from feminist sociologists Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, who insist on the intrinsic value to feminist research practices of "the experiences of the researcher as a person in a situation" (196), I have referred in each foyer to my own experiences, as they inform and are germane to the particular focus I have given to each author's work.

One of the foyer's critical functions is to invite readers to turn inward and examine some of the meanings of everyday domestic objects, which are conventionally viewed as unimportant, or considered only in terms of their

use-value, but which nevertheless convey unspoken messages about the people and the culture that use them. The foyer has a political function too, and this has its basis in the feminist precept that the personal is political. I have brought the personal, in the form of reference to my own practices and perspective as a feminist researcher and consumer, user and recoverer of domestic material culture, out into the public and conventionally impersonal "space" of the academic dissertation to insist, along with the women authors whose work I examine in the dissertation, on the value of the personal and the particular. Indeed,

> like them, I'll argue
> the stubborn argument of the particular
> right now, in the midst of things, *this*
> and *this.* (Wallace, "Particulars" 111)

In referring to these texts as "foyers" I also want to evoke the French meaning of the word *foyer*, or hearth, which, as Peter Ward points out, has long been a synonym for 'household,' and domesticity (66, 68). I also want to draw attention to the Latin source of the word "foyer"— *focus*, or fire— and in so doing suggest that it is in the foyers, called "Wallpaper," "Tray," and "Linen," that one finds the concentrated focus or real fire of my feminist engagement with domestic material culture. My use of the word "foyer" also recalls, but distinguishes itself from, its use as a theme of the second Geneva School, whose members, including Jean Rousset, employed the word as a "key term [. . .], a focus or generating core that unites a

cluster of related experiences" (Lawall 75). My use of the term distinguishes itself mainly in its feminist creative and critical application and implications.

What Miriam Schapiro has said about the marginalization of women's experience still carries weight today:

> Merely to speak out, to describe the daily ways of your life, turns out to be political. To say that you make a bed, cook a meal, live with someone you love, care for a child, that you cover windows and clothe your family—to say these things is to redress the trivializations of women's experience. (qtd. in Berlo 91)

I am willing to assume this burden, what Stanley and Wise call "vulnerability" (296), in affirming the value of women's experiences, and in not effacing my own or rendering them invisible. In this way I highlight the process of constructing, which is always part of conducting research, but which in the written products of scholarly research is often "masked," to use Joseph J. Corn's term (46).

Corn offers an explanation for the "masking or erasure of experience" he finds characteristic of critical studies purporting to concern themselves primarily with knowledge derived from encounters with objects:

> The process of graduate training quickly teaches the budding scholar to privilege the cognitive, the theorized, and the abstract over the experiential, the ordinary, and the personally

> particularized. One then readily learns that the opposite of a 'professional' publication is a personal account, and that knowledge derived from personal experience, whether tactile, visual, or experiential, is not likely to be taken seriously. Even in an object-centered specialty like the history of technology, being 'objective' paradoxically may require suppressing experience with actual objects. (46-47)

My own critical practice, which grows out of my desire to shatter the customary transparency of the contemporary domestic interior, and to foreground its capacity to communicate meaning, also requires that I be willing to face the interiors, both literally and figuratively speaking, in which I live and write, and produce criticism about other women's writing. In other words, I cannot insist on the importance of the "ordinary stuff" in our lives and in contemporary Canadian fiction if I am unwilling to interrogate my own relationship to the material culture in my possession.

❖

In the conclusion to his 1994 article, "Living Spaces: Some Australian Houses of Childhood," Bruce Bennett writes that "a major challenge" raised by the literary texts his paper is concerned with "is to link their representations of living spaces with those of human sciences such as anthropology, architecture and human geography," a challenge he recognizes but leaves to others to take up (40). In examining these contemporary Canadian women's fictions through the lens of material

culture, I accept the challenge they likewise raise, and attempt to articulate some of the messages that attach to domestic material culture objects in these fictions, which tend to circulate as "open secrets."

notes to introduction

1 See W. H. New for one of the latest studies on the subject of topographic images. In her recent study, Deborah Keahey advocates and performs a kind of critical re-placement in reading prairie fiction, focussing on the ways that concepts of place and home in prairie fiction are constructed as much by social and cultural categories as by "the land."

1• The Elephant in the Living Room

. . . she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it.
— Alice Munro, "Open Secrets" (186)

She saw as she had never seen before how material things spoke to her.
— Henry James, *The Wings of the Dove* (35)

"Nobody mentioned it; it was the elephant in the living room," I have heard people utter, recalling awkward social situations in which something of obvious importance is ostensibly ignored. The phrase typically refers to formidable, taboo subjects such as abuse, addiction, death, or disease, subjects people tend to avoid especially when they are not topics for casual conversation, but realities which loom large and dangerously close to home, so to speak.[1] Although the elephant in the living room is usually an intangible matter rather than a material thing *per se*, the metaphor describes a "matter" so large that it seems, to all intents and purposes, to take up space, to operate as though it has a substantial material presence.

I begin with this metaphor because it also suggests the common tendency to apprehend, but avoid discussing, the meanings embodied in contemporary domestic interiors and in the objects that furnish them. When we come across contemporary domestic interiors, both in the lives we

lead and the fiction we read, all the while internalizing the messages they convey through elements of décor such as furniture and its arrangement in space, without consciously interpreting the content of those messages, we treat the unspoken semantic content of those spaces like the elephant in the living room. Paradoxically in this context, the living room itself becomes the elephant within it.[2]

Or, to evoke another fittingly paradoxical metaphor, the living room becomes an "open secret," a favourite motif of Alice Munro. In a 1973 interview with Graeme Gibson, Munro points out how attentive she is in her fiction to "the surface of life," especially to all of the contours given that surface by the myriad and seemingly mundane material objects people encounter on a daily basis (241). She affirms the importance of "things in themselves," suggesting that they have both personal and cultural significance (241). Somewhat guardedly, she explains the frequent representation of "things" in her fiction as a creative imperative: "I have to write about—I can't have anybody in a room without describing all the furniture," she says, laughing, and goes on to admit, "I can't yet get into people or life without [. . .] having all those other things around them" (256-57). Her story "Open Secrets," from the collection of the same name, reflects this orientation toward seeing mundane objects as material expressions of tacit meanings.

The story ends with the central character, Maureen Stephens, stirring a custard with a wooden spoon. Sometime in Maureen's future, the

narrator projects, "she'll watch the soft skin form on the back of a wooden spoon and her memory will twitch, but it will not quite reveal to her this moment when she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it" (186). The story ends just when it seems on the verge of really beginning, and readers are left, like Maureen, poised before some ineffable, "secret" and apparent truth. We are left with a depiction of everyday domestic practice, performed with an everyday cooking utensil that the narrator suggests functions like a "magnet of meaning," drawing together details from the past just as it attracts the custard's skin.[3]

Munro's open secret, "something not startling until you think of trying to tell it," describes the messages which are always subtly communicated through domestic material culture, but which do not always register with us on a conscious level, where we can articulate them. The concise OED defines open secret somewhat less equivocally as a "thing secret only to those who do not trouble to learn it," thus emphasizing, as does Munro, the effort it actually takes to discern the thing that seems obvious or given ("Secret"). In this instance, the content of the message communicated is the horror of Maureen's domestic situation, a horror barely held in check by a thin film of surface calm, one very like the skin of the custard she stirs in order to keep its texture smooth, to prevent it from violently boiling over.

The critical landscape is ill-furnished with examinations of the domestic spaces and objects depicted in contemporary Canadian fiction, and this despite their prominence in much of that fiction. This lack of critical attention, however, merely repeats the larger cultural tendency to pass over the material specificities and cultural significances of contemporary domestic interiors in everyday contexts, to take their meanings simply as given. This lacuna in our critical discourse is particularly regrettable because, as anthropologist Grant McCracken observes in his book *Culture and Consumption*, novelists are really "the most active and successful ethnographers at work in North America today" (xii).

To fail to pay critical attention to the kinds and uses of everyday domestic objects and spaces represented in fiction is to leave unexamined a whole arena of human-object encounters through which selves are fashioned, and social meanings produced and circulated. I want to take this opportunity to say what has not been said on this subject. There is an elephant in the living room of contemporary Canadian fiction, especially that written by women, an open secret concerning things, our relations to them, and the ways in which fictional representations of our relations to them are typically gendered.

What Is Material Culture?

I understand how the native domestic architecture shaped our choice of ways to live, and was in turn shaped by them, until a consensus was reached.
— Hugh Hood, *The Swing in the Garden* (28)

Having developed in an "eclectic intellectual milieu" (Martin 144) for the past thirty years, material culture studies is ultimately less a single disciplinary field than a meshwork of multidisciplinary approaches used variously by folklorists, archaeologists and cultural anthropologists, sociologists, social historians, art and architecture historians, American and Canadian cultural studies researchers, and, increasingly, literary critics. Because there are so many material culture approaches, there are many definitions of what material culture is, and does. American studies scholar Thomas J. Schlereth has researched the history of the term and found it in use as far back as a century ago (231). In the past thirty years, the term has been widely adopted by researchers from various disciplines. I will mention a few of the ways that it has been used during this period, and then define my own use of the term.

Architectural historian Dell Upton advocates thinking of material culture as a "subject matter" (85), a term that, like the term "material culture" itself, suggests the interplay between the ideational (subject) and the material (matter). As art historian Jules David Prown notes, "the term *material culture* refers quite directly and efficiently, if not elegantly, both to the subject matter of the study, *material*, and to its purpose, the understanding of *culture*" ("Mind in Matter" 2). For his part, Schlereth

advocates viewing material culture as neither a discipline nor a field, but rather "as a mode of inquiry primarily (but not exclusively) focussed upon a type of evidence. Material culture thus becomes an investigation that uses artifacts (along with relevant documentary, statistical, and oral data) to explore cultural questions" in existing disciplines and fields (236). More recently, anthropologist Daniel Miller has echoed Ann Smart Martin by averring that material culture studies "remains eclectic in its methods," and adding to the long list of more widely recognized contributing approaches to material culture studies those from geography, design, and literature (Miller 19). In short, material culture can be understood as both a subject and an approach—or approaches.

Basic to all material culture approaches is a focus on the object, the material artifact, as an index of culture. Historical archaeologist James Deetz uses the term to refer to "that segment of man's physical environment which is purposely shaped by him according to culturally dictated plans" (10). Folklorist and historian Henry Glassie defines material culture as "those objects that combine natural substances with human will," a definition that, he emphasizes, could equally be applied to art (255). Ann Smart Martin, whose research focusses on the consumer practices and material culture of colonial America, defines material culture as "aspects of the physical world that are modified by cultural behavior," thus making room for people's manipulations of the physical world that are not intentional, or purposeful, in Deetz's and Glassie's senses (144). Ronald T.

Marchese, advancing a system for classifying objects that contribute to the material record of a culture, defines material culture as "any monument, non-perishable physical object, or bio-degradable garbage man produces," thereby pointedly including a whole category of objects that end up as waste, the material by–products of, and debris created by, people's more purposeful encounters with the object world (607). Noting that "most writers on material culture have focussed on the use of objects in purposeful expression," anthropologist Andrea Pellegram, too, has signaled the need to consider "the latent and incidental message of objects [. . .], what is not overtly intended" (103). Such unintended communication is the subject of her essay on the "message in" (as distinct from the literal messages inscribed on) paper in a business setting.

My working definition of material culture is informed by all those cited above, but is primarily derived from definitions put forth by Jules David Prown, and historical archaeologist James A. Delle. Prown maintains that material culture "is the study through artifacts of the beliefs—values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular society at a given time," and that the founding assumption of material culture as a study "is that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged" (1-2). Delle, drawing on the work of archaeologist Martin Wobst, expands earlier object-centred definitions of material culture

to make room for the study of space itself. He thus finds it useful to define material culture as "a reflexive material product of and precedent to human behavior" (37). Space, Delle argues, is considered material culture when it is "created, mediated, or defined by human behavior" and also "creates, defines, or mediates human behavior" (37).

For the present work, I will define material culture simply as material products of human design which both reflect and mediate human beliefs and behaviour. The term will be used to refer not only to objects and spaces created or manipulated by human activity, but also as a way of looking at such things, a way of understanding or apprehending the processes through which social meanings circulate, or temporarily reside in, or are embedded in, or are expressed through, material objects.

The remark made by fictional art historian Matthew Goderich in Hugh Hood's *The Swing in the Garden* (quoted as epigraph above) on the subject of single-family dwellings in Toronto in the 1930s, neatly distills some of the ideas about material culture outlined in this section, and brings them (into the) home, so to speak. It presents a view of domestic material culture as reflexive, as shaping and shaped by human endeavors and attitudes. It also suggests, in its reference to the idea of consensus, that beliefs are always at issue in people's encounters with domestic material culture, and that the material objects themselves, in the specificities of their shapes or arrangement, provide clues about these beliefs.

Material Culture in Literary Studies

We see human thought and feeling best and clearest by seeing it through something solid that our hands have made.
—Eudora Welty, "The House of Willa Cather" (58)

Because expressions of domestic material culture such as houses, rooms, and furnishings both reflect and generate human responses, when they are represented in works of fiction they function as more than mere containers or settings for the action that unfolds therein. As an alternative to considering such fictional representations as elements of setting—which implies their status as background, or props, as passive containers for action—I would suggest that we think about them as material culture, a perspective that foregrounds their reflexive nature as products of human design.

I have deliberately not framed my dissertation as a study of literary setting, owing to the way the term "setting" is currently most widely employed in literary contexts. Likely because of its association with the theatrical "set," there is a general tendency to think of setting as the "background" or "backdrop" to action, and hence to focus on its contribution to the general atmosphere in the literary text. When setting is conceived of as "background" to the action, its capacity to bear meaningfully upon the development of the action as well as its ability to participate in the delineation of character, expressed in the choice of one's surroundings, are clearly diminished, if not erased. A brief survey of literary handbooks for definitions of setting supports these general observations. While some

handbooks gloss setting only as "locale," others include additional elements in their definition, such as "the moral, intellectual, and social milieu in which the characters move" (Harper 428). However, only Holman's refers to specific architectural examples which might be considered elements of setting, pointing, for example, to "such physical arrangements as the location of the windows and doors in a room" (453). The notion of setting as background is informed by setting's common association with theatre scenery, and the literal painted backdrop of the set on the stage. The treatment of literary setting as background also seems related to the common tendency to experience interior decoration as background to the living that takes place within it. Most of us want to experience interior design as transparent, claims Kevin Melchionne in "Living in Glass Houses: Domesticity, Interior Decoration, and Environmental Aesthetics." When the décor asserts itself as décor, foregrounds itself radically, and "never recedes into the background" it "fails as full-fledged interior design" (191). The idea of setting as locale or backdrop is not adequate for my purposes, because it does not posit rooms as "living."

In the chapters that follow I plan to give representations of furniture, furnishings, and décor in fiction the attention they demand, by noting the ways domestic material culture objects and practices reflect and shape different female characters' attitudes and values. In addition, I will call attention to the ways that these characters often use material culture objects to shape others' experiences. A basic assumption informing my readings of

these fictions is that male and female characters' encounters with, and manipulations of, domestic material culture can contribute to our understanding of gender relations in contemporary Canadian society. Anthropologist Grant McCracken has explicitly and compellingly delineated the connection between gender politics and consumer goods used in everyday domestic practice:

> It is probably not controversial to say that sexism takes some of its power from the fact that it is resident in the material world and that it is from this hiding place particularly that it works to insinuate itself into consciousness and everyday life. There can be no serious doubt that it is partly because sexism has been represented in and by the object world that it has been so hard to root out of social life. The study of gender meanings of material culture is one of our opportunities to track the monster to its lair. ("The Voice of Gender" 445)

In this study I focus less on evidence of sexism manifested in consumer goods than on strategies employed by women characters to gain a sense of agency in their lives, lives that are plainly affected by the kind of "resident" sexism McCracken has identified.

I have chosen a sentence from *The Wings of the Dove* as one of the epigraphs to this chapter because, in the context of the passage in which it appears in the novel, it formulates with admirable clarity the way in which

material culture communicates meaning. Henry James was particularly attentive to the communicative powers of domestic interiors.[4] He also had a genius for representing characters' encounters with the metaphorical elephant in the living room, in the content of their conversations, their evasions of suppressed and oppressive subject matter.

The Wings of the Dove opens with Kate Croy's visit to her father's seedy Chirk Street lodgings. Obliged to wait for a long while in his sitting room, she has little else to do but study her lacklustre surroundings and perceive the "emanation of things" which makes manifest to her "the failure of fortune and of honour" that her father has experienced (21). Lionel Croy finally makes his appearance, and in the midst of his unpleasant conversation with her about their future prospects for social and economic advancement, Kate once again examines the room. Perceiving her surroundings at a glance, Kate observes that "it might well have seemed odd that with so little to meet the eye there should be so much to show"(26).

Occurring at a moment when the cheerful tone of one of Lionel Croy's statements is particularly inconsistent with the predominantly cheerless tone of the room, Kate's observation underscores the communicative power of the domestic interior itself. Despite her father's attempt to screen it off with a posture of gaiety, the "ugliness" of the place shows through: to Kate it was "positive and palpable"(26). What she perceives as palpable in the room on Chirk Street is the silent message communicated by the décor when it acquires a "grotesque visibility" for her

(30), when it becomes, as Alice Munro would say, an open secret. Later, after having returned to her rooms in her Aunt's sumptuous Lancaster Gate home, Kate reflects on the "rudimentary readings" (35) of the world she has made from two very different locations: her own "charming quarters" (35), and her father's less than charming Chirk Street lodgings. When thus reflecting, she sees "as she had never seen before how material things spoke to her" (35). She becomes newly conscious of her skill at interpreting what is later in the novel referred to as "the language of the house" (62).[5]

❖

Poets have long been sensitive to the communicative power of material culture objects, from Homer's description of Achilles's shield, to Shakespeare's Othello alluding to the magical powers instilled in the handkerchief his wife has lost, to Keats's famous meditation on a Grecian urn. To date, however, most literary critics who have expressly incorporated a material culture approach in their readings of texts have focussed on nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century American and European fiction. The reason for the increased critical attention to material culture in the literature of this period, when writers such as Henry James began to represent people representing themselves through things, probably relates to the concomitant development of what we now recognize as consumer culture in this period.

A recent example of the use of material culture as a critical approach in literary studies is Janell Watson's analysis of bibelots in selected realist

novels of Flaubert and Zola, titled "Assimilating Mobility: Material Culture in the Novel During the Age of Proto-Consumption." Watson identifies in the works of these writers "a paradox fundamental to the material culture of the nineteenth-century novel: a complex aesthetic and moral resistance to material objects accompanies elaborate descriptions of great quantities of them" (144). Such an ambivalence certainly also accompanies James's description of Kate Croy's encounter with the world of things. We shall find a similar aesthetic complex at work in Diane Schoemperlen's fiction, and to a lesser extent, in Barfoot's. Brian Rigby, also working on nineteenth-century French literature, senses the same ambivalence in the work of Balzac, in which "bourgeois acquisitiveness and decadent excess hasten the process of the wearing out of the self" (98). Here, Rigby finds, material culture objects are endowed with a sense of agency, are compared to people, and are even seen to define them: "[t]hings testify to human creativity; they constitute personal identity and confer social distinction. But things, like human beings, are also locked in the eternal cycle of creation and destruction" (97).

A number of American literature critics, though not explicitly taking a material culture approach, have nevertheless trained their gazes on representations of houses and material domestic experience. For example, in their article "Living Patterns in Antebellum Rural America as Depicted by Nineteenth-Century Women Writers," Jean Gordon and Jan McArthur comb through the fictional works of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Marion Harland

to arrive at a better understanding of the "living patterns in rural New England and the upper South as portrayed by women writers with a firsthand experience of the things they described" (177). In a different study, Hilton Anderson argues that "[h]ouses and their descriptions in *The Great Gatsby* serve as symbols of the various socio-economic classes; but they also characterize individuals and reveal their values, ideals and dreams" (117).

Working with more recent literary texts, Frank W. Shelton, writing on Anne Tyler, notes that her work will often "center in one way or another on domestic life, and often she uses the very images of domestic entrapment and enclosure Gilbert and Gubar and others see as elements of a particularly female literary tradition" (40). Shelton finds that in Tyler's fiction, "houses function in the largest sense as physical and spiritual correlatives of people, for the space an individual chooses or is forced to inhabit in a meaningful way defines that individual" (45). Paula Geyh, in her article on Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, meditates on "the ways in which feminine subjectivity both constitutes itself and is constituted through or in opposition to the space of the 'house' or the 'home'" (104). She argues that Robinson's novel "explores the centrality of the space of the house in the construction of feminine subjectivity and attempts to imagine a new *transient* subjectivity which is located in a place outside of all patriarchal structures" (104). Geyh's reading voices a theme that is prevalent in quite a lot of writing on domestic material culture in literature: attachment to

domestic objects is frequently represented as implicated in the range of social mobility their owners enjoy (see Compton; Shelton; Watson; Zimmerman).

By far the most ambitious and substantial work on houses in American literature is Marilyn R. Chandler's *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction.* Chandler explores how American writers from Thoreau to Toni Morrison "have appropriated houses as structural, psychological, metaphysical, and literary metaphors, constructing complex analogies between house and psyche, house and family structure, house and social environment, house and text" (3).

Within the past five years, a growing number of doctoral dissertations have appeared in which American literary texts are analysed specifically from a material culture standpoint. Working on American literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Lori Merish shows how the emergence of the genre of domestic realism was closely aligned with a contemporary ideology that promoted and reinforced feminine consumer practices. Rosanne Welker investigates the ways in which nineteenth-century discussions that related architecture and morality were played out in the works of writers such as Frances Hodgson Burnett and Edgar Allen Poe. Exploring the links between sexuality and consumerism in English and American novels of the turn of the century is the subject of Ariel Balter. And Bridget Heneghan, focussing on the turn of the nineteenth century, studies the trend for white-coloured goods in the period, including the way

the trend related to contemporary discourses about race, and the way it was articulated in literary texts of the era (see Balter; Heneghan; Merish; Welker).

To date I have found no studies, short or extended, of material culture in Canadian literature that identify themselves as such (which is to say that my own is likely the first), though there have been a number of article-length studies attending to the representations of houses, domestic spaces, and/or domesticity in Canadian literature. Two early critical studies involving houses in Canadian fiction are Susan Zimmerman's discussion of the houses in Dorothy Livesay's poetry, and Robert Lecker's treatment of the rooms represented in Anne Hébert's *Kamouraska*, which he reads as an expressionistic projection of the protagonist's consciousness (Zimmerman; Lecker, "The Rooms")

Susan Jackel has more recently surveyed representations of houses in prairie fiction from Nellie McClung to Margaret Laurence, finding that in the works she reads, "the significance of the word 'house' begins from a straight-forward reference to the physical structure which provides shelter, and by association extends to the money needed to build and support it, and develops into the broader concept of a family establishment, a continuing bloodline which inherits both material and cultural acquisitions" (46). In a similar vein, D. M. R. Bentley takes his reader on a tour through Canada's important older houses, both real and literary, periodically stopping along the way to meditate on our affection for them, and the

political significance of conserving both older gems and present monstrosities intact for future generations.[6]

A signal text for the present study has of course been Diane Schoemperlen's 1979 article, "The Role of the House in Canadian Fiction," which surveys fictional representations of mostly twentieth-century houses. Schoemperlen comments on houses depicted in Hugh MacLennan's *Two Solitudes*, Gabrielle Roy's *The Tin Flute*, Sinclair Ross's *As for Me and My House*, Margaret Laurence's *The Stone Angel*, and Alice Munro's "The Shining Houses," among others. Her interest in houses is also reflected in her own work, which is rich in details about domestic life and the objects associated with it. I will deal with this essay, and with Schoemperlen's fiction, more extensively in chapter four.

There have been several more recent studies of houses and domestic spaces in Canadian literature as well. Karen Grandy has examined the persistence of the cult of domesticity in recent commonwealth fiction, both in Joan Barfoot's *Dancing in the Dark*, and Australian author Helen Garner's *The Children's Bach*. With respect to the former, she points to "the possible thematic and political significance of clean sheets or dirty dishes" (77). Marlene Goldman considers, in her reading of gender construction in Alice Munro's short story "Boys and Girls," the "division and control of space" that occurs both at the fox farm and inside the farm house depicted in that story (62). And most recently, Anne Compton offers a reading, inspired by Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space*, of nineteenth-century domestic spaces in

Jane Urquhart's *Changing Heaven* and *The Whirlpool.* Compton notes the way in which Urquhart's fiction "invites attention to the house: in her fiction characters' dreaming and remembering occur in well defined interior spaces" (10).

❖

My own particular focus is on fictional representations of contemporary domestic spaces, on home interiors and the objects used to decorate and furnish those spaces. Just as there are differences in the kinds of objects and spaces in each of the novels and stories to be considered, so are there differences in my approach to each writer's representations of material culture. In each case I have had to cater my analysis to the specific inventory of objects each text offers; not every one of them comments on a chair, a window, and a dish, or even on broad categories like containers. The flexibility of this approach might be said to mimic the way we relate to material culture in our own lives. Every day, our encounters with material culture are varied and complex. Before the day has gotten well under way, we have encountered and responded to many forms of material culture, each form calling for a different, culturally determined and situationally-attuned response.

Jules David Prown's distinction between "hard" and "soft" material culture analysis is useful here. Prown distinguishes two basic approaches to material culture analysis, emphasizing that neither is superior to the other. Hard material culturists have a curatorial disposition; they typically "gather

and order information" ("Material/Culture" 21-22). Their work concentrates on identifying, authenticating, and describing the material components of artifacts, focussing "on the reality of the object itself, its material, configuration, articulation all the way down to the molecular level, color, and texture." By contrast, soft material culturists have a more hermeneutic disposition; they "tend to range more widely away from the material facts of the artifacts they study" chiefly tracking the "underlying cultural beliefs" associated with those artifacts. I find Prown's analogy between the work of the soft material culturist and the practice of literary critics especially relevant to the present study, especially when we juxtapose it with Munro's metaphor of the open secret: "Soft material culture analysis, like the explication of poetry, is the process of bringing these half-hidden, metaphorical aspects of the language of forms to the surface by articulating them, making that which is felt explicit" (23).

One might say that the approach I take in this dissertation is more "soft" than "hard"—and yet clearly it is neither, for I am not concerned with analyzing artifacts *per se*, but rather I am concerned with fictional representations of material culture artifacts and spaces, or "written material culture," to modify Roland Barthes's term. I thus employ what architectural historian and material culture expert Annmarie Adams has called an "impure method." As Adams pointed out in a meeting I had with her when I had just begun my research on this project, such methods are sometimes the most fruitful. The combination of literary and material

culture approaches is unusual only in the discipline of literary studies, and is becoming less so even there. Those whose specialization is the study of material culture outside of literature themselves tend to look to textual sources in order to enrich their understanding of the material artifact in question. This is an especially informative approach when the material culture under investigation has been made, used, adapted, and so forth, by women.[8]

If representations of contemporary domestic material culture are largely ignored in critical discussions of contemporary Canadian fiction, if the contemporary interior in its manifold fictional incarnations remains unexamined, just what prevents critics from talking about it? The main factor is the radical transparency of contemporary domestic interiors in the first place. The customary treatment of domestic interiors as background effectively screens them from deeper notice and examination of their cultural meanings. Kevin Melchionne's comments in "Living in Glass Houses: Domesticity, Interior Decoration and Environmental Aesthetics" are germane here. As Melchionne puts it, the domestic interior typically "recedes into the background," subordinated to "the practices of everyday life," a phrase borrowed from Michel de Certeau (191).

Material culture from the past is generally more noticeable than material culture of one's own time. The domestic interior assumes a transparency when it does not assert itself as pure style, or when it does not assert itself as "period" décor. This is in part because it is human tendency

to see as transparent that which does not assert itself as pure or exaggerated style. As Susan Stewart points out, a Victorian chair is more likely than a modern one to be a signifier of "chairness" in the dollhouse (119). That is to say, the domestic interior's conventional transparency owes something to its contemporaneity with the perceiver.

The relative scarcity of critical discussion addressed to the material culture represented in contemporary fiction is also, I believe, in part attributable to a professional preference for the abstract, a preference which literary studies shares with other disciplines. Prown chalks this up to the fact that "the history of Western Civilization has been a narrative of the progressive mastery of mind over matter. As a result, we have been inculcated with a mode of hierarchical ordering in the way in which we evaluate human activities and experiences, privileging that which is cerebral and abstract over that which is manual and material" ("Material/Culture" 19).

Historian Marshal Fishwick commented in 1978 on the disinclination of historians to examine material evidence as a supplement to textual evidence, observing that such practice is characteristic of those trained in the profession: "Word-people simply don't know how to handle images and icons. Historians, for better or worse, have decided to put all their bluechips on words" (9). As material culture scholar Karal Ann Marling pointed out in a recent conference panel on the cultural logic of the Martha Stewart phenomenon, sponsored by the material culture caucus of

the American Studies Association, "the world of things, especially those things not made for profit, is still deemed inferior to the world of words, especially by those in our profession." In addition, Canadian poet and author Deborah Keahey has noted the "institutional pressures" to formulate "sweeping theories and 'grand narratives'" (158). Her methodological response to this pressure is "microanalysis," which she suggests "may offer a point of resistance to the dominant movement to generalize: theory tries to 'contain' fiction but fails, as literature maintains its specificity and resists formulaic politicization" (159).

I too have employed what might be called microanalysis in my study of fiction by Barfoot and Schoemperlen, and most intensively, in my reading of a specific piece of furniture depicted in Quednau's novel. This analytical practice, like the flexibility of focus I mentioned earlier, is appropriate and perhaps even requisite to an approach that interfaces literary and material culture methodologies. As I have already indicated, it is a political, specifically a feminist, strategy to "argue the stubborn argument of the particular" (as Wallace calls it), especially when "detail and particularity" have been negatively connected with the category of "the feminine," and dismissed as "distracting" (Gordon "Intimacy and Objects" 243)."

Threads of Connection

Now it's things that connect us.
They are social beings after all,
leading complex, cosmopolitan lives.

— Bronwen Wallace, "Things" (96)

I have suggested that, as a study, material culture is a meshwork of approaches. Now I would like to trace a few threads of connection, weaving a loose meshwork of biographical, historical, literary, and cultural contexts, in which the selected texts by Joan Barfoot Marion Quednau, and Diane Schoemperlen may be apprehended.

Barfoot (b. 1946), Quednau (b. 1952), and Schoemperlen (b. 1954) are of the same generation, "baby boomers" born in the decade following World War II. They were all born and educated in Ontario: Barfoot was born and raised in Owen Sound, and attended the University of Western Ontario; Quednau grew up in a Toronto neighbourhood along the Humber River, and attended the University of Toronto; and Schoemperlen was born in Thunder Bay, and attended Lakehead University. All of the fiction that will be considered in the individual chapters devoted to each author's work was published between 1978 and 1998. Barfoot's and Quednau's novels are set in Ontario, as is much of Schoemperlen's fiction. My point is that their fiction emerges from, and refers to, a common regional location.

The work of all three writers has achieved a measure of critical success: both Barfoot and Quednau won the W. H. Smith/Books in Canada First Novel Award for *Abra* (1978) and *The Butterfly Chair* (1987),

respectively, while Schoemperlen's *In the Language of Love: A Novel in 100 Chapters* (1994) was shortlisted for the same award. The latter's most recent short story collection, *Forms of Devotion* (1998), won a Governor General's Award last year. It is not, however, the critical success of their writing that brings them together here, but rather their mutual attention in their fiction to "the ordinary lives of women—women specifically," to use Barfoot's phrase, and their shared preoccupation with the material accoutrements of those ordinary lives (qtd. in Stamp 21). All of the texts to be considered in the following chapters focus on the domestic lives of female protagonists, and feature concentrated representations of domestic material culture.

If English-Canadian fiction from 1940-60 "begins to show an increasing awareness of the fact that Canada was rapidly being transformed into a modern industrial nation" (Keith 820), from 1960 to the present it reflects an even greater awareness of Canada as a consumer culture. The appearance of Margaret Atwood's novel *The Edible Woman* in 1969 (it was written in 1965) was a signal moment in the development of a literature attuned to the effects of conspicuous consumption. One might also say (*pace* Atwood) that this novel casts an oblique light on second-wave feminism's ambivalent attitude toward the kind of consumption associated with advanced capitalism. This ambivalent attitude is perceptible in Barfoot's and Schoemperlen's fiction, as I suggest in Chapters 2 and 4.

It is perhaps less a case of coincidence than of cross-cultural synchrony that Atwood's book was written the same year Georges Perec

published his novel *Les Choses, une histoire des années soixante,* in France, ushering in a school of writing dubbed *chosisme.* Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton point to Perec's novel and the literary movement it was considered to have launched as influential antecedents to their own sociological study of the significance of domestic "things" in contemporary North American life, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self*. The sociologists provide a succinct account of the concerns of this literary school:

> The goal [. . .] was to portray human life mainly in terms of the characters' acquisition, use, and disposal of objects, and not in terms of an inner stream of consciousness or of a sequence of actions and events. Thus the reader learned, exclusively from the things he owned and from what he did with them, what a hero valued, whom he loved, and what his thoughts and actions were. (xi)

The literary movement *chosisme* preceded and possibly even precipitated some of the critical texts to join in the stentorian conversation about material things in the 1960s. Roland Barthes's *Système de la mode* and Jean Baudrillard's *Le Système des objets* were published within three years of Perec's novel, in 1967 and 1968, respectively. Baudrillard in fact quotes Perec's novel at length as part of a discussion on objects' signifying capacities "in the realm of consumption" (*System of Objects* 202). And as I have already pointed out, the material culture movement itself also develops during this

period. "The material cultural movement of today," according to folklorist historian Henry Glassie, is "largely a product of the 1960s" (261). Certainly it drew some of its energy from the general current of interest in the object world that was then coursing through numerous academic disciplines and sparking various cultural productions. Quednau and Schoemperlen were adolescents, and Barfoot a young woman in the 1960s, their formative years coinciding with an international ground swell of interest in *things*.

At this point I would like to pull in other lines of connection, these ones from the poems and poetics of Bronwen Wallace. But then I have already done precisely that, in quoting portions of Wallace's poems as epigraphs to sections of this dissertation. Wallace was a Kingston, Ontario poet of the 1980s (she died in '89), whose writing inscribes an acute awareness of things, everyday things, domestic things, as material culture. Wallace and Schoemperlen became friends shortly after the latter moved to Kingston in the autumn of 1986. The publication of Wallace's 1987 collection of narrative poems, *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace*, coincided with that of Marion Quednau's *The Butterfly Chair*. Her poetic style, crystallized in *The Stubborn Particulars of Grace*, is characterized by a conversational, over-the-kitchen-table quality of voice, and an anthropologist's attention to everyday objects and situations. "Things," for example, expresses the idea that humans are as much products of the things that they make, own, and love as they are producers, buyers, users and

destroyers of such objects. It also insists on the power of domestic things to define and record our existence:

> all the things we make
>
> to nourish the body and its life,
>
> whatever takes its purpose
>
> from our limitations
>
> and seeks to bless them
>
> even in small ways.

That is our history here (96)

Wallace's poetry participates in the same ongoing conversation about the meaning of things that became so animated in the 1960s. Her particular contribution is in having brought that conversation around (to) the kitchen table, to the particulars of working class domestic life.

✥

In the end it took Augusta four and a half sessions to finish her snow house. She had remembered to leave a space for the doorway and had entered and exited several times. [. . .] *Augusta had thought to create a west-facing window. It was always going to be afternoon in her house so the light was always going to be perfect. She enlarged the window as much as possible.* [. . .] *Then, in the last half hour of perfect light, she rolled several large balls of snow through her door and constructed one white arm chair.*

—Jane Urquhart, *The Underpainter* (121-22)

I think it is significant that these women wrote their novels and stories at a time when home renovations, especially the do-it-yourself variety, were undertaken by Canadian home owners at an unprecedented rate. In his book *The Canadian Home: From Cave to Electronic Cocoon*, Marc Denhez calls the wave of refurbishment activity a "social revolution," and traces its beginning to the founding of the Heritage Canada Foundation in 1973 (174-75).

That same year, one might also recall, extensive renovations were undertaken at a certain Ottawa residence, renovations that, ironically, flew in the face of heritage and tradition. Prime Minister and Margaret Trudeau altered the structure and changed the decoration of many rooms at 24 Sussex Drive, even dismantling the Canadiana Room that had been painstakingly assembled, over the course of two years, by Mrs. Pearson, in honour of Canada's centennial (McTeer 58, 60). The changes in structure and decoration that the Trudeaus made to 24 Sussex Drive, especially Margaret Trudeau's conversion of the second floor sitting room "with its traditional Victorian look" (McTeer 32) into a more personal haven decorated in an informal contemporary style, captured the public's attention—and, I would suggest, not solely on account of the considerable cost that such renovations represented to the taxpayers (see fig. 1, page 45). This room, which her predecessors had used to perform tasks traditionally associated with their role as the wife of the Prime Minister, came to be known as Margaret Trudeau's "freedom room."[10] It had been "modernized in an attempt to create a quiet corner where she could relax" (McTeer 53), to withdraw from the demands of public life and service, or to seek tranquility in a comfortable space of her own making, depending on how one looks at it.

The Canadian public took notice of this change at 24 Sussex Drive because it signaled or reflected a change in attitudes that would also affect the rest of the nation's residences. Margaret Trudeau's "freedom room"

became a symbol of the change in women's roles and expectations stemming from feminism's re-emergence in Canada.[11] In the "freedom room" was materialized the possibility of women refashioning ideas about their traditional roles or even gaining freedom from them entirely, as Mrs. Trudeau so notoriously did, just six years after her days as a "flower child" ended and her days of picking flower arrangements commenced. Barfoot's Abra Phillips describes her own retreat to her cabin in the country as "not so much an escape from [. . .] as an escape to something" (89). Her own freedom room? I do not claim a *direct* correlation between the historical reality of Margaret Trudeau's construction of a "freedom room" (and subsequent flight to something beyond even that), and the co-emergence of a number of novels and stories which depict women's "going off into the woods to be by themselves" (Atwood 107).[12] However, this historical context is worth considering when we read Barfoot's, Quednau's and Schoemperlen's fiction.

By 1982, Denhez points out, the "largest development of the era" was "almost unnoticed—the rediscovery of Canada's older houses along with an overwhelming urge to renovate them" (173). "Overall renovation spending in Canada, in the residential sector, passed new construction in mid-1981" (175). In 1982 "Canadians did up to 85 percent of their own painting, weather-stripping, landscaping, and replacement of light fixtures. Furthermore, Ontarians [. . .] also did 53 percent of their own kitchen work and 64 percent of their own bathroom work" (175). Refurbishment was a

buzzword in the 1980s. I recall, for example, that, in 1984, my Brampton high school urban studies class took a field trip to Toronto's Cabbagetown and Beaches districts to see first-hand the refurbishment projects of the "white painters," the nickname first given to the young urban professionals who moved into houses in those older districts and suddenly gentrified them with as little as "a coat of paint and some modest renovations" (Denhez 173).

Women were, and remain, very active in home renovation and improvement projects. So Annmarie Adams and Pieter Sijpkes find in their study, "Wartime Housing and Architectural Change, 1942-1992," which draws its evidence both from interviews with case-study families in a Québec suburb and from scrutiny of their homes. Their observation that women are prime movers in domestic refurbishment endeavours, they point out, "is scantily documented in the literature on Canadian architecture, although it certainly has been acknowledged by the advertising industry for years. A large number of house renovations are initiated, undertaken, and/or supervised by women" (109). I want to suggest that there is a connection between the refurbishment movement, especially women's active role in it, and the preponderance of renovation and house-work projects in the novels and stories of these three women. The "social revolution" that Denhez identifies is clearly, and sometimes ambivalently, reflected in these writers' texts.

Barfoot's Abra Phillips and Quednau's Else Rainer each go to live alone in run-down cabins that need to be refit. Abra single-handedly accomplishes the work that needs done, whereas, for reasons beyond her control, Else has to abandon her handy-woman's dream. Many of Schoemperlen's characters are building new houses or making improvements to old ones. For example, Schoemperlen's story "Count Your Blessings" features a couple, William and Grace, who, "like many of their friends, bought a large old house and began to spend all their time and money renovating and redecorating. They did most of the work themselves, as was the custom in their circle" (178).

In fact, the entire first half of this "fairy tale" is concerned with relating the details of the renovation work, down to the before-and-after shots (of sorts) of "their home improvement achievements" (179). This part of the story is entirely familiar to me as an Ontarian with a background similar to Schoemperlen's, where before-and-after photographs of home renovation projects are circulated among family and friends. Refurbishment—and Schoemperlen uses that word explicitly—is only half of this (scary) fairy story; disheartenment—and I use that word literally—is the other half. Because she cannot achieve a kind of graceful living, because she is not content with practicing the "art of domesticity," Grace has her heart cut out.[13] Her condition is common enough—Betty Friedan gave it a name: the feminine mystique. Grace's fate is a more gruesome variation of the one suffered by the protagonist of Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The

Yellow Wallpaper," which seems to be Schoemperlen's way of saying that, as far as women's relationship to the home is concerned, little has changed; ambivalence continues to be a common pattern.

Nevertheless, the refurbishment and redecorating trends continue to gain momentum in North America, witness the phenomenal success of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, which joined the New York Stock Exchange as an initial public offering on October 18, 1999. That month's issue of *Canadian House and Home* announces "The Return of Wallpaper," and captures (in the pithy way shelter magazine copy can) the ambivalence even an ordinary domestic object can engender: "In the world of decorating, there are those who love wallpaper, those who don't, and the rest of us—who are afraid of it" (Lanthier 119). One of the goals of this dissertation is to track such patterns in female characters' relationships with domestic material culture, from butterfly chairs to wallpaper.

Figure 1: Margaret Trudeau's "freedom room," 24 Sussex Drive, as pictured in Maureen McTeer's *Residences: Homes of Canada's Leaders* (56).

notes to chapter one

1 The phrase has in fact been used for the title of a book written for children of alcoholics. See Hastings and Typpo.

2 Matthew Johnson succinctly summarizes a few of the reasons why people generally tend not to take conscious notice of, let alone discuss, the ways in which social meaning is communicated through domestic architecture, what he calls the "dovetailing of domestic architecture and social meaning": "In the first place, few people recognize such patterning at an overt level: it works in implicit ways, being overtly rationalized as 'normal' or 'natural'." When we formulate or manipulate the "impressions" communicated by objects arranged in domestic spaces, he notes, "we do so at the level of the implicit, the unspoken or rarely spoken, and the 'taken for granted'" (viii).

3 I have borrowed the phrase "magnet of meaning" from the subtitle of an exhibition on material culture at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, which ran from April 18-August 5, 1997. See Aaron Betsky et al., *Icons: Magnets of Meaning*, the publication based on the exhibition.

4 "James's awareness of rooms, of houses, and of what they tell us about their inhabitants, is a critical common-place," writes Michiel Heyns, citing Charles R. Anderson's study, *Person, Place, and Thing in Henry James's Novels* as an example (117).

5 For a more extended reading of this aspect of the novel, see Michiel Heyns's article, in which he argues that the "culture James has chosen to represent in his novel produces value in terms of a language of material objects" (134-35).

6 Another work dealing with both real and fictional houses, though this time in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British novels, is Philippa Tristram's *Living Space in Fact and Fiction.* "From the beginning the house and the novel are interconnected," writes Tristram, "for the eighteenth century, which saw the rise of the novel, was also the great age of the English house" (2). Annmarie Adams, in her review of the book, defends Tristram's project with a pertinent question: "Why is a house described by Jane Austen or a city seen through the eyes of Charles Dickens a less valuable perception of contemporary domestic and urban space than one drawn by Mies van der Rohe or Frank Lloyd Wright?" See her "Rooms with a View: Domestic Architecture and Anglo-American Fiction" (61).

7 Barthes's phrase is "written clothing" (23-28).

8 See for example Adams' and Peter Gossage's article, "Chez Fadette: Girlhood, Family, and Private Space in Late-Nineteenth-Century Saint-Hyacinthe." Theirs is an interdisciplinary study combining methods of the histories of domestic space and domestic life. Their

two central arguments develop from examinations of the extant childhood house of nineteenth-century Québec journalist Henriette Dessaulles and other textual sources related to that structure (census data, deeds, etc.), as well as one especially rich textual source: the young Dessaulles's personal diary, in which she recorded observations about family dynamics while she was a resident in the home. Their methodology, they reveal, "has also been inspired by the recent interpretation by literary critics of the 'architecture' designed by prominent American women novelists," evincing that there is useful cross-talk between disciplines on the subject of domestic material culture (633).

9 See Beverly Gordon's essay, "Intimacy and Objects: A Proxemic Analysis of Gender-Based Response to the Material World," the critical framework of which is based on the work of anthropologist Edward T. Hall. "Proxemics considers subtle levels of cultural conditioning and response and brings them forward into conscious awareness," asserts Gordon. One might hear in that statement an echo of my comments on the nature of the open secret. Gordon concludes that "[t]he proxemic framework can be used to supplement and build on more traditional forms of analysis and is a useful tool for even seemingly distant subjects such as the meaning of objects and material culture" (250).

10 Mrs. Pearson and Mrs. Diefenbaker each used the room as a working sitting-room. Without the aid of a social secretary, Mrs. Diefenbaker "spent every morning there answering by hand as many as fifty letters" (McTeer 54).

11 In referring to feminism's "re-emergence" in Canada, I wish to acknowledge two things: the existence here of a first-wave feminism, for example the early twentieth-century suffrage movement lead by such activists as Nellie McClung; and Margaret Atwood's observation that, in the years following World War II, there was no feminist movement to speak of in Canada, at least not one that she was aware of. When she wrote *The Edible Woman* in 1965, she has insisted, "there wasn't a feminist movement. There had been, but there wasn't at that time, and it didn't really get going, till '68 or '69 in the States and in Canada later than that" (Kaminski 27).

12 Atwood perceptively comments upon the vogue of "women-in-the-wilderness books" in *Strange Things*, her series of lectures on the Canadian North. She mentions her own novel, *Surfacing* (which predates the "freedom room" by a year), Marian Engel's *Bear*, Aritha Van Herk's *The Tent Peg*, Susan Swan's *Last of the Golden Girls*, and Joan Barfoot's *Abra*. To this list I add Ethel Wilson's *Swamp Angel*, a foundational text in this tradition, Quednau's *The Butterfly Chair*, and Jane Urquhart's story "John's Cottage" in *Storm Glass*. One might also consider Schoemperlen's story "Five Small Rooms: A Murder Mystery" as participating in the tradition, although the story's protagonist escapes to a wilderness of small rooms, rather than to the wilderness as it is conventionally understood.

13 I discuss Kevin Melchionne's notion of the "art of domesticity" in Chapter 4.

Wallpaper

There are things in that paper that nobody knows but me, or ever will.
— Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper* (22)

Let me put it this way. I knew every detail of the rooms I lived in; the cracked paint around the windows, the stains on the carpets, that bit in the corner where the wallpaper was beginning to peel.
— Jane Urquhart, "John's Cottage" (102)

While most of my friends were festively hanging toilet-paper carnations and crêpe-paper garlands in our high-school gymnasium, decorating for the formals that punctuate the senior year, I was feverishly hanging wallpaper at home, single-handedly redecorating our misfit of a house. My mother had given me *carte blanche* to give the walls a make-over, or more accurately, a make-*under*. Room by room, beginning with my own, I slam danced with those sad, wall-flower walls. With flourish and with fury, I stripped away royal blue faux-velvet and silver foil panels in the living room; giant white, green and orange daisies in the kitchen; and whole landscapes of withering lilacs in the bathroom, all of which had made their debut fifteen years earlier, during the reconstruction following our four-alarm house fire.

On one of the newly white walls of my bedroom I put up paper which was itself predominantly white and featured small, brightly-coloured birds

flying in a uniform pattern against the pristine idea of sky. For the living room my taste was even more restrained. The creamy paper chosen to offset the new *café au lait* paint in that room had no pattern to speak of, just texture, like hand-loomed linen under a magnifying glass. To my mother's request for "something cheery and bright" in the kitchen, I responded with an organic, grassy pattern in neutral tones, upon which I hung two grass fans, my notion of whimsy. For the bathroom I chose a demure white paper delicately embossed with tight-fisted little sweetheart roses.

I understood then, though solely on the level of the implicit, the power of wallpaper to convey messages about the values of the individual or individuals who select and display it. But like many who believe that they choose one style, colour, or pattern over another simply because they like it, I would have been hard put to articulate the messages I wished to convey via wall coverings. Or perhaps I would have been hard put to verbalize those messages precisely because I had *repressed* them, and could only use material culture to express what I could not (or would rather not) say. Now I can surmise that my replacement of colourful, conspicuous wallpaper patterns with discrete and, for the most part, neutral colours and patterns was tantamount to declaring myself a member of the middle class. This much would be consistent with Baudrillard's observations, in *The System of Objects*, that the traditional bourgeois interior tends to "reduce" colour to "discrete 'tints' and 'shades,'" and that this attenuation of colour is related to specifically bourgeois values: "whatever registers zero on the colour scale [...]

is correspondingly paradigmatic of dignity, repression, and moral standing" (31). Ironically, my wallpaper application as a hallmark of the middle class was itself in effect neutralized by the presence of other clashing bits of material culture, most notably our stacked televisions (one of them broken) in the living room, clearly broadcasting the message *working class.*

2 • Possessions and Dispossession in Fiction by Joan Barfoot

Some women marry houses.
— Anne Sexton, "Housewife" (77)

Life's messy. Clean it up.
— Bissell vacuum cleaner advertising slogan

Finding the Right Pattern

I had occasion to reflect upon my own past "paperwork" while reading Joan Barfoot's first two novels, in which women protagonists use wallpaper, along with other material culture objects, to express and contest values. *Abra* (1978) and *Dancing in the Dark* (1982) tell the stories of women who ultimately reject their houses, the spaces they associate with selflessly maintaining their loved ones in domestic comfort. In a feminized version of Thoreauvian self-sufficiency, Abra, the title character of Barfoot's first novel, single-handedly papers the living room of her cabin, choosing a "delicate, feathery, old-fashioned" (114) pattern which reflects both her new connectedness to nature and her refusal of the bourgeois "burden of appearances" (103). Hanging the paper solo is a challenge for Abra. It forces her to accept imperfection, a quality that she feels was not permitted

in the "dream house" she maintained for her family and then felt compelled to abandon (56).

In *Dancing in the Dark* wallpaper is even more prominent. Indeed, it is in the foreground, so to speak, when protagonist Edna Cormick murders her husband Harry. An acquaintance informs Edna that Harry is having an affair. Without questioning the reliability of this information, Edna stares for twelve hours at her living room wallpaper, and with such great intensity that it is difficult to ascertain whether she holds it in her gaze or it holds her. During this time of challenge to her beliefs and values, Edna holds fast to her wallpaper with her gaze as though it were "a kind of ballast" (McCracken 124) without which, as she puts it, "There would be no holding me" (174).

The spectre of writer and feminist lecturer Charlotte Perkins Gilman plainly hangs (or should I say "creeps"?) in the background of Barfoot's literary wallpaper treatments. In *Dancing in the Dark*, especially, allusions to Gilman's most celebrated story are subtle but unmistakable. "The Yellow Wallpaper" is the disturbing account of one woman's confinement for the ostensible purpose of recovery from nervous illness; the real purpose, the woman herself suspects, is to thwart her capacity for creative thought and expression. It is a narrative based on Gilman's own experience of depression and patriarchically-devised "cures." The protagonist in Gilman's story is vexed to distraction by the "sprawling" organic patterns in the paper covering the walls of the room where she is obliged to rest (13). She is

convinced that she sees a trapped woman "always creeping" in the background of the wallpaper pattern, mirroring her own confinement (30). Traces of Gilman's wallpaper are discernible in protagonist Edna Cormick's description of her childhood home, where "wallpaper had light colours but heavy designs, great green flowers and ferns slammed onto white so that it was a wonder they stayed up; so cumbersome one might expect to get up one morning and find a heap of paper greenery tumbled on the floor" (31). Like the protagonist of Gilman's story, Edna finds that the wallpaper contributes to an oppressive atmosphere, one that, as she puts it, "was damp and heavy and sucked away my courage and any words I might have had. I was inclined to creep about" (31). She opts for a much simpler pattern of paper for the living room wall of her suburban home: "Gold-flecked white. Elegant, I thought, for just one wall" (11).

Like Abra, Edna speaks of or uses wallpaper in ways that suggest her rejection of certain values and her appreciation of others. One notes, for instance, the marked difference in her attitudes toward the wallpaper in the working class home where she was raised and that in middle class home where she kept up appearances. She aims to demonstrate "judgment and taste" in her wallpaper selection for her suburban living room (11). In this, as in all matters, she strictly avoids "garishness and foolishness" (24). She approaches the question of the wallpaper's appropriateness to its setting as a moral question: "In my home I did not make mistakes, and he would have been surprised, no doubt, if the wallpaper had not been right" (11). Edna

insists that ideas about the "proper pattern of a life" are "absorbed" (25), very much the way ideas about the appropriateness of a wallpaper pattern are. Her intuition about the way cultural patterns are received through material forms, expressed in her linkage of wallpaper and life patterns, is seconded by the research of material culture scholars: "Communications transmitted through artifacts may operate below the level of consciousness, but they are clearly received and internalized," writes Cheryl Robertson (84; see also McCracken *Culture and Consumption* 133).

A hundred years before Barfoot created Abra Phillips and Edna Cormick, an American, Mrs. M. E. W. Sherwood surmised that there was a link between marital discord and home décor: "Indiana divorce laws may be perhaps directly traced to some frightful inharmoniousness in wall-paper," she wrote (qtd. in Robertson 84). Sherwood's claim is only partly facetious. It also acknowledges the power of domestic furnishings to alienate their users by communicating messages which threaten rather than reflect their values. Interestingly, Sherwood imagines, it is only men who are "irritated" by wallpaper or "soothed" by an "Eastlake bookcase," while women have an uncomplicated relationship to these things. Writing from a feminist perspective in 1978, Barfoot demonstrates in *Abra* that it is not the wallpaper *per se* that is, to use Sherwood's word, "inharmonious." Rather it is the messages it requires one "live with" that either harmonize or clash with (feminist, bourgeois, or) other values which one embraces—what (problematically but poetically) might be called, with a nod to feminist,

bourgeois poet Anne Sexton, the values of one's "self's self where it lives" (36).

The Politics of Purchasing Power

For an instant, in the vestibule, they dreamed of what it would look like when they came home, when they had recovered everything they had lost—a dream of the peace and rest provided by the language of loved objects which serve as bridges to communication, as masks that protect against the hostile nakedness in which they had been living for so many days.
—José Donoso, *Green Atom Number Five* (125)

In the chapter "The Evocative Power of Things: Consumer Goods and the Preservation of Hopes and Ideals" in his book *Culture and Consumption* (1990), Grant McCracken develops the argument that one reason we purchase consumer goods is because they serve as bridges to "displaced meaning," to the imaginary location where we store the hopes and ideals that are incompatible with the present conditions of our experience. The "displaced meaning strategy" is, McCracken argues, particularly effective for those suffering "dispossessed statuses of all kinds," for it allows them to store their hopes and ideals away so that they are not threatened by the disappointing realities of their present circumstances (109). According to McCracken, a crisis normally occurs when the consumer purchases too many of the consumer goods that stand for the bridge to displaced meaning, when the bridge is essentially complete: "When a 'bridge' is purchased, the owner has begun to run the risk of putting the displaced meaning to empirical test" (112). "The individuals

and groups who give up their displaced meaning are promptly moved either to consuming despair or fierce rebellion," McCracken maintains (109).

As useful as McCracken's theory is, it has at its centre two related assumptions that need to be questioned: 1) that the consumer has his or her own purchasing power, and 2) that the consumer purchases goods that stand for his or her own displaced meaning. When an individual spends another's money, as for example in the case of a housewife who obtains money from her husband (directly or from their joint account) to buy new bedding, the buyer must take into consideration the needs and tastes of the one who made the money available, the one who, in the scenario I've just supplied, is implicitly co-purchaser, whether or not he takes an active role in picking out the bedding. Individual purchasing power is particularly important for women, because only when a woman is free to spend money purchasing consumer goods completely of her own choosing—when there is no implicit co-purchaser, in other words—can she purchase consumer goods that are bridges to her own displaced meaning and not that of her spouse or of the group to which she belongs as wife and perhaps mother. As retail anthropologist Paco Underhill unequivocally puts it, "a man goes to the grocery store spending his money. A woman goes and spends the family's money" ("The Art and Science of Shopping")[1].

In this section I trace the implications of purchasing power as it relates to the pursuit of personal ideals for two women characters in novels by Joan Barfoot, *Abra* and *Dancing in the Dark*. It is not only, as McCracken

suggests, buying too many of the consumer goods associated with a set of ideals that can lead to rebellion or "consuming despair"; these novels show that purchasing goods as bridges to someone else's hopes and ideals can also bring about this sort of reaction. I argue that the rebellion that Barfoot's women characters undertake is political, and more specifically, feminist. For each it involves a reaction against the notion that her own ideals are represented in the consumer goods she and her husband have amassed together. Both women characters question and ultimately reject buying into lifestyles that both shelter them and introduce them to "the paradox that women don't keep house as much as houses keep women" (Heller 229).

In *Abra*'s Abra Phillips and *Dancing in the Dark*'s Edna McCormick Barfoot has created characters who are textbook cases, each of them a "damning indictment of the feminine mystique" (Friedan 10). Both characters are homemakers who ultimately find their work at home to be unsatisfying. They become aware of a need to have something beyond it which is uniquely their own. Initially, the displaced meaning strategy has powerful appeal to these women characters. Both of them do eventually experience crises brought on by close scrutiny of the displaced meaning accessed through the purchase of consumer goods. However, because these consumer goods—houses, furniture, automobiles, vacations, even clothes—all had an implicit co-purchaser, what Abra and Edna come to realize is that they were not purchasing bridges to their own displaced

meaning, but to someone else's. Ironically, then, the consumer goods that these women characters initially invest in exacerbate their dispossessed status, and remove them further from their hopes and ideals.

At this point I want to emphasize that my identification of the stances assumed by Barfoot's characters vis-à-vis notions of domesticity, self-fashioning, personal autonomy, investment and consumption, is not an indictment of these stances. I acknowledge, along with Jane Darke, that "the home is central" to the lives of a whole range of women, and "that the care of the home and family may be a source of job satisfaction as well as resentment," generally speaking (28). This ambivalence concerning the care of the home, and the consumption and creative practices related to it, is reflected to varying degrees in the work of each of the authors considered in my dissertation. Darke is unequivocal on one matter in particular, and I second her assertion: "It is facile and anti-feminist to dismiss feelings of pride and pleasure in the home as evidence of false consciousness. Neither should we dismiss the feelings of frustration, lack of purpose or captivity in the home voiced by some women" (26). That said, Barfoot brings these more negative, troubled and troubling stances into focus through her characters' encounters with, and attitudes toward, domestic material culture. I will discuss such encounters and attitudes first in the context of consumption in the novels.

In *Abra*, Barfoot provides a particularly fascinating example of the relevance of purchasing power to the access of displaced meaning because

Abra participates in two types of consumption. Before she leaves her husband, children and home, she is co-purchaser, investing in consumer goods that point to displaced meaning her husband determines. After she leaves, taking with her fifty thousand dollars, money she had inherited and set aside, never once dipping into, she becomes a purchaser in her own right, able to buy goods related to her own displaced meaning. When the money she spends is her own, she feels herself free to purchase goods that reflect her individuality and autonomy, or as she puts it, her desire "to *be* something on my own" (67). She had apprehended the importance of this goal when she was a housewife and mother who found herself unable to act independently, and was virtually immobilized in her empty house while her husband was at work and her children were at school, completely apathetic about her life. Her description of her dilemma sounds very much like classic depression:

> I would drink my coffee and smoke my cigarettes and wonder when I should stand up, and when I stood, what should I do, which direction should I turn, which room should I go to, and I would have another coffee and try to decide. Everything seemed very bright, and at the same time hazy. I was alert to sounds, smells, and everything was unreal, as if I were not a part of it; or as if I were only that, a part of it like a couch or a lamp. (67)

The way in which she feels like a piece of the furniture indicates her disenchantment with the dream life her husband had envisioned for them early on in their marriage. To "mark the end of poverty" that defined the period when she worked to put Stephen through school, they buy new furniture for the house (15). "And for a while I felt a little free," Abra admits. However, these purchases give her only fleeting gratification, gratification that lasts only as long as the novelty of rearranging the furniture in her leisure time. When he senses Abra's growing malaise, Stephen supplies another consumer dream, a new set of ideals, he hopes Abra will share:

> His idea was to 'settle down' as he put it, as if we weren't already as settled as it was possible to be. We would buy the 'dream house' that would give us plenty of space and privacy and we would get a cleaning lady and I would not be so tired and everything would be the way he had always wanted it to be. It sounded wonderful; it gave me enough hope to keep going. (56)

Just as McCracken suggests is normally the case in consumer societies, for Abra, there seems to be an intimate connection between consumer goods and hope (116). "Displaced meaning helps us to resist the pessimistic conclusions that unhappy personal or collective affairs threaten to force upon us," McCracken argues. "It allows us to suppose that while things may not presently conform to ideal expectations, there is a time or a place in

which they do. The displacement of meaning allows us to take heart, to sustain hope" (116). The problem for Abra is that, at the time, she doesn't realize fully that it is Stephen's and not her own ideals that she is buying into, although the observation that "everything would be the way *he* had always wanted it to be" provides a subtle clue to the reader that this awareness exists at some level.

In her article "The Role of the House in Canadian Fiction," Diane Schoemperlen suggests that the house "assumes a dual role in the question of identity: it may indicate the annihilation as well as the assertion of identity" (20). Abra's first house threatens to annihilate her identity, while her second permits an assertion of it. In retrospect, Abra seems aware of the politics involved in buying the suburban "dream" house. "We were buying a setting for a career play," she says: Stephen's (56). "[G]oods can help the individual contemplate the possession of an emotional condition, a social circumstance, even an entire style of life, by somehow concretizing these things in themselves" (McCracken 110). This is certainly what the house means for Stephen; it will help him complete his vision of himself as a man on his way up the corporate ladder. While Abra and Stephen's ostensible dream house indicates the assertion of his identity as a successful stock broker, it has the opposite effect on Abra's sense of her own identity. Living in it she can only identify herself in the negative; she is not something on her own, but someone peripheral to others' lives. It is significant, therefore, that she admits that, although she did not dislike the

house, "It just was not a home, and no mater what we did, it never became one to me. It was always 'the house'" (56). That she does not have a more personal attachment to the house suggests that she has disinvested it of her ideals of what a home should be. She has, in fact, put those ideals into cold storage, where they stay, until she reads an ad in the paper one morning that ignites her confidence once again in the power of consumer goods to reflect her ideals.

The ad is for some property and an isolated hunting cabin for sale. Abra calls, goes to see, and after some hard deliberation, buys the house without Stephen's knowledge. This is Abra's "fierce rebellion." She uses her inheritance money, which, not insignificantly, I think, comes from her grandmother, "an odd, secluded old woman, the family thought" (40). The money is passed from woman to woman, as is the legacy of seeking solitude. Things change dramatically for Abra then. Part of what makes the purchase momentous is that it will take such a large chunk of the limited money Abra has. McCracken would argue that the fact that the object "does not admit of ready purchase" (116) is partly what makes it meaningful as a portion of the bridge to displaced meaning. The bridge to meaning is, in most cases, "as inaccessible as the meaning itself" (116). Just as it was important for Stephen to feel like the house he purchased was a reflection of his success after much hard work, it is important for Abra to feel this about her house. She could not feel that way about the house that she considered merely a setting for Stephen's career play.

Another aspect of McCracken's theory is played out in *Abra*, but with a difference. His theory is that a large purchase is usually followed by other, smaller purchases. "The motivation for the exceptional purchase is usually anticipatory. It arrives as a 'front runner.' The good is purchased in anticipation of the eventual purchase of a much larger package of goods, attitudes, and circumstances of which it is a piece" (111). This is what keeps a consumer society going, people feeling like there is always something more they need to buy to get to the place they've envisioned—and this figurative place is where their ideals are lodged. Abra does make other purchases; she needs a new freezer, furniture, dishes, and other things to make the cabin functional. She has grown "accustomed to comfort" (19), and is intent on making her new home comfortable according to her own standards. For her this means paint and wallpaper, Salvation Army furniture, which she refinishes and upholsters herself, and, notably, an old oil lamp. The oil lamp lends a certain atmosphere that she finds appealing, and she associates it with intimacy, cocooning on a weathery night. Abra does not conform to McCracken's model of consumer activity in her conviction that she has purchased enough, that she has, to use McCracken's terms, purchased her bridge to displaced meaning. She does this *without* experiencing a crisis brought on by holding those ideals up to scrutiny and having them fall short.

Abra regains confidence in purchasing goods once two of her realizations coalesce: she realizes her power to purchase (in very real dollars

and cents terms) and she realizes that she too has ideals, quite different from her husband's. Recall that Abra wanted to be something on her own. Well, she literally arranges for this by moving away on her own to a place where the nearest neighbours are a car drive away. It is there that she develops into an expert gardener and, of all things, an artist who works for her pleasure alone. (While living in Stephen's house she never touched the garden, and she had been utterly bewildered by his idea that she seek a job in an art gallery to fill her time.) Unlike McCracken's typical purchaser, which I suggest is gendered male, Abra purchases her bridge and suffers no threat to her ideals. Could it be that this is because having ideals of her own is itself a novelty for her? Could it be that she is pleased with her purchases because what she has really purchased is herself? Or could it be that the consumer practice of further displacing ideals onto consumer goods not yet possessed is itself related to the politics of masculine desire, an ever available opportunity to play out the scenario summed up in the phrase *vini vidi vici* (I came, I saw, I conquered). I have not yet resolved these issues for myself. Taking the actions of another of Barfoot's women characters into consideration only brings these questions into greater relief.

In *Dancing in the Dark*, Edna McCormick only glimpses her own ideals when it is too late to pursue them, and this is what makes it a more pessimistic novel than *Abra*. Like Abra, Edna participates in two types of consumption, but her time as purchaser-in-her-own-right lasts only as long as it takes to meet and "snag" Harry Cormick, another university student,

her future husband. Before they are married, and a phase of Edna's life begins in which she will not purchase goods as bridges to her own ideals but to what she thinks are Harry's, she does show signs of envisioning her own set of ideals. She attempts to fulfill them much later, however pathetically, while in the mental hospital, where she is confined for having murdered Harry. The difference between the two sets of conflicting ideals and the objects associated with them points up the disparity between Harry's ideals, which Edna pursues because they seem to reflect the ideal of safety she has been conditioned to hold dear, and her own, less conventional ideals of womanhood.

While she lives in her "shabby" student apartment, Edna has on the walls two photographs clipped from magazines, images that reflect the ideals she can barely articulate. One is a portrait of a young girl dancing, "whirling, entirely intent on herself, her movements, and her body." The other is "an old woman full of lines and thought." Looking at the young girl, Edna feels "some uplifting about her concentrated joy," while the older woman's face she associates with character, with having suffered but survived (45). She seems to abandon these images when Harry is perplexed by them, and concentrates instead on how to please him. She invests in a few tubes of lipstick and powders, "all [her] assets diving into Harry" (46), because she considers that her life with him should have been a "blue-chip stock" (49). When she is to meet his parents, he helps her to buy the right dress. It was "simple, and a bit expensive," she notes in her journal.

"Another thing I was learning: that simplicity can cost more than the elaborate, and is better in taste," she tells us (54).

This dictum is reflected in their suburban home, where she "approved of the starkness of Rosenthal vases in the dining room and the cool beige woven couch in the living room, the simple silver frame on a mildly modern print of something not quite like what it was" (152). The contrast between this elegantly framed, ambiguous image in her suburban living room, and the rawness of both the images and their presentation on her student apartment wall is telling. Her previous domestic life, like the image she embraces at forty, appears with hindsight to be "something not quite like what it was."

This illusory life is typified by Edna's so called "addiction," her fantasies of dancing, for which the novel is named. Central to Edna's "hidden sweet in the afternoon" (90), her dancing fantasies after house cleaning, is her record collection. The songs, mostly by women artists such as Streisand and Baez, or from musicals such as *Oklahoma* and *South Pacific*, permit her to, as she says, "claim anyone's voice I chose, for my own small neat body" (91). A sour note enters Edna's recollection of her habit when she recalls that Harry "used to say, flipping through the albums, 'Jesus, we have a lot of stuff by women here'" (91). Part of her rebellion is to continue to buy those records to feed her cravings, despite the idea that as co-purchaser she is obligated to buy things Harry will enjoy too.

Edna's obsessive cleaning is a subconscious effort to sustain the patina of newness on the consumer goods she and Harry have purchased, a formidable but unsuccessful attempt to defer the exposure of the ideals they reflect to the possibility of disproof. McCracken argues that, "The possession of an object that has served as a bridge to displaced meaning presents a clear and present danger to the individual's ideals" (112). In Edna's case, the danger is that she will recognize that the ideals she has bought into are not her own after all; she will see that she has deceived herself, that she has wasted twenty years "drudg[ing] like a nun for salvation" (171).

Edna, perhaps deliberately, makes herself vulnerable to suffering the kind of crisis McCracken associates with holding ideals up to scrutiny. She does this by refusing to displace meaning further in consumer goods only coveted, not owned. Thus she leaves herself open to facing the possibility head-on that she has made a bad investment in Harry's dreams. She enters a stalemate of confusion about the role of consumer goods in the pursuit of ideals. On the night of her fortieth birthday, just one day before killing Harry, she reflects on the possessions of which she was co-purchaser. She finds herself feeling locked into them because she cannot envision redecorating her home according to the changing tastes of the magazines she reads. "Things—tastes and rules—seemed to be going backward and forward simultaneously. Very confusing," she thinks (153). She resists, perilously, the kind of consumer activity that could keep her searching after

ideals which are always out of grasp. She falls into "consuming despair," to use McCracken's term. Thus, I venture that it is not so much Harry's infidelity that drives her to commit her murderous act, but the despair associated with the exposure of the ideals she has pursued so vigorously as not her own, and as unsustaining. Indeed, the bad investment has left its mark on her; she feels more dispossessed than ever. Like (and unlike) the vacuum cleaner left upstairs on the day of the murder, she feels totally disengaged: "Unplugged, another loose end in my body is dangling disconnected" (126).

The key moment in Edna's story occurs when, having discovered that her image of comfort and safety was false, she attempts to reconnect with the consumer goods that had previously provided her with a feeling of security. After the phone call that breaks the news of Harry's affair, she sits on the sofa and stares at the wallpaper in her living room. This wallpaper, white with small gold flecks, is the epitome of taste and care, in Edna's view. "In my home I did not make mistakes," she tells us in describing the wallpaper (11). She fixes her gaze on that wallpaper for twelve hours, "without," as she says, "taking my eyes from the gold-flecked whiteness of the wall, that point that rooted, the point without which I might topple, slide, lose balance irrevocably" (12). In fact, it is when Harry comes between her and the wallpaper, and symbolically, between her and the ideal of security she had dedicated herself to co-purchasing with him, that she runs after the knife. The knife, interestingly enough, was a wedding present, the middle-

sized knife in the teak knife rack, a knife Edna had associated with the special care she put in to the preparation of food, delicate things like tomatoes. "Food should be part of a whole, a ceremony of care," she claims at one point (97). That she refers to the murder not as a tragedy, but dismissively as "a simple, ordinary, domestic failure" (148) brings the irony home.

The irony of Barfoot's choice of object reinforces two notions: 1) that ideals are bound up with consumer goods and 2) that individuals, particularly women, should take care to be purchasers in their own right of goods that serve as bridges to displaced ideals. When they are not, they may find, as Edna does, that the bridge is not sturdy enough for them; they will "topple, slide, lose balance."

Significantly, in the hospital, she writes in her journal that she does not want to go back to the old house; "The pillows alone would break my heart," she says (97). Formerly she associated pillows with the comfort of being somebody's wife. Now what she thinks might give her joy is bulldozing the house, and along with it "the lying moments in each kitchen tile and cupboard. Every thread of yellow curtains and each drop of yellow paint [. . .]. Each tap on the sink and each element on the stove, all the chairs and the two plants," all those lies (178). She has forsaken the ideals that she falsely embraced, and only when she has done this, does she fully reinvest in the ideal images from her university days. Now they have melded, the young dancing girl and the old suffering woman, and Edna has

become them: she dances to her broken heart's content down the halls of the hospital.

Abra and Edna both experience "consuming despair" and "fierce rebellion" in response to the patterns of consumption in which they have participated. These painful experiences are related to the exposure of the ideals they have pursued as not their own, but their husbands'—or what they thought were their husbands'. Why these women characters do not experience crises when their own ideals are in danger of being exposed to scrutiny is not entirely clear. I conclude that it is at least partly attributable to a difference in masculinist and feminist ideals and desire. The novels are not indictments of consumerism in general, which, as Rachel Bowlby has noted

> has at various times been identified as the key to female oppression now associated with a false, commodified form of home life, implicitly differentiated from something more authentic that either preceded the present situation or might be available in the future, if women could rid themselves of their subjection to the lures of commodities. (87)

In both books purchases are nevertheless associated with ideals. This for Barfoot is not problematic in itself. Rather, it is the differences in the ideals and the kinds of purchases associated with them that are significant. The rebellions of these characters are realistically feminist, in that that they oppose patterns of consumption which keep women protecting pretty

pictures instead of fashioning and realizing their own sustaining images and ideals.

Cracks in the Garrison, or, A Theme of One's Own

. . . by stressing the relevance of literature for issues of immediate human concern, the advent of feminist criticism has restored the respectability of thematic criticism.
— Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (10)

At the heart of Joan Barfoot's first two novels is a critique of the garrison mentality, an isolationist and protectionist mentality that critic Northrop Frye argued characterizes much Canadian literature. Frye first advanced his ideas about the garrison mentality in his "Conclusion" to the *Literary History of Canada* (1965).[2] There, he relates the concept to the experiences of those inhabiting the forts and military outposts that served to protect trade centres during Canada's period of exploration. A respect for law and order, and a fear, often irrational, of all that was outside the fort's walls, made for tight, often oppressive garrison communities such as those represented in Francis Brooke's *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) and John Richardson's *Wacousta* (1832). While in those early Canadian novels the garrisons are actual, there can be psychological garrisons too. Frye's contemporary example is Westmount, Québec, where a considerable portion of Montréal's anglophones are concentrated. Wherever there is an impulse to keep some things or people in and others out, the garrison mentality can be said to operate. What Frye defines as the real threat to the member of a garrison culture, however, is not the outside or "common

enemy," but rather the imperative that the individual submit to the homogenizing power of the garrison: "The real terror comes when the individual feels himself becoming an individual, pulling away from the group, losing the sense of driving power that the group gives him, aware of a conflict within himself far subtler than the struggle of morality against evil" (101).[3]

It is this terror that Abra Phillips and Edna Cormick experience and confront in drastically different ways. In *Abra*, Barfoot warns against the limiting and identity-erasing forces of the garrison mentality by bringing the idea of the garrison very close to home. It is represented by the title character's suburban home and by the values associated with maintaining suburban middle-class comfort. Barfoot's warning is intensified, and her vision more bleak, in *Dancing in the Dark*, in which Edna Cormick stabs her husband to death after devoting twenty years to keeping their home spotless and cooking gourmet dinners for him. What makes these novels different from other Canadian novels in which the garrison mentality is perceptible is that Barfoot shows the suburban home, which traditionally has been the domain of women, to be a contemporary stronghold of the garrison.[4]

Furthermore, Barfoot shows that women are the individuals most at risk of suffering negative consequences for rejecting the values of middle-class Ontario suburbia's cult of comfort and privacy, because they are primarily responsible for protecting those same values. I want to argue that Barfoot employs furniture and objects of the home, and her female

characters' relationships to these objects, to demonstrate their changing attitudes toward the values of suburban bourgeois culture. A struggle between the values of the group and the desires of the individual is demonstrated in Abra and Edna's view of their homes and the objects in them, notably clocks and mirrors, as well as in their attitudes towards cleaning and home maintenance.

What Edna fears most is the world outside her home, the world of crime and betrayals she sees on television news reports and reads about in the morning paper (19). She considers herself safe in what she refers to as her "bomb shelter of a home" (84), and goes to extreme measures to maintain the safety, comfort, emotional harmony and privacy that she associates with it. The garrison mentality is clearly perceptible in Edna's view of her home as a fortress against imagined enemies: "Outside the walls, of course, where the men went, danger. Wild animals, wild enemies, leaping to claw and kill. But then safe again inside, the letting out of breath, the loosening of tense muscles, the putting up of feet" (6). Edna, a self-described "small-space person" (107), dedicates herself entirely to preserving safety and comfort in her home. The front door is the main symbol of safety. She describes it thus: "Solid door, closing with a clunk, always safe behind such a door, no intruders, no one seeing in" (177). Even the central air conditioning, which requires that the windows be kept shut, "disconnect[s] the house from the world" (173). Similarly, the draperies,

carpeting and furniture contribute to the protective shell of comfort and harmony in the home's interior:

> When we bought that house, I wanted everything to be just right, and so ordered drapes and curtains, men coming to measure and install, hanging them precisely, the exact shades and nuances for each room, bright cheerful yellow for the kitchen, golden for the living room, heavy material shielding rooms from watchers, sheers beneath for filtering out bright light; upstairs in the bedrooms, more matching—blue in the bedroom of Harry and myself, same as the carpet, the walls, a perfect womb. White-shaded lamps on dark wood bedside tables, dark wood bed, dark wood dresser, and all the rest blue. (18)

With her multiple references to matching, measuring and precision in her description of her home's decoration, Edna puts great emphasis on harmony between the various decorative elements. Harmony among elements has an affective function as well as an aesthetic function. Based on the findings of sociologists Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, reported in their chapter on the home as a symbolic environment, we can surmise that Edna's preferred colour scheme of yellow in the kitchen and blue in the bedroom indicates her preoccupation with "emotional harmony" (132). The sociologists deduced, from their many interviews with women on the subject of their homes, that "concern with

emotional harmony manifested itself [. . .] in their reliance on color terms. Over and over women mentioned a 'yellow kitchen' or a 'blue pastel bedroom,' obviously intending to convey a certain mood with that description" (132). The mood is characterized as harmonious, conducive to the congenial interaction of people within the home. Baudrillard's earlier observation that "blue is a sign of calm, yellow optimistic" also finds a material example in Edna's description of her home's décor (31). (In Chapters 3 and 4, I draw attention to Quednau's and Schoemperlen's ironic use of yellow and blue furniture, clothing, and décor, to suggest not only harmony and domestic bliss but also the opposite of these ideals: discord and domestic strife.)

After Edna's illusion of safety is shattered by the news of Harry's affair, she considers in retrospect that Harry must have connived to make a hole in her monument to safety "the great [. . .] shining wall" that she has metaphorically constructed around them (168). And she uses another architectural metaphor to explain her failure to keep threatening forces from penetrating her sanctuary; she attributes this failure to "cracks," which are only perceptible in retrospect, but must have been there all along (20, 86). After the murder, she most fears the lawyers and doctors involved with her case because, as she says, "they wanted me not to be safe any more. They wanted to put me outside, when I'd been so careful and worked so hard to get inside and stay there where I'd be safe" (123). In the hospital, she dearly misses the sense of comfort her home afforded her: "I used to be

so warm, so well-covered and safe. I thought all that padding, all the layers of soft warmth behind the wall, would keep me safe" (169). Pillows are an especially important image of comfort in the novel. Nuzzling them as a teenager, Edna envisioned her future husband and home. From her chair in the mental hospital, where she does not always feel safe, she reflects that a visit to the bedroom, the womb of comfort in her former home, would be even more unsettling: "The pillows alone would break my heart" (97).

The element of decor most clearly associated with Edna's disillusionment in the supreme safety of her home is the white, gold-flecked wallpaper in the living room. It is related in the novel to blindness and insight; the blindness of maintaining illusions, and the insight of recognizing and reacting against them. At first, she views the wallpaper as the epitome of the simple elegance and good taste that people in her and Harry's position are expected to surround themselves with. But after she receives the devastating phone call from the wife of one of Harry's associates alerting her to Harry's affair, Edna sees this familiar wallpaper pattern as the only thing capable of holding her in place, mentally and physically.

Ironically, the structures and domestic objects that Edna once associated with the safety and domestic comfort of her life with Harry—walls, pillows, tasteful wallpaper, and (those emblems of ordinary, middle-class domesticity) the daisy kitchen clock and teak-handled knife—are also the things most associated with the rupture of those values.

For a time Abra, too, upholds the values of the suburban garrison, chief among them safety and privacy. Emphasizing the closed nature of her life with her husband she says, "we became each other's refuge against the outside" (39). Their 'dream house' would provide "space and privacy" above all (56). A hint of dissatisfaction with the vision of domestic bliss slips in, however, when Abra remarks that she and her husband "were buying a setting for a career play," her husband Stephen's (56). Abra begins to lose sight of the vision when she realizes that it cannot accommodate a sense of herself as an individual: "Everything seemed very bright, and everything was unreal, as if I were not a part of it; or as if I were only that, a part of it like a couch or a lamp" (67).

That she desperately wants to find something that will generate in her a sense of personal autonomy and agency reveals her growing disillusionment with middle-class suburbia's tendency to erase difference, especially for women locked behind the doors of their cookie cutter houses. The "sense of displacement" (89) she experiences is most acute when she first visits the small cabin that will become her new home. Attracted by the possibility of a life determined by her own values, desires and tastes, and not those of the group she belongs to as a suburban housewife and mother, she recognizes that conditions in her present life have made her feel dispossessed of her sense of self. Summarizing the difference between what the two homes represented for her, she says of the suburban home, "It was safety, not belonging" that she felt there (104). By contrast, Abra expresses

a definite sense of belonging to her new home. Not only does the cabin belong to her—she buys it with her own money, and emphasizes that it is her place several times—but she belongs to it. "The cabin held me," she remarks the day she moves in (87; 105).

The way Abra furnishes and decorates the cabin represents a dramatic, though incomplete, break with the values of the suburban community that she physically leaves behind. She takes the quest for privacy to the extreme. But she does do away with the stifling separation from nature that characterized her former life. In her new home, she lets the wilderness in, as Jones puts it (8). She grows her own vegetables, chops her own wood and brings it into the house. Whereas Edna has only two plants in her house, more alive, as they are, than she and her husband, Abra has within her new domain "seventy acres, stream and bush" (81) where "weeds and trees" thrive (82). Her attitude is to cultivate and celebrate the natural. She places her bed directly below the window, for example, so that she can see the stars at night and the dawn and the wakening birds in the willow tree when she wakes (21; 107). She chooses blues and greens, colours associated with sky and grass, for the main colours in the cabin (112). And rather than new, pristine furniture, she buys used furniture from the Salvation Army, furniture marked with other people's living. She lets the disorder associated with nature into her cabin by celebrating the "slightly shabby." Envisioning what the rooms will look like when she has finished with them, she says, "I knew they would not be perfect, that some things would be crooked and

others wouldn't fit right, but it was my place and I could have crooked things" (107).

In her other house, as in Edna's, mistakes were not permitted, lines were precise, and "comfortable middle-classness" was represented by "tables suiting chairs, and couches matching" (*Dancing in the Dark* 44). Unlike Edna, for whom anything but gleaming surfaces foretells "chaos, a breaking down, "catastrophe" (86), Abra finds comfort in the rough and natural surfaces of the rustic cabin with its plain "ancient wooden counters and cupboards everywhere" (19). There are no curtains on the window above the sink, so that the landscape, the source of her deepest and newfound joy, is in clear view (19). Yet another example of how Abra lets the wilderness in to her home is her treatment of the Salvation Army furniture: she painstakingly strips off the layers of paint, sands, and then oils, not varnishes, the thirsty wood underneath, and all of this she does outdoors in the sun. Her sense while working that the wood is "clean and breathing, as if it had been smothered for a long time and was now released" and that the wood soaked up the oil she rubbed into it "as if it had been dying of thirst, as if it had been dying for breath" (113) is suggestive also of the liberating and restorative change Abra herself undergoes in this natural environment. When she takes the large table into her kitchen, it is as though she is bringing a living tree into her home, and she too is finally alive. Significantly, Abra considers her transformation of the table—and not, for

example, her bringing of two children into the world—to be "the first perfect thing that [she] had done" (115).

Perhaps the clearest way that Abra brings the outdoors indoors is through her art, drawings and embroideries of birds and insects that she mounts on the walls of the cabin. A far cry from the "starkness of the Rosenthal vases in the dining room" of Edna's house and so different from the "mildly modern print of something not quite what it was" (152), of which Edna approves, Abra's designs are exercises in careful observation, illuminations. These drawings serve more than a decorative purpose; they document her experiences in her new abode, and are the product of an almost mystical communion with nature that she did not, and felt that she could not experience in suburbia, where it was her husband's job to look after the garden and trim the hedges. Of the drawings she says,

> [e]ach one, when I look closely, calls up that same mysterious intensity of concentration, the same sense of being what I see. [. . .] now it is possible to feel the unity with subtleties of colour. I see each of them; I am each of them. What is on the walls is my experience here; they are what happened to me. I know that anyone coming in would not see that, but they were not done for the outside. (145)

Abra's choice of what hangs on her walls and what decorates her home is in stark contrast to Edna's.

The central difference, though, more important even than the artwork, is the absence in Abra's cabin of clocks and mirrors, instruments *par excellence* of ideology. Mark P. Leone calls clocks "the material culture of the ideology of time" (26). Abra recognizes that clocks, as standards for the measure of time, and mirrors, as reflectors of images, place artificial limits on her activities and provide a false and qualified sense of security: "It was an instinct to want to know how I looked; or perhaps I wanted to be able to catch glimpses of myself, just in passing, to reassure myself that I existed. That is what mirrors do; and also, I have decided, what clocks do" (22).

Abra's view of the mirror suggests her intuitive awareness of its dual ideological function in bourgeois and patriarchal culture: as, in Jean Baudrillard's words, "an opulent object which affords the self-indulgent bourgeois individual the opportunity to exercise his privilege—to reproduce his own image and revel in his possessions" (22), and as an instrument which reminds women of their objectification within a culture obsessed with images of women.[5] In the house she inhabits with Stephen, mirrors appear to remind Abra of her presence as an object among objects. Clocks in her suburban home likewise locate and regulate Abra. Noting the most dramatic change in her new life, she says, "I remember now that in the old life, I watched clocks. They told me everything: when to do each thing, waking, cooking, laundering, watching television, reading the newspaper, even having a cigarette. And sleeping. Time was how I counted off my life"

(22-23). By contrast, with the activities that she carries out in and around the cabin in the absence of clocks, she is "fighting time" (112).

Edna, on the other hand, is completely motivated by observing time and manipulating images. Ironically, "her own time" (82) is not leisure time, as one might expect, but is an eleven hour workday cleaning and cooking, preparing for Harry's return. While her obsession with mirrors is reminiscent of the seventeenth-century Dutch fascination with reflections, her obsession with the clock is more sinister, like Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart."

Several times in *Dancing in the Dark*, mirrors are associated with pillows, with comfort. Edna's pride in smudge-free mirrors, cleaned every day, is related to her obsession for flawless images, and in this concern *Dancing in the Dark* recalls Simone de Beauvoir's feminist novel *Les Belles images*. As Harry comes up the driveway each day after work, Edna compulsively checks the mirror to make sure her hair and make up are perfect, and in this act typifies the sort of woman who keeps her man interested, as the homemaking magazines she reads recommends. She admits to "a pleasure in looking at a mirror and seeing undistorted reflection, a pure picture of the room, like a perfect watercolour of a pond" (84). On her fortieth birthday, when she undergoes a small crisis in the form of feeling an almost overwhelming desire not to clean that day, and reflects on the vacuity of her life up to that point, she notes, "I could not quite make out salvation in the unsmudged glass of mirrors" (145). Barfoot's choice of diction here is significant. Edna's view of the power of

mirrors to confirm the perfection of her efforts at home is quasi-religious. She experiences "[t]he passion of mirrors and pillows" (175), that is until "the mirror is shattered, the pillow shredded, the man torn" (181) in her murderous act.

Before the murder, and especially after it, the clock figures as a recurrent image of her emotionally sterile suburban existence. (Significantly, she is literally sterile too, sharing the condition of other unhappy housewives in Canadian literature: Mrs. Bentley in *As for Me and My House*, Maureen Stephens in "Open Secrets," to name just two.) Unlike the freer Abra, who measures her time by the rising and setting of the sun, by her hunger, by the logs added to the woodpile daily, and by the seasons, Edna lives by the clock; her time is measured in minutes and in seconds. Such a conception of time distracts her from making any long-term plans, and this is why she is so startled on her fortieth birthday, wondering where the time went.

In an almost fanatical attempt to keep to a schedule, she keeps a clock in the bathroom to make sure that her afternoon bath doesn't last too long and delay her carrying out her other duties (88). The kitchen clock, "white, shaped like a daisy, with a yellow centre and yellow hands, and the yellow hand that showed the seconds" is one of the more popular designs of the 1960s and 70s—we had one in my own house while I was growing up. It is typical in style, but atypical in its power over its owner. Edna "would see the clock, that white daisy with the yellow centre, yellow hands, moving

minutes to when he would leave" (82), and would know when to begin her ritual cleaning. She would watch the clock when he was late, and judge her day complete when he returned. And, after the murder occurs, she stares at the clock, dazed, watching the seconds tick by, and feels as though her life is over. In the hospital, that kitchen clock clearly becomes a symbol of Edna's rage, as it is the most vivid recollection she has of the moments after the murder.

Edna recognizes near the end of her narrative that she can either continue her obsessive scrutiny of minute but apparently meaningless details in her search for answers, or she "can face the moment and the white and yellow daisy clock" (166). She sums up these two possibilities as "[t]unnelling in or spiralling out," actions that encapsulate the inside/outside dichotomy of the garrison. Clearly, for Edna spiralling out is dangerous. It means reliving the pain, the primordial and uncivilized rage that makes her an enemy of all that 'civilized' suburban culture holds dear. Abra, whose spiralling out consists of falling gravely ill once a year (perhaps she even wills this sickness), articulates the imperative not to tunnel in terms of the blindness/insight opposition: "[F]or all the pain and discomfort, it is important to see things too clearly, to hear things too strongly, to feel things too harshly" (168).

Edna's passion is almost entirely spent in cleaning; it becomes for her a religion and an art. She clearly participates in the "emotionalization of housework," described by Ruth Schwartz Cowan as a pervasive attitude

toward domestic labour which developed in the years following the first World War. (I refer to this concept in the section called "Reflecting Surfaces" in Chapter 4, on Schoemperlen.) In retrospect, Edna views each task as "a kind of ritual abasement, an appeasing of the unknown, threatening gods, a sacrifice like slaughtering goats on alters to fool the gods [. . .], a form of worship and of fear" (89). She is, she says, "a forty-three-year-old woman who has drudged like a nun for salvation" (171). She becomes "a cherisher of lines and patterns" (35), to better maintain the order central to preserving her domain. Her daily routine upstairs in the bedroom and bathroom makes it seem like Edna is a chamber maid in Harry's hotel: she makes sure that there are fresh sheets and fresh soap every day, to give just two examples (84-86). To create their "perfect living room, all shined and cleaned and plumped and neat" (9), she spends hours a day removing every speck and trace of dirt from the outdoors left behind by Harry, who, she seems to consider (however subconsciously) a contaminating force as well.

Lest we dismiss Edna's daily erasure of all traces of her husband—"fingerprints, or marks from his heels if he'd put his feet up" (83); "a hair from one part of his body or another" (85)—as an idiosyncratic character trait, we should recall that this kind of domestic fastidiousness was and still is a common enough neurosis to be exploited by savvy advertising agencies. A full page advertisement on page one of the *New Yorker* in 1946 (the year Barfoot was born) shows a woman who has shot her husband dead

for putting his shod feet up on her "Hope Skillman cotton spreads, designed by Craig" (see fig. 2, page 91). "I had to do it [. . .]. Now get your other foot off that bed," she commands. We might also recall that Edna is an avid reader of magazines, and that this advertisement is just one cultural articulation of a pattern of response to dirt that is codified in Western culture as feminine, unmanly. An avid consumer of print and television media is exposed to a profusion of such messages. Considering that she leaves her vacuum cleaner plugged in upstairs when she murders Harry, Edna would probably also appreciate the irony of the current advertising campaign of the vacuum cleaner manufacturer Bissell: "Life's messy. Clean it up."

All Edna's cleaning is in the interests of safety: "Those [city] walls, impractical in our day, could be recreated, the sense of them, in clean floors and dishes and well-cooked meals and vacuumed carpets, gleaming windows" (6). In her cleaning, she is ever vigilant against potential invasion of the outside world, for she fears that "[s]ome pollution, a taint, will get a grip otherwise" (69). Her attention to cleanliness seems to be the outlet for the thwarted artistic inclinations she had as a young woman; she explains, "I did more than cook and serve, much more. I arranged. I was an artist. I created his home. I sketched each moment of the day with care, so that the portrait of his desires was precise when he arrived" (9). Whereas Abra makes pictures, Edna spends "considerable effort" merely "protecting pictures" (38).

Abra, for her part, is able to minimize her efforts cleaning the interior of her home, and to redirect her energies working outdoors, where she is truly happy, and where her work provides inspiration for her creativity. This is what makes Barfoot's earlier novel more optimistic in the end. Although each protagonist experiences the heightened awareness and transcendence that art can occasion, Abra experiences it while producing art, while Edna, damaged and dispossessed of her faculties as she is the day after her fortieth birthday, experiences pure rage as art. Sadly, she considers murdering Harry her one definitive act. "Much better than cooking the perfect meal, or shining the perfect crystal. I have accomplished something here, I have found the moment," is one of the more sinister admissions in her narrative (180).

Before they commit the definitive acts that effectively burn the bridges to their former lives, Abra and Edna are guided by values that encourage overinvestment in the lives of others, at the expense of pursuing self-fulfillment. Both narratives are troubling, but especially *Dancing in the Dark*, where the sole pursuit of domestic comfort is portrayed as an illness. Abra, for her part, is able to make a radical, though incomplete, break with the attitudes and behaviours that made her feel initially kept by a house; in immersing herself in a challenging, rugged lifestyle close to nature she completely redefines her place in the world and the meaning of her work. She regains a sense of identity and happiness in renouncing the social values of her community, values that she perceives strictly limit her roles to

housewife, mother, and supporter of her husband's career. Yet to accomplish this she finds it necessary to keep herself apart from family and society. This is an aspect of the novel that several reviewers and critics found especially disturbing (Bilan; Bannon; Macpherson; Waddington).

Edna, too, makes a radical break. But her desperate defining act, murdering her husband for his betrayal, provides only limited freedom; she frees herself from her former life, but what she ends up with is hardly enviable. She recounts her story in journals supplied by a nurse at the mental hospital where she has spent three years, silent and without visitors. These women characters' attitudes toward objects of the home are key to understanding the degree to which they successfully work through the terror of recognizing and asserting the sort of individuality that social forces in their communities vigorously suppress.

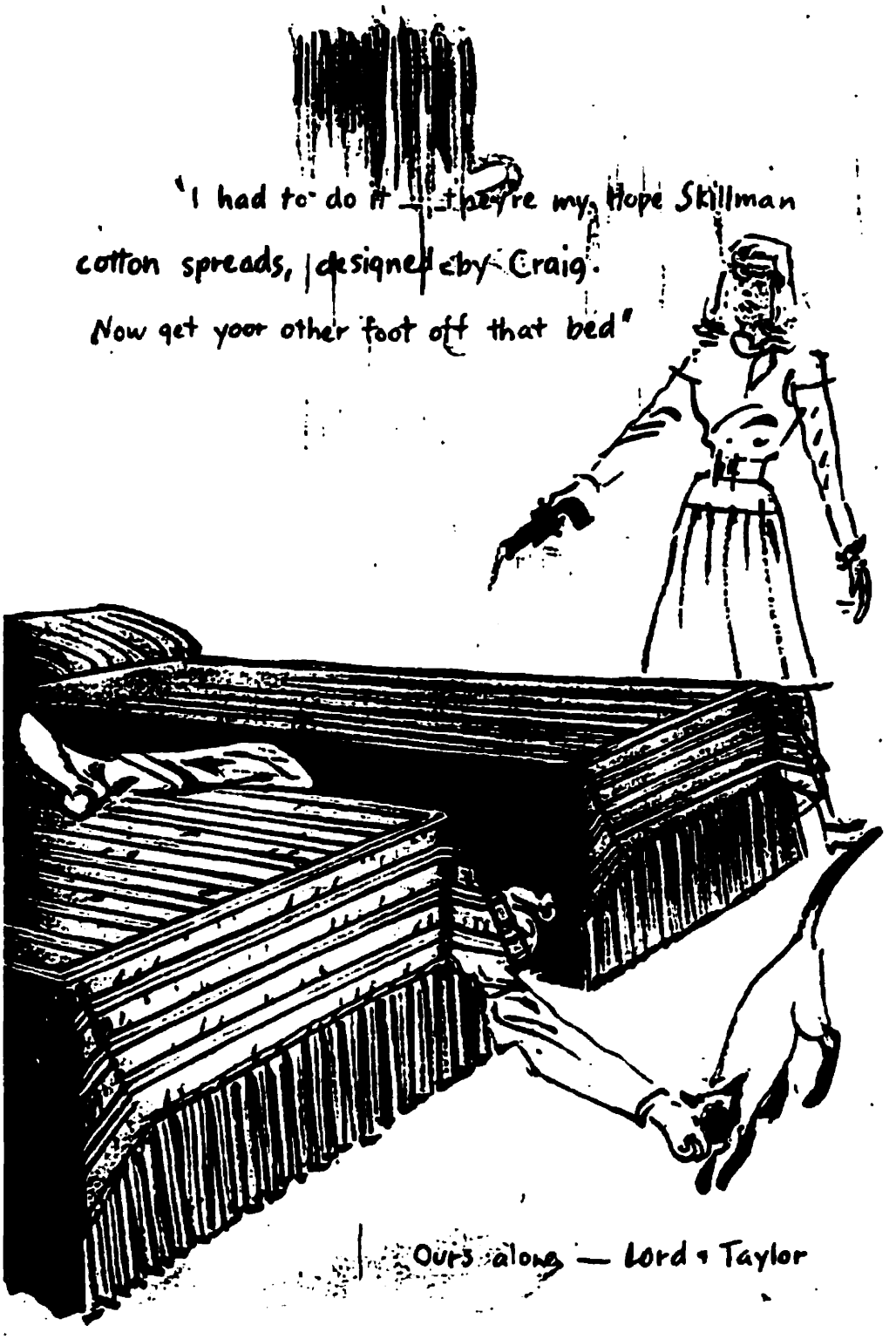

Figure 2. Lord & Taylor advertisement, *New Yorker*, 27 April 1946: 1.

notes to chapter two

1 See Underhill (95-128) for his detailed consideration of gender differences in shopping.

2 D. G. Jones would further develop the theme in *Butterfly on Rock* (1970).

3 For example, the terror associated with drawing on the insights of thematic criticism in a contemporary climate pervaded by politicized literary critical discourse? During the later 1980s thematic criticism of the sort practiced by Frye, D. G. Jones and Margaret Atwood fell out of critical favour in a big way, so I suppose it is out of fashion to discuss texts from the late 1970s and 80s from this perspective. However, the notion that criticism always follows literature and not vice versa is suspect in the case of Canadian literature of this period. There are at least three factors which suggest that the literature of this period may in fact have been a response to the work of critics like the ones I've just mentioned—or at least to the general thematic patterns they identified in what was fast becoming "Canadian Literature." Briefly, these factors are: 1) the massive proliferation, following 1965, of criticism on and teaching of Canadian literature, partly generated by the publication of the first *Literary History of Canada* in that year, a book which, according to T. D. MacLulich,

"gave a definite imprimatur of respectability to the academic study of Canadian writing" (19); 2) the relatively large popularity of the work of Frye, Jones, and especially Atwood; and 3) the pressures undoubtedly felt by the writers of the period to participate, as Robert Lecker puts it in *Making it Real*, in "establishing a mimetic link between writing and nation" (74). As Lecker argues, the Canadian literature produced in this period was part of a homogenizing process that responded to the political necessity of defining the Canadian canon. It should be noted that this specific political-literary situation is itself already described by the thematic terms of the "garrison mentality." That is, the construction and definition of "Canadian Literature" in this period—what it is, what it is not, defining and maintaining its identity with respect to other national literatures—is itself an institutional articulation of Frye's theory. To the extent that this is the case (and I think that it is), I would argue that books written during this era, as Barfoot's were, at least ask to be read and understood in light of the historical and critical climate in which they were produced.

4 Heidi Slettedahl Macpherson, writing on *Gaining Ground*, the British version of *Abra*, sees Barfoot's handling of this topos as a feminist "modification of the garrison mentality," in which what is "originally seen as necessary to protect society from the wilderness, becomes a prison from which characters need to attempt to escape in order to reaffirm their ties to nature and 'selfhood'." See her "From Housewife to Hermit: Fleeing the Feminine Mystique in Joan Barfoot's *Gaining Ground*," especially pp. 94-95.

5 Susan Stewart has commented on the mirror's strange capacity, in our culture obsessed with the cover girl, to reflect the image of the woman as well as the disconnect between the woman herself and her commodified image, which is always "the articulation of another's reading" (125).

Tray

"Parmee parmee," said a maid with a tray, pushing between them.
"What does she mean—'parmee'?" asked Mr. Leaper.
"I think she means 'pardon me'," said Mrs. Gormley. "You were saying when you were in Spain?"
— Ethel Wilson, "A Drink with Adolphus"(71)

One day during my first week of flying we were returning to Chicago from Syracuse with a full load of people, and we were rushed to get everything cleared away before landing. I was almost running down the aisle, dumping the trays into the galley when somehow I got my finger jammed between the two sliding doors of the buffet. I called to my fellow stewardess, [. . .] she just ignored me and kept shoving trays at me. "Just keep emptying those trays", she said frantically, shoving another load at me. I was kneeling on the floor of the buffet, trying with my free hand to empty and stack the trays, and she kept running in and dumping more trays over me—just throwing them in my general direction.
— Paula Kane, *Sex Objects in the Sky: A Personal Account of the Stewardess Rebellion* (45)

While I was working on the chapter that follows, sorting out (*Butterfly Chair* protagonist) Else Rainer's complicated and ambivalent attitudes toward traditional and modern architecture and design, and toward those people and objects in the novel whom she considers representatives of these categories, I happened to purchase a couple of small airline food service trays at my favourite Montreal thrift store.

The beige melamine trays, made for American Airlines in Japan by Noritake, measure 16.5 x 11.8 cm and 12.5 x 8.6 cm, and are 2 cm deep. They probably fit inside a larger tray, and held individual portions of airline food. I could not know the date of manufacture of these trays when I acquired them. However, based on their understated, neutral colour and

clean lines, and a whole series of vague and inexplicable associations my mind made when I looked at them (I flashed on images of impeccable uniforms and scarves tied just so, buffed French manicures, and, absurdly, Lauren Hutton's gap-toothed, artless smile), I thought they must be from the 1970s. The trays' simple design and retro cachet appealed to me. My decision to purchase them also owes something to my growing appreciation for the minimalist design aesthetic, promoted in the mid-1990s in Canada by Club Monaco, and still represented today in Alfred Sung Home shops.

Responding to my request for information, a Noritake employee in Japan informed me that the trays in my possession were in fact made only about ten years ago, in the late 1980s. Other than that, wrote Tamami Sakurai, Noritake can supply no information about this tray. So ended my investigation of the trays' "hard" features, or their physically tangible, measurable, and verifiable aspects, including provenance.

I remained attentive, however, to the network of cultural associations these objects continued to evoke. Part of the story these and other serving trays tell is about class and gender. The tray is a point of contact between the server and the served, or between classes (and in many cases, between ethnic groups). I chose the first epigraph, from a story by Ethel Wilson, for the way it shows the tray to be a material nexus of class and gender interactions, something which becomes particularly evident in the context of the exclusive house party portrayed in "A Drink With Adolphus." Although the maid's words are unintelligible to Mr. Leaper, the object that

she carries nevertheless communicates to all that she is a member of the so-called serving class. While Mrs. Gormley is of the same social class as Mr. Leaper, she nevertheless "serves" as a translator of the maid's words for the haughty Mr. Leaper and as an inwardly reluctant but outwardly enthusiastic facilitator of her highly conventional social interchange with him. She assumes what a friend of mine would call the feminized role of "social lubricant"; she might as well be holding the tray.

My own encounter with my recently purchased American Airlines food service trays has served to highlight that the meanings of objects are not static, but "dynamic," and that, while "material culture makes culture material" (McCracken 130, 131), material culture objects may also bear traces of individuals' appropriations and manipulations of them, and that this, too, contributes to the cultural significance of objects. As James Delle puts it, the "meanings that people place on material culture, and the meanings within a given society that material culture elicits and creates, are often arbitrary and/or elicited at the level of the individual" (35). Along with Delle, I credit the users of objects with creating some of the meanings those objects assume. Consequently, agreeing with Quednau's well-founded critique of the anti-domestic and anti-feminine impulses associated with modern architecture and design in *The Butterfly Chair* (and in the culture it portrays) does not abrogate my current appreciation for modern architecture and design; nor should it, because the meanings I attach to objects in these categories are always doubly-layered, inflected with a degree

of feminist ambivalence about the meanings they originally might have embodied for someone else.

Despite their more recent date of manufacture, the melamine trays recall for me a time when flight attendants were stewardesses ("glorified waitresses" is a term I remember hearing), hired if they satisfied formal height, weight and age restrictions, and lived up to rigid standards of beauty; forced to quit when they turned thirty-two or got married. In her 1974 book, *Sex Objects in the Sky: A Personal Account of the Stewardess Rebellion* (from which I have taken the second epigraph, above), Paula Kane documents her personal and career transformations—from nurse, to sexually harassed and neurotic flight attendant, to activist in the organization Stewardesses For Women's Rights—placing them in the context of the anti-discrimination lawsuits provoked by the culture of exploitation endemic in American airline companies. Kane's description of the tray-clearing incident shows that her company's low regard for its flight attendants' personal safety and dignity filtered down to its employees, affecting their ability to care for passengers and each other. It also demonstrates that tensions between competing sets of values in the workplace are manifested in workers' interactions with objects.

There is another noteworthy dimension to the object-lesson presented by my trays. I indicated, at the opening of this foyer, that I "happened to purchase" these trays, as though noticing them in the cluttered thrift shop on Mont Royal Avenue and deciding to acquire them

were acts entirely unrelated to my intellectual preoccupations at the time of purchase. However, I now recognize that, as material culture objects, these trays tell a story that is, in many ways, a parallel narrative to the one I was concerned with sorting out in *The Butterfly Chair.* Regardless of how chic the material (design) aspects of these trays currently make them; regardless, in other words, of how modern they look, they also bear residual traces of cultural memory, specifically the cultural memory of the traditional exploitation of women as sex objects, typified in "the image of the sexual stewardess" (Kane 104). I am old enough to remember National Airlines' (in)famous "Fly Me—I'm Cheryl" advertising campaign. As a teenager in the 1980s, I regularly watched *Flying High*, a show about "stews," starring Connie Seleca. This is something I only just recalled, (dubious) thanks to these trays.

Placed on a cabinet beside our bathroom sink, the larger of the trays now holds a slim, travel-size tube of toothpaste; the smaller is the perfect spot for tortoise shell hairpins, and, at the end of the day, my watch. Placed on a cabinet beside our bathroom sink, holding these particular objects, ironically, they also refer to the passage of time and the persistence of memory.

3 • The Butterfly Chair

Furniture—and the chair especially—has been used by 20th-century architects and designers as a means of making an aesthetic, social and ideological argument.
— Peter Dormer, *Design Since 1945* (117)

We choose furniture, after all, just as we choose clothes [. . .] *whether fashionable or not. We choose it not primarily for what it does, but for what it says.*
— David Pye (qtd. in Nigel Whiteley, "'Semi-Works of Art': Consumerism, Youth Culture and Chair Design in the 1960s," 119)

The seat in particular is a more complex object than is usually realised.
— Joseph Rykwert, "The Sitting Position–A Question of Method" (237)

Winner of the W. H. Smith/*Books in Canada* First Novel Award for 1987, Marion Quednau's *The Butterfly Chair* engages with theories and styles of design and with the ways in which the material products of human design reflect and mediate human beliefs and behaviour. The novel's key conflicts are embedded in its representations of material artifacts and spaces, beginning with the butterfly chair itself. These conflicts are intensely sexual-political and were writ large in the design debates raging at mid-century in North America. Specifically, the tensions between modernist and traditionalist styles of architecture are figured in the violent tensions between Gerhard Rainer, a domineering and perfectionistic architect who designs in the modern style, and his wife, Charlotte, a former classmate of

his in Germany and subsequently a "traditional" wife, mother, and helpmate to her husband, who uses her as his draftsperson after they immigrate to Canada following World War II. These tensions are also reflected to a lesser degree, and are ultimately resolved somewhat, in the relationship between their daughter, Else, and her architect lover Dean. The novel focuses on Else Rainer as she comes to terms with having witnessed the grisly deaths of her parents on a country road north of Toronto in 1967—a murder-suicide committed by her father after years of abusing his wife.

Throughout the novel, Else investigates meanings built into a number of spaces: her parents' literally divided house, the home "bought for 'investment purposes'" (Quednau 46) that she shares with Dean; the Gothic mental hospital where her father was confined for a short while; her mother's garden; and finally a rustic cabin in Hastings County, Ontario. Domestic and institutional spaces, furniture (especially the Hardoy/butterfly chair of the title), and cognitive spaces, including Gerhard's unbuilt designs, all serve as indicators of cultural conflict over issues of gender and power.[1] While Else may not recognize all the larger meanings at work in the spaces that she investigates, Quednau seems to suggest at different points in the narrative that the contours of Else's personal history trace and participate in larger cultural formations. These suggestions are further encoded in the novel's representations of material culture, in which spaces and objects express, construct, and at times contest conventional gender categories.

In this chapter, I focus on the ways in which the butterfly chair's larger cultural meanings exist alongside more personal meanings attached to it by Else, who makes a point of hauling from place to place one of two such chairs that sat in her mother's garden. In the novel, the butterfly chair is a kind of *sedes belli*, or "seat of conflict," for it literally supports Else as she sorts through various third-party narratives and her own disturbing memories of her family's history. It is the piece of furniture that she associates with her father's attempts to control the family and their domestic environment. She also associates it with her mother's circumscribed attempts to resist that control. Karin Beeler has noted that, as "a construct, the Rainer *family* [. . .] embodies the conflict between the old and the new, the constrained and the free" (42; emphasis added). I take that observation further, arguing that a specific piece of the Rainer family's furniture embodies these and other conflicts, which explains its titular and structural centrality in the novel.

What Else perceives to be each parent's dominant characteristic is embodied in the butterfly chair's material structure: the father's rigid bearing has its correlative in the rigid metal-rod frame, described as resembling "four giant hairpins locked in mortal combat" (Blake and Thompson 73), while the mother's tendency to yield to her husband is expressed in the pliant yellow sling cover. Its striking juxtaposition of angles and curves prompted Joseph Rykwert to call the butterfly chair's structure "a curious indication of intellectual imprecision" (242). But it is not

imprecision so much as opposition that one sees expressed in Else's butterfly chair. Hers speaks of both the future and the past. It is associated with the exercise of authority and the subversion of authority, with containment and submission, with comfort and discomfort, with freedom as well as defiance. It is, ultimately, the material object in which these many conflicts cocoon—and open up when Else carries it up out of the basement after so many years.

The butterfly chair can be read, of course, as a conventional literary symbol. It is expressly linked at one point to Else's attempts to understand her past through the lens of Jungian psychology, a school of thought fundamentally concerned with the study of archetypes and archetypal images.[2] In fact, Carl Jung even appears as a character in an involved dream that Else has while curled up in the very chair she dreams of. In revealing to Jung (a psychoanalyst whose own journey to individuation was mapped in the building of his home) her fantasy of sitting with him in the butterfly chairs, facing her parents' house, she encourages readers' explorations of the house-psyche connection in the novel. That Else and Jung face the house while seated in the butterfly chairs suggests that there is also a chair-psyche connection worth exploring. When one does explore this connection, the following details become significant. In ancient Greek mythology, Cupid's bride, Psyche, is represented with the wings of a butterfly. Her name also meant "soul," and the butterfly associated with the goddess thus became a symbol for the human soul (Mazumder 199).

Jung's appearance in the novel signals Else's need to understand her father's design projects as well as her own motives in homemaking and resistance to homemaking. As a literary symbol, the butterfly is most commonly associated, and rightly so, with the idea of metamorphosis. Else's response to Dean's marriage proposal is to spend an unspecified amount of time sitting in the butterfly chair as if cocooned, reflecting on her family's history, running over her investigations into that history, and sleeping as if conserving her resources for the energy that she will need to end "her love affair with doom and gloom"—Dean's phrase for her obsession with her past (Quednau 179). Her "emergence" is marked by a letter that she writes to her father in which she confronts him directly. She comes to fair and even charitable understandings of the life that he had led, and the one that he had provided her with, symbolically freeing herself from his hold on her. The theme of metamorphosis also appears in the novel's frequent reference to alchemical transformation, another concept associated with Jungian psychology. Significantly, when they appear in Else's dream of Jung, the butterfly chairs are "golden" (103), while elsewhere they are typically referred to as being yellow (57, 115, 123, 194).

It should be clear that, in reading the butterfly chair in terms of conventional literary symbology, we privilege the first term of the phrase "butterfly chair," netting the insect while the chair itself falls through the spaces of the analytical network. We lose sight of the chair as a specific material artifact inscribed with the "values, ideas, attitudes, and

assumptions" of the society that produced and consumed it (Prown 1). When we examine the butterfly chair qua chair—that is, when we examine it as a specific design with a specific history of production and consumption—its meanings in the novel become even more densely layered and radically ambivalent.

The Butterfly Chair in the Gendered Aesthetics of Contemporary Design Debates

The March 1950 issue of *Canadian Homes and Gardens* contains a full-page colour advertisement whose illustrations and text may be read as a kind of shorthand for some of the issues that I am concerned with in this chapter. The ad, for Amtico rubber flooring (see fig. 3, page 129), has at its centre a photograph of a room in which Amtico's flooring is set off by modern furniture by Knoll Associates, including the butterfly chair, reissued by Knoll in 1946. Framing this photograph are two *New Yorker*-style illustrations of a woman reading: in the first she sits up straight in a Windsor armchair, and in the second she reclines in a butterfly lounge chair. The caption "Traditional or Modern?" flanks each illustration, prompting the ad's readers to make the following mental equation: Windsor chair = traditional, butterfly chair = modern.

But what would such an equation have meant to readers of *Canadian Homes and Gardens* in 1950? It would have been as familiar to the educated and consuming public as $E = mc^2$. They would have been hearing and reading all about the heated debates between advocates of traditional and

modern architecture and design since at least the 1930s.[3] If they listened to the radio, read magazines, or shopped at Eaton's, then they would have had an introduction to what seems to have been the most important debate between Canadian architects in the ten years preceding World War II and the twenty years following it: the debate between the so-called traditionalists and the so-called modernists.[4]

Throughout the "battle of the styles," as commentators dubbed it (Blake 187; Scott 159), advocates for each side impugned the design preferences of the other. The rhetoric reflects divisions that existed along gender and class lines. The traditionalists, collectively sounding as genteel as southern belles, called modern architecture "unnatural and unhuman" (Blake 190). They attacked it for its "barrenness and gauntness" (Blake 188) and for its apparent rejection of history ("Contemporary Architecture"; Blomfield and Connell 75, 76). The "exponents of the extreme modern view are decidedly the more aggressive" wrote E. H. Blake in 1931 (187): macho modernists vehemently attacked "the general architecture of the Nation" ("Contemporary Architecture"), especially Victorian Gothic and vernacular architecture, for their "hideous" use of ornamentation (Blake 190), and for being "sentimental," "incoherent," "formless," "dishonest," "hackneyed," and "trite."[5] Each side attacked the other for its perceived excesses. The traditionalists were accused of brooking excessive ornamentation, which, according to one of modern architecture's international spokespersons, Adolf Loos, was evidence of more than bad

bourgeois taste; it was "criminal" and "degenerate" (21, 22). The modernists, in turn, were accused of paring design down excessively; in the years before World War II, some detractors saw traces of fascism in modernist architects' penchant for "almost ultimate eliminations," most visible in examples of the international style or "warehouse cube" school (Blomfield and Connell 78).

In an address reprinted in the *Journal of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada*, the president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, explained the dissent between modernists and traditionalists as another instance of the age-old conflict between the "Thinkers" and the "Feelers." The "Thinkers" are "those who favour the scientific, logical and practical approach to architecture, and the 'Feelers' [are] those who are guided more by their instinctive feelings, emotions and reactions" (159). While the gender bias against the "Feelers" may not be overt in his address, it is unmistakable in the remarks of another authority on style. French decorating expert Émile Cardon delivered a back-handed compliment, insisting on the nonrational, unschooled aspect of women's facility with matters of interior decoration: "woman, no matter how incomplete her artistic education, has an innate feeling for artistic things, and the most fine and delicate taste; she lacks the science of art, but she guesses; she doesn't know, she feels" (qtd. in Tiersten 29).[6]

To choose traditional or modern was to buy into more than rubber flooring, after all. It was to align oneself with a set of values. If you were

partial to the Windsor chair, then the set of values that you took home with you included an appreciation for comfort, history, authenticity, and authority.[7] If the butterfly chair set your heart a-flutter, then you were choosing not only a chair that, to quote the Amtico ad, broke "with tradition in appearance" but also one that, in its incarnation as modern, had an ambivalent relationship to bourgeois notions of comfort, both physical and social.

I say "in its incarnation as modern" because the butterfly chair (which had been around for over half a century in wooden folding versions) took on new meanings when it was "improved" by three Argentinian architects in 1938 and promptly appropriated by the guardians of North American high culture, beginning with Edgar Kaufmann Jr., who, while in charge of industrial design at New York's Museum of Modern Art, "ordered the first two Hardoy chairs ever to enter the United States" (Blake and Thompson 77). The Bonet–Kurchan–Ferrari–Hardoy chair, popularly known as the Hardoy, or the butterfly chair, is the icon of modern chair design par excellence due to its combined aesthetic and popular appeal.[8] It has enjoyed "enormous success [. . .] both in terms of sale and prestige," contributing to its overall high profile (Rykwert 242). It is frequently estimated that no fewer than five million of the chairs were produced and sold. In *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design*, Galen Cranz notes that it "became one of the conventional symbols of modernism" (143). Leafing through issues of the design magazine *Interiors* for 1948 to 1958, I

spotted over a dozen of the chairs in photographs of modern rooms designed by different architects, a pervasiveness that lends credence to industrial designer George Nelson's "story about an architect who was able to get his projects published because he sent his photographer to every site with the same props," among them butterfly chairs (Cranz 143-44; see also Conroy). The butterfly chair also appears in a striking advertisement for a furniture store, Texas Modern (see fig. 4, page 130). It is evident that by 1951, when this ad appeared, the butterfly chair had achieved its status as an icon of modern furniture—one need only read the visual shorthand used in the ad: the bull is to Texas as the butterfly chair is to modern.

The Butterfly Chair and Notions of Comfort and Discomfort

Cultural materializations of the butterfly chair registered not only its tremendous popularity but also people's conception of it as a radically different kind of seating. A remarkable number of these references had one thing in common: the exploitation of women's bodies for the purpose of sexual titillation, humour, or both. The recurrence of these references may have had something to do with the chair's common associations with female anatomy. Even though Eero Saarinen's Womb Chair has the official designation, the butterfly chair might as easily have earned that appellation as another of its many nicknames: *Interiors* called it "obstetrical" ("Year's Work" 95), and Rykwert asserts that the chair's "concave sack [. . .] is very much a womb and offers, if not the physical protection at least the material

semblance of the protecting womb" (239). It was, for example, represented as sexy, glamorous furniture, curvy and alluring enough to be on the set of MGM's movie *Torch Song* (1953), featuring Dorothy Patrick. Images of pinups lounging seductively in this yielding chair were common; Peter Blake and Jane Thompson's article shows a 1954 calendar girl with exposed brassière and stockings, one leg raised above her head (80). The butterfly chair frequently appeared in comic strips and drawings. Canadians flipping through the *Globe and Mail* classifieds for 7 June 1954 would have seen a comic depicting a young woman relaxing with her sister on a patio (see fig. 5, page 131). The contemporary audience would have been taken aback by the woman on the left's sitting posture, one that brazenly disregards the basic rule that mothers taught their daughters in the 1950s about keeping their knees together, particularly when wearing skirts.[9] She tells her sister, "I'll be fair, Sis. You go out with all the fellows who have bright red hair and I'll just date the ones who are blondes or brunettes." Her licentious posture and speech combined create the humour, which leads to uncomfortable laughter. Her unbridled posture, promoted by the butterfly chair, seems to be completely fitting for her "easy" talk.

The chair's image as sexy furniture travelled the gamut from being only mildly to being blatantly misogynistic. Designers of book covers apparently found its low-slung canvas seat serviceable for cradling female corpses. On the cover of one edition of *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine*, readers saw more of it than the woman shot dead while reading in it. But

mystery fans would see more; another provocative cover, this one of a mystery novel by Mary McMullen called *Strangle Hold*, depicted a slain nude woman lying prone across a butterfly chair (Blake and Thompson 77-79).

People found the chair as funny as it was sexy, depending on who was sitting in it (pinup versus "Pops" visiting Junior in his college pad). Blake and Thompson, the foremost experts on the chair's history and life in American popular culture, have noted its comedic appeal, which grew out of its popularity, citing the *Sunday Magazine* of the *New York Times* for December 1954, which published "humorous hints on do-it-yourself Christmas decorations," including "a method of turning your 'Sling Chair' into a fetching candelabrum" (79). The butterfly chair had received much exposure in 1953, when millions of North Americans watched as a very pregnant Lucille Ball tried to get out of one on *I Love Lucy*—an instance when the womb connection became especially apparent (Cranz 144; "Liked Ike"). The elderly and the portly were also frequently portrayed as having trouble getting out of this lounge chair.

Indeed, by some accounts, getting out of a butterfly chair was only slightly more difficult and uncomfortable than sitting in it in the first place. Rykwert identified the "hazards which someone using the chair must meet":

> The chair [. . .] consists of a rigid metal rod frame so bent that it provides four vertical hooks on points for a canvas seat slung between them. This means, of course, that the seat, which is loosely suspended, will mould itself to the thighs and buttocks.

> and that support will not be concentrated, as is thought desirable, on the ischial tuberosities [the bones that you sit on]; also that there will be no lumbar support so that the spinal erectors will never be completely relaxed. The hard edge of the canvas must always press on the under side of the thighs and cause considerable discomfort. What is worse, the fixed form framework and its high protuberances make any changes of position very cumbersome. (236)

One consumer said that it looked like a "medieval torture device," but she and her husband bought it anyway (Conroy). Cranz has this to say about the butterfly chair's ergonomic debility:

> Some people call them comfortable because they invite the sitter to slump and imply that bad posture is not only acceptable but also desirable. Because the chair is basically a sling, the torso is treated like a bag. The thighs and the torso are weighted to drop toward the same centre point, so in adults the internal organs collapse and the hip joints are jammed. This is true no matter how you sit in it. If the sitter rotates and sits on this chair on the diagonal, it at least offers support for the head and the neck. But if you sit on it centered, your head has no support, so you bring it forward and exacerbate the collapse already promoted by the sling structure. (144)

The posture that the chair's design imposes made women who were socially conditioned to keep their knees together appear particularly vulnerable. Evidently, the depth of the sling poses distinct problems for the average woman. "The average woman is 5'4" tall. Very few lounge chairs are made in which this average woman can be comfortable—nearly all chairs are too high and too deep for her," asserts a piece on "contemporary chairs" in *Design Quarterly* in 1951 (3). However sculptural and "big-time modern" the butterfly chair may have been, for the average sitter, especially for the average *female* sitter, it just was not comfortable.[10]

This might partially explain why it is usually pictured empty, qua sculpture, in the pristine rooms of *Interiors*; a chair that, when occupied, draws attention to the sitter as an ungainly body is perhaps most aesthetically pleasing and elegant when it is unoccupied. But here we stumble upon one of the other noteworthy tensions that reside in the butterfly chair as material culture and in Quednau's novel. This is the tension between so-called authentic domesticity and its mere, posed, spectacle. In the novel, this tension is represented in Gerhard's posed family photographs, a subject to which I will return.

The antipathy of a high modernist architecture and design aesthetic toward the realities of domesticity and "bourgeois" concepts such as comfort is well documented. "Today the domestic is returning to a position of cultural prominence, impelling us to look back over the mainstream of modernism in an effort to trace its domestic subcurrents," Christopher Reed

points out in his introduction to *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture* (17). This 1996 collection of essays has as its subject the "anti-domestic imperatives of high modernism" (14). Tom Wolfe's 1981 book *From Bauhaus to Our House* takes stock of "that glass of ice water in the face, that bracing slap across the mouth, that reprimand for the fat on one's bourgeois soul, known as modern architecture" (7). In *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (1987), Witold Rybczynski

> traces the phenomenon of domesticity from a faint presence in the Middle Ages, through a florescence in seventeenth-century Holland that lasted through the nineteenth century, and finally to a crisis at the dawn of the twentieth century when the "distinctly unhomey" International Style aesthetic of what critics called the "cold storage warehouse cube" came to dominate the most prestigious ranks of architecture and design. (Reed 8)

The connection between architecture and furniture was closer than it ever had been when the Hardoy made its debut; some of the most famous modern furniture designs, especially chair designs, were the formal experiments of architects.[11] As industrial designer and architectural critic George Nelson reminded readers in his introduction to the book *Living Spaces*, a showcase of modern rooms, "Interiors exist only in relation to buildings and therefore, wherever architecture goes, interior design has to follow" (5).[12] Likewise, in modern furniture designs, especially those

produced by architects, as the Hardoy was, the issues current in architecture were worked out in small scale. British architect Peter Smithson presses this point home: "It could be said that when we design a chair, we make a society and city in miniature. Certainly this has never been more true than in this century [. . .]. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Miesian city is implicit in the 'Mies' chair" (qtd. in Antonelli 28).[13]

Rykwert maintains the chair's status as an icon of modern design, and its popularity—notwithstanding its "operational failure"—must be attributed to factors other than comfort (242). He suggests psychological factors:

> In an age where the relationship with one's mother is so much discussed (one need only open a psychological text book of any school to see how true that is) a chair of this nature was bound to have a success, particularly among the intellectual public, where this question poses special difficulties. (239)

Rykwert's comments shed light on Quednau's treatment of the butterfly chair in her novel, particularly since a good part of Else's quest involves sorting out her relationship with her mother. It is an interesting detail, then, that Else works for a publisher of college psychology textbooks. The chair's relationship with the past in Quednau's novel turns out to be as complex as its history in the world of design. Now I would like to turn to the particularities of those complex and intersecting histories, and point out a few more correspondences between the meanings attached to the

butterfly chair in late twentieth-century Western culture, and in the fictional family Quednau depicts in her novel.

"Historian of My Infancy": The Butterfly Chair and the Past

Like Else in her travelling sales job, and like the butterfly that it resembles, the chair is nomadic or "migratory." An early foldable and portable version of the chair was used by British officers on colonial military campaigns in North Africa; it was a safari chair for those wealthy enough to go on a safari, a camp chair for trappers and fishers, and at one time the only piece of furniture that circus performers could carry with them, earning it the nickname "circus chair" (Blake and Thompson 74-76). The more popular the butterfly chair became with average consumers, the less popular it became with guardians of high culture (79). The versatile design meant that the chair could often be employed in places where more expensive, upholstered furniture could not. This versatility contributed to its fall from grace. Blake and Thompson trace a familiar trajectory from the chair's heyday as a central component in the modern home's interior to a prolonged retirement as patio furniture: "At first it went into the nursery, to be demolished by the tots. When that failed, it was kicked out into the garden, where the weather might slowly take its toll" (79).

A similar pattern has evidently occurred in Quednau's narrative. Else drags the chair up from the basement to her bedroom, where it is resuscitated from a long dormancy or "banishment" imposed by the man in

her life (Quednau 57). In addition to being physically out-of-the-way, the basement is one of those domestic spaces, like the attic, that is "tied to the temporality of the past" (Stewart 150). By shifting this personally iconic object from the periphery of her domestic situation to its very centre, Else reasserts the centrality of her past to her sense of identity. Not incidentally, in terms of the novel's structure, the section called "The Butterfly Chair" is dead centre. Else uses not words but the chair to articulate most fully her reaction to Dean's marriage proposal and what it has to do with her father. It says (too late, for Dean has already left), "If you really want to live with me, then you're going to have to live with *this* too," meaning what the chair has come to represent. "For Else," we are told, "the fact that the yellow canvas is charred with dirt and that the rusted black frame is showing through the frayed corners is a positive reminder that she is part of a struggle against the ending of things" (57). In her association of the butterfly chair with preserving her family's past, we hear an ironic echo of Wordsworth's wistful lines in his poem addressed "To a Butterfly" (1801):

> Much converse do I find in thee,
> Historian of my infancy!
> Float near me; do not yet depart!
> Dead times revive in thee:
> Thou bring'st, gay creature as thou art!
> A solemn image to my heart,
> My father's family!

As material culture, Else's butterfly chair does function as a historian of her infancy. It is an artifact that effectively speaks of the past when Else herself cannot speak. And the "dead times" that revive in her butterfly chair are Else's memory capsules of her father's family, before the deaths of her parents.

As a modern furniture icon and an object from Else's past, the butterfly chair is "dated." This datedness affects Else and Dean differently: "It gave her some comfort at three in the morning when she had dragged the chair triumphantly from its banishment in the cellar to know that Dean hated it, probably for its strong sentimental value" (57). Their other furnishings fall rather neatly into the categories of modern (Dean) and traditional (Else). He has "suspiciously white Flacetti rugs," and she has recovered a horsehair couch, "found rotting in the back yard," that Dean says "looks like his grandmother's curtains." Through these objects they are "waging their war," we are told. His "cool tubular-steel chairs" are "pitted against her old brass lamps, carried home by hand from the Sally Ann." Dean appreciates the chair aesthetically, though, and is aware of the visual language that 1950s consumers recognized in its design: "The only thing he has ever acknowledged in her love of the butterfly chair is the beautiful shape given it by a designer named Hardoy, and that at the time her father had first brought it home, early in the fifties, it had spoken of the future." Indeed, as I have shown, it was "big-time modern." To Dean, though, it is simply passé. His is a "timeless" aesthetic. He has no interest in the

personal iconographies of objects. Obsessed with the past as she is, Else is critical of this. She is bothered that "Dean has always liked a quick turnover of things so new they could never impart any kind of history. Scarcely even any present tense" (57). For her, Dean's design preferences reflect a hostile attitude toward notions of history; her own painful personal history is not something that she can forget or discard as though it were an outmoded piece of furniture. Or a smashed butterfly. Indeed, just as "[t]he butterfly's meaning, even though smashed," is crucial to the speaker of Margaret Avison's poem "The Butterfly," the butterfly chair's meaning is crucial to Else, precisely because her chair is so battered and its history so full of dark shadows.

Else also perceives a gender bias in Dean's willingness to discard old objects that retain so-called sentimental value. She sees this willingness as symptomatic of a pervasive and persistent negative attitude toward women's domestic experiences and women's values—and toward women themselves when they are treated as objects. Her sense that Dean has a limited view of her as "the bright object of his desires" ("object" being the operative word) leads her to reflect that women throughout history have struggled to retain their values in the face of such hostility (51). In her thoughts, things intangible (though not immaterial) and things material coalesce so that use value and sentimental value are indistinguishable concepts; she imagines that

> she and all the women heading somewhere into the past had been embracing all, clutching everything close to them as though it mattered. They grasped at senseless strains of music, they held onto memories as firmly as they held snow shovels and hot-water faucets. And for this closeness to the surface of things, they were thought foolish, weak-minded, unfaithful. (53)

Else's own experience tells her that women's "closeness to the surface of things" is actually indicative of their attention to the mysteries just underneath even apparently banal domestic surfaces, to the deep caves underneath the kitchen linoleum, to borrow Alice Munro's well-known image.[14] She suspects that a subtle but damaging hatred of women, domesticity, family, and the preservation of memory is bound up with—even drives—the rejection of history that she associates with modern architects, her father, and Dean. Such hostility is indeed reflected in the views of some of the opponents of traditional design that I referred to earlier.

Dean's refusal of history, materialized in his furniture preferences, likewise brings us back to the design debates that I mentioned earlier, for it echoes the disinclination of Canadian modernist architects toward "dating" their designs through the use of ornament. In *The Canadian Home: From Cave to Electronic Cocoon*, Marc Denhez describes this disinclination as expressed in publications of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada (RAIC) and the Central Mortgage and Housing Corporation, now the

Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC). In a RAIC article on the subject of contemporary domestic architecture, C. E. Pratt wrote in 1947 that,

> Prior to the recent war domestic architecture was in a rather sorry state. The architectural styles ran the gamut [. . .]. The three popular styles were Tudor, Cape Cod and Georgian, and the architects who championed these three styles, of course, were famous and enjoyed a very lucrative business. This then, was the situation that confronted the young and enthusiastic architect, aspiring to persuade an unappreciative public to build in a more logical way. (179)

As Denhez explains, this way of building "meant the obliteration of traditional variations" (94). As further encouragement to builders to adopt more modern designs with less ornamentation and decoration, in the decade following World War II (1946–54), the CMHC acted to support only modern designs. "The new institution immediately dictated designs—all of which were variations on the same theme," according to Denhez (94). The CMHC publication *67 Homes for Canadians* recommended the following: "At all costs, avoid applied decoration: you date your house, and from that moment obsolescence becomes effective" (qtd. in Denhez 94).

Dean's preference for the new, the seemingly ahistorical, is thus not only a personal but also a professional disposition. Else, who has spent most of her life living with architects, comes to an awareness of the real

consequences involved in this rejection of history. Her father's violence is at least partly an expression of anguish over the negativity that he finds associated with his own past in his new country. At the age of eight, Else is attacked on the way home from school by a group of older boys because of her German background (118–21). For Gerhard, as for the modernist architect in general, the past with all its attendant baggage is unusable and a hindrance to be avoided.

The Seat of Authority

Rykwert has pointed out the connection between chairs in general and Western notions of authority, and he mentions the butterfly chair as a case in point. He holds the "intellectual public" largely responsible for the butterfly chair's success, maintaining that "It is also this section of the public which is particularly distrustful of any imposed authority whether political or religious and prefers authority reduced to a minimal structure like the cage supports of the Hardoy chair" (239).

In Quednau's novel, the butterfly chair is clearly associated with attitudes toward and responses to authority. One of Else's sharpest memories of her father is his insistence on posing his wife and children in the garden, and in the butterfly chairs kept there, for family photos that he controls, down to the dress that he insists Charlotte wear (123). In this memory, the butterfly chair literally "frames" Charlotte—its winglike extrusions are visible behind her. It also frames, or contains, her in a more

figurative sense, for its colour vividly recalls a dress that she wears the night Gerhard exerts violent control over her in front of their dear friends, Uncle and Lily (90). Because it recalls the yellow butterfly chairs and the forced posing in the garden, this dress appears to be a version of the frame that Gerhard is always trying to assemble around his wife; wearing this dress, she carries the butterfly chair with her; it becomes the ultimate in portability. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, the colour yellow generally is a sign of harmony and optimism. It is used here with considerable irony, then. In this instance, it stands for her misplaced optimism and Gerhard's abusive authority over her.

But Else senses, too, the butterfly chair's ambivalent relationship to authority. In its eternal suggestion of transformation is the possibility of resistance to authority.[15] In the long letter that she writes to her dead father, which forms part 4 of the novel, Else admits that the only sense she got of her mother as an individual with hopes and dreams, as a "tall woman," a "dreaming" woman, was when she stood up after gardening, when, it seems, she wasn't too eagerly trying to please someone else. She continues:

> And when she moved out of those golden chairs, never once using the power of that image, when she moved out of those chairs, always looking back over her shoulder to care for us, to clothe us, to feed us, to keep things in their proper places, she was always drawn back to the centre of that thing our family

became. She was never able to walk farther away from it all than her gardens. Her gardens formed the boundaries. (123)

Here Else associates the butterfly chair with her mother's quiet sort of defiance. In this memory, the chairs are described as "bold" (123), while the woman is cowed by her domineering husband, told how to pose and how to smile for the many photographs that he holds up as evidence of their perfect family life. For Charlotte, there is no metamorphosis from "cocooned" captive to free woman. Although she manages to effect a brief flight from her abuser, when she finally gets settled what happens to her recalls the grim ending of Irving Layton's poem "Butterfly on Rock."[16]

The butterfly chair is at the centre of Else's own acts of defiance—her rescue of the chair from the basement, to name one. The authority that Else defies in this instance is her own partner, Dean, who "loomed as large as a cathedral-sized poster of Lenin in Red Square" (53). Sitting in the chair also seems to fortify her somewhat. Indeed, it is only while she sits in its "protective deep lap" that she can face the more imposing figure of "the German," her father (115, 63). Here the tensions between comfort and discomfort, which the chair embodies on a larger, material and cultural, level, are also played out on a more private and personal level, in Else's imagination. Else addresses Gerhard directly in the letter composed in the chair: "So it seems clear I would be angry when I think of what you did to my mother, to us all. I can hear my voice almost shouting, like a defiant child's, whenever I speak of you, even yet" (139). Interestingly, her

association of the butterfly chair with defiance resonates closely with Orvar Löfgren's reading of the chair in "My Life as a Consumer: Narratives from the World of Goods":

> For the postwar teenage generation there are [. . .] material acquisitions which mark the entry into modern life. Several interviews mention the butterfly or sling chair of the late 1950s as an icon of modern teenage life, with its bold design (plastic-coated steel with a leatherette seat in the bright new colours). It was one piece of furniture that you longed for as a teenager. In Sweden you could order it from the mail-order house "Modern Living": "I remember when I went and bought my first furniture. I remember that butterfly chair, of tubular steel and vinyl. . . You can really feel the smell. That's something I feel was very typical of the fifties." The sling chair fitted nicely with a new kind of body, the loose-limbed American teenage body, and you sat in it in a way that provoked the older generations. As one woman put it, "that chair became a symbol of defiance." (121)

My perusal of 1950s shelter magazines confirms that the butterfly chair was associated with, among other things, "modern teenage life." Frequently, it provided the only seating in rooms designed for teens in that era, hardly an invitation to the older generation to get comfortable there. It was a kind of generational shibboleth, and it was related to balking authority. In

Quednau's novel, this is also the case. Else certainly enlists her mother's chair to help her "provoke," or access, the violent memories of her father, and to occupy a protected yet provocative position from which to quarrel with "the German," who would not tolerate defiance while he lived. By design, it seems, Quednau furnishes the domestic spaces of her novel with an especially meaningful bit of material culture, "a very significant chair," to quote Blake and Thompson, one whose complex cultural associations with authority also underpin her central character's clashes with patriarchal authority. The seat of conflict in this novel could take no more appropriate material form than the butterfly chair.

End of the Line

Else first meets Dean on a train trip, on her way to a "Saskatoon Women's Festival"; the purpose of her trip, she tells him, is to make a presentation about what she calls "women's survival art," and the mere suggestion of such a genre troubles Dean, who "looked a little surprised then. Things were no longer in his control" (36). Else proceeds to describe for him some of the projects that participate in this genre. The projects, "a sculpture made of chicken bones that took up five years and much of a back yard in Winnipeg," and a slide show featuring a woman "who was banished to a lonely vacation without her workaholic husband and who then proceeded to paint their summer cottage in vivid scenes of primitive art," focus on women asserting their right to participate in the creation and

definition of domestic space (36). Else's explanation for the impetus driving these rearrangements comes down to a simple quest for recognition: "these are women nobody sees; that's precisely why they have to pull apart their fences and build statues with crude carpentry and Fisher Price toys intertwined as though nothing else matters. It's the way they hang on to their lives" (37). As Else defines it, women's survival art is typically situated in and associated with issues of control over domestic space. She sees it as a creative response to "inhabiting a world that mostly was a man's bag of tricks" (37).

Charlotte's garden, too, is another instance of women's survival art. Else's fascination with the butterfly chair closely associated with her mother's garden is her own way of continuing to work on her mother's project, by appropriating a material object that in so many ways signifies the intrusion of masculine control into that domestic space. It is the seat of a conflict both personal and cultural, concerned with the allocation of authority along gender lines—in this context, seen in issues of control over the definition and organization of domestic space. The butterfly chair's status as what *Interiors* called "unorthodox" home furniture, and the new way of sitting that it introduced to those agile enough to enjoy it, established its association with freedom and defiance ("Four Bachelor Domiciles" 103). The cultural meanings that it accrued when it was manufactured and sold as a modern chair included a challenge of authority. But in the novel, its association with defiance is somewhat tempered by its simultaneous, though

not exclusive, association with oppressive framing and containment. In its brand-new modern incarnation, the Hardoy design "spoke," in a patriarchal bellow, "of the future." In its battered and scarred state, Else's inherited butterfly chair speaks of the Rainer family's past. And of the era when feminism struggled to emerge in Canada, when women found it necessary to break with tradition and find their wings.

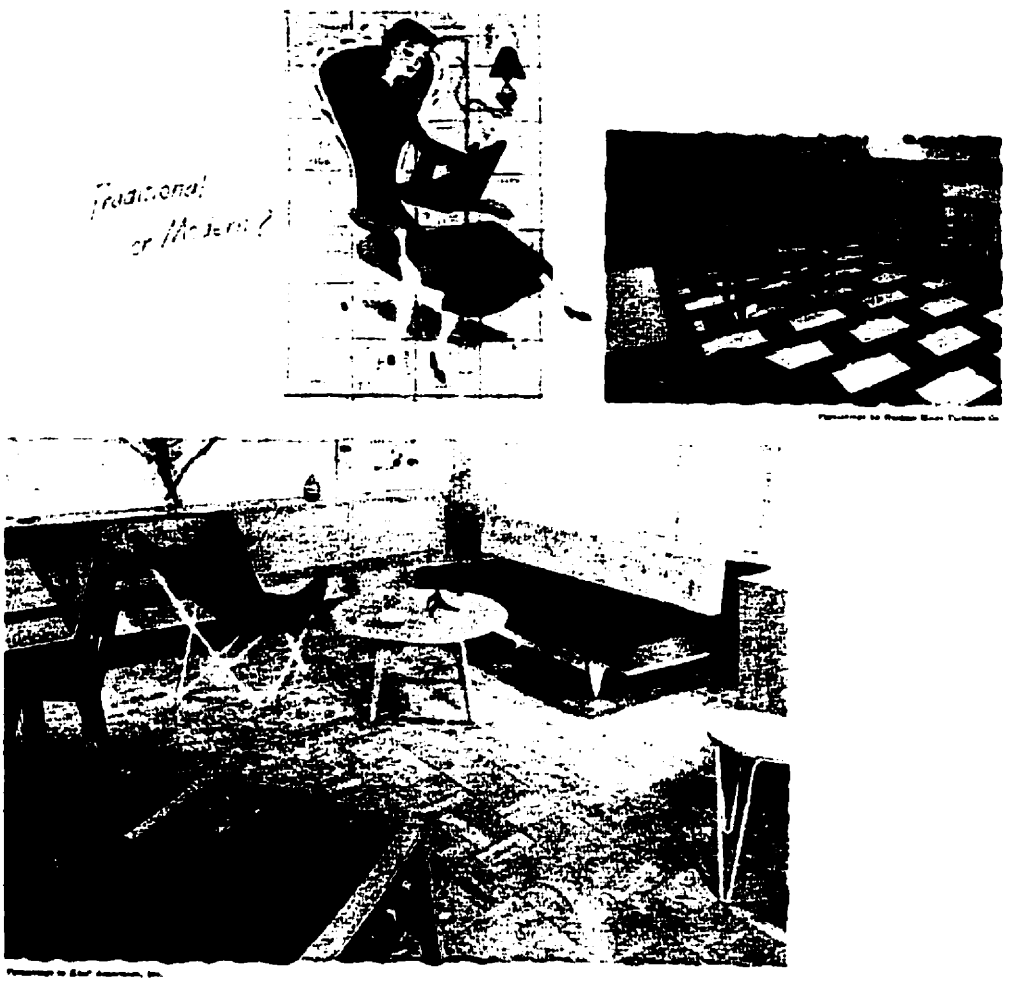

Figure 3. Amtico Rubber Flooring, advertisement, *Canadian Homes and Gardens*, March 1950: 17.

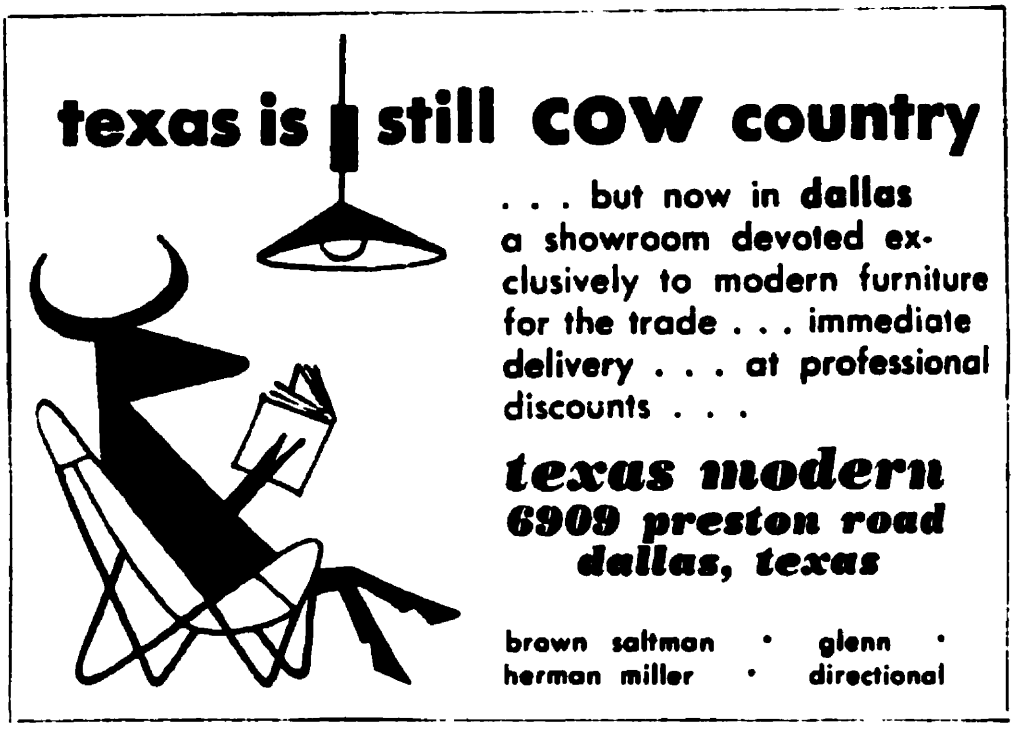

Figure 4. Texas Modern, advertisement, *Interiors* Oct. 1951: 158.

Figure 5. "Gals Aglee." *Globe and Mail* 7 June 1954: 37.

notes to chapter three

1 The term "cognitive space" is borrowed from Delle, who uses it to refer to "both the conception of social and material spaces that do not yet or may never exist and the interpretation of those spaces that will or do exist" (39).

2 The concurrence in the novel of Jungian psychology and butterfly imagery invites commentary on the double significance of the term "imago," which in the zoological context refers to the final stage of the butterfly's life, after the butterfly has undergone the metamorphoses of the larva and pupa stages. In the language of psychology, it is also an "idealized mental picture of oneself or another person, especially [a] parent" ("Imago").

3 The *Journal* of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada documents this debate among members of the architectural profession in Canada. A 1930 editorial relates the events occurring at the convention of the American Institute of Architects, with attention to the discussion during the "Symposium on Modern Architecture in which many prominent members of the profession took part. It was clear as the discussion progressed that there was a sharp difference of thought between the so-called Modernists and the Traditionalists"

("Contemporary Architecture"). The debate continues in the *Journal* well into the 1960s. However, the general public would have been exposed to it not in the pages of this professional journal—even though in 1937 its editors thought that its appeal was general enough that copies might be sold at newsstands. The general public would have learned about the debate from a number of other sources. Broadcasts by members of the RAIC were heard on CBC Radio until August 1938. Eaton's put together many a showcase on modern décor, and one in Toronto in 1937 consisted of two comparative rooms, 1887 and 1937, designed to highlight the differences between Victorian and modern designs and use of space. Virginia Wright reports in her book *Modern Furniture in Canada 1920–1970* that, at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto in 1948, over ten thousand people from different socioeconomic and age groups participated in a design quiz called "A Chance to Test Your Taste," part of an installation featuring Canadian-designed household objects (21). This quiz "invited the public to judge the merits of two parallel groups of objects—one group modern and the other traditional"—and then to compare their favourites with the selections of a panel of design experts. The popular exhibit also travelled to Montreal, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Edmonton, and Vancouver the following year (21). During the 1940s, popular decorating magazines, *House Beautiful* chief among them, covered the "controversy" between modern and traditional as if it were a prize fight or "the Montague and Capulet affair" (Tannen 212; Ball 73). Canadians continued to be exposed to questions of design in the popular media well into the 1950s. As Wright notes, "One of the first programs shown on Canadian television, in September 1952, was a series called *Design in*

Living, written and narrated by the Canadian painter Arthur Lismer" (162).

4 It was also an international debate, and developments in the United States and England were reflected in the Canadian context.

5 The first four of these choice epithets appeared in the RAIC editorial "Contemporary Architecture." The April 1947 issue of *House Beautiful* includes a piece called "You Can Be Traditional without Being Trite," which tells readers how "shutters and shakes and heart-tug touches" can be incorporated into their house designs without reverting to "a copycat version of hackneyed styles" (139, 141).

6 For the original source, see Emile Cardon, *L'Art au foyer domestique* (Paris: Renouard, 1884).

7 So much is clear in a piece in *Interiors*, which spotlights an architect who keeps his mother's six "pedigreed" Windsor chairs "of tubular but aged elegance" in his modern Connecticut hillside house (Drexler 102); they "contribute a special authenticity of their own" (105). Scott Symons, the former curator of the Canadiana collection at the Royal Ontario Museum, wrote a section of his self-described "furniture novel" (Taylor 216) on the Windsor chair. He mentions this chair's long history in Canada, beginning with its arrival in the Maritime provinces and Newfoundland in the mid-eighteenth century, and he attributes its later entry into Quebec and Ontario to the movements of the Loyalists. "It is an intrinsic part of our Canadian culture" Symons concludes (2). Given that it is the namesake of the royal family, the Windsor also brings to mind

colonial authority. That the Windsor chair is comfortable is supported by the scientific research of Dr. Akerblom of Norway, whose analysis of posture studies led him to develop a chair almost identical in form to one type of Windsor, according to an article on "Contemporary Chairs" in *Design Quarterly* (3).

8 "It has been variously called Butterfly, Safari, Sling, Wing, African Campaign, African Safari, North African Campaign or Italian Officer's Chair. Among the cognoscenti of the design world, it is known as the Hardoy Chair named thus for one of its three designers, the Argentine architect Jorge Ferrari-Hardoy" (Blake and Thompson 73). It has also been called the A.A. chair (Frey 39). Ferrari-Hardoy called it the B.K.F. chair "in fairness to his colleagues," the chair's codesigners (Larrabee and Vignelli 44), and it has been called the number 198, its model number at Artek Pascoe, its first manufacturer. I refer to it, in most contexts in this chapter, as the butterfly chair because Quednau's novel calls it thus.

9 "Girls keep their knees together when they sit down," is one of the grandmother's admonishments to the "girl" narrator in Alice Munro's story, "Boys and Girls" (119).

10 The epithet comes from a 1951 *Interiors* piece by Jane Fiske called "Two Houses from Down Under: Big-Time Modern in Australia." (Dec. 1951: 82-89). In the photo spread, two butterfly chairs provide the seating on an open terrace occupied by three men and a woman. Against the backdrop of a Picassoesque wall mural, the butterfly chair is an integral element in the "big-time modern" tableau, striking in its sculptural aspect—though the Australians are artless enough to

actually sit in them. The houses featured are by architect Harry Siedler, "late of the United States and Harvard School of Design, [and] are undisguised progeny of an idiom personalized by Marcel Breuer" (Fiske 82). The houses "introduce to Australia that style loosely referred to as International" (82). One is most likely to spot the butterfly chair in such self-consciously modern settings in the shelter magazines; indeed, the chair itself is one of the decorative markers that communicate the modern message in design idiom, as I have already suggested.

11 Michael Boyd and Gabrielle Boyd's extensive collection of modern chairs, featured in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art exhibition "Sitting on the Edge" (1998) is "a survey of twentieth-century avant-garde design, mostly the work of architects, never the work of interior designers or decorators" (Boyd 16).

12 It is worth noting that a significant proportion of the rooms appearing in *Living Spaces* contain butterfly chairs, which suggests that, for mid-century interior designers, the chair performs the function of materializing the modern idiom in interior spaces.

13 Donald Blake Webster, art historian and former curator of the Canadiana Department of the Royal Ontario Museum, has also commented on the complementarity of architecture and furniture, both past and contemporary (69).

14 In the chapter entitled "Linoleum Caves" in *Strange Things: The Malevolent North in Canadian Literature*, Margaret Atwood comments on Munro's juxtaposition of those two seemingly remote terms,

"linoleum" and "caves," and is "struck" by "the idea of domesticity as simply a thin overlay covering a natural, and wild, abyss" (88).

15 Rykwert, making a related point, suggests that "Every chair is . . . in some sense a comment on our conception of birth and rebirth" (239). The butterfly chair's design and production history also reveal its unstable relationship with authority, which is partly expressed in commentators' uncertainty about the paternity, or ultimate source, of the design (i.e., who "authored" or "fathered" it). As Blake and Thompson have shown, the butterfly chair's own history is storied, and its authority as an original design has been questioned.

16 The large yellow wings, black-fringed, / were motionless // They say the soul of a dead person / will settle like that on the still face // But I thought: the rock has borne this; / this butterfly is the rock's grace, / its most obstinate and secret desire / to be a thing alive made manifest // Forgot were the two shattered porcupines / I had seen die in the bleak forest. / Pain is unreal; death, an illusion: / There is no death in all the land, / I heard my voice cry; / And brought my hand down on the butterfly / And felt the rock move beneath my hand. (110)

Linen

Aroha's Fossil

Aroha's fossil goes clear through the washing cycle
still in the pocket of her wrangler jeans
and comes out deepsea clean & pure as
someone's eyes are seas who's
fallen right through the world
(straight through to China as we used to say)

Keelhauling, gutting, name it —
nothing of that shows.

She says, hey here's my fossil back and
warms it in her hand.

— Colleen Thibaudeau (79)

I have always appreciated linen; pillowcases my Granny embroidered were among the few things I sailed away with when I first left home to attend university. This past year, linen has once again become a material enthusiasm of mine. I have passed more than a few Saturday mornings at yard sales or the Sally Ann, picking up yellowed linen table cloths, tea and hand towels, or the odd sheet, and then mending, laundering, and ironing them at home. It is an aesthetic and sensual pleasure that I derive from all stages, but especially the final stages, of this process of transformation—I imagine it is very much like the pleasure experienced by gardeners when their labour is rewarded with blooms. The process is not only about

transformation. For me, restoring old linen weaves other meaningful threads of connection as well.

I financed part of my Master's studies by serving lunches at, and working as a caterer for, London Ontario's *Auberge du Petit Prince* restaurant. Every day I would spend an hour or two standing at an old pine hutch, folding scores of cloth dinner napkins. While I was doing this, the sous-chef, Aroha (the self-same Aroha of Colleen Thibaudeau's poem, above), would knead dough and shape the many sticks of baguette required for the restaurant and catering functions. Folding napkins was quiet, repetitive work during which my mind was free to wander and, often, revisit some of the questions related to my thesis work on (appropriately enough) excursion. This daily meditative folding of linen strengthened (in-creased?) my association of linen with story-telling.

By this time I was becoming aware of an assortment of cultural connections between women's telling of stories and weaving—the myth of Penelope's tapestry comes readily to mind—as well as the fact that theorists such as Roland Barthes (160) have played with associations between texts, textiles and textures (see also Pearce 3). However, I trace my own association of linen with story-telling back to the linen closet in my childhood home. My eldest sister would often come by with her two daughters for a visit, and while she was catching up with my mother, I would help my nieces climb onto shelves of the linen closet, and then would climb in myself and shut the door behind me. In the darkness, each of us

comfortable on a broad shelf of sheets or wool blankets, I would tell those other little girls stories which took them to the edge of fear, but which always concluded with the opening of the closet door, and a tumbling into the soft light of the hall. The personal significance of this early experience of a link between linen and story only became apparent to me during the writing of this present work.

I have said that reconditioning old linen is not only a transformation story; it is also about attention and recovery. It reminds me of what happens to Aroha's fossil. In washing it, something is lost, but vestiges of a past life recur nonetheless. The act of reconditioning old linen reminds me of Thibaudeau's poem "Aroha's Fossil" because, like the poem, it is a concentrated act of attention, an aesthetic response that is political because it turns on the work, the warmth, of a woman's hands. I hold on to my Granny's pillowcases not only because of their use-value and their aesthetic appeal, but also because they are the work of her hands. Each time I focus my attention on the flower pattern she embroidered along the borders of two white cotton pillow cases, I am recovering part of the pattern of a life of which few other material traces remain. That she once desperately risked that life by slitting her wrists in a bid to escape her dour husband and "have her own bed" makes the existence of these embroidered pillowcases more significant to me. Particularly resonant in this context is Adrienne Rich's celebrated poem "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," which reflects upon the relationship between one woman's needle work and her life. Rich's poem

depicts Aunt Jennifer's needle work as a form of what Else Rainer called "women's survival art." It is survival art not only because it allows its creator to express herself in defiance of the cultural force that would silence her, but also because it literally survives her; it survives to tell a story of creative and political resistance to patriarchal oppression. My own interest is focussed designedly on second-hand linen, especially on that displaying the needle work of women I can never know but through this, through some of the actual fabric of their lives.

The recuperative function of my work with linen shares a common thread with my work with women's texts, and my thoughts about how I see my role as a critic. My impulse to pay attention to fine writing which has received little substantial critical attention, although (or perhaps even because) it reveals a great deal about women's lives, especially their anxieties and fears, is partly the reason why I have been drawn to work with the women's texts I have in this dissertation. I certainly do not anticipate that the work of the writers I am interested in will pass into near oblivion like the linen I wrestle out of bins (though *Abra*, *The Butterfly Chair*, and four out of Schoemperlen's seven books are now out of print). Nor do I flatter myself by thinking that my attention to a text will guarantee it a place on the shelf, other than my own, that is. One thing is sure, however. There is a lot of linen out there; I intend to keep looking.

4 • The Power of Rooms

I have learned not to underestimate the power of rooms.

This room, like the others, has large windows divided into many rectangular panes, thick walls solid straight through, built-in shelves filled with an efficient array of cookware, several sturdy tables, and no chairs. I see now that I am beginning to repeat myself.
— Diane Schoemperlen "Five Small Rooms" (25, 35)

Diane Schoemperlen has an abiding interest in the communicative potentialities of houses and home interiors. In 1979, when she was twenty-five, she published an essay in the *Malahat Review* called "The Role of the House in Canadian Fiction." In its opening sentence she flatly declares that "The abundance of houses in Canadian fiction is not a coincidence" (17). When I came across this in the early stages of my dissertation research I was struck by the younger Schoemperlen's tone of conviction on this matter; she seems, well, in possession of a secret. It is the beginning of a seduction. I am eager for her to present me the key to all those shining (or dusty) fictional houses: Jalna, Green Gables, the Plummer Place, the Bentley house. Twenty years after its publication, though, this essay remains less remarkable for its observations about houses in the fiction of other Canadian writers, than as an early indicator of the preoccupation with houses and their interiors that would become so evident in her own work.

Indeed, I now consider this early essay on fictional houses as a prolusion to Schoemperlen's later fiction, in which domestic material culture figures prominently, where what she calls "the power of rooms" is explored more intimately.

The Quest for Control

As a prolusion, the *Malahat* essay performs an important role in Schoemperlen's corpus, laying the foundation for her later, detailed literary treatment of home spaces. It also announces a concept that greatly informs Schoemperlen's treatment of those fictional home spaces. I refer to the concept of control. Her initial point in the essay concerns the protective role of the house in general: "The physical structure of the house provides the necessary boundaries which allow a person to place and cope with his life. Without such boundaries, he would be overwhelmed by the vast expanse of life and the inadequacy of his ability to control it" (17). She goes on to argue that various Canadian literary characters' houses reflect their attempts to create a sense of permanence, to exert control over the chaos of the environment. The destruction of houses, such as that depicted in Hugh MacLennan's *Barometer Rising*, caused by the Halifax explosion, exemplifies a failure to control the environment, and illustrates "the insignificance of man's attempts to leave a permanent mark on the world" (31).

It is in this essay that Schoemperlen first communicates a vision of life as "overwhelming," a vision which later comes to dominate her fiction.[1] Her preoccupation with control, a preoccupation which no doubt proceeds from such a vision of life, is apparent throughout her fiction, beginning with her photo-fiction project, *Double Exposures* (1984), which was followed by several short story collections, *Frogs and Other Stories* (1986), *Hockey Night in Canada* (1987), *The Man of My Dreams* (1990), the uncollected story "A Change Is As Good As a Rest" (1992), *In the Language of Love: A Novel in 100 Chapters* (1994), and her latest collection of short stories, *Forms of Devotion* (1998).[2] In her fiction, she typically concerns herself with what are, by comparison with the Halifax explosion, smaller, more personal catastrophes: failed relationships, thwarted ambitions, vague and disabling fears. And while in the *Malahat* essay Schoemperlen is not expressly interested in female characters and women's experiences (note her choice of pronouns in the quotation in the preceding paragraph), her ensuing fiction is almost exclusively devoted to female characters' struggles to cope with what reviewer Christine Hamelin terms "life's small disasters" (748).

This chapter illustrates how Schoemperlen's characters interact with domestic material culture objects and spaces in an attempt to navigate their own preoccupations with control. Some characters attempt to gain, for example, a sense of domestic, sexual, and personal control to further their own sense of self and independence. Others strive to transform themselves or enact an "everyday resistance" to oppressive domestic or social realities

through the manipulation of material things. Still others find themselves mired in the immediate material concerns of the home, when in fact they are equally troubled by, and their energies pulled toward, more global issues. This sense of divided loyalties and interests creates a deep ambivalence that is shared by many of her female characters. Throughout her corpus, Schoemperlen resolutely continues to implicate women in things, stubbornly grounding them both in the material and in the compulsions that often accompany such relations. Tellingly, her latest work, while more candidly addressing these issues, refuses to free her characters from domestic material concerns. Instead she intensifies her characters' encounters with the material world and the ambivalence that regularly attends such encounters. She does this not to resolve that ambivalence, it seems, but to face it, head on, as the elephant in the living room.

Another reviewer, Cynthia Sugars, has remarked upon the tendency of Schoemperlen's female characters to struggle to gain control of their situations. About *The Man of My Dreams* she notes:

> The stories are about women—women school teachers, writers, store clerks, mothers, daughters, wives, lovers, ex-lovers—and, to a lesser extent, the men in their lives. Most often in their mid-thirties, what these characters have in common is their attempt to make sense of their lives, usually after failed relationships, by taking active control of the present. [. . .] The

> extent to which they attain control or ultimately celebrate their very lack of control varies from story to story. ("Relationships" 224)

While Sugars is correct in pointing out that failed romantic relationships often impel the typical Schoemperlen character to try to "take active control of the present," Schoemperlen herself emphasizes that the theme of relationships, or love, addresses only half of what her fiction is about. It's as often about fear. The anxious single mother who narrates "The Look of the Lightning, the Sound of the Birds," neatly encapsulates these two foci of the author's work—each of which relates to the theme of control—when she asserts at the beginning of her narrative, "If a story is not to be about love, then I think it must be about fear" (230).[3]

A whole host of fears can plague the average female character in a Schoemperlen story, but chief among these is the fear of vulnerability to life's real and random tragedies. Schoemperlen has candidly acknowledged this fear, one she evidently shares with her characters. "The bottom line is there are a lot of things to be afraid of," she says in a 1991 interview with Larry Scanlan. "My characters are afraid of things happening that they can't control. Sudden death. Terrible injuries. It's a fear of randomness more than anything" (12).

The very structure of Schoemperlen's prose, in its own concern with control, reflects this outlook. She accounts for the profusion of lists in her fiction as one way of coping with justifiable fears. Scanlan suggested in his

interview that, by including "all those numbered lists, recipes, parentheses," Schoemperlen, or her characters, or both, "are dividing life into manageable parts as a survival strategy." Schoemperlen responds by saying, "I think that's true. The list-making thing is a way of trying to create some sense of order within the general chaos of life. That's something that comes from me. I make lists as a way of trying to get things done and to feel I'm in control—even though I'm not" (11).

The profusion of lists in her fiction is one example of the way in which the form of her prose is affected by her concern for, her desire for, control. A similar connection is noticeable in Schoemperlen's penchant for both small rooms and small paragraphs, the latter being the unit which poets and critics have aptly called the *stanza*, Italian for a chamber, or room.[4] Darryl Whetter, in a 1996 interview with the writer, remarks upon Schoemperlen's "frequent use of one-sentence paragraphs," an observation which prompts him to ask, "Are you attempting to manipulate the pace of the reading through the creation of slower and faster moments in the prose?" Her response is telling:

> Yes, very definitely. We are accustomed to thinking of rhythm in connection with poetry, but I like to try and do it with prose: it is conscious. I sit at the computer with my clipboard, I write everything out by hand first and then go to the keyboard and I go back and forth, but there is also a stage where I read it all

> out loud. I'm doing a reading of everything as I'm writing, so yes, pace is very important to me. (140)

Her pains to control the reader's temporal experience of her prose find an analogy in her characters' efforts to control their and others' spatial experience of their rooms. Without stretching these correspondences between Schoemperlen's creative aesthetic and her characters' environmental aesthetics too far, I suggest that there is some sense in which the editing undertaken by the writer in the composition process resembles the editing of a composition of furniture and decorative elements in a room. Both editors "go back and forth" during (or on) a "stage" where the spectacle of dwelling (in a text; in a room) is rehearsed on behalf of the one (a reader; a visitor or co-habitant) who will experience the product of this labour afterwards. At very least, Schoemperlen's comments on s/pacing point up her awareness of arrangement as control: "it is conscious."

If Schoemperlen employs lists in her life and in her fiction to create a sense of control over the "general chaos" of experience, one of the more noticeable ways her characters try to achieve a similar sense of control is through manipulation of their domestic environment. Common tactics include acquiring, placing, rearranging and disposing of furniture and household objects, redecorating, or even simply leaving houses. When physically manipulating or simply vacating an undesirable domestic environment is not a satisfactory option, her characters will sometimes

engage in mental ordering by imagining domestic spaces, particularly the homes of others to which they would like access.[5]

Most of the published criticism on Schoemperlen includes the observation that her writing is deeply concerned with the subject of interpersonal relationships (Harrison; Smythe; Sugars). While I do not disagree with this, the overarching argument of the present chapter is that these relationships are consistently represented in her fiction as mediated *through* objects of material culture, particularly through objects of the home, which are so frequently and specifically represented in her work. The material forms she seems most devoted to are the contours of everyday domestic objects: bedspreads, dining room tables, dishes—an exhaustive list would read like the inventory of a contemporary house, maybe two. As Robert R. Wilson has suggested, entire "Worlds emerge neatly from Diane Schoemperlen's fiction. Their boundaries are crisply marked. Their laws are clear and straightforward. They possess an unmistakable coherence and plausibility. *They evoke actual human things with a loving gaze*" (80; my emphasis). Domestic spaces and their appointments (to recover an antiquated word like a flea-market find) figure especially prominently in stories about female characters' struggles with issues of control. Characters who lack control in their lives typically look to the small rooms they inhabit for opportunities to exert control. They try to avert or cope with distressing occurrences by controlling their (and others') experience of inhabiting rooms.

Even in the little yet published on Schoemperlen, one notes the tendency of critics and interviewers to try to account for (or to get her to account for) the sheer profusion of recognizable detail in her fiction. That is, readers frequently recognize the presence of detail, but are not sure what to make of it. Furthermore, critics' recognition of this detail is often tellingly selective. When Larry Scanlan asks her about the detail in her fiction, "You specifically mention the names of TV shows, commercial products, franchise restaurants, malls" (11), he leaves the one category of material culture that is so conspicuously present in Schoemperlen's work, domestic furnishings, conspicuously absent from his list. It could be argued that this failure to recognize the amount of specifically domestic detail is owing to the currently prevailing ideology, described in the first chapter, that figures the domestic interior as transparent.

Related to the ideological transparency of the domestic interior is the critical assumption that there must be something either behind or beneath Schoemperlen's attention to domestic detail. Her attention to "mere" surfaces, what Scanlan calls "cluttered background" (11), is of itself not important enough to warrant serious consideration, simply because the surfaces she most often attends to are those of the mundane, domestic world. This view is expressed by reviewer Michael Mirolla:

> Especially in her later work, there's always the sense of a tale being told, characters being created, situations being invented—and not just a factual representation of the world

> around her. *She's never satisfied with kitchen-sink-stuff—even if that's exactly what it might look like on the surface level.* What she wants to do is tear the kitchen ceiling off first and then describe, from that vantage point, what's happening—or could be happening—at the sink." (119; emphasis added)

Mirolla's account of Schoemperlen's motives emphasizes the view of the domestic interior as mere backdrop, even, it seems here, as a kind of doll's house in which dramatic action, clearly valorized as the story's *raison d'être*, takes place. One can read his conviction that Schoemperlen is "never satisfied with kitchen-sink-stuff" as an indication of his own culturally and professionally legitimated bias against the more mundane aspects of women's experiences, that their encounters with domestic material culture are unfit subject matter for fiction, when fiction is viewed as the privileged domain of invention. Mirolla implies that attention to domestic detail is trifling, that it is of itself somehow insufficient. But it seems to me that, along with poet Bronwen Wallace, Schoemperlen wants to insist on the particulars, because, like her characters, she expresses herself through "the particulars of tables, sidewalks, ceilings, bricks, curtains, crockery, knives" (Schoemperlen "How to Write" 108). The sense of distance that Mirolla observes in her work is certainly an aesthetic effect that Schoemperlen cultivates in her quest for control, though the palpable extent to which both she and her characters actually fail in this quest is what gives the work the ever-present hint of poignancy that is perhaps its greatest strength.

I have written elsewhere that Schoemperlen's stories are characterized by "domestic realism, an attention to the furniture, food and habits of late-1960s and 1970s Canadian families, especially those of younger women who struggle towards finding a sense of self" (Elmslie 1040-41). Robert R. Wilson has identified Schoemperlen's style as participating in that "distinctive, highly codified, way of writing fiction" called by a number of names: "Diet-Pepsi minimalism," "K-Mart realism," "brand-name realism," or just plain "dirty realism," Wilson's preferred term (89). As understood by Bill Buford, editor of a special issue of *Granta* devoted to this type of writing, dirty realism is "about people who watch day-time television, read cheap romances or listen to country and western music . . . . drifters in a world cluttered with junk food and the oppressive details of modern consumerism" (qtd. in Wilson 89).

It is a misnomer to call the kind of realism in the typical Schoemperlen story "dirty." The term as used by Buford is disparaging, and classist; it implies that "dirt" is only found among the consumers of popular culture. The realism in her story "Clues," by contrast, is very much focussed on ways in which female characters' encounters with the material culture in domestic spaces reveal their attempts to control the "alarming" and "gruesome" realities of "this crazy world" ("Clues" 38), what is outside, by controlling their own small corner of the world: the interiors of their homes and the activities associated with sustaining life there; shopping, cooking, inhabiting.

Clues

Not all the spirits are friendly, you know. Some of them are very unhappy. If they bother me too much, I rearrange the furniture. That confuses them, all right.
— Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (108)

"Clues," the third story in the collection *Hockey Night in Canada*, is about a short-lived but instructive friendship between an adolescent girl and her newly-married neighbour, a woman seven years her senior. Over the course of a summer, the neighbour, Linda Anderson, provides the teenager with a glimpse, both seductive and terrifying, of married life. "She was drawing me into a womanly conspiracy," reflects the unnamed narrator, a wide-open eye/I who takes everything in, "lush with the promise of fat secrets and special knowledge" about what goes on behind closed doors (37). Told in retrospect, "Clues" traces the friendship as it is experienced by the teenager, first as a positive and thrilling experience, and then as an enormous burden, at which point she begins "shutting her off, cutting her out, moving glibly away," coldly concluding that "We could not do anything for each other anymore" (45). The real reason behind this rupture has little to do with the narrator's observation that Linda "could be so tiresome," or her purported explanation for avoiding her neighbour: "if I was too young for her, as my mother repeatedly pointed out, then she was certainly too old for me" (42).

Rather, the decisive moment that marks the turning point in their relationship is Linda's impromptu rearrangement of the living room

furniture in the Anderson's war-time bungalow, a spontaneous attempt to exert control over the domestic environment which evidently elicits a severe response from her husband. The beginning of the end of the friendship occurs when the teenager observes that Linda Anderson has little more control over her life and immediate surroundings than she herself does living under her parents' roof. She becomes disillusioned about "the powerful magic of homemaking" (41) when she discovers that Linda is subject to humiliation too, and possibly worse, at the hands of her "hard to please" husband, Neil (36).

Before this key episode takes place, however, the narrator focusses on the clues which seem to suggest that Linda Anderson is a woman in control of her life. The first glimpse we get of her through the teenager's eyes shows her audaciously commanding attention, and getting it. The story opens with a description of how "Every Friday just after lunch, Linda Anderson went out to their wheezing blue Chevy in the driveway next door and sat there honking," boldly signalling the beginning of their grocery shopping ritual together. The outing seems like a transgressive act to the teenager because, as she notes, the honking "irritated my mother marvelously and made me feel like I was going out on a heavy date" (35). She enjoys a sense of power in displeasing her judgmental and unimaginative mother, who "viciously" disapproves of Linda, especially her inappropriate habitual personal revelations and "gabbing all day" about shocking news stories (38). During these shopping trips, the chirpy Linda

offers her neighbour helpful hints on household economy (coupon clipping) and "new products, new dishes" (36). This strikes the teenager as novel and so very unlike her parents' joyless grocery store routine, which she is "forced" to witness, but is excluded from really participating in every Saturday: "Then my mother led the way, my father pushed the cart, which was invariably one of those balky ones with the wheels going in all directions at once, and I lagged along uselessly behind" (35-36).

The image of the shopping cart with its wheels spinning at cross purposes is the objective correlative for the teenager's own frustrated impulse to escape a predictably disempowering experience. With Linda, on the other hand, the narrator is allowed a measure of control denied her by her mother, and this difference seems to account for her eager participation in this particular domestic activity. As she makes a point of revealing, "I pushed the cart" (35), a phrase which brilliantly and economically suggests both her sense of her own agency, and her inexperience.

With Linda as well, the teenager is permitted to hear and to see things not normally disclosed to her. She initially enjoys this new-found access to information, to clues, believing that acquiring the "special knowledge" Linda apparently possesses will transform her from an "uneasily innocent" (43) adolescent into one of the capable and urbane Friday Safeway shoppers, "sure of themselves, experts in their element" (36), and no doubt pleasing to their men. Linda shares with her the details of their

lives "past present and future," glibly revealing, for instance, that she and Neil are "getting busy" on having their first child right away (38). Linda also exposes her to her "repertoire of alarming and gruesome tales" (38), the *true crime* variety of "grisly gossip" (45), which the teenager eventually comes to suspect is her neighbour's way of trying to control her own fears by foisting them on someone else.

In addition to these more outspoken (or spoken out) ways of communicating with her neighbour, Linda unwittingly communicates with her through the unspoken language of her home furnishings and their arrangement. These material clues are extraordinarily revealing. By giving the neighbour access to her home, Linda shares more about herself and her relationship with Neil than she is aware. The teenager scrutinizes the furnishings, crockery and decorative accents of Linda's home just as carefully as her shopping list, because she considers these to be "clues" to the mysteries of married life, a life which she considers "inevitable" for herself (36):

> I took careful note of everything in the house. The teapot clock, the ceramic Aunt Jemima canisters, the hot pot holders which read, 'Don't Monkey With the Cook,' the plastic placemats with kittens, roosters, or roses on them—she changed them once a week.
>
> Every detail was important to me, an avenue into the esoteric intricacies of married life, a state of being which

> seemed to me then divinely blessed, glamorous, intimate but clean. I needed to know how you achieved such a permanent and inviolable state of grace. (40-41)

Each material object in the Anderson's home is regarded by the teenager as an "avenue," or way of accessing the special knowledge she seeks. I would like to dwell for a moment on this metaphor, where the narrator describes the domestic details of Linda's home as avenues/ways to secret meaning, because the metaphor has its own hidden cargo, so to speak. In the teenager's perception of these domestic details, they are simultaneously avenues (ways) to meaning, and "weighty," or freighted with meaning, both wagon and path, vehicle and tenor. That these details are also called "clues" supports this reading of the metaphor. One need only recall that the word "clue" comes from "clew," the ball of yarn used in the myth of Theseus to guide him through the labyrinth, to see that the clue too is both the thing carried and the path it marks. Interestingly, the clue's earliest association is with both the domestic and the esoteric. Yarn is a typically domestic material object, in Western cultures traditionally the product of women's labour; in the myth, its magic is really an expression of Ariadne's ingenuity. Daedalus's labyrinth is an archetypal image of the esoteric, from which Theseus's escape is possible only with Ariadne's clew.

The Anderson's house is a rich source of clues because Linda is so fond of display. When the narrator remarks that Linda "was always wearing something new and flamboyant" to "perk up" what she seemed to recognize

was her naturally plain appearance, she draws attention to Linda's perceived need for attractive display (35). In the neighbours' home, the bedroom door "stood proudly always open, displaying a dainty doll in the middle of the white chenille bedspread, her voluminous pink skirt spread around her in layers like a cake," whereas in the narrator's own home, "the bedroom doors were always shut tight, a concession to privacy, shame, or not having made the bed yet" (41). It is Linda's inclination to display, rather than the rainy weather alone, which brings the two inside to sit at the "stylish new breakfast nook which Neil had built himself and Linda had wall-papered in a blue and orange pattern featuring teapots and coffee mugs" (40). In Schoemperlen's literary pattern book of home interiors, do-it-yourself carpentry jobs and wall treatments and decorative accents primarily in blue are frequently associated with the idea of domestic bliss. Often, as is the case here, they function as "camouflage," projecting images that belie a less than optimal reality.[6]

Linda clearly enjoys showcasing her ostensibly blissful domestic situation for her young neighbour's benefit. Her skill at display remains unchallenged until her "bright idea" of having her younger neighbour help her rearrange the living room furniture to surprise Neil backfires: the resulting furniture arrangement is rejected by him, and the spectacle Linda makes of herself while fretting over her collections occasions her rejection by her friend.

The rearrangement of the furniture in the Anderson's living room entails displacing the items displayed on the surfaces of the furniture, namely "the dozens of photographs in different sized filigree frames" which cover the top of the television, and Linda's substantial salt and pepper shaker collection housed in the china cabinet (41). To her neighbour's annoyance, Linda greets the displacement of these items as an opportunity to subject her to lengthy narratives about them. Linda's running commentary on the family photographs and sets of shakers rehearses the functions of the souvenir and the collection, as these are theorized by Susan Stewart in her fascinating book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection.* Souvenirs and collections have associations with ideas of displacement, manipulation, positioning, classification, and containment. The special attention Linda confers on these particular objects, especially within the larger context of rearranging the furniture, fundamentally relates them to the issue of control.

In Stewart's scheme, Linda's set of family photographs would be classified as *souvenir* rather than *collection*, for, as Stewart sees it, stories generated by the souvenir reflect "the experience of objects-into-narratives," narratives which in turn point to the "context of origin or acquisition" of the souvenir and thereby displace one's attention onto the past (151-52). As the narrator of "Clues" describes it, taking down the photographs is driven by Linda's recollection of those contexts of acquisition. It "was a lengthy procedure," she remembers, "which involved the identification of every

person in every picture, who took which shot, and what the special occasion was and at whose house it was held that year" (41). The backward-looking gaze associated with the photographs might be especially seductive to Linda because it permits her to focus on happier, "special" occasions rather than on the unspectacular present. The activity also positions her as a kind of curator of these contexts of originating occasions. Stewart's observation that the function of the souvenir is to "envelop the present within the past" finds clear expression here (151). The souvenir's capacity to telescope the present into the past makes it an effective instrument for Linda to manipulate and control her own experience of time.

The collection, on the other hand, appertains to the manipulation of space, as Stewart implies when she argues that "a value of manipulation and positioning, not a value of reference to a context of origin, is at work in the collection" (166). Such manipulation and positioning is apparent in Linda's attention to her salt and pepper shakers, in both her "fondling" and "explaining" of each set. In contrast to the stories connected to the souvenir photographs, Linda's narratives explaining the pieces in her salt and pepper shaker collection do not refer to their context of acquisition. Rather, this time her explanations substitute "history with classification, with order beyond the realm of temporality" (Stewart 151).

Obviously, one kind of order, the order of pairing, is built into Linda's collection; each vessel is already positioned with regard to its mate. Linda respects this order by collecting only complete pairs. No doubt the

requisite pairing into sets is a large part of this collection's appeal to her, oriented as she is towards her own spouse.[8] She loosely classifies her collection in terms of its size, though the spectacle of her fondling and explaining each set grotesquely distorts the narrator's sense of the collection's true size: Linda "estimated the collection at two hundred pairs but it seemed more like eight or nine hundred to me, every set different, from cupids to corn cobs, from Santa and Mrs. Claus to Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe" (42).

Stewart further notes the connection between the collection and containment, a form of spatial control. She argues that the collection's "function of containment must be taken into account" for the reason that a surprisingly substantial number of collectibles are often containers in themselves. She even notes salt and pepper shakers among these (159). Other examples include what I think of as containers *par excellence*, the Russian nesting doll, Chinese boxes, and (in recent years) Tupperware, containers which are designed to contain other containers." "The finite boundaries these objects afford are played against the infinite possibility of their collection," Stewart explains, accounting in part for the appeal of such container collectibles (159). By having the narrator exaggerate the shakers' numbers out of a sense of annoyance, Schoemperlen makes the most of this and other tensions, most notably the tension between the retentive capacity of the salt and pepper shakers and Linda's apparent incapacity to contain her own enthusiasm for them. Linda's apparent loss of self-control while

manipulating and positioning her shakers puts an ironic spin on Baudrillard's assertion, in *The System of Objects*, that what the collector really collects is always him or herself (91). Thus Linda's collection is a perfect material embodiment of her sense of control—one that wavers, or is shaken, back and forth between two extremes. Full. Empty.

Because Linda's absorption with her collection occurs in the context of rearranging the living room, however, it must be understood as part of that same project. Schoemperlen uses the language of physical contests, wrestling in particular, to draw a vivid picture of the women's encounter with the living room suite: "The aqua-coloured couch and chair with arms at least a foot wide were unwieldy but simple enough once we threw our weight into it" (41). Like the moving of the furniture, Linda's collection offers her the opportunity for both recreation and re-creation. "The collection is a form of art as play," as Stewart so ably puts it, "a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context" (151). Linda's manipulation of all the objects in the living room affords her a sense of control over these objects, and over others'—her neighbour's, Neil's—experience of them.

The narrator's observation that Linda's talk in the Safeway of placating Neil with sweets makes him sound "like a spoiled child or maybe a snake she had managed to tame, but just barely" (37), suggests the actual tenuousness of the wife's control over her sexually wayward husband. Her rearrangement of the furniture to surprise Neil might be an unconscious

exertion of control on her part, or it could be a manifestation of her desire to forestall her husband's search for sexual novelty outside the home, to reign in his libido, by reintroducing spatial novelty into his living room (as noted before, she already secures a basic level of decorative novelty in the kitchen with the weekly changing of plastic placemats).

Relations between sexuality and the exertion of control are unmistakably suggested in the description of the furniture episode. The more delicate china cabinet is "dismantled," stripped. As well, Linda's intense engagement with her shakers is represented as a kind of hyper-extended, self-gratifying foreplay, the end of which is only anticlimactic for her cohort: "By the time Linda was finished fondling and explaining them, I was so bored, impatient and somehow embarrassed for her, that I went home, leaving her sprawled on the couch, sweating and self-satisfied" (42). What's more, the satisfaction Linda takes in fondling and explaining her collection appears to be a turn off for the teenager, who gives Linda the cold shoulder, punishing her with her absence for several days afterward. The narrator is discomfited by watching this mere display of control, which appears to her more as a lack of self-control, because she of course wants and expects the real thing.

This partially explains her attraction to Neil, who dazzles her like the Wizard of Oz before the curtain is pulled back on him, too. She has only limited access to *his* collection, of guns, and even less to the collector, who, like his collection, is himself described as cool and detached. If Linda's

collection is somewhat ambivalent in its association with control, Neil's is unequivocal: "Arrayed in wooden racks against the wall, the smooth metal barrels were perfectly, endlessly, polished, cool to the touch even in this unbearable heat" (42). The fact that his gun collection alone was not "touched," or moved with the other furniture is telling, because the narrator's tactile description of it belies that she must have indeed touched it, perhaps secretly (42). Not surprisingly, she doesn't mention laying a finger on any of the shakers.

Neil's gun collection is not the only material display of his power apparent to the teenage neighbour. She assumes that the prompt replacement of the furniture to its former arrangement has been at his bidding, and is evidence of his tactical superiority in all conflicts, including that over space, in the Anderson's war-time house. She chooses to read the undoing of the new arrangement as Neil's refusal to be controlled by his wife, an interpretation which results in the undoing of her ties with Linda: "Neil, obviously, had not been impressed. I was obscurely pleased, meanly imagining that he'd made her put it all back by herself. No one was going to push him around, least of all silly, fluffy Linda. It served her right" (42).

Following the furniture episode, which occupies the physical and figurative centre of the narrative, the narrator focusses on indications that Linda's control is slipping, or has always been a sham display. When going out shopping with Linda makes her feel like she is "going out on a heavy date," the suggestion is that the control Linda seems to have in this context,

a control which the teenager wants (in the double sense of "lacks" and "desires"), is the source of an erotic attraction. Not surprisingly then, after the furniture episode the teenager's erotic attraction to control shifts focus to Neil, whose role in returning the furniture to its original position the teenager interprets as evidence of his dominance in the domicile. Unlike the furniture itself, the teenager's attraction to power remains just where Linda has unwittingly helped her move it: onto her husband. In the way only a collector can, Linda succeeds in fetishizing the object of her affection: "she had made him seem so desirable, so serious and important, so perfectly male, the only man worth having" (43). This new attraction to Neil is articulated in terms of a turning away from Linda and the lack of control the teenager sees typified in her "embarrassing" effusion about her collection. "I no longer wanted to be like Linda," she remarks, "But I did want everything she had, including her house and her husband" (43). She seems unaware of the way these possessions position Linda, and contribute significantly to who she is.

Neil inadvertently confirms the impressions the teenager has begun to form from clues found inside his and Linda's home, when she chances upon him emerging from the Hastings hotel bar "just drunk enough," clinging to a blonde woman described as "stunning in an ornamental sort of way" (46). Neil is the one with the power, and however recklessly that power might be wielded, it is better to be the one with the power than the one who lacks it. The "gleaming buck knife strapped to his belt" (46) and

his "perfectly, endlessly, polished" (42) gun collection at home are associated in the restless, fascinated teenager's mind with escape from the mundane world of endless (and empty) salt and pepper shakers: "I was aching for adventure and convinced now that Neil, more than anyone, knew where to find it" (46).

Given the choice between identifying with Linda, who seems too much like the objects in her collection, empty, in need of another for completion, shaken, and Neil, who appears, like his weapons, to be "cool," and "volatile, capable of anything," the teenager chooses the latter (45). To choose otherwise is apparently too much like an acknowledgement of her own vulnerability; "a shameful admission of helplessness" (45). For all her careful scrutiny of Linda and Neil's belongings, the teenager is more aware of the communicative power of these things than she is of her own complicity in authorizing the messages she reads in them. In the *Malahat* essay, Schoemperlen quotes a line from Gabrielle Roy's *The Tin Flute:* "the mere '. . . rearrangement of a few articles of furniture . . . subtly altered the relationship between the house and the people who lived there'" (30). In her own short story, she shows that the effects of such rearrangements can be felt by outsiders as well, if they can read the clues.

Reflecting Surfaces

. . . a mind in search of ideas should first stock up on appearances.
— Francis Ponge, *The Voice of Things* (47)

In their habitual scrutiny and contemplation of the domestic environments of others, a number of Schoemperlen's other female characters resemble the narrator of "Clues." For example, there are the high school friends Ruth and Mary in "The Long Way Home," from the collection *Frogs and Other Stories*, who reunite in their late twenties when Mary visits Ruth, now a writer, in her basement apartment. Mary, a real estate agent, claims to be happily married, but eventually betrays her misery. As Mary's unhappiness becomes increasingly apparent during the course of the reunion, so does her appreciation for Ruth's life and humble abode. With more than polite enthusiasm, she gushes over Ruth's apartment, "which was compact and crowded with second-hand furniture, big coloured pillows, photographs and posters, and hundreds of books" (27). Her appreciation is reflected in her gaze, which lingers on Ruth's things, taking them in as if to take them home. "'You're so lucky, Ruth,'" she declares, while gesturing to "the bright yellow cupboards, the blue countertop, the magazine, the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves in the living room, the oak desk, the filing cabinet, all the other books piled on every flat surface" (36). The combination of yellow and blue no doubt conveys a message of harmony, optimism, and calm to Mary.

When Ruth imagines Mary's home, on the other hand, she envisions enacted in it an appallingly cold scene in which Mary and her husband ridicule and dismiss the importance of the graduate student that he openly acknowledges he is having a sexual relationship with. One piece of modern

furniture in particular figures prominently in Ruth's picture of the scene, indeed seems almost to participate in the cold exchange between spouses. "Mary would laugh [. . .] and pat his hand across the thousand-dollar oval teak table" (37), Ruth imagines. Quite clearly, in Ruth's mind, the specific material and cost of the table contribute to the coldness of the scenario. Teak as a material "became synonymous with postwar Scandinavian design" (Hanks and Teulié 188), a style that many Ontarians describe as cold, the opposite of homey (McCracken "Homeyness" 170). By the early 1970s teak wood had become "scarce and expensive" (Hanks and Teulié 188) and consequently would be found, for the most part, in the homes of the affluent *haut monde.* To be sure, in Ruth's mind the table's polished dark surface completes a tableau every bit as off-putting as a scene in one of Hogarth's satiric *Marriage à la Mode* paintings.

While Ruth's basement apartment may not be as elegantly furnished, or posh, as Mary's suburban home, it nevertheless appeals to her friend, both for its homeyness and for the evidence it presents of Ruth's independence. Homeyness is an almost ineffable quality, an epithet the meaning of which we regularly take for granted. It describes a subjective attitude towards a particular domestic environment. Something just is or is not homey, we are apt to feel (McCracken, "'Homeyness'" 170). The homeyness of Ruth's apartment is created by the colour scheme of warm, earthy colours, notably the brown of the big corner armchair and the brown bed sheets with orange flowers and green leaves, all warm colours which

McCracken finds regularly associated with the quality of homeyness (169). Ruth's apartment is not only homey, however; it also appears to Mary as the home of an apparently happy and successful independent woman. It recalls Margaret Trudeau's "freedom room" in its some of its material and symbolic elements. For Mary, the apartment of her unmarried friend materializes the possibility of self-sufficiency for women. One recalls the similar excitement of the narrator of "Hockey Night in Canada" when she imaginatively enters the apartment of her mother's widowed friend Rita, a rare woman on her own.[10]

One sign of Ruth's independence is her freedom to embrace clutter. Other women fiction writers, such as Margaret Atwood and Marilynne Robinson, have created memorable independent women characters whose cultivation of clutter and mess is an outright rejection of the values of good housekeeping, an inherited vestige of the cult of domesticity. I refer to the eccentric aunts in Atwood's *Lady Oracle* and Robinson's *Housekeeping*, both of whom function as alternative caregivers to the female protagonists. Kevin Melchionne has argued that "there is a uniquely feminist attitude to clutter and mess," which is explained as follows: "Women who have been trained to clean up after others and to take responsibility for the neatness of a home particularly relish clutter, presumably because it is the sign of liberation" (Melchionne 195; see Leddy as well).

From the point of view of environmental aesthetics, it is important to distinguish between "clutter" and "mess." The former, Melchionne

suggests, "retains some decorative intention," while the latter is characterized by a complete lack of method: "for the pure slob, there is no tidying because there is no underlying design which might orient it" (195). Ruth's apartment, it should be noted, is a model of cleanliness compared with the aunt's shabby, untidy and grimy apartment in Atwood's novel, or with the extremely dilapidated house that turns the notion of housekeeping literally inside-out in Robinson's novel. Her apartment is clean, though she takes no pleasure in keeping it that way—she "had yet to get anything besides sore knees out of washing her kitchen floor and she'd never seriously considered waxing it" (28).

In her article "The 'Industrial Revolution' in the Home: Household Technology and Social Change in the 20th Century," Ruth Schwartz Cowan discusses the ideologies connected to the new kind of housework women performed in the years following the first World War, ideologies which were rekindled in the years following the second World War for the purpose of "demobilizing" the female work force symbolized by Rosie the Riveter, and rechanneling its considerable energy back to where it was prior to the war, back into the home. The mothers of many of Schoemperlen's female protagonists, women who cooked and cleaned in "war-time houses," are frustrated inheritors of the homemaking ideologies Schwartz Cowan sees developing in the years following the first World War:

> After the war, housework changed: it was no longer a trial and a chore, but something quite different—an emotional "trip."

> Laundering was not just laundering, but an expression of love; the housewife who truly loved her family would protect them from the embarrassment of tattletale gray. Feeding the family was not just feeding family, but a way to express the housewife's artistic inclinations and a way to encourage feelings of family loyalty and affection. (195)

Schwartz Cowan refers to this investment of cleaning and other household chores with artistic and affective values as "the emotionalization of housework" (198). She posits that this phenomenon is a key cause of the "pervasive social illness" which formed the subject of Betty Friedan's influential critique in *The Feminine Mystique.* When women "found that their work was invested with emotional weight far out of proportion to its own inherent value," they were likely to wonder, like the friend Schwartz Cowan refers to in her essay, "How long [. . .] can we continue to believe that we will have orgasms while waxing the kitchen floor?" (198).

Schoemperlen's character Ruth suffers no such illusions about waxing the floor, this much is clear. And yet, written right into Schoemperlen's choice of words (Ruth "had yet to get anything besides sore knees out of washing her kitchen floor") is the suggestion, not rejected wholesale, that there *is* something to get from cleaning a floor, some additional satisfaction to be had, theoretically speaking, even if Ruth herself is not taking it. Whether this satisfaction is brought about merely by a clean floor, or whether the process itself is the sexually charged "emotional trip"

Schwartz Cowan describes matters little here—neither is available to her. Ruth does take pleasure in her clutter, if not in her cleaning: she "often thought that one of the finest pleasures of living alone was being able to watch all your belongings spread out around you and no one else could complain or rearrange them" (28). It is in light of this observation that her friend Mary's envious glances at everything, including Ruth's unmade bed, take on new meaning.

Ruth is not alone in taking pleasure in seeing herself reflected, figuratively speaking, in her belongings. A number of other Schoemperlen characters experience similar gratification from the material culture they possess. Living alone in "an elegant studio apartment over some old warehouse by the docks," surrounded by her own work displayed on the green walls, the photographer Evelyn in "What We Want," from the collection *Man of My Dreams*, lives in a space where she is "meeting herself every time she turns around," and "thinks it may well be the best place in the whole world" (30). Cynthia in "A Change Is as Good as a Rest" turns to the "reflective surfaces" in her apartment (mere/mirror surfaces?), including the canvasses she paints on, as well as the furniture and decorative objects she surrounds herself with, to see a clearer, more positive self-image. In the story "Innocent Objects" from *Forms of Devotion*, Helen Wingham's principal delight in her antiques is that they reify and reflect a pleasing image back onto herself in an apparently straightforward way:

> Helen bought these antiques for the moments of pure happiness they offered her each time she walked into a room and: there they were! Every day the sheer sight of them would give her a jolt of surprised satisfaction. It was like catching sight of her own reflection now in a store window as she walked through the city streets. (65-66)

In their complicity in generating the lack of control they experience, several of Schoemperlen's female characters seem to be adult versions of the narrator in "Clues." One such character is found in the uncollected short story "Still Life with Lover," which Schoemperlen later reworks and integrates, as the chapter called "Mountain," into her novel *In the Language of Love*. As a literary "still life," this story depicts little action, which makes its plot easy to summarize: A woman agrees to housesit at the home of her married lover while he is on a ski vacation with his wife, and, while in their house, she scrutinizes the couple's belongings. The housesitter, an artist named Joanna, both regrets and relishes the lack of control she experiences in the current situation. She reflects, "This trip had been planned last winter, long before she and Lewis became lovers. There was nothing she could do. It, like many things lately, was out of her control" (47). And yet, as she once made clear to Lewis, she prefers to play the tortured role of lover over what she thinks of as the blasé role of mistress, prefers, it seems, to be dramatically out of control, as long as she is out of control willingly and on her own terms, and thus paradoxically in control. In her mind's eye,

a mistress would be the very image of control, with the attendant material markers of bourgeois success: "well-dressed," she "would have her rendezvous pencilled into her leather-bound monogrammed appointment book." A lover, on the other hand, is not so "self-contained" (47).

What I mainly want to call attention to, however, is Joanna's intuitive awareness that Lewis and Wanda's things convey messages about the state of their relationship. In addition to feeling like she is close to Lewis when she is close to his things, she "feels them out" for inklings of whether he really will leave Wanda eventually. Things, in this story, are more important (more material) than people, who are portrayed as merely inserting themselves as other objects into the snug domestic still-life.

In the story's incarnation as "Mountain," Schoemperlen gives originally unnamed characters the names of those inhabiting the fictional world of her novel; hence "the husband and wife" become Lewis and Wanda, and "his lover" becomes Joanna, the novel's protagonist. Schoemperlen is also careful, of course, to modify certain material elements to dovetail with the new context. For instance, in the new context she changes the items on a desk, replacing office supplies with art supplies, to better reflect Lewis's occupation. Thus a former study becomes a studio. It is at once a familiar and strange transformation. It is familiar, of course, because it has its real life analogues that form part of everyday contemporary domestic experience. (One that comes to mind for me personally is when an office in the apartment I share with my husband

becomes my step-son's bedroom in the summer months.) The strangeness resides in the fact that Schoemperlen effects a change in the function of a single fictional room when it is inhabited by characters in another fiction.

Schoemperlen's texts effectively dramatize the ways in which social meaning is constructed either willy-nilly, or willfully and skillfully by individuals' interactions with and manipulations of material culture. One character who becomes expert in the manipulation of the messages of material culture is Cynthia in the humorously satirical story "A Change Is as Good as a Rest." What makes this story extremely interesting from a material culture standpoint is how overt and explicit the main character's specific manipulations of material culture are. As Matthew Johnson points out in *Housing Culture* (drawing on Daniel Miller's research in *Culture and Consumption*),

> we are all adept readers of material culture distributed in space; we can all monitor someone's occupation, status, class, gender, even their political views, quite accurately from a few seconds perusal of their homes and the material culture they possess, the objects they choose to put within that space. Further, we all know how to manipulate such impressions, creating our own identities and affiliations through our own homes and material culture. But we do so at the level of the

> implicit, the unspoken or rarely spoken, and the "taken for granted." (viii)

Cynthia, on the other hand, definitely engages in "impression management," to borrow a term from the field of consumer behaviour.[11] She is keenly aware of the power of objects to convey messages about their maker, purchaser, and/or user. Her actions and stated motives shed light on the process of self-fashioning via material culture which every individual engages in on a daily basis, albeit usually on a smaller scale. Telling the story of one woman character's transformation, Schoemperlen demystifies what is quite a mysterious, if not an especially miraculous, phenomenon.[12]

Following a string of failed romances, Cynthia has a revealing dream in which she sits "naked on an elaborate throne, a cross between a peacock wicker chair and a flower-festooned dentist's chair," surrounded by suppliant "alleged" friends and enemies sitting "cross-legged and humble on the cold stone floor" (218). This dream-image of herself, so comfortable in the seat of authority, inspires her to change her life in almost every aspect conceivable. Having found people, especially men, sorely lacking in their ability to reflect back to her a positive image of herself, she turns instead to things, which are more easily manipulated. "If I could not find a man to reflect me, perhaps it was time to concentrate on other reflective surfaces," she reasons (220).

Her motive for change is explicitly stated, through a parody of multiple-choice self-esteem quizzes:

B. I feel hopeless, helpless, and out of control of my own life.

1. sometimes

2. often

3. always (220)

She then proceeds to undertake a complete transformation in order to "generate feelings of control and accomplishment" (220). In the past, small scale manipulations of material culture—namely the planting of a garden, the organization of her photo album, and the alphabetization of her spices—fail to provide her with the sweeping sense of control she expects to experience as a "powerful person" (221). She therefore resolves to "change the whole picture" that is the collage of self-images she shows to the world (222). This involves changing the objects in which these images are materialized.

Her project of self-transformation (or re-creation) begins on a Monday with the making of a list, and includes, over the course of a week, a "new look," new name, change of occupation, diet and lifestyle, the disposal of old clothes and the purchase of new ones, a purge of "primitive" and potentially hazardous kitchen appliances and cookware, and, on Sunday, a day of rest. It is fitting that, since Cynthia's transformation plans begin with a dream featuring herself in a symbolically meaningful, stylistically expressive chair, those plans culminate in her resolve to throw out certain furniture and furnishings, and to replace them with acquisitions which better reflect her newly-fashioned self. Newly self-dubbed Xochiquetzal

after the Mexican goddess "in charge of all change and transformation" (223), she conceives of the further transformation thus:

> Come Monday I would tackle my whole apartment. My belongings, I figured, should be like accessories to the new me, accessories after the fact. Not only would I replace my cheap tattered posters, my fuzzy pink toilet seat cover, and my cute kitten calendar, but I would also throw out all my tacky furniture, my juvenile record collection, and my sadly unenlightened and generally misinformed library. What I wanted first and foremost was one of those intricate handmade dried flowered arrangements to put in the centre of my new coffee table which would of course be natural genuine 100% knotty pine. (225)

Styles of furniture change to reflect changes in the individual's relationships to society (Baudrillard 17). Xochiquetzal's relationship to patriarchal society clearly changes when she redefines herself as a "virgin again" (223), and opts to take care of herself instead of passively hoping to be taken care of by a man. "Reborn" into a sisterhood of wholesome "granola girls," she feels newly empowered. She consequently chooses to part with furniture and furnishings which place their user, symbolically speaking, not in the seat of authority, but rather in the canopy bed of girlhood. The epithets she uses to describe these material objects, "fuzzy,"

"cute," "juvenile," communicate in a kind of verbal shorthand that she has, in a figurative sense, outgrown them.

From another perspective, one could argue that she has seen the role of material objects in the dynamics of power relations. Her rejection of objects that associate her with other disempowered groups such as children, or the economically or educationally disadvantaged, is an attempt to resist social, economic, and gender domination. In "The Archaeology of Inequality," Robert Paynter and Randall. H. McGuire describe "the dialectic of domination and resistance" that is traceable in people's manipulations of material culture within a society. "Instances of everyday resistance rarely figure in the analysis of material culture," they note (15). Schoemperlen's "A Change Is as Good as a Rest" presents a fictional account of such "everyday resistance." Redecorating materializes the protagonist's intention to control the impressions she transmits about herself to herself and to others, and constitutes a form of "everyday resistance" to domination based on gender and social position.

Given the examples of new objects she will introduce, it seems that, besides creating the impression of control (the flowers are an "intricate arrangement"), she wants to create the impression of authenticity, naturalness, perhaps even "homeyness" in her surroundings.[13] Earlier in the story she declares, "No more of this halfway stuff for me: I wanted to go all the way: 100% pure or nothing" (224), affirming her intention to cultivate in her appurtenances the quality of authenticity, one of the "symbolic

properties" McCracken finds in "homeyness" (174). But as McCracken has shown, producing its effects in one's home is no simple task; notably, one of the terms applied to "unhomey" homes is "controlled" (170).

Cynthia's entire life make-over necessarily entails overhauling or replacing the things in her home which convey so many messages about the life she has become eager to leave behind. Her pronouncement that her "belongings [. . .] should be like accessories [. . .], accessories after the fact" telescopes two views of the household object. In the first view, her belongings only passively reflect the owner; they are mere accessories. In the second view, the view of household objects as material culture, they are not only shaped by the self that uses them, but in turn shape that self. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, authors of a study on the role of domestic objects in the construction of subjectivities, note that "things actively change the content of what we think is our self and thus perform a creative as well as a reflexive function" (28).[14] By invoking the language of criminal complicity ("accessories after the fact"), Cynthia acknowledges the complicity of these accessories in the construction of her new sense of identity. In doing so, she of course acknowledges their complicity in the formation of her "old" self as well.

This awareness points to her growing knowledge that the things she surrounds herself with generate effects, sometimes beyond the ones she intends them to have. At the end of the story, for instance, a canvas which she is in the process of preparing (she has lately become an artist) seems "to

have developed a mind of its own." Having "transformed itself," it produces an image of the protagonist to herself, seemingly of its own accord (226). Material culture objects, like the humans who produce and use them, can be manipulated and can manipulate. Like a criminal, they can betray the one who would work with them. Cynthia/Xochiquetzal, like all of us, runs the risk that, along with messages she intends to convey through the material culture in her home, messages she does not intend to convey may be communicated as well.

"Complete Quiet Benevolent Control"

The occupation of space is the first proof of existence.
— Le Corbusier (7)

For all her considerable attention to the "art of domesticity," Schoemperlen's writing inscribes a marked and characteristically feminist ambivalence about its value.[15] The protagonist of *In the Language of Love*, Joanna, expresses this ambivalence most clearly. In the chapter called "Citizen," she relates her conflicted feelings about expending energy on creating a well-ordered and pleasing domestic environment, in the process raising questions about the values associated with that practice, and about the power of material culture to reflect those values. She wonders, for one thing, if the meticulous home maintenance advocated by her mother is as important as it is ineluctable, or if it is merely "one of those trivialities which only shallow bourgeois people fuss over because they've got nothing more

meaningful to occupy their minds" (142). She wonders, too, about the relative importance of certain consumer and so-called "nesting" behaviours which she enjoys engaging in.

Alongside of these reservations, she nevertheless acknowledges deriving "an ardent sense of accomplishment, [. . .] such immense satisfaction," and a feeling of worth from performing such seemingly "meaningless" domestic activities and tasks as completing several loads of laundry, or buying fruit at the market and polishing it and arranging it, "carefully in the big wicker basket like a bouquet of flowers," for her family's aesthetic appreciation and consumption (143-44). Something as ostensibly mundane as "purchasing, carrying home, and then putting up in the kitchen three wicker plant baskets (multicoloured, mostly purple, pink, and turquoise, in graduated sized with hoop handles, flat on one side, to hang on the wall) can fill her with such pride of ownership, such joy of home decorating," that she cannot resist calling her husband at work to tell him about her purchase (143). Moreover, the mere sight of those baskets even weeks later never fails to elicit an approving smile from Joanna, who "likes them so much she goes back to the store and buys another set for the bathroom and this time they're on sale, twenty per cent off, and this makes her even happier."

The aesthetic pleasure generated by the kitchen basket arrangement also heightens the sense of enjoyment and fulfilment she and her family take from other domestic practices and experiences, and thus it performs

one of the functions of the "art of domesticity." The "process" of growing herbs and preparing meals with them, as well as the "products," namely the herbs and the meals they flavour, undergo "aesthetic enrichment," in Melchionne's terms.[16] Joanna is sure that "the herbs she snips from the plants she has put in these baskets taste so much better than they did when they were just sitting on the windowsill in square green plastic pots" (143). It is worth noting that Joanna is not the only one in her household to derive aesthetic enjoyment from her domestic endeavours. Upon beholding the fruit-laden basket, her son embraces and delivers a sincere compliment to his mother, evidence of his appreciation of both the edible still-life and the care she has taken to produce it. The spectacle of her son sitting at the kitchen table, gleefully chomping on one of each fruit, produces a feeling that is as rare in Joanna's experience as it is for Schoemperlen's other female characters: a blissful feeling of being in control. The scene she has set makes her feel "so confident, so clear, in such complete quiet benevolent control of her own small (but significant) corner of the world" (144).

Notably, Joanna's sense of having "complete quiet benevolent control" is not generated by performing any other *non-domestic* activity, including working on her (other) art, collage. At one point, in fact, she half-seriously supposes that her passion for paper is liable to make her "lose control" in the art supply store, "and then, for sure, they would have her taken away" (322). Granted, she "feels lighter (if not enlightened), clearer (if not translucid), calmer (if not downright serene)" while working on a

new non-representational collage made up of geometrical shapes and numbers, a departure from her usual story- or narrative-based work (280). But the feeling is short-lived. By bedtime Joanna has become so anxious about the possibility of having misplaced confidence in "the orderliness of geometry, the cleanliness of numbers, the luxuriousness of mathematics" (279) that she passes a dark night of the soul wondering about what really matters, or "*What Counts*," to quote the trenchantly significant title of a book she consults in her sleeplessness (281).

One cannot fail to note that those things Joanna desires, "orderliness," "cleanliness," "luxuriousness," are typically located in the well-maintained and comfortable domestic interior. Even so, she continues to be bothered by a haunting skepticism about the relevance of these mundane and very local activities and tasks, especially when she compares them to the problems that she recognizes need to be addressed on a global level. Joanna's ambivalence about the importance of certain domestic practices relates to her awareness that her mother's preoccupation with these domestic concerns grew out of a sense of powerlessness to effect change in the world outside her home. And Joanna does not want to inherit that disempowering legacy as part of her mother's fastidious approach to cleaning and home maintenance. Remembering her mother Esther's "extensive list of requirements for good citizenship" (137) causes her to reflect that Esther's view of good citizenship was less conventionally "civic-minded" than home-centred.

Having resigned herself to "a state of political impotence" (137) in the world beyond the home, it seems that Esther had resolved to assure her importance within it. Her attentions thus focussed led to a blurring between public and private expectations of good conduct. Joanna notes that her mother's notions of what it meant to be a "good citizen had a tendency to expand and accumulate until they bled into a correlative list of qualities necessary to be a good person. The borderlines between these two ideals were blurry and Joanna had trouble keeping track of the difference" (138). She worries that too much focus on piles of laundry and polishing pears will cause her to lose sight of the "big things [. . .], being good to the planet" (142-43)—not to mention being good at her art.

It is in fact somewhat typical for Schoemperlen's female protagonists to feel that other people are always the ones with talent. Stay-at-home and working women characters frequently offer stability and support to more mercurial artist lovers or husbands; in these situations the women typically harbour a low sense of entitlement themselves. Even an artist such as Joanna is uncertain and self-deprecating about being an artist in her own right, owing to the lack of parental encouragment and support she experienced while growing up. "What if she had had parents who believed in her? What if she had not had to spend most of her adult life struggling to believe in herself?" she wonders. "Even now, as a practising, fairly successful, professional artist, even now, when accosted in the art supply store by the over-eager salesclerk [. . .], she feels instantly guilty [. . .], as if

she had been exposed as a pervert who loves paint, glue, canvas, paper" (322). In a low self-esteem moment with her son at the grocery store, she debases herself as "an eccentric artist-type," when she feels she ought to be "like June Cleaver with her pearls and perfect hairdo first thing in the morning, not to mention her melodious voice and her infinite patience" (292). This comparison points up her anxieties about the demands of traditional gender roles and her conflicted attitude toward her own "artistic inclinations" (321), which are regarded as deviant because they lead her away from more traditional pursuits, such as looking beautiful and pleasing others. Joanna, like other Schoemperlen characters, feels that, when it comes to appearing like she's successful at filling the traditional female roles of lover, housewife and mother, there "must be a trick [. . .] that she is not privy to" (295).

Sometimes these women try to get close to men who seem to have creative talent, by casually picking them up like a curious instrument, or by holding on to them like a bad habit. Impressed by his "gravelly voice and acrobat fingers on his electric guitar," Joyce picks up Larry following his performance in the local Landmark Lounge, in the story "First Things First" in *Frogs and Other Stories* (96). Ruth in "The Long Way Home" picks up carpenter Martin MacDougal at the Aurora Hotel bar, and goes with him to his house, where any expectations she might have had that he'd show a talent for making either love or a liveable space are undercut by her quick scan of his domestic environment: "there were no curtains on the window

and no sheets on the bed" (41). In "Frogs," Val and her friend Annette "always sit [. . .] closer to the band" (19) in the local tavern. If Val can't "get [her] act together" (8), as her mother admonishes, she can at least appreciate and support an established one. Val also wants to be close to the aloof struggling writer, Simon (one of the "frogs" of the title), and would likely marry him, notwithstanding her disappointment that he has no talent for domesticity. The day he moves out they gather up his few things: "typewriter, papers, clothes. Considering he'd lived in the apartment for a year and a half, he hadn't accumulated or contributed much" (12).

With very few exceptions, Schoemperlen's female characters feel that other people possess the talent they lack. The one exception that does immediately come to mind is all the more striking because she is not posited as a "real" character, but one whose decidedly fictional status highlights her exaggerated self-confidence relative to Schoemperlen's other women characters, who are posited as manifestly material women. She appears in the story "Stranger Than Fiction," in which the narrator, who is a writer, creates a character named Sheila, a would-be Country-and-Western singer. "Having never been much bothered by either self-doubt or self-examination it did not even occur to her that she might very well be crazy or untalented," the writer comments on her creation (140). While Sheila is not at all typical in her confidence in her own talent, she strikes a chord with many of Schoemperlen's other characters in that she "wanted to be someone else"

(140). She wants to be someone with talent. And more than this, she wants to be someone with talent who is recognized for it.

Ironically, in both her unquestioned self-assurance about her own talent and her lack of attachment to a material domestic existence, Sheila most resembles Simon, the quasi-ascetic struggling writer in "Frogs." Together Simon and the "unreal" Sheila establish one antipode of an opposition that Schoemperlen establishes between the conventional notion of talent and what might be called a feminized notion of talent. The conventional idea of talent as inspiration, as available most fully to the cerebral ascetic who withdraws from the business of daily living in order to produce a cultural artifact, is contrasted with a notion of talent as involving both a cerebral and a distinctly material engagement with daily life, as likely to be expressed in the creation of ephemeral installations, or in literally consumable domestic products and spectacles as in the creation of works of so-called fine art. Schoemperlen's aim in creating conventionally untalented, but nevertheless gifted women characters is to expose the ways in which "limiting gender constructions conflict with male-based definitions of the artist," as Christine Hamelin puts it (745). Hamelin refers specifically to the female artist figure in the novel *In the Language of Love*, but such characters abound in Schoemperlen's writing, and often their less conventional talents go unrecognized, even by themselves.

Despite their frequent inability to recognize them as such, Schoemperlen's female protagonists do indeed possess talents. Sometimes

these talents are just budding, sometimes as yet undiscovered, and sometimes deliberately kept secret, not shared in any material way, or, instead, staged in the domain of environmental art. One encounters a noteworthy example of Schoemperlen's typically creative-woman-behind-the-scenes in an earlier collection of stories, *The Man of My Dreams.* Although Howard in the story "Tickets to Spain" is a playwright, and Miriam, his common-law spouse and the story's narrator, seems to have no occupation, she is the one who seems the more creative and more in control of the direction his play, if not their actual lives, will take. Indeed, Miriam's whims (such as their upcoming trip to Spain) and the dreams she relates to him each morning shape the content of Howard's play directly. "By proxy for Howard" she eavesdrops in restaurants for tidbits of interesting conversation (64).

Significantly, she has the power to make Howard rewrite details of setting, simply by making changes in the decorative details of their house: "At first the bed was covered with a Guatemalan blanket but then my mother sent us the Log Cabin quilt which has been making its way around my family for decades, and the Guatemalan blanket got rewritten" in Howard's play (60). Miriam regularly monitors Howard's progress on the play; while cleaning his study, she listens to his many dialogue rewrites on his tape recorder. She does this in defiance of his injunctions to the contrary. "In Howard's room, according to law, I do not touch or remove anything else" besides dirty dishes and cigarette butts, Miriam resentfully

admits. However, her "touch" is everywhere perceptible, in the rooms of their home and the matching sets in Howard's play, even in the dialogue she mentally assigns his characters. There is no doubt when all is said and done that Miriam's imagination is the preponderant, truly creative force in their household (64).

In "Trick Questions," Janice, a young woman in a May-December marriage to an astronomy professor, feels like she has little control in their marriage, a state of affairs she, significantly, finds reflected in her lack of control over their place of residence. She "struggle[s] to master her resentment over the fact that she and Sam lived in a small stucco bungalow with tiny dark rooms and a wet basement," while Sam's ex-wife Solange occupied the "hundred-year-old five-bedroom limestone [. . .] mansion" complete with "sunroom, and a walk-in pantry the size of Janice's kitchen and living room put together" (205-06). Janice's general sense of a lack of control is exacerbated when she becomes pregnant, and must deal with a swelling body and unpredictable emotions. After the baby is born, Sam worries that his happily maternal young wife is "neglecting her intellect" (201), so, upon his suggestion, Janice enrolls in a painting class. She has internalized disregard for women's traditional caregiving and homemaking work to such a degree that, as much as she loves this work, she opposes it in her own mind to what some regard as loftier pursuits, such as living as "a true intellectual totally immersed in academia," like Sam's ex-wife, Solange, a philosophy professor who "had never much troubled herself with the trivia

of daily living" (64). As usual, Schoemperlen is careful to preserve the reader's sense of ambivalence about domesticity in her portrait of Janice: it should be noted that even the cerebral Solange stands in awe of her culinary skills.

Evangeline Clark in "The Spacious Chambers of Her Heart," from the collection *Forms of Devotion*, is similarly creative in ways that go unnoticed by the more turbulent male artist in her life. A voracious reader, she has an affinity for words. She also has a "secret love" for the mutable qualities of light which seems every bit as refined and developed as her celebrated husband's sense of colour. Evangeline's love of light goes unrecorded, however, and does not result in the production of a typically aesthetic material artifact. Instead, all of Evangeline's loves are manifested in her manipulation and control of the domestic environment. She "kept the air in her house [. . .] always filled with music," which functions as a kind of soundtrack for her emotional life: "country and western for hurtin', rock and roll for dancing, jazz for the nerves, blues for the blues, and classical for catharsis. And especially there was Mendelssohn for the middle of the night, to smooth the wrinkles out of the weight of the world" (82). She also "took great pains to keep her house (his house, their house) full of color" (84). She extends this manipulation of colour to her personal dress, both to please and to appease her husband, the "volatile genius" (83):

> Every morning her husband sat in his blue shirt at the breakfast table, surrounded by the still life she had so carefully arranged:

> the yellow egg yolks, the red jam, the brown coffee, the purple lilacs on the windowsill, his red lips, white teeth, chewing and smiling. And while he admired the orange juice shot through with sunlight, Evangeline was left breathless and intoxicated with the pleasure of her own power. Of course she didn't put it to her husband that way. Instead she said she was smiling because she was happy. (84-85)[17]

The scene, very similar to the one with Joanna and her son from *In the Language of Love*, is yet another version of the search for "complete quiet benevolent control," a search conducted by characters primarily through the practices of environmental aesthetics, through their ambivalent concerns for and attention to the communicative power of objects of the home.

Small Comfort

> *It's no accident: women take after birds and robbers* [. . .]. *They go by, fly the coop, take pleasure in jumbling the order of space, in disorienting it, in changing around the furniture, dislocating things and values, breaking them all up, emptying structures, and turning propriety upside down. What woman hasn't flown/stolen?*
>
> — Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1098)

Schoemperlen's latest collection of stories, *Forms of Devotion*, constitutes a formal departure in her work, every bit as much as it marks a reprise of the ambivalences wrestled with in earlier collections, as well as in the novel *In the Language of Love*. The tone of the stories in this collection signals a modal shift in Schoemperlen's writing, away from the kitchen table

realism of earlier collections, toward parodies of various genres, including sentimental fiction ("The Spacious Chambers of Her Heart"); the fairy tale ("Count Your Blessings: A Fairy Tale"); and the murder mystery ("Five Small Rooms: A Murder Mystery"). Like the *Malahat* essay at the beginning of her career, *Forms of Devotion* functions as a kind of metacritical guide to reading her corpus—which is to say that, in various stories, she comments in a self-conscious manner on her own concerns about and strategies for writing fiction. For example, one of the stories in this collection, "How To Write a Serious Novel About Love," is a humorous, tongue-in-cheek crash-course in creative writing for the aspiring author eager to produce the kind of novel Schoemperlen might have written herself.

If the tone of her stories has changed, so has her technique, most notably in her inclusion of a vast assortment of illustrations, ranging from anatomical diagrams to emblem drawings to advertising cuts, some of which appear as in their original sources (which are carefully cited by the author in a list at the end of the collection), some of which are collages created by Schoemperlen herself. In every case, they form an important part of each story. Functioning very much like material culture itself, certain illustrations of objects seem to generate and shape the narratives about them, rather than merely illustrate or reflect them, as is more conventional in fiction featuring illustrations (much children's fiction, for example). In the book's dedication, Schoemperlen credits her young son, Alexander, with providing her with the originating impulse to include "pictures." She

thus acknowledges and reclaims the value of an attention to things themselves, one often dismissed as puerile, materialistic, or fetishistic.

Her preoccupation with things themselves, with houses and the objects that fill them, with the material contours of domestic space, is even more apparent in this collection than in her earlier writing; indeed it is visible.[18] It is also clear that she wants the title, *Forms of Devotion*, to be considered in its full polysemy. The expression meaningfully comprehends not only the methods by which people express their faith (devotional practices take many forms), but also the forms which result from devotional practices—the things that take shape, are formed or arranged by people through and because of their devotion, when the term is understood as a heightened, almost sacred sense of attendance to specific elements of experience. Implicit in the phrase is also the idea of devotion *to* forms. The narrator of the "how-to" story just referred to advocates such devotion in a number of prescriptives to aspiring writers:

> Be specific. Give all objects the dignity of their names. You owe them that much at least. (106)

> Remember that ordinariness is only in the eye of the beholder. Remember that *ordinary* does not mean *simple* or *dull*. You, as writer, have the power to reveal the extraordinary which lies within (behind, beneath, or beyond) the ordinary. Pay attention to details. Hone your vision. Rekindle the marvel,

> the innocence, and/or the menace of the mundane. All things have presence. Study the particulars of tables, sidewalks, ceilings, bricks, curtains, crockery, knives. (108)

> Describe the cup: the white bone china so thin it is nearly translucent, the perfect curves of the handle, the delicate pattern of red and gold around the saucer. (108)

Replacing the pronoun "You" with "I" in the preceding passages transforms these prescriptives into procedures. Schoemperlen here comments on some of the forms her own devotion to forms actually take, in her fiction. The entire collection reveals much about her devotion to forms—especially to the forms of domestic material culture. It also revisits the uncomfortable rocking chair of ambivalence that occupies the centre of every one of the fictions that Schoemperlen has furnished to date.

The story "Innocent Objects," for example, presents a character, Helen Wingham, who seems to possess what many of Schoemperlen's characters desire: independence, the material comforts that wealth makes available, a certain (though not specifically feminine) mystique. Yet she is in love with her objects, showing a kind of devotion which forecloses on personal growth and relationships. She lives her life by proxy, entirely through the objects which she has carefully accumulated over the years, using second-hand souvenirs as replacements for travel and adventure, and antique photo albums filled with images of strangers as replacements for

family. In Helen Wingham, Schoemperlen presents an extreme case of devotion to forms, a devotion that, at times makes her "too dreamy, floating aimlessly through the rooms of her sturdy house, anchored to the real world only by the solidity of the house itself and by the high-frequency resonance of the objects with which she filled it" (62). However, the feeling of control that Helen typically enjoys in acquiring and surrounding herself with "treasures" (67) makes her no less vulnerable to life's small disasters: she is the victim of a petty robbery which shakes her sense of security but offers the possibility for freedom, flight, release from the possessions that she gathers must be "just furniture after all" (66).

The seduction of these many small rooms for Schoemperlen, as a writer preoccupied with the idea of control, is that, contained as it is, the small room seems to offer the possibility of controlling experiences along with space. The fixed boundaries of domestic spaces make them seem controllable. But ultimately, Schoemperlen's message seems to be that the sense of control that one might experience from manipulating domestic material culture, or practicing "the art of domesticity," is at once satisfying and not enough. This latest collection suggests that, not only is Schoemperlen uninterested in ironing out the ironies and resolving the ambivalences related to her association of domestic practices with control, she is committed to exploring them further, in greater material detail. In *Forms of Devotion* she expresses a more light-hearted (more experienced?) resignation to this ambivalence, introducing, not without a degree of irony,

the concept of "faith," where once the topnotes in her fiction were only frustration and fear.

We might fold things up here, in fact, by returning to one of her earlier stories, "The Look of the Lightning, the Sound of the Birds," in which the narrator has an epiphany triggered by, of all things, linen. At the end of a day spent morbidly fixated on a local news story about the discovery of a pair of human legs in a garbage bag by the highway, seized by the fear that such things happen and no one is safe, the narrator of this story comes to an important realization. Let me describe how it happens.

While idling at an intersection during the drive home after work, she takes notice of a flock of pigeons as it ascends from the top of an apartment building that recalls for her the site of yet another woman's murder some months before. When the light changes, she avoids a running shoe "lying like a dead animal in the middle of the intersection," is reminded of those severed legs again, and prays that her son will escape hurt and unhappiness in his life. However, she reflects: "There is no way of knowing, there is nothing I can do. For the first time I fully understand that having given birth to him guarantees nothing, gives me no power, no shelter, no peace save that to be found in the sound of the birds" heard through the open car window—which she hears, significantly, as a domestic sound, "like sheets on a clothesline, drying in the wind" (243).

Her realization is both unsettling and liberating: unsettling because it means that certain things remain beyond her control, and liberating

because that means she can surrender some of her need for control. However, for this narrator, as for many of Schoemperlen's other female characters—certainly the teenage narrator of "Clues," Cynthia in "A Change Is as Good as a Rest," and Joanna, protagonist of *In the Language of Love*—such an awareness might offer small comfort.

notes to chapter four

1 In his 1991 *Books in Canada* interview with Schoemperlen, Larry Scanlan brings the discussion around to the "relentless pessimism" that the critics pick up on in her work (12).

2 Another short story collection, *Hockey Night in Canada & Other Stories* (1991), contains stories previously published in *Frogs* and *Hockey Night in Canada.*

3 This focus is anticipated in the three epigraphs concerned with the subject of fear, one of which is the *Webster's New World Dictionary* definition of the terms "fear," "dread," "fright," "alarm," "terror," and "panic" (227).

4 For example, John Ruskin compares the stanza to "the chamber of a house" in his *Elements of English Prosody* (327).

5 For instance, the narrator of "She Wants to Tell Me," a lonely woman whom "other people feel compelled to confide in" (64), and who craves but invariably is denied the opportunity to reciprocate, fabricates familiarity with others by imagining the lives they lead, using some of the objects they possess—for instance those "junky but revealing accumulations" (62) stored on their balconies—as clues to those inaccessible lives. Visualizing the interior of the apartment of a neighbour who has come over on a whim to partake of a few glasses

of wine lets her imaginitively follow her neighbour back to her place, in this way controlling her departure and concomitant emotional withdrawal, creating a sense of intimacy that otherwise would not exist (70-71). Another notable example is the unnamed teenage narrator of "Hockey Night in Canada," who lets her imagination run wild thinking what the apartment of her parents' widowed friend, Rita, would look like: "The apartment would be quite small, yes, and half-dark all the time, with huge exotic plants dangling in all the windows [. . .]. The furniture was probably old, cleverly draped with throws in vivid geometrics. The hardwood floors gleamed and in one room (which one?) the ceiling was painted a throbbing bloody red" (31). The apartment's imagined exotic appeal is linked in the teenager's mind with the idea of a woman living alone, an "arrangement" which seems both novel and "more and more attractive" as a future option the more she learns about the trials of married life (31).

6 A few other examples elaborate the pattern. *Double Exposures* (a book in which the passage of time itself is marked by changes in the décor of the family's house) ends on a solemn note when the narrator returns with her new baby for a visit, and her parents, despite having laid yet another coat of paint on the walls, haven't changed their colours; they are as emotionally bankrupt as ever. The narrator recognizes "the new white fridge" and "the bright blue kitchen" as a form of "camouflage," used to conceal her parents' general dissatisfaction, and that, despite the fresh brightness of their kitchen, "they too will change back into themselves" before long (101). In "Notes for a Travelogue" Sharon reflects on some of the things couples do to try to prevent the dissolution of their marriage. They

might, she considers, "buy a new house, build a rumpus room in the basement, put blue wallpaper up in the bathroom [. . .]" (44). In "Histories," Anne and Peter, a couple who appear like their neighbours to be "more or less content" are growing apart. They live in a new house built by Peter, a carpenter, and eat a meal which highlights their emotional distance from one another at a "blonde maple table which Peter built when they first moved in. The white dishes are like coins on the blue tablecloth" (67). The latest house of Mavis and Danny Singer, a couple with a storied past but a projected happy future, is "breezy-looking, a curious cool blue with white trim. It is an old house made over inside and out" ("True Or False" 69). The narrator of "The Man of My Dreams" recalls a Polaroid snapshot of a perfect domestic moment shared with her estranged partner. Here is her description of the image which poignantly speaks to her loss: "We kept this picture on our bulletin board for years. I study it now: egg in the egg-cup, a half-eaten piece of toast on the Blue River plate on the wicker placemat on the blue tabletop [. . .]" (23). Penny in "What We Want" has put down new blue linoleum flooring in an attempt to make her mobile home a more recognizably domestic space, because she feels trailers should "look like real houses instead of like trains" (7).

7 Those who examine material culture in literature are especially drawn to representations of collections, it seems. For recent essays on the subject, see Edgar and Wilkinson.

8 Collections "represent and enact the achievement orientation of the collector." So argue Russell Belk and Melanie Wallendorf in their article, "Of Mice and Men: Gender Identity in Collecting" (23).

9 Tupperware's recent collectibility is no doubt part of the vogue of 1950s popular culture, but must also be owing to its inclusion in the collections of modern art and design museums since the 1950s. In "Tupperware: Product as Social Relations," Alison J. Clarke examines the production and, through the phenomenon of Tupperware parties, women's consumption of this commodity.

10 There is in fact good reason to believe that the unnamed narrator of "Hockey Night in Canada" is a younger incarnation of this Ruth who has chosen to live on her own. For example, the best friend in "Hockey Night in Canada" is Mary Yurick. Mary Yurick is also Ruth's friend in "The Long Way Home." The name of the town where they grew up, Hastings, is likewise the same in both stories, creating one of Schoemperlen's many double exposures.

11 "*Impression management* studies how an individual will manage symbols to create certain impressions in the minds of others" (Wilkie 460). See *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, by Erving Goffman, the sociologist who who defined the concept. Interestingly, Cynthia is just as interested in creating impressions, or "reflections," of herself *by and for herself* as she is with creating impressions in the minds of others. Put otherwise, she is equally intent on seeing herself as she is with being seen by others in a certain light.

12 That this radical transformation is accomplished in a week is an obvious allusion to the biblical account of creation in the book of Genesis.

13 In his study on the cultural character of "homeyness" Grant McCracken reports that, for those attempting to capture the "homey" effect, the "only acceptable material for furniture construction is wood. [. . .] Furniture styles are traditional, home crafted, colonial or antique. [. . .] Plants and flowers are objects that contribute to the homeyness of a room" (169-70).

14 Delle makes a related point in asserting that material culture objects "both express and produce human behavior" (11).

15 I borrow the phrase "the art of domesticity" from Kevin Melchionne's essay "Living in Glass Houses: Domesticity, Interior Decoration, and Environmental Aesthetics" (17).

16 As Melchionne explains it, this art "involves the aesthetic enrichment of domestic process (i.e. labor itself) and domestic products (rooms, meals, moments)" (197). The stakes are raised somewhat, though, when one treats one's domestic work and creations as art, as Joanna's case demonstrates. When the aesthetically enriched (and literally elevated) basil plant dies she "feels like a failure" (143).

17 Noteworthy is the tone of this story, which might be described as mock-sentimental. The language sounds Edwardian, in keeping with the passage on the human heart from the 1901 edition of *Gray's Anatomy*, sections of which appear as epigraph to the story and, with illustrations, as intertext accompanying the descriptions of each of Evangeline's four loves.

18 At one point the working title of the collection was in fact *The Visible World.*

Ribbon (Conclusion)

What amazed me was the sheer volume of objects, remnants of lives, and the way they circulated.
— Margaret Atwood, *Lady Oracle* (158)

When the house is finished, death comes.
— Turkish proverb (qtd. in Gillian Tindall, "The House of Fiction" (232)

Wrapping up the present work is not as simple as picking out a ribbon from the bag of bows I keep for wrapping gifts. As is typical for a research project of this size, especially perhaps for an interdisciplinary one which forays into several fields of study, new things have continued to emerge on the landscape of my research, like houses in a ribbon development extending outwards.

I will briefly describe the most significant of these, my very recent discovery of the material source for the cabin inhabited by Else Rainer in part 5 of *The Butterfly Chair*. An example of vernacular architecture, this late-nineteenth-century cabin is the structure which typifies "traditional" architecture and values in the novel, and, like the butterfly chair, is one of the material forms that Quednau uses to examine gendered attitudes toward concepts of comfort, history and authority. I unearthed information about the cabin's actual existence and location approximately a year after

first picking up on two clues dropped by Marion Quednau in the novel, specifically her description of this place as a "farm without indoor plumbing, one of the oldest in [. . .] Hastings County, the one farmed by a series of strong-minded settlers, the Tivys, the Goldbolts, the McGregors," and her vague reference to a book about this farm that Else had shown Dean, "a collection of letters written by a lonely pioneer woman who'd been saddled with five children and the cares of the farm when her husband had died from the kick of a horse" (182).

While the character Dean "showed little interest in the story," I, the reader, became utterly intrigued, and intent on discovering if there was indeed an actual cabin on which Quednau based her fictional representation. My initial identification of the book that Quednau alludes to, *Your Loving Anna: Letters from the Ontario Frontier*, was exciting in itself, because this publication includes a verbal description of the spatial arrangement of the cabin's interior and a sketch of its exterior, items I was later able to confirm that Quednau had seen and which figure in her own fictional representation of the cabin (see fig. 6, page 210).[1] Several letters of inquiry eventually and serendipitously led me to the nephew of the author of *Your Loving Anna*, Richard Trounce, who is currently researching his family's history and Coe Hill homestead.[2] He provided me with a detailed description of the floor plan of the cabin, based on a sketch by his mother, as well as details about the building's material construction and the allocation of space within it while it was inhabited (up until the early 1930s).

He also supplied photographs and information about the cabin's condition thirty, fifty, and ninety years ago (see figs. 7-9, pages 210-211), and described its current "foundation-only" state.

I was also able to confirm that Quednau had viewed the site in person prior to depicting it in her novel. She recollected for me her memories of the property she had visited in the mid-1970s, when the cabin itself was still standing, though structurally unsound, and the land was overrun with "seedling trees, long grasses, brambles," returning to scrub. Quednau saw the Leveridge homestead first, then read Tivy's book, and later returned to the cabin for a second look around, inside and out. She recalls feeling, during this second visit, that this was "a place where things had happened," where there was rich material evidence of history, of story (Telephone interview). Evidently, she drew on her personal, physical encounter with the uninhabited pioneer homestead and on her reading of *Your Loving Anna* to form her depiction of the place where a female character of her own creation discovers "what that pioneer woman had left behind" ("Butterfly Chair" 184).

From the oral accounts and pictures an image emerges of a place that recalls Al Purdy's poetic description of "The Country North of Belleville,"

> where the farms have gone back
> to forest
> are only soft outlines and
> shadowy differences—
>
> Old fences drift vaguely among the trees
> a pile of moss-covered stones

gathered for some ghost purpose
has lost meaning under the meaningless sky (75)[3]

While the actual property might fit Purdy's description, the place as imaginatively reconstructed in *The Butterfly Chair* has recovered some of the meaning that is under erasure with the return of the farm house to forest, and under threat of becoming "lost," like the "pile of moss-covered stones" (an unmarked grave?) in Purdy's poem. This spot that is, to use Quednau's phrase, both "on the outskirts" of a small Ontario town and on the outskirts of cultural memory (as the difficulty of my own digging for information about it testifies) experiences new life in the novel (*Butterfly Chair* 183).

The real-life cabin was once a "living room," an example of domestic material culture shaped by and actively shaping the lives of its inhabitants. Though going wild, it is still living in this sense, for it has also shaped the final chapter of Quednau's novel. Finding its way into fiction, it "circulates," like the objects that *Lady Oracle*'s Joan Delacourt sees crowding the antiques stalls on London's Portobello Road. As it circulates, new meanings attach to it, so that, in its material and fictional incarnations, it is not only a repository of "remnants of lives" but of cultural memory.

This dissertation has touched on some of the ways in which fictional representations of contemporary domestic material culture convey messages about how our interactions with the objects that surround us contribute to identity formation, and to gender relations. I hope to have shown that, paradoxically, each writer's preoccupation with the surfaces of everyday life

(one shared by Munro, Wallace and a whole coterie of others), is also a preoccupation with depths, with the meanings embedded in seemingly mundane objects, including

> the odds and ends we've no idea
> what to do with, the jumble we just can't
> throw out, stuffed into rooms
> full of corners (Wallace, "Man with the Single Miracle" 40)

Barfoot's second novel would seem to be "a reminder not to trust surfaces" (Howells 173), while Schoemperlen writes with humour and ironic distance about discovering the self in reflective surfaces. Quednau's Else Rainer finds that women's "closeness to the surface of things" (53) has provoked distrust and contempt.

The narrator of Schoemperlen's story, "A Matter of Perspective," reminds us that, unfortunately, one "can never see all sides of an object at once. Sometimes there is no time to figure out all the angles" (126). Reading the fiction of Joan Barfoot, Marion Quednau, and Diane Schoemperlen from a material culture perspective, I hope that, together, we have figured out, and figured in, some of them.

Figure 6: Sketch of Leveridge cabin in Louis Tivy, *Your Loving Anna: Letters from the Ontario Frontier* (106).

Figure 7: Leveridge cabin photographed from the North side, circa 1911, by Eddie Leveridge.

Figure 8: Leveridge outbuildings, circa 1946.

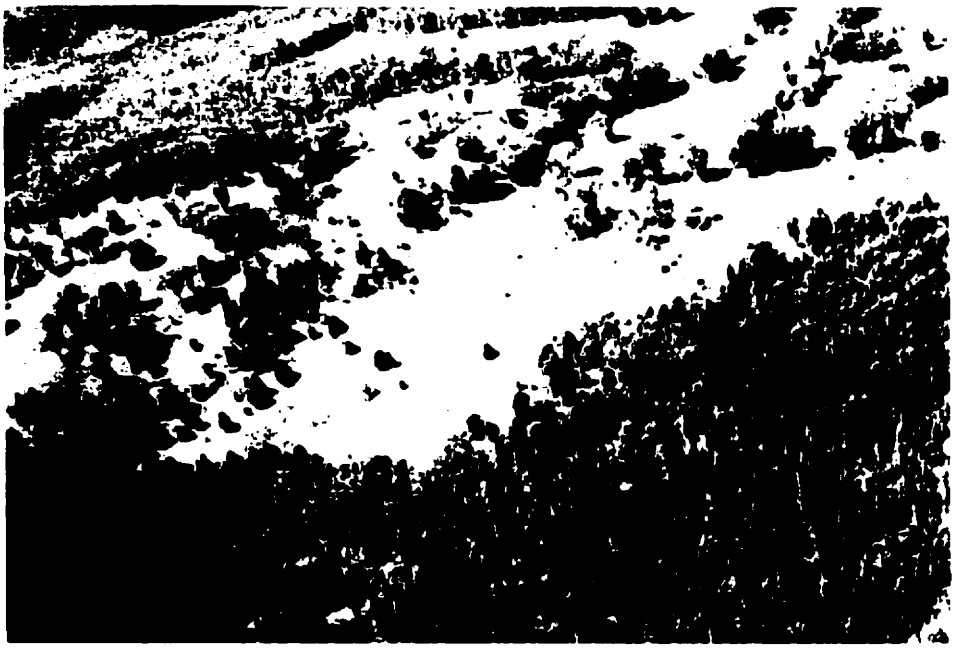

Figure 9: Aerial shot of Leveridge property, 4 Oct. 1970, by Richard Trounce. The cabin, located in the upper right quarter, is nearly indistinguishable from the surrounding tree growth.

notes to conclusion

1 Quednau depicts the cabin, which has been dilapidated for nearly half a century, as functional, imaginatively restoring it for the purposes of her fiction. A glance at *Your Loving Anna* also reveals that Quednau plays with the historical facts in her fictional account of events related in the book: it was not Anna Leveridge's husband who was killed by the horse, but rather her son-in-law, who had four, not five, children, one of whom wrote the book containing his grandmother's letters.

2 Trounce has collected and compiled the writings of his uncle, Louis Tivy, and added to them a preface, introduction, and photographs. His manuscript contains the full text of *Your Loving Anna*, as well as his uncle's fifty two newspaper articles on the subject of pioneer life on the family farm in Coe Hill, originally published in the *Leamington Post & News*. At present, the 400-page-plus manuscript, "Pioneer Days in Ontario" is under consideration at an Ontario press. The writings of the second generation to grow up on the farm, the children of Anna and David Leveridge, also survive. Trounce is now compiling a volume of his aunt Lily Leveridge's nine small books of poetry, and is

in possession of the diary of Frank Leveridge (the youngest son of the Leveridge's eight children), which describes daily life on the farm for the years 1908-1910.

3 Coe Hill, in the Township of Wollaston (specifically mentioned in Purdy's poem), is about sixty miles north of Belleville.

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