

## Frances Mateychuk's Quilts : Mapping a Place

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Résumé de l'article

La réalisation d'une courtepointe peut être bien plus que la simple fabrication d'une couverture de lit à partir de chutes de tissus. C'est, pour Frances Mateychuk, cette fermière de la Saskatchewan, comme pour bien d'autres femmes du Canada, une manière de traverser les longues heures de l'hiver. À travers le témoignage de Frances, le geste de fabriquer une courtepointe prend tout son sens. Plus qu'un objet utilitaire, la courtepointe peut devenir, au sein d'une communauté, un outil de socialisation avec les voisins, et parfois même un moyen de "déranger" les stéréotypes sexuels, lorsque les maris se mettent à coudre, par exemple...

Les courtepointes de Frances Mateychuk tracent la carte de sa vie et de son espace. Elles constituent l'héritage qu'elle laissera à sa famille et à sa communauté et par lequel on se souviendra d'elle.

# FRANCES MATEYCHUK'S QUILTS : MAPPING A PLACE<sup>1</sup>

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*In the following article segments of text in the voice of Frances Mateychuk are interwoven with my own voice.<sup>2</sup> Correspondence between the two voices is not always sequential nor even present; this is deliberate, as I want Frances' voice to speak parallel to my own, rather than the subordinated to the authoritative voice of the writer. My representation of her experience thus becomes closer, I hope, to the open-endedness of lived experience. While it is difficult to minimize the scholar's "voice-over," it is a necessary task if ethnography is to truly become empathic "dual-tracking" where I, the inquirer, consciously bring my own interests and assumptions into conversation with the person or materials with which I am engaged.<sup>3</sup>*

The quilts of Frances Mateychuk came to my attention when I stopped at a farmhouse in rural Saskatchewan in response to a hand-lettered sign announcing "QUILTS 4 SALE." This farm, which appeared to be Ukrainian (a large whitewashed stone near the road bore red and black flowers painted in imitation cross-stitch design) was on a main highway one hour east of Saskatoon. The woman who answered my knock, Zonia Pidlisny, was in the midst of making bread and cabbage rolls. When I expressed interest in seeing her quilts, she took me upstairs to a small spare bedroom where a metal bed was loaded with folded quilts. All were brightly coloured and made of fortrel fabric.<sup>4</sup> Most of them, the

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1 A version of the article was read as a paper at the Undisciplined Women Panel, a joint session of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada and the Canadian Women's Studies Association, Learned Societies Conference, Ottawa, Ontario, June 3, 1993.

2 The texts of Frances Mateychuk's voice are based on transcriptions of audio- and video-taped interviews I conducted during the summers of 1991 and 1992; I have retained her speech patterns but edited them into thematic units.

3 The concept of dual-tracking is described by Michael M. J. Fischer, "Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory," *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1986, p. 193-233.

4 "Fortrel" is one of numerous trade names for the synthetic, polyester fabrics developed during the 1940s. They became popular for use in clothing in the 1960s and 1970s due to their easy care (polyesters could be machine-washed, needed no ironing, and did not wrinkle) and durability. Frances Mateychuk uses the trade name, "fortrel," to refer to all the heavyweight, polyesters with which she makes her pieced quilt tops; "polyester," technically the generic name, is the term used by Frances to refer to a lightweight, crepe polyester which she uses exclusively in the making of "Puff" quilts (see below). Trade names were often substituted for the generic name in popular usage. I will retain Frances' usage and meaning throughout this article.

woman explained, were made by her friend, Frances Mateychuk, also Ukrainian, who lived several miles off the main highway on a gravel road.

*I'm bored in winter and you can't crochet that much and you can't embroider that much . . . are you going to be pushing dust all the time in the house? No! As soon as our work starts holding up in the fall I start to quilt. November. October. When it first snows. We have no other chores in winter, we have just straight grain . . . when it's very cold I don't like being out; it's scary. It doesn't matter how good the vehicle is, they freeze when it's cold.*

I took several photographs that day of both women's quilts, but it was Frances' I returned to track down the following summer. I found the Mateychuk bungalow, set back from the gravel sideroad on its quarter section (160 acres) of prairie, atop a rise of dry, mown grass (Fig. 1). Small red out-buildings as well as farm implements dotted the slope in front of the house. But for a straight windbreak of trees behind the house the site was bare and unlandscaped. Functional, I thought, and revealing nothing of the colour and energy I'd seen in the quilt tops. What I remembered of Frances' quilts was the bold contrast of bright and dark fabrics in most of her pieced tops and the occasionally unexpected colour combination (a border of checked red, blue and yellow surrounded the subtler mauves, browns and white of the central motifs in a *Butterfly* quilt). The use of fortrel I remembered with alternating repulsion and fascination; it was a fabric I had used to sew clothes for myself two decades ago but which I now found distasteful enough to initially prevent me from buying one of Frances' quilts, despite the appeal of their colours and patterns. I was not unfamiliar with quilts, having grown up in a Mennonite community where they were made in homes and churches, exchanged as gifts at weddings and births, donated to charities and passed between generations. I had made several quilts myself and recently written the text for a book that included, among others, quilts by four generations of women in my family.<sup>5</sup> I remembered few fortrel quilts though, as it was the "fancy" quilts, with their fine, even stitching, that were discussed and displayed by the women in their family and church communities. Informally, from my mother and aunts, I had learned the values of traditional quilting.<sup>6</sup> What

5 I had been commissioned to write the text for *Quilts of Waterloo County: A Sampling*, (1990), by Marjorie Kaethler, a Mennonite woman who had selected the quilts and who was herself an avid quilter. While the book uses the display conventions of popular quilt books — colour reproductions of quilts isolated on a white page as if they are paintings on a gallery wall — I attempted in the text to introduce something of the contexts and meanings quilts have for their makers and users. "Genealogies" of quilts (an idea suggested to me by Pauline Greenhill, who read an early version of the manuscript) are provided to clarify the paths quilts took as they were passed along the generational lines of inheritance that are so important within the Mennonite community.

6 In her study of traditional quilting groups in southern Indiana, Mary Stevens found these same values to be widespread; large quilting stitches and the use of synthetic and/or mixed fabrics were disdained (in "Women's Work: Traditional Quiltmakers of Southern Indiana," Diss. Indiana University, 1989, p. 16).

fortrel quilts I could vaguely remember in the Mennonite community were “everyday” ones, composed of large squares of fabric pieced together and tied with yarn, rather than quilted with thread, through a thick batt to a backing; these were called “comforters” rather than quilts as they lacked the surface stitching that is, technically, the “quilting.” Such comforters were used to add extra warmth in the winter on a bed that was covered with a better “everyday” quilt, or they were donated to charities and overseas relief projects. Fortrel quilts were, in the hierarchy of Mennonite quilts, at the bottom of the pile.

Frances Mateychuk’s quilts differed from both the “fancy” and “everyday” quilts with which I was familiar. Many of her patterns, *Double Wedding Ring*, *Grandmother’s Flower Garden*, *Log Cabin*, involved complex cutting and piecing and were used among Mennonite quilters to make “fancy” quilts. These patterns took more time and care to construct than the simple, tied, fortrel comforters that I recalled. And Frances always quilted, rather than tied, the pieced top to the backing fabric. My attempt to place Frances’ quilts into my framework was frustrated further when I examined the backs of her quilts: Frances chose to finish these colourful, bold tops with printed bed sheets that were often marred with the flaws that had designated them “seconds” when she had bought them. The stitching joining this bottom sheet to the pieced top was large and uneven, a factor necessitated, to some extent, by the thickness of fortrel which prevents the accomplishment of fine stitching. It was this limitation, I suspected, which could explain why fortrel had never become popular among the Mennonite quilters I knew who valued very fine stitches (as many as 15-20/inch, in comparison to Frances’ 3-4/inch) even more than overall design. When I queried Frances as to whether some of her quilts were “fancier” than others, or of more importance to her, she responded emphatically, “No! They’re all equal. All my quilts are equal. I cherish all of my work.” She was aware that some quilters valued fine stitching and that the use of lightweight cotton would allow her this. However, she expressed no interest in changing to cotton or cotton/polyester fabric, even though she was beginning to suspect it would help her quilts sell.

*Zonia said she made this spring a quilt from cottons for her cousin or somebody. And she said, “Never again from cottons! I’ll stick to my fortrels!” I know some people prefer cotton, but I don’t see why. See what makes a difference. With fortrel it doesn’t show if you stretch it a bit. Some people, they don’t match the corners too carefully, and it shows! I try to do the best I can. And I think these colours [in fortrel] are so much prettier than the cotton ones. Cottons don’t give the brightness, you know. And I don’t think they would last as long. What’s the use of making a quilt and putting it in the cupboard? No use!*

Despite my having been thoroughly inculcated with traditional quilting values in my home, when I went on to study fine art at university I learned very different standards of excellence. Quilts were never considered “art” in any of my classes (I will look at some of the reasons for this below). Even when I studied

“Textile Arts” the design vocabulary we were taught had more to do with contemporary, abstract painting than with traditional textile practices, one way in which fabric art has attempted to gain legitimacy within the world of fine art.<sup>7</sup> The focus on composition and design in my art education sensitized me to overall visual effect and taught me to value this more than meticulous workmanship. In this way, my formally-learned standards accord with those of the contemporary, avant-garde quilt artists Mary Stevens mentions briefly, who value colour, form and unique, interpretive design (all surface qualities) more than fine hand work.<sup>8</sup> That I hold both value systems in tension is evident in my attraction to Frances’ quilts: their “excellence” is more that of overall design than traditional workmanship, although I looked for the latter but consistently failed to discover a way to fit her quilts into my “traditional” categories.<sup>9</sup>

Since learning to quilt thirteen years ago, Frances has made nearly 100 quilts, all of fortrel; she has no children to whom she can give her quilts so at least 50 of them have been given away to friends and a few to relatives (a niece and her two children). When I first met her, Frances had placed some of her quilts on consignment in a local craft store and had others for sale at Zonia’s house on the highway; but she had sold only one. Despite the fact that her quilts seldom sell and she can recover little of the money that she invests in them, Frances continues to produce between five and ten quilts each year. I was intrigued by this level of creative production. The quilts of Frances Mateychuk reminded me of the diverse forms that quilts can take and hinted at the ways in which they can clarify differences within women’s culture, breaking the stereotype of women and what they do as uniform, and essentially feminine. Yet I present Frances’ work and

7 Exhibitions of contemporary textiles (the *Lausanne Textile Biennale*, for example) continue to reveal Modern art’s primary interest in formal artistic concerns: colour, texture, space, etc. Many of these textile pieces replicate the large scale of Modernist artworks and thus fit easily into the white, cubic galleries designed for Modernist painting and sculpture. The institution thus further legitimates textile works as “art;” it is interesting, however, that textiles are most often shown with other textiles, seldom alongside painting or sculpture in other media. While textiles have attempted to become “fine art” by mimicking the formal characteristics of dominant artworld movements, avant-garde artists and art historians have also turned to textiles, quilts in particular, as a *source* of formal design. A 1971 exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, “Abstract Design in American Quilts,” is noted by Robert Bishop as having inspired renewed interest in quilts (in Stevens, p. 21). Similarities can be drawn between quilts and the paintings of numerous American Abstract artists (Mark Rothko, Jasper Johns, Robert Indiana, etc.); one of these, Robert Rauschenberg, collaged pieces of old quilts into his painted works. All of these male artists achieved fame for their innovative art.

8 Stevens, p. 48-49, 220.

9 My mother unexpectedly provided me with a solution: I showed her and two aunts videotapes of Frances and her quilts, expecting them to judge the quality as “poor,” given the standards I knew them to hold. “They’re like comforters,” my mother said, referring to the loose stitching and fortrel fabric, “only nicer designs.” When she later visited me in Saskatoon she purchased several “to use at the cottage” where the standards of home are relaxed and practicality is all-important. There they will replace the worn-out, “everyday” quilts, currently in use.

words not because I think she is *atypical* and therefore worthy of note, but because the kind of quilts she makes are in fact *common*, but overlooked, as are the words spoken, in this case by Frances, about them. For socioeconomic and geographic reasons Frances and her quilts exist at the margins of North American artistic culture. Because they conform to neither traditional nor contemporary, avant-garde standards of quiltmaking her quilts are even marginal within the subculture of quilters. Yet, rather than representing the demise of quilts from some "authentic" model, Frances' quilts are evidence of a distinct response to the requirements of her time and place and the realities of quiltmaking itself.<sup>10</sup>

*If I get going I'll start to quilt at eight in the morning, seven in the morning 'til two, three in the morning. I plan in bed my colours! Once I sat 'til three o'clock in the morning trying to figure out this pattern [Attic Fans]. There was a pattern in a book but it did not show how to put it together. Just the picture, and it wasn't very good. So I sat there and my husband says, "Leave it, throw it out and that's that!" In the morning I had it set on the table when he came down. It's against my religion to sit idle, I told my husband!*

Quilts belong to that area of culture frequently defined as "folk art" or "craft" and, like other art objects so categorized, are often depicted in popular representations as static and unchanging (articles on quilts appear almost exclusively in women's, craft or heritage magazines; they are seldom the subject of serious study)<sup>11</sup>. Both terms obtained their current meanings in the nineteenth century, when faith in progress and evolution legitimated change and innovation as inherently valuable in all aspects of culture, including art. Given this bias, the art of other classes and other cultures which seemed "to obey past or even existing conventions . . . doom[ed] it," in the eyes of those defining the terms, "to stagnation and failure."<sup>12</sup> As folklorist Henry Glassie has pointed out, folk art does change, although its rate of change may differ from what our culture has come to accept as normative for art. Glassie concludes his extensive discussion of the many ways in which folk art has been defined *in contrast to* fine art by pointing out that many popular and scholarly distinctions are too simplistic and

10 Belief in an "authenticity" of the past is popular evidence of anthropology's "salvage" paradigm which James Clifford critiques while also noting its continuing prevalence in many ethnographic and travel accounts that see historical changes in material culture as destructive (see "The Others: Beyond the 'Salvage' Paradigm," *Third Text: Third World Perspectives on Contemporary Art and Culture*, 6, 1989, p. 73-79).

11 A number of doctoral dissertations that consider quiltmaking as a more complex cultural phenomenon have recently been completed in Departments of Folklore. See, in addition to Stevens, Joyce Ann Ice, "Quilting and the Pattern of Relationships in Community Life," Diss. University of Texas at Austin, 1984, and Margaret Susan Roach, "The Traditional Quiltmakers of Northern Louisiana Women: Form, Function and Meaning," Diss. University of Texas at Austin, 1986.

12 Larry Gross, "Art History as Ethnography and Social Analysis: A Review Essay," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, 1:1, 1974, p. 54.

easily reversed. We in fact distinguish the two, he suggests, by our point of view: that which is *ours* is fine art, and that which is *theirs* is folk art.<sup>13</sup>

Rozsika Parker has explored the distinctions between “art” and “craft” from the perspective of art history and gender politics. The differentiation between these terms coincided historically, she suggests, with the development of the idea of femininity. That art made with thread should emerge as intrinsically unequal to art made with paint, hides the fact that the real issue was *who* made it, and *where* it was displayed (women’s art at home or men’s art in public). “When women embroider [or, I would add, quilt] it is seen not as art but entirely as the expression of femininity. And crucially, it is categorized as craft.”<sup>14</sup> Hidden in this distinction is the belief that fine art can be defined by medium (which in European cultures since the Renaissance has meant illusionistic painting and sculpture). Labelling work which does not fit these categories “craft” or “folk art” has created a hierarchy of terms that are used to accord less artistic worth to work made by women, as well as to objects made by lower-class members of our own society, and to the art of nonEuropean peoples.

*I'll sell a quilt for anywhere's from a hundred to three hundred dollars. Depending on the pattern, how difficult it is. And I think that's very, very reasonable! Think of all the hours! Really—500 hours! It doesn't pay. Just to keep on buying stuff. 'Cause the material costs lots — the backing sheets, the polyester filler, threads . . . around \$50 for a quilt. It costs quite a bit!*

*How do I support my quilting? From the farm. We have two more quarter sections. But what can you do with grain just two dollars a bushel now?*

Frances’ fortrel quilts, accumulating in the basement of her rural prairie bungalow, fail to meet either the collector’s notion of what constitutes a “traditional” quilt or current ideas of “authenticity” promoted by marketing networks within the quilting community itself. Quilting publications, workshops and classes in the 1980s were aimed at middle-class women with a certain amount of leisure and money, and fed on the nostalgia in popular home decorating for “Country” designs. One popular quilter from this period, Jinny Beyer, publishes books that promote the use of traditional pieced quilt patterns but using special border-print fabrics she has designed and copyrighted for this purpose; new “medallion-like” motifs are created as the horizontal borders are cut up and carefully stitched into circular forms. Beyer argues that quilts were never really “scrap-bag projects” and promotes the use of new, 100% cotton, print fabric, only rarely solid colours, for both the front and back of a quilt.<sup>15</sup> These directives are

13 Henry Glassie, *The Spirit of Folk Art: The Girard Collection at the Museum of Folk Art*, New York: Henry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989, p. 92-228.

14 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, London, The Woman’s Press, 1984, p. 5.

15 Jinny Beyer, *The Quilter’s Album of Blocks and Borders*, Virginia, EPM Publications, 1980, p. 11-12.

antithetical to Frances' visual aesthetic: she makes extensive use of solid colours, freely mixing them with occasional plaids and prints. Beyer also suggests hand-sewing the entire quilt since hand-piecing the top (a task most quilters began to do more efficiently on sewing machines when they became common household items in the late 1800s) allows greater accuracy in matching corners and border-print fabrics.<sup>16</sup> When I proposed this idea to Frances she exclaimed with mild outrage, "Who's going to stitch by hand! I'd be there *forever!*"

A "Puff" quilt is a little square . . . you get to pleat as you sew [demonstrating] . . . three sides, and you leave one side open and you fill it [with polyester batting]. But don't overfill it! If you use a lot of filler, like that green one in that other bedroom—I used seven bags! That's heavy! Too heavy. I didn't know how much to use . . . Practice. It takes time (Fig. 2).

Zonia made a "Puff" quilt in red and black—is that ever beautiful! She made it for her cousin. The lady supplied the materials—she had a red sheet she didn't like. And it's satin! Is it ever beautiful! Red and black and it looked gorgeous!

Frances obtains all the fortrel she uses for piecing her quilt tops free from friends or for minimal cost at second-hand stores and garage sales. She knows of local quilters who buy new fabric for their quilts and might spend as much as \$300 on materials alone, an expense she considers high and unnecessary. Less popular as a material for clothing since the ecological 1980s when "natural" fibres (cotton, linen, silk, wool) became fashionable, fortrel is still the fabric of choice for those who value practicality over fashion. Among many middle-class, urban people, fortrel now carries the stigma of being out-of-date, nonorganic and "lower-class" (its durability and cheap availability in second-hand stores makes it the necessary choice of those with little income). It is seen as "tacky," "gaudy," and "in bad taste," judgements that imply more genuine materials exist elsewhere. Collectors overlook quilts made of synthetics, positing an authenticity of the past when quilts were made of cotton or wool. Yet those quilts, like the contemporary polyester quilts, simply reflect the availability of fabrics popular at any given time. There is currently no shortage of fortrel for, as Frances notes, one of its virtues is that "it will last *forever!*" Still, she has nearly depleted her own supply (until the clothes she currently wears are relegated to the scrap box) and that of her immediate neighbours; she will now travel several hundred miles to pick up boxes of fortrel collected for her by friends who live at some distance.

16 These new criteria are described in Jinny Beyer, *Patchwork Patterns*, Virginia, EPM Publications, 1979. Many of the Mennonite women with whom I spoke in southern Ontario have recently taken quilting classes, know about "Jinny Beyer quilts," and have produced the kind of quilts I describe here. Most of them have the economic means to do so and frequently commented on the new standards they encountered in these nontraditional settings (Quilter's Guilds, classes offered through commercial fabric outlets), standards which even the best quilters in their traditional church groups, they confessed, could not match.



*This is what will sell [Frances points to a “multi-colour” quilt like the one she sold]. This kind of colours — all kinds of colours — matches everything. Quilter’s Guild in Saskatoon were telling me that. I’m using scraps that’s left over. I don’t make a plan. I sew up a row, unless there’s two colours too close together, kind of spread them out. You wouldn’t want two blacks together . . . well . . . [holding a completed strip of dark squares against the edge of an incomplete quilt] . . . maybe nobody would notice it. If I haven’t got enough, like in here — for one colour I had to put two colours. Nobody sees it!*

*I should’ve used a little darker green here I think . . . and this is a little too light. But you use what you have! . . . I don’t know if you call it conservation or what, but I like doing it! I don’t waste anything!*

Even before her fabric was “hard to come by,” Frances made use of all her scraps. In addition to what she calls her “more complicated” pieced tops (those which make use of quilt patterns obtained from books or friends), Frances invents “multi-colour” quilts (her term), specifically to use up the scraps created from cutting out the larger shapes needed for the pattern-based quilts. The “multi-colours” consist of squares or triangles as small as one inch and might be randomly joined or follow a simple “pinwheel” or “nine-patch” pattern of larger squares. Looking at one of these Frances commented, “I really like this one! It’s kind of cluttered and kind of . . . gets your eyes!” Her aesthetic is more intuitive than conscious or articulated. Since the “multi-colours” use up the leftover pieces of what was already scrap fabric, they are priced lower than her “more complicated” quilts. “The tinier pieces, I don’t care . . . Well sure it takes time, but I don’t throw out pieces.” Her pricing reveals that her enjoyment of the visual effect of this quilt is subordinated to the value she attaches to the harder-to-get, large scraps of fabric needed for a more colour-coordinated quilt which might also require more wasteful curved pieces. The extreme thriftiness of these “multi-colour” quilts contributes to their lower price. “If you can iron it you can probably use it too,” Frances quoted her husband as saying; he is in fact the one who rips open the seams of the old fortrel clothes and irons the pieces flat. Frances has made one quilt entirely of fortrel belts that her husband opened, flattened and cut into shorter lengths ready for her to sew (Fig. 3).

*Quilt Almanac, Lady’s Circle, Quilt World. Stitch and Sew is the one I really like. We go to the States . . . they have more there than they do in Saskatoon. But books are very, very expensive. I quit buying books ‘cause I spent about \$500 on books. That’s enough!*

*That pattern, [Friendship Link], came from Drayton Valley, Alberta. See we travelled a lot by bus. Made friends all over. They were on the bus trip . . . Now we visit back and forth. So we were visiting and she was making a quilt like this and I really loved the pattern . . .*

Scholars of women's art have seen in quilts a nonhierarchical assemblage of fragments; they have suggested a parallel between this and the quality of women's time which, if not oriented toward a career but to a traditional domestic setting, is often fragmented and multi-directional.<sup>17</sup> Frances' scrap-bag quilts are worked on in the hours available between other household and farming activities. They map her time as well as her household space since quilts, or aspects of the production of quilts, occupy nearly every room of the house. The double beds of the two upstairs bedrooms that open off the front rooms of the house are covered with quilts; if the bedroom doors are left open (as they were on several of my visits) the bright tops are clearly visible. Quilted fortrel pillows are prominently displayed on the brown sofa that curves around a corner of the living room. A recently acquired second sewing machine sits against the back wall of the dining room, small squares of fabric ready for sewing beside it; the dining room is where Frances prefers to quilt in the winter when the basement becomes too cold and damp (the other sewing machine is open in the basement and ready to use in the summer "when it rains"). The basement is where most of the production and storage of the quilts occurs: boxes of scrap fabric ready to be washed are on tables in the large rec room; more boxes of fabric that have already been sorted are stored in cupboards alongside canned fruits and vegetables. Small piles of fabric pieces, cut and ready for sewing, accumulate on tables throughout the basement, both winter and summer. A metal chest under the staircase in the rec room stores many of Frances' completed quilts; another chest in the spare basement bedroom contains both completed quilts and incomplete tops. The two metal-frame beds in the basement guest room are covered with pieced tops that have not yet been quilted (the edges of fortrel fabric, unlike cotton, do not fray and so the quilt can be used before its seams are enclosed by a backing); almost half of the quilts Frances has in storage are of this "incomplete" type. More unfinished tops are stored in a closet in the spare bedroom. Frances seems in no hurry to finish these tops, using them as they are and annually adding more to her collection.

Composed of hundreds of pieces and organized into many centres, the quilts are also ideal maps for the broader spatial networks they serve to mark. The actual fabric of the quilts may have been clothing worn by herself, neighbours, friends or relatives. Patterns for quilts are collected on trips and from friends who quilt, copied out of their magazines and taken home. In the winter, neighbours come to quilt in the large living room of the Mateychuk bungalow, working on one of Frances' quilts or one a neighbour might bring to have finished. The day of quilting ends with an evening of cards and drinks, ensuring that all who work are rewarded for their labour. As a "salvage craft" such quilts are the hallmark

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17 Sheila de Bretteville, "A Re-examination of Some Aspects of the Design Arts from the Perspective of a Woman Designer," *Women and the Arts: Arts in Society*, 11:1, 1974, p. 117-118, in C. Kurt Dewhurst et. al., *Artists in Aprons: Folk Art by American Women*, New York, E.P. Dutton, 1979, p. 127.

of rural life where avoiding waste and making much of limited resources are important values. Quilting also fits easily into a rural lifestyle where belief in the goodness of one's neighbours and a strong sense of community encourages visiting and labour exchange. The quilts themselves eventually become objects of exchange — sometimes traded for other goods or simply given as gifts. In a small photo album Frances keeps pictures of some of the quilts she has given away; there are pictures as well of Frances and her husband and neighbours quilting in their living room (the men, unlike their wives, have their faces turned away from the camera).

It was Virginia Woolf who suggested that women's art resembles a diary, a desk, a tote-bag.<sup>18</sup> Frances' quilts begin in similar spaces: scraps in boxes and closets, patterns in a suitcase ("it was Pete's uncle's, when he was secretary for the church; he took this suitcase around with him"). When she is planning a quilt, magazines and fabric scraps spill across the busy medallions of the brown basement carpet (Fig. 4). Frances' work as a quilter is nomadic: it does not require its own space or one space only. Rec room, dining room, living room, all become sites of production. Her "nomadism" is, however, confined to the house, and the suitcase that once moved through the outside world on official duties, is stationary. Yet what it contains — the hundreds of pictures of quilts each composed of hundreds of pieces of fabric — suggests an energy that can't be suppressed. Kathy M'Closky cites a quilt made up of 10,000 pieces as an example of the movement and activity denied women in the world, taken to an obsessive extreme in one quilt.<sup>19</sup> Because quilts fit easily into the space of a house and the traditional ideology of femininity, they are suitable creative outlets for women who, for various reasons, might not wish to cross the boundaries of conventional gender roles.

*These are all I gave away. Two of these (Diamond Log Cabin) . . . I gave this one away (Cornflower), it's gone for a wedding present, two years ago. This one went to Edmonton (Star and Tumbling Blocks). This one . . . I don't even know who has it! . . . This one went to Ontario . . . I gave this to the neighbour. This one her daughter got . . .*

*Her, I gave maybe six to her. But she knits. I don't knit so she does knitting. This one my niece got, and her two children [got one each]. That's my hairdresser! She cuts my hair all the time so she has to get something! I can't remember who all I gave to! I gave too many away! Some relatives . . . but friends are first!*

18 Virginia Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, Leonard Woolf, ed., New York, Harcourt, Brace, 1953, p. 13, in Rachel Blau, "For the Etruscans," *The New Feminist Criticism*, Elaine Showalter, ed., New York, Pantheon, 1985, p. 279.

19 Kathy M'Closky, "Thread of Life: Ties that Bind," *Fibre: Tradition/Transition*, Windsor, Ontario, Art Gallery of Windsor, 1988, np.

*How many quilts I gave away! And I sold a few . . . but how many I gave away!  
But I'm tired of giving. Because, god! it's costing me a fortune!*

The sheer volume of quilts that Frances has made and given away points to their function as more than utilitarian objects. While quilts literally keep people warm, they are layered as well with social and symbolic “warmth.” The emotional warmth represented by a quilt is difficult to commodify, to translate into dollars and cents. Lewis Hyde observed that many traditionally “female” professions in our culture (child care, social work, nursing) “all contain a greater admixture of gift labour” than male professions (banking, law, engineering) and do not pay as well.<sup>20</sup> The gender inequality in these professions is in part due to the nonquantifiable emotional element involved in them (what Hyde has called the “gift” portion of the labour), a quality women in our culture are assumed to embody more than men. Hyde argues for the necessity of gift labour — for keeping parts of our life out of the marketplace where commodity exchange engenders no corresponding social bond between people — but points out what feminists have long recognized: these labours must become “human,” not just “female,” tasks.<sup>21</sup> The feeling bond established by gifts can amplify the tension between individualism and community which is particularly acute in our culture, because gifts carry elements of obligation as well as spontaneity. Gifts push us toward community, whether we are eager or reluctant for it.

The differences between Frances’ and my perceptions and expectations of community became increasingly apparent as my interaction with the Mateychuks entered a second summer. Initially, Frances’ comments indicated that she saw me as a prospective buyer, or at least a writer who might bring attention to her work in her community.<sup>22</sup> Since my research would not “repay” her in this way, I wanted to thank her in practical ways for the hours of time she gave me: I brought her fortrel from Saskatoon second-hand stores and duplicates of the photographs I took of her quilts; when my mother and sister were visiting, we went to see Frances’ quilts and I was glad when they purchased three of them, leaving Frances with \$500. These “payments,” I felt, helped balance my “debt,” as *time*, to me, is the most valuable asset and one I have too little of. For Frances, however, these exchanges seemed to only pull me further into her social network of “friends.” She would call when her garden was producing too many vegetables, expecting me to drop everything and come collect my “gift.” That I had a career, even in the summer, was incomprehensible to her. Once, when I was too busy to make

20 Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property*, New York, Vintage Books, 1983, p. 106.

21 Hyde, p. 107.

22 Frances initially thought I was writing for *The Western Producer*, a rural newspaper popular in all three prairie provinces, which includes a biweekly supplement, *Western People*. Although not my original intention, I would like to do this as one way to address *her* audience, in addition to mine.

the hour drive (that I knew would include an hour-long visit as well), she was clearly disappointed, but then called in the evening, announcing herself with the question, "What size bag you want for the peas? Two cups or four cups?" Rather than seeing them go to waste, she'd picked, podded, blanched and frozen the peas for me to pick up later; when I protested her excessive generosity she dismissed me: "Well, what are friends for, eh?"

The boundary of the group which thinks of itself as "one body," sharing, if not "blood," similar values and lifestyle, usually determines the limit of gift exchange. The gift itself might even function to define and establish this community — Frances' quilts that are given away outline a network of people who, more than likely, share her tastes and values. Although I had not bought a quilt, my family's purchase of her quilts and my husband's enjoyment of gathering wild berries with the Mateychuks, pulled me part way into this shared value system. But I did not entirely fit — to Frances, I seemed inexplicably preoccupied with things less important than harvesting food and visiting friends. The item used in gift-exchange with friends can become a commodity when it is exchanged with strangers. Thus my family, like the man travelling from Saskatoon to Winnipeg who stopped at Zonia's farmhouse and bought one of Frances' quilts for his wife, paid the requisite \$100 or \$200. Because my position is ambiguous, I too exchanged money for the quilt I helped complete this past winter when I finally decided I would like one.

*I believe there was a lady inquired . . . She's opening a craft store in Saskatoon. She inquired of my sister if I wanted to put quilts in . . . I said definitely! Well, I don't use all of them and I enjoy doing it. When I started I wasn't thinking of selling them. I didn't think I'd ever make so many.*

*And a lady from B.C. [British Columbia], she appraised this one [Golden Wedding Ring] and she said \$600. She said her husband bought one for her and he paid \$1500. But she said it's not half as nice . . . I didn't ask [if it was made of fortrel] . . .*

Because quilts are made by women and carry the emotional symbolism of caring and nurturance which stereotype and trivialize them as "feminine," quilts can never demand their monetary worth for the time involved. Frances is happy for the money they bring her even though, as she notes, "it doesn't pay!" (consider 500 hours at even minimum wage!). For this reason, and because they are seen as having a role in perpetuating notions of femininity, some feminists have rejected all needle-arts as restrictive means for keeping women oppressed, suspicious that they can be too easily celebrated as symbols of "women's art," their double-edged nature denied. Parker notes this dilemma, then moves out of the impasse by seeking to discover ways women have used embroidery, for example, as a source of pleasure and power. That quilts provide Frances with these rewards is evident in her enthusiasm for quilting, which can't be contained and literally spills across her house as she makes the quilts. Quilts allow her to

“negotiate the constraints of femininity” and provide her with an expressive outlet that is not threatening to the social order of her place and class. As Parker concludes, “Sometimes the secondary gains, or the ways women make meaning of their own, are covert indeed.”<sup>23</sup>

*This one, I have to tell you . . . This one my husband made! First one. He made the blocks. I sewed them together. He cuts. I pin . . . I think he's kind of proud. A bit. You have to ask him.*

*In laying out colours, he's better at it than I am. I like when he lays out the colours. He helps — unless he gets balky! Then he reads. Or watches that idiot box!*

In an interesting role reversal, Frances' husband, Peter, has, in recent years, begun to quilt: first, to do the quilting with the husbands of the women who come to finish the quilts in their living room; later, to prepare the fabric for Frances by ripping the seams, ironing them flat and then cutting out the shapes she has marked with a pen.<sup>24</sup> “He cuts. I sew. Unless he gets balky. Then I cut myself,” Frances explained. Two winters ago Peter made a quilt, a simple *Maple Leaf* pattern in maroon, navy and black-and-white check fortrel that Frances had selected (colours closer to typical men's clothing than any of Frances' other quilts). Frances told me this information, with a twinkle in her eye, as she unfolded the *Maple Leaf* quilt from the chest where it was stored. When I later mentioned to Peter that I had seen his quilt, he flushed and said lamely, defensively, “I don't care that much. There's nothing to do in winter . . .” Like the men who turned away from the camera in the photograph of the quilting, Peter was initially embarrassed to be portrayed to an “outsider” as a man who does a task so stereotypically “feminine.” Parker observes that men who do needlework are assumed to be “pious, prim and conformist,” quoting a statement from a British newspaper of 1979 which equated the two percentage of British men who embroider with the same percent who attend church regularly.<sup>25</sup> After several visits with the Mateychuks, Peter showed me with some pride the second-hand sewing machine in the dining room which he had just bought for himself for \$50 at an auction. While his enthusiasm seemed to be about the machine itself and the good price he'd paid, it revealed as well his commitment to quilting. Frances had told me that the winter before he had sewn about one-quarter of the 20,000 “Puff” quilt squares needed for the nineteen quilts they had made for a neighbour. Nevertheless, quilting is represented by both of them as Frances' work; the farm, as Peter's.<sup>26</sup>

23 Parker, p.11,13.

24 Stevens interviewed men who quilted in southern Indiana, all husbands of quiltmakers (p. 56). I have spoken with other quiltmakers on the Canadian prairies who mention the same fact, always describing it as a “winter” activity that husband and wife do together.

25 Parker, p. 1.

26 I could not help but note, from my feminist vantage point, the symmetry of a second sewing machine in the house to parallel the second combine in the shed outside that France drives during wheat harvest!

*These are my second try of quilts I made [Grandmother's Flower Garden, 1980]. It's never been quilted yet. Looks good without being quilted on the bed. It will eventually get quilted but I don't know when.*

*Last winter we never quilted one because we were doing for our neighbour "Puff" quilts. Nine "Puff" quilts. Plus I made some tops. But I never quilted any.*

*Rainbow, Missouri Daisy, Golden Wedding Ring have been on the beds for a while — before these "Puff" quilts we made last winter. The "Puff" quilts are more cuddly to sleep under. They're not hard like a quilt — the more stitching there is the harder the quilt. A "Puff" quilt cuddles up around you.*

In a culture and social class where gender roles are publically maintained along clear, traditional lines, the crossing of boundaries is normally private information and downplayed or not mentioned outside of the home. Erving Goffman's distinction between "front" and "back" regions of culture and cultural performance offers insight into when such boundaries can be crossed. Goffman's "back regions" are similar to the backstage of a theatre where performers prepare themselves for public presentation (in "front regions"). Within the home, for example, there are "back" regions such as bathrooms and bedrooms where we prepare ourselves for "front" rooms and places that exist beyond the walls of the house. Analogously, I suggest that "home" itself is a "back" region *vis à vis* the larger culture, especially for men who are expected to perform their primary role in public. By extending Goffman's spatial metaphor, I would like to further suggest that winter, on the prairies, is a temporal "back region" when the visible, monetary task of grain farming can't be performed. Weather (weeks at a time of -30 C) confines both men and women to the house where different roles might be enacted. Whereas the performance of an individual in a "front" region (in public, in summer, to an outsider) is "an effort to give the appearance that his activity . . . embodies certain standards," in a "back" region "the impression fostered by the [public] performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course."<sup>27</sup> Peter, subject to my outsider's eye, like the men caught before the potentially public eye of the camera, turned away and renounced his unconventional behaviour, despite the fact that quilting relieves boredom in winter and offers unspoken, though enacted, satisfactions. It was only after several visits, including an afternoon picking "saskatoon" berries that ended with a shared meal at the Mateychuks house, that I had become enough of an "insider" for "back region" behaviour to be safely revealed.

*I was supposed to take these outside today to air them out but it's so darn windy! These two didn't get aired out yet . . . just set back in the cupboard. I air them at least three times a year, or four. Once in the spring, twice in the summer . . . and the fall. See, they smell musty. A bit. It says in the book to air them out.*

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27 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959, p. 107, 112.

*I'd say we quilt around five in a winter. Then make some tops as well. With quilting your fingers get sore. You have to rest in between. One time they wanted me to come to Prud'homme to quilt, a senior's group. But I just couldn't. I was walking with fingers like this! — they were raw! Fortrel is very hard to quilt. The finger you push the needle with, the needle kind of gets stuck into your skin . . . I couldn't go that time because my fingers were too sore. But they heal!*

During the five or six months of prairie “winter” when they cannot farm and are largely confined to their house, the Mateychuks quilt. This activity is interrupted once a season with a two-week bus trip to a warmer climate in the southern States. Tourism, Victor Turner has noted, provides “structurally necessary, ritualized breaks in routine that define and relieve the ordinary.”<sup>28</sup> Using Turner’s formulation of structure and antistructure, Nelson Grabum has gone on to show ways in which the “stay-at-home who participates in some creative activity... shares some of the values of tourism in that recreation is involved that is nonordinary and represents a *voluntary* self-indulgent choice on the part of the practitioner.”<sup>29</sup> As a very labour-intensive process, quilting allows the Mateychuks to meet the needs of their own and their communities’ strong work ethic (‘staying at home and *not* working is considered improper for normal people . . . [who] are labelled “hippies,” “bums,” or even “welfare chisellers”’<sup>30</sup>). Yet the fact that it is nonordinary work, “gift labour,” as we have seen above, and outside the volatile commodity-exchange system to which their summer farm work is especially vulnerable in the 1990s, that makes quilting leisure activity, rather than real work. Turner notes that leisure is largely an urban phenomenon where it complements and rewards work; he adds, however, that in rural communities where agriculture has been industrialized (as it was on the prairies in the prosperous 1960s and 1970s), leisure, with its aspects of “freedom from” ordinary structure and “freedom to” enter symbolic worlds of diversion and play, has entered as a pleasurable counterpoint to a rationalized economy.<sup>31</sup> Modern leisure activities, existing between periods of normative structural behaviour, contain the possibility of experimentation with forms and ideas as well as with social relationships. Hence Frances can spend long hours each winter puzzling over new combinations of colours and designs to make vivid objects that are ostensibly practical but more indulgent and pleasurable than most of her other domestic duties. Men can quilt in a leisure time (winter) and space (the home) as they could not if quilting took place in the time and space of their “real work” when they would feel constrained by conventional gender expectations. Turner

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28 Cited in Nelson Grabum, “Tourism: The Sacred Journey,” *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, Valene Smith, ed., Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania, 1989, p. 23.

29 Grabum, p. 24.

30 Grabum, p. 23.

31 Victor Turner, “Variations on a Theme of Liminality,” *Secular Ritual*, Sally Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, eds., Assen/Amsterdam, Van Gorcum, 1977, p. 41-42.



identifies the human need for both structure and antistructure as essential for social and psychological well-being though ill-provided for in modern culture.<sup>32</sup> Quilting, a leisure activity that results in a concrete, visible object embodying something of the maker's personality, provides Frances and Peter with a seasonal break from the routine of their larger, structured existence.

*I crochet. And I cross-stitch [from kits]. I like it, but too expensive. And hard on my eyes. For such a small picture and it costs so much to make!*

*When crochet was out for a while, I gave everything away ... I guess I just got tired of it. Then I see all of a sudden everybody putting crochet pieces. So again I went back to crochet! When I want to see something on TV, I can't quilt. So I crochet.*

*Quilting used to be a tradition years back and then it died off and then it started . . . I'd say in the last ten years it started really again, strong. Years back there was no magazines, I don't think so. They used to only make blocks. Actually I never, never saw a quilted quilt until . . . I bet you it was about fifteen years ago, north of Prud'homme, at Smiths. A German family, they'd been making them years back . . .*

The volume of quilts that Frances has produced in thirteen years, and the fact that many of them are tops, not yet taken to their final state of completion, suggests that for Frances, much of the pleasure lies in the process of piecing rather than in the end product. The use of fortrel is part of this pleasure as she prefers its colours, its durability and the fact that it is easier to sew. When I suggested to Frances that she might be forced to make quilts of cotton or cotton/polyester blends if her supply of fortrel dries up, she exclaimed forcefully, "Not in my lifetime!" The use of cotton would, for Frances, introduce a degree of anxiety that would reduce, if not end, the pleasure of the activity.<sup>33</sup> Anxiety was present for Frances in the first quilt she made, *Jacob's Ladder*, of which she is now critical, recalling with a groan, "It was hard! I didn't have the colours. I was just learning to do something." Yet as she gained confidence in quilting she sought more and more difficult patterns, admitting that she preferred quilting to crochet or embroidery because "it's more challenging." Yet the rewards Frances receives from quilting are more intrinsic than extrinsic; they require an investment of money that is considerable for her and seldom returned. That this is less important than her enjoyment of the task is hinted at in the quality of timelessness she described as being part of her winter quilting schedule when she might work a 20-hour day without complaint. While she explains this as part of her work ethic and response to boredom, neither of these factors can alone account for such

<sup>32</sup> Turner, p. 46-47.

<sup>33</sup> Frances' speed in quiltmaking seems a natural extension of her quickness in speech and movement; she jokes that her friends tell her she talks too quickly. When I showed my mother and aunts the unedited video footage of Frances and her quilts, they gasped, in good humour, "Lady, slow down!"

involvement in time. Something of the pleasure she derives from quilting is hinted at by Frances when she explains how she plans her quilts (“That’s why I don’t sleep at night. I lay in bed and plan my colours”), or works out a challenging pattern (“I sat ‘til three o’clock in the morning trying to figure it out”), or describes how she would feel if she could no longer quilt (“I’d go haywire!”).

The enjoyment of the original experience is relived by Frances several times each summer as she takes her quilts out of storage to air them on the washline in the front yard. Here, the beauty of her work, as well as the scale and volume of it, unfolds before her, and is strikingly visible from the road, adding unexpected vibrancy to the plain farmyard. What was “back region,” largely confined to basement, bedrooms and chests, moves into a more public space. Looking through her photo album at miniature reproductions of the quilts she has given away, she is reminded of the scope of her social community through time as well as space: her quilts are in Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Ontario, where they have gone by virtue of the friendships that link them to her farm. There are also pictures in her album of the many friends she “got started on quilting,” evidence of yet another way in which Frances has made quilting into a social event and passed on her enthusiasm for the process. Traditional objects made of a contemporary fabric — fortrel which “will last forever” —, the quilts give Frances a legacy of permanence not afforded by any of her other tasks.<sup>34</sup> In a rural community that has declined and shifted toward urban centres in recent years, the Mateychuks quilts identify, as well as reinforce, the boundaries of their social group and actively mitigate the isolation of its members.

*These are the neighbours who came down and showed me how to quilt thirteen years ago [pointing to a photograph in her album]. That was very nice of them to come out and show me. We had a great time! She likes her drinks! “Pour me a man-size one,” she says to my husband!*

*This one [pointing to another picture], I got her started on quilting. This one too.*

*How many quilts did I give away? I forget . . . But I get a lot of people started on quilting. In the neighbourhood. And farther. They come and I show them.*

*If I couldn’t quilt? God! — I’d go haywire! I love to do it!*

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34 The eternal function of quilts — as objects by which to be remembered — is discussed by Stevens, who suggests that, for older quiltmakers, this is a quilt’s most important role (p. 263).