

'First Tools': Context and Implication of Feminine Technology and the Methodology of Gathering

By Molly McKinstry

Priapic tools and 'masculine technologies' are often perceived to be human-kind's most original and vital, their outward-pointing implements of stone and steel often attributed to the development of modern society. However, some theorists argue that it is instead a feminine technology to thank for the development of modern civilisation. In her 1979 book *Women's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society*, Elizabeth Fisher reframes feminine technologies through the methodology of gathering, looking at the technological qualities of the receptacle, examining bags, textiles, and quilts as art form, social invention, and social entity. Her chapter "The Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution" sparked trans-disciplinary discussion about ways in which female voices and tool have been minimised throughout history. It can be argued that the varied manifestations of the feminine 'recipient' have both theoretical and practical implications, including the cultural expression of the maker and the nature of an embodied artifact – a tool to warm her and hers, to collect, chronicle, and 'hold'.

Elizabeth Fisher's theoretical framework "The Carrier Bag Theory of Evolution" makes an argument for woman's role in the technological development of humankind, positioning the domestic as essential, and questioning the prominence of the 'masculine tool'. Fisher suggests that "[t]he first cultural device was probably a recipient" (Fisher 58), based on her thesis that for the vast majority of human history, humans almost exclusively 'gathered' their food. As humans were originally nomadic, she argues for the first technology being the "development of an infant sling", as it became apparent that such containers could "[free] the hands for gathering and [provide] temporary storage for foods such as nuts and fruits" (Fisher 60). The implications of Fisher's theory, that the first technology was not man-made but female-made, continues to be counter-cultural in regards to heroic historical narratives where we learn that "hunting dominated the attention of prehistoric man" instead of acknowledging the ways in which hold-alls continue to dominate in modern society (Pfeiffer, as cited in Fisher 137).

Through her interpretation of Fisher's theory in her essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction", Ursula Le Guin expands upon 'feminine technology' to include 'story' as a transformational carrier bag of culture. She proposes that 'story' exists both a living body of information, and a duplicable artifact to be preserved and transmitted through tools like quilts and other textiles. 'Story' has, however, originally been told from the perspective of man, too – through the eyes and impulses of the 'Hero', the archetypal figure of domination, noting that "the central concern of narrative ... is conflict" (34): a battle to be won or lost. Le Guin, a writer of science fiction, interprets Fisher's theory through a literary lens, observing ways in which stories are, or could be instead perceived as "capacious bags for collecting, carrying, and telling the stuff of living" (Le Guin 10). Rhyme, poem, song, and prose could then be interpreted as patchworked pieces on a quilt, as crafted ways of remembering. There is an interrelation between form and story: quilt as a physical realisation of story, and by extension, information – knowledge externalised beyond the body. Quilt becomes community, a place

to share the story. It became an interdisciplinary form, an artefact and a tool, a methodology and a metaphor, form as story, story as form – ever expanding what we perceive as feminine technology collectively.

Between the two writer's 'Carrier Bag Theories', the materials used, and the 'embodiment' of the material reveal themselves to be significant (web, weft, and stitch) to the very vitality of the technologies. This idea of active relationship between living and material matter is supported by Jane Bennett's work on vital materiality in her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. 'Vital Materiality' is a theoretical framework through which human relationship to matter and form is explored, particularly the ways in which non-human forces impact human life and events. As Bennett notes, "[i]f matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated" (13). She advances a concept of all matter holding some kind of 'vibrant', inter-relational quality. Found matter, such as grass, found fibres, wool, or hair, is able to be patch-worked together to create feminine technologies (quilt, bag, appliqué); Bennett argues that these forms are not "passive objects or stable entities" (20), but active participants that strengthen, shape-shift, and evolve symbiotically.

Textiles in particular have inherent bodily implications. We sleep inside them, wear them, sleep under them, and even die in them. Bennett notes that, "materiality ... is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension" – *an extension* (Bennett 20). Man's spear is an extension of his arm, an outward symbol of dominance and power – but the bag, inverted both literally and energetically, serves to 'hold'. Feminine technologies like textiles could even be seen to replicate the a swaddle, a proxy womb, an external expansion and extension of the female body as a contemporary device to provide warmth and comfort – to gather around something precious. As outlined in Fisher's text, feminine forms cultivated from found materials allowed humans to become effective and nomadic. Without these living feminine technologies, humanity might become stagnant – perhaps life itself would be stagnant. The matter used to create these technologies have a symbiotic relationship with human 'aliveness', real and felt. Applying Fisher and Le Guin's observations to Bennett's framework (putting them into the same bag or medicine bundle) we could observe feminine technology and matter as a set of "Russian matryoshki dolls" (Bennett 45), stacked within one another. The universe as a vessel for the home, that is a vessel for the family, for the woman, for the baby, and so on and so forth. In this way, these vibrant and energetic "receptacles" are not isolated, but inter-dependant; vital and essential.

Through additional analysis via Michel de Certeau's 'Practice of Everyday Life', feminine technology can be seen to have additional implications as survival skill for many women and families in positions of societal weakness throughout history. Certeau explains that the "ancient art of making do" (30) is a "tactical" behaviour for those who are not in positions of power to utilise tools and equipment within a system that does not work for them (35). *La perruque* describes divisionary tactical work in which "the worker's own work [is] disguised as work for his employer [differing] from pilfering in that nothing of material value is stolen." (Certeau 25). A crucial aspect of *la perruque* is that it is done in secret; a trojan horse of subversive utilisation, or as Certeau describes it, "clever tricks of the 'weak'" (40).

This has implications in the context of feminine technologies, particularly that of textiles and quilts. Women's assigned relationship to their labour in modern society has been portrayed as less than heroic – trivial, menial, lowly. In fact, their labour is almost designed to be

interrupted: “quilting ... can be seen in terms of the kinds of units of time available to women. These are often characterized as creative work or acts of creation that are capable of surviving multiple interruptions” (Dormor 95). The formation of female quilting circles, and the harnessing of their power to enact information gathering, sharing, and collectivising, meant female work became its own trojan horse — ‘nothing to see here’. Early modern quilting traditions were born out of patriarchal ones; women have historically been in charge of the storage and maximisation of resources, budgeting, clothing the family, and keeping everyone warm and fed during times of hardship. Often paired with a lack of financial autonomy, women’s resourcefulness and access to one another became paramount: the transformative process of quilting, its metamorphosis from scrap into tool, has been vital to the survival of the family unit, and to the communication of women’s stories. Where women might have been isolated or controlled, they used *la perruque*: making the most of the resources available to them (or provided to them by men) to strengthen and support their families, tell stories, and check in on each other, all from the vantage point of the private sphere to which they had been assigned (Michena 168).

We can make sense of the ways feminine technology presents both a practical and metaphorical methodology and philosophy, a prominent example being the research model of Cook Islands tivaevae quilting: “Tivaevae is a “handmade, bedspread-size quilt made by a group ... led by a ta’unga tivaevae”, or expert quilt maker (Futter-Puati and Teremoana). Returning to the idea of ‘interdisciplinary’ work-forms, the tivaevae serves as both a physical manifestation of storytelling, and as a context and setting for the ta’unga tivaevae to share stories and impart knowledge on the group, realising “textile’s potency as a network” (Dormor 17). The form of the quilt is layered, with intricate applique and stitching revealing the varied vocabulary, narratives, experience and knowledge of the contributors. The methodology of collectively stitched tivaevae can be broken down into aspects: “conceptualised and planned research activities; ... data collection methods; ... to cut, analyse and interpret data and ... presenting the report” (Futter-Puati and Teremoana). It is a layered process, a generative fusing of art, tool and life inseparable and indeterminate from each another, just as Le Guin outlined the “novel [as] a medicine bundle” (34) with unique and sacred generative properties of its own.

When analysed through such theoretical and practical lenses, the vitality and significance of feminine technologies presents as culturally foundational, yet is diluted in dominant contemporary Western histories. The refusal to accept ‘container-ship’ as a critical technology is in part due to the suppression of the matriarchical frameworks that uphold human societies. Fisher ponders why “[m]ost of history has been written as if women did not exist, save as passive spectators” (135). Indeed, when considering the instrumental roles that women have played throughout history for familial survival and cultural development, in honing tools and the vessels with which so much of human history has been passed on and remembered, it doesn’t make much sense. While “[m]an conquers earth, space, aliens, death, the future” (Le Guin 36), women hold down the cultural carrier bag of human history from the vantage point of the domestic. Often with little to no financial or environmental control, developing technologies to ‘make do’, to make the most of the resources available to them, to create something both beautiful and practical and full of information. It could be argued that much of why women’s labour and creation has been overlooked is rooted in the inherent misogyny of ‘success’, where woman’s work is only acknowledged in the context of its ability to imitate the masculine. Fisher describes the initial shift away from sling, receptacle, and women’s thought as an indicator of “[d]evolution in Western civilisation”, our contemporary

representation of the maternal stereotypically being the “immobile woman, seated indoors, holding a babe in arms or rocking a stationary cradle” (61). Where textile has strong associations with woman-ness, it is still “regarded as a point of weakness not potency” (Dormor 13), its collective reputation dowdy and frivolous. There is an general political and sociological disinterest in the ‘domestic’, the ‘feminine’, and in the acknowledgement of the carrier as a position of great power and responsibility.

Women will continue to make and continue to develop resourceful, complex and pregnant technologies. The implications that feminine technology have had on human history extend far beyond the theoretical: we experience and embody them every day, and in some senses, are ourselves all creations of the ultimate receptacle — all vibrant, electric matters floating within the “belly of the universe” (Le Guin 37). Stigma and historical erasure of these technologies and the power they hold do not undermine their fecundity. What is the role of the female, the mother, the healer, the silent worker, whose tools and developments are overlooked again and again? The carrier. The life of feminine technologies through multiple theoretical frameworks has provided a lens with which to understand the dimensionality and significance of the tools, not mere additions to, human development, but are its very foundations.