

## **“Not a Vacation, But a Hardening Process”: The Self-Empowerment Work of Therapeutic Craft in Nova Scotia**

By Erin Morton

### **Abstract**

This article will examine the development of a state-sponsored therapeutic craft regime in Nova Scotia in the early to mid-twentieth century. Built on the notion that postwar residents needed “work therapy – not a vacation, but a hardening process” (Black n.d. a: 3) – therapeutic craft emerged in Nova Scotia through a complex combination of the individualization of work habits, the desire to construct an antimodern regional identity around handwork, and the notion that both infirm patients and the province as a whole could be healed from economic stagnation through craft. Key to the success of Nova Scotia’s therapeutic craft regime was occupational therapist Mary E. Black’s career as director of the provincial government’s Handicrafts and Home Industries Division from 1943 to 1955. Black’s healthcare training led her to seek out therapeutic possibilities in everyday work activities, not to mention a therapeutic solution to what she called “the attitude of most Nova Scotians...[:] defeatism” (Black 1949: 46). Her ability to turn seemingly disparate things – such as Scandinavian design, the ordered work of occupational rehabilitation, and a phenomenological focus on what she called “individualistic existence” (Black n.d. b: 2) – into a unified therapeutic solution demonstrates that the contemporary rise of therapeutic culture under the increased individualism of the neoliberal era has an established historical root in the postwar period that remains important to understand.

**Keywords:** Therapeutic craft, arts and craft revivalism, occupational therapy, antimodernism, tourism, Nova Scotia, economic development

## Introduction

Occupational therapist Mary E. Black wrote that her 1943 initiation of an economic development program centred on craftwork in the eastern Canadian province of Nova Scotia was “a complete about face from considering the patient’s reaction to considering the sales value of the product, [a strategy that] was completely revolutionary. Medical concepts had to be discarded and thought given to commercial processes rather than therapeutic” (Black 1949: 46). Yet Black’s initial comments did not tell the whole story of the connection between liberal therapeutic ideals of the postwar period and her desire to institute a form of capitalist development built on handwork. Black’s program, which she initiated in her role as Director of the Handcrafts Division of Nova Scotia’s Provincial Department of Trade and Industry from 1943 to 1955, saw economy and therapy as intertwined in its initiation of widespread craft training programmes bent on helping postwar residents negotiate economic decline.

Black’s revival has been described at length by Canadian historian Ian McKay as “an almost utopian liberal vision of the redemptive power of craft in the modern world. ... Crafts were valuable therapy for the wounded .... On a much larger scale, crafts could also heal the wounds of damaged regions” (1994: 166). Yet while historians have examined the particulars of Black’s craft revival, which took the form of government-coordinated technical training workshops and exhibitions, the underpinnings of her therapeutic mission remain less understood. There is evidence to suggest that Black’s therapeutic craft programme was both utopian in its aesthetic vision and practical in its capitalist outlook. In her words, therapeutic craft could help Nova Scotians address:

A distinct group problem...inadequacy and defeatism. Viewed from this angle the whole program took on an added interest and a definite challenge. A program that seemed comparatively simple at first glance, in its concept of commercialism and culture, began to take on a deeper meaning as the large group broke up into smaller groups and small groups into people who became individuals – individuals with problems as acute as those suffered by many hospitalized persons (Black 1949: 46).

Black’s role, as she saw it, was to help postwar Nova Scotians merge their economic development strategies with liberal individualist perspectives on both cultural production and on therapeutic ideals – ideals that she encountered long before taking up her post as Director of Handicrafts in 1943. The result was that Black implemented a state-sponsored therapeutic craft regime around the premise that residents of the province needed “work therapy – not a vacation, but a hardening process,” a notion that both meshed and complicated Black’s earlier understandings of craftwork revivalism and therapy (Kennedy 1942, cited in Black n.d. a: 3).

This article examines the paradox of Black’s mission by considering her experiences with craftwork and medical practice leading up to her 1943 appointment as Director of Handicraft in Nova Scotia, when she came into her own as a bu-

reaucratic organizer of therapeutic craft. While Black worked as an occupational therapist across New England and eastern Canada in the 1920s and 1930s, after 1943 her patients shifted from the disabled and the infirm to the rural resident and the urban worker in Nova Scotia. Her hiring by the Nova Scotia government was a response to an educational meeting known as the Antigonish Conference in 1942 at St. Francis Xavier University, where organizers argued that handicrafts revivalism in the province was “a million dollar industry awaiting development” (McKay 1994: 164). Black was the ideal developer to tackle this challenge, since she made good use of her medical background in employing craft as therapy to set up a systematic state handicrafts programme in the province. She encountered her new clients by establishing training opportunities in rural communities and launching handicrafts exhibitions to display the resulting objects, all in the name of forging possibilities for economic and cultural revival. While other arts and craft revivalists existed on a smaller scale in Nova Scotia earlier in the twentieth-century, Black’s programme was unique in that it garnered governmental support for craftwork province-wide in an attempt to both build and capitalize upon the tourist desire for locally-made material objects (McKay 1994). Hers was a strategy that combined the aesthetics of transnational arts and crafts revivalism with local interpretations of antimodernism that remain significant in Nova Scotia to this day. Less a political attempt to remove workers from a Marxist sense of alienation in postindustrial labour, Black’s goal was instead an unapologetic exercise in “modernizing antimodernism” that used crafts as a commercial base to assist Nova Scotians in recovering from postwar economic disaster (McKay 2001: 119). This in itself is significant, for Black’s revival was not only commercially successful in Nova Scotia but it has also continued to provide the foundation of present-day tourist craft production in such notable examples as the provincial tartan, which has since been reproduced on everything from playing cards in England to a Manhattan manufacturer’s bathrobes (McKay 2001: 126).

From its inception, then, Black’s therapeutic craft programme was connected to the tourist state in Nova Scotia and to commercial craft industries. Black’s idea that Nova Scotians needed work rather than a vacation might appear especially ironic to those familiar with Nova Scotia’s twentieth-century history and the influence on tourism on local material culture. The province that came to be known as “Canada’s Ocean Playground” in a 1931 government tourist slogan has since been used to capture an ideal antimodernist destination for visitors in search of “salty little villages ... in unexpected places along a jigsaw coastline, where mellowed inland clearings offer drowsy summer afternoons and wild berries for the hiker ... [and] where memories have gathered giving depth and meaning to the lives of a people who always had leisure to be kind,” in the words of one travel writer (Will R. Bird 1959: book jacket quoted in McKay & Bates 2010: 163). Nova Scotia’s tourist and heritage promoters certainly capitalized upon – and helped to shape – a liberal political economy in which tourism and the objects it produced

worked together to mediate social exchanges built on discrete experiences and decontextualized images (McKay & Bates 2010: 9). In Nova Scotia, tourism and history became synonymous in many ways, but particularly in terms of heritage industrialists such as Black who worked with the provincial government to fill in the antimodernist gap left by the realities of industrialization that also tapered tourist expectations of lazy seascapes.

In fact, tourists arriving in Nova Scotia in the postwar period of the 1940s came face to face with an industrialized province that was anything but “mellow” or “drowsy” because of the complexities of modern capitalist development there. Moreover, Black’s take on such promises of a “mellow” life in Nova Scotia geared at potential visitors was not entirely positive. In fact, she understood the province as plagued not by a life of leisure but by an idleness borne from a sense of postwar defeatism that resulted from increasingly precarious work conditions and changing labour patterns that brought rural residents into urban centres en masse. Black’s strategy to get idle Nova Scotians to find meaningful work during the 1940s had the aim of “increas[ing] income, improv[ing] standards of physical living and cultural development, [and encouraging] the therapeutic concept of easement of individual problems ...” (Black 1949: 48). Black thus expected resident Nova Scotians to participate as tourist hosts according to a set therapeutic logic, in which those who were not on vacation were hardened and improved by the healthy benefits of craftwork, not to mention by the “work-cure” itself.

Black was not alone in her ideas about the therapeutic use of occupation during this period, especially those focused on craftwork. The U.S. American physician Herbert J. Hall established the “work-cure” model in a 1910 article published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. According to Hall, the “suitable occupation of hand and mind is a very potent factor in the maintenance of physical, mental and moral health in the individual and the community” (Hall 1910: 12). Hall founded an on-the-ground therapeutic commune known as the “Handicrafts Shop” in Marblehead, Massachusetts, where he taught craftwork to patients to focus the mind and to uplift the spirit of the infirm (Hall 1917; Hall & Buck 1915). Hall’s mission in using craftwork therapeutically towards the productive building of occupation thereby challenged standard late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century “rest-cure” practices, which insisted that patients remain in bed and avoid activities to receive therapy (Friedland 2011: 70). Often, the rest-cure model maintained that patients be isolated in establishments with curative possibilities such as water or sunlight, far away from their families, where the afflicted could focus on nutrition and environmental therapies in an attempt to cure their invalidism (Lefkowitz Horowitz 2010: 129-135).

Like Hall, Black purported that individualized activity and not isolated rest was the way to cure mental illness and physical ailments, and saw craftwork in terms of its “specific purpose of contributing to or hastening recovery from disease or injury” (Black n.d. a: 1). To prove this point, she researched the chief “work-cure”

advocates of her day, and collated their collective arguments together in an undated manuscript draft that examined such diverse conditions as injuries to the spine, amputations, cardiac diseases, effort syndrome, pulmonary tuberculosis, mental diseases, hysterical contractures, war neuroses, and chronic arthritis. While Black concluded her manuscript with the words of physician John Grove Kuhns that there “*is no one craft for a single disability*,” on the whole she saw craftwork as having the potential to bring patients back to the reality of capitalist productivity after injury or illness (Kuhns 1941 quoted in Black n.d. a: 17; italics in original). In fact, according to Black, patients must be “encouraged, cajoled, stimulated and when necessary bullied into activity” (Black n.d. a: 5).

While Black’s advancement of the work-cure model in postwar Nova Scotia helped her build a therapeutic craft regime on occupation, it also established a system that encouraged craftmakers to think of “work [as] being reality” in their daily lives in ways that were unique to this particular context (Black n.d. b: 1). Following the practices of established work-cure practitioners such as Hall, who warned of the dangers of “ill-advised work” producing “positive harm [that] ... may result not only in deepening discouragement, but in the intensifying of all symptoms” (Hall 1910: 12), Black’s goal was to teach postwar Nova Scotians productive occupation as a means to achieve individual sustainability. Specifically, Black wrote that the first goal of an occupational therapist should be “to seek out what remains of individual thinking and acting in each patient[,] work to rehabilitate this and so fit the patient for re-entry to an environment of individualistic existence” (Black n.d. b: 8).

This idea that Black’s “patients” (infirm and healthy alike) could improve themselves by tapping into the work-cure’s discourse of individual wellbeing and self-empowerment indicates that her therapeutic craft program was in line with broader notions of liberal therapeutic culture during the mid to late twentieth century. The paradox of the liberal ideology of therapeutic craft, which insisted that individual craftmakers both become self-sufficient workers in a capitalist context and also be heavily moderated and directed in their therapies by knowledgeable healthcare experts, ensured that Black advanced her therapeutic craftwork on a number of fronts. In particular, Black drew on the words of physician William A. Bryan to insist that “organized systematic work is better treatment than careless haphazard occupation” (Bryan 1937: 186 quoted in Black n.d. b: 4). Additionally, Black validated her system of therapy not only with her own authority as a healthcare practitioner, but also through providing evidence of her craftmakers’ success by documenting their personal experiences. The result was a context in which Black sought out the therapeutic possibilities in everyday work activities and a therapeutic solution to the postwar Nova Scotian’s attitude of defeatism – which she understood as a social disease more widespread than any physical or mental ailment she had encountered in her training as an occupational therapist to date.

## Therapeutic Craft in Nova Scotia and Abroad

Although Black was born in Massachusetts in 1885, she spent most of her young life in Wolfville, Nova Scotia, before training and working in a series of hospitals and sanitariums throughout Canada and the US in the 1920s and 1930s. In 1919, Black trained as a ward's aide (later known as occupational aides and, then, occupational therapists) in Montreal through the newly formed, federally-funded Department of Soldiers' Civil Re-establishment (DSCR) (Morton 2011: 326). The DSCR was a programme founded to help injured soldiers prepare to return to work or to train them to perform new work when injury prevented them from taking up their former vocations; the Department established the ward's aide programme at both McGill University in Montreal in 1919 and the University of Toronto the previous year (Friedland 2011: 88). As part of her training with the DSCR, Black specialized in using craft towards therapeutic purposes in the form of basketry, beadwork, weaving, and woodcarving under the auspices of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, which touted the teaching of craftwork to help people improve their productivity (Friedland 2011: 68; 125).

In essence, the DSRC used occupational therapy to help professionalize young middle-class women so that they could contribute directly to the war effort, for they were thought to best be able to "tend to a soldier's broken spirit" as the "guardians of culture and morality" (Friedland 2011: 114; 128). Yet when Black returned to Nova Scotia in August 1919, where she took up her first medical post at the Nova Scotia Sanatorium before transferring to the Nova Scotia Hospital in Dartmouth in 1920, she began working with civilian patients – and was the first occupational therapist in the province to do so (Twohig 2003). She felt, however, that women professionals such as herself had limited opportunity to advance their careers in Nova Scotia and so she quickly returned to New England in 1922 to take up a position at the Boston State Hospital (Morton 2011: 328), before moving to Michigan in 1923 and Milwaukee in 1939.

Nova Scotia was never far from her mind, however. In 1935, she wrote to the president of the Nova Scotia Technical College, Frederick H. Sexton, to express that despite having "travelled far in experience and knowledge" she found her "thoughts turning frequent of late back to Nova Scotia and its problems in curative measures for the rehabilitation of its mentally (and other) ill" (Black 1935). That being said, Black also spent significant time travelling throughout Europe in the late 1930s, for example, to attend the Paris World's Fair in 1937, and certainly such touring informed her particular understanding of Nova Scotia's postwar therapeutic needs in the 1940s. While on tour in 1937, she wrote to her colleagues in the Ypsilanti State Hospital in Michigan, where she worked as director of occupational therapy from 1932 to 1939, to remark that she found "some grand craft ideas in the Swiss [pavilion]. ... Have seen some marvelous tapestries and petite and gros point this past week – old – but colors still beautiful" (Black 1937a). Earlier

that spring, Black registered as a special student at the Sätergläntan Vävskola weaving school near Insjön, where she learned to weave Swedish samplers such as Daldräll, Möbeltyg, and Rosengång. The school presented these patterns as “typical Swedish tekniks [sic.]” that would benefit its pupils in the instruction of historical Scandinavian design (Augulander 1937). Black’s participation in this training, and her travels in Scandinavia, might be understood as a starting point for expanding her therapeutic craft mission to Nova Scotia, where she would soon return as Director of the Handicrafts Division of the Provincial Department of Trade and Industry in 1943.

Part of the Sätergläntan’s influence on Black no doubt stemmed from the fact that the school was well known in North American crafting circles in the 1930s, having received coverage in such publications as the popular Massachusetts-based *Handicrafter* magazine. These publications followed the ideas of such prominent English craft revivalists of the 1840s and 1850s as William Morris and John Ruskin, who considered craft and machine work as innately antagonistic (Schaffer 2011: 37). Late nineteenth-century followers of their Arts and Crafts movement in Britain often clung to the idea of peasant art as not only being threatened by modernization, but also as existing in tension with most contemporary domestic handwork, which commonly celebrated industrial modernity (Schaffer 2011: 51). Morris and Ruskin therefore attempted to emulate medieval craftwork; this nineteenth-century perspective on modernity insisted, according to Alice Chandler, that medieval society “be built upon imagination and emotion; modern society upon a shallow rationalism” (1970: 151-152). In turn, twentieth-century disciples of Morris and Ruskin interpreted their ideas with perhaps greater utopianism in an effort to build communities of artisans according to particular “medievalizing impulses,” including Eric Gill’s Ditchling village in 1920s Sussex (Robichaud 2007: 30). Gill in particular championed the artist’s role as a craftsperson, arguing that handwork could help fight against the alienation of creators in postindustrial society (Robichaud 2007: 30-31). Indeed Black’s craftwork followed the visions of arts and crafts revivalists before her, even if hers was a less utopian model in its direct linkage to the capitalist enterprise of modernity.

The appeal of learning Swedish craft techniques for Black may have been connected to the nature of the Swedish-form of the revival itself, which presented itself in ways distinct from British and American examples. In particular, the Swedish model embraced traditions of domestic craftwork in ways that Morris and Ruskin outright rejected (Schaffer 2011). Marie Olsen of *Handicrafter* noted that Sweden’s Sätergläntan was representative of a trend in “all civilized countries” of “a revival in the art of weaving” (Oslen 1934: 10). The teaching of “Swedish skill” through textile art also provided a therapeutic benefit according to Oslen, as she pointed out that “to all those who long for a rest from the hectic life of the present day, Sätergläntan offers the very best recreation, both when snow covers fields and marshes and affords opportunities for skiing, and when the

school is enveloped in the beauty of the Nordic summer” (Oslen 1934: 11). In other words, the Sätergläntan was both school and retreat, a place where pupils such as Black could learn about the tenets of craft revivalism from those who sought out “the country people who still clung with tenacity to their national costumes and old tradition” (Oslen 1934: 11). The paradox here, to be sure, was that Black’s participation in the Sätergläntan curriculum built its notion of “retreat” on a particular understanding of craftwork that was in line with her work-cure centred therapeutic ideals. The Swedish peasants who developed the patterns that Black and her counterparts learned at Sätergläntan were, in Olsen’s words, “people who could not loaf long, who must keep hands and mind alert to combat the wear and tear of the daily fight for bread” (Oslen 1934: 13).

The Sätergläntan program therefore suggested that productive design came from people engaged in daily craftwork rather than from those whose idleness was the result of inactivity. Students such as Black not only recreated the patterns of Swedish weaving samplers with this in mind, but also mimicked the routines of an idealized peasantry with which they associated such crafts. To immerse students in the world of Scandinavian homecraft, the Sätergläntan curriculum included sightseeing tours of the area to see where rural peoples still produced such textiles. Black’s itinerary was filled with visits to “numerous picturesque villages, castles, churches, cloisters, etc.” (Black n.d. c). She toured the rural villages in the area, noting in a letter home that while many of the Sätergläntan students were advanced weavers, “the loveliest I have seen is done by the farm women and brought in and sold from here” (Black 1937b). This exposure to Sweden’s rural craft traditions in particular contrasted with Black’s experience at Sätergläntan, which she observed was “much more modern than I expected” to the point that “it could be in America anywhere” (Black 1937b). Her training was therefore one built in a discourse of class difference, in which relatively privileged students such as herself could afford the leisure time to undertake craftmaking on vacation rather than as vocation, even if such associations between craft and leisure remained ideologically undesirable for work-cure proponents.

Yet Black’s training at Sätergläntan also solidified her belief in work-cure methods, particularly those that could help her to transfer the antimodernist ideals that she learned in Sweden back to North America in general and to Nova Scotia in particular. The idea of hardworking Swedish peasants relying on their own hands and minds to produce woven goods fit well with Black’s notion that in North America industrialization had wrought too many mechanized solutions to disease. As she put it:

Many patients who come to our hospitals are crushed emotionally by the impact of industrial standardization. Somewhat homeopathically we prescribe work as an antidote for work sickness. We call it OT. Patients like it. It helps them. It is work, but it is different from the daily grind. It’s work beautified and dignified by being individualized. The patient makes *all* of a thing whether it’s a rag rug or a piece of sculpture. There is the pride of creation. Here is the lesson to be learned from industry: if



the entire process of the making of the end product were visualized for them and they were given vocational cultural opportunities, assembly line workers would find a degree of satisfaction in life which cannot be won by strikes (Black 1942: n.p.).

The idea that it was “natural for a man to be occupied,” but occupied by a particular kind of work that distracted producers from such things as labour disputes, certainly was consistent with North American perspectives on Swedish craftmaking. As a feature article on Swedish craft in a Nova Scotian newspaper reported, for example, before the nineteenth century Sweden represented a lifestyle in which everything “was hand-made, home-spun, and the work of the whole family. Then, industrialism reared its ugly head, the machine took over and ‘traditionally Swedish’ became ‘just European’” (Anon, 1953). For craft revivalists such as Black, Sweden provided an ideal locale with which to imagine a national preindustrial domestic craft tradition that Nova Scotia could model in Canada at the provincial level. If Sweden represented for Black the ideal of hardworking landed peasants whose craftwork was of a high quality because of its connection to vocation, Nova Scotia was a context where the trained therapist’s hand could impose such standards could be imposed where they did not naturally exist.

Certainly, it is clear that Black’s conception of Swedish design was heavily informed by craft revivalism in the United States as well, where entire communities such as those centred on Hall’s Handicrafts Shop focused on teaching historical craftmaking techniques as therapeutic work. However, there remained a sense in North American coverage of Swedish craft revivalism that these Scandinavian craftsmakers were ideal examples of how organized work-cure methodologies could be emulated elsewhere:

Like everything else in Sweden, the Swedish handcrafts, the “Hemslojd,” are well-organized, well-run, and superlatively efficient. Information is readily available on everything from what kind of yarn to use for rug-making to setting up a handcraft exhibition, and lecturers pay regular visits. Many of the individual societies for handcraft have their own full-time consultants, and the State Inspector of Handcrafts in the Board of Trade is a permanent government official available for lectures and consultations (Anon. 1953).

This hyper-efficiency was in line with what Black herself observed throughout her travels in Scandinavia, particularly in Oslo and Stockholm, where she noted that:

The State has abolished the slums and built very fine apartment houses. One part of the city is given over to the working classes; another to the white collar people and then the residence section proper. The apartment houses are comfortable looking certainly and we in America would be more than fortunate to have such housing at such prices (Black 1937c).

For Black, dividing housing based on class enhanced the productivity of the local populace and had the benefit of regulating work. Indeed, the Sätergläntan curriculum depended on such ordered measures, where students “weave from 9 to 1 then from 2 to 5” as part of a regulated work day – even if such work was often undertaken on vacation (Black 1937c).

That the orderliness of craftwork methods combined itself with an ordered everyday existence also struck Black, who commented on “the cleanliness of everything” in Sweden – “streets, shops, houses, people – which is all the more impressive because it seems to be self-perpetuating” (Black 1937d). She used this perception to ascertain “certain basic qualities of the Swedish people[s]’ character: solidity, stability and self-respect; in fact Swedish self-respect and self-possession goes so far that a stranger might, and sometimes does, mistake them for self-complacency and assumption of superiority” (Black 1937d). This idealization of Swedish character was indeed in sharp contrast with what Black interpreted in her home province of Nova Scotia, which, upon her return there in 1943, she described as “very dirty” and as a place where crafts held “nothing of interest” save a “few pieces of woodenware unpainted furniture and a few piece of pottery” (Black 1943a).

Moreover, she expressed concern about the province’s capital city of Halifax having unsafe streets, where “everything [was] crowded and food not only poor but uninteresting and dirty. Ugh!” (Black 1943a) Black connected what she saw as a lack of order and cleanliness in Nova Scotia with a “standard of design and appreciation of good design [being] very low” there, leading people to “bring in poorly designed and executed articles for sale” at local shops and then feeling “very badly” when merchants “explain that they are not acceptable (Black 1943b). Compounding the problem was the fact that unlike in Sweden most rural people in Nova Scotia had “no interest in crafts” according to Black, since parents tended “to get children educated away from manual labour” and that “any hand work is looked down upon” (Black 1943c). To say the least, Black did not see Nova Scotia as having the same kind of fruitful environment for therapeutic craftwork that she observed in Sweden – although this challenge did not deter her occupational therapy mission for long.

### **Crafting a Therapeutic Regime in Nova Scotia**

Black’s travels to Sweden in 1937 and her subsequent move from the United States to Nova Scotia in 1943 ultimately paved the way for her greatest challenge as a therapist. In essence, Black saw Nova Scotians as having a hardworking past that they had not properly tapped into in the present. Specifically, despite the fact that she understood Nova Scotians as toiling “hard and long for generations to wrest and hold their land from the sea and from exploitation by outside big business,” she feared that they had only “come to realize that their strength lies rather in emergencies than in normal living” (Black 1949: 45). For Black, this attitude was typical of a postwar situation, since in the 1940s Nova Scotia saw major state commitment to such industrializing efforts as rural electrification, roadway expansion, and refrigeration services (Miller 1993: 337). In other words, rural Nova Scotians did not have to confront the same challenges of daily life under the rubric

of modernization that the culmination of World War Two brought to the province on the whole. In general, new employment opportunities based on a wartime economy drew rural workers away from the agricultural, forestry, and fishing occupations that had dominated local labour up to that point (Miller 1993: 314). The influx of such wartime workers to city centres such as the capital of Halifax strained available housing to the limit, and compounded the “often deplorable” living conditions that Black observed into the late 1940s and early 1950s there (Miller 1993: 316).

While Black’s observations here certainly point to her desire to use crafts towards social reform, and in particular to help give workers productive, moral activities, there may have also been a racial sub-text in her writings. Certainly, tourist literature promoting Nova Scotia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century alluded to the idea that it was a place settled and populated by “the best races in the world,” which no doubt informed Black’s perspective in terms of the province existing according to a particular racialized register (McKay & Bates 2010: 13). Indeed, Nova Scotia was home to the first eugenics movement in Canada, which came in the form of the 1908 establishment of League for the Care and Protection of Feeble-minded Persons (Grekul 2009: 136-7). When conceptualizing weaving patterns that she would use to teach locals the craft, for example, she outlined a colour scheme inspired by the grey twill of a “French Girl’s dress” and the yellow buttercup field “on which United Empire Loyalists are resting” (Black n.d. d). While Black did not comment directly on the use of craft towards improving Nova Scotia’s established Anglo-Celtic racial hierarchy, the fact that she made connections between craft aesthetics and nationality does suggest that she sought to improve residents’ ability to perform as peasants based on particular racialized identities. To be sure, Sweden’s valorization of peasant culture and the country’s own postwar exercises in eugenics signaled a relationship between racial science and therapeutic culture that Black undoubtedly recognized.

This situation created what Black saw as a heightened need for therapeutic craft, which she understood not only as reinvigorating a preindustrial work-ethic in Nova Scotia but also as helping to address what she framed as the unacceptable social conditions created by the industrializing process itself. In a manner typical of her commitment to liberal ideology, however, Black insisted that such therapy had to be highly individualized. Even if social defeatism was widespread in Nova Scotia and could benefit from the general implementation of the kind of ordered craftwork that she witnessed in Sweden, it remained up to the individual craft worker to heal themselves under her guidance. A provincial handcraft program modeled on what Black understood as the Swedish ideals of ordered work could provide the people of Nova Scotia with what she described as “an opportunity to develop latent talents thus adding to income and enriching their cultural life” (Black 1949: 46). Ultimately, though, Black saw craftwork as a way to teach Nova Scotians self-sufficiency based on a highly individualized commitment to

craftwork as vocation, rather than as another form of postwar industrialization that she saw as impeding such personal commitment to valuable work.

In this regard, and as Canadian historian Ian McKay has argued (1994), Nova Scotia's craft revival was less about returning to an "old way" of rural production and more about establishing a viable occupational base that tied in well with the expansion of a tourist industry in the province into the late twentieth century. As McKay puts it, "the handicraft revival in Nova Scotia was entirely predictable" given this context, even if it "took far more effort, against greater odds, to naturalize a description of Nova Scotia as a haven of handicrafts" than it did elsewhere in North America and Western Europe (McKay 1994: 155). In 1943, the year that Black returned to Nova Scotia to implement her therapeutic craft program, it was "a matter of common knowledge among those interested in sponsoring a craft revival that Nova Scotians lagged far behind the rest of North America in handicrafts" (McKay 1994: 155). Not only did this situation contrast with what Black felt she had observed in terms of the revival and maintenance of traditional craft-making in Sweden, but it also conflicted with Nova Scotia's provincial government's creation of a tourist environment in which visitors to the province expected to find rural peoples toiling away at preindustrial activities such as handwork. Yet, even if tourists held "an *idée fixe* ... that fishing villages, home of the hearty and independent fisherfolk, must also be havens of domestic handicrafts (especially weaving, woodwork, and leatherwork), apparently they rarely were" (McKay 1994: 155-156).

The reality that Nova Scotia did not have a rural craft tradition that Black deemed acceptable to draw upon for revival deterred her therapeutic craft mission very little, however. In fact, she understood her role as an occupational therapist as teaching Nova Scotians vocational craft skills to bring on a form of healing that would mend the wounds of wartime modernization and the social unrest that emerged alongside it. This in and of itself was a form of revival for Black, since its ideology depended on an understanding of Nova Scotia having a self-sufficient past to draw upon even in the dependent present. As I have argued elsewhere, Black's work in Nova Scotia emerged under what she described as "the therapeutics of weaving" (Morton 2011: 324), in which occupational therapy offered one possibility for social reform. In short, occupational therapy allowed Black "to remodel her therapeutic craftmaking for a different kind of patient, one less affected by disease of the mind and body and instead stricken with the more common social and moral affliction of idleness" (Morton 2011: 333). Thus, even though Black wrote that some of her occupational therapy colleagues accused her "of 'quitting' O.T. when I came to my own Province to organize the Handcrafts and Home Industries of Nova Scotia," she saw her therapeutic work as facilitated by craftmaking: "if some of my critics could follow me around a bit I am sure they would find I'm as much O.T. as I ever was. There is a broad scope for the

practice of psychiatric and other types of O.T. in field work as in hospitals if one but sees it” (Black 1947).

What Black saw in Nova Scotia was an expansive field in which therapeutic craftmaking could bring about widespread social reform. Black’s therapeutic objective was quite simply to stimulate the creative interests of her patients. This, she noted, “is always a difficult task, yet by perseverance success will be attained, and it is a sign of improvement when a patient begins to be absorbed in his work” (Black n.d. a: 12). Moreover, Black was convinced that the patient’s ability to engage in meaningful therapy through craft was tied to personal conviction, which she saw as informed by an individual’s own experiences rather than by systemic social disparity. For instance, she argued that:

It may be possible to obtain leads from the patient’s history which will be suggestive, as a man whose artistic craving had been thwarted by the necessity for making a living may take a greater interest in leather tooling or decorative painting than in carpentry or weaving, while another whose professional duties have kept him from manual work may greatly enjoy the latter (Black n.d. a: 12).

It was therefore necessary for Black to tackle therapeutic craft in Nova Scotia by both addressing the idleness that she understood as plaguing the province as a whole, while at the same time comprehending that “it is as necessary to individualize treatment with this as with any other form of therapy” (Black n.d. a: 12).

The result was that Black orchestrated a therapeutic craftmaking program through the Handicrafts and Home Industry Division between 1943 and 1955 that was built around her occupational therapy training (Morton 2011). Black pointed out that “occupational therapy is not merely to be used as a pastime, but as a deliberate means of directing the patient’s attention to material objects,” which would in turn help the province focus on “the therapeutic aspect of the work” (Black n.d. a: 13). That Black understood her “patients” in Nova Scotia not as the physically infirm or the mentally ill, but as the socially challenged, made little difference in her decision to treat them with craftwork. “Idleness,” she insisted, “is a positive evil and ... the cause rather than the effect of social, moral and intellectual deterioration ...” (Black n.d. a: 13). With this in mind, in 1944 Black attempted to implement a ten-point program for craftmaking across the province, built on technical training, aesthetic instruction, and a marketing program to make the resulting craft articles salable to tourists (McKay 1994: 171). Part of the goal here was to attain particular social welfare objectives by mimicking the Swedish model, since she proposed to the Nova Scotia government that she could best accomplish her therapeutic craftwork through “a central bureau for coordinated efforts and for the dissemination of information and exchange of ideas to those interested in Handicrafts, and to give instruction where needed” (Black quoted in McKay 1994: 172).

Yet Black’s ambition to establish a Sätergläntan-like regime of therapeutic craft in Nova Scotia was never fully realized. In the end, Black’s use of craftmak-

ing to combat idleness in the province took on a highly commercialized form, in which she directed the selection of weaving patterns in particular to correspond with her expectations of craft revivalism where it did not intuitively exist. Black launched a series of exhibitions entitled “Craftsmen at Work,” which became a regular part of tourist calendars around the province. Visitors could see craftworkers orchestrate “a pattern that is part of Canada ... hooked into rugs from native wools, molded into pottery from native clays, and carved from native woods,” according to the exhibitions’ accompanying publicity film (Perry 1945). She created weaving guilds across the province, in keeping with her interest in this particular form of craft production, and distributed patterns and instructions through a quarterly bulletin entitled *Handcrafts* (McKay 1994: 173). Even if the model did not entirely conform to her expectations for a highly ordered and bureaucratized central craft agency, Black’s supervision of the Handicrafts and Home Industries Division did yield certain results. Namely, it demonstrated that, in McKay’s words, “local manifestations of the craft revival required the coordination, inspiration, and pedagogy of a state if they were ever to amount to a coherent plan of development” in Nova Scotia (1994: 175).

### **Conclusion: Therapeutic Craft at Work**

Black’s relative success in creating a craft revival based on occupational therapy in Nova Scotia between 1943 and 1955 is important to consider in light of more recent calls for therapeutic solutions to a contemporary society in stress. In particular, Black’s case demonstrates that discourses of social wellbeing and individual self-sufficiency and empowerment are not unique to the neoliberal era, even if the hyper-individuality of this moment has since spurred therapeutic culture in new directions. The notion that individuals have the power to transform their own lives outside of the social fields that shape them was indeed alive and well in Black’s day. Her objective in therapeutic craftmaking was to do no less than to confront individual crisis on the one hand – particularly that of idleness – and to rehabilitate her patients “for re-entry to an environment of individualistic existence” on the other (Black nd a: 2). Indeed, Black represented a community of physical culturalists of her day who believed that committed bodily labour could contribute to both individual health and to the greater task of nation-building (Shocket 2006: 125).

The work-cure model of therapeutic craft offers several avenues for critical interpretation from a contemporary perspective that seeks to unsettle the present-day neoliberal impulses of therapy. Commonly, neoliberal thought insists that people can choose between idleness and work, which suggests, for example, that poverty is not the symptom of a liberal political economy but rather of individual irresponsibility (Whitehead and Crawshaw 2012: 7). In this respect, the “curative possibilities” of individualized work remains at the core of many therapeutic mis-

sions, including Black's, whether she enacted it in state hospitals in the United States, on vacation in Sweden, or in her position as a bureaucrat in the Nova Scotia provincial government (Black n.d. a: 3). Black's role, as she saw it, was to help organize such work in a systematic way, so that her patients could avoid falling into a pattern of using craftmaking as leisure or as carelessly undertaking craft as vocation without the help of a trained healthcare expert guiding them. The ideal result was that Black could ensure "the therapeutic value of the development of initiative and originality," since to "prevent [the patient's] use of initiative destroys the object of the whole program" (Black n.d. a: 4). While "idleness" might be easily recast as a point of resistance to work-cure methods, such a position requires a greater understanding of the tensions that existed between Black and her clientele in terms of the failures that therapeutic craft no doubt enacted in Nova Scotia.

What is known based on Black's archival papers is that the work-cure method provided her a means to a very particular end in Nova Scotia and beyond it, in which the socially afflicted could benefit from being led to individualized self-care. In short, Black's idealized end result was to foster a situation in which her patients (broadly defined) could bring about their own healing through systematic craftmaking activity. To be sure, the resulting material craft objects provided a base for economic self-sufficiency if orchestrated under her careful guidance. More than this, though, Black understood therapeutic craftmaking as having a very particular cultural benefit: "These men and women, from both urban and rural centres [of Nova Scotia], freely discuss their various crafts without restraint because crafts speak a universal language and are not bound by race, creed, colour or social barriers" (Black 1949: 48). In this regard, Black had at least marginally achieved her therapeutic vision at home, since she encouraged the dissolution of group mentality in favour of individualized cures for social disease. She ultimately concluded that her therapeutic craft program in Nova Scotia "increased income, improved standards of physical living and cultural developments, [and that] the therapeutic concept of easement of individual problems" benefitted provincial residents on the whole (Black 1949: 48). If therapeutic craft could not entirely resist the narratives and institutions of modernity in Black's day, it could at least succeed in articulating a notion of individual identity through curative work that has implications up to the present moment.

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