

Stitching Feminism

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Starting this essay, I put down my sewing, and thread my needle into the butter yellow flannel pages of my needlebook. Then, I pick up my notebook, and flip through to the page where my pen is tucked into the spine, and I have transcribed this passage from Olive Schreiner's 1926 novel *From Man to Man*:

The woman who is only a woman, what has she but her needle? In that torn bit of brown leather brace worked through and through with yellow silk, in that bit of white rag with invisible stitching, lying among the fallen leaves and rubbish that the wind has blown into the gutter or the street corner, lies all the passion of some woman's soul finding voiceless expression. Has the pen or pencil dipped so deep in the blood of the human race as the needle?¹

The language of cloth, needle and thread were my first form of literacy. From my earliest memories of sitting in my mother's lap at the sewing machine, dressmaking and embroidery have been how I understand the world and my place in it.² Before I could read and write, my needle and thread gave me a voice. In 2022, I am a feminist maker, curator, writer, educator and activist living on unceded Kurna land in Adelaide, South Australia.³ The traditions, histories, practices and imagery of hand stitching run through my writing and my activism and are at the heart of the change I strive to make in my communities. Schreiner's words are woven through my work; I am a woman who has a needle. Thinking back through my mother and my grandmother, my practices of slow, conscious and ethical sewing connect me to traditions of handmaking and mending that are both quotidian and radical in their subversion of hegemonic powers, knowledges

1 Olive Schreiner, *From Man to Man, or Perhaps Only* (1926; London: Virago Press, 1982), 323.

2 Madeleine Seys, '#IMadeMyClothes: The ethics and practices of home dressmaking', *Artlink: Australian Contemporary Art Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (April 2021): 30.

3 I acknowledge and pay my respects to the Kurna people as the owners and custodians of the Adelaide plains. I pay my respects to Kurna elders past, present and emerging and to all First Nations people. Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land. I acknowledge that colonisation continues to threaten First Nations material cultural practices and heritage.

and capitalist consumerism.⁴ In the twenty-first century, handmaking is a powerful rejection of the production and consumer practices of fast fashion and its exploitation of human labour and environmental resources.⁵ Handmaking is a reminder that activism begins with the personal, the embodied, the material and the local. As Betsy Greer states: 'the creation of things by hand ... reminds us that we have power'.⁶

Feminist stitching derives its power through the subversion of expectations, and an exploitation of the patriarchal ignorance of the practices, epistemologies and meanings of thread and cloth. Historically, embroidery and dressmaking have been consigned to the simultaneously devalued and taken-for-granted category of 'women's work'.⁷ The products of this work, such as clothing and household linen, serve the important purposes of warming, protecting and comforting us, but are then discarded as rubbish, devoid of use and meaning. So too the practices of needlework and dressmaking have been discarded from histories. Like Schreiner, many makers and thinkers have equated sewing with writing and painting, pointing out that the misogyny ingrained in the cultural hierarchy of 'art' above 'craft' has seen the work of the pen and paintbrush taken seriously as forms of artistic expression and chronicles of human experience, whilst the needle's work is discarded as decorative and ephemeral.⁸ From the Middle Ages, modern sewing and embroidery practices were used as a way of educating young girls into their gender and class roles; 'embroidery has been women's art through innumerable ages, how long can only be surmised', wrote Mary Thomas in 1936.⁹ Through this history, though, runs the thread of a vivid counter-history wherein embroidery and garment sewing have been used by disenfranchised individuals and communities to subvert dominant patriarchal power structures and knowledge systems.¹⁰ In the nineteenth century, women used the slow and embodied processes of needlework, and a shared cultural knowledge of the meanings of cloth and threads, to tell stories that drew attention to the mechanisms of the white patriarchy and challenged its power.¹¹

4 With credit to Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).

5 Seys, '#IMadeMyClothes', 32.

6 Betsy Greer, *Craftivism: The Art of Craft and Activism* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2014), 8.

7 Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1989), vi.

8 *Dressmaking Made Easy*, revised edition (New York: McCall Publishing Company, 1939), 1.

9 Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, vi, 1–5; Mary Thomas, *Mary Thomas's Embroidery Book*, 7th impression (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1952), ix.

10 Christine Bayles Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction: Literacy, Textiles and Activism* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009), 5.

11 Kortsch, *Dress Culture in Late Victorian Women's Fiction*, 5.

Among such makers, I am particularly reminded of Elizabeth Parker who, in the 1830s, worked her biography on linen, using fine cross-stitches in red silk. She begins with a statement of her voicelessness as a working-class woman, stitching: 'As I cannot write'.¹² This draws attention to the fact that, although Parker is literate, the pen of history and power is not in her hands. Parker then makes an appeal for a sympathetic audience for her story of trauma: 'I put this down freely and simply', she stitches, 'as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully entrust myself'.¹³ Parker was a domestic servant from Sussex, England. In 1,654 words and 6,475 characters stitched over 46 lines, Parker recounts her childhood, her entry into domestic service, her abuse at the hands of her employer 'Lieutenant G', and its impact on her mental health and Christian faith.¹⁴ Parker's last thread is neatly secured at the back of the linen, but her final questions dangles, poignant and unfinished: 'what will become of my soul[?]'.¹⁵ The embroidered sampler is a powerful medium for Parker; it allows her to recount her experiences and appeal for help and solidarity from 'a person', most likely a woman, versed in the function of embroidery as a form of communication, 'to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully entrust myself'.¹⁶ The patriarchal disregard of embroidery as anything other than facile 'women's work' and an expression of ideal, submissive femininity, protects Parker and her story from threatening eyes and further violence. Parker's sampler survives today, in London's Victoria & Albert Museum, as a testimony to how needlework can bring attention to injustices, create community, compassion, wellbeing and speak back to power.¹⁷ For twenty-first-century makers, the threads of our stitching connect us in community with Elizabeth Parker.

In 2003, Greer coined the term 'craftivism' to describe the practices whereby craft, broadly conceived, is used as a form of activism. Craftivism voices and protests injustice, connects communities and improves individual and collective wellbeing.¹⁸ In 'We the craftivists: A manifesto' (2018), Tal Fitzpatrick calls on 'A patchwork of makers, diverse but united in kinship'. She states:

12 Elizabeth Parker, 'Sampler', c.1830, *Victoria & Albert Museum*, collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O70506/sampler-parker-elizabeth/.

13 Content warning: discussion of sexual and physical abuse and suicidal ideation (Elizabeth Parker, 'Sampler').

14 Elizabeth Parker, 'Sampler'.

15 Elizabeth Parker, 'Sampler'.

16 Elizabeth Parker, 'Sampler'.

17 Nikki Sullivan and Britt Burton, *Stitch & Resist*, Centre of Democracy, History Trust of South Australia and State Library of South Australia (Blurb, 2021), 1.

18 Greer, *Craftivism*.

We stand for justice, universally applied.

Through our craft we bear witness.

With our skilled hands and compassionate hearts, we mend the tears in the fabric of our society.¹⁹

In 2020, the start of the Covid-19 pandemic prompted feminist activists to direct, or redirect, our attention inwards, towards our personal, embodied and material practices, and towards the injustices and crises close to home and within our own communities. The conditions of the pandemic and responses to it tore wide open long-standing holes in the fabric of society and unravelled the social safety net, increasing the incidence of poverty, homelessness, social isolation, racism, domestic violence and inequality. Job losses and changes in work conditions disproportionately impacted those in precarious employment and those with caring responsibilities. There were significant cultural shifts, too. Lockdowns and isolation mandates resulted in a turn towards domestic activities such as craft, baking and preserving as recreation and self-care practices, as well as community care.²⁰ Far from representing a nostalgia for, or return to, traditional and oppressive domestic gender roles, such practices continue to be mobilised as ethical alternatives to wasteful consumer habits. The pandemic also changed consumer fashion practices with more people reusing, repairing and recycling garments rather than shopping, and thus breaking the fast-fashion cycle.²¹ By necessity, activist practices also changed with the Covid-19 pandemic, pivoting towards personal behaviours, digital activism and local community service. Craftivism reflects and represents these changing habits and practices. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the feminist maker's needle has been a powerful tool in bearing witness, creating compassion and making change within our communities.

In my own community, a public participatory craftivist project, *Stitch & Resist*, became a way of bearing witness to the experiences of the pandemic and bringing attention to the holes it rent in our society. *Stitch & Resist*

19 Tal Fitzpatrick, *Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology* (Melbourne: self published), 1.

20 The resurgence of popularity in crafts such as needlecraft, knitting, crocheting, macramé and dressmaking could be connected to what Addie Martindale and Ellen McKinney identify as a broader pattern post-9/11. See Addie Martindale and Ellen McKinney, 'Self-sewn identity: How female home sewers use garment sewing to control self-presentation', *Journal of Consumer Culture* 20, no. 4 (2020): 567.

21 See Orsola de Castro, *Loved Clothes Last: How the Joy of Rewearing and Repairing Your Clothes Can Be a Revolutionary Act* (London: Penguin, 2021).

was launched in March 2020 as a collaboration between the History Trust of South Australia and the State Library of South Australia's Centre of Democracy to 'support individuals and communities to play an active and creative role in civic engagement and change making'.²² With the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, the project pivoted to digital delivery, and the focus shifted to explore the experiences and impact of the pandemic. Participants, some experienced stitchers and some new to the craft, were invited to use our needles to: 'make political statements / make important cultural objects / make a difference / and make change'.²³ Over a year, participants uploaded images of their handiwork to www.stitchandresist.com/. The archive comprises 157 pieces by 80 individuals and groups. Most pieces use a combination of text (in many languages), visual iconography and colour to communicate their message and are worked in the media of cross stitch and embroidery. Some directly address life during the pandemic, with messages such as: 'Stay the Fuck Home' and 'Don't be a prick. Wash your hands & wear a mask'.²⁴ Others explore pre-existing issues brought to crisis point by and during the Covid-19 pandemic, such as racism, reconciliation, asylum seeker rights, the wage gap, trans+ rights, feminism, homophobia, marriage equality, LGBTQIA+ rights, domestic and gender-based violence, misogyny, consent, sex workers' rights, abortion rights, the #Me Too movement, homelessness and housing precarity, diet culture, the Black Lives Matter movement, police brutality, white privilege, climate change, food security and the devaluing of so-called 'women's work'. My own submission for the project, 'We Part to Meet Again', uses the nineteenth-century tradition of sampler embroidery to record my experiences during Covid-19 in 2020, particularly that of being in lockdown and isolated from my loved ones. The design is based on a pair of dressmaking scissors I inherited (along with my love of threads) from my grandmother. I embroidered the patina on their handles, acquired over years of being held in her hands, a reminder of the power of my own hands to make, to mend and to change. The text is borrowed from a nineteenth-century sweetheart token and is a pun on the scissors' mechanism; the blades separate and come back together,

22 Sullivan and Burton, *Stitch & Resist*, 1.

23 'Stitch & Resist', *The Centre of Democracy*, stitchandresist.com/.

24 Kel G in Sullivan and Burton, *Stitch & Resist*, 66; CB in Sullivan and Burton, *Stitch & Resist*, 22. In these and subsequent references to individual embroideries in the *Stitch & Resist* project, the numbers refer to the order in which the works are reproduced in the unpaginated *Stitch & Resist* exhibition book.

just as people part and are reunited. The threads of this work connect me to these loved ones, to my mother and grandmother and to histories of feminist stitching.

What separates the works of craftivism in *Stitch & Resist* from other forms of activism during 2020–21 is the painstaking, embodied nature of their production. Each message is worked stitch by stitch, letter by letter, word by word. With the slow making of each piece comes the deep and sustained consideration of the issue at hand. In *Seamlessness* Yeseung Lee refers to ‘the attentive interaction between maker and material as a process of mutual making’.²⁵ Through stitching these pieces and collaborating in forming a collective, democratic material archive of life during the Covid-19 pandemic, participants in *Stitch & Resist* are remaking our habits, practices and identities as makers and activists. The slow, embodied nature of embroidery was a way to reinvigorate our activism in the relative isolation of the pandemic and a reminder to ‘resist’ and be an ‘angry liberal feminist killjoy’ because ‘Persistence is Fruitful’.²⁶ Collectively, these pieces dip deep into the individual and collective experiences of Covid-19 in 2020–21.

Tying up the loose ends of this essay, I put down my pen and open my needlebook again. I cut a length of blood red stranded silk, thread my needle and begin to work Schreiner’s question across a piece of linen: ‘Has the pen or pencil dipped so deep in the blood of the human race as the needle?’²⁷ In my own feminist stitching, I answer this question, slowly and decidedly, in the negative. The threads of this work connect me to my mother and grandmother who gave me my love of and literacy in cloth and threads, and to a long and rich history of makers who used their needle and thread to tell their story and craft change. In the age of Covid-19, the craftivist’s needle remains a powerful and radical tool to mend our relationships with each other, our communities and our environment, and to make change.

25 Yeseung Lee, *Seamlessness: Making and (un)Knowing in Fashion Practice* (Bristol: Intellect, 2016), 4.

26 Amy Dale in Sullivan and Burton, *Stitch & Resist*, 2; Gin in Sullivan and Burton, *Stitch & Resist*,

38. Gin’s embroidered message evokes the words of Sara Ahmed and her identification as a ‘feminist killjoy’. Amy Freeborn in Sullivan and Burton, *Stitch & Resist*, 3. The text in Freeborn’s embroidery is quoted from Anthony Burrill.

27 Schreiner, *From Man to Man*, 323.

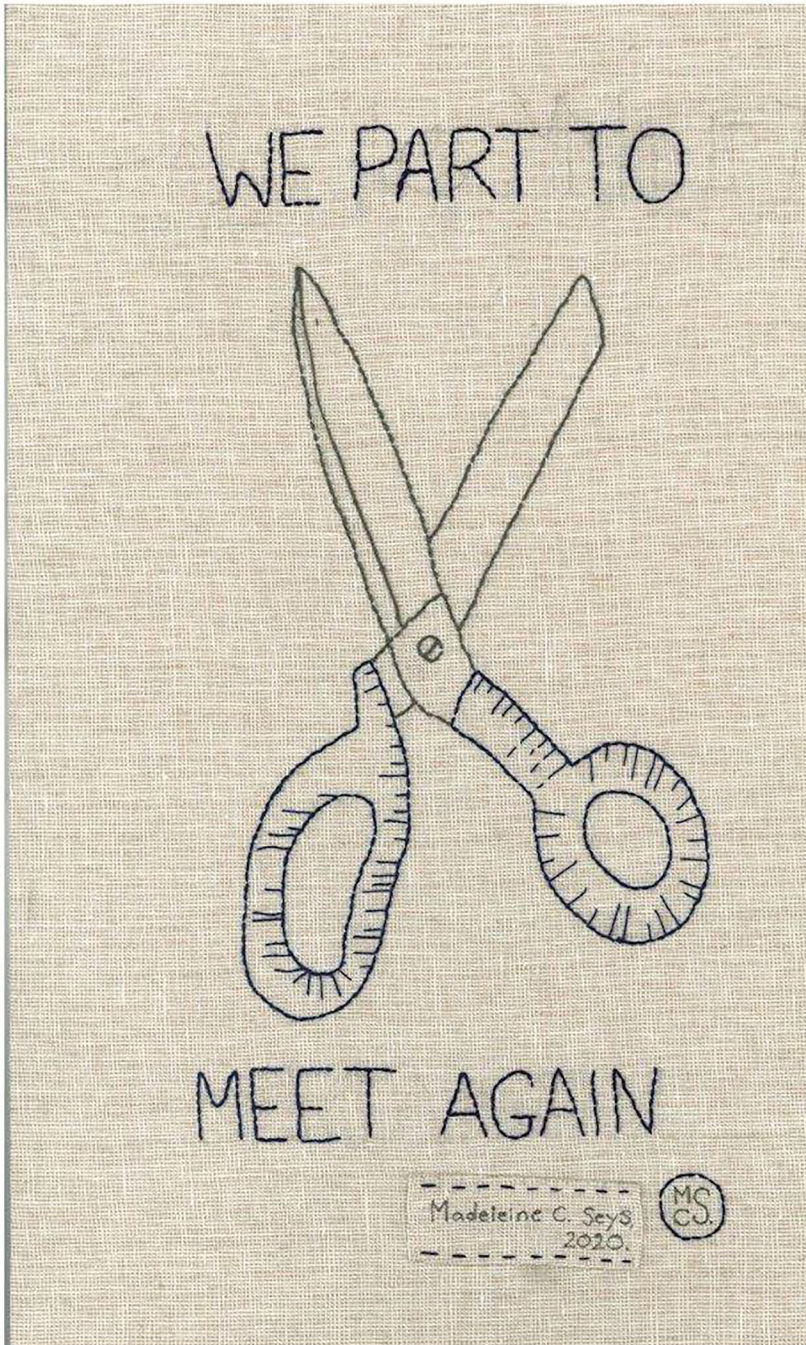


Figure 1: 'We Part to Meet Again'.

Source: Madeleine C. Seys, 2020.

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