



Essay

Becoming the Marine Lover: Stitching Myself into Feminist Futures

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Abstract

*This essay explores how slow stitching and collage can become forms of feminist inquiry that weave together art, philosophy, and embodied knowledge. Through encounters with Irigaray's *Marine Lover*, Milojević's 'hesitant feminism,' and the lived practices of women such as Johanna Wintsch, I reflect on materiality as providing opportunity for both healing and resistance. The act of stitching becomes a form of remaking the self within patriarchal and colonial structures that fracture identity. By integrating creative and philosophical practice, the article responds to *Threads of Hope's* call to imagine feminist futures through tactile, relational, and transformative ways of knowing.*

Keywords

Feminist Futures, Embodied Knowledge, Living Inquiry, Slow Stitching, Creative Philosophy

Introduction

Like many during 2020, I reconnected to a long-ignored creative practice to cope with the anxiety of a sudden disruption not only to my life, but to the lives of millions of others across the globe, due to COVID-19. For some years, I had already felt dissatisfied with my life as an academic, where my research and writing mattered only in terms of metrics. When I reconnected with a creative practice of collaging, something shifted. Hand cut and digital collages gave me a way to start assembling felt intuitions that didn't require a 'telos', or a final goal. It felt freeing to create without the constraint of language, of words which had become for me an imprisonment of my own being.

Yet creative practice often requires gestation. Collaging only slowly turned to needle and thread. Then, when I began to incorporate textile into my art practice, it was as if something in my very being began to swim its way to the surface. Not gently but viscerally, at times urgently – seeking to be expressed through cloth, needle and thread. As I stitched, the needlework practice itself began to reveal tensions between care and coercion, healing and violence, giving rise to a sense of feminist agency expressed as a refusal to acquiesce to systems that attempt to define or contain what it is to be a woman. This is a reflection on my slow stitch journey, from stitching as a therapeutic practice to reconnect with myself, to discovering that needlework contains potential for political action, where tactile making and imagining can lead to new feminist futures.

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Stitching to Find a Sense of Self

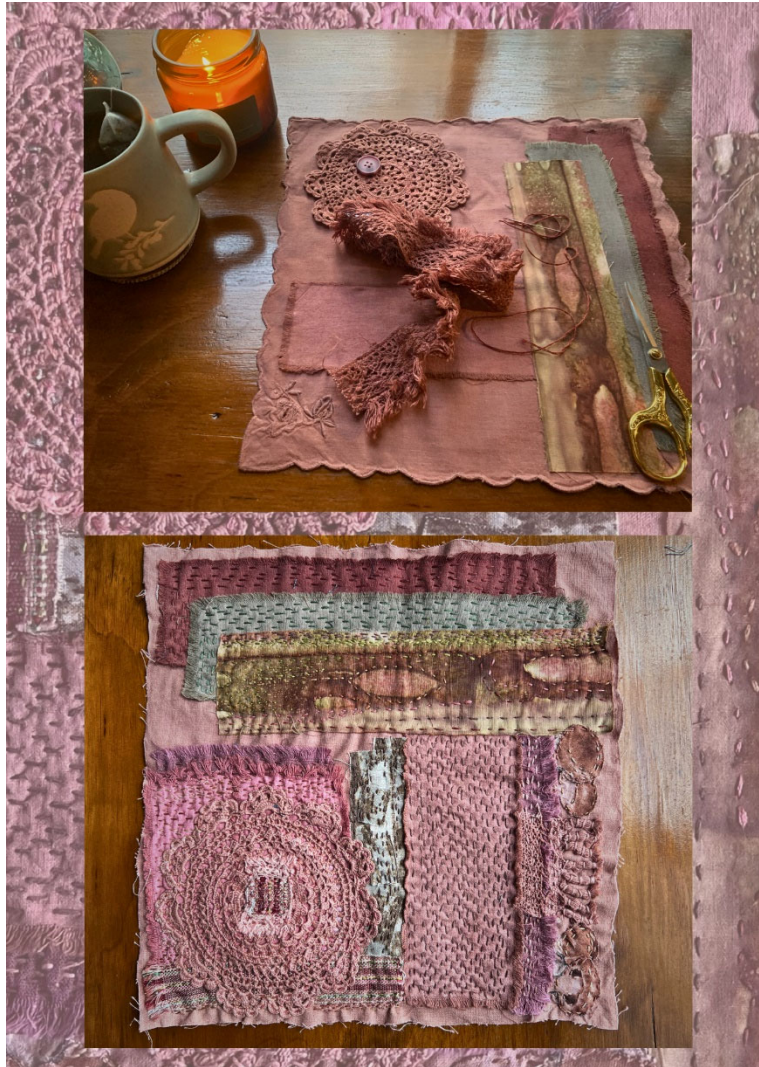


Fig. 1: “Finding a sense of self” – Hand-stitched textile collage (2024)

On the first of March 2024, I started my first slow stitch project, committing to at least 15 minutes a day for thirty days, sitting at my Japanese inspired floor table. I gathered the materials, as can be seen in figure 1: fabric scraps and hand dyed cotton strips, fragments of lace, and a vintage doily, each item chosen to harmonize with the next. The composition emerged intuitively, through the process of hand stitching, rather than a pre-planned design. I layered tactile fabrics, adding texture and pattern through the process of repetitive, imperfect running stitches. The emerging muted rose and clay tones, interwoven with mossy green, provide a sense of grounding, reconnecting to myself, through the materiality of the work, and the place at which I sat each day.

Through a daily stitching practice I began to sense a re-awakening of my agency where the “needle becomes a numinous tool” that remakes my self and allows it to become manifest in the world (Amos & Binkley, 2020, p. 17). With each stitch, the theme of the existential self began to resonate within me, emerging through the encounter with the needle, the thread and the materiality of the fabric.

During my reading at this time, I encountered the work and story of Johanna Natalie Wintsch who, lacking any

artistic training, embroidered her way through and then out of two stays in Swiss mental asylums during the early 1920s (Wieber, 2020, p. 125). With her freedom of movement severely restricted, “her needle, the tactile qualities of her silk threads and the repetitive motion of moving the thread in and out of the linen or cotton canvas” enabled Wintsch to recover a sense of herself that predated her now circumscribed institutional life (Wieber, 2020, p. 133). Though my life was less restricted and circumscribed, I strongly resonated with Wintsch’s story. I uncomfortably wondered whether I had traded *my* freedom for self-expression for ‘institutionalised’ forms of approval and security, particularly that of being a good and compliant woman/academic.

At the end of the month, I concluded my reading of Wintsch and my daily stitching practice, as can be seen in figure 1, showing the complete piece. Stitching intuitively, rather than following a set pattern, had been a new experience. Using materials associated with traditional women’s work in new and unexpected ways gave a sense of emotional freedom, as did stitching without a preconceived idea of what I ‘should’ do. A stronger sense of self emerged, grounded in materiality and daily practice. Stitching had connected me to a sense of *becoming* through material encounter. Yet I couldn’t help but notice that my daily practice and the intuitive composition of my work nevertheless evidenced an inclination towards structure and order. I was left wondering whether the encounter with materiality might contain the potential to leave behind the security of ground beneath my feet.

Encountering the Undauntable One



Fig. 2: “The Undauntable One” – Hand-stitched mixed-media collage (2024)

Having discovered the quiet, grounding pleasure of slow stitch in March 2024, I revisited a collage I’d created in 2022, inspired by my reading of Luce Irigaray’s book, *Marine Lover*. Irigaray does not make for easy reading; she “is associative rather than systematic in her reasoning” (Whitford, 1991, p. 4). Reading Irigaray, I found myself

asking what kind of encounter the text demanded. I was not simply able to consume the ideas and apply them in a useful way. Yet, the language drew me in. There's a poetic, lyrical quality to the writing that invites the reader to start mid-way, mid-page or mid-sentence. Even mid-word, if that is where you find your beginning.

The reader is taken by the possibility of the feminine in Irigaray's writing, and the 'undaunting one' emerged unexpectedly, in both my art and my reading:

Even the most intrepid tie themselves to the mast, for fear of succumbing to the spell of the undaunting one. And they want to drive their prows over her. But her depths are never ploughed by their blades. Which barely cleave the crest of her waves. And their passage leaves no permanent trace. Once they are gone, she returns to her rhythm and her measure. (Irigaray, 1991, p. 48)

I was troubled by the seeming acquiescence of the feminine spirit to violence done to her. Unsettled by what had emerged on the page, both book and artwork were set aside. For several years the undaunting one silently watched ... waiting. Now, armed with a sense of purpose, and a needle and thread, I felt better equipped to meet her gaze. Both the materiality and the mood of the work shifted, away from the grounded self-connection I'd experienced in my first slow stitch project. In a practical sense, I was now working with paper, covered with a mixed-media stabilising layer to give the strength and flexibility needed for stitching. This meant a divergence from materials traditionally associated with the handcraft of women, and which had given a connection to history and memories through a familiar practice and materiality: fabric, needle and thread. There was also an emotional shift from the grounding, earthier tones in my first project, to now re-encountering the shifting shades of blue and green found in the original paper collage. In selecting new threads for stitching, my inner landscape responded, and the security of ground gave way to oceanic movement.

The stitching was relatively easy at first. Two-dimensional crustaceans came alive, as soft threads weaved their way through hard shells. Yet, even as I stitched, I uneasily watched my hand relentlessly piercing the needle through defiantly resisting paper-shell, as can be seen in figure 2, showing the needle, thread and puncture marks. The materiality of the collage proved less pliant, or compliant, than the soft fabric from the first project.

I want to say that there is no room for force in slow stitching, or in creating art. Violence and art are referenced by their polarity to each other. Art bears witness to the futility of violence; art is our most courageous and hopeful 'no' in the face of coercion. Yet I found myself stabbing, piercing through the materiality of paper, tearing skin, even as the thread is pulled through to close and heal the wound. And it is my hand that controls the needle. Her eyes gazed at me, while my hand kept stitching. I asked myself, was I stitching her into place because I feared succumbing to her spell?

Stitching is thankfully not a one directional process: "fragments can be pieced and made anew" (Amos & Binkley, 2020, p. 17). Stitching, identity and meaning share a capacity for re-formation, and re-creation over the course of time, in ways that can shape the world in new and unexpected way. Instead of seeking to escape the discomfort of the needle, I began to practice presence with Irigaray's undaunting one who rests in rhythm and her measure, beneath the violence that occurs at the surface of the sea. As a result, my interaction with the materiality changed. Slowly, the stitching began to take on a life of its own, guided by the materiality of paper, fabric and thread, and the pull of emotion. Stitching intuitively, my body responded to oceanic forms captured through the technology of treated materiality, able to interact and respond precisely through the resistance of an unsettled world.

The rolling emotions of my inner landscape settle through the process of stitching, becoming present to me in the form of veiled eyes peering from her home in the ocean bed, surrounded by teeming sea life. The threads woven through paper now connect the undaunting one to all life in the ocean that surrounds her, as can be seen in figure 2, showing the complete piece. She is no longer trapped in sediment, but in her own element, making her home with clams and crustaceans: "Life beneath the sea is not fed upon honey even. Its own element suffices it" (Irigaray, 1991, p. 47). I realised I was not stitching her into place after all; I was stitching myself to her way of being. The undaunting one became a threshold in the deep from which I emerged into the making of the marine lover.

The Emergence of Marine Lover



Fig. 3: “Marine Lover” – Hand-stitched mixed-media collage (2025)

In May 2025, I began a new slow stitch project. I had submitted a proposal to include a mixed media artwork for an exhibition, combining collaging techniques with textile elements, using slow stitch as a method to explore the relationship between materiality, touch and emotion. In this way, the process of art-making itself would become deliberate act of embodied engagement with materiality and the internal oceanic landscape of emotion. The new work would combine digital collage, hand-dyed textiles and layered fibres to form a textured, organic (self) portrait that merges human and oceanic forms through free-from stitching, as can be seen in figure 3. Using again an intuitive process, I employed a Japanese paper kneading technique to create flexible fabric-like paper that could be digitally printed, painted and then stitched together with strips of silk and cotton, feathers, teabags and other assorted materials, adding layers of tactile complexity to the artwork.

But now the gaze of Irigaray’s “undauntable one” was transformed (Irigaray, 1991, p. 48); my own eyes would look back at me from the sea-bed, informing also the colours that would shape the emotional tone of the artwork itself. I would become the ‘marine lover’, created by my own hands interacting with the materiality of the world. It would be my most ambitious and intimate art project yet, and it would be the first time I would create art for public exhibition.

As the work began to take shape, its meaning emerged through the encounter with the materials. The eyes draw the viewer’s gaze, surrounded by the skin of the ocean bed, less obscured than the undauntable one, seen in figure 2, yet equally enigmatic, as can be seen in figure 3, the complete piece. I am sensing a stronger connection to my own elemental energy, even as I live my daily life in an arid landscape that I am coming to understand is often hostile to feminist ways of being.

This time I read Ivana Milojević’s book, *The Hesitant Feminist’s Guide to the Future* (2024) alongside my

stitching practice. Milojević views feminism as women collectively finding their own voice and working for social and political change towards a new future. Yet she warns that feminists are likely to encounter resistance through the hierarchical “rule of the father” (Milojević, 2024, pp. 34-35). Under patriarchy all genders suffer “the avoidable impairment of fundamental human needs” that constitutes violence, since the system itself creates and enforces social inequality at scale (Galtung cited in Milojević, 2024, pp. 47-48). Yet while all bodies are imbricated with violence, feminist perspectives make violence visible in public contexts, including ‘private’ threats of domestic violence and ‘public’ displays of war (Youngs, 2024, pp. 54-55). I can see that a patriarchal social and political paradigm conditions women’s bodies to submit to its values and laws, that can even include a ‘willingness’ to suffer violence.

Can needlework offer women a mode of resistance, and a new way to imagine social and political order? Is it possible to create a renewed female imaginary: “that will bind or attach the scraps and debris together into something which gives women a ‘home’ but which does not prevent their mobility, their becoming, and their growth”? (Whitford, 1991, p. 138) I am not sure, but I sense that the act of stitching and reflecting could help shape future feminisms that are attentive to context and locality, grassroots experiences and knowledge, diverse and inclusive leadership, and collective learning and policy making that emerge from critical reflectiveness about the limitations of masculinist state-centrism (Youngs, 2025). In this sense, Milojević’s concept of ‘hesitant feminism’ finds tactile expression in what Betsy Greer (2014) calls ‘craftivism’, connecting the art of making (crafting) with social and political exchange, inviting others to ask questions and engaging in dialogue through small-scale craftivist practice. Craftivism ‘makes’ with a greater good in mind, and in order to nourish ourselves (Greer, 2014, pp. 12-13). This is feminist in the way it looks to traditional creative practice as something beyond the therapeutic value of craft, important though this is. Through creative practice, I now see that I can actively reimagine myself into a feminist future through the practice of collective forms of making, laying the groundwork for a relational ethics that is attuned to what is not easily heard but has power to re-world communities.

Coming to the end of Milojević’s book, I put the final touches to my artwork, stitching the final layers of scraps and fibres to my (self) portrait, as can be seen in figure 3. The ‘marine lover’ is now complete, stitched from the same waters that once unsettled me. When oceanic themes appeared in my artwork, the inaccessible language of Irigaray’s *Marine Lover* had mirrored the way I felt my own sense of self slip away from me. At the same time, I have also found a way of doing philosophy that does not immediately silence the voice of my art, that does not seek to take up the symbolic into a (patriarchal) rationalised explanation about ‘what is really going on’ with me, and with so many women who are struggling to be heard.

Conclusion

I don’t know where my stitching practice will take me. Perhaps, subconsciously, I am trying to remake my sense of self, to create something beautiful still from scraps and discarded refuse, remaking myself in the same world where MK84s grind human lives into uninhabitable concrete rubble. The work of remaking as humanity is unmade. Perhaps collectively we stitch because we sense the vulnerability of bodies, our own and others, in relation to power. We mend ourselves even as we protest hierarchies that consolidate power through violence.

My first slow stitch project began as a therapeutic practice. But I now know that the needle is “a tool for self expression” that enables individuals *and* communities “to remake themselves and the world around them (Amos & Binkley, 2020, p. 1). The earlier stitching and reading provided a foundation to connect traditional women’s needlework to contemporary social and political problems that affect women’s lives. By stitching thought and feeling together in my art practice and my writing, I participate in what *Threads of Hope* invites us to do collectively: to reweave embodied forms of knowing into practices that resist the hierarchies of patriarchal and colonial epistemologies. This is a form of action that occurs amidst ‘frayed edges and holes’, a gesture towards a feminist future that is always unfinished, interdependent and relationally constituted through the tactile work of making and imagining together.

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