



THE NEEDLE AS MEDIUM: USING EMBROIDERY TO SPEAK TO GHOSTS

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Abstract: As an adoptee, I am haunted by what Lifton (2009) calls the *Ghost Kingdom*, a place filled with the spectres of the ancestors I have been disconnected from. Derrida (1993), with his notion of *hauntology*, tells us that we must learn to speak to ghosts, and that by doing so we will learn to live. I am on a journey to speak to the ancestors of my birth father who were Ngāi Tahu (Māori), and through this, to make meaning in my present and future (Carsten, 2000). I am using embroidery as a *medium* to speak to, and with, my great-great-grandmother, Elizabeth (Fitzpatrick & Bell, 2016), working in a craft vernacular that would have been deeply familiar to her. This paper will discuss how the methodology of autoethnography, informed by adoption scholarship and feminist studies of craft, has led me to stitch work that engages with craft tradition, and speaks to loss, identity and belonging.

Keywords: autoethnography; hauntology; embroidery; adoption; Māori

I am embroidering a sampler. As the words and Māori and European motifs become three-dimensional under my fingers, no longer computer-generated and perfect, but wonky, flawed and human, I can feel a connection being made between me and the work, and a connection to my past. A past that until recently was unknown to me. This is a critical autoethnographic story of my search for belonging. This is a story of stitching a connection with my tūpuna wahine, my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth Arnett. This is a story of learning to embroider.

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Stories about distant relatives can be living things, passed down through families like precious pieces of hand-stitched cloth, touched and held, told over and again. But I am adopted, and my narrative was broken. Cut off from my blood roots, I am adrift, “like a foreigner who needs a guidebook to show [her] the way that others know naturally” (Lifton, 1994, p. 23). Stories of my birth ancestors have not been passed down to me, but must be sought, gathered, gleaned. I turn to the archives, to colonial Aotearoa (New Zealand).

I soon find there is a marked difference between the amount of data on my great-great-grandfather John Arnett (Ngāi Tahu/Pākehā¹) and Elizabeth Arnett nee Leader (Ngāi Tahu/Pākehā), his wife. John was an entrepreneur; at various times he was a farmer, tin miner, boat builder. In 1880 he spoke on behalf “of local people who were not chiefs” (Evison, 2006, p. 157) at the Royal Commission on Middle Island Native Land Purchases. One of his obituaries states he “displayed rare intelligence and shrewdness” (Local & General, 1895). In contrast Elizabeth, who bore him eight children, is absent, except for her birth, death, and two marriage entries. In her obituary she is even nameless, listed as Mrs. John T. Wesley, her second husband’s name (Obituary, 1936). Early records and writing about the colonies are overwhelmingly men writing about men, but Caughley reminds us that there is another record; “surviving textiles” remind us that “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (Caughley, 2009, p. 27). Someone in my birth family may have a precious stitched memento from Elizabeth. I have nothing of her except two photographs. I must make my own stitched memento, a piece of craft that links the generations. To do this I am using creative practice in the form of embroidery, along with autoethnography, adoption scholarship and feminist craft theory. My research feeds my material practice, and my material practice deepens my research.

Theory: The Knot of Threads Behind the Work

In my creative practice, I move between thinking, researching and making, and in this way I am “drawing connections to make constellations” (Batty & Berry, 2015, p. 186), in a

process full of “chaos and complexity” (Haseman & Mafe, 2009, p. 219). These constellations can be seen as knots of thought connected to other knots of thought, like the complex clusters of embroidery knots behind the fabric. It was in researching, finding Elizabeth’s absence in the archives and reading the history of early colonial women and post-colonial theory, that I came to the idea that I could embroider her story and engage in a centuries-old craft practice that might help break the tyranny of distance and absence. For me, the impulses for the creative work are as much unconscious as conscious: it is what I am “drawn to.” Autoethnography helps me uncover and nurture this attraction, and it is also a subtle and flexible working tool that combines thinking (theory and reflection) and doing (story and embroidering).

Autoethnography: Theory and Story Together

Autoethnography is part autobiography, part ethnography. An autoethnographer writes consciously from the *inside* of culture, doing story and theory together (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). I am working with Anderson and Glass-Coffin’s (2013) five key features of autoethnographic practice: visibility of self, strong reflexivity, engagement, vulnerability and rejection of closure and finality. This is my story, I am central. As a practitioner, I am self-reflexive and vulnerable in the work I make and write. I am engaged with the Ngāi Tahu community, and I intend to stitch the threads of Elizabeth and my story across multiple embroidery works, with no neat ending or closure in sight.

Autoethnography ensures that theory and story are “collaborators;” practice is empty without informed ideas, and that practice needs to be material, but also ethical (Holman Jones, 2016). In speaking about my tūpuna it is vital to me that I be respectful, for the dead cannot defend themselves. However, this methodology also breaks traditional boundaries, and it’s meant to be that way: “as a mode of inquiry, [autoethnography] was designed to be unruly, dangerous, vulnerable, rebellious and creative...” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). This appeals to my innate sense of rebellion, a trait linked to the outsider status of an adoptee, and it shows in the text of my embroidery piece.

I am working with evocative autoethnography, which privileges the journey rather than the destination, and the messiness of lived experience (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). As autoethnography works from the inside out, it can tell the stories that have remained unheard, or muted (Russell, 1999), which offers me the opportunity of speaking from the in-between, as I am, and as Elizabeth was too. This is a way of telling *oppositional* stories, rather than stories about the way things are “supposed to work” (Bochner, Ellis, & Tillmann-Healy, 2000). Oppositional stories such as growing up without any connection to your birth kin.

Adoption: A Broken Narrative

As a child I immersed myself in stories and this was where I found myself, because “adopted children feel akin to the children in fairy tales... motherless babes who are suckled by animals; crafty changelings who replace human children; and magical children found in forests or on riverbanks” (Lifton, 1994, p. 19). Story-making is now seen as vital for adoptees. Modern adoptees and their families are encouraged to write a “life story” document, creating in material form a living history – a process which helps make sure the future “is sufficiently grounded in a coherent and narratable past” (Brookfield, Brown, & Reavey, 2008, p. 477). I am building a past to build a future.

I have stories now, fragments from Brian, my birth father. Other information has come from relatives and archives. But these flimsy part-stories, newspaper cuttings, photographs and ancient memory are more gap than substance. I do what Ormond’s mother, another adoptee, does: “cobbling together sometimes scarce and incongruent fragments from a bevy of sources in order to create origin stories – explanatory narratives about genealogical descent” (Ormond, 2018, p. 158). Carsten warns me that building biographies from fragments reveals the gaps, producing “often vivid and painful reminders of the missing threads of continuity... [documenting] the breaks in kinship as much as the re-established connections” (2000, p. 696). Despite this I continue, stitching together what I can.

One Long Ghost Story

Through the vernacular of craft I am “representing the unrepresentable” (Holloway & Kneale, 2008, p. 297); I am talking with ghosts – my ancestors. The attraction of hauntology for adoptees is powerful, because adoption “... is a ghost story, full of fantasy, mystery, and missing persons” (Lifton, 2009, p. 71-72). Harris (2016) writes that she and her adopted brother had two childhoods, a “lost” childhood, and the one in which they were present.² Lifton calls this lost space the *Ghost Kingdom*, and she urges us to search for our birth family, seeing this as an “exorcism”, to placate “hungry ghosts” in order to put together an “authentic adopted self” (1994, p. 12).

For Derrida, who coined the term *hauntology*, speaking with ghosts is vital – we must learn “how to let them speak or how to give them back speech” (1994/2012, p. 221). For Derrida, ghosts do not settle, they are not exorcised. They do not even belong to the order of knowledge, but sit between life and death, presence and absence, making “established certainties vacillate” (Davis, 2005, p. 376). A number of scholars have made links between haunting and colonial places and spaces that hold the spectres of past trauma (Cameron,

2008; Coddington, 2011; Davis, 2005; Gordon, 1997/2008; Tuck & Ree, 2013). The notion of the troubled past being ever-present is a powerful one, but trying to speak to living ghosts can painfully disappoint.

Harris's birth mother told her through a closed door "you're a ghost and I want you to leave" (2014, p. 69). My birth mother, Helen, wrote in her first letter to me how amazing it was that you could be going along, perfectly happily and then, bam, something could happen "out of the blue." I was the thing "out of the blue." This relationship was haunted from the start and after several years it collapsed under the weight of (unrealisable) expectations. Like Derrida (1994/2012), I have come to believe adoption ghosts, this trouble, cannot be exorcised. It must be incorporated into life, and one way I am doing this is through my creative practice of embroidery.

A New Family, A New Belonging

First, some background on my adoption. I was one of 3,088 children adopted in New Zealand in 1965 (Else, 1991), out of a total of just over 60,000 live births (Statistics New Zealand, 2012, p. 42) in the most common form – a closed stranger adoption. The popularity of adoption in the 1950s and 1960s as a solution to high numbers of illegitimate births has many complex societal and cultural threads, but none of this mattered to me. In following the recommended practice of the time, I was told this astounding fact as a young child, so I have never known a life without abandonment at the very heart of it.

At the age of 21, I searched for my birth mother. This search was, at this time, unsuccessful. Later, at around the age of 30, I was given official assistance to find my birth father, Brian. He and his four children, my half-siblings, were full of welcome. It was then that I found out that they, and I, have Ngāi Tahu ancestors.³

This revelation was deeply moving to me because I saw myself as two times adrift: through adoption, and as a Pākehā, dislocated from the whenua (land) itself in some profound way. No matter that officially I am only 1/16th Ngāi Tahu, it is this part of me that is driving my creative practice research. This ancestry of mine holds a deep fascination for me that I cannot resist, because, as Homans writes, "Like (or as) trauma narratives, adoption narratives are often obsessively orientated towards an irretrievable past" (2006, p. 7). It is these people from the very bottom of the South Island, my tūpuna (ancestors) who were both colonizers and the colonized, who fascinate me.

Ngāi Tahu, A Southern People

As Ngāi Tahu, we lay claim to almost all of the South Island of New Zealand, a place we call Te Wai Pounamu (the greenstone waters), after migrating from the North Island in the 17th century (King, 2003). This magnificent territory includes the Southern Alps, and Aoraki (Mount Cook) and is by far the largest of any iwi (tribe), however, Ngāi Tahu population was always considerably less than in the North Island, where the more favourable climate allowed year-round cultivation of food. The Aparima hapū (sub-tribe), my ancestors, were hunter-gatherers, with seasonal patterns of travelling for food (Evison, 2006). The first Ngāi Tahu to encounter the white strangers were further north; in 1770, 57 “bemused” men in double canoes watched Captain Cook in the Endeavour sail past at Kaikoura (Anderson, 1998). Only two decades later, gangs of men began arriving in Southland to exploit the riches of the sea, and by 1804, southern Ngāi Tahu were increasingly working with, trading, and cohabiting with Europeans. Over a million seals were slaughtered between 1804-1809 (Richards, 1995). It must have seemed the seals would never end, but of course they did.

Sealing on a commercial level ended around 1827, but whaling replaced it (Salmond, 1992). Elizabeth’s father, James Leader, was a whaler. He reportedly arrived from England with John Howell, who would become a prominent entrepreneur and take a leading role in Elizabeth’s young life. By the time James married Mere Wehikore (Ngāi Tahu/Ngati Mamoe), Elizabeth’s mother, in 1844, the majority of southern Ngāi Tahu were in permanent settlements and complex economic relationships with Pākehā (Anderson, 1998). When land settlements were formalised in the 1850s, the loss of prized mahinga kai (food gathering places) was written into law, increasing Ngāi Tahu reliance on European culture and capitalism (O’Regan, Palmer, & Langton, 2006). These early and close relationships resulted in Southland Ngāi Tahu becoming the largest mixed-race population in New Zealand.

An Intimate History, A Unique Population

Both Elizabeth and her husband John Arnett were mixed-race, with Pākehā fathers and Māori mothers. They were “hawhe kaihe,” literally “half-caste.” (The term half-caste and three-quarter cast were extensively used in official documents of the time, however, I use the term mixed-race as this has less negative “blood-rule” connotations). Shore-based whaling operations encouraged early and sizeable settlements (Wanhalla, 2007), and by 1844, New Zealand Company surveyor Frederick Tuckett estimated that from Banks Peninsula to Riverton, where Mere and James lived and worked, “two-thirds of the native women, who

are not aged, are living with Europeans” (cited in Anderson, 1998, p. 194). In 1864, when the final Crown purchase of Ngāi Tahu land was completed, a massive 68% of the Foveaux Strait⁴ population was of mixed-race (Anderson, 1998, p. 195). In comparison, in census dating from 1861-1921, mixed-race individuals across the North Island never consisted of more than around 14% of the population (Stevens, 2008).

Māori women *wanted* to marry Pākehā men and, at least initially, longer relationships occurred almost entirely on Māori terms, as families sought to incorporate Europeans, with their status and valuable trade items, into their whakapapa (lineage). These marriages ultimately converted what Haines calls the “middle ground” (2009, p. 49) into a European economic space. But this was a gendered space, with the great majority of marriages in a “‘colonialist’ form, where the wife was the indigenous partner...as Maori women offered men access to property, as well as ‘fair dalliance’” (Binney, 2006, p. 105). Māori women inherited from both parents, unlike European women, who did not have this right until 1884 (Binney, 2006).

Paid for in Biscuits

The mixed-marriages of my ancestors have been used to illustrate unproblematic colonisation and harmonious race relations, in contrast to the sustained conflict experienced in the North Island (Wanhalla, 2015). However, this population was viewed by many Pākehā and Māori contemporaries with suspicion, and there is a great deal of scholarship on the difficulties faced by early mixed-race New Zealanders such as Elizabeth and John (Anderson & Niven, 1991; Binney, 2006; Brown, 2016; Haines, 2009; Meredith, 2000; Paterson, 2010; Stevens, 2008; Wanhalla, 2007, 2015). Perhaps they were called some of the contemporary Māori terms for mixed-race people: “utu pihikete” (paid for in biscuits), “huipaiana” (an iron hoop, also an item of trade), or “o te parara” (out of the whalers barrel) (Meredith, 2000). A hint of this trouble survives in a letter to the editor in a local paper, correcting John Arnett on a matter regarding the Riverton Native School: “The school was erected for the Natives, not for the half-castes” (Daniel, 1886). However, the struggle to survive was not limited to those of mixed-race.

Resilience and Fortitude

Ngāi Tahu began asking for promises of reserves, schools and hospitals to be honoured almost immediately after land deeds were signed. Part of this ongoing claim was to ensure mixed-race families were taken care of. Walter Mantell, Commissioner for Extinguishing Native Land Claims, received 23 applications for land for mixed-race families

in 1853 in Otago, where my kaumātua (elders) lived. However, these land provisions were to Pākehā men who had married Māori wives, not to mixed-race adults such as John and Elizabeth, who were already the 2nd generation of original Pākehā/Māori partnerships (Brown, 2016). Despite early and repeated lobbying of the government, Ngāi Tahu land allocations were vastly insufficient, and remained so until claim settlement in the late twentieth century.

This history is akin to what Raymond Williams calls, when speaking about his Welsh ancestors, “a record of ... defeat, invasion, victimization, oppression. When one sees what was done to the people who are physically my ancestors, one feels it to be almost incredible. . . It's the infinite resilience, even deviousness, with which people have managed to persist...” (Harvey & Williams, 1995, p. 79). Williams, a cultural theorist, used fiction to explore the difficult history of his ancestors. I am using embroidery; to make work about Elizabeth is to try and know her. I turn to one of two images I have of her. This is a hand-coloured photograph.⁵



Figure 1. Elizabeth Arnett, nee Leader (n.d.)

Elizabeth, a Victorian Lady

In the photograph Elizabeth is young, perhaps late teens or early twenties, and she's standing in a studio, wearing an ornate, probably expensive, Victorian gown. The gown's true colour can only be guessed at. Her hair is ornately arranged, and she stands stiffly, hands awkwardly posed, a strange, unreadable smile on her face. Maybe it's a wedding portrait. There is nothing that speaks to her mixed-race ancestry. This picture probably dates from the 1860s. From early contact there was quick but selective uptake of European clothing by Māori, with woven cotton and wool often replacing flax, a time-consuming material to prepare (Caughley, 2009). Colonial attitudes of what was seen as acceptable were no doubt also a factor in this. However, there was a fine balancing act for Māori and mixed-race women to perform; too "white" and you were condemned: "Their desire is to look European and their highest aim is to act the European. Females in particular are most anxious to eradicate the traces of their rich, nut-brown blood, and I have heard it hinted that the puff-pot is resorted to" ("Stewart Island Notes," Otago Daily Times, 4 January 1904, cited in Anderson & Niven, 1991, p. 30).

We cannot know why Elizabeth chose European dress in this picture, but it's reasonable to conject that her upbringing had a powerful influence on her. Her father drowned crossing Jacob's River in 1852, when Elizabeth was aged 5. Sometime after this, she and her sister and brother were taken from their mother Mere, and put into the care of John Howell. Howell had been married to Kohikohi, the daughter of chief Patu of Raratoka (Wilson, 1976), Mere's cousin. However, she had died, and his second wife was Catherine Brown, who was mixed-race. Family rumour has it that James Leader intended for his children to be sent to England for education, and there was money set aside for this, but Howell used this money, instead, to import a governess to educate them and his own children. This would have been a Pākehā education, as Howell did not even like his mixed-race wife to "sit among the natives" (Stevens, 2008, p. 45).

It's extremely likely that Elizabeth would have been taught stitching and needlework as part of her schooling. Needlecraft was seen as a core skill for girls. One of the colourful samplers in Caughey's (2014) *Historic New Zealand Samplers* was made at a local school, Wakari, in 1865 and the virtues of teaching children needlework were extolled right through the nineteenth century. Morell quotes her grandmother's teaching book from 1896:

Needlework drills are of great use and value...the purpose of these drills are manifold.

1. To interest the children, and make them obedient and attentive
 2. To make the children's hands supple and dexterous
 3. To make the children quick and industrious, without any undue excitement.
- (Morrell, 2012, p. 92)

During a time when clothing was handmade, and often extensively recycled within a family, this reliance on needlework skills made sense, even for the middle-classes. It's likely Elizabeth would have been working on her trousseau, stitching clothing and linens, throughout her teenage years. And it is fair to say that most girls would have stitched some kind of sampler.

Embroidery: Women's Work, Women's Pleasure

I am stitching a sampler because it is where embroidery beginners begin. Samplers were "a stitched exercise" (Caughley, 2009, p. 26) and part of an eighteenth and nineteenth century English girl's education, with form, content and materials intricately tied to social class. The name sampler comes from the French *essamplaire* (literally, copy or imitation), from the Renaissance practice of women copying and trying out new stitches and patterns on a long piece of fabric (Lewis, 1981/1990). By Victorian times, samplers were colourful and often ornate. They typically showed letters and numbers, bible verses or popular sentimental poems, and motifs, often with a historical significance. Common motifs include a house, flowers, animals, crowns and religious symbols.

Mixed-blood on the Calico

By using motifs that speak to Elizabeth's and my story; a tiki, a kiwi, a kowhai flower, and a panel of koru (spirals), I am stitching Elizabeth's mixed-race identity into the calico in a way that I have yet to see in a contemporary sampler. Although the earliest known sampler made in a New Zealand household was made by a Māori woman, "Oreo," in the King home in 1820 (Caughley, 2014), this sampler does not survive. In the many samplers in Caughley's *New Zealand's Historical Samplers* there are no Māori symbols or motifs. They could all be English, except for the familiar, and welcome, location names: West Taieri, Nelson, Hokitika. In private correspondence, Caughley noted that she has yet to find any early samplers with Māori content, but she was sure that there would be work like this in "bottom drawers and linen cupboards," – someone's treasured memento (personal communication, 15 December 2017). So, I am making a work to fill this gap. At the same time, I am engaging in a craft vernacular that was common in Elizabeth's day, a creative practice that is now seen to be loaded with meaning.

A Stitched Compliance

Embroidery is not a “necessary” stitch, it’s decorative, and because of this, it had a unique place in the lives of middle-class nineteenth century women. For girls, embroidering was to do with obedience and demonstrating skill. For women, Rozika Parker writes, embroidery was connected to the very idea of what it meant to be a woman. The art both “promoted submission to the norms of feminine obedience and offered both psychological and practical means to independence” (1984/2010, p. xix). By its very association with domesticity and women, the *act* of stitching was seen as more important than its content, which was trivialised: “embroidery and a stereotype of femininity have become collapsed into one another, characterised as mindless, decorative and delicate; like the icing on the cake, good to look at, adding taste and status, but devoid of significant content” (Parker, 1984/2010, p. 6).

In Victorian times, a man would have been proud to have a wife and daughters with enough time, and education, to embroider. The physical act itself reinforced the Victorian ideal of the morally superior woman, the “Angel in the House:” “eyes lowered, head bent, shoulders hunched – the position signifies repression and subjugation” (Parker, 1984/2010, p. 10). Embroidery was also “moral hygiene,” a way of keeping hands busy, and genteel women out of trouble (Hung & Magliaro, 2007, p. 122). Certainly, the act of embroidering requires great periods of quiet and concentration. It’s easy to imagine myself in the nineteenth century as I work by the light of the dining-room window, with the same materials that Elizabeth would have used: coloured cotton thread, calico and a wooden frame. I can hear birds, and close, the satisfying sound of the needle drawing thread through the material. She might be in the room with me, or I in the room with her. For something that is on the surface so meditative, I remind myself that needlework was used as a means of “civilizing” Māori.

Stitching as “a Civilizing Mission”

Needlecraft was brought early to New Zealand, part of a toolkit for “civilizing” Māori people. In 1814, Hannah King travelled with her husband and two other couples to the Bay of Islands, in the North Island. They were missionaries and artisans – it was part of the Church Missionary Society’s (CMS) caveat that conversions to Christianity would follow the introduction of “civilized arts.” Hannah was skilled in needlecraft and quickly put her skill to use. Her husband wrote to the CMS that in 1815, ten-year-old Ehura was brought by her grandmother “to learn everything like white people,” and she was given “print” (printed cloth)

in order to make two gowns (Caughley, 2009, p. 19-20). Conversion to God and European ways was to be achieved, not just by teaching, but by example. Missionary women "dressed in prescribed ways and went to some lengths to reproduce these values amongst Māori women and children. Clothing the indigenous body was seen as an important part of mission work" (Middleton, 2007, p. 18). This shines a light on Elizabeth's elaborate dress – a symbol of her middle-class Christian status.

Māori women had the same role in their culture: they made the cloth and made the clothes. They also "conveyed message and meaning in cloak-making...through the use of fibres, feathers, dogskin, taniko pattern and colour" (Caughley, 2009, p. 26). But change was inevitable as the numbers of Europeans in New Zealand steadily grew. Taking up European craft vernacular was a seismic shift for Māori women and in a rapidly changing culture, traditional knowledge was often sidelined. The choice of European clothing must have been further complicated for those who were mixed-race, such as Elizabeth; for to choose one culture is to, in some manner, abandon the other. If Elizabeth chose to embroider as a leisure activity beyond the obligatory sampler, I wonder if she found in its calm a small way to mend this divide.

Stitching to Build Bridges and to Mend

Embroidering, stitching, can be reparative. Gina Niederhumer embroidered and made craft to help mend her difficult relationship with her mother. For her, stitching "pins, pierces and binds, one's thoughts into the cloth in hand, changing its appearance as it orders and mends the gaps between the torn and frayed edges in one's self" (2015, p. 11). Esther Fitzpatrick used stitching as a material process to speak to the ghosts of her silenced Pākehā ancestors, and to explore her "inbetweenness." In sewing an arpillera, a traditional Chilean tapestry, she was able to embody "the 'small stories' that had been consigned to the shadow world" (Fitzpatrick & Bell, 2016, p. 15). Artist Kirsten Lyttle, who is Māori, but was adopted into a Pākehā family, wove old photographs of Māori women, this tactile process growing out of her attempt to build bridges of knowledge, and connect one generation of Māori weavers to the next (personal communication, 17 December 2017). It is the making of something with our hands that seems to hold the key here. Creating reminds us that although there is pain and disconnection in our stories, we are in the world, and able to make something of beauty that then exists beyond us.

Through using embroidery, I am also doing what Coddington recommends as a way to speak to ghosts, focusing on the mundane activities that made up the daily lives of our ancestors (2011). I could work with Māori craft practices, as Elizabeth was mixed-race, however, I am careful to not appropriate something that does not feel like it fully belongs to

me. Also, by using European craft, a practice I grew up with, I am able to work from the inside out, bringing my prior skills and knowledge to this new work. It is important to me, however, that Elizabeth's "inbetweenness" is in the work.

The Work: A Kiwi and a Kangaroo

To begin, there must be a design. This will be transferred onto the fabric and then stitched. I studied historical samplers and some contemporary embroidery artists. It was easy to write about Elizabeth, but harder to choose what to tell of my story. I added modern motifs that speak to Elizabeth's mixed-race ancestry, and included a kangaroo – to represent the country I now call home. After a lot of thought, I included a swear word in my story, because I habitually swear, and also because I wanted to undercut the middle-class "nice-girl" hegemony of traditional sampler language.



Figure 2. December 2018

However, I did keep one of the traditions of Victorian samplers: the “modesty” mark, where the last number of a birth year is not revealed, to hide a lady’s exact age, as this was considered a private matter (Caughley, 2014). I added our shared genealogy⁶ and underneath this, a Māori saying, which translated, reads: “if kindness is sown, then kindness you shall receive⁸.” With this I acknowledged the kindness of Ngāi Tahu, who make no delineation between those who have more recent Māori ancestors, and those of us who have been thoroughly “Pākehāed.” And here I revealed my precarious attachment to this history, how I am always expecting to be turned away, abandonment resonating always within.

In carefully choosing the words to embroider, I was brought closer to Elizabeth’s story. How strange that our stories have some similarity, both of us taken from our mothers. Through this I reflected more on my adoption, moving deeper into story as autoethnography urges us to do.

When the design was complete, I gathered the materials. I decided to work with calico, an old fabric. I liked that the warp and weft are imperfect and it was inexpensive, perfect for a sampler. I copied the pattern onto the fabric, a frustrating process. At first I used a fabric pencil, holding the fabric over the paper pattern on the window, but this was tricky and the pencil marks turned out to be too faint to be useful. Then I discovered the

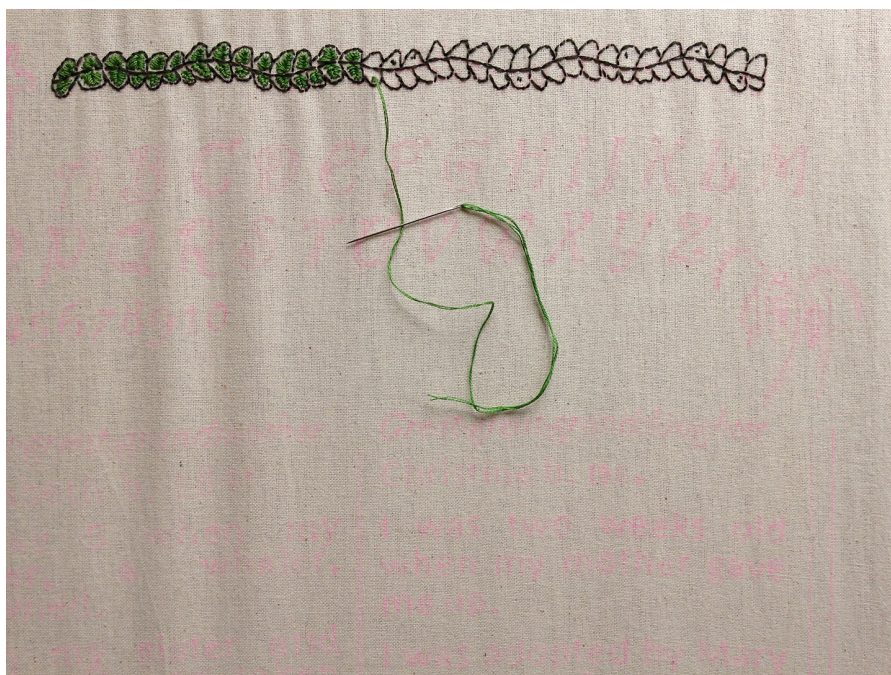


Figure 3. January 2018

wonderful disappearing pen. I also bought a light box. This meant I could accurately trace a portion of the design using the light box and the disappearing pen, enough to stitch that day. By the following day the tracing was gone.

Then I chose my colours. I read that in the late 17th century numerals and alphabets were worked in many different colours, but longer passages of text were typically in one colour only (Lewis, 1981/1990). I looked again at Victorian samplers and found a great deal of variety in colour, form, and stitches. I decided to embroider leaves, flowers and animals in



Figure 4. February 2018

in stitches, but I liked the faint textured background it gave the sampler.

the colours they are in nature, and the longer text in one colour for Elizabeth, and another for me. I worked the alphabet in multiple colours, copying a gorgeous 1859 German sampler (Lewis, 1981/1990). Then I began to stitch. How slow it was. How slow I am!

I worked down the fabric so that my hand didn't rub on the completed stitching. You could see here the shadow of the transfer pencil. This would end up mostly covered

To choose stitches I consulted a stitch bible (Haxell, 2012). I chose simple, easy stitches, as a beginner must. I outlined the leaf in running stitch, then the inside in leaf stitch. Even when Elizabeth and her peers stitched, this was an old, old language. In Egypt, hand embroidery has been found that dates from the first millennium AD, showing chain stitch, back stitch, diagonal filling stitch and running stitch (Morrell, 2012).



Figure 5. February 2018

Satin stitch for the kowhai flowers. Alice Swain, an English embroiderer, stitched the first kowhai alongside her map of NZ in 1804. Her image came from Joseph Banks, the botanist on Captain Cook's voyage to New Zealand, in the late 18th century, via *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* (Caughley, 2014). Mine came from Google images.

Back-stitch for the letters. The edges of the fabric began to fray and I made hasty repair. I stitched too tightly and the fabric puckered. The needle had a mind of its own: "Sometimes a stitched line is moving happily along the warp and then shoots off, finding its own pattern" (McKeating, 2012, p. 29). This is the slowest kind of handwriting, but it's not a note to myself. I worry about legibility. There is some unpicking, which is, if anything, more laborious than stitching.

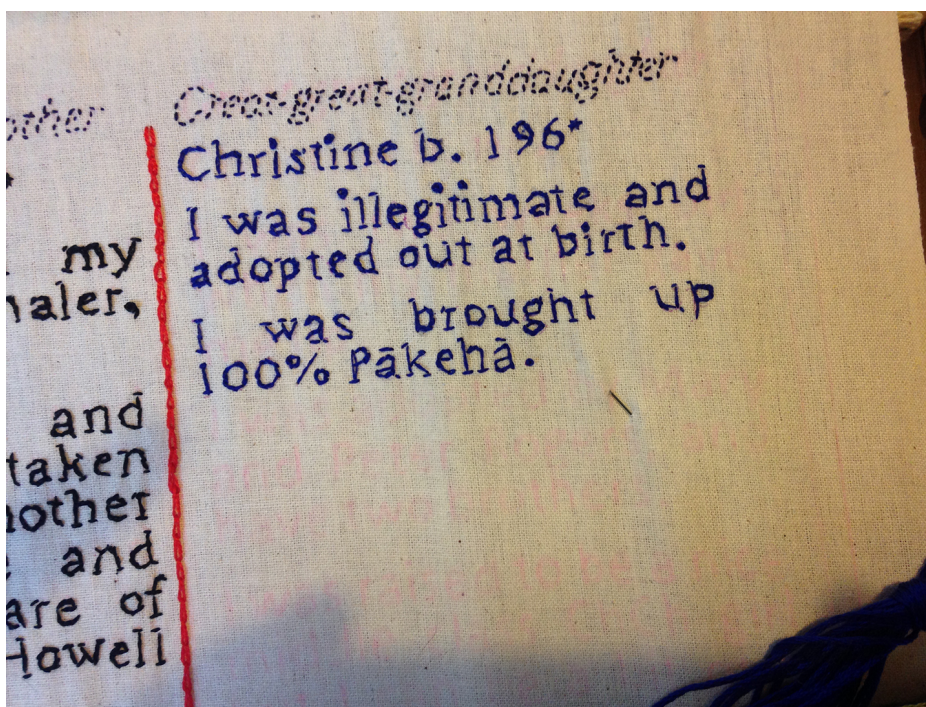


Figure 6. March 2018

The kiwi was more accomplished than the kangaroo. My skill was growing. Unlike writing, where each word must be carefully chosen, each stitch means little by itself. Stitches work in a cumulative way, in a slow process of emergence, in the same way my past was slowly emerging from gaps and fragments and becoming more whole.

At the last moment, I felt the bottom right was too barren, so I embroidered some more traditional motifs – a pansy, leaf and twig. In this way I added colour, and tried some new stitches. After all, a sampler is about showing off embroidery skills!

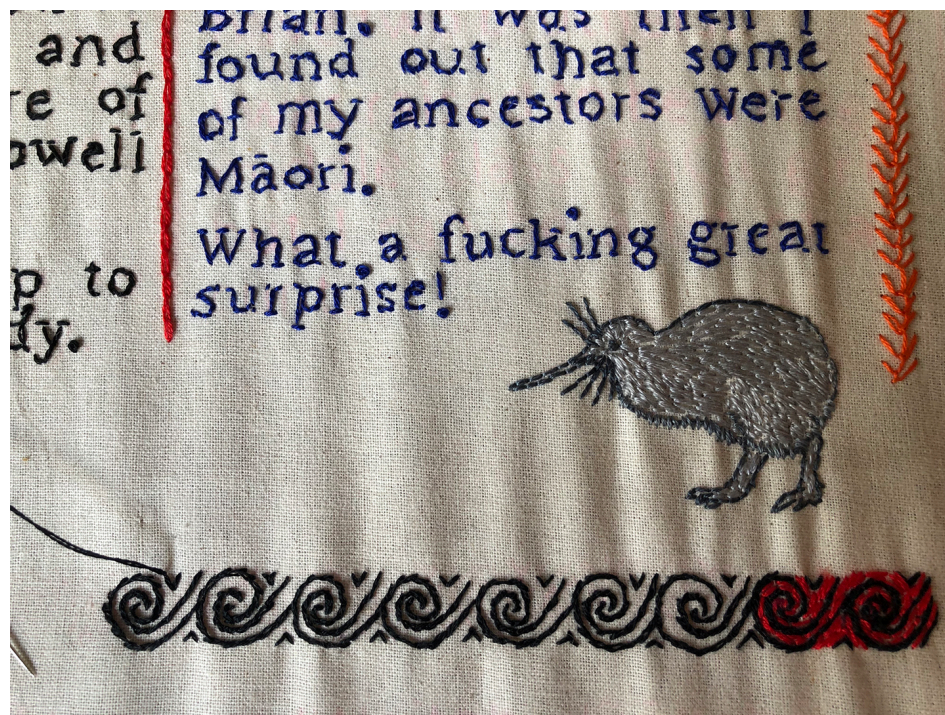


Figure 7. May 2018

Embroidering this sampler proved to have what Miller calls *potency*. In the physical act of shaping each letter, of traversing the curves, embroidering the macrons, of unpicking, then starting again, I felt a connection being made between myself and the work. Miller writes, “as our fingers struggle with the tiny piece of cloth and the unfamiliar movements as we shape the letters, we become one with the name: we bear the mark” (Millar, 2012, p. 13). Through the act of stitching each letter and word I also honoured Elizabeth, and stitched her and her story into the fabric of my life, with my needle as my medium.

Conclusion

Lippard wrote in the 1970s that many artists and makers were returning to traditional craft-based arts, but this statement holds true for now as well: “Today we are resurrecting our mothers’, aunts’ and grandmothers’ activities – not only in the well-publicized areas of quilts and textiles, but also in the more random and freer area of *transformational rehabilitation...*” (Lippard, 1978/2010, p. 489). But there is a vital difference between embroidery now and then – it is no longer a “feminine ideal; for the first time in hundreds of years it is no longer an essential part of every woman’s training” (Barrett, 2008, n.p.). I come to this work as a free agent.

The practice of making my sampler, of engaging in a creative and imaginative relationship with my great-great-grandmother Elizabeth, has been a fruitful one. The spectre

of my adoption remains with me, however, through this investigation, and through my material practice, I am learning to speak to the ghost and to amalgamate this “trouble” into my life and my ongoing creative practice.



Figure 8. June 2018 – the sampler, complete

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ENDNOTES

¹ I use the macron-emphasised version of Māori, Ngāi Tahu and Pākehā (New Zealand European), although this practice is not homogeneous across all writers I quote. The macron indicates a long vowel, and I use it as “long vowels... are critical for pronunciation and meaning...” (Metge, 2010, p. xii). In ensuring the distinctiveness of written Te Reo Māori, I honour my ancestors. I also use Ngāi Tahu and not Kāi Tahu, which is a regional dialect, and used by some authors, in accordance with usage on [Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu](#), our official tribal website.

² I also have an older brother who was adopted.

³ It is only necessary to have one kaumātua (elder), in the Blue Book (census, Ngāi Tahu Maori Trust Board, published 1967) and no other Māori ancestors, to officially belong to the tribe. In contrast, Hawaiians and Native Americans, for example, must satisfy “factional criteria” (Te Punga Somerville, 1998, p. 95) in order to be eligible for funds, quota places and even land inheritance.

⁴ Foveaux Strait, or Favourite Strait, is the stretch of water between the bottom of the South Island and Rakiura, or Stewart Island, and other surrounding smaller islands.

⁵ The other image is a portrait of her, along with two other people, also taken a studio. It's in black and white, and of poor quality.

⁶ Ngāti Mamoe and Waitaha were iwi (tribes) incorporated into Ngāi Tahu primarily through marriage.