

Chapter 5

It's Like Felting: Reflections on Feminist Social and Community Practices

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ABSTRACT

This is a personal story describing the role and importance of local action whilst reflecting on collective and collaborative feminist community practices. The craft of felting is used as a metaphor for merging feminist social and community work theory and practices that encourage engagement with continuing cycles of activism aimed towards gender equality and Indigenous sovereignty. Following a rough chronology of engagement with movements for social change and respect for human and environmental rights, this chapter points to the value of post modernists' treatise of doubt, tension, and uncertainty. It also contains a plea for a continuation of the modernist social work activism to decrease suffering and inequality. Narrating and evaluating the ideas and actions of real-time practice, the author will demonstrate how knowledge of place, process, and strength in work towards interpersonal peace and planetary survival was achieved.

INTRODUCTION

Felt is a textile material that is produced by matting, condensing and pressing fibers together... Felt has special properties that allow it to be used for a wide variety of purposes. It is fire-retardant and self-extinguishing; it dampens vibration and absorbs sound; and it can hold large amounts of fluid without feeling wet (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felt>, accessed 13.07.2020).

There are several types of felt and felting practices including needle felting, dry and wet thread and my favorite, felting onto other natural fibers, nuno felting. Felt is created from many materials and through a process of cross layering and agitation that literally knits the threads together. The felting process is organic, you get your hands wet rather than dirty, and it can be done individually or collectively. Ancient

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and contemporary at the same time, felt is one of the first forms of material used for shelter and clothing. Laying raw wool onto existing natural material such as cotton or silk, nuno felting builds a new fabric upon a pre-existing fabric. Additional threads of wool and silk can also be worked together, embroidered and shaped to create stronger more colorful and utilitarian fabric.

Looking back over forty years as a feminist social and community work practitioner, the metaphoric threads and materials in this *felt work* are represented by the mentors; formal and informal training; connections and involvements with community groups; engagement and dis-engagement with groups and communities; and a lived experience as a cis gendered woman raising two cis female born daughters as a sole parent. Growing up and mostly living and working on the lands of the Wurundjeri and Bunurong peoples of the Kulin nations influenced my sense of belonging to this country. The processes and products of this working and living resemble the assembling of felt with layers upon layers of fiber being rubbed up against, into, over and under, each to create a giving, yet also resilient fabric that evokes a similar sensation of building and holding fabrics together.

Ever changing, growing, decomposing and recomposing, feminist community work practices involve local and contextual actors and events. But they also signal wider and perhaps even global movements, as is evident in the current #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements.

Using nuno felting as metaphor, the objectives of this paper are to build upon the base material of some Australian feminist social and community practices as outlined by Weeks, Hoatson and Dixon, (2003), Kenny (2011) and Ife (1997). Sharing examples of principles and practice, events and activities become the threads as do fibers, matted, patted, agitated into layers then brought together to become felted fabric and perhaps at times unified or solid(ish) practice.

Feminist community practice relies on engagement with the layers of women's experience. Sharing a personal and political perspective (Hinisch, 1969) on Australian feminist social and community practice in the inter-related fields of health, housing and violence against women, I describe how individual issues were shaped by and into collective practice concerns and shared troubles. These lived experiences also link to broader social action, which in Victoria, achieved some early state sanctioned legal reforms and feminist services. More recently the actions of women and allies led to *The Royal Commission into Family Violence* (2015) as struggles for gender justice and equality continue.

In discussing communities as the domain of practice I am referring to what Australian sociologist Dempsey (2002) exhorts as "the greater complexity of meanings for modern communities. Beyond but inclusive of geographic place, cultural and personal allegiance and identification and extending at times into the reality of 'virtual' communities". In the realm of community studies this includes a context of virtual communities Shoech (2013), but as Hyde (2005) reminds us women's community practice and indeed women's diverse experiences of diverse communities is too rarely addressed in community studies. Notable exceptions to this in Australia are Kenny (2011) and Weeks et al., (2003) who center women's experiences.

Creating the Context: Laying it out

I was raised as a Cis-gender¹ female on the lands of the Wurundjeri people in the beautiful temperate forests of the Dandenong ranges, 30 km from Melbourne. I did not learn of the people who belonged and cared for those lands until I was in my mid-teens. However, I did meet and go to school with Aboriginal people and I learnt to respect and value my curiosity, to know more about the land, its custodians, and all of us newcomers. The small school I attended had a Welsh school principal and included refugee

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