

Creative interdisciplinary geographies in practice: Stitching sphagnum moss

cultural geographies

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Abstract

How might we get to know moss on more intimate terms? This paper outlines a creative stitching workshop as a method for facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration and for encouraging slowly paced, tactile ways of noticing and getting to know plants – in this case, sphagnum mosses. We reflect on *MossWorlds*, a project bringing together artists and academics from a variety of disciplines in the social and physical sciences and humanities. Via a series of experimental and playful interventions, the project investigates the historical, contemporary and future importance of mosses in Greater Manchester. Our ‘Moss Stitch’ workshop, held in the University of Manchester’s geography laboratories, invited participants to get to know (sphagnum) moss more intimately by stitching it. This task required focused attention and tactile engagement with mosses and materials, opening a space for knowing mosses otherwise. Drawing together reflections from workshop participants we consider what it means to carry out creative, cultural geographic practice in geography laboratories – spaces traditionally reserved for physical geographers and the ‘hard’ environmental sciences. We ask how performing soft forms of textile making might subvert these spaces and norms.

Keywords

creative methods, interdisciplinary, moss, textiles, vegetal geographies

Conversation emerges slowly.

Pull, pluck, point.

Speaking without looking.

Parallel play in a shared space.

My hair, trapped in the stitch

(buried)

Moss work.

How might we come to understand mosses more intimately? What methods can help bring together the varied disciplinary knowledges, embodied dispositions and forms of attentiveness needed to appreciate mosses – plants that are small and slow growing, and which, historically, have been overlooked and understudied (Figure 1)? This writing draws on a larger endeavour: *MossWorlds* (August 2024–July 2025) is a project bringing together a team of artists and academics researching plants from varied disciplinary perspectives. While urban mosses have often been overlooked or relegated to the margins, they are gaining attention as bio-indicators of urban pollution, markers of place and belonging, and aesthetic signals of various ethical concerns and values.¹ Our overarching objective in *MossWorlds* is to ‘re-story’ moss, bringing together Manchester’s botanical, civic and aesthetic ‘worlds’ of moss to creatively address the contemporary challenges of our ecological and biodiversity crises.

In this paper,² we describe a creative textiles workshop, ‘Moss Stitch’, as a method for generating different forms of attention to (sphagnum) moss,³ and building a sense of connection within an interdisciplinary collective. ‘Moss Stitch’ was one collaborative event within a series of playful interventions organised as part of *MossWorlds*, which included sessions focused on bryology, musical improvisation, herbarium archives, peatland ecologies, poetry, microscopy and spectroscopy, and protest art, each bringing together interdisciplinary artists and researchers. Each workshop aimed to provide space for developing a shared language and methodology for knowing mosses. The ‘Moss Stitch’ workshop, held in March 2025, brought participants into the University of Manchester’s SEED (School of Environment, Education and Development) Laboratories to handle, look closely, and think about mosses at varied scales, and then recreate them with textiles (Figure 2).

This paper builds on recent interest in creative methods in cultural geography and the social sciences, as well as longer traditions of arts practitioners exploring textiles and other craft forms.⁴ Existing work has highlighted the potential of embodied, tactile, creative practices both as methodological techniques in research, and as tools for building social connection and solidarity.⁵ We extend these possibilities by asking how textile making might be mobilised to better understand plants and to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration for researching the vegetal.⁶

Interdependencies, time ma(r)ker, landscape maker, witness (but in an active way)

Stitching is an intimate, embodied practice, usually performed at a small scale, requiring careful handling and manipulation of materials, repetitive actions and focused attention.⁷ Stitching often demands a degree of stillness, slowness and quiet contemplation. When conducted with other makers, it can generate a particular sociality and form of conversation.⁸ There is growing interest in textile making as a research method in the social sciences and humanities,⁹ due to this capacity for



Figure 1. A bog pool created during peatland restoration colonised by *Sphagnum cuspidatum* (Swineshaw Moor, UK).

Source: Photograph by Jonathan Ritson.

facilitating slow, reflective thinking, social connection, haptic understanding and intimacy with materials.¹⁰ Cultural and vegetal¹¹ geographers have also recently asked what intimacies with plants¹² might mean, noting that vegetal intimacy implies close-up, embodied knowing¹³ and attention to plants' rhythms and temporalities.¹⁴ Importantly, such proximate understandings may have potential to foster emotional attachment and care for plants. This is especially pertinent in relation to mosses, which have traditionally been under-explored or treated as weeds to be eradicated. As Calkins notes, thinking with vegetal intimacy can draw 'attention to muted histories that perhaps have never been made explicit but still are sensed and felt'.¹⁵

The two-hour 'Moss Stitch' workshop was an experiment with sewing, itself an intimate practice, as a technique for deepening participants' relationships with mosses, and with one another. It was attended by the coauthors of this paper, who include undergraduate students, artists, the curator of botany at Manchester Museum and researchers in English literature, cultural and physical geography, music, and bryology. The workshop followed a morning session (led by Emma Shuttleworth) learning about the environmental processes through which sphagnum mosses form peat. We gleaned how scientists can use mosses as windows onto past, present, and future environments, and considered how mosses act as ecosystem engineers, regulating flows of water and climate at different scales (Figures 3 and 4).

Guided by textile artist Natalie Linney, we then spent the afternoon stitching into cotton fabric stretched between wooden embroidery hoops. Natalie first introduced her exploration of sphagnum

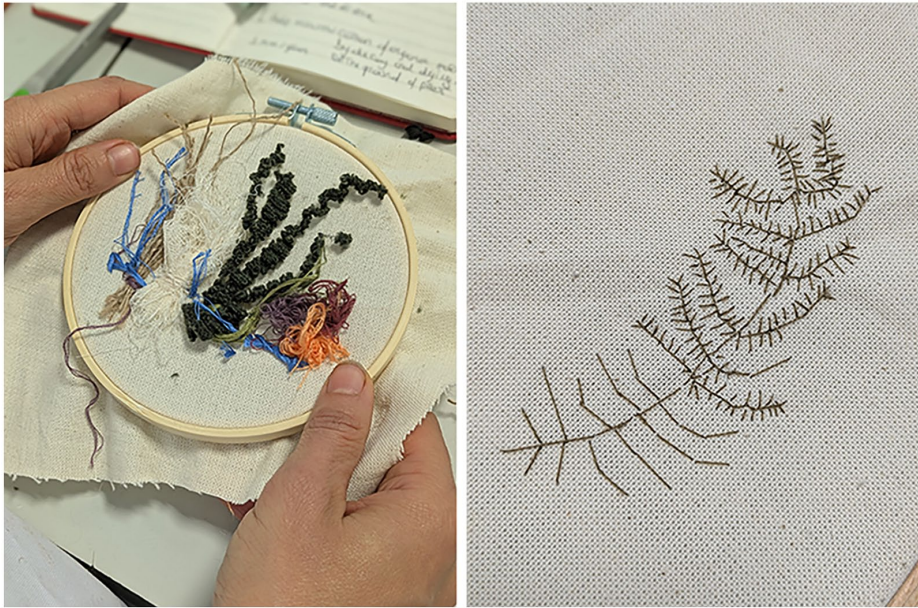


Figure 2. Stitched mosses in progress (left and right).
Source: Photographs by Laura Pottinger.



Figure 3. A *Sphagnum cuspidatum* bog pool community using nearby cottongrass (*Eriophorum* Spp.) as scaffolding (Holcombe Moor, UK).
Source: Photograph by Jonathan Ritson.



Figure 4. A *Sphagnum capillifolium* hummock (Exmoor National Park, UK).
Source: Photograph by Jonathan Ritson.



Figure 5. Sphagnum mosses: fresh, freeze-dried, as powdered pigment, and painted (left); reverse side of stitched moss (right).
Source: Left: photograph by Laura Pottinger; Right: photograph by Antony Hall.

moss as a creative medium, drawing on freeze-drying and processing techniques she had piloted in an artist residency in the University of Manchester geography laboratories in 2023.¹⁶ In her experiments, sphagnum moss proved unsuccessful as a dyestuff or source of eco-print,¹⁷ resisting attempts at instrumentalisation,¹⁸ but gave promising results when dried and ground into a fine pigment, prompting ideas for future experiments. We examined the powdered, dried and fresh mosses using hand lenses, thinking about how these planty materials felt and behaved. We looked at images of sphagnum at various scales, from boggy landscapes to microscopic cells (Figure 5).



Figure 6. Working with mosses and textiles in the geography laboratories.

Source: Photograph by Laura Pottinger.

Our task was to bring these aesthetic, textural qualities into a stitched response, and at the end of the two-hour session, to give our mossy creations a name. These included:

Laboratory Incident. Star Plug. Tangled Thread Moss. Splurging Fray Moss. Richesse. Spaggie Baggie. Tufted. Not Branching Too Far.

The workshop involved us and our materials taking over a large section of the geography laboratories, clearing away glass beakers and soil samples, and filling the space with soft, multi-hued tangled threads and bits of textural fabric gathered from our own collections. We attempted to think like mosses to recreate them, as one stitcher commented:

I wanted to be small scale like the moss. I like the tufty unpredictable fabric that spirals everywhere.

Some of us stitched intricate details with cotton floss, others layered mesh-like gauze or sculpted springy polyester stuffing into three dimensional forms. A pair of sleeve cuffs, cut from a green woolly jumper yielded pleasingly bouncy, unravelling tendrils.

The subversive potential of stitching sphagnum

Stitching has long associations with the feminine and with private, domestic spaces, and textiles theorists suggest it is therefore imbued with subversive potential when performed publicly.¹⁹ Conducting soft forms of textile making in a laboratory, traditionally the preserve of the physical and ‘hard’ environmental sciences, disrupts daily activity within these spaces (Figure 6).

Stitching also has capacity to challenge ideas about ‘proper’ ways of studying and naming plants, unsettling the scientific gaze and inviting more embodied, affective ways of knowing and



Figure 7. Stitched moss: 'Against method in real time: A textile version of the scientific method versus a more anarchist understanding'.

Source: Photograph by Laura Pottinger.

feeling plants through the cultural geographic imagination, creative methods, and 'anarchic' dispositions.²⁰ Joey, a bryologist reflects on how his thinking shifted while stitching (Figure 7):

I called the piece 'Against method in real time' because I started with a very scientific breakdown and quickly realised that the more engaging form of this knowledge was the more tactile version. I come from quite a strict 'scientific method is king' background in my research career. As I went through the process of sewing, I realised that I didn't want to make a scientific breakdown of the structure, I actually just wanted to make something more fun and engaging. It reminded me, in the moment, of the arguments in Against Method by Paul Feyerabend,²¹ hence the title.

Stitching together gave us an opportunity to 'sit with' mosses, as we worked in the company of physical moss plants in various states of desiccation and quietly contemplated the information we had absorbed throughout the day. Anke, an academic researcher in Medieval Literature and Plant Humanities reflects on her experience:

Spending time stitching moss after a morning learning about the ecological importance of sphagnum and touring the geography labs might seem an incongruous thing to do - an exercise in contrasts. But it turned



Figure 8. ‘Splurging fray moss’ (left); stitched detail of a sphagnum moss stem (right).
Source: Photographs by Laura Pottinger.

out to make a beautiful kind of sense. The lab itself became a space conducive to different kinds of creativity and experimentation as it was filled with colour, texture and encouragement. The information shared by Emma and her colleagues now had space and time to sink in – the stitching not only picked up on some of the same themes (the morphology of mosses; their scale; their intricate and varied shapes, colours, textures) but also opened up another way of being with mosses.

The slow, patient, careful (sometimes tentative, uncertain) process of stitching felt like a form of rumination. In medieval monastic culture, *ruminatio* described the act of meditating on sacred texts: ‘chewing’ them over until they became part of oneself. The stitching felt similar, allowing theoretical knowledge to be translated into material creation and so ‘digested’ and incorporated. The attention required by stitching turned out to be different in kind or quality from that involved in reading an academic article or listening to a talk. Because we also chatted or were silent while fiddling with a particularly recalcitrant thread, attention moved dynamically between open awareness and close focus. Ideas for designs emerged – and metamorphosed in the process of translation from abstract image into material expression. When our works were gathered together, we could see the creativity of the group as well as that of moss itself.

Stitching created an unhurried space for us to spend time alongside one another, engrossed in what was taking shape in the circle of the embroidery hoop (Figures 8 and 9). Though we started with mosses, our attention turned towards the materials, and our talk to fragmented chatter, what Shercliff refers to as ‘gossip and a continuous flux of coordinated hands and bodies’²² through which ‘[t]he conversation and the embroideries are jointly produced’.²³ Henry, an improviser, composer and researcher in music touches on the generative potential of this type of talk:

Stitching in the laboratory, conversation flows. Anecdotes give way to reflections. Laughter leads to pause for thought (or threading). As we stitch, I notice a mutual attentiveness, both to these materials and to each



Figure 9. Stitched moss detail (left and right).

Source: Photographs by Antony Hall.

other. Even in this brief workshop, it emerges in the quiet moments between chatter; in our sitting side by side, and in the passing of thread and fabrics between hands. The invitation to consider mosses through this time-stretching medium (needlework is slow) is an opportunity to create a space for co-presence. Does this help us listen better?

Along the bench, I can hear pockets of sharing and support – “I’m not sure about mine”, “Oh, really? I think it’s brilliant!”, “I like how you’ve brought together these different fabrics, do you do much stitching?”, “yeah, in the pandemic, my partner took up cross-stitch”; “I like mine to be neat at the back”, “whereas mine’s just chaotic!”. These aren’t arbitrary, or superficial things. In this collaborative space, they feel generous, and generative – part of the fabric of the world we are making together at this time. What we bring to this table, besides our disciplines and accumulated ways of knowing, is ourselves.

The slowness of stitching meant our attempts at making moss exceeded the time allotted to the short workshop, and the mossy pieces needed to be finished at home, in our own time. A few months later, in July 2025, they were brought back together and exhibited at a celebration event for *MossWorlds* participants and friends, held at The Firs, the University’s botanical grounds and environmental research station. The stitched pieces were placed among the plants in the site’s historic glasshouses for visitors to seek out and examine.

Concluding thoughts

In bringing together artists and academics to stitch mosses in the University of Manchester’s geography laboratories, the ‘Moss Stitch’ workshop opened a space for knowing mosses otherwise. The stitching activity afforded us a small window of time together, working on a meaningful, and

for many of us, unfamiliar task, and offering each other encouragement. In a modest way, we came to know sphagnum mosses more deeply. Stitching made us slow down, creating space to quietly digest and think over the information presented earlier in the day. Significantly, our attempts to stitch the qualities of sphagnum – its absorbency, sponginess, layering and tangled growth – required iterative, non-verbal and multi-sensory engagements with materials. Our attention moved dynamically between the moss, the making, and one another, allowing for unhurried, unpressured conversation and moments of quiet, which felt unusual in a workshop setting.

The performance of creative, cultural geographic practice, such as the soft textile-making methods outlined here, holds potential to momentarily disrupt ingrained disciplinary hierarchies by offering alternative spaces for being with and knowing plants. Perhaps most significantly, creative methods can facilitate connection within diverse and interdisciplinary teams. Through our gentle, fragmented chatter, and our slowly paced, hesitant construction we began to stitch together a strong sense of collaboration. At the end of the workshop, Henry, a researcher in Music, posed the following reflective questions:

What might it afford us to be and do together in this way, in the longer term? How can we find space, within the apparatus of the Academy, for slow collaboration, and anarchistic, experimental work? And what lessons might we learn in our attentiveness to the threads, to each other, to the mosses?

For cultural geographers, the answers are multiple: the slow, quiet practice of stitching plants draws us into modes of attention to the environment that both exceed and compliment the scientific methods of our colleagues in physical geography. It invites us to rethink how we relate to plants in our research, and to reorient our ways of knowing and feeling the vegetal. The Moss Stitch session opened a space, if only for a few hours, to resist and rethink the urgent temporalities that increasingly define successful academic projects and collaborations.

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Ethics Statement

As coauthors of the paper, all workshop participants consented for their reflections and photographs taken during the workshop to be included. All sources have been properly cited in accordance with academic standards.


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Notes

1. R.W.Kimmerer, *Gathering Moss: A Natural and Cultural History of Mosses* (London: Penguin, 2021).
2. This paper is co-authored by a large, interdisciplinary team spanning the MossWorlds collective, which includes undergraduate students, artists, institutional partners Manchester Museum and the Firs Botanical Grounds, and academic researchers in disciplines including human and physical geography, English literature, cultural studies, biology, music and environmental sciences. All workshop participants were invited to share their stitched pieces, photographs, and written or spoken reflections, which are threaded together to create this text. Laura and Aurora led the construction and organisation of the paper, sharing an initial abstract and draft versions with the wider team for comment. By taking part in the workshop, participants consented for their reflections to be included.
3. Across the text we use 'sphagnum' rather than the conventional styling under botanical nomenclature of *Sphagnum*. This reflects how the name was used in discussions as a common name rather than a reference to the genus. See also B.Subramaniam, *Botany of Empire: Plant Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2024) for a critique of Latin-based naming systems.
4. See for example: L.Pottinger, 'Making (Slowly) as Method: Piecing, Stitching and Steeping Metaphors for Multiple Methodologies', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 23, 2024, pp. 1–16; E.Shercliff and A.Twigger Holroyd, 'Stitching Together: Participatory Textile Making as an Emerging Methodological Approach to Research', *Journal of Arts & Communities*, 10(1–2), 2020, pp. 5–18; S.Springgay, "'How to Write as Felt" Touching Transmaterialities and More-Than-Human Intimacies', *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 38, 2019, pp. 57–69.
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8. Shercliff, 'Joining', p. 188.
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21. Feyerabend, 'Against', p. 1.
22. Shercliff, 'Joining', p. 191.
23. Shercliff, 'Joining', p. 194.

Author biographies

Laura Pottinger is a Research Fellow in cultural geography at The University of Manchester, with an interest in everyday forms of social and environmental activism, people and plant relationships, and ‘slow’ practices of making and cultivation. She draws on creative, participatory and ethnographic methodologies to explore these themes. She currently works closely with textile artists and makers to consider the potentials and challenges of slow making and natural dyeing.

Anke Bernau is Senior Lecturer in English and American Studies at the University of Manchester. She has specialised in late medieval literature and culture and has a long-standing interest in ecocriticism. In recent years, her research has increasingly moved into the field of plant humanities; most recently, she has co-edited a special issue on ‘Plant Temporalities: Living with Plants’ for *Medieval Ecocriticism* (volume 5, 2025).

Abigail Bleach works on Old English literature and ecocritical theory. Her research focuses on the temporality of ecological crisis, and of the epistemological and existential crises that accompany it.

Amanda Cobbett is an award winning British contemporary textile artist with over 30 years’ experience. She took up embroidery after a successful career as a Fashion print designer because she wanted to return to the art of making and a more meaningful approach to textiles as a medium. Amanda’s 3-dimensional, papier-mâché and machine-embroidered sculptures of fungi, lichen and moss are created from her studio in the Surrey Hills.

Khushi Dodhia is a recent BSc Geography graduate from The University of Manchester. Her love of mosses stems from the final year Peatlands module and her dissertation research explored how soil and vegetation are impacted by land use and management practices in urban green space.

Abbi Flint is a poet and researcher working across archaeology, environmental history and the environmental humanities, who integrates poetic, mobile and qualitative approaches within her work. Her research practice is influenced by phenomenological perspectives and concerns the plural, multi-species, and multi-sensory aspects of human entanglements with their environments and other-than-human beings. Her poetry has been published in online and print magazines, and been included in various research projects.

Aurora Fredriksen is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Geography, University of Manchester, UK. Her research explores the spaces where the ordinary and crisis coexist, with a particular focus on emplaced encounters with ecological change.

Antony Hall is a transdisciplinary artist, educator and researcher working between the fields of science and art. His practice spans interactive installation, and sound art. The work often takes the appearance of scientific experiments and often incorporates live processes, such as circulating liquids, behaviours of animals, or sensations of human perception.

Ingrid Hanson is a Lecturer in English literature at the University of Manchester, with a particular research interest in social change, social dreaming and ideas of peace. She has published work on nineteenth- and twentieth-century writings on peace, as well as on Victorian socialist and anarchist journalism, masculinities, mourning, and utopia. She is currently working on a book project on political and literary constructions of peace (including land justice and ecologies of peace) in the long nineteenth century.

Oliver TW Hughes is the technical manager at The University of Manchester’s Firs Environmental Research Station, which houses one of the only moss houses in the UK, containing a diversity of bryophytes; mosses and liverworts, as well as club mosses and ferns. It supported early botanical research into lower plants and is still used for teaching and research. Oliver’s scientific background is in plant conservation, sustainability and environmental science.

Sophy King is a multidisciplinary environmental artist, investigating the climate crisis, human and non-human ecologies, geological time and socioeconomic histories. She examines these through site-specific installation, sculpture and audiovisuals, using living elements, natural and man-made materials. Originally trained in 3D

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Natalie Linney is an artist exploring human connection to landscape, nature and place throughout her work. Using textiles, form and print, she produces visual responses to current, historical, environmental and anthropological themes. With a background in eco prints and natural dyes, Natalie utilises ancient dyeing techniques to make site specific prints documenting landscape and heritage.

D Henry James McPherson is a composer, improviser, and Postdoctoral Research Associate with the Creative Manchester research platform at the University of Manchester. Henry's research work focuses on improvisation and spontaneous creativity within the performing arts, with a particular interest in applied performance for social, environmental, and health benefit. His creative work explores moss music and microclimates, dialogues with trees, sonic collage, illustrated notation, and dancing with instruments. His developing approach to 'ecological improvisation' aims to cultivate inclusive listening and interspecies empathy in and through performance.

Kayley Pearson is a recent BSc Geography graduate from The University of Manchester. Her love of mosses stems from the final year Peatlands module and her dissertation research explored microplastic distribution and characteristics in beach sediments.

Joseph Pickard works as an Ecologist specialising in bryology, botany and peatland ecology for Haven Ecology, and is a Co-Director of Adfer Natur CIC. He is based in South Wales and is also currently in the final stages of a PhD at Swansea University. Joey's work and research focuses on biodiversity and carbon responses to landscape scale restoration, designing conservation management plans, and delivering training and public facing workshops for bryology and peatland ecology.

Jonathan Ritson is a research fellow in the Geography Department at The University of Manchester. He is primarily a peatland biogeochemist working on restoration projects across the UK. One aspect of his work looks at the potential of mosses to act as both a carbon sink via peat formation but also as hosts for methane-eating bacteria. Together these processes may offer a powerful tool to fight climate change.

Emma Shuttleworth is a Senior Lecturer in Physical Geography at the University of Manchester. She has over 15 years' experience of working closely with practitioners on landscape-scale peatland restoration initiatives, providing the scientific evidence base for the efficacy of restoration works. Her research sits at the nexus of policy and practice, combining the fields of hydrology, geomorphology, ecology and biogeoscience to understand ecosystem recovery. Her current mossy focus is on how *Sphagnum* reintroduction in upland headwaters can contribute to Natural Flood Management by slowing the flow of water and how resilient *Sphagnum* might be to future climate change.

Arianna Tozzi is an environmental human geographer researching processes of rural agrarian transformation and grassroots-led approaches to social and environmental change. Her work draws on environmental humanities, feminist political ecology, and science studies to explore how intersecting agrarian and climate crises are experienced, contested, and reimagined through everyday farming practices—particularly those of women and other marginalized actors.

Rachel E Webster is Senior Curator for Natural Sciences at Manchester Museum, responsible for the herbarium of The University of Manchester. North-west England has a long tradition of the study bryophytes, and the herbarium reflects this history with an internationally important collection of liverworts, hornworts and mosses.