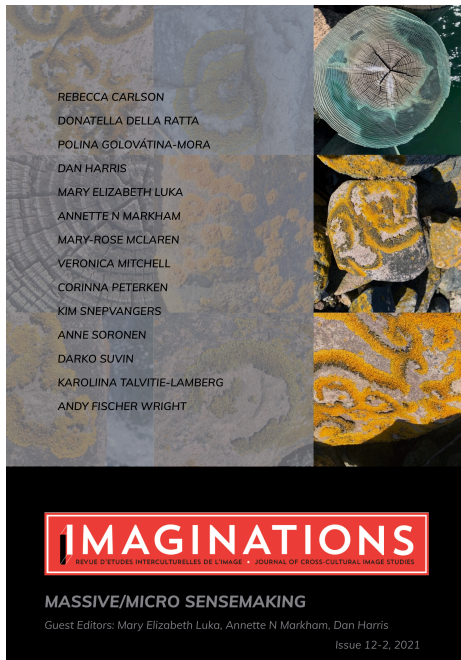


# IMAGINATIONS

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Towards Post-pandemic Futures**  
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## UN/THINKING WITH THREAD/S: NEEDLING THROUGH BOUNDARIES RELATED TO COVID-19 AND MEDICAL TRAINING

VERONICA MITCHELL

*This article draws on my connection with sewing threads, and explores how the 2020 Massive Microscopic Sense-making (MMS) online challenge contributed to an emergent entanglement of timespacemattering related to COVID-19, teaching and researching medical learning in obstetrics, and thinking further with my PhD. It explores affirmative processes enacted during times of anxiety, when my thoughts needled through in-between spaces with different times and materials that were generative and productive. I explain my rhizomatic movements that bleed through conventional separations and boundary-making assumptions. I draw on Karen Barad's agential realism to theorize the emergence of creative relationalities with artful artifacts enacted with medical undergraduate students, with partici-*

*Cet article s'appuie sur mon lien avec les fils à coudre et explore comment le défi en ligne 2020 Massive Microscopic Sensemaking (MMS) a contribué à un enchevêtrement émergent de l'espace-temps lié à COVID-19, à l'enseignement et à la recherche sur l'apprentissage médical en obstétrique, et à la réflexion plus approfondie de mon doctorat. Il explore les processus affirmatifs mis en œuvre pendant les périodes d'anxiété, lorsque mes pensées se frayaient un chemin à travers des espaces intermédiaires avec des moments et des matériaux différents qui étaient génératifs et productifs. J'explique mes mouvements rhizomatiques qui saignent à travers les séparations conventionnelles et les hypothèses de délimitation. Je m'appuie sur le réalisme agential de Karen Barad pour théoriser l'émergence de relations créatives avec des artefacts astucieux mis en scène avec des étudiants de premier cycle en médecine, avec*

*pants in the MMS project, and with  
my own PhD during times of tension.*

*des participants au projet MMS et avec mon  
propre doctorat en période de tension.*

## INTRODUCTION

*“[T]he crossing of boundaries is an essential, but often troubling,  
part of learning.” (Smith-Oka and Marshalla 2019, 115).*

Can an academic’s work with thread be anything other than a relaxing distraction separated from the world of research and knowing, particularly in the discipline of obstetrics? This question sat with me for a long time as I began my Masters degree in 2013 at a mature age and kept the fabric cupboard closed. Later, time appeared to stop as I anxiously waited for my PhD dissertation examiners’ comments, and again when our university closed down with the rest of the country, and much of the world. South Africa’s COVID-19 lockdown initiated the declaration of a National State of Disaster under Coronavirus, and also revealed a different kind of time.

Both the PhD waiting period and the initial lockdown time seemed to allow a return to the cupboard, an opening up to the array of fabrics and related items: a renewed sense of joy in which the touching and working with threads would contribute a vitality and new potential to my academic work, rather than invoke guilt or feelings of wasted time. The unusual mix of craft work, art, science, and philosophical concepts was first revealed to me in the massive crocheted coral reefs project (Wertheim and Wertheim 2015), an international collaboration that Donna Haraway (2016) uses as an example of entangled practices which she refers to as “science art worldings” (71). Playing with ideas through handiwork, such as crochet, enacts new material-discursive relations. These relationships then enable spaces for differences to become integrated with each other so that those differences, such as the detrimental effects of climate change on coral reefs, can then come to matter.

In this article I explain my movements of thoughts and the experimentations through which I shifted into unusual artful processes

that immersed me into intense in-between spaces. For instance, arts-based creative inquiry with students has contributed to revelations of concerning entanglements with their harmful curricular experiences. By enabling such risky and disruptive pedagogical practices in conventional medical education, an affirmative process has emerged to work with the tensions. What was revealed for me as a facilitator/researcher was that art-in-the-making-with-students can provide an avenue for relooking at students' experiences. Furthermore, my involvement in the MMS online challenge during corona-time has reinforced the notion that such creative intra-activities offer valuable potential also for educators, as well as for postgraduate students. From a more personal perspective, I point to my tentacular wo/anderings with spiders, inspired by Louise Bourgeois' large spider sculpture, *Mamon*. Through various rhizomatic movements, my re-turning and becoming-with needles and threads has helped mediate my multidirectional experiences with/in indeterminate times.

Global disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic appeared at the start of 2020. Time seemed to stand still, then it shifted, becoming corona-time, moving through the waves of increasing and decreasing levels of transmission of infections representing the virus spread across country borders, and then later intersecting with vaccination programmes. The virus has entered our worlds with a powerful force, unanticipated, with incredible intensity that has taken over our habits of being, as well as over-burdening health systems. In the media it is frequently depicted and represented as a spiked ball, perhaps to highlight its penetration into boundaries of bodies both human and more-than-human. The patterning of the virus can be viewed as beautiful and appealing—highlighting contradictions and the reality of our porosity (Figures 1a and 1b).



Figure 1a: Image of COVID-19 (Public Domain).



Figure 1b: Embroidered spiky virus.

In their recent *Imaginations* article titled “*Discussing the Anatomy Table and the Vaccination*,” Caulfield, Caulfield, and Holst (2020) explore the interface of art and biomedicine, referring to different perspectives related to vaccinations as well as acknowledging the current distrust prevalent in medical matters. The roles and responsibilities of health professionals as key actors in the global response to the pandemic have been a deep concern. Both experienced professionals and those in training, such as undergraduate medical students, are affected by these multiple challenges. Although many medical procedures were postponed and delayed during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, birthing facilities had to continue their services. Obstetrics is an essential discipline and a core component in medical curricula. It is the curricular space where my teaching has engaged with students over the past fifteen years, and my subsequent research projects. Birthing brings its own uncertain and often troubling time.

At the onset of corona-time my engagement with fourth-year students in the Health Sciences Faculty at the University of Cape Town (UCT) was halted. Our earlier classroom participatory workshops in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology had involved the sharing of students’ experiences through personal narratives, role-play performances, poetry, music, and other forms of art-in-the-

making related to their clinical encounters in various public health birthing units (Mitchell 2016). Later in 2021, our discussions (complemented with drawings) resumed online in Zoom.

Students' expectations of observing kindness and compassion during a joyful birthing process in their obstetrics learning rotation are surprisingly replaced by encountering frequent shocking practices; they witnessed neglect, disrespect, and abuse of women during labour. *Obstetric violence*<sup>e</sup> is acknowledged as a global problem, and a form of gender-based violence (Mitchell 2019; Šimonović 2019). There is no boundary protecting students from the reality of practice.

The time that medical students spend learning their obstetrics skills is filled with tensions and uncertainties (Mitchell 2019). In my efforts to promote change to current practices, supported by departmental colleagues at one of the most prestigious medical schools in Africa, we have collaboratively troubled student learning, attempting to move away from binary assumptions of subject/object, cause/effect, blame/shame, and similar humanistic perspectives. We recognize that past, current, and on-going injustices have tentacular e/affects on medical students now and as future doctors, as well as on midwives and those giving birth in and under adverse conditions.

Unlike corona-time, the actual birthing process is marked by an endpoint, i.e. the third stage, which is the expulsion of the placenta. During pregnancy, the placenta has an essential role in-between; it is positioned between the mother and growing foetus, establishing crucial relational responsibility through the development process and labour. Students learn the significance of the placenta in terms of colour, texture, and shape as they grasp and feel it, look at it, and sense the smell, with the sensual memory remaining with them. The placenta is not a barrier separating mother and foetus, nor a separate entity, but an intra-acting "fetal-maternal interface" with "diffuse responsibilities," as explained by Yoshizawa (2016, 81). The concept of Intra-action is a neologism introduced by Karen Barad (2007), based on a relational ontology in which relationships pre-exist entities, with an understanding that entities come into being through relationships.

In what follows, I expand my thinking beyond the placenta to draw more widely on Karen Barad's (2007) relational ontology with reference to my student class activities and related research, moving on to the material agency co-constituted through the Massive Microscopic Sensemaking online challenge (Markham, Harris, and Luka 2020). Finally, I illustrate how my working with threads generated an extension to my doctoral research project, opening ways for more to come.

Through these arts-based creative inquiries I explore the emergent material-discursive relationships, providing different insights to conventional human-centred discourses that identify individuals as atomic, rational, independent entities. Barad (2007) puts forward that matter is "not a fixed essence; rather, matter is substance in its intra-active becoming - not a thing but a doing, a congealing of agency" (183-184). Therefore, handwork is not a separated material activity but is enacted through multidirectional agentic relationships.

#### CLASS-TIME AND RESEARCH-TIME

**A**rts-based activities in the classroom and in my PhD research focus groups (Figure 2) enabled students to think-with crayons, clay, and other materials, not including needles and threads, and not the usual in conventional medical education settings. These experimental movements appeared to open up difficult and important conversations about student responses to troubling clinical encounters, their responsibilities and response-abilities, with the potential to enhance students' capacity to respond to injustices they observed in birthing units.





Figure 2: Concerning students' responses related to their obstetrics learning (Mitchell 2019).

As teacher-facilitator-researcher, I found myself immersed into the in-between space with the students' drawings, clay models, and mandalas, recognizing how these material relationships could generate powerful opportunities to promote change to enhance student flourishing in obstetrics. Haraway (2016) notes the value of thinking with and between other bodies, using her wit and biology expertise to express this point:

"Flourishing will be cultivated as a multispecies response-ability without the arrogance of the sky gods and their minions, or else biodiverse terra will flip out into something very slimy, like any overstressed complex adaptive system at the end of its abilities to absorb insult after insult." (56)

It became apparent to me that the theoretical perspectives of Feminist New Materialism (FNM) and Posthumanism could offer novel insights into promoting respectful maternity care (RMC) and empower students in their capacity to respond. By moving beyond human-centric notions of meaning-making and interpretations, Barad's (2007) relational ontology opens the potential to explore the more-than-hu-

man relationships that impact on students' being and becoming-with their curricular tasks; a justice-to-come<sup>2</sup> that acknowledges multiple and dynamic intra-actions with both human and non-human agents.

### CORONA-TIME



Figure 3a: Embroidered clock-time.



Aion time offers a different understanding of time to chronos (or clocktime). It moves beyond structured and sequential issues of linear time.

Aion, a Greek concept of time, refers to the cyclical time of becoming with inherent forces acting in each encounter.

Figure 3b: Chronos and Aion time.

COVID-19 has dramatically disrupted habits of chronos, or clock-time. This linear, chronological concept of time can be deceptive, as it carries an assumption that time past can be closed off (Figure 3b). Barad (2010) puts forward that the past, the present, and the future are threaded through each other. I wonder, how will the future be haunted by past/present corona-time?

Of particular relevance to this article is the Corona Reading Group (CRG), which became a congealed force during corona-time in 2020, reinforced by the MMS online challenge (Bozalek, Newfield, Romano, et al. 2020). Over the strict lockdown period and beyond, our group of seven academics connected, and continues to connect, through multiple devices enabling us to read aloud different texts, provoking conversations that frequently lead to synchronous writing on Google Drive. During the early, unpredictable, stressful lockdown days of COVID-19, Barad's 2007 text, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* held the seven of us together.

Additionally, from a more personal material perspective, after these inspiring collective sessions I reconnected with my fabric cupboard. The touch and feel of old denim on torn jeans attracted my attention and desire to allow my thoughts to wo/ander with threads. I cut out a piece of the denim which then became the foundation for creative explorations, needling the fabric with threads, expanding my own sensemaking with and through the MMS journey (Figure 4). Becoming-with the material agency of the different patterns enabled a new, unexpected performative relationship to develop through this visual experimentation. I recognized that the threads could work further with me, through different avenues where different relationships mattered.



Figure 4: Working-thinking-creating with threads through the MMS challenge.

As I question corona-time and wonder if it will continue like a haemorrhage that is unstoppable, I relook at the borders of my MMS sewn artefact. Along the upper edge, the green dye from the fabric has seeped into other spaces. It reveals an unexpected bleed, appearing

to highlight the indeterminacy of corona-time and our projects. I am reminded about diffraction patterns<sup>3</sup> that can be “a manifestation of times bleeding through one another” (Barad 2018, 68). I refer to Stacy Alaimo’s (2010) concept of trans-corporeality to highlight the webs of interdependence that are interwoven and continue to be interweaving, enabling the meshing of borders rather than assuming defined boundaries. Our bodily substance is vitally connected to the broader environment, with porous boundaries that cannot be considered as fixed. The boundary fence on the denim fabric depicts boundary-making in academia. It is made with a soft plastic rope material to highlight the gatekeeping actions that are visible and invisible in academic practices.

Another of the border fabrics is one designed by textile-artist Kaffe Fassett, who describes the pattern as “beautiful glass candies” in fragments of Roman glass (2021). This special fabric has waited in my cupboard for a very long time, waiting to find a meaningful placing. Now the pattern takes on a different relationship; it appears to symbolize the force and intensity of the coronavirus, with its many mutations and variants moving through international borders, emerging with new and different challenges in terms of risk and containment, invoking much anxiety and uncertainty. The embroidered mask, (Figure 5a) a symbol of corona-time, reminds me of the start of deep global concerns (Figure 5b), and how face masks have become a global form of protection from the potential violence of aerosol transmission of the virus (Figure 9).



Figure 5a: Mask as protector.

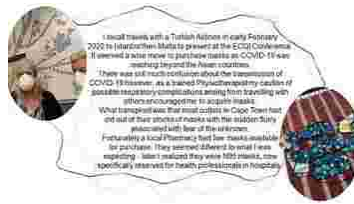


Figure 5b: Mask buying and mask making.

While immersed in the daily activities shared in the MMS project, I was attracted to a favourite turquoise fabric with planetary patterns, folded tightly in my cupboard. Through my sewing efforts, the fabric unfolded, transforming into seven masks distributed to each of our CRG Zoom-mates, creating a bonding relationship across different geopolitical spaces that could help to protect us (Figure 5b). Through corona-time, it has become apparent that masks not only act as protective barriers to the virus, but also have materializing effects with different belief systems and cultures that have sparked unpredictable adverse reactions.

In what follows, I further explore my practical and theoretical movements, explaining the relational enactments connecting my research-thinking-doing with threads and artworks.

### THINKING WITH THEORY AND SPIDERS

**R**osie Braidotti (2006, 4) develops Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s concept of nomadic subjectivity, describing it as “a contested space of mutations” in which we “weave a web connecting philosophy to social realities; theoretical speculations to concrete plans; concepts to imaginative figurations” (5). Although mutations now set off alarm bells with the infectious spread of COVID-19, my own nomadic movements with threads and other forms of art-in-the-making have shifted my thoughts through webs

of relations with different theoretical tools. Braidotti (2013) points out:

“Thinking is the conceptual counterpart of the ability to enter modes of relation, to affect and be affected, sustaining qualitative shifts and creative tensions accordingly, which is also the prerogative of art.” (14)

A sensitivity to the affective forces and flows enables nomadic thinking, which, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is a way of picking up the tensions that are not easily evident, often hidden in the cracks or ruptures of habitual thinking, enabling these tensions to emerge by breaking through into new spaces. Such movements tend to occur in the middle/in-between spaces, causing a disruption to established boundaries.

Alecia Jackson (2017) refers to a spider strategy, drawing on Deleuze’s (2007) work suggesting that it “is not a plan or a starting point but is emergent and revealed in fragments along the way” (667). I think with Jackson and Mazzei (2017), finding myself “plugging in” to many open relationships, not constrained by boundaries, binaries, or linearities. New connections are revealed through my relationship with the material agency of needle-thread-fabric-sequins-beads. Avoiding thinking with predetermined structures, my thoughts have moved across in-between spaces through ever-changing assemblages with each intra-action (Barad 2007). Jackson and Mazzei (2017) put forward that “ideas, fragments, theory, selves, affects, and other lifeworlds as a nonlinear movement, [are] always in a state of becoming” (728). Sewing with-research has been generative and productive. Furthermore, I find myself contributing a different perspective through my eyesight impairment. Congenital nystagmus shifts my eyes, producing alternative visual experiences to others with more visual acuity.

I have found Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept of the rhizome helpful to describe the patterns of exploration in my thinking and working. The middle is my preferred starting point, and then my ideas spread out in an expansive manner, seeking possible new cre-

ative opportunities. Following a sequential, predetermined structure with a beginning point leading on to an end moment is difficult for me. An understanding of the rhizomatic researcher (Clark and Parsons 2013) acknowledged this positioning, and seemed to offer me permission to continue my research-teaching journey in medical education through fluid, multidimensional, experimentation. At times, this process was risky; it generated messiness and disruptions.

In finding my rhizomatic self, caught in and drawn through numerous webs of relationships during our troubling corona-time, the spider has crept into several projects and activities. One bold member of this arachnid species was waiting at my front door recently to greet me—a reminder of our kinship (Figure 6).

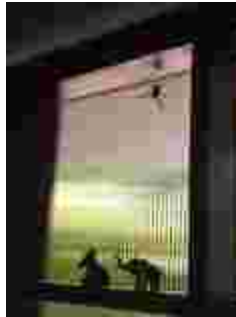


Figure 6: Sense-making with the spider at my front door. Photo by author, May 2020.

As I flip back over my digital photographs from the first year of corona-time, I pick up the beauty of a spider's web photographed in the forest on Table Mountain that overlooks our city of Cape Town. This image (Figure 7) reminds me of a welcome walk and a connection with our spectacular natural surroundings before our movements were heavily curtailed, with restrictions not permitting us to leave home except for essential services. My appreciation of our environment has grown as I now consider the material arrangements and materialising effects that are enacted in our multiple and dynamic intra-actions.



Figure 7. Shimmering patterns and connections of spiders. Photo by author, February 2020.

Donna Haraway reminds us of kinship with and between human and other-than-human beings. In her book, *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), she describes tentacular thinking in terms of rhizomatic connections and collective thinking in “multispecies muddles,” which can be joyfully generative while also invoking terror (31). She refers to a specific spider in the redwood forests of California, recognizing that this *Pimoa cthulhu* helps her with “returns, and with roots and routes” (31). The spider, according to Haraway, also reminds us to think about sympoiesis, which is a process of coming-together; “poiesis as making, sym as together-with” (256). “I love words that just won’t sit still,” admits Haraway in her interview with Martha Kenney (2015), when she also explains figuring as “a way of thinking or cogitating or meditating or hanging out with ideas” (257).

In the 21-day online MMS project, I was introduced to Louise Bourgeois’s giant spider sculpture, *Maman*. This female spider symbolizes her mother’s protective strength and support that Bourgeois felt throughout her life. Our Corona Reading Group created a collective photographic collage that appeared to resemble the *Maman*, with similar tentacular connections (Figure 8). By referencing the *Maman*, we noted that our “working together through a shared screen evoked a tentacular arrangement like that of the spider with its many eyes and limbs” (Bozalek, Newfield, Romano, et al. 2020, 6). Since com-



pleting our shared MMS project, the spider has continued to inhabit various parts of my life, both physically as noted above, and more intimately in my needlework that has also activated the metaphorical spider. I feel the connection with Bourgeois's mother who worked as a weaver in the tapestry industry.



Figure 8: Of cables and webs, with acknowledgement to Maman of Louise Bourgeois.  
Created online by Nike Romano with Corona Reading Group colleagues (Bozalek et al. 2020).

Bourgeois' art has become part of several of my recent enactments within different assemblages connected to violence, trauma, and healing in my research in which art, women's bodies, fabrics, and researchers come together-apart; one move, rather than separations (Barad 2007). One such connection was generated with a local artist and friend, Gina Niederhumer.

Niederhumer's (2016) sewing-artwork-thesis attracted my attention. She admits that her needle and thread form a bridge for her to reflect on the past as well as a healing connection to work in the present and future—supporting her autoethnographic account of separations and trauma. She stitches bits torn out from her personal narrative together with thread and fabric, taking her through her brokenness (Figure 9). Niederhumer (2016) expresses the “physicality of the work itself; which 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" (11). Using naive applique and different patterns of stitching, she found that her needlework provided "a point of re-negotiating the past and an apparatus of healing" (31). While her movements with threads appear to have acted in a therapeutic manner with her discomforts, what I find striking in her thesis is the separation of her personal accounts with her academic thoughts, as represented by a column of text for each, with examples of her stitchwork.



Figure 9: Gina Niederhumer's (2014) needlework titled, *I am also not Louise Bourgeois* (2016, 36). Reproduced with artist's permission.

In 2019, I attended a workshop facilitated by Niederhumer, who alerted me to the value of using fabric with text. She was on her way to Austria to display her art-thread-work and promote her newly published book, titled *Mend: A Personal Exploration of Healing*. I wondered what thinking with thread could mean for me and my engagements with medical students at UCT. What became apparent was that thread could do work through different intra-actions in terms of becoming-with research, health activism, and more. Niederhumer's work inspired me to think-with threads and to connect sewing to my research-teaching, thereby bridging the boundaries that had previously been present.

Boundary-breaking and disruption has characterized COVID-19's penetration into our lives. However, unexpected new opportunities

have emerged such as our engagement with others in the MMS online project. Below I examine how my needle and thread connected with the daily prompts in this challenge. A piece of old denim fabric cut away from torn jeans became the base for relating to my MMS journey with others during a period of time when the world was waiting for new knowledge, vaccines, and other ways of responding to the viral onslaught. I demonstrate the tentacular wo/anderings of my thoughts with threads, and then follow through to describe another indeterminate time and period of anxiety between the submission of my doctoral thesis and the examiners' responses. Pat Thomson blogs about this period, calling it "thesis limbo-land" (2019).

### WAITING WITH COVID-19



The MMS challenge in April 2020 opened up a 21-day period for collaborative creative online engagement guided by three key questions, including asking us, the participants, how, in these times, *are we making sense of Self, Other and the World?* (Markham, Harris, and Luka 2020). The fascinating daily prompts in this innovative, experimental autoethnographic project helped our Corona Reading Group work with the tensions created by the disruptions of COVID-19 (Markham and Harris 2020). The prompts facilitated a process for spreading our thoughts and online activities beyond the constraints of spatial boundaries during a very strict lockdown period in South Africa. More broadly, the project, which included over 150 participants around the world, addressed the common need for distraction during the anxiety of early corona-time. It invited us to reach out across our differences and connect globally in an asynchronous manner, not limited by the usual constraints of working together in different time zones. Alongside the MMS project daily prompts, I felt the warmth of encounters together/apart through my coffee mug, bringing a reminder of Barad's (2014) explanation that there is an electromagnetic repulsion between atoms in our fingers and the porcelain.



My favourite mug for coffee during online meetings was bought in San Antonio, Texas soon after my first AERA conference. The mug came with a chocolate egg inside giving a taste of newness. It continues to connect me to those special learning moments with colleagues, and walking around the stalls along the over.



As mentioned earlier in this article, the shared collective creativity also opened my sewing-self, though it stayed contained in my personal space at home. At the end of the challenge, on the last day, these boundaries were broken by my uploading a photograph (Figure 4) of my sewing artifact into the collaborative writing Google document set up by our Corona Reading Group. In our Day 21 prompt I wrote:

“[This sewing artifact] seems appropriate as threads are touching fabrics, sequins, beads, needles, pins, my fingers, as well as the marks on my body that sparked off each of these shapes and texts which now may be viewed as representations of my thinking. Yet, to me they continue to be alive with agency. Is this an example of Barad’s claim that “matter is condensations of response-ability” (161), or that Viv reminded me of “the congealing of agency? For instance, the yellow text in the lower right hand corner refers to Black Lives Matter that is now boldly written across the central street in Washington. It also denotes timespacemattering in and through our reading group, as well as reminding me about always asking, “what matters?” Interestingly, and much to my surprise and annoyance, the green dye of the folded fabric at the top bled into the denim showing me that an assumed boundary is no more.”

My sewing-based contribution to our MMS project was greeted with appreciation and admiration from my generous reading group Zoom-mates. Then, the group understandably moved on, continuing

to explore further readings from Barad and other interesting texts enhancing our understanding of Feminist New Materialism. However, my relationship with the agency of the fabric-thread-artefact continued to grow over the following days and months. It did not become a passive, inert object that could be separated from my being. The affective force emerging from this relationship of the artifact with me generated a sense of urgency that resisted any separation. I could not bring myself to hide the worked-on denim piece nor to have it tucked away with other unfinished sewing endeavours. A new relationship was becoming established that I could not ignore or discard. I felt a calling, an invitation that more was needed, a creative-relating<sup>4</sup> that had the potential to stretch across and between boundaries, without limits (Harris 2020).

By taking up four specific MMS prompts below, I briefly explain my emerging thoughts and actions with/in/through this sewn apparatus. First, I refer to basic food insecurities; second, to a digital learning experience reminding me of the many different forms of messaging relating to data and digital access; third, to the ups and downs of indeterminate undulating waves of daily transmission numbers of the virus and its mutations that are non-discriminatory; lastly, I take up the notion of dynamic fluidity of corona-time symbolized through the melting of an ice cube, which connected me to the energetic activism in terms of vulnerability in another global space.

**1. Prompt 5: Walking with Guavas**



A guava tree in my back garden led me to be mindful of the shocking state of hunger (exacerbated by COVID lockdowns) affecting many South Africans. In my MMS Facebook post I wrote:

“I’m pushed to consider the iterative intra-actions that are enacted with each of my movements in the back garden. Barad’s relational ontology helps me look beyond my individual intention to rather consider how, during this lockdown period, the back garden has beckoned to me. Once in that space, I feel a new sense of time, pleasure and freedom enhanced by the different experiences that have come to matter, such as picking and eating wormy guavas.”

I sense and feel my privilege as I move through a flourishing, contained garden space, and question the impact of a fleshy fruit shared with a hungry worm. Later, stitching a pile of autumn leaves enabled me to continue to take my thoughts for a walk (Springgay and Truman 2018) considering individuals and communities who do not have safe spaces to comfortably walk through during COVID lockdown. Intimate partner violence in South Africa has been named as a “silent public health epidemic” (Gordon 2016, 962).

**2. Prompt 3: Team Video-Making**

Joining unknown others to create a video was a new experience for me, depicted on the denim fabric by the video logo made with se-

quins and threads. Our ideas and work stretched across unexpected international boundaries, with MMS participants in Finland and Colombia. I give thanks to co-authors in this issue, Anne Soronen, Karoliina Talvitie-Lamberg, and Polina Golovátina-Mora, who exposed me to new digital expressions.



Figure 12a:  
Video icon.



Figure 12b: Video screenshots of our collaborative effort.

### 3. Prompt 8: Snakes and Ladders



Figure 13: Ups and downs of corona-time.

The stressful uncertainty of corona-time brought to the fore my many memories of the board game Snakes and Ladders. What has become evident worldwide, is that the coronavirus does not discriminate, even for those who feel they are in good health, on top of the ladder. If we are in the vicinity of an infectious COVID-19-positive individual, considered as the ‘wrong place’ at the wrong time, we are

likely to slide down with the snakes, to succumb to the grip of the virus, with indeterminate symptoms and possible long-term sequelae, passing into the unknown ‘afterlife.’

#### 4. Prompt 9: Moving with Ice



Figure 14a: Threads as ice.



Figure 14b: Melting ice with hand.

Re-turning to the ice cube activity from MMS, I think about the enactments of fluid movements. New ideas are generated with the ice-hand-skin assemblage as my thoughts have moved to video recordings of Latai Taumoepeau’s (2020) performances with ice breaking, shaking, cracking and, and, and... : activism towards forces of fragility and vulnerability faced by the Pacific people.

Finally, before concluding, I describe how needle and thread provided support and inspiration during an anxious period familiar to many academics working on their doctoral theses. I acknowledged that becoming-researcher led me into an unanticipated terrain, questioning relationships of time, place, and space. In my PhD thesis I put forward that the text was an open apparatus with the potential for more to come, yet I had not expected that the more would become-with thread and needles re-turning to a past pastime and pulling the threads through my new life in academia.



## WAITING IN-BETWEEN THE PHD PROCESS

**A**s mentioned earlier in this article, during the PhD research process I attempted to keep strict boundaries to avoid distractions. I was cognizant of the impact of prolonged sitting which also excluded any desire for sewing. My training in physiotherapy provoked a sense of guilt for the many hours spent in a relatively static sitting position facing my computer screen. However, waiting for responses from external examiners situated across the oceans created a space of discomfort that I was unprepared for after all the pressures to complete the thesis task. Waiting for my research assessment felt like sitting in a labyrinth not knowing which way to turn. I recognized that working so intensely with words was not the usual for me (Figure 15a).



Figure 15a: Wordy world. The dominance of text in academia.



Figure 15b: Cover page of my PhD thesis.

Then keywords and phrases began to glow as I worked with/in them creating sewn squares with texts of self-expression, such as: research-sewing-creation, sew what-when-waiting, wild times, one month thesis in—needle out, moving beyond, opening up, differences, not a straight journey, entangled becoming, layers, unfolding, supportive family, lighting up, entangled, circles and drawings, wait-

ing, assemblages, im/possibility, and more (Figure 16). Maggie MacLure (2013) points out how we can be invited back to specific fragments of our research data, leaving us to wonder further as these “hotspots” have an intensity and force to “exert a kind of fascination, and have a capacity to animate further thought” (228).

My research with swimming achievements surprisingly emerged in one of my first fabric squares. In recognizing the importance of a balanced life with the need for exercise, I began swimming at a local gym. Taking length after length, moving with the water, I eventually reached 80 lengths, while just not being able to attain that desirable 100 that could be celebrated with a huge sense of achievement from a swimmer who was only becoming-with water through the research process. In terms of sewing as a form of artwork, I refer to Sylvia Kind (2008) who explains how art making helped make sense of life’s experiences, noting:

“I hold the finished squares and read back their stories. I lay them out side by side and consider the ways I have been cut and stitched together with the fabric.” (109)



Figure 16: Collection of thoughts in-between my PhD process.

## KNOTTING BUT NOT ENDING

In this article I explore my involvement with others (both human and more-than-human) in a South African Health Sciences Faculty, in terms of teaching and research, and online with the MMS challenge during corona-time, and how these relationships intersected with my different embodied activities. My movements through various forms of self-expression are described in this text with images of spiders, embroidered objects, and related items that thread through each other, intra-acting in and through our emergent relationships.

Making as pedagogy and making as method, in terms of my teaching and research with undergraduate medical students during their obstetrics learning, has reminded me of the seeping through of nutrients across the placenta, with reciprocal affective engagements between a growing foetus and its mother. My experiences were nourished and enriched through these wo/anderings, enabling a process of needling through previously bounded professional and personal compartments of my life—a disruptive, risky journey which has appeared beneficial.

A relational approach moves beyond binaries and fixed boundary-making separations. It acknowledges the entanglements that are enacted with each encounter—a bleeding through porosities that contests the dominant essentialist epistemology established in scientific disciplines, like obstetrics, and is valuable to consider for encouraging transdisciplinary work.

Moving beyond human-centred representational modes of thinking and doing, I have highlighted how experimental craft-making art works offered alternative pathways to engage affirmatively with tensions during corona-time, as well as in curricular tasks in obstetrics and connected research. A scrap of torn denim jeans became a different landscape for working with the 21 days of intense intra-actions in our collaborative MMS project. And the end-journey of my doctoral thesis continued beyond text-on-computer screens to text-with-fabric and threads, creating an openness for new possibilities.

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## IMAGE NOTES

- Figure 1a: Image of COVID-19 (PD).
- Figure 1b: Embroidered spiky virus.
- Figure 2: Concerning students' responses related to their obstetrics learning (Mitchell 2019).
- Figure 3a: Embroidered clock-time.
- Figure 3b: Chronos and Aion time.
- Figure 4: Working-thinking-creating with threads through the MMS challenge.
- Figure 5a: Mask as protector.
- Figure 5b: Mask buying and mask making.
- Figure 6: Sense-making with the spider at my front door.
- Figure 7. Shimmering patterns and connections of spiders. Photo by author, February 2020.
- Figure 8: Of cables and webs, with acknowledgement to Maman of Louise Bourgeois. Created online by Nike Romano with Corona Reading Group colleagues (Bozalek et al. 2020).
- Figure 9: Gina Niederhumer's 2014 needlework titled, "I am also not Louise Bourgeois" (2016, 36). Reproduced with artist's permission.
- Figure 10a: Mug with coffee.

Figure 10b: Thinking and becoming-with the mug.

Figure 11a: Guava.

Figure 11b: Guavas and me.

Figure 12a: Video icon.

Figure 12b: Video screenshots of our collaborative effort.

Figure 13: Ups and downs of corona-time.

Figure 14a: Threads as ice.

Figure 14b: Melting ice with hand.

Figure 15a: Wordy world. The dominance of text in academia.

Figure 15b: Cover page of my PhD thesis.

Figure 16: Collection of thoughts in-between my PhD process.

## NOTES

1. *Obstetric violence* is a term coined in Venezuela in 2007. It aims to address women's loss of autonomy and freedom of choice, gaining legal protection (Shabat 2020).↵
2. Barad (2019) refers to Derrida's "justice-to-come" which implies an ethical and ongoing commitment to address injustices.↵
3. A diffraction or interference pattern occurs when waves of water, light, or sound are disturbed as they intersect with each other. Barad (2007) uses the example of two stones dropped into a pool of water resulting in waves moving outwards, overlapping and creating new patterns as they intra-act through their force and movement.↵
4. Harris (2020) refers to her work with Jonathan Wyatt's creative-relational inquiry to explain that creative-relational moves are "a performative way of knowing and expressing that is rooted in neither the discursive nor the material but transcends binaries and breathes through connection" (17).↵