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A Patchworking Process: Coming Together under Pandemic Conditions for Collaborative, Caring Scholarship

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Article abstract

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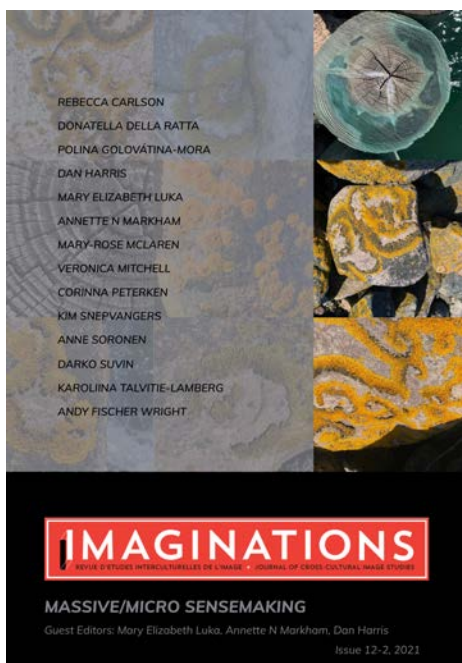
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Image credit: Annette N Markham

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A PATCHWORKING PROCESS: COMING TOGETHER UNDER
PANDEMIC CONDITIONS FOR COLLABORATIVE, CARING
SCHOLARSHIP

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In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, the authors in this special issue came together within the Massive Microscopic Sensemaking (MMS) writing project in the spring of 2020. Collectively grappling with the impact of the extended pandemic, each paper in this issue touches on experiences of social isolation, making do, and a technological reaching out under conditions of a public health crisis. This introduction describes the issue's 'patchwork' development which reflects an attempt to break from traditions of academic scholarship that often fail to recognize the value of emergent, and therefore

Dans le contexte de l'épidémie de COVID-19, les auteurs de ce numéro spécial se sont réunis autour du projet de rédaction Massive Microscopic Sensemaking (MMS) au printemps 2020. Les articles de ce numéro viennent collectivement se confronter aux répercussions de la pandémie prolongée. Chaque article relate des expériences d'isolement social, d'adaptation et d'ouverture technologique en temps de crise sanitaire. Cette introduction décrit le raisonnement de ce numéro à la composition « patchwork » qui illustre une tentative de rupture avec les traditions académiques qui souvent ne réussissent pas à reconnaître la valeur émergente, et par consé-

uncertain, cross-disciplinary and collective work.

quent incertaine, des travaux transdisciplinaires et collectifs.

The authors, editors, and co-editors in this special issue came together within the experimental and large-scale Massive Microscopic Sensemaking (MMS) writing project in the spring of 2020 (described in detail by Markham, Harris and Luka [2020] and by Markham and Luka, this issue). Although the exercises were fragmented and completed largely solitarily, the broader MMS project pieced together 165 participants from around the world through spaces for sharing the process and progress of their individual work. What began as a searching for and sensing of the pandemic through autoethnographic—and thereby also initially microscopic—means, lead to an encounter with others, and to the massive world through them. That emergent and community-building process, which provoked this collection of essays, resonated for us as it was an opportunity to see in others, and to share and even embrace, the many daily pandemic uncertainties we faced.

In this issue, we recognize the way emergent experiences are often hard to classify. Such moments may float precariously towards ambiguity, defy easy standards of categorization, and therefore be unrecognized; sometimes that means they are less valued by universities and institutions. As we began work on this collective publication, many of us initially echoed concerns about the ultimate outcome of the effort we were set to engage in. We met several times online throughout the development of this issue, which began as rough draft abstracts. In our first meeting, we also found it necessary to sort out who needed what kind of career building qualification, and by necessity, this concern was integrated into questions about the final shape of and venue for this collection. Yet, our creative and emergent process, which felt so valuable to us particularly at this moment in time, seemed incompatible with any sense of certainty—or with the predetermined work trajectory and typically rigid institutional approvals and requirements of career advancement. We see such structuring of labour and its certifications as a fundamental flaw in academic organization, which largely acknowledges only conventional

research and publication outcomes. Outside of these necessities, academics, we realized, may struggle to connect to others, to new ideas and methods, in precisely the kind of emergent and collaborative endeavor we had begun.

Growing from the MMS experiment, our collaboration in writing, reading, and co-editing for this issue was a different pandemic bubble that made us forget living in a very competitive academic world, for valuable moments. That was a motivating factor for many of us. Perhaps the difficulties and uncertainties we felt in these exceptional circumstances also intensified the experiences of camaraderie and collaboration during the coming together of this publication project. As a result, the papers in this special issue, which we completed in conversation with one another, developed into personal, sensitive, and thought-provoking conceptualizations of our mutual pandemic experiences as well as rigorous scholarly work. Working together quickly began to feel like a productive and caring space. We met online across vastly different (and sometimes challengingly so!) time zones, joining those who were waking before dawn and those who were preparing for bed. Discussing together individual, local, and global aspects of the pandemic happened in irregular Zoom meetings and Slack messages that were inclusive and encouraging in nature, as we shared in sickness and grief. Google documents and emails added conversations and supported our writing and thinking together. We shared experiences of living the pandemic but also a means for coping, and through these we also shared (academic) means to connect to the pandemic world in flux.

To our delight, this uncertain process transformed into an organic texture, with each thread, or individual piece, distinguishable but interconnected within a larger web. Throughout this issue, we have grouped articles and situated them within that web by interstitial quilt blocks, crafted by Corinna as part of her MMS prompt writing (see her work in this issue and below). Quilt blocks may be individual squares of fabric, yet they are interconnected parts of a whole. They work together to reveal every entangled colour or shade, exposing a beauty that might otherwise be missed. With each view, the meaning of individual blocks, and indeed, the entire quilt, is transformed

anew. Organizing our pieces thematically in groups to reveal these transforming threads then became a greater challenge. Each article, we realized, intersected in some way with all the others, just as some seemed to cluster organically, even serendipitously. In their articles, Corinna, Mary-Rose, and Veronica all deal directly with ‘making do’ in a pandemic environment through the incorporation and repurposing of objects and things (and, in Mary-Rose’s case, even words), to variously trouble absence and stasis alongside violent change. Each challenged these everyday materials to take on and embody, perhaps by necessity of isolation, an internal reflection on the broader shared experience of the pandemic, incorporating ‘matters’ at hand for sense-making in research. Anne and Karoliina, Andy and Donatella all collectively consider the outcome of social isolation in techno-mediated sociality, a coming together or moving apart within what are now ubiquitous communication technologies such as blogs, text messaging, and cellular notifications. These tenuous and shifting connections, in Andy’s case concerningly constraining, reflect the diversity of intimacies and entanglements that emerged over the past year. Kim, Polina, and Rebecca reflect on movements across diversely configured fields, boundaries that some felt ever more vital to overcome or stitch over as a result of the pandemic. These three pieces each challenge the perceived stabilities of those borders which—so often made invisible or shadowy in the everyday—still powerfully demarcate our experiences of place, knowledge, and the fragmentary, momentary thoughts of the mind, even as they rapidly unravel. Taken all together, each piece in this issue reflects these personal and theoretical threads as collectively shared questions: How do we make do and make sense with the materials and technologies available to us during the pandemic? What possibilities for intimacy emerge as a result? How are these differentially experienced as constraints or as border crossing lifelines? Integrated together here, as a collection, our multiple, even divergent perspectives—like the quilt—create a new spatial view, a possible future place situated by the cross-disciplinary tools we adapted for research and learning. We use Corinna’s quilt pieces then as colorful thematic lenses for seeing, refracting, and juxtaposing our shared pandemic concerns and our

research innovations; taken together, these also reflect our patchworked process. And as each serendipitous encounter in this issue leads onto the next, we prioritise the interstitial as a self-organizational system to offer new, yet unfinished approaches to arts-based research. Ultimately, the order proposed in this special issue is momentary, and the reader is encouraged to use their imagination, to play with suggested meanings, and to explore the resources the issue and individual essays offer independently as well as together.

The individual square blocks, which Corinna stitched into a quilt as part of her work in the project, also provide us a way to think metaphorically about the potentials of academic research collaborations and the convergence of our productive differences, just as our patchworking process revealed complex material and intercultural understandings. Like the quilt pieces, we incorporate attention to visual and sensory mediums or materials, not only as valuable cultural expressions open to analysis, but as rich tools for research themselves. Alongside historical and contemporary references to patchwork, stitching, threading, and embroidery, quilting allows us to break from traditions of academic scholarship that prioritise set canonical forms, as we seek to create a new vocabulary of research sensibilities, in an interlacing of academia and visual culture. Yet, thinking academically with and through sounds, images, and textures, as an analytical process, still remains more marginalized within some academic research fields. For this reason, we are grateful to be included as a special issue of *Imaginations*, which centers attention to diverse intercultural understandings of images, screens, and digital content in crisis conditions.

While we were writing and working on our pieces, we were all ‘making do’; assembling the materials and things we had on hand to spin out the threads of our stories, just as we were getting by in the face of personal and global challenges. In such a space of rupture, we hope to offer a sense of the collective modes of sense-making that may emerge in troubled times, and perhaps a way forward through to a patchworking process for future academic work—a collaborative, generative, always uncertain, but extremely valuable practice that reflects the indeterminacies of our time.

Mapping living with pandemic, “...focusing on what comes to be produced...” (Bodén et al., 19)



Figure 1: Mapping pandemic home. Corinna Peterken.

As I turned the fabric over I saw another mapping outline. I tied off each thread neatly and noticed this is becoming about home and spaces for living with social distancing, making, masking, planting, picking, cleaning, avoiding COVID-19 ...

A neat vegetable garden offers spring shoots in rows. Promises of nourishment to come. The quilt applique of flowers and garden show me that home is mapped in lines of stitching.

IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Mapping pandemic home. Permission of Corinna Peterken.