

Tal Fitzpatrick*, Alyce McGovern**

Home, Health and Power: Exploring Experiences of and Responses to the Pandemic through the Global @covid19quilt Project

Abstract

This article explores the @Covid19Quilt, a global digital participatory art project started by Australian artists Kate Just and Tal Fitzpatrick, designed to gather and share people's experience of the COVID-19 pandemic via craft. Starting with an overview of this continuing project, this article applies an interdisciplinary lens to consider the significance of making and sharing during a pandemic. Drawing on a preliminary thematic analysis of the quilt, we discuss three broad motifs that have characterised the project thus far: home, health, and power. In exploring these three themes, the paper highlights the ways in which the @Covid19Quilt project is an important cultural artefact that draws together 'threads of collective meaning and understanding' (Ferrell, Hayward, Young 2015, 3) and opens up possibilities for transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary dialogue.

Keywords

COVID-19, Pandemic Art, Participatory Art, Digital Quilt, Interdisciplinary

Introduction

In late December 2019 and early January 2020, reports began to emerge of a cluster of pneumonia cases in the city of Wuhan, China, without a known cause. Subsequently identified by the World Health Organisation as a novel coronavirus and named COVID-19, by the 11th March 2020, this fast-spreading virus was officially declared a global pandemic (World Health

* Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne
Email: tal.fitzpatrick@gmail.com

** University of New South Wales, Sydney
Email: a.mcgovern@unsw.edu.au

Organization 2020a). The rapid spread of COVID-19 obliged countries around the globe to respond, some taking action to minimise the threat more swiftly and effectively than others. Quite quickly, people found themselves subject to various government mandated control measures, including travel restrictions, the closing of borders, regional and national lockdowns, the introduction of mandatory mask wearing, and the quarantining of those afflicted with the virus.

As the world went into lockdown, people sought out activities to help them cope with the personal, social and economic challenges that coronavirus restrictions introduced or exacerbated. These activities were not only a way to fill the additional time some people suddenly had on their hands as entire industries shut down and communities were subject to various degrees of lockdown, but they also helped people deal with their anxieties and concerns around the pandemic itself (Inocencio Smith 2020). Notably, many people (re)turned to craft activities such as knitting, weaving, quilting, and embroidery, with “hashtags such as #quarantinecrafts #covidcrafts #covidcrafting #coronaviruscraftproject #coronaviruscraftchallenge... trend[ing] across social media platforms” early on in the pandemic (Fairley 2020).

As individuals (re)engaged with craft practices, a number of participatory quilt-inspired projects emerged as a way to encourage people to connect, virtually, whilst maintaining their physical distance.¹ In this paper we discuss one such project, the global @Covid19Quilt project, in order to provide an interdisciplinary analysis of the function these projects have played during this pandemic along with their significance as cultural artefacts that open up a space for contributors to creatively engage with issues that are important and meaningful to them during this significant point in history (O'Neill 2017).

We begin by providing an overview of the project, before moving on to explore the important role artists have played as facilitators, creators and curators of culture during this global pandemic specifically, and in momen-

¹ Including: Queensland Quarantine Quilt (2020) <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/queensland-quarantine-quilt-comes-state-libraris-collection>, Toledo Museum of Art's Covid-19 Virtual Quilting Bee (2020) <https://www.toledomuseum.org/quilting-bee>, Wisconsin Museum of Quilts & Fiber Arts Quarantine Quilt (2020) <https://www.wiquilt-museum.com/the-quarantine-quilt>, Art Refuge's Corona Quilt (2020) <https://www.coronaquilt.org>, the Covid Hope Quilt Project (2020) <https://www.hopequilt.org/events>, Gina Kellogg and Shruti Sonthalia's Corona Quilt (2020) <https://kelloggsisters.com/the-corona-quilt/?v=6cc98ba2045f>, Jen Broemel's Collaborative Quarantine Quilt (2020) <https://www.jenbroemel.com/coquilt-2020>, Madeleine Fugate's Covid Memorial Quilt <https://covidquilt2020.com>.

tous points in history more generally. Following this, we focus on three motifs identified in a thematic analysis of the @Covid19Quilt: home, health and power. In discussing these key themes, we juxtapose the personal and socio-political concerns evident in the quilt with the emergent interdisciplinary academic research around the pandemic and, building on the work of criminologists O'Neill and Seal (2012, 155-159), demonstrate three key points: one, the @Covid19Quilt provides individuals with a space “for dialogue and for listening and communicating experience across linguistic and cultural divides” (O'Neill and Seal 2012, 158); two, the @Covid19Quilt is a site where complex social issues are being explored in ways that not only complement academic discourse and knowledge, but in a forum that is more visible and accessible to the public; and three, the @Covid19Quilt, as a cultural artefact, exemplifies the possibilities of interdisciplinary, creative, and critical research that is “committed to exploring how culture is materialised in different contexts” (Woodward 2020, 17; O'Neill and Seal 2012, 159).

The @Covid19Quilt Project

Designed to enable contributors from around the world “[...] to gather, narrate and share their experiences of Covid-19 via craft” (Just 2020), the @Covid19Quilt project was started and is led by Melbourne-based artists Kate Just (@katejustknits) and Tal Fitzpatrick (@talfitzpatrick). The project began on the 5th of April 2020, one week after Australia’s first nationwide lockdown and, at the time of writing, continues to accept submissions, with Just and Fitzpatrick committed to growing the project for as long as COVID-19 is considered a global pandemic. Part digital quilt, part time capsule, this project facilitates the integration of people’s craft practices, their use of social media, their interior emotional lives, and their responses to current events as they unfold.

Contributions to this project are collected via the @Covid19Quilt Instagram feed, which as of May 2021 has over 3.9k followers, and is itself the digital ‘quilt’ at the centre of this project. To take part in the @Covid19Quilt project makers are invited to submit a square image of a textile-based work they created during the pandemic, along with a short statement detailing how the piece relates to their experiences of COVID-19, via direct message to the project’s Instagram page. Just and Fitzpatrick then post the image and accompanying text on the main feed of the @Covid19Quilt Instagram page, along with the maker’s name and/or Instagram handle and their location. As of April 28, 2021, they have received over 522 submissions from 28 coun-

tries around the globe including: Australia, United Kingdom (England, Scotland, Wales), United States, New Zealand, Germany, Canada, Brazil, Ecuador, Estonia, Spain, Greece, Austria, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Japan, China, Croatia, Romania, France, Georgia, Netherlands, Malaysia, Denmark, Switzerland, Vietnam, South Africa and the United Arab Emirates. Participants include professional artists, skilled amateurs and first-time crafters of all ages, working across a range of techniques from embroidery and hand sewing to cross-stitch and knitting.

While the primary site for engaging with this artwork is Instagram, the @Covid19Quilt project has been recognised outside this digital space, reaching a broader audience through its inclusion in online and physical exhibitions and publications, including the *2020 Incinerator Gallery Art Award for Activist Art*, where the @Covid19Quilt project was awarded the People's Choice Award (Incinerator Gallery 2020), and *The National 2021: Contemporary Australian Art* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, which includes an installation of Kate Just's recent work. To date, the @Covid19Quilt has also been featured on the Australian TV show *The Mix* (ABC TV, 2020) as well as in multiple online publications including *Art Guide Australia* (Downes 2020), *Crafts Council UK* (Crafts Magazine 2020), and *Frankie* (The Frankie Team 2020).

Making and Sharing in a Pandemic

As facilitators, creators and curators of this project, Just and Fitzpatrick state that they started the @Covid19Quilt Instagram page as "a way of responding to the distress, illness and loss arising globally due to the pandemic" (Just 2020). Sensing that in this moment of crisis, many of the artists and makers who constitute the online communities they are a part of would turn to their creative practices as a way to process what was happening, Just and Fitzpatrick chose to create a communal space where groups of predominantly women could use digital technologies to come together to narrate their histories through craft (Robson 2021).

In this way, the @Covid19quilt project builds on a long legacy of participatory and collaborative textile art projects that use craft as a way to centre women and other marginalised communities and to document significant historical events, including other pandemics, as they unfold. Other notable examples include: the US-based *NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt* (National AIDS Memorial no date), which aimed to memorialise the lives of those lost to AIDS at a time when key political and medical figures were si-

lent on the crisis; the Gee's Bend Quiltmakers (Arnett, Herman 2006; Collins 2015), who since the early twentieth century have been creating quilts that "rank with the finest abstract art of any tradition" (Livingstone quoted in Wallach 2016), while also contributing to the Civil Rights movement and supporting their own community by establishing a foundation that fosters economic empowerment, racial and social justice, and educational advancement (Souls Grown Deep 2019); the *Monument Quilt* (FORCE: Upsetting Rape Culture no date), which featured the personal stories, in the form of "written, drawn or stitched" quilt blocks, of survivors of sexual violence; and, the global *Universal Declaration of Human Rights Quilt Project* (2017), which constituted a series of quilts created to celebrate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on its 70 year anniversary, as well as document the current state of human rights (Museum of Australian Democracy 2018). Each of these participatory art/craft endeavours demonstrate the role that creativity can play in not only "capturing human experiences" and chronicling events (Hunter 2019, 10), but also drawing attention to and calling for action on a range of social concerns (McGovern 2019).

The @Covid19Quilt project is also informed by the practice of 'craftivism' (Greer 2007), which brings together craft and activism and is defined by Fitzpatrick in her self-published book *Craftivism: A Manifesto/Methodology* (2018, 3), as:

[...] both a strategy for non-violent activism and a mode of DIY citizenship that looks to influence positive social and political change. This uniquely 21st Century practice involve[s] the combination of craft techniques with elements of social and/or digital engagement as part of a proactive effort to bring attention to, or pragmatically address, issues of social, political and environmental justice.

As this definition highlights, contemporary forms of 'craftivism' often rely on 21st century technologies, such as home computers with access to the internet, digital cameras and smartphones, as well as blogs and social media platforms that allow the rapid sharing of user-created content and the coalescing of online communities of interest.

These technologies, as craft critics Robertson and Vinebaum (2016, 6) explain, "[...] played a central role in moving textiles from the private to the public sphere" and have become essential for facilitating and encouraging interventionist collaborative practices at a global scale. Indeed, as social theorists argue, digital technologies have "have transformed *how people engage* with one another" (Stratton *et al.* 2017, 24, emphasis in original). Through its integration of social media into its design, this project functions

as a digital space where makers come together to express their views on broader social, political, and environmental concerns with public audiences. As the following analysis of the @Covid19Quilt highlights, the project serves as a dynamic record that traces “the wider socio-political impact of COVID-19 as participants reflect on broader issues and systematic inequalities highlighted, intersected and/or exasperated by the pandemic, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, domestic violence, wealth distribution and health-care access” (Robson 2021).

@Covid19Quilt—Themes of the Pandemic

A preliminary thematic analysis² (Braun, Clarke 2006) of the contributions made to the @Covid19Quilt Instagram page has highlighted a number of broad themes evident across the contributions submitted thus far. These themes not only demonstrate the key reflections of contributors during the pandemic, but also indicate how these reflections have evolved and shifted over the period of the pandemic, from a focus on the personal to the community to the political, mirroring the socio-political climate that contributors were no doubt experiencing while creating their pieces, or what photographer and artist Nick Jaffe (2014, 3) refers to as a “shared subjective experience.”

For the purposes of this paper, we discuss three key themes that feature repeatedly in the @Covid19Quilt: home, health and power. We explore these three themes in turn by using a range of submissions from the @covid19Quilt³ to highlight the way that these works intersect with interdisciplinary concerns and scholarship, as discussed above, before engaging in a discussion about the ways in which this global project has made effective use of digital and social media to foster the sharing of stories and recognise how “[...] creative expression can provide individuals with an important avenue for empowerment and emancipation” (Fitzpatrick 2020).

² According to Braun and Clarke (2006, 79), “[t]hematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data.”

³ Just and Fitzpatrick requested permission to share these images and accompanying statements from all the participants of this project and have only shared those where express permission was granted for their work to be included in publications.

Home

In the early days of the pandemic, home became a very familiar place to people, as governments across the globe requested—or mandated—that their citizens stay at home to stop the spread of the virus. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, ‘home’ has been a prominent theme in @Covid19Quilt contributions, initially as a call to action—‘Stay Home!’ (Fig. 1)—then as a critique of who is affected by such mandates and in what ways.



covid19quilt Stay home is by our youngest contributor yet, Phil, an 11 year old from Melbourne, Australia.

Phil says, 'In the time of Covid-19, I've been doing a lot of creative things like loom bands and Hama beads. I have also taken up jogging. My family are supporting me to be creative. My square Stay Home is made with ironed Hama beads and a knitted blanket. I did Stay Home because people should pay attention to the rules, because if they do, that will save lives.' #covid19quilt #covid-19 #hamabeads #stayhome

Fig. 1. Stay Home Orders

Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

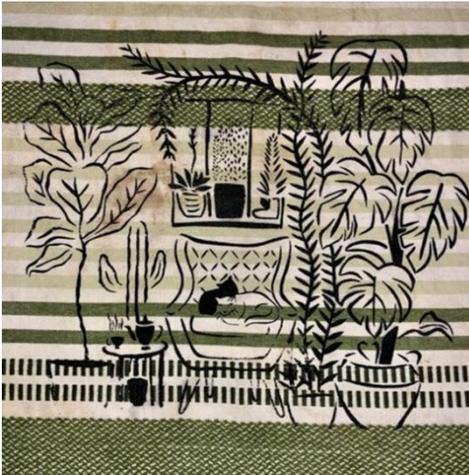
As people found themselves confined to the home for extended periods, the home suddenly took on a very different meaning and role than it had pre-pandemic. This contribution from @jayneraven from London, England (Fig. 2), for example, reflects on how stay at home orders have impacted those without a home, raising questions about the governmental failures to provide support for vulnerable populations such as the homeless. As public policy and administration scholars Benavides and Nukpezah (2020) note in their examination of local government responses to the homeless during the pandemic, there are serious moral, ethical and human rights considerations that need to be addressed when managing the needs of these populations at this time. Such concerns have similarly been front of mind for a number of contributors to the @Covid19Quilt project.



covid19quilt @janyeraven from London, UK writes, 'I took my photos for this piece in Leeds two weeks ago. I was deeply saddened by rough sleeping in Leeds and the number of homeless I saw. Somehow the situation hits home more when it is where you were born. Since then our government's disregard during the Coronavirus outbreak for the most vulnerable in our society has been shameful. I had too many late nights and got very sore fingers making this quilt but it has been worth every stitch. I am so pleased to say that thanks to 'Little Laura' @penster135 this quilt will be going to the Lotus Project in Bradford who do work to support sex workers. Bradford is the neighbouring city to Leeds, the place where I grew up and many of my family and friends still live there.'

Fig. 2. Rough Sleeping and Homelessness
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

The situation for homeless populations sits in stark contrast to those who do have a home, as evident in the quilt. Contributors to the @Covid19Quilt spoke of the safety and sanctuary that their homes provided them during the pandemic. For example, for @dougwebb91 in Melbourne, Australia, being confined to the home initially gave them the opportunity to engage in activities that aligned with their values and enabled them to care for and nurture others (Fig. 3).



covid19quilt @dougwebb91 From Melbourne, Australia has contributed this handcut stencil that was silk screen printed onto a tea towel. Doug writes: 'Being forced to remain indoors led me to reflect upon our own places of sanctuary. A place to retreat and hide in. It has helped me realise an underlying thread in my art practice and values as a person - that I place importance in acts of nurturing, comfort, and making others feel safe and content. Domestic pursuits such as baking, caring for pets, the joys thriving house plants can bring, the bright and uplifting nature a freshly brewed cup of tea can bring. In this time of bleak uncertainties, ad nauseam news cycles with worsening outcomes, and a deep sense of pervasive malaise, let us all find refuge in that which brings us comfort and respite.' #covid19quilt

Fig. 3. Home as Sanctuary
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

With many unable to continue working in their usual setting, the home space also suddenly became a workplace, with bedrooms, kitchens, living spaces, and dining tables serving dual functions as workspaces. Navigating the blurring of home/office boundaries was particularly challenging for those who were also taking on carer and/or childcare duties, particularly women. As sociologists Collins *et al.* (2020, 1, 5-8) found in the US context, “[s]chool and daycare closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have increased caregiving responsibilities for working parents,” with mothers of young children more likely to reduce their working hours to manage these dual demands than fathers. In highlighting these complexities, @Covid19-Quilt contributors show how the pandemic has made visible the structural and systemic factors that see women not only take on more domestic and caregiving responsibilities, but also become marginalised from the labour market as a result (Reichelt *et al.* 2020). However, as @taisnaith explores (see Fig.4) in their piece, for many spending more time at home with children was a rewarding challenge, and craft activities suddenly became important tools for home-schooling.



 covid19quilt @taisnaith from Melbourne, Australia writes, “This square celebrates my time at home with my two boys Leo (10) and Gil (6) during isolation. We go for a walk each morning along the Merri Creek with our dog, Wally and have been keeping a journal of one mysterious thing we find and research each day. In our first week of home schooling Leo asked me to teach him how to sew, which made my heart explode. He has done some of these stitches here. ❤️ #covid19quilt”

Fig. 4. Home with children
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

While the home was a sanctuary, a place of work, and/or a space of caregiving for some, for others, being confined to the home was a source of danger. As @cobbjulian’s piece depicts (see Fig. 5), for victims of domestic and family violence, being confined to the home is anything but a sanctuary; it is

a literal prison. As doctors, nurses, psychologists and criminologists noted, the social isolation measures put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 placed many at an increased risk of family and domestic violence, cut off from support services and trapped at home with their abusers (Usher *et al.* 2020a). One Australian study conducted with family and domestic violence support workers, for example, found evidence that “the incidence and severity of domestic violence has increased in Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions” (Pfitzner *et al.* 2020; see also Boxall *et al.* 2020), findings which are also reflected in available data from North and South America, Europe and Asia (Usher *et al.* 2020a). The urgent need for governments to respond to the immediate risks facing victims was a theme across a number of @Covid19Quilt contributions.



covid19quilt Content Warning:
Domestic violence, abuse.
@cobbjulian from Melbourne Australia, shares a piece called 'Home is (not) where the heart is!' Julian writes, 'It is representative of how the home has turned from sanctuary to prison for a lot of people, while also speaking of those who are suffering from domestic violence and abuse. Now literally locked in their own homes with their abusers, hidden behind walls and curtains, where they are trapped as if behind bars and being tormented daily. Home isn't a safe place for everyone.'
#covid19quilt

Fig. 5. Home as Threat

Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

Additionally, As illustrated in Fig. 6, the way in which the pandemic has separated many from their families has resulted in some individuals existing in a liminal space, physically in one location but mentally and emotionally wishing to be elsewhere, hoping that at any moment travel and other restrictions might lift so they can be reunited with their families. With there being no clear end in sight to the pandemic, this liminality has had a growing emotional toll on those who have found themselves far from home during this pandemic. Separated by closed borders and without any indication of when travel (in particular international travel) will once again be possible, families long for the day when they will be reunited.



Fig. 6. Far from Home

Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

 covid19quilt @jaqstojanovic based in Melbourne, Australia shares, 'With family and loved ones in Serbia, the closure of borders between nations amidst the lockdown has reframed my perception on the ease of bridging our distance. I make abstract textile work that is inspired by traditional weaving practices. While self isolated I have been working on tapestries with geometric motifs that focus on repetition. This practice has served as a meditation for me and helped me to reflect upon the new repetitive nature of my days.' #covid19quilt

Health

Naturally, given the context of the pandemic, health was another common theme across contributions to the @Covid19Quilt project. The virus itself featured in a number of works, particularly as more became known about its characteristics and form. For example, @pleatybunny's work (Fig. 7) uses thread and beadwork to depict the physical attributes of COVID-19 in comparison to other well-known viruses, such as influenza, while @nicole_p_oloughlin's (Fig. 8) uses pom poms, french knots and tassels to depict the coronavirus cell itself. As those working in the social sciences, arts and humanities argue, paying attention to the sensorial allows us to gain an understanding of individual experiences that draw on knowledge beyond language (Pink 2015, 96-96).



Fig. 7. The Virus

Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

 covid19quilt @pleatybunny from Melbourne, Australia shares a square comprised of multiple textile parts. Sai-Wai writes, 'It includes an embroidery project I started a couple of months ago, exploring droplet borne respiratory diseases capturing pathogens in needle & beadwork. Influenza, pertussis, rhinovirus, pneumonia, strep, tuberculosis, sars and corona all inform the subject matter worked onto the surface of vintage handkerchiefs. The work was influenced by time spent at a biomedical science and art residency program with @thevincentsmelbourne & @jurnalmb medical museum and by the early stages of reporting of the pandemic.' #covid19quilt #craft #textile #embroidery #beadwork



covid19quilt @nicole_p_sloughlin from Hobart Tasmania shares 'A crafted COVID 19 cell!' Nicole writes, 'The representation of this cell has become instantly recognisable to most people in the world. It's depiction makes it a celebrity in its own right. I made a textile interpretation to centre in my larger COVID Dis-comforter. Pom poms, tassels and many many French knots to depict something that has changed most people's lives.' #covid19quilt

Fig. 8. CoronaVirus Testing
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

Other contributions also demonstrated the differential ways in which countries were responding to the virus, and the various policies and practices that either facilitated or impeded access to personal protective equipment (PPE), testing and vaccination. While multiple submissions touched upon the protective and preventative measures that individuals were encouraged to take in public health campaigns designed to limit transmission, including the washing of hands (Fig. 9) and the wearing (and making) of masks (Fig. 10), some raised concerns about the provisions available to the community. Indeed, as Fig.10 shows, many crafters took it upon themselves to produce their own cloth masks, with many donating masks to health professionals and community members where access to PPE was limited or expensive (Kipp, Kretz 2021).



covid19quilt @deborah_eddy_art from Brisbane, Australia writes, 'This is my square for the @covid19quilt. It is a CHUX wipe embroidered with builder's string. We are all cleaning madly, house, hands etc so this seems appropriate.' #covid19quilt

Fig. 9. Hand Hygiene
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram



 covid19quilt @preprint from Melbourne, Australia shares, 'Making masks during #Covid19. I've watched quite a few different mask making youtube clips and searched for patterns online. I settled for a simple design that enables the insert of a filter. This was a pattern designed by a nurse and shared when PPE shortage was highlighted. I used cotton fabric quilting squares that are sewn together providing three layers. There is an opening to insert an extra filter and a pliable metal insert to enable molding around the nose. Today I had a team conversation online discussing PPE as schools prepare to reopen next week. Our library is definitely a high traffic area. Wearing masks was a topic uncomfortably raised. Yes I will be wearing a mask. This square is a self-portrait of me making masks. You can be asymptomatic and not know it. At least we can protect each other with a simple measure.' #covid19quilt

Fig. 10. Mask Wearing and Mask Making
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

In globalising the discussion and highlighting the inequities experienced around the world, the @Covid19Quilt is making visible the very real impacts that differential public healthcare systems have on communities around the world. Furthermore, the quilt is highlighting the difficulties some populations are experiencing in accessing information, and support and treatment for the virus, mirroring calls from scholars and the WHO to ensure poorer nations are provided safe and affordable access to healthcare and vaccination (Kamradt-Scott 2020).

Aside from the health concerns directly related to the virus itself, the @Covid19Quilt also captured adjacent mental health concerns generated or exacerbated by the virus on individuals, their family and friends, and the global community more broadly. As @leratomotaurartwork from Johannesburg, South Africa (Fig. 11) explains in her piece, there was a great deal of anxiety around the virus and how measures taken to control the spread would impact on people's lives and mental health. Once again, such works shed light on the need for more awareness around the mental health impacts of the pandemic, and the need for better support from governments for those affected, echoing responses from experts and practitioners that "[r]ecovery from the negative impacts of this pandemic must include plans for addressing mental health issues for both public and healthcare professionals" (Usher *et al.* 2020b: 316).




 covid19quilt @leratomofaartwork from Johannesburg, South Africa. Lerato shares, 'My piece is about anxiety, which is what 'go da iketang' means in my mother tongue. When they first announced he lockdown here in South Africa they said it would last for 21 days... as they added more and more weeks my anxiety and my concerns about mental health grew. How is one going to be able to sit in the house and not able to move? How are the kids going to cope studying from home and not be able to go to school and see their friends?' #covid19quilt

Fig. 11. Anxiety and Mental Health
 Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

Another interesting element of health-themed submissions was the awareness raised by those suffering from chronic illness. A number contributions detailed how those with pre-existing health conditions, invisible disabilities/illnesses, and mental health diagnoses were already well-accustomed with many of the circumstances ushered in by the pandemic, such as self-isolation and strict hygiene measures (see Fig. 12).

The emergence of the pandemic, therefore, was not the first time many have been confronted by uncertainty, confusion, isolation, and health concerns. As has become evident, for some such concerns were exacerbated by and during the pandemic, particularly in circumstances where ongoing health care was compromised by lockdowns and restrictions, something similarly noted by support agencies (e.g. see Rääbus 2020). Furthermore, workplace responses during the pandemic—such as allowing people to work from home—brought into sharp relief what is actually possible in terms of making adjustments and accommodations for individuals to work off-site, something those with disabilities had faced a degree of resistance to prior to the pandemic (Schur, Kruse 2020). In examining the way in which health emerged as a key theme in the @Covid19Quilt then, we are able to see the intersections between public and academic discourse around the health-related concerns during the pandemic.



covid19quilt @michelle_hamer is an artist from Melbourne, Australia. Michelle speaks to the text on her hand stitched square, 'DAY 7423 is part of a pair of works dedicated to all the people with invisible disabilities, chronic health issues, holocaust survivors who were in hiding and any others who have previously experienced isolation. While new experiences for so many, the fear, uncertainty and precariousness of life is ever present for these communities and is largely unseen - their current challenges are unique too. This is not my first isolation.' #covid19quilt #handstitched #isolation.

Fig. 12. Invisible and Chronic Illness
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

In addition to documenting personal experiences and concerns around health, many contributors also paid tribute to the amazing work and contributions of health professionals in responding to the pandemic (see Fig. 13). Contributors recognised the enormous sacrifices being made by doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals on the front line, assisting those stricken by the virus, but also at the mercy of catching the virus themselves and continuing to work in such a precarious environment regardless. According to the World Health Organization, in the early period of the pandemic up to one in 10 health workers were infected with COVID-19 in some countries (Lacinda 2020) and hundreds have subsequently died (see Fig. 14), with reports suggesting “that black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) doctors were over-represented in early deaths” in the UK (Kursumovic *et al.* 2020, 989).



covid19quilt @athenaanemeth from Montreal, Quebec, Canada. Athena shares, "This piece I made while living in England in the beginning stages of lockdown. I was passionate by this piece mainly how my dad is an trauma doctor who is dealing with COVID-19 face to face so this piece was a reflection on how NHS staff should be funded more especially at these tough times and how the prime minister wasn't doing much to help in that aspect." #covid19quilt

Fig. 13. Supporting Health Workers
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

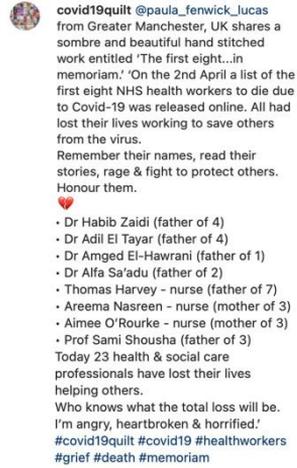


Fig. 14. Deaths in Healthcare
Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

Such contributions served to underline the enormous pressures put on health services as the virus spread and also spoke to ongoing debates around government-funded health services and universal health care.

Power

The final theme woven through many of the contributions to the @Covid-19Quilt project was that of power. One dimension of power evident in submissions related to the way in which the virus has been politicised. As this piece from @o_corcoran of North Carolina, US, exemplifies (Fig. 15), contributors to the quilt documented the growing scepticism about the existence of the virus and expressed frustration with those who refused to comply with health advice or take the virus seriously. These tensions were particularly heightened in countries where the virus was treated as a partisan issue rather than a global health emergency.

These observations tap into larger public discourses that argue 'deep state' conspiracy theories seeded doubt in the minds of some in the community, with some reports suggesting a large proportion of the community believe that the virus was either manufactured on purpose, or did not exist at all (Uscinski, Enders 2020). A national survey conducted by Yahoo News/YouGov, for example, "found that 31% of Americans thought the threat of the coronavirus was being exaggerated for political reasons during the early stages of the pandemic" (Kerr *et al.* 2021, 2).



covid19quilt @o_corcoran from Durham, North Carolina writes, "Give me Liberty or Give Me Covid!" An actual reopen protest sign.

I have no meaningful words for these buttnuts. I only have my impotent stitches. I vainly attempt to process in thread the madness of these science deniers, who think Covid is a Deep State hoax and that wearing a mask is an actual attack on their liberty as Americans. Why not drive drunk? Screw seatbelts! If people want to walk barefoot on broken bottles and barbed wire, who is Dr. Fauci to tell them they don't have to bleed! We're Americans, dammit, we have Constitutional rights!! Today, 7/13/20, the US death toll is 137K and 3.37 million have been infected. 12.9 million people on this planet have been infected and more than 57K have died. Yesterday in Florida, 15K people tested positive. In a single day.

In the midst of a long overdue, national reckoning about the systemic racism that this country is built on, the reality that the pandemic has disproportionately killed Black, Native American and Latinx people in the US, makes the refusal to wear masks in public even more disturbing. But it isn't surprising. It's yet another act of violence against non-white Americans.

As Kayla Chadwick said, "I don't know how to explain to you that you should care about other people."

#covid19quilt

Fig. 15. COVID-19 Denial

Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

It was not just in relation to COVID-19 itself though where power-relations were the focus of @Covid19Quilt submissions. The wider systems of governance that function to uphold oppressive practices and institutions also came into focus during the pandemic and within contributions to the project. While the pandemic might have illuminated a range of structural issues that had contributors and the broader public alike critiquing some governments and their institutions, concurrent events further fuelled community concerns. One incident in particular served as a catalyst for a social movement: the death of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police in the US state of Minnesota in May 2020, during the first wave of the pandemic. The circulation of mobile phone camera footage depicting a White police officer kneeling on the neck of Floyd for eight minutes and 46 seconds, (re)ignited debates around differential policing and institutional racism, and led to ongoing Black Lives Matter protests in the US and around the globe (see e.g. Kirby 2020).

Unsurprisingly, in this climate, critiques and commentary on structural racism were apparent in a number of contributions to the @Covid19Quilt. As @nayking_88 details in her contribution (see Fig. 16), the death of George Floyd brought together Black, Indigenous and First Nations communities, who felt a sense of solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, particularly given the colonial histories of countries like Australia and New Zealand and their own experiences with police violence and deaths in custody.

Indeed, over time, the project increasingly became more than just a series of reflections on the individual experience of this pandemic, with participants contributing work that focussed on the growing number of power structures coming under criticism during this time. The growing momentum amongst social change movements calling for justice is exemplified by the work of @amorphophallus_titanium, who documented (see Fig. 17) that people were willing to risk their health during the pandemic to protest for the rights and treatment of Black communities in the US.



covid19quilt @nayking_88 writes, 'As a Maori woman living in colonised Australia, I feel a keen sense of solidarity with the indigenous people of this country & with #BLM movement. This patch - which features the Tino Rangatiratanga (Maori flag on left), the Aboriginal flag and the black power symbol, signifies the coming together of those 3 communities. Last week I marched at the #BLM rally in Melb wearing this to protest deaths in custody & honour of George Floyd who was recently murdered by police in the US. It was a beautiful humbling experience to stand in solidarity with people of so many people from different races & religions in support of equality and justice for those most marginalised.' #covid19quilt

Fig. 16. Black Lives Matter

Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram



covid19quilt @amorphophallus_titanium from NYC, USA. Susie writes, 'I began this linoprint on muslin in april as an illustration about missing each other, willingly self-isolating in the interest of public health. I added embroidery in June and have reinterpreted this image: now we are reconnecting en masse, willingly imperiling individual health in the interest of human rights and justice for our black communities.' #covid19quilt

Fig. 17. Human Rights, Health and Black Lives Matter

Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

The pandemic itself also revealed racism against other communities of colour, no doubt bolstered by the rhetoric of individuals such as outgoing US President Donald Trump, who continually referred to the Coronavirus as the 'Chinese virus' (Viala-Gaufrey, Lindaman 2020). As @suyanhvisual writes in her contribution (see Fig. 18), the wearing of a face mask during the pandemic became politicised, and was a signifier for racist and xenophobic hatred. As one study from the Australian National University found, between January and October 2020, 84.5% of Asian Australians reported being discriminated against on at least one occasion (Biddle *et al.* 2020). Similarly, racially motivated hate crimes against Asian Americans have reportedly increased in the wake of COVID-19 (Gover *et al.* 2020, 647), with the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism finding a 146% increase in anti-Asian hate crimes in 2020 across 26 US jurisdictions (Levin 2021, 2).



covid19quilt @suyanhvisual is from Melbourne & Beijing. Su writes:
 'This is a mask.
 This is a cloth face mask.
 This is a mask that helped me prevent seasonal flu on tram and subway.
 This is a mask that used to keep me warm when I ride a bicycle in winter.
 This is a mask that was brought by my partner from China when he visited me in Australia.
 This mask was the symbolization of care, health, and love.
 However, one day it is suddenly stigmatized as if it is a virus.
 It becomes the excuse for racists and xenophobes to expound their hatred.
 People of color are having anxiety about wearing masks.
 Some Asian people are targeted as scapegoats.
 Some Asian people are discouraged to wear it and expose themselves to the virus because they try to fit in the "dominant culture."
 The heart of the mask is broken.
 Arrogance and prejudice should not have been and can not be universal.
 True freedom and human rights will mean all of us can experience the world with respect!' #covid19quilt

Fig. 18. Racism and COVID-19
 Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

The conversations raised by these submissions brought attention to the reality that while many politicians used the rhetoric that 'we are all in this together' the truth was that communities of colour, First Nations peoples, people with disabilities and other pre-existing conditions, and otherwise disadvantaged communities were disproportionately affected by this pandemic (World Health Organization 2020b). The devastating impacts of this unequal impact of the virus are repeatedly highlighted in the @Covid19Quilt including, as Fig. 19 highlights, the devastating death toll that has been a result of inadequate or neglectful government responses to addressing the virus (see also Shuster 2020).



 covid19quilt @jademariani from Rio De Janeiro shares 'One thousand a day' 30x20cm. Jade writes, 'Traditionally embroidery was a women's craft, they would sit together at home and slowly embroider everyday motives and sayings to decorate their houses and clothings. This piece is about tradition. It's about a modern day woman embroidering her daily life scenes from her home. In Brazil, the most affected country by the covid virus, one thousand people are dying a day, and that's just daily life.' #covid19quilt

Fig. 19. COVID-19 and Death
 Source: @Covid19Quilt Instagram

Discussion and conclusion

As this discussion of the three key themes from the @Covid19Quilt demonstrates, through their digital contributions to the quilt, participants were able to articulate and share their thoughts on a wide variety of topics, ranging from very personal explorations of isolation, anxiety and grief (much of which was experienced in the home due to COVID-19 restrictions), to expressions of concern about systemic issues in relation to healthcare, racial equality, and politics/democracy. In this way, the @Covid19Quilt serves to facilitate “engagement with aspects of experience such as affect states and understandings of the relationship between self and others, past and present, the individual and the collective” (O’Neill and Seal 2021, 134).

As a cultural artefact, the quilt documents, in digital form, the complex and multilayered experience of living through a pandemic, giving voice to and putting into context similar issues being discussed in scholarly and political circles. In the words of Just and Fitzpatrick, the project serves as a digital space where “[...] we can reclaim our connection to each other by continuing to make things with our hands and by sharing stories that highlight our shared humanity” (Fitzpatrick 2020). In this way, the @Covid19Quilt provides a window into the socio-political context of the pandemic in ways that cut across cultural, linguistic, and geographic divides (O’Neill and Seal 2021). It bears witness to the very real impacts and reflections of living through

a pandemic. To draw on the work of education scholars Adeniji-Neill *et al.* (2014, 26), the project can be understood as providing a space for people to “see and feel cultural differences and commonalities” as represented in both the creations that people share and the maker’s statements which accompany these creations on social media.

Through its incorporation of physical craft based practices and peoples’ use of social media, this project exemplifies what criminologists Stratton *et al.* (2017, 24, 26) argue is the increased blurring between people’s online and offline worlds. As Stratton *et al.* point out, the digital society in which we now live has seen “a shift in structures, socio-cultural practices and lived experience that does not distinguish between the online and offline world,” a shift that amongst other things, “arguably better captures the lived experiences of marginalised communities and the operation of power, inequalities and violence across every aspect of their daily lives” (Stratton *et al.* 2017). Furthermore, the quilt’s digital form and the way it continues to grow over time, allows for a sustained engagement that enables contributors and audiences to expand their consciousness by participating in supranational conversations about these complex sets of issues. As a result, this project will provide those looking back on this moment in the future with a primary source that documents this pandemic through the viewpoints of everyday people around the world, a source that centres the stories and experiences of women who have historically been marginalised and excluded from the annals of history (see for example Hunter 2019).

Along with other digital creative participatory responses to this pandemic, the @Covid19Quilt project is collating significant records of first-person accounts of the pandemic. Artists Just and Fitzpatrick purposefully designed the project to encourage broad participation,⁴ and to “value and recognise the creative contributions of ‘non-artists’ and enable participants to communicate ‘their own truth’ in a public space” (Robson 2021). Through their hand crafted work and their use of social media to share and reflect their experiences, contributors to the @Covid19Quilt project are articulating their wider concerns about the personal, social, and political impacts of COVID-19, alongside other events that have (co-)occurred during this time.

⁴ Within the scope of this project, which is bound by its reliance on the internet and Instagram, the project looks to mitigate barriers to participation by: 1) Translating and sharing the project brief in 15 languages, including Australian sign language. 2) Accepting submissions from people who don’t have Instagram accounts, accepting multiple submissions and accepting submissions in any language. 3) Only asking for images of the submitted artworks rather than the original artworks.

As our preliminary thematic analysis of this project reveals, the recurring themes raised in this work focus around the issues of home, health and power, with makers around the work using their contribution to the @Covid19Quilt as an outlet to reflect on, draw attention to, and even protest injustice, inequality, and the abuse of power. In this way, the @Covid19Quilt exemplifies how supranational communities use the public/private intersection of craft and digital technologies to narrate their histories and engage collective meaning making.

By examining the contributions to the @Covid19Quilt, what becomes clear is that the project operates on multiple levels, playing multiple functions, including: a platform through which individuals can advocate for and bring attention to specific social justice issues; a space for public conversations about complex often emotional issues; a time capsule of this significant moment in history as recorded by members of the global community; and a site for storytelling by those whose stories are often under-represented in the annals of history—women, people of colour, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, young people, people living with disabilities and/or chronic illness, as well as seniors. By exploring the themes that emerge in this project, this paper highlights the ways in which the @Covid19Quilt project is an important cultural artefact that draws together “threads of collective meaning and understanding” (Ferrell, Hayward, Young 2015, 3) and opens up possibilities for transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary dialogue. As such, it highlights how digital quilt projects can serve as cultural artefacts imbued with meaning, context and affect, and thus are a site ripe with meaning for interdisciplinary scholars wanting to gain new and interesting insights into the experience of living through a pandemic.

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