



## Knitting Back Better

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The long, dark, and damp winter of social isolation led me back to knitting. After a few calls to my grandmother, I felt the muscle memory come back. I hoped to stave off boredom, ease some anxiety, and maybe have something to show for the time warp we were living through. Something else started happening. Knitting was changing the way I was thinking. I mentioned it to friends and family, “I think knitting is helping me think more intricately.” Some laughed and reminded me I was supposed to be writing a dissertation. In their defense, I had, over the course of the year, become a cat mom and stopped wearing pants with seams. With knitting in the mix, I had seemingly not only skipped over the last year of my twenties but the next couple of decades as well. But, jokes aside, I kept coming back to this idea of knitting—and woven fibers more generally—in the context of what was happening to the world.

Just as the light was fading on the before-times, I was being introduced to a [new world of scholarship, advocacy, and practice](#) centered on the importance of infrastructure to the sustaining of life with aims to make visible the work of care, maintenance, and repair this sustenance requires. I had a feeling of warmth and homecoming in finding others to think with. Their language suited my thinking. It was intricate and embodied, age-old, yet creative. It felt like knitting.

Thinking intricately about our shared reliance on infrastructures—social, informational, and material— complicated every issue, both practical and theoretical. Thinking intricately requires iteration of thought and requires one to think across scales—following a thread and then zooming out to see how it fits within a larger fabric. Somewhat serendipitous, my return to knitting was accompanied by a thinking practice following those enamored by seemingly “boring things” (Star, 2002). I found that knitting, in its monotony, allowed space for parsing the structures that sustain our world, the power that influences them, allows them to decay, and fuels their transformation. These thinkers attracted me as a graduate student trying to become a specialist in a world that demanded it, knowing full-well I was a generalist who struggled with commitment. Yet, in early 2020, just as I had begun to rehearse my elevator pitch, everything started falling apart. And yes, I mean everything. At this point, you, the reader, don’t need me to back that up.

A fissure began to open in almost every infrastructure we rely on. The chasm opened to chaos. It doesn’t matter what you were studying, working on, building, or creating in the before-times. Now, whether you like it or not, you are doing this craft on shifting ground. For the generalists, genre-benders, and anti-disciplinary among us it is a daunting time, but one that affirms what we have long been unable to ignore—[our collective precarity](#). I have become increasingly perturbed by the insistence that corporate partnerships, tech giants, institutional leadership, and governing bodies can provide the care we need and that these patchwork solutions can still work.

If you knit, you know better.

Knitting is an iterative, frustrating, embodied, and cumulative practice. Thinking like a knitter - being a knit-thinker, if you will—can help light a path through the chaos chasm, weave something stronger, and teach all of us about how to get on with each other as well as possible (Fisher & Tronto, 1990; Haraway, 2016).

The first thing knit-thinking does is hollow out any trust in patchwork solutions. Patches conveniently hide that which is deemed unsightly. They don’t require iteration or unraveling. They are a convenient solution to the fallout of a ‘move

fast and break things' approach. So, what happens when the foundation upon which a patch is placed is hollowed out completely?

There are so many moments from the chaos chasm of 2020-2021 that illustrate the ineptitude of this approach. In the US, multiple crises unfolded over the span of a few months: the Texas power disaster, which showed us that [“the past is no longer a safe guide to future extremes”](#) in the midst of a climate crisis; the [water crisis in Jackson, Mississippi](#), and the gap in critical services being filled by mutual aid networks because of the failure of racist, extractive, capitalist structures; the fact that [Flint, Michigan is still in the throes of a water crisis](#) that has eroded trust in other federal programs, including the vaccine rollout.

So, it is with the caution of a knit-thinker, that I await news on US President Biden's ambitious \$2 trillion infrastructure plan. [It's no Green New Deal](#), to be sure, but it promises to consider equity in the construction of physical infrastructure that has routinely cut through BIPOC communities and displaced many (Henke & Sims, 2020). In fact, there is a national conversation in the United States about human infrastructure. I couldn't help but feel giddy that we were talking about infrastructure beyond roads, bridges, and pipes, beginning to consider people, care, and community. However, these promises are secondary, it seems, to the “Build Back Better” effort that, as usual, privileges capital over our more-than-human community. This language emerges in concepts like the prioritization of “consequential bridges”—apparently defined as [“a bridge that is important in connecting people, and particularly commerce.”](#)

My giddiness was fleeting, it turns out.

Knowing just a fraction of the history of the infrastructure programs of the United States's past and the depth of the injustice that persists, should give us all pause. Infrastructure studies have shown us that things are most visible when they break. But if the infrastructure is built to break strategically in minoritized communities, and perhaps even to break those communities apart, and we are complicit in this out-of-sight-out-of-mind delusion, we are destined to repeat our history.

A failure to think intricately can allow our hope for a solution to decay and fall into disrepair - despite trillions of dollars flowing in. The patches will continue pulling apart at the seams; they will rupture, and unveil the decaying foundation of oppression. Still, there is hope, but it, too, will require work to sustain. As Steven Jackson (2014) espouses, one can look at decay, rupture, and chaos with a “deep wonder and appreciation for the ongoing activities by which stability (such as it is) is maintained, the subtle arts of repair by which rich and robust lives are sustained against the weight of centrifugal odds” (p. 222). However, this wonder and appreciation must be combined with resistance to patchwork responses and instead approach weaknesses in our collective fabric like a knitter would mend a hole—by tearing out rows and reworking them.

[The mayor of Jackson, Mississippi, said as much.](#) The elected leader of a state capitol, with a majority-black population and majority-white representation at the state level, did not reach for a patch. In the midst of a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted black communities, months of infrastructure failures that left residents without clean water, in part the result of record-breaking weather events due to climate change, Mayor Lumumba holds all the threads together in his response and rips out the rows.

This exemplifies the intricate thinking we need now. Mayor Lumumba, like a knitter stewarding a tapestry, unravels the history of stitches that allowed this weakness to endure (e.g. divestment from black communities, structural racism, and extractive capitalism that has neglected critical infrastructures). He lifts up the importance of the thankless work of mutual aid that has “stood in the gap” of this failure.

This work is not fast and destructive. It is urgent and deliberate.

As we sift through the rubble of the chaos chasm, I wonder how we might knit-think together towards a fabric that strengthens us all. As the patches pull apart, how might we unravel the yarn and weave it together again? What does it take to hold the threads long enough that we can rework them in a way that is mutually strengthening and can stand the test of time?

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