



# The becoming of a Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group: Reactive, interactive and intra-active complicated conversations

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(Received: 25 October 2023; accepted: 10 April 2024)

## Abstract

In this article we document the becoming of the Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group of the South African Education Research Association. We outline the SIG's activities since inception and theorise the work of the SIG through thinking with the ideas of scholars. For us theory works not as a noun but as a verb, so we prefer to speak of theorising rather than of theory. We also use writing as a mode of inquiry rather than a mode of representation. Fidelities that sustained the work of the SIG were not because of common histories, cultures, and lived experiences but because of the ethical commitment to engage in an ongoing manner with the worthiness of knowledge—a critical conversation about what is included/excluded in teaching and learning programmes (and why). We end the article by exploring how we might re/imagine the SIG as a relational entity/assemblage, a shift from viewing complicated conversations not as interactions but as intra-actions.

**Keywords:** becoming, complicated conversations, curriculum studies, intra-action, special interest group

## Introduction

The education research community in South Africa was divided during apartheid and different education associations existed, the most prominent general ones being the Education Association of South Africa (whose members were mainly from historically white and Afrikaans universities), and the Kenton Education Association (whose members were mainly from historically white and English universities). Several discipline-related associations (along with many regional ones) existed during apartheid and continue to exist in post-apartheid South Africa, such as the Southern African Comparative and History of Education Society (SACHES), Southern African Association for Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education (SAARMSTE), Environmental Education Association of Southern Africa (EEASA), Association for Mathematics Education of South Africa (AMESA), etc. These four organisations have histories of inclusivity, and divisions that characterise the general education associations were not as conspicuous.

The South African Education Research Association (SAERA) was established in 2013 to overcome the divisions that existed among education research associations and promised to be a forum in which all South African scholars could engage in conversations about research, including curriculum research. In its short history, SAERA has been successful in providing a platform for South African scholars to engage with one another but much still needs to be done to actualise complicated conversations to advance education as a field of study generally and curriculum studies more specifically. A Curriculum Studies Special Interest Group (CSSIG) was established at the SAERA conference in 2014, as one potential space in which to actualise complicated conversations as an impetus to advance the field in South Africa. At the triennial conference of the International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (IAACS) held in Ottawa in 2015, three of the seven scholars who are the core members of the CSSIG envisioned that it would engage in complicated conversations at both a national level (through its activities) and in transnational spaces through IAACS. Put differently, the CSSIG, would, in a sense, be a South African chapter of IAACS. Several

South African scholars have attended IAACS conferences and core members of the CSSIG currently hold the positions of President, South African member of the General Assembly, member of the conference committee, and member of the publications committee. The becoming of the CSSIG is therefore occurring in both national and transnational spaces. We will elaborate on the concept of complicated conversations and outline the activities of the CSSIG later in this article.

Our aim here is to discuss the becoming (the making) of the CSSIG and to theorise its becoming as a relational entity. In doing so, we divide the article into the following main sections: theoretical and methodological orientation; unlikely fidelities (the biographies of the authors/core members of CSSIG); CSSIG and the advancement of the field; and CSSIG as relational entity/assemblage.

## Theoretical/methodological orientation

We do not use a theoretical framework, something that has become ubiquitous in conventional educational inquiry. A theoretical framework is aligned with the normative deductive approach that has its roots in logical positivism. For us theory does not pre-exist scholarly intra-actions<sup>1</sup> but becomes through such intra-actions. We do, of course, engage with the scholarly work of others but when doing so we think with their ideas rather than framing our work in terms of the ideas of others. Theory does not exist externally to scholarly intra-actions. Moreover, we do not distinguish between theorising (our preference to using theory) and methodology and view both theorising and writing as modes of experimentation/inquiry. Barad and Gandorfer (2021) pointed out that theorising is a mode of experimentation that occurs through intra-actions. They explain that “[t]he world theorizes as well as experiments with itself” and that “[t]heorizing is a particular form of intra-acting and as such is part of the world” (Barad and Gandorfer, 2021, p. 15); and “[t]heorizing in its radical openness provides not only possibilities for thinking otherwise, but for thinking thinking otherwise” (p. 17). Briefly, we use theory as part of a verb form rather than as a noun.

The imbrication of theorising and inquiry is also emphasised by Ulmer (2017). She asserts that postqualitative research invites us to think without, to think with, and to think differently. Thinking without is akin to non-representational research whereby notions such as “representation, method, proper names, labels, and perhaps even methodology” (p. 841) are removed or suspended from research processes. When this happens, researchers are free to embark upon imaginative adventures. Thinking with means that researchers think with theories, processes, phenomena, data, etc. Such thinking could open new ways of doing research through creative experiments with humans/non-humans (Le Grange, 2018a). Thinking differently invites alternatives to methodological orthodoxy and conventional ways of knowing.

As already mentioned, we also view writing as a mode of experimentation/inquiry. We do not write to represent but to inquire, to learn. As Richardson (2001, p. 35) so aptly put it, “I write

because I want to find something out. I write to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it.”

## Unlikely fidelities and complicated conversations

In this section of the article, we share our biographies. The disparate histories of the core members of the CISIG suggest that an unlikely group of people are working together. However, our different histories and a complex and ever-changing world (locally and globally) provided fertile ground for complicated conversations to occur. To orient the reader, in the next section, we also discuss Pinar’s (2004) notion of curriculum as complicated conversation and Le Grange’s (2018b) extension of his idea not as the only frame of our work but because it served as the basis for our ongoing theorising of this notion. We begin with a brief biography of each author.

### Jerry<sup>1</sup>

My entry into Curriculum Studies scholarship commenced in the year 2000 when I was recruited to teach on a taught MPhil master’s programme that was offered at centres across Southern Africa. This qualification was offered as far afield as Zimbabwe, Zambia, Namibia, and South Africa. The course stimulated my interest in curriculum work as we dealt with all the main curriculum theorists. The objective of the programme was to induct students into designing and theorising curriculum since they were all teachers. Teaching this programme deepened my interest and understanding of the concept of curriculum. This contributed greatly to my own growth and development. This was followed by quite a few publications in curriculum studies, such as “Teachers’ sense-making and implementation of curriculum policy”, “The Policy-practice dichotomy: Can we straddle the divide?”, “The intended and enacted curriculum: Tracing the trajectory of an enduring problem” and “Transforming the curriculum for the unique challenges faced by South Africa.” As a Black scholar I have always tried to trouble common-sense understandings of the world through my teaching and publications. My involvement in the CISIG evolved historically through meeting at different conferences locally and internationally, notably at a curriculum conference in 2012 in Brazil. This interaction was formalised during 2020 through online meetings when COVID-19 afflicted the world, and our engagements were intellectually stimulating, rich, and congenial.

### Gilles

In 1980 I was in Grade 11, during the period of protracted school boycotts in South Africa. As school students we boycotted normal school activities, demanding a single national education department and for educational resources to be distributed equitably. During the four-month boycott I attended alternative awareness programmes organised by the student representative council. I learned that students have power to change some conditions of teaching and learning and came to understand education to be an important site of struggle. I developed a sensibility that alternatives to apartheid state curriculum and pedagogy were

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1 All names in this section of the article are pseudonyms.

possible. During my initial teacher education studies at the University of Cape Town I read a course entitled “Curriculum Theory and Classroom Practice”, which inducted me into curriculum theory. During this year of study, we also critically discussed what probably was the first formal scholarly exchange on curriculum in the field in South Africa, between Tunmer and Buckland (see Le Grange, 2010; 2014). In the late 1980s, the last years of legal apartheid, as black teachers we engaged in curriculum development processes after formal school hours. We termed this “in-service for teachers by teachers.” Through this work I became interested in curriculum development, participatory research, environmental education, materials development, and teacher professional development. My interest in the field expanded and horizons broadened through academic study, engagements with colleagues in professional organisations, and through writing on matters curriculum. I have come to understand that the lifeblood of Curriculum Studies is the study of self in intra-action with humans (past and present) and the more-than-human world. Years of interest in the field made involvement with the CISIG since inception, a natural process.

### Geo

Although I had not named the field explicitly in my high school days, I was particularly interested in issues of curriculum as active force, especially as it related to the South African apartheid government’s ideological oppression through the school curriculum [in] systematically subjugating colonised peoples by marginalising indigenous languages, culture, and epistemologies. Since my appointment as a junior teacher educator, I began to pursue scholarly inquiry into curriculum with the view to generating social justice activism through curriculum by contesting knowledge canons, pedagogies, and ideologies inherent in the received curriculum. My association with the CSSIG began as a peripheral participant, attending SAERA panel presentations and responding to SIG seminar invitations. COVID-19 and the subsequent hard lock down, found me desperately searching for academic nourishment and stimulation. My inclusion in online social meetings at the time, of core members of the CSSIG, was a powerful space in which I began to participate more actively and engage in deliberations with colleagues on education issues facing the country and society in general at the time. Although the CSSIG comprises individuals with wide-ranging philosophical homes, a common aspiration was the need to advance the field. My particular race, class, and gender activism resonated well with the perspectives of the core members. While we may differ as it relates to intensity and approach, striving towards a just society through activist scholarship is an important tenet of this community. In recent years, as a result of my exposure to the CSSIG, I have begun to embrace the notion of justice beyond a narrow humanist orientation. I am excited by the inspiration that posthumanist thought might offer the field.

### Nelly

The younger of two children, I was born in 1983 into a white family. I remember clearly the introduction of non-white learners into my primary school while my teachers remained white females. Being in a model C government school, I followed the national curriculum underpinned by Christian values. Fresh from high school in 2002 I became part of an

exchange programme with a primary school in England's west midlands. Truth be told, I went to England because I wanted to travel Europe. The hearts of children, their stories and their outlook on life intrigued me so deeply that I enrolled in a BEd programme the next year. Who and what children are in-becoming and what is influencing this (or not), matters. They are not just the by-product of the school system and the obedient servant to capitalist economies post-schooling. Amid a colourful BEd degree, curriculum featured as a political, social, historical, and economical act. The standardised school curriculum, a beacon of hope for post-apartheid South Africa also featured mixed species of critique, dismissal, and even technocratic application. This led to my understanding of curriculum as a dynamic field; with too many faces to call it by one name. Instead of being *something* with defined boundaries, its fluidity attracted me to its entanglement and encouraged me to embrace its generative *meddlesome* nature. To experiment with curriculum studies required imagining its possibilities beyond being an 'object' (*thing*) that can be mastered, or man handled. If *meddlesome*, curriculum studies might stimulate curiosity to imagine the unknown and regard knowing alongside being and doing. I joined the CSSIG because it creates a platform for experimenting with Curriculum Studies in complicated *meddlesome* intra-actions beyond my own institution.

## Sophia

Born in South Africa in 1980, I was classified as a white person. I received an apartheid education in my primary school years (1987–1993) and entered high school in 1994, the same year as the first democratic election. This syllabus, although slightly sanitised, was still mostly based on apartheid's ideologies. I entered a historically white, Afrikaans university in 1999, the same year that I could vote for the first time. Until then, my political awareness was basically non-existent. Experiencing a growing unease with the version of history that was sold to me, I became more critical and, with nowhere to turn, I made libraries my second home. Here I was introduced to critical theory. My political awakenings brought along unease as I realised how one-sided my education was. Pursuing a PhD in Curriculum Studies, I questioned the null curriculum, the fact that my education was geared towards solving *how to* questions, and desired an engagement with *why* questions, i.e. why I was deprived of learning from the rich diversity of South Africa, why I was taught only one version of the (hi)story, etc. Curriculum Studies provided an avenue with which to engage with such questions and stretch the limits of my understanding/s. My appointment at another historically white, Afrikaans university (with a very conservative Christian Nationalist legacy)<sup>2</sup> where my critical thinking was not only qualitatively different, but generally unwelcome because of its strong social constructivist thinking, led me to search for Curriculum Studies mentors. Reaching out to colleagues from other universities coincided with the CSSIG's initiation (I am one of The Ottawa 3) and this group became a vital scholarly lifeline for me. At the time, I also invited another core member who worked with me at the institution to strengthen the development of Curriculum Studies there.

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2 Sophia no longer works at this university.

## Stang

My first encounter with the concept of curriculum was during my school days when I resisted taking history as part of the subject package offered to me in Standard 8 (grade 10 equivalent) despite there being little interest in history among the learners in the school that I attended. It didn't matter to me then since, through resistance, I got the subject selection that I wanted. Fast forward to being a staff member at the university at which I worked in the late 80's, there was a media hype, spurred on by accounts of teachers who graduated from our programme, accusing my university of training student teachers within a critical framework and our faculty leadership scrambled around to appease the media that students were exposed to a range of perspectives, one of which was a critical one. This was at the time when Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was being used as one of the teaching resources for our students. This was the moment when I began to pay attention to what was being taught and why. My first formal exposure to curriculum and curriculum studies was through my initial teacher education qualification (through UNISA) and, being interested in Curriculum Studies, I pursued my BEd Honours degree in Curriculum Studies: Mathematics where I was exposed to critical scholars like Michael Apple and other contemporary scholars who brought different perspectives to curriculum. My real engagement then unfolded when I led the process of conceptualising a new Bachelor of Education degree based on an alternative conception of teacher development. I was one of the three founding members of the CSSIG (the Ottawa 3) who conceptualised it and saw to the emergence, intent, and process of establishing the CISIG. Being inspired by the international curriculum studies conference in Ottawa, Canada, I wanted to be part of creating such a structure in our broader research association in South Africa where Curriculum Studies would become the focus of my scholarship beyond just curriculum development.

## Krish

As a teacher I had many encounters with official structures in education. I always had a critical approach to my work and would describe my practice as one of activism. The most important curriculum encounter was when, as part of the Peninsula Biology Teacher's Forum, we decided to challenge the official syllabus for Biology in secondary schools. The idea was to develop a more relevant curriculum and to sequence topics provided in a more logical manner. This also included developing teaching and learning materials to supplement the textbook as a resource. This was a radical initiative at the time when education departments held a tight rein on syllabus and curriculum matters as part of the apartheid regime's suppression and control. When attempts were made at transformation in education post 1994, I was also part of a team working with subject advisors and other department officials, to restructure the school curriculum for natural sciences in the capacity of a biology teacher. My undergraduate and initial postgraduate studies were in biological sciences and my preservice teacher education was focused on science teaching. I developed and took on a critical stance to curriculum and curriculum development through forays into environmental education, working with material written largely by John Fien and Ian Robottom. Further reading on basic ideas related to critical stance on curriculum, included work by Carr and Kemmis and

the work of Lawrence Stenhouse. My curriculum understandings were developed largely through self-study and work with colleagues in the Environmental Education field. During postgraduate studies and work as an academic in teacher education I engaged with curriculum projects, which included collaborative research-based materials development, linked to teacher education, pre- and in-service. I became involved with the development of the CSSIG at the invitation of Celia Booyse who was keen to start such a body. We exchanged emails and met on the sidelines of conferences together with other academics. Further developments included discussions with some current members of the CSSIG. Formalisation started with regional meetings at universities (SU, NWU, UKZN) and CSSIG meetings at the SAERA conference.

## Curriculum as complicated conversation

In one of the introductory chapters to the *International Handbook of Curriculum Research*, Autio (2014) emphasised the moral dimensions of education and suggested that it is morality that makes education educative. Autio's (2014) reference to moral is not in a moralistic sense but is more aligned with an ethics that involves a commitment to engage in an ongoing manner with the worthiness of knowledge, the worthiness of what is included/excluded in teaching/learning programmes. It is this sense of the moral that informs our "profession's ethics, our commitment to study, and teach as we engage in academic research to understand curriculum" (Pinar, 2004, p. 2) and leads us to understand curriculum as a complicated conversation that occurs among scholars in the field and between scholars and students. It may be the loyalty of CSSIG members to this profession's ethics that explains the unlikely fidelities that were forged.

As a CSSIG we began our work by thinking with William Pinar's concept of "curriculum as complicated conversation." Pinar (2004) found inspiration for his notion from theorisings of the philosophers, Richard Rorty and Michael Oakeshott. The context of Pinar's notion of complicated conversation is the academic field of education in the United States that was under attack by politicians, and this meant that there was a need for scholars of curriculum to maintain their professional dignity by reasserting their commitment to the intellectual life of the field. Le Grange (2018b) pointed out that the "relevance of complicated conversation to South Africa is twofold: first, ... the field remains divided and in its infancy; second, the marriage between the field and the school curriculum has made the field unimaginative." (p. 6) The fragmented state of the field (see Le Grange, 2010, 2014) has inhibited its advancement and the field's preoccupation with present circumstances (school curriculum reform) has resulted in intellectual amnesia about the past (colonialism and its delinquent cousin, apartheid), and there is a lack of imagination vis-à-vis the future of the field (Le Grange, 2018b)

How might we understand the concept of conversation? Aoki (2004) has argued that conversation is not "chitchat," nor is it a simple exchange of information because none of these requires "true human presence" (p. 180). Furthermore, in conversations, language is not the only tool through which thoughts are recoded into words. Curriculum as conversation is



therefore not an exchange of “representational knowledge,” but “a matter of attunement, an auditory rather than visual conception, in which the sound of music . . . being improvised is an apt example” (Pinar, 2004, p. 189). Conversations, therefore, do not conform to predetermined outcomes, but, as in the case of improvisational jazz, produce something new and transform those engaged in the conversation (Le Grange (2018a). For Oakeshott (1959) difference structures and stimulates complicated conversations.

Curriculum becomes a complicated conversation when, as pedagogues, we complicate students’ understandings of the subject they are studying (particularly understandings of postgraduate students working in the field). Pinar (2004, p. 2) suggested that such complicated conversations occur when we do not devise “airtight” arguments but provide spaces for students to find their own voices so that they “construct their own understanding of what it means to teach, to study, to become educated.” Conversations also become complicated when scholars of curriculum engage with their peers (particularly those with different histories, beliefs, and ideas), and listen respectfully to them to interrogate their own understandings of self and of the field. Pinar suggested that complicated conversations are premised on a commitment of scholars of curriculum to engage with their peers, their students and themselves, and that such a commitment is accompanied by “frank and ongoing self-criticism” (p. 9). Le Grange (2018b) pointed out that power relations are always present when humans engage in educational exchanges. He argued that complicated conversations are constructed to lessen hierarchical power relations and their colonising effects. When this *potestas* (negative power) is moderated through self-criticism and respect, the positive power of the *potentia* can flourish and productive curriculum work can be performed in new knowledge spaces. *Potentia* is not a power that is external, hierarchical, or imposed, but is an immanent power that connects to life’s creative forces (see Le Grange, 2018a).

We now turn to a discussion that is comprised of an outline of the CSSIG’s activities coupled with theorisings of these activities as this relates to complicated conversations.

## CSSIG and the advancement of the field

The CSSIG of SAERA,<sup>3</sup> endeavours to harness scholarship in Curriculum Studies, to recognise and promote advancement in inquiry, thinking, and theorising in the discipline through research, collaborative engagements, seminars, conferences, and publications, and to build a formidable group of curriculum scholars in South Africa. We outline some of the CSSIG’s activities over the past eight years.

### Panel presentations at the SAERA conference

The year 2015 was the first time the CSSIG members engaged with one another through panel presentations and this tradition has continued every year. This usually takes the form of a two-hour symposium. Since 2015, the following topics have been addressed.

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3 <https://www.saera.co.za/sigs/curriculum/>

- Curriculum in/and/for policy: Venturing beyond instrumentality (University of the Free State, 2015)
- Intellectual integrity, rigour, and critical illumination: Re-imagining Curriculum Studies scholarship (Stellenbosch University, 2016)
- Decolonising Curriculum in formal education – what, why, how, and for whom? (Nelson Mandela University, 2017)
- Celebrating 50 years of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed (North-West University, 2018)

To widen participation and collaboration with other curriculum scholars, the CSSIG felt the need to expand and grow. So instead of just one panel, three were presented at the 2019 conference hosted by the Durban University of Technology.

- Scoping the curriculum scholarship in South Africa over the last 25 years
- Stuck in the rhetoric of decolonisation: Curriculum Studies in South Africa through the lens of Pinar’s complicated conversations
- Curriculum capture of educational reforms: Accountability to whom and for whom in re-situating the complicated conversations in South Africa

In 2020 there was no conference because of COVID-19. This was followed by an online conference in 2021 and a hybrid conference in 2022. The following topics were addressed:

- A curriculum gaze on the dark times we are currently experiencing globally and in South Africa (University of the Witwatersrand, 2021)
- Transformational social justice agendas: Some curriculum perspectives (University of the Western Cape, 2022)
- Global conflicts (in Ukraine, Yemen, Sahel, Ethiopia, Palestine): Implications for the contemporaneity of Curriculum Studies scholarship (University of the Western Cape, 2022)
- Pre-Conference Workshop: Posthumanism and curriculum inquiry (University of the Western Cape, 2022)
- Troubling the notion of boundaries: Transgressivism in Curriculum Studies scholarship (Rhodes University, 2023)

### Webinars/regional workshops

The intention of the regional workshops and webinars is to organise opportunities for scholars to meet outside of the annual SAERA conference to engage with scholarly discussions and debates on issues related to Curriculum Studies. The focus of these regional workshops and webinars is to explore the range of discourses and debates that are informing the work of Curriculum Studies scholars in South Africa. The outcome of these regional workshops and webinars was to establish a project on scoping the field of Curriculum Studies in South Africa to illuminate the interest in and future directions of Curriculum Studies. It is

our view that baseline scoping could create opportunities to harness interests in and direct future engagement to build a formidable Curriculum Studies scholarship in South Africa.

The following topics have been addressed in these regional workshops.

- In March 2019 a regional workshop was held at Stellenbosch University. This involved two keynotes with topics on Decolonisation in Universities: The Politics of Curriculum (Jonathan Jansen) and Learning to Teach in Post-apartheid South Africa—Student Teachers’ Encounters with Initial Teacher Encounters’ (Yusuf Sayed). This workshop was attended by 18 academics from five universities (CPUT, SU, NWU, UKZN, UWC) and involved active participation. Smaller groups were formed, and these groups were asked to select the dimension(s) they viewed as most important for the field and to say what bigger questions or discourses are informing and framing these.
- In August 2019, a regional workshop was held at North-West University. There was one keynote on the topic, Curriculum Studies and its commitment to activist intellectualism: The case of the decolonial project in South Africa (Suriamurthee Maistry) and a respondent (Lesley Le Grange). The focus of this regional meeting was to explore a range of discourses and debates that are informing the work of Curriculum Studies research in South Africa. This was in continuation of the current intellectual project of the CSSIG to scope the field of Curriculum Studies research in post-apartheid South Africa (1994–2018). The outcome of this meeting was to continue the discussions that were initiated at the first regional workshop (hosted by Stellenbosch University in March 2019) and collaborate on existing scoping research projects.

When COVID-19 inhibited regional workshops from taking place, online webinars were conducted. The following topics were addressed in 2020.

- *Ubuntu-currere*: Rethinking curriculum in South Africa’s decolonial moment (Lesley Le Grange, Mlamuli Hlatshwayo, and Lester Shawa)
- Neoliberalist curriculum in the context of crisis (Suriamurthee Maistry and Zayd Waghid)
- Work-integrated learning for student teachers: A research-led approach during COVID-19 and beyond (Maureen Robinson, Lee Rusznyak, and Carol Bertram)
- (Re)configuring curriculum theorising: Some posthumanist musings (Petro du Preez and Shan Simmonds)

Once COVID-19 restrictions had been lifted enough for travel across provinces, the core members of the CSSIG held regional meetings to discuss book projects. Meetings took place in KwaZulu-Natal in 2021 and in the North West province in 2022; both led to conceptualising a book, *Critical Reflections on Teacher Education in South Africa*, that is forthcoming from Palgrave. In 2023 the regional workshop involved a webinar that brought the Department of Basic Education and academics into conversation on “The revision of the school curriculum and the future of education in South Africa” (Haroon Mohamed, Labby

Ramrathan, Ria de Villiers, and Suriamurthee Maistry). This webinar included a week-long engagement during which the three founding members of the CSSIG (The Ottawa 3, namely Lesley Le Grange, Petro du Preez, and Labby Ramrathan) had engagements related to the upcoming CSSIG activities such as the involvement of it in the International Association for the Advancement of Curriculum Studies (IAACS) 2025 conference. Later, in 2023, prominent South African scholar-activists Na'eem Jeena, Steven Friedman, and Mohamed Shahid Mathee were invited, in an online forum, to provide critical perspectives on what we then referred to as the Palestine-Israel crisis.

### Publications and special issues of the CSSIG

In 2018 the CSSIG sent a call for papers for a special issue in the *Journal of Education* (edited by Labby Ramrathan, Petro du Preez, and Lesley Le Grange). The theme was “Internationalising, indigenising, decolonising and Africanising Curriculum Studies.” In this special issue the editors invited papers that were concerned with advancing the discipline of Curriculum Studies, taking cognisance of the current discourses and debates relating to binaries, contestations, illuminations, and possibilities. Internationalisation, indigenisation, decolonisation, and Africanisation are shaping debates informing the global and local education landscape. Contributions complexified, demystified, and disrupted discourses on grammars of change such as internationalisation, indigenisation, decolonisation, Africanisation, and other related concepts as they relate to Curriculum Studies. Philosophical and empirical works employing a variety of methodological traditions were considered in the focal areas of higher education, technical and vocational education and training, teacher education, and schooling.<sup>4</sup>

In 2020 the CSSIG again sent out a call for papers for a special issue in *Alternation* (edited by Petro du Preez, Labby Ramrathan, and Shan Simmonds). The theme was “On Curriculum Philosophy, Thinking, and Theorising in South African Higher Education Transformation.” The intent of the special issue was to engage critically with various dimensions of curriculum transformation. This important, appropriate, and timely scholarly undertaking with its philosophical and theoretical musings, was framed by the questions: Why is curriculum philosophy, thinking, and theorising in South African higher education transformation pivotal right now? How has curriculum transformation unfolded in diverse higher education institutions? These questions are central to curriculum specialists and their continued commitment to advance the field in South Africa. Articles providing philosophical engagement with higher education curriculum transformation opened this special issue and these were followed by articles that contribute to the thinking and theorising thereof.<sup>5</sup>

The core members of the CSSIG also contributed to a book, *Re-thinking the Humanities Curriculum in the Time of COVID-19*, published by Alternation in 2020. COVID-19 had become a threat to the health and wellbeing of the world's population. Its global pandemic nature had the potential to destabilise systems and processes that have defined human

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4 The issue is available at <https://journals.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/joe/issue/view/48>

5 This special issue is available at: <http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/pages/volume-27-2020/alternation-special-edition-31.aspx>

existence, epistemology, and knowledge up till then. New ways of thinking, new responses to systems, and processes and new boundaries were being formed because of this rapidly spreading pandemic. In responding to the disruption to higher education, the volume sought to address the key question of how institutions have responded to the institutional closures and the protection of integrity of what is being taught, learnt, and assessed across programmes in the Humanities. In response to this key question, a compilation of ten chapters addressing initial insights, problematisations, opportunities, and actions taken by institutions on the Humanities curriculum in the context of COVID-19 formed the volume.<sup>6</sup>

In 2022 the CSSIG sent out a call for papers for a special issue in *Education as Change* (edited by Lesley Le Grange, Suriamurthee Maistry, and Shan Simmonds). The theme was “Re-imagining Curriculum Enquiry/Inquiry in Times of Unprecedented Uncertainty.” The intent of this special issue was to proffer the need for (post)critical responses in times when many crises and uncertainties beg for alternative pathways for curriculum enquiry/inquiry and pedagogy. Contributors interrogated the *condition of uncertainty* as a telling feature of contemporary times by being critical of higher education’s neoliberal constraints. This led to complicated curriculum conversations on decoloniality and critical care work in research supervision. The need for reclaiming Southern voices and indigenous knowledge also featured as a key dimension for school curriculum, especially in relation to sustainability. Philosophical engagements invoked Curriculum Studies in the posthuman condition and considered how critical posthumanism can be used to invigorate some of its core concepts (curriculum-as-lived, curriculum as complicated conversation and *currere*). A posthumanist take that challenged the notion of uncertainty, formed another approach to curriculum studies as open and in becoming alongside ecological understandings of space/time indeterminacy.<sup>7</sup>

In 2023 the SIG sent out a call for papers for a special issue in the *South African Journal of Higher Education* (edited by Petro du Preez, Suriamurthee Maistry, & Shan Simmonds). The theme was “Posthumanist curriculum studies and post-schooling: Contemplations from the South”. The theme was spurred by the need for curriculum inquiry to unveil alternative pathways to challenge traditional thinking and doing. We live in a posthuman condition, with issues such as ecological destruction, the ever-present economic crises, ongoing poverty, and social injustice, and this calls for curriculum studies that is attuned to a post-anthropocentric world. Although posthumanism is not new, its presence is yet to be felt in education and Curriculum Studies in South Africa. This special issue invoked posthumanist Curriculum Studies as the experimentation with the affective, ethological, ethico-onto-epistemological delinking, untaming or rewilding pedagogy and care for reimagining post-schooling.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to these special issues, the SIG engaged collaboratively in a series of publications. See Table 1.

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6 This book is available at: <http://alternation.ukzn.ac.za/Files/books/series-01/01/12-AASBS-01-Full-Volume.pdf>

7 This special issue is available at: <https://unisapressjournals.co.za/index.php/EAC/issue/view/432>

8 This special issue is available at: <https://www.journals.ac.za/sajhe/issue/view/322>

**Table 1**

Publications co-produced by CSSIG members

Authors and date of publication	Title of Publication
Du Preez, P., Ramrathan, L. & Le Grange, L. 2018.	On the hegemony of international knowledge in Tier 1 high-impact literature: A meta-study of citation in Indilinga (2008–2017). <i>Journal of Education</i> , 73, 4–19. <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i73a01">http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i73a01</a>
Le Grange, L., Du Preez, P., Ramrathan, L. & Blignaut, S. 2020.	Decolonising the university curriculum or decolonial washing? <i>Journal of Education</i> , 80, 25–48. <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i80a02">http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2520-9868/i80a02</a>
Maistry, S., Blignaut, S., Du Preez, P., Le Grange, L., Ramrathan, L. & Simmonds, S. 2021.	Towards a counter-narrative: Why dissent/agonism <sup>9</sup> might have appeal in a neoliberal higher education space? <i>Alternation</i> , 28(2), 1–27.
Blignaut, S., Pheiffer, G., Le Grange, L., Maistry, S., Ramrathan, L., Simmonds, S. & Visser, A. 2021.	Engendering a sense of belonging to support student well-being during COVID-19: A focus on sustainable development goals 3 & 4. <i>Sustainability</i> , 13, 12944. <a href="https://doi:10.3390/su132312944">https://doi:10.3390/su132312944</a>
Le Grange, L., Simmonds, S., Maistry, S., Blignaut, S. & Ramrathan, L. 2022.	Assessment and social justice: Invigorating lines of articulation and lines of flight. <i>Journal of Education</i> , 87, 21–44. <a href="https://dx.doi.org/10/17159/2520-9868/i87a02">https://dx.doi.org/10/17159/2520-9868/i87a02</a>
Le Grange, L., Simmonds, S., Maistry, S., Visser, A. & Ramrathan, L. 2022.	Education in a ‘neoliberalised’ online teaching and learning space: Towards an affirmative ethics. <i>Transformation in Higher Education</i> , 7(0), a205. <a href="https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v7i0.205">https://doi.org/10.4102/the.v7i0.205</a>
Du Preez, P., Le Grange, L., Maistry, S. & Simmonds, S. 2022.	Sustainability and higher education: Towards an affirmative ethics. <i>Perspectives in Education</i> , 40(3), 118–131. <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v40.i3.8">http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v40.i3.8</a>
Du Preez, P., Le Grange, L., & Simmonds, S. 2022.	Re/thinking curriculum inquiry in the posthuman condition: A critical posthumanist stance. <i>Education as Change</i> , 26, 1–26. <a href="https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/11460">https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/11460</a>
Blignaut, S., Pheiffer, G., Le Grange, L., Maistry, S., Ramrathan, L., Simmonds, S. & Visser, A. 2022.	Belonging, wellbeing and stress with COVID-19 with online learning during COVID-19. <i>South African Journal of Higher Education</i> , 36(6), 169–191. <a href="https://doi.org/10.20853/36-6-5525">https://doi.org/10.20853/36-6-5525</a>
Simmonds, S., Blignaut, S., Du Preez, P., Le Grange, L., Maistry, S., Ramrathan, L. & Reddy, C. 2023.	Continuing professional development in the context of a neoliberal higher education space. In C. Nalidi & R. Shoba (Eds.). <i>Academic staff development: Disruptions, complexities, change (Envisioning new futures)</i> . Stellenbosch: AfricanSunMedia. Forthcoming.

Authors and date of publication	Title of Publication
Le Grange, L. & Du Preez, P. 2023.	Curriculum Studies in the posthuman condition/posthuman curriculum (studies). <i>South African Journal of Higher Education</i> , 37(5), 60–77. <a href="https://dx.doi.org/10.20853/37-5-5985">https://dx.doi.org/10.20853/37-5-5985</a>
Maistry, S., Sabelis, I. & Simmonds, S. 2023.	Invoking posthumanist vistas: A diffractive gaze on curriculum practices and potential. <i>South African Journal of Higher Education</i> , 37(5), 78–99. <a href="https://dx.doi.org/10.20853/37-5-5988">https://dx.doi.org/10.20853/37-5-5988</a>

Jansen (2019, p. 81) proffers that there is a poverty of “vibrant, original and creative knowledge” in South Africa leading to a “dearth of inventive curriculum theory.” We believe that the CSSIG is taking strides to dismantle Jansen’s view. We are intent on making CSSIG’s activities and publications draw on topics that are contested and emerging to break new ground while opening alternative pathways for many different possibilities. This vision is akin to the perspective held by the CSSIG, namely that among us we also have differing views on Curriculum Studies, and it is through our complicated conversations that we approach the field as radiant and always becoming. Through these initiatives, the CSSIG is hopeful that the field of Curriculum Studies is being advanced.

The CSSIG is a fledgling configuration. As can be expected of such assemblages, it is usually a core group of founder members who formulate and drive the entity’s emerging agenda. During the formative years, while the CSIG remained active as evidenced by the various activities documented above, it was particularly during the hard lockdown in South Africa in 2020, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, that fortuitously galvanised the membership. As with all academics in the normal pre-COVID era, we were subject to the university schizophrenia, a negative consequence of a neoliberal performance-driven higher education sector in South Africa, a condition that makes demands on our mind-bodies, and limits and constrains the intellectual enterprise in particular ways. We hail from geographically dispersed and diverse university campuses across different provinces, with CSSIG events and deliberations taking place at in-person face-to-face sessions at different times during the academic year. With the onset of COVID-19, the subsequent hard lockdown and mandatory social distancing, virtual modes of communication that came into vogue (Zoom and Teams), acted as a decisive gelling agent that lubricated both the scholarly and social dimensions of the CSSIG.

The conversations among the CSSIG members were attuned to the notion of complicatedness in each of our activities and encounters, whether it was during the seminar presentations, the webinars, our on-going discussions, and engagements (on Zoom platform) or in our writing processes, during which we listened, respectfully, interrogated conceptions, and reviewed our own understandings of key concepts, theoretical gazes, and expansions of the field. Institutional cultural differences, personal exposure and experiences, and the collaborative work of the CSSIG has opened new insights into and beyond the common gaze of

Curriculum Studies as can be seen through the topics to which we, as a group, chose to allow our vulnerabilities to be exposed and sometimes re/constituted.

As described above, the core membership of the CSSIG is comprised of educational researchers with varying ideological orientations and theoretical homes. As such, Pinar's concept of complicated conversation had less of an influence on some members than on others. The core members did not mechanically begin each encounter with a reminder that the notion of complicated conversation should frame our deliberations. In fact, the criticality that everyone brought to the space made for a powerful agonistic milieu—a productive-argumentative ethos. This disposition was powerful since it catalysed the conception of a scholarly article for a special issue of a journal that had as its subtext, education for social cohesion. Our CSSIG article led the argument for why dissent and agonism are imperative in a neoliberal higher education sector. Engaging difference then, became a powerful way of thinking without (theory), with (theory) and producing theory. When disparate biographies (as depicted above) are forced to converge, it materialises new lines of creative flight such as contrapuntal compositional writing (fugue) with which we successfully experimented as a methodological innovation in the first publication listed in the Table above. While South Africa's distorted and painful (apartheid) history has shaped our identities in particular ways, we view our personal lived experience as a fertile oasis for engaging distortions and blind spots sustained by apartheid's ideological machinery. We experimented with memory work through collaborative ethnographic accounts as we contemplated the invested identity work, we perform. In an attempt to develop a responsive culture, the CSSIG has also experimented, as it were, with the concept of contemporaneity at a philosophical and practical level. We hosted a discussion panel at the 2022 SAERA Conference, in which we deliberated on what this might mean for the work of the CSSIG. Two members (Petro du Preez and Suriamurthee Maistry) are currently in the process of constructing a call for papers for the journal, *African Perspectives of Research in Teaching and Learning*, to pick up further on these discussions. A call for papers is currently under construction. The ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinians that has recently escalated as well as other recent seismic ecological events, suggest that such occurrences warrant Curriculum Studies as a field of scholarship that continues to remain alert to contemporary phenomena. CSSIG seminars and conference workshops are set up as dialogic spaces in which we publicly self-challenge, interrogate, and allow travelling thoughts and ideas to disrupt and discomfit incestuous consensus-seeking. To this end the CSSIG actively invites divergent thought by creating opportunities for thinking with young and emerging scholars in seminars and workshop sessions. Information regarding this is communicated via a CSSIG membership mailing list and a WhatsApp group as well as more broadly to all SAERA members through emails from the association's secretary.

While the CSSIG members consist of predominantly qualitative researchers, this did not preclude us from experimenting beyond qualitative research by venturing into quantitative research during the COVID-19 pandemic. This transpired when one of its members involved the CSSIG with a network of international scholars doing quantitative research at Hertfordshire University in the United Kingdom. Working with bigger data sets was an interesting challenge and it served us well to explore belonging and wellbeing of university



students during the pandemic using this research approach. This led to two scholarly articles of which one appeared in an international journal and the other in a special issue on belonging in a local/national journal. The findings of this research were also presented with Swedish academics during South Africa Sweden University Forum (SASUF) engagements. Not only did we experiment with different genres of research but one of the lasting consequences of the online deliberations was experimenting with collaborative writing which was new to most of us. The online deliberations in the CSSIG, as alluded to above, were not always cordial and harmonious but were characterised by robust conversations. These challenged our differing philosophical and curricular stances respectfully and revealed our divergent backgrounds and philosophical persuasions.

The activities conducted by CSSIG members over the period documented in this paper included collaborative processes between and among members towards varying ends. These included writing a book chapter, the collective authorship of journal articles, the collective presentations at conferences as panel members, and so on. The activities were conducted by way of email communications, online meetings, and an in-person writing retreat that was coupled with a conference presentation. The topics chosen for writing and presentations were products of collective decision-making and deliberation. Throughout the processes, resources were shared, and critical inputs provided to all involved. Much of the initial activities of this group commenced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

All CSSIG members are staff affiliated with higher education institutions in South Africa who operate in a nested environment. The activities and operations of the CSSIG members exhibit many features of complex adaptive systems, being dynamic and emergent, and sometimes unpredictable non-linear organisations operating in unpredictable and changing external environments. Members communicated with each other by way of informal and formal networks. The activities in which members participated were agreed on through informal deliberations with everyone having equal status in the decision-making and planning.

More recently, the CSSIG has engaged with the contestations of identity politics by challenging the separation of material from discursive (binary, dichotomous thinking), that is the hallmark of Western Humanism, an ontological, epistemological, and methodological fountain, if you like, that has nourished our scholarly development in our formative academic years—a canon that makes dis/identification intellectually arduous. To nuance the notion of complicated conversation, we contemplate embroiled, entangled conversations beyond those with our human counterparts that discompose and agitate anew. In the latter half of 2022, there was a rising interest in posthumanism among the group since some members had already been immersed in this philosophy for some time and were actively publishing on it.

The narrative unfolding here is that of a CSSIG that was not static/moribund but constantly on the move in its quest for new ideas to advance the field of Curriculum Studies. The CSSIG as an assemblage has changed us as much as we, constituting the members, have changed the CSSIG. We can never go back to our old selves since we have undergone change (in our continuing becoming) through our intra-actions that nourished and enriched us in this journey

of mutual exploration (as amply demonstrated by the variegated activities listed above). Given these recent developments of the CSSIG, in the last section of the paper, we reimagine the SIG as a relational entity situated in the posthuman condition.

## CSSIG as relational entity: Reaction, interaction, and intra-action

Our experimentation of theorising and writing different modes of knowing, being, thinking, doing, and becoming, is and was driven by our common intention to engage in complicated conversations to advance Curriculum Studies as a field of inquiry. The unlikely fidelities that brought us together, ignited and continue/d to fuel our complicated conversations has taken on different modes/forms/manifestations over time and in different spaces (as has been discussed hitherto). At times, our complicated conversations were more reactive in so far as we responded to immediate events and phenomena of the *thick now*,<sup>10</sup> whereas at other times our conversations were marked by interactive engagement. To illustrate this difference, and to demonstrate how we became ever more inclined towards intra-action, we go on to distinguish between these.

In responding to problematic manifestations of leadership because of capitalist accelerationism in the neoliberal university space, Du Preez and Le Grange (forthcoming), have theorised three overlapping modes of leadership: reactive; interactive; and intra-active. In discussing these overlapping modes, they argue that certain spacetime-matter configurations prompt reactive modes of responses, whereas others might be more interactive or intra-active. Complicated conversations, too, can be reactive, interactive, and intra-active. *Intra-action*, a neologism first used by Donna Haraway (2016) and theorised by Barad (2007) as a key component to *agential realism*, derives from Latin, and means within, interior, and during. Intra-action is radically different from traditional interaction because interaction assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction. Interaction is thus, on the one hand, about acting “between, towards and among each other as separate entities” (Murriss & Bozalek, 2022, p. 70). Interactive complicated conversations therefore rely on separate individuals with agency who can engage in conversations about (often predetermined) topics and with aims in mind. Intra-action, on the other hand, supposes “an ontological shift from individual to relational existence” (Murriss & Bozalek, 2022, p. 70). In such understanding, distinct agencies or phenomena do not precede, but rather emerge through intra-action (Barad, 2007). Intra-active complicated conversations are thus based on relational existence where individuals understand their becoming in relation to others in non-deterministic ways. The relational nature of intra-active complicated conversations is thus not to serve only one’s own interest, but to converse collectively in the spirit of respect and, most importantly, authentic, and frank self-criticism. Drawing on Barad’s (2007) reconfiguration

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10 *Thick now* relates to the present time and space we inhabit (and that inhabits us)—marked by threats and bursting with potential for newness—that comprises multiple connections, entanglements of past, present, and future. See Haraway (2016) on the ‘thick present’.

of intra-action, we argue that intra-active complicated conversations should be slow,<sup>11</sup> immanent, and affirmative.<sup>12</sup>

We do not propose that all complicated conversations should be intra-active, but the CSSIG conversations were always manifested in this way because certain circumstances prompted reactive responses (such as was the case during the COVID-19 pandemic). At other times, interactive complicated conversations were more useful because it left room for setting and achieving predetermined goals through complicated conversations. What intra-active complicated conversations cut open, are the limits of reactive and interactive conversations. This is so because intra-action requires the development of a posthuman sensibility that cultivates critical awareness in (crisis) circumstances that sometimes necessitates reactive and interactive responses.

The CSSIG as a relational entity was changing (onto-epistemological morphing), as intricate, complex intra-actions with a technologically mediated communication assemblage began to (un)fold. We embraced the many, more-than-human technological artefacts such as the internet, our home office confines, the devices that enable communication, the Eskom power grid that dis/en/abled our existences, the more-than-human agentic matter that induced life into what would otherwise have been a state of relative dormancy. Thus, overcoming distance and time while experimenting with a new becoming with/through technology was an onto-epistemological recognition of our becoming with/in a (dynamic) world.

What started out as a social yearning for (human) connection in a time of extreme separation of humans from one another, inspired a recognition of the reality of our intra-action, our always already entanglements with more-than-human actants (Murriss, 2017), including microscopic organisms such as the COVID virus and (digital) technology. The CSSIG as relational entity thus depended on necessary entanglements of all individuals, each, powerful and agentic (in the posthuman sense) in their own right. As Murriss (2017, p. 106) has reminded us, a “posthuman relational ontology changes how we see the more-than-human; from inert, passive things . . . to objects we have no access to . . . and then again to assemblages with agency, which requires an un/learning of agency.”

The CSSIG assemblage, or the CSSIG as relational entity, electricity-internet-scholars-friends-computers-images-text-wine-sport-humour, and ever growing always and already there actants. “(A)gency is *not attributable* to any one thing, but rather *bound* to an assemblage” (Jackson & Mazzei, 2016, p. 94, emphases in original). It develops a creative potency that manifests in Deleuzian lines of flight, spawned by intra-actions, with us humans

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11 Intra-active conversations are slow and are an ethical choice that support the Deep Work Hypothesis that states, “The ability to perform deep work is becoming increasingly rare at exactly the same time it is becoming increasingly valuable in our economy. As a consequence, the few who cultivate this skill, and then make it the core of their working life, will thrive” (Newport, 2016, p. 14). Du Preez and Du Toit (2022, p. 118) state that “... the fast-paced, rapidly changing societal context requires an ethical commitment from us scholars to engage in deep scholarly work if we wish to remain at the forefront of new advancements in our disciplines and beyond”.

12 Intra-active conversations do not start from or settle for any a priori, transcendental, and/or secular ethical principles, normative constructs, and/or moralistic arguments. They imply an immanent and affirmative ethics that is life-affirming, non-normative and in-becoming, creative, and truly free (Verhoef & Du Preez, 2020, p. 161).

(co)constituted as *of* the world as opposed to existing *in* it (Murriss, 2017). Inherent in intra-actions is the notion of affirmation, of attending to difference produced by agential cuts, but always in a respectful fashion, theorising and being produced by theory (St. Pierre, 2016). Advancing scholarship in the field of Curriculum Studies becomes one of collective response-ability, as we seek to rhizomatise the assemblage by seeking connections with other assemblages – other SIGS, policy makers, teachers, and researchers as we embrace the notion of a relational entity that is indeterminate and always in becoming.

## Parting thoughts

The becoming of the CSSIG through complicated conversations between unlikely fidelities, is geared towards self-criticism and respect, coupled with the shared intention to advance Curriculum Studies as a field of inquiry. This intention is one of enacting one's ability to respond, in the thick now, to matters related to Curriculum Studies. We remain acutely aware of the liberal undertones of the notion of complicated conversations, and its potential for becoming yet another canon that simply masks conservative scholarship that is superficially troubling while it reinforces the status quo. As a SIG that is becoming, we realise that we are yet to test the limits of complication as deep unsettling of our often-conflicting ideological dispositions. We recognise the frailty of developing converging consensus on issues that threaten to disrupt our coagulation. What has become patently clear is that pushing the limits of complicated conversations is discomfiting yet powerful as we constantly revisit our ethical obligations.

In this article, core members of the CSSIG of SAERA documented the group's becoming. We have theorised the CSSIG's activities since its inception and have pointed to the dynamic, slow, non-deterministic becoming of the group. As we have done before, we have used this space to write (as a mode of inquiry) about our continual becoming, instead of merely using writing to represent our work. As became evident, fidelities that sustained the work of the CSSIG were not because of common histories, cultures and lived experiences, but because of the ethical commitment to engage in an ongoing manner with the worthiness of knowledge, a critical conversation about what is included/excluded in teaching and learning programmes, and why. Towards the end, we explored how we might re/imagine the CSSIG as a relational entity, one in which complicated conversations differ from being reactive, interactive, and intra-active. We have broken from traditional frames to invigorate pathways for the becoming of a CSSIG in the thick now of the posthuman condition.

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