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Editorial

Emergent Literacies, Cartographies and Ecologies for World-Making

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A new era has not just dawned but firmly taken root—an era that has gradually emerged and spilled through what were once mere cracks, now widened into ruptures (Mahanty et al., 2023). The rise of authoritarianism worldwide signals deep shifts in power and centralization. In our last editorial, we commented:

> Democracies throughout the world are caught in a polarizing grip—echoed in rhetoric that swings between moving backward ("Again") and maintaining the status quo (“Still”). When choice is presented as "either-or," as it is throughout much of mainstream discourse, hardly any room is left for the "both-and" approaches necessary to embrace the complexities of our interconnected realities. (Koenig et al., 2024a, p. 2)

Six months on, the either-or discourse has taken on an increasingly vitriolic and even violent tone. While transformation often emerges from the margins, not all transformations inspire hope or inclusion. We borrow the metaphor of interstitial spaces—"space located in the shadow of conventional … form” (Steele & Keys, 2015, p. 112)—to explore how these shifts, spilling through the cracks of

established norms, both expand the boundaries of what is possible and expose unsettling and destructive forces. These "in-between" spaces, once confined and silent, have now overflowed into public discourse, reshaping what is considered speakable and permissible. This reshaping is transformative (Somer & McCoy, 2019) not as steady, incremental progression toward greater societal acceptance and awareness of difference, but as a series of ruptures that challenge our assumptions of an unfolding enlightenment. Instead of moving smoothly toward inclusion, these shifts reveal the fragility of progress and the contested nature of what constitutes transformation itself.

As we sit down to write this editorial, none of us are untouched by these currents. The ruptures writ large in our social and political systems show up in our own co-being and doing, with each of us situated in distinct personal and geo-political contexts. We find ourselves occupying different positions as we navigate a central tension: how to speak hard truths to power while resisting the pull toward further polarization. For some of us, naming the emergent authoritarian, and exclusionary agendas feels essential to preserving democratic and inclusive futures. Yet, this does not preclude an equally pressing commitment to speaking in ways that open spaces for connection, dialogue, and the possibility of bridging differences, emphasized by others. Rather than opposing forces, these are entangled dynamics that we each carry within us, that surface in our lived experiences, our contexts, and the immediate demands of this work. Thus, as an editorial team, we are called to enter into frank, and at times uncomfortable, exchanges, and to listen across our own differences—in a sense, to turn toward a crisis of our own as a fractal of the context in which we do the work of awareness-based systems change. Together, we wrestle with the profound question of how to help bring into reality the systems transformations we know are necessary and what this requires of us now. This includes navigating the inner and collective forces of love, power, and justice that underpin such transformations (Kahane, 2023)—not to achieve a singular future but to co-create plural, just, and sustainable futures in which all can stand on equal footing.

This editorial emerges from our shared attempt to hold these tensions together—not as polarities that divide us but as forces that coexist within and between us, shaping our co-being, co-doing, and co-becoming. The question, then, is not whether to prioritize one position over the other, but how to navigate these tensions internally and collectively in ways that serve systems transformation. This work requires us to hold space for both grief over what has been lost and hope for what might yet emerge (Thaler, 2024). It demands that we engage both with the darkness and the light inherent in transformation (Tourish, 2013).

As we engage in collective sense-making of our current moment we find our different lenses afford different 'sense,' revealing how crises unfold not as abrupt, but rather cumulative, processes that reflect broader systemic currents. In offering a political ecology lens Mahanty et al. (2023) situates rupture within broader systemic processes. Far from being abrupt, they argue, rupture accumulates over time through the interplay of material drivers, slow violence,

and punctuated moments of crisis. This cumulative nature creates conditions of heightened insecurity and precarity that are deeply affective, unevenly distributed, and embedded within existing power configurations.

Yet, these crises rarely announce themselves as dramatic breaks. Instead, they spill through and into the interstitial, slowly seeping into the ordinariness of daily life. Their effects accumulate unnoticed at first, becoming part of routines, relationships, and attachments. This steady encroachment normalizes the extraordinary until it becomes ordinary—a process that Lauren Berlant's reflection on crisis captures with profound insight:

> A traumatic event is simply an event that has the capacity to induce trauma. My claim is that most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or 'crisis ordinariness' and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated. Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming... The extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure. In the impasse induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown. Even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least. (Berlant, 2011, p. 10)

Berlant's notion of "crisis ordinariness" invites us to see these transformations as the amplification of dynamics already embedded in the fabric of daily life. It asks us to hold the tension between what is overwhelming and what endures, to trace how hope and despair intertwine, and to sit with the complexities of a moment that defies easy resolution. This perspective doesn't resolve the contradictions we face but illuminates the work of navigating them—a process that requires both patience and courage.

Yet, this analysis is incomplete without also reflecting inward. This involves critically examining how the identity-driven progressive discourse of our own contexts has, at times, contributed to losing connection with the lived realities of many. This gap between discourse and lived reality demands careful attention—our personal attention and that of the broader field of academia—as it has not only fostered alienation but also created fertile ground for conflict to be steered and manipulated. As Léger (2023) observes, "neoliberal centrists have sought to hegemonize identity politics, allowing it to further divide the left while at the same time doing nothing to reverse course on the upward redistribution of wealth" (p. 1). Much like the *proxy wars* of the Cold War, identity debates have become *proxy conflicts* in today's cultural sphere obscuring and diverting attention from the structural inequalities so much in need of our attention.

This entanglement of cultural and class wars is further exacerbated by forces that distort democratic processes and erode collective agency (Somer & McCoy, 2019). As Scharmer (2024) notes, mass polarization prevents critical conversations about shared concerns and fractures the very foundations of democratic functioning. "Societies that lose those foundations of democratic functioning," he warns, "are either disintegrating or heading toward the edge of a cliff" (para 9). Two forces in particular, he argues, are to be held accountable for this development: "dark money"—used invisibly to shape political agendas—and "dark tech"—also used invisibly to manipulate citizens' viewpoints and voting behaviors. Together, they distort not only what is politically possible but also how citizens engage with one another, further entrenching divides and resulting in a "democracy whose soil is being degraded" (para 11).

This alignment of cultural polarization and economic concentration reveals a profound tension: Conflicts over identity often overshadow critical conversations about wealth inequality, gender inequities, and global disparities, leaving the structural inequalities perpetuated by economic systems unchallenged. Joan Tronto (2023) frames this dynamic within the concept of "Wealth Care," a deeply undemocratic framework embedding the belief that "what democratic citizens should be most concerned to do is to advocate their interests" (p. 23). This framework operates within a landscape where cultural and economic dynamics disproportionately benefit the wealthiest, as evidenced by the fact that the bottom 50% of the world's population in terms of income owns just 2% of global wealth, while the top 10% owns 76% (Chancel et al., 2022, p. 10). As Léger (2023) observes: "the various forms of identitarianism, left, right and centre, are today working to the advantage of the wealthiest ten and one percent of society" (p. 2).

German sociologists Carolin Amlinger and Oliver Nachtwey (2022) offer further insight into how these dynamics manifest, linking the rise of libertarian freedom to the experiences of precarity and exclusion described in Nachtwey's concept of a relegated society (Abstiegsgesellschaft) (2023), in which increasing numbers of individuals experience a loss of status and security, fueling a sense of disillusionment with collective structures. Libertarian freedom, as Amlinger and Nachtwey (2022) argue, emerges in response to this precarity, viewing social agreements as "external restrictions that limit one's own self-realization in an illegitimate way" (p. 12; translated by the authors). In this context, the emphasis on personal autonomy over collective welfare becomes a mechanism for navigating structural disempowerment, even as it exacerbates tensions where boundaries of public and private interests collide.

As Gaffikin (2023) suggests, this climate of division reflects a deliberate effort to keep discourse off balance. The narrative of a deeply polarized society often oversimplifies a more nuanced reality. Mau et al. (2023), in their analysis of societal trigger points, argue that many conflicts dominating public discourse arise not from irreconcilable divides but from specific issues that ignite disproportionate contention. These trigger points distort the perception of societal consensus and obscure opportunities to address deeper structural

inequities through collective effort. For example, in a recent report, the United Nations Development Program found 69% of respondents in a global survey reported a willingness to reduce their income to contribute to climate change mitigation—arguably the most 'collective' of wicked problems—yet only 43% believe that others feel the same way (UN Human Development Report 2023/2024a, p. 6). Moreover, 68% of those surveyed simultaneously reported feeling little influence over their government's decisions and half reported not feeling in control of their own lives (UN Human Development Report, 2023/2024b, p. 110). This lack of perceived influence undermines collective efforts, explaining why altruistic sentiment often fails to translate into tangible action focused on the common good.

To use an American term, the situation is a "hot mess." Within this context, one can easily perceive the process of creating this and other editorials, like much sense-making about our current moment, to be a chronicling of collective collapse, a notion reflected in the emerging field of collapsology (Servigne & Stevens, 2020). This field often engages with conversations centered on navigating the trajectory of collapse—conversations that, while vital for understanding our current predicament, carry the risk of fostering apathy and closing down pathways to collective action and change. Yet, as Ian Fazey noted in the *In Dialogue* feature in the previous issue of JASC, "we know that to create something new, we have to allow things to die first. So, at what level does one simply accept that we are just in the collapse of the old system?" (Koenig et al., 2024b, p. 240).

If we accept this proposition, that we are bearing witness to the collapse of the old system or, as Vanessa Andreotti frames it, "hospicing modernity" (Machado de Oliveira, 2021), we return to the question of what is ours to do in this time. When 50% of people around the globe feel they have no or limited control over their lives and even less over our public spaces, where is our agency? As we noted in our previous editorial, in our own work, it is through "co-developing our own practices and rituals" (Koenig et al., 2024a, p. 1) that we cultivate the alternative interstitial spaces that allow us to explore this question—different and third discursive and material practices that exist in-between the restrictive either-or deadlock (Hussenius et al., 2016, p. 13). Within this effort, the space we try to create and the spaces that inspire us are those where sustained acts of community-building challenge existing contexts, loosen rigid boundaries, and nurture sites of interchange that shape possible futures.

Co-curating a journal issue, and then writing an editorial that traces the thematic connections running through each contribution, is always an act of sense- making. As a new journal representing an emerging field, each editorial is simultaneously a reflection on our own journey with the field of Awareness-Based Systems Change. What strikes us in this reflection is the sense of being on new territory, where our methods and frames haven't yet quite caught up. We find ourselves in the dual task of questioning current ways of understanding, being, and doing in the world while, at the same time, through these

contributions and within ourselves, something else is opening up—not so much new as an exploration of what has been present in our experience but largely unexpressed.

This reflection brought us to a core question: how do we navigate the space between the tangible and intangible? And how do we do this while integrating both "the 'enlightened' and 'shadow' sides of our culture, at both the social and individual levels" (Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015, p. 559)? The challenge was to explore how the articles in this issue speak to the space between these dualities and their potential to support *becoming* within the context of shadow in this new era.

In this exploration, three central themes emerged, guiding us in our navigation of world-making: emergent literacies, cartographies, and ecologies. Each is distinct yet intertwined, contributing uniquely to the fabric of awareness-based transformation. Their relationship is neither sequential nor linear but rather braided together in dialogue, much like systemic transformation work where conversations and interactions spill into each other, forming an interconnected whole, showing that systemic intervention flourishes when varied knowledge practices intertwine (Rajagopalan & Midgley, 2015).

Emergent literacies explore ways of knowing that go beyond the visible and known, inviting us into a relational accountability that is ontological, ethical, and epistemological (Barad, 2007). One dimension of emergent literacies involves fostering a deeper awareness of the emotional and psychological dimensions of engaging with our own knowing and doing. As Bendell (2021) note, "People who do not experience any distress, despite being exposed to the information on the situation, might be experiencing something psychopathological," (p.36) thus emphasizing the necessity of acknowledging and engaging with difficult emotions as part of a genuine literacy practice that embraces relational accountability.

A second dimension emphasizes the embodied, relational, and co-emergent nature of knowing. Erin Manning asserts that:

> Thought is not first in the mind. It is in the bodying... where it is not the mind that speaks, what emerges is not a subject-centered narrative, but an account of how thought moves, how it moves us and how it moves the world. A practice of collective learning is about the movement of thought, engaging thought at the immanent limit where it is still fully in the act. (Manning, 2019, p. 47)

This approach to literacy highlights that learning and knowledge are collective, embodied acts that extend beyond individual cognition to encompass shared practices. It calls for a reorientation toward interconnectedness and collective responsibility, shifting the focus from static representations of knowledge to dynamic processes of understanding that move through and with us, implicating us as both carriers and movers of thought (Manning, 2021).

Emergent cartographies challenge us to rethink the act of mapping itself—not just as a means of representing space but as a practice that can reveal or obscure the potential for new ways of being. Indigenous educator, artist, and activist Lilly Manycolors (2022) conceives of forms of mappings as mechanisms of worldbuilding rooted in interrelationality and politics of care. For her, "Worldbuilding is defined as creating a tangible space where species are braided together. I believe people are capable of disidentifying with imperial-colonial mapping practices to worldbuild + curate reality otherwise" (Manycolors, 2022, para 7). Such mapping practices and resulting cartographies emphasize relationality and collective participation, resisting colonial and extractive approaches to understanding space. Bayo Akomolafe captures the essence of such forms of un/settling:

> To be in a place is to keep making maps to locate oneself there again and again, and being at home is always an exercise in cartography. So how do we find ourselves in modernity? We keep lists, we name things, we lose them, we filter out information, we adopt positions, we promise, we renege, we try out things. These exercises make 'place' an ongoing socio-material dynamic.
>
> This suggests that to be displaced is not so much to be chased away from one's land (indeed, displacement can happen without being chased away), as it is to be interrupted by the imposition of a finished product, a complete map. This is the stuff of the colonial: the denial of place and the insertion of the frozen. The toxic gift of arrival. (Bayo Akomolafe, 2020, para 1–2)

Unlike conventional mapping that freezes landscapes, positionality, and imposes order, emergent cartographies reveal the lived, shifting nature of place and location, capturing how spaces can become sites of negotiation and resistance.

Finally, *emergent ecologies* ask us to consider the interconnectedness of life systems, encouraging us to embrace difference and interdependence as foundational elements of our collective world-making. Peter Block's (2008) argument that "only when we are connected and care for the well-being of the whole that a civil and democratic society is created" (p. 9) reinforces this view, highlighting that ecologies are relational spaces that nurture collective world-making. His perspective emphasizes that authentic transformation arises from embracing interconnectedness, fostering environments where true collaboration and mutual care can thrive. As Escobar (2024) writes, "we have to return to this basis in biology, the biological basis of coexistence they refer to as 'love,' which today we could perhaps call 'care'" (p. 131). This emphasis on care as a fundamental practice aligns with Haraway's concept of *sympoiesis*, or "making-with," which posits that no entity exists in isolation but is always in a state of co-creation (Haraway, 2016). Such ecologies activate a "relational field at its point of inflection, creating a new composition that is capable of keeping difference alive" (Manning, 2016, p. 234). This invites us to reconsider the human-centric

narratives that dominate our understanding of ecosystems and to foster practices that sustain diversity, nurturing spaces for shared survival and healing.

Together, these three dimensions—literacies, cartographies, and ecologies—offer a layered approach to world-making that resists the simplicity of linear narratives and embraces the complexity of entangled relationships. They remind us that genuine transformation is not an individual endeavor but a collective one, flourishing within the interstitial, relational spaces of care, negotiation, and shared accountability. These spaces hold both the visible and invisible, bringing awareness to what often lies beneath or in the shadow of conventional discourse. By avoiding rigid frameworks or singular interpretations, this integrated approach cultivates coherence while maintaining space for deep heterogeneity—essential for meaningful systems change.

Contributions to This Issue

Each contribution in this issue—in its own way—cuts through the layered approach of literacies, cartographies, and ecologies, confronting today's discourses with tough questions but also with potential solutions rooted in deep and ethical practice. They show that true transformation requires letting real experiences challenge and evolve our concepts, ensuring they stay relevant.

This issue commences and features four *Peer-Reviewed Articles*. First, Judith Enriquez's article, *Becoming-Story: A Decolonised Desire of a Colonised 'I',* explores literacy, identity, and decoloniality through the lens of personal disruption and systemic critique. Set against the backdrop of a literacy project aligned with Sustainable Development Goals and shaped by the dominance of the English language, Enriquez recounts how the Covid-19 pandemic fractured her research and academic self. This rupture serves as an opening to reimagine literacies beyond developmentalism, dominant narratives, and textual confines. Through the concept of *becoming-story*, Enriquez traces how literacy, voice, and self are interwoven with ways of knowing that are shaped by both colonial legacies and personal entanglements with land, language, and community. She critiques the reductionist paradigms of solutionism and "best practices" that permeate both research and global development, offering instead a vision of literacy as embodied, relational, and ecological. Drawing from Indigenous epistemologies and grounded in experiences of listening to the land and the stories it holds, the article weaves together a narrative of literacy events as life-based and life-giving, offering a poetic methodology of walking, listening, and memory work. By slowing down and attending to relational accountability, Enriquez enacts a decolonial approach that invites readers to rethink literacies as processes of collective becoming.

In a series of articles to delineate Radical Participatory and Relational Design, Victor Udoewa's third article published in JASC *Studies in Radical Biocracy: Flows from Relational Being to Relational, Autonomous Decision-Making,* reimagines decision-making as a systemic practice grounded in relational ways of being. Critiquing conventional models rooted in individualism

and competition, Udoewa introduces *Radical Biocracy*, a relational approach to transform decision-making into a dynamic process, embedded in mutual interdependence and ecological principles. At its core, Radical Biocracy relies on three key ecological "nutrients": relationality, emergence-conducive principles, and relational autonomy. These elements create conditions where decision-making becomes an emergent phenomenon, bypassing the need for hierarchical deliberation. Drawing on biological metaphors, such as the self-healing properties of fractured bones, Udoewa illustrates how interconnected processes can generate solutions that are symbiotic and unplanned, yet deeply responsive to the needs of the system, pointing to new cartographies for understanding decision-making as a shared, relational act. Grounded in a project to co-design an equitable, racially just Parent-Teacher Association, his article invites a rethinking of autonomy as something deeply relational, where individual actions are interwoven with collective intentions.

Bianca Briciu's article, *Absencing as Attentional Violence and Its Impact on Well-Being: Loss of Resonance in Advanced Capitalism,* critically examines how advanced capitalism shapes and undermines well-being. Drawing on two concepts from Scharmer's work, Briciu explores how absencing as attentional violence—the systemic de-sensing and disengagement from the interconnected nature of self, others, and the world—manifests in advanced capitalist societies' framing of well-being as individual self-optimization. In her article she works to unpack the pervasive internalization of capitalist values, linking self-worth to productivity and reducing the complexity of well-being to a consumerist model. This reductionism fosters what Briciu terms inner, relational, and social absencing: a lack of awareness of one's wholeness, the commodification of relationships, and a dominant social logic of alienation and disconnection. In the main part of her article, she traces how even transformative practices geared towards enhancing well-being such as mindfulness, workplace spirituality, and Theory U, are at risk of being co-opted by the very capitalist logic they seek to resist. Through an engagement with attentional violence, the article challenges to resist the logics of advanced capitalism and to nurture practices that restore resonance and wholeness in personal, relational, and social contexts.

The last peer-reviewed article of this issue by Ricardo Dutra Gonçalves and Lisa Grocott's *Awareness-Based Design: Bringing Design to Social Presencing Theater* is a seminal contribution introducing *Awareness-Based Design (ABD)* as a living curriculum for engaging with the intangible dimensions of human experience—thoughts, emotions, felt senses, and sensations—through relational and co-creative processes. Drawing on case studies from India and Chile, the authors offer rich accounts of how ABD prompts—ranging from visualizations to sensory tools—enable participants to access and articulate deeply personal and relational experiences. These prompts serve to illuminate the non-verbal, pre-reflective layers of experience, fostering transformative shifts in perception and action. By introducing the interconnected literacies of *making visible, making space, making aware, and making sense,* the authors exemplify how design can make the ephemeral tangible, and explore how inner awareness can and needs to

be connected to outer transformation. In so doing, they expand the possibilities of design to include not just the creation of objects or systems but the cultivation of relational and generative capacities within the social field. This article serves as a prelude to the upcoming *Special Issue on Social Presencing Theater (May 2025),* offering readers a first deep dive into the potential of combining social arts (and design) and embodied awareness.

This issue features our fourth book review, and the second by Norma Romm, who explores José-Rodrigo Córdoba-Pachón's 2024 publication Ritual and Systems Thinking: Managing an Initial Encounter. Once again, Romm provides an account of her intimate engagement with the work, founded in relationship with its author and drawing from her own vast experience with systems thinking and systems change. She draws out the core through-lines and questions raised by Córdoba-Pachón in his extensive exploration of the role of ritual to heighten awareness of "life forces bigger than ourselves" and their role in systems change. In doing so, Romm concludes, Córdoba-Pachón "invites us too to embark on such a journey, partly through engaging with his deliberations, but also creatively extending them" (Romm, 2024 p.129).

This issue's *In the Making* and *Discussant Commentary* bring to the fore the issue of evaluation in awareness-based systems change—a key aspect of the work that has not yet been broached in JASC. In their paper *Generative Evaluation: Learning With and For Living Systems,* Malika Virah-Sawmy, Christina Tewes-Gradl, and Pierre Golbach share their early work exploring the potential for evaluation itself to be a generative force. Central to their approach is their conceptualization of the settings in which they work as living systems that, when held organically with warmth and space for emergence, can engage in the "daring, complex, and exploratory interventions" (Virah-Sawmy et al., 2024 p. 132) needed for transformation. Inspired by Michael Quinn Patton's Developmental Evaluation, they describe a hybrid evaluation-intervention approach to evaluation that brings together stakeholders of an initiative or collaboration to re-connect, re-fresh purpose, and re-view design, and they illustrate this approach with three distinct case studies. It is our great fortune in this issue to have Michael Quinn Patton himself as the Discussant for this exploratory work. He locates the work within the proliferation of evaluation approaches, highlighting that the articulation of these distinctions is in fact an important development as the relatively new field of formal and systemic evaluation evolves. Rooted in the notion of project accountability, and a command-and-control approach, evaluation has evolved in step with recognition of the ongoing, complex, dynamic, and generative process of program and systems change. For Patton, as we seek to create more sustainable and equitable futures through programs that reflect this recognition, aligning evaluation methodology with program purpose is particularly appropriate and relevant. It is here that he locates and sees the potential contribution of Generative Evaluation.

In this issue's *Innovations in Praxis*, Janine Saponara gives a rich account of what is involved in creating environments and building containers for authentic

citizen participation. She uses the Rethink DF 2030 project as her field for exploration. The project engaged stakeholders from 33 cities in the Federal District of Brazil as they co-developed a Strategic Public Policy Plan. The process involved 46 facilitators from over 5 Brazilian states in the co-design and co-facilitation of a 12-month on-line process, using Theory U as framing methodology, supported by other transformative methods and approaches. The narrative reveals the quality of conscious and creative artistry needed to build containers at different levels of scale to hold the level of complexity and tensions inherent in collaborative governance, as diverse groups seek to co-shape inclusive, transformative pathways. In this piece, Saponara identifies and unpacks three essential dimensions of their own transformation system that helped them evolve as individuals and as active contributors to the containers they created: *connection*, *coherence* and *amplification*.

This issue's *In Dialogue* makes visible what it means to be and to become awareness-based systems change through the very process of intervention itself. In conversation with Associate Editor Megan Seneque, Teo Lordache, Sharon Munyaka, and Liz Alperin Solms explore what it meant for them to be a container for systems transformation in their work of co-leading an in-person UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) Leadership Lab in Liberia. They reveal their journey of navigating the interstitial spaces, not only within and amongst themselves as 'co-facilitators' in all their diversity, but also in the complex context of Liberia, a country which they had never previously visited. In many ways their transformation journey is an embodiment of the key question we have explored in this editorial: "how do we navigate the space between the tangible and intangible? And how do we do this while integrating both "the 'enlightened' and 'shadow' sides of our culture, at both the social and individual levels?" They provide a living example of what it means to create new narratives of possibility (personal and collective) in a context of crisis and with a history of conflict. In the process of creating a container of love and care, which held diversity at multiple levels, they reveal the emergent literacies, cartographies, and ecologies required for world-making in times of rupture and profound transition.

This issue began with the acknowledgment of a new era—an era of ruptures spilling through the cracks of the structures that once seemed to contain and hold together. These cracks have widened into gaps that are not easily bridged. The rise of authoritarianism, the intensification of inequality, and the fracturing of collective agency have left many feeling adrift, unsure of where to stand or how to move forward. Yet, as much as these ruptures reflect a breaking apart, they can also become "open moments" (Mahanty et al., 2023, p. 187), where both risks and opportunities open up—spaces where the difficult work of wading through uncertainty, rather than rushing to patch the cracks, becomes possible.

To wade in this water is to feel its depth and its cold, to sit with the discomfort of not knowing how or if we will reach the other side. It is also to take responsibility—not in the sense of control or mastery, but in response-ability (Barad, 2007): the capacity to engage with care and integrity in the messy,

relational work of transformation. This involves more than naming the external forces that perpetuate inequality and exclusion; it requires us to examine, with humility and honesty, the frameworks and narratives we ourselves employ. This has been our own process as a team writing this editorial in a moment in time that feels fractured and fractious—within, between and around us. We hope our effort to walk the talk of awareness-based systems change and hold ourselves accountable to the relational work we call for in the world is reflected in the editorial itself.

Writing this editorial has actually been such a process for us as an editorial team given we have not been united about our perception of the current moment or what is needed now. At times our work together has been deeply emotional; at other times it has been fraught with our own shortcomings, misperceptions and contradictions. In navigating these pitfalls, we have tried to walk the talk of awareness-based systems change. This meant holding ourselves accountable to the relational dynamics we call for in the world, challenging the dualisms that pervade not just society but also our own ways of thinking, and finding ways to bring our own personal and emotional engagement with the content into a commentary that could otherwise remain safely hidden in third-person analysis.

Addendum: Milestones and Transitions

As this issue closes, we are also reminded on two significant developments on JASC's maturation journey, which mark both an ending and an opening—emblematic of the interplay of continuity and change that the journal tries to embody.

The first is a moment of recognition: JASC is now listed in the *Directory of Open Access Journals* (DOAJ) and has been awarded the *DOAJ Seal*. This honor, bestowed on only about 10% of the journals in the directory, signifies adherence to best practices in open-access publishing. For Ph.D. candidates, this listing makes it easier to include their work in JASC, and for international grant proposals, it serves as a mark of excellence.

The second moment is a wholehearted thank you and farewell. Kelvy Bird, who has been an integral and founding member of our journal and production team, is stepping away from her role. Kelvy's care-full attention to design and layout has shaped the journal's aesthetic identity—an attention to the spaces between, the gaps otherwise easily missed. Her foundational contributions over the past four years have ensured that the offerings within JASC are not just meaningful but receivable. Whether locating artists' pieces or providing her own, Kelvy has brought visual coherence to our shared work, offering a sense-making that is just as vital as the words themselves. Her legacy will remain imprinted in the DNA of this journal, and we are deeply grateful for her artistry and herself as a person—Kelvy you will be dearly missed. Fittingly this issue's artwork, bringing beauty and meaning into the margins and spaces of our collective work, is by Kelvy herself.

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Peer Review Article

Becoming-Story:

A Decolonised Desire of a Colonised 'I'

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Abstract
The pandemic disrupted a literacy project fully subjected to the discourse of community development, dominated by the English language. The disruption created an encounter with the potentiality of a different cartography—a new way of mapping literacies through reading the world and self, particularly as a colonised academic researcher engaged with decolonial theory. This article explores how concepts of the "I"—both as the individual and the modern subject—along with the notions of "voice" and "literacy," shape and condition ways of knowing. It gestures towards a decolonial approach to literacy—framed as "becoming story"—involving processes of becoming-imperceptible, becoming-minor-language, and becoming-land. The work serves as an invitation to be companion and kin to a different telling of stories in qualitative research.

Keywords
community, literacy, decoloniality, storytelling, Old Man Coyote

Becoming-Story: A Decolonial Desire of a Colonized 'I'

The pandemic disrupted a literacy project fully subjected to the discourse of community development, dominated by the English language. This disruption led to an encounter with a potentiality of a different cartography—a new way of mapping literacies through reading the world and self, particularly as a colonised academic researcher engaged with decolonial theory. This article explores how concepts of the "I"—both as the individual and the modern subject—along with the notions of "voice" and "literacy," shape and condition ways of knowing. It gestures towards a decolonial approach to literacy—framed as "becoming story"—involving processes of becoming-imperceptible, becoming-minor-language, and becoming-land. The work serves as an invitation to be companion and kin to a different telling of stories in qualitative research.

Borrowed Story with a Borrowed Tongue

I came across *The Coyote's Story: Searching for the Bone Needle* from Jo-anne Archibald et al. (2019). I was gifted the story as a companion to help me attune to what had happened in a literacy project I had helped facilitate. The story created a space for me to think about research differently. I later describe the project as an 'I-script'—designed with all my research acumen and claimed academic experience—and then as a story, where 'I-literate' means little and *becoming-illiterate* matters more when I find I belong to a 'we' of more than human encounters and possibilities of literacy itself. First, the story from Archibald et al. (2019):

> Old Man Coyote (OMC) decided to go hunting for deer to replenish his food supplies. He packed his bag with his hunting and other gear. After a long, unsuccessful day of walking up hills and down valleys and through thick forest, with no deer in sight, he decided to set up camp for the night by starting a fire for his meal. After supper, he sat by the cozy warm fire and rubbed his tired feet from the long day's walk. He took his favourite moccasins out of his bag and noticed there was a hole in the toe of one of them. He looked for his special bone needle to mend the moccasin but couldn't feel it in the bag.
>
> Old Man Coyote started to crawl on his hands and knees around the fire, which was blazing by this time, to see if he could see or feel the needle. He went around and around the fire many times. Just then Owl landed next to OMC because he had watched OMC go round and round the fire. He asked OMC what he was looking for. Old Man Coyote told Owl his problem.
>
> Owl said that he would help his friend look for the bone needle. After he made one swoop around the area of the fire, he told Old Man Coyote that he didn't see the needle. Owl said that if it were around the fire, then he would have spotted it. He then asked

> OMC where he last used the needle. Old Man Coyote said that he used it quite far away, in the northern direction, to mend his jacket. Owl then asked OMC why he kept going round and round the campfire when the needle clearly was not there. Old Man Coyote replied, "Well, it's easier to look for the needle here because the fire gives off such good light, and I can see better here. (adapted slightly, Archibald, 2008, as cited in Archibald et al., 2019, pp. 2–3)

When I first read this story in Archibald et al. (2019), it spoke to me in the same way it spoke to Archibald in the early 1990's. She reflected on Old Man Coyote's circling the fire as a metaphor for the types of quantitative and qualitative research that we apply *on or about* others, often based solely on what we are accustomed to or what we know, without necessarily asking if our actions serve others with respect and without harm (Archibald et al., 2019). Like her, I thought the logic of Old Man Coyote's actions made sense to a colonized mind, an 'enlightened' and literate mind according to Western standards of reading and writing, most specifically in the English language.

I was schooled in a 'borrowed' language, English. Its words inhabit my mind more easily and naturally than Tagalog, the language of the country where I was born. My colonized mind demands clarity and rigor, illuminated and certain in its seeking and seeing. Yet the 'literate search' is the culmination of this mind's efforts to find meaning through its enlightened ways of seeing. My mind has been educated to search in the light, where I can apply my literate ways of seeking and looking. Going round and round the fire was a familiar mode of research enchantment, shaped by the hard-wired frameworks of qualitative and quantitative methodologies that researchers like me are trained in within the modern system of academia. We insist on their rigorous applications, even when evidence suggests they are inadequate, inappropriate, or even unethical when taken to interact directly with life experiences outside the Western logic of approved ethics.

The story of Old Man Coyote is an invitation to do things differently—to move into the dark and leave the warmth and light of Enlightenment, of the fire. It is an invitation to engage with what may emerge through decolonizing my research approach, with the help of stories. My academic life, with a doctorate, has detached me from the rich teachings that come from the land, forests, mountains, Indigenous plants, families, and communities. Unbeknownst to me, a literacy project in the country of my birth would be my undoing – my unbecoming as an academic researcher in the literate, PhD-qualified sense. In short, not as I have been 'educated,' and definitely not as I came to produce knowledge and became an academic researcher. I was invited to search in the dark and look beyond my literate or enlightened mind.

David Whyte's words about our species, shared in a recorded podcast interview (Simon, 2013) and again in an audiobook (Whyte, 2008) I listened to, have occupied my mind and possibly inhabited my body. He said the one thing he

has learned about humans is our great capacity to refuse to be ourselves, and choose to do so with wide ranging possibilities. We demand progress and certainty (light) while the world itself seems more uncertain (dark) and in ruins. The colonized mind attempts to 'repair' the future with 'what works,' focusing on reliable outcomes and guaranteed answers. This 'best practice' approach, championed by the most literate scientists and scholars of the world, mirrors how we approach research inquiry—with ready-made answers based on the same logic that brought us to a state of disrepair in the first place. We have toolkits, models and frameworks for almost everything. We see the world as a problem to be solved.

This mindset—for our planet and for research—is worrying and reductive. We cannot use the same tools, logic, or solutions that got us where we are—and yet this is the tendency, the default programming of a collective consciousness enthralled by the Enlightenment. We circle the light when we need to move in the dark. The invitation of this work is not what I had in mind, has been gifted me: the opportunity to explore deeply the call for decoloniality and to ground my work on the planet and not in a theoretical framework. The intentions are, first and foremost, personal: To decolonize my own voice and agency in this research, and to leave the warmth and light of the fire in order to gesture toward a decolonial approach. To explore a call for decoloniality, grounded in my experience of working on the planet, not through a theoretical framework.

Part of the invitation of this work is to explore without the clarity of concepts as sedimented in the minds and works of scholars and theorists. This is not an unwillingness to give credit where credit is due, nor an avoidance strategy, but it is a commitment to do the 'shadow wok'—to stay awhile in the less discernible, undefined—and to allow concepts to exhale another possibility of meaning, making, and becoming. That concepts themselves could be or have and do have the potentiality of *becoming-story*.

There is an Old Man Coyote in all of us. We seem unable to stop going round in circles when it comes to learning theories, learning outcomes, research methods, tools and methodologies that are not beneficial to us or to those we teach. We continue to use them because they are well known, well cited, and what we have always relied on or proven to work (Smith, 2012).

The invitation then of this work is, first and foremost personal: to decolonize my own voice and agency in this research, and to leave the warmth and light of the fire in order to gesture towards a decolonial approach. My teachers on this journey are not academic scholars; they are artists (storytellers, documentary artist, writer, publishers), 'illiterate' parents, and their children. They are considered illiterate based on how we construct education or what it means to be educated or literate. The decolonial desire is, therefore, to live *along* the understanding that not everything is known, knowable or should be made literate—that becoming is dependent on more knowledge, more evidence, and better analyses.

> What if the 'righting of wrongs' requires some wronging of perceived rights, like: displacing ourselves from the center of the world; interrupting our desires to look, feel and 'do' good; exposing the source and connections between our fears, desires, and denials; letting go of our fantasies of certainty, comfort, security, and control; recognizing and affirming (rather than disavowing) that we are already "entangled, vulnerable, open, non-full, more than and less than" ourselves (Moten, 2014); and reaching the edge of our knowing and being - and jumping with our eyes closed. (Andreotti et al., 2015, pp. 36–37)

There are both new and old encounters in the creative assembly that led to the making of this article. Below, I briefly describe the *literate* methodology—conditioned through Western constructs—that I initially planned to implement with a remote farming community in Southern Philippines. I then proceed to explore the invitation to move toward the dark, as suggested by Old Man Coyote's story above, by loosening the rigidity of my literate mind and following the unfolding of many (un)becomings that, first of all, displaced me from the center of my own literacy project in the Philippines. Something else happened: I was unable to travel due to Covid-19 restrictions. I found myself out of the way of the project as it became a community-driven initiative. My own colonized 'I' confronted the attachments to the education enterprise and the making of academic research—particularly the entrenched ways literacy and community development have been constituted. For instance, our attachment to literacy and its development, since the invention of schooling, tends to promote it as an unquestionable good and worthy goal of education. We have become so attached to its perceived benefits that we tend to ignore or overlook its costs.

I re-encounter David Greenwood, formerly Gruenewald, and his invitation to ask the question: *How to be here?* This is a question he explores by citing the works of Tim Lilburn (1999, 2017), whom I have yet to encounter. It is the invitation of *becoming-story*: an awareness of the inner rhythms of living systems or enlivenment. The question *how-to* is asked—not necessarily with the expectation of an immediate answer, but to shape the mapping and the map-making that arise through its questioning. *How-to-be* decenters 'I' from being an individual, a bounded subject, or body. *How to be here*—in a Deleuzian sense—invites detachment from fixed points of view and attunement to that which moves or propels us to continue with the vitalistic energy generated from living or becoming—not by human agency, but by the life force of existence, actions, and relations. *To be here* invites an awareness that shifts the understanding of voice away from an intentional, free subject acting in the world with will. It is an inquiry that loosens my attachments to certain things through a *re-turn*—a going back and a re-looking anew (Enriquez, 2023).

Going into the Dark

In 2018, I had a well-crafted script for my community-based literacy project in the Philippines. I had a ready-made research plan and ethical approval. In my mind, I was responding to the SDG 2030 (UN, 2015) call for quality education and gender equality. I promised to adhere to participatory approaches such as appreciative inquiry and asset-based community development, valuing collective action, shared values, cultural assets, participation, empowerment, and people-oriented facilitation. My planned methodology was community mapping, a term that refers to both a process and a product. I was committed to mapping literacies within the community using narrative inquiry-based methods, such as storytelling and story writing. These methods are considered well-suited to capturing and unearthing the cultural and literacy assets of a dynamic, ever-changing community, with socio-political-historical legacies and contemporary resources.

The project received ethical approval from my university's research ethics committee (reference number 21/EDN/010) on April 6, 2021. To implement the planned study design, I was scheduled to fly to the Philippines in April 2021. However, this plan was thwarted by the UK Prime Minister's announcement on March 8, 2021, that the country under the stay-at-home restrictions would only allow international travel that were deemed essential. My research funding had to be spent by the end of July. To meet this deadline, the project had to be carried out without me. I made arrangements for Rey and MJ, my Philippine partners, to travel to the community without me, while I would conduct the study at a distance. Rey, MJ, and members of the community took on various tasks to carry out the project in my physical absence.

One of the main tasks of the project was to build a space for books and to conduct storytelling and story-writing workshops to facilitate the mapping of literacies within the community. After a few consultations and meetings with community leaders, the location of the *Sari-Sari* (which means 'variety' in Tagalog) Education (SSED) hub was chosen and agreed upon. Instead of placing it within the school grounds, as originally suggested, it was decided that the hub should be owned and managed by the community, which is governed by the local education agency. Many storytelling events and book borrowings took place that I did not witness. I saw video recordings of some children telling stories in the local Hiligaynon language. Storytelling and story-writing workshops were led by Rey, and field notes where written and translated into Tagalog by MJ. It happened without the colonized 'I,' and this absence was a 'going into the dark' that allowed other things to emerge.

A community-based literacy program took place without my physical presence. However, I was involved in every development, discussion, and decision along the way. It took Rey and MJ two months to deliver what we had discussed and agreed upon, with the community's participation and support. I heard the stories, watched recordings of activities, and viewed numerous photographs taken by my partners and community members on the ground. Field notes and

interviews were transcribed and translated to Tagalog when relevant for me, and these were delivered as part of the project data.

How do I begin to attend to the data I did not directly collect or create? How do I re-tell stories I did not hear with my own ears? How do I bear witness to what happened at a distance and in my absence?

The Mountain of My (Un)becoming

The journey back to the mountain required not just data gathering but simply a gathering – a taking part and taking time to develop relationships and strive for a reciprocal, beneficial outcome for the children and families in the community. The invitation that came to me through Old Man Coyote's story and the works of many scholars was to decolonize myself and let go of my "bone needle"—the foundations of what I thought I knew. This invitation was compelling. I was a willing "subject," though I did not know how to traverse the darkness of my own absence in a project that was so dear to me.

I lost my "bone needle" 20 years ago, though I did not know that I was losing it. The first time I visited a mountain in Southern Philippines, I was on a different island. I encountered Indigenous people whose ways of knowing—through walking the mountain ridges and reading tree lines and treetops—were far more intricate and sophisticated than the GPS device I held in my hands, which I used to collect datapoints for mapping watersheds. I quickly realized that the value of my undergraduate degree, my deep engagement with philosophy, theory, and computing, had little consequence in such a place—one so fully enlivened by the elemental and by walking the land. I thought to myself, *they do not need me*. But a voice inside me clearly spoke, *I need them*. I did not know what this meant, but my response was simple: *I shall return.*

Return to the Mountain

That promise of a return was fulfilled a year later, when travel became possible. After the project had already commenced without me, I was finally able to visit my project partners in another mountain community. My partners provided me with data to analyze and work with as an academic researcher. I had a second chance to find and care for my "bone needle."

I was fortunate to have read Archibald et al.'s (2019) retelling of Old Man Coyote's story (quoted above) before this experience. I was also deeply inspired by reading Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013) and Rebecca Solnit's *The Faraway Nearby* (2013). The invitation I felt then—and feel now—is to stop becoming an academic coroner, rendering lifeways as dead matter ready for analytical dissection. I recall the words of Clyde Woods (2002):

> Have we become academic coroners? Have the tools of theory, method, instruction, and social responsibility become so rusted that they can only be used for autopsies? Does our research in any

> way reflect the experiences, viewpoints, and needs of the residents of … communities? (p. 63)

These words are like shadow markings on my academic sensibility, challenging and haunting me to venture into the dark and admit that the 'enlightened 'research methodologies I have been accustomed to may not be spacious enough to carry the community's stories or support my own process of becoming decolonized. This article is my attempt to gesture toward the dark. In contrast to the dream of the Enlightenment or modernity, which seeks to render everything explainable, predictable, and controllable, the 'logic' of *becoming-story* gives priority and credibility to the unknowable and values the inaudible and unsettled.

There I was, on another mountain, visiting a remote farming community 20 years 20 years after my first visit. I had not realized the promise of returning I made in my twenties would happen within the first-ever Sari-Sari Education (SSED) learning hub, funded by my institution and built by community members. What an homage it was—though I did not know this until I was actually sitting on the bamboo floor and invited to speak by Rey. It was the final day of my visit.

Inside the SSED hub, with children seated on chairs and the bamboo floor, I was invited to speak to young faces staring at me wide-eyed—somehow both terrified and curious about what I might offer. I had nothing concrete to give them. My hands were empty, but my heart was filled with a sense of 'return 'to the mountain I had promised to revisit one day, twenty years ago, before I knew I would become a Doctor of Philosophy or an academic researcher, just before I lost my "bone needle."

I told those wide-eyed faces my first mountain story, which came to me in that moment as I searched for words to express my awe and gratitude for what they have gifted me—not with words, but with the literal fruits of the land. I thanked them for offering me plastic bags full of fruit, gifts from so-and-so's parent(s) or household. It was their way of saying *'Salamat po '*(meaning 'Thank you 'in Tagalog) for the SSED, for the books. To be gifted with the fruits of the mountain was quite special—how my life, our lives, are sustained by the labor and death of many other beings. I am composed and kept alive by many stories becoming inside me.

I did, and still do, experience the 'call of the mountain 'and its stories of land, its people, and my own—though our lives have seemingly untraceable lineage of descent and circumstance.

What is my "bone-needle," seemingly lost and hopefully found? This question, posed by two reviewers of this article, is deeply unsettling. I welcome its invitation, even as I resist the implication of naming a sense of the multitude of things I have lost or do not simply have the words to write or speak. I respond tentatively and partially. My "bone-needle" is an inner urge, from my gut, to live

out the spirit within and to attune to *Mabuhay* (meaning 'be alive 'in Tagalog) by weaving an attunement to all beings.

I began writing this article far away from those faces and the dark mountain that has given me both homage and a homecoming—a return to my land, language, and community. I welcome its call to become other-than, and, in some ways to (un)become academic by decentering my ego, tools, and methods, and being present to receive the gifts of the land and reconnect with a community in the spirit of becoming-kin. In making this utterance, I understand beyond words that my role—and my appreciative response—is not to *analyse* the community's stories.

Where, then, does one begin with a more-than analysis of stories? I am relieved to know that decoloniality does not mean a total rejection of all theories of research or Western knowledge. I could not possibly reject my own constitution, or my becoming academic in Westernized institutions, which have shaped my life. However, I cannot approach decoloniality without changing basic assumptions about self, voice, and literacy itself. These are concepts I must open up to scrutiny and invite into a space of new possibility, of coming together to mean and do differently.

I take guidance from the Deleuzian sense of a *concept* (Colebrook, 2002) as a creative power, not a means to assign labels to a world or reality pre-arranged by methods, tools, what can become data, or what counts as literacy.

To enliven dead concepts—and to reconceptualize beyond what is already known or assumed—is the task of *how to be here* in the dark, a place teeming with uncharted possibilities for decolonizing one's mind (Greenwood, 2019). The following sections, or subheadings, are not a matter of certainty but a gesturing toward the possibility of decoloniality, more particularly toward *becoming-story*.

Becoming-Imperceptible

Each species exists as an assemblage, that is, through various modes and in relation to other beings. Metamorphosis of form—translation—is fundamental to establishing and sustaining existence. Humans, in this sense, are reciprocally composed with non-humans. Instead of perceiving an image or representation set against or within the world, we recognize that we are not the origin of perceptions, but rather one possible perception among many others, in many other perceptual worlds. In this refinement of perception, I wish to approach becoming-story by drawing attention to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming-imperceptible (Colebrook, 2002).

Becoming-imperceptible is the "opening of ourselves to the life that passes through us, rather than objectifying that life in advance through the systems of … [what is called in this article literate and illiterate/non-literate]" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 132). It is the power to let go of perception. Instead of being the one who perceives, imperceptibility invites us to become one with the differential flows of life.

In *becoming-story*, *becoming-imperceptible* means no longer acting as the author or separate plot-maker within the perceived world, but instead becoming different with—and through—what is perceived. *Becoming-story* does not mean become "like" a story or being an autobiography. It is a becoming *along* (Ingold, 2011) the lines of becoming-land, becoming-language, becoming-animal, among other becomings-other-than-the-self. It is the process of wayfaring, as Ingold (2011) would put it, not just *in* the world, but *along* what is alive and going on.

Social distancing, travel restrictions, face masks, and negative Covid-19 test results reorganized the "field site" or "place of study" for my research, wherein I experienced *becoming-imperceptible*. In the words of Rebecca Solnit (2013), I experienced *becoming-imperceptible* through embracing the "faraway nearby":

> From faraway you see the pattern, the connections, and the thing as a whole, see all the islands and the routes between them. (p. 170)
>
> To perceive that 'everything travels. (p. 71)
>
> Stories migrate; meanings migrate; everything metamorphoses. (p. 172)

Every life form, animate or inanimate, has its own power to become. Becoming-imperceptible occurs before sense-making splits and creates difference among species-specific perceptual worlds. If there are a multitude of modes of existence or perception, then there are a variety of ways to articulate becoming. I may have not spoken or written in Tagalog throughout my academic life, yet its utterances, songs, and stories are not faraway. It is the language of my breath among others. It is the language that invites awareness of alterity in my colonized body.

In becoming-imperceptible, decolonizing "I" involves an attunement to voices other than one's own and loosens attachment to human speech or articulation. In this context, human language is not going to be helpful—it cuts across a whole range of phenomena without sufficient attention to the specific practices that bring species into existence. It is not the case that certain entities are literally unseen or unheard or integrally unseeable or inaudible; there are active (alive) processes at play that render some entities imperceptible in every sense.

Voice Without a Mouth

Voice without a mouth is a refusal of the primacy of spoken or written words emanating from an author. Instead, it emerges from the entanglement, of becoming-story in this case. The concept of *voice without a mouth* or '*voice without organs'* (Mazzei, 2013) had my full attention. Voice beyond words and a "human" beyond the individual subject, or in Deleuzian sense, toward the "inhuman," became a live question for me, a purposeful invitation for my project in the Philippines. Decolonizing the 'I' involves attuning to voices other than one's own and loosening attachment to human speech or articulation. The

reframing of voice away from 'I 'has already been undertaken by Elizabeth St. Pierre (2008), Alecia Youngblood Jackson (2003) and in an edited book by Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2009).

In the prevailing scientific view, the inanimate does not speak. Truffle fungi are not articulate. They are automatons, following robotic routines to maximize survival. Again, this perspective is rooted in a humanist view, which holds that speaking is only for those with mouths or vocabulary. But the community I spent time with is not just its inhabitants, its people; the land speaks. I find resonance here in Merlin Sheldrake's (2020) question:

> Might we be able to expand some of our concepts, such that speaking might not always require a mouth, hearing might not always require ears, and interpreting might not always require a nervous system? Are we able to do these without smothering other life forms with prejudice and innuendo? (p. 46)

I carry this question with an affirmative response and slice it open for further consideration in how literacy has been constructed as something for those who can read and write. What if we expand this definition to include illiteracy or other human expressions of life experiences? To cultivate literacy beyond language or speech in research, a mountain robbed of its trees and a community that relies on its corn produce provided a fertile space for such imagining. I was well placed, out of the way and in the "dark," when this project—one I led—did not include me being at the center of its happenings.

Language is the voice of the land itself. Based on the growing field of biosemiotics, it has become clear that signification or sign-making is not restricted to human sign use but encompasses all living systems including cells, fungi, plants, and animals—all of which are sign producers and interpreters. Biosemiotics has cleared the way for hearing non-humans. Fungi may not have brains or mouths to speak, yet through the mycelium, they adapt and navigate their fickle environments. In De Landa's (2006) morphogenesis, a rock is articulated through the processes of sedimentation and cementation, and does not need language or the human mind to express itself (Hickey-Moody, 2015).

Umwelt and Signification

To become a voice without a mouth is to become imperceptible and Umwelt. I encountered Umwelt through reading Jakob von Uexküll's contributions to sign theory in Bueno-Guerra (2018). As von Uexküll states: "All that a subject perceives becomes his perceptual world [Merkwelt] and all that he does, his effector world [Wirkwelt]. Perceptual and effector worlds together form a closed unit, the Umwelt" (von Uexküll, 1920/2014, as cited in Bueno-Guerra, 2018, p. 1). In short, my perception of how I experience the world cannot serve as the basis for the perceptual and effector worlds of other beings or species. And yet, this is precisely the default mode of I-literate in framing and perceiving other beings.

Bueno-Guerra (2018) highlights von Uexküll's observation that we interpret the physical world based on our senses and actions. This is, in essence, incomprehensible when applied to non-human beings. He points out that "… the world for a Jacobean oyster, for example, is just movement. And the world for a bright jellyfish, is just electricity" (von Uexküll, 1920/2014, as cited in Bueno-Guerra, 2018, p. 2).

At the frontiers of von Uexküll's *Umwelt* and De Landa's morphogenesis, *logos* (i.e., word or reason) is not something that only humans can possess. Speech is not uniquely a human property. Instead, logos—sense-making or meaning-making—is a property shared by humans and non-human assemblages. Signification is distributed among beings in the world and it is not confined to humanness. It is tied to the *place* and the *role* these beings play in the operations of life. Therefore, semiosis is possible with or without the presence of human speech.

Signification is not limited to humans, and literacy, as a matter of expression, is not confined to language or discourse. Instead of literacy events that have been codified by language and writing, other expressions emerge from events in the natural world, proceeding from sensible qualities for signification that are not restricted by language or words.

My work, then, is based on the premise that if articulation is not a property of human language or speech but an ontological property of the universe, it is my task to create conditions of possibility in which or where other life forms can become intelligible. It is to deeply observe that inquiry does not only invite questions from the community but also from the dam, corn plants, Hiligaynon, and unnamed others, all speaking in their own terms. Ideally, these perspectives would shift the very terms of the inquiry itself. This is exactly what the Covid-19 pandemic has done.

Life and death are shaped around senses and composed of different perceptual worlds. Thus, human perception must be challenged when working with non-humans. We have to consider the sensory spectrum of other species and appreciate their ecological situations that, for example, animals have overcome through evolution a perceptual process different from our own. With the concept of *Umwelt*, of sign- and sense-making, I approach Deleuze's concept of *becoming-imperceptible*, a molecular style of perception that is freed from the perceiving human mind and from a human self who can be disengaged from the force of life. There is no point of view that detaches us from life. We become with life, affirming its creative power through all kinds of becomings—such as a plant becoming through the reception of light, heat, moisture, insect pollination, and so on, and the mycelium becoming through decomposing organic materials.

How silly of me! The SSED's becoming did not need my physical presence. I am already entangled with its land and language, whether I like or not, and with the community I did not know before returning to the mountain of my (un)becoming.

Becoming-Minor-Language

When I finally had the opportunity to visit the field site in 2022, my presence was still accompanied by silence or absence. I could not understand the local language, Hiligaynon, of the community. And yet, there were moments of intense presence when I heard Tagalog being spoken or when I spoke it myself. Filipino words passed my lips, and interlocutors helped me find meaning that I could not articulate or translate with the singular voice of my English-speaking self.

The English language, including the Tagalog language I could speak, carries a majoritarian bias in Deleuzian sense-making, aligning with major literature—a superior, essentialist formulation that "recycles previous forms and structures to which it must stay conceptually devoted" (Garcia, 2017, p. 27). After all, English is the privileged and established global vehicular language. It is exclusive rather than inclusive, despite its far-reaching presence in the speaking world. English has the capacity to exclude those who do not meet its criteria of speaking, reading, and writing. The marks of a literate person are traced through English grammar. Although the Philippines achieved political independence from the US in 1946, its postcolonial economic, political, and educational reforms are still indirectly influenced by the colonial mindset. This is most evident in the privileging of English as the language of education and communication within households, often serving as a marker of literate social status.

The English language has occupied my cognitive and speaking self. Hiligaynon, on the other hand, has not, yet it allowed me to inhabit Tagalog in its translations. My mother tongue feels both foreign and familiar, open to mutation as it moves from one lexicon to another. Hiligaynon fractures the English language that has occupied my articulated self for far too long, producing sense-making and culturally linguistic and somatic expressions that are incomprehensible to me in transcribed text. In the presence of Hiligaynon, I become illiterate. It dislocates my locus of understanding and interpretation, shifting me away from the grasp of the majoritarian language. In this sense, language is not simply tied to communication and interpretation. Its power lies in its ability to "…not represent the world or located subjects, but to imagine, create and vary effects that are not already given" (Colebrook, 2002, p. 101). Hiligaynon jolts me into a deep observation of how languages have been muted in our bodies, and in my migrant body.

As Deleuze and Guattari (1983) express:

> How many people live today in a language that is not their own? Or else, no longer even know their tongue – or do not know it yet – and know a major tongue which they are forced to use poorly? Problem of immigrants and especially of their children, Problem of minorities. Problem of a minor literature, but also the problem of us all: how to wrest a minor literature from our tongue, a literature that can hollow the language out and spin it along a sober, revolutionary line? How to become the nomad and the immigrant and the gypsy of our own language? (p.19)

The interview data transcribed had already been translated for me from Hiligaynon to Tagalog by MJ. From Tagalog, I then translated the field notes to English. *Becoming-minor-language* thus entails the decentering of the majoritarian premise that denominates it as such. In its translation, the language of *becoming-minor-literature* is post-representational. There is no originary source from which the data could attribute its textual meanings or provide a clear contextual basis for interpretation.

Translation cannot function as a simulation of the original spoken or written text. Helplessly analogical at its very inception, every resultant text becomes derivative—irreducible to the discursive forces that brought it about, even as it is constituted by them. Translation deterritorializes and produces meaning as difference, decoupled both from its representational ties to reality and from its expressionist ties to the author (Colebrook, 2002). This allows for a plurality of articulations, where intentions are created—not merely expressed—in the encounter. We might call this the beginning of *becoming-minor*—a move away from the binary and majoritarian bias of both the languages I speak here: English and Tagalog.

Hiligaynon, though no longer visible in my inability to comprehend its lexicon, remains articulated in a *minor* way. I am hopeful that its translations can be a small step toward *becoming* with other tongues, and an urgent call to relocate the value and status of language away from the purely linguistic to all other material, sensory, and semiotic expressions and practices. The fact is, Hiligaynon, in this context, is already trapped within the majoritarian logic of national language (i.e., Tagalog), national identity and "… nativism that always already limits what it can be and do" (Garcia, 2017, p. 30).

Translatedness, therefore, becomes a crucial generative tool for *becoming-minor*, for orienting or gesturing toward a complex appreciation and attunement of the differences that constitute both language and community. The 'carrying across 'that translation performs slips and slides, remaining unmoored from its unstable connections to the community and language it intends to belong to. *Becoming-minor-language* is a shifting away—an opening up—from universality, conformity, standards, and the normativity of the majoritarian. To *become-story* is to give voice to what is not given, or what has been hidden—to a "people to com"', nomadic and yet not estranged from many other translations and articulations.

Becoming-Land

In *A Philosophy of Walking*, Frédéric Gros (2015) writes:

> To become imperceptible is to keep and take the self walking.
>
> By walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history. Being someone is all very well for smart parties where everyone is telling their story, it's all very well for psychologists' consulting rooms.

> But isn't being someone also a social obligation which trails in its wake – for one has to be faithful to the self-portrait – a stupid and burdensome fiction? The freedom in walking lies in not being anyone; for the walking body has no history, it is just an eddy in the stream of immemorial life. (pp. 6–7)

Walking the land provides an orientation—a cartography—to *becoming imperceptible*. When I was in the community, I spent a lot of time walking across paddy fields, uneven ground washed away by monsoon, and forest with no roots to hold its ground in place. I observed the small reservoir dam, which, over the years, has become a tourist spot and perhaps the most photographed landscape of the community. I walked between corn plants, haunted by befallen trees. Everyday of my visit was greeted with the blasting music from a karaoke system from one of the houses in the community. There was no hiding or escaping the music that I could never trace as it carried across the undulating mountains.

The language of the land is alive with the natural world's relationships: corn, floods, masks, water, the dam, and karaoke—all commingled. Up in the mountains, there is no clear boundary where the mountain ends and the dam begins; such borders are artificial and restrictive to spiritual and environmental connectedness of the land. The wound of this rift is most acutely felt in the livelihoods of those who live near the dam, which has replaced the farming lands of many residences. Fish travel—not as easily as "lost trees"—in the mixed media of darkness, humidity, water, light, and karaoke.

Landscape is not just a scenery or a backdrop to the community. It is itself a story, unspoken on some days and retold again and again on others—especially when visitors ask about its place and its belonging in a forest that is no longer there. In this community, the land holds together its past geography and biography. As such, the land is storied and they (we) inhabit its stories. Therefore, its assemblage implicates me and engages me—whether I like it or not—whether I would speak of it or not. It merges and emerges through layers of becoming along the lines of colonization, indigeneity, and race. To make present the colonial history and its pattern of land theft and disregard for Indigenous peoples cannot be resolved by land ownership and acknowledgment alone (Greenwood, 2019). Human-land relations under the ownership story treat land as property, not as kin.

People (in this case, me) must learn to care for places as deeply observed and described in Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2020). The tracks and traces of colonial legacies in the land and its inhabitants must be told. Functional literacy skills cannot repair or restore the loss of forest trees, farming land, and livelihoods—nor can they return lives lost. This begs the question: What purpose does literacy serve, if it does not save?

As already discussed above, voice is not a matter of agency, nor its authenticity individual or separate from others. Instead, voice is a matter of relation—of bumping into things and people through walking, getting lost, or losing one's 'colonized 'mind. Voice is composed by many other acoustic

encounters. It is heard in the spaces of intermingling, in the seemingly non-literate network of relations, such as a child planting corn instead of going to school (child-corn relations), fathers out before dawn to catch fish from the dam (adult-dam relations), and so on. These require a refocusing and new ways of showing up in the world. The land, with its corn plants and dam, presents itself differently from what conventional expectations and practices of literacy demand.

Neighborly relations, animated by affective (sonic) encounters and laboring bodies with unspoken, yet shared intentions—not dialogues—became more prominent and binding in the expression of experiences entangled with Hiligaynon, a language I could not speak. The trauma of a landscape shaped by monoculture crop planning, imposed by capitalist arrangements and the community's need to earn a living, was palpable. With the grammar of nature alongside the community's language, Hiligaynon, I became a listener without ears to the stories told by a language I do not speak. In this way, my voice occupied the silent articulation of the landscape.

(Un)becoming 'I-literate'

Becoming-story does not happen from an outsider position. It is a recognition of my already-entangled thread of becoming, linking me to my motherland and mother-tongue. It is an attunement to an encounter, event, or happening—without the need to seek meaning—while I was enfolded in another mother-tongue that was not my own. In those moments, spoken words were silences of the place and community, and all I could be was to be there—immersed in the unfolding story that did not demand my comprehension or interpretation but, more profoundly, required my participation and implication. Tongue-tied, I learned how to be *(t)here*, a "tug-o-where" (Enriquez, 2011), and here, a way of "speaking nearby" (Trinh T. Minh-Ha, in an interview with Chen, 1992)—not on behalf of or about—but being okay with a "faraway nearby" (Solnit, 2013). I breathe in a deeper knowledge and awareness of others, their language, landscape, and livelihoods.

Hiligaynon, more-than-words, is an ongoing storytelling process in which I am spoken to rather than being the one speaking. This insight comes from the Coyote story invitation of "becoming towards the dark." Haladay (2006) describes how oral stories are grounded in Indigenous epistemology, philosophy, and pedagogy that are not fairy tales or bedtime stories, but tellings that come from many tongues and mouths of the Filipino people and the land around them. Haladay (2006) writes:

I understand I am a listener to the language's stories, and when my words form, I am merely retelling the same stories in different patterns. I have known this about my language since learning English as a second language (Haladay, 2006, p. 35).

In similar way, I have been invited to become a listener-teller, hearing (and, in some ways, still hearing) the stories told by the dam, the corn plants, the sweat-giving heat, and more. I am invited to retell these stories in many ways, and here, I share them in my borrowed tongue, a colonizing language. I was embraced and reclaimed by a language and land that has always been mine, yet I have been a stranger to them throughout much of my academic life. Voices, sensations, and sounds that travel through my body are not solely awakened or experienced when they are formed into words. I know this now. What I am gifted with in writing gives spaciousness to the unspoken, untold patterns that hold and carry stories to others, weaving a social fabric that stitches together time and place. *Becoming-story* originates from literacy events that arise from this sense-making of the body, which does not require a telling of what it is about.

Literacy events that are life-based and life-giving bear witness to the land, language, and community. The land speaks and must be listened to. This means literacy events are not confined to the linguistic expression involving print or alphabet-script texts. The ways children learn or become literate are shaped by the lifeways they acquire—through encounters with peers, family, plants, animals, the land they inhabit, and the languages that carry and tell their stories.

In its typical forms, literacy is often school-oriented, centered on middle-class parents and their children. *Becoming-literate* is modeled through books and reading—practices that seem natural in Western homes and schools. For example, the bedtime story sets recurring patterns of behavior, reinforced by encouraging children to take home books to read, usually at bedtime. Life events outside the pages of these books must measure up or create scenarios that can be evaluated and culturally embraced through the lens of these books, as seen in book-based films and Halloween costumes for children. Here the story form is framed or trapped within "text-worlds," nested in patterns that sit within patterns, all under the guise of literacy development.

In *becoming-story* and in gesturing towards decolonizing literacy, I encounter literacy as a happening that carries and articulates particular norms and values, which may disrupt, interrupt or devalue the norms and values of the community, and the voices and stories of its land and language. System change, in this sense, requires a lot of walking—as I did during the lockdown months of Covid-19, when I eventually found myself re-turned to the mountain. Gros (2015) describes how "[i]n walking, far from any vehicle or machine, from any meditation, I am replaying the earthly human condition, embodying once again [hu]man's inborn essential destitution" (p. 199). To decenter 'I 'in the pursuit of system change towards decolonization, walking is a vital act—a quiet rejection of accelerated consumption, mindless productivism, high-demand solutionism, and short-term approaches to the future of life and well-being. Walking is simply the right speed to understand, to show up, and to attend to a multitude of sounds as one places one foot in front of another (Gros, 2015).

The making of this article—a *becoming-story* in itself—is more akin to a collection of potential storylines that the reader may bring into coherent sequence, unfolding a particular story and feeling one's own *becoming-imperceptible*, *becoming-land, becoming-minor-language* and other becomings (or not) toward decoloniality from within. The story written here underwent a process of selection, shaped by what is remembered and forgotten. The role of memory in crafting data and its interpretation or analysis is deeply reliant on memory work—wholly partial, and spatiotemporal. This is usually not part of the story itself. This article is my way of settling the score and grounding partial articulations of how I might encounter the land of my birth anew, within a community-based literacy project. Writing this article made me grateful for something that I had not fully appreciated until now: I speak other languages, and therefore possess a worldview that extends and at times escapes the English-speaking system of institutions and professionals that shaped me into an academic with a colonized identity, while simultaneously serving as a threshold to gesture toward the "dark".

Allow me to begin again—with a borrowed story, in a borrowed tongue, and slowly approach *how to be here*, most likely, by walking as the methodology of waking up my awareness to the potentiality of *becoming-story*.

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Peer Review Article

Studies in Radical Biocracy:

Flows from Relational Being to Relational, Autonomous Decision-making

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Abstract

Work to improve the health of a system should look at decision-making because decisions propagate throughout a system, shaping system dynamics. This is especially true for decisions by those with more power, resources, and relationships in a system. Usually, human collective or group decision-making is conducted from an individualist, objectivist perspective. What happens when we allow the system to sense itself and make group decisions instead of deliberating, negotiating, and voting between individualist positions? What happens when we use an approach based on the radical relationality of Radical Participatory Design and Relational Design? Is it possible to experience a type of relational political ecology in group decision-making? The term political ecology carries multiple meanings. Here, we use the term political ecology to denote the power dynamics within any ecological system—a geographical population, a community, an ecosystem, etc. We describe three special ingredients or nutrients for a relational political ecology—relationality, emergence-conducive principles, and relational autonomy. On a team of people working for system health, these three ecological nutrients support a relational way of being which then transforms the team's way of knowing, decision-making, and thus, political ecology. The fourth-

person being that emerges from these three ecological nutrients leads to a fourth-person knowing in which individuals do not deliberate and vote on various decisions. Instead, the system senses itself and the social field makes the decisions resulting in emergent and symbiotic design. Emergent design refers to design that emerges from consistently following a few basic principles. Symbiotic design occurs over time when deeply, relationally embedded entities or groups retain autonomy and indirectly or directly co-evolve, creating a design that would not have occurred through an individualist, consciously explicit design process. Using two situations from social and service design, we describe three examples of relational, autonomous decision-making or political ecologies. The three examples illustrate participatory futures, service, and systems work that lead to emergent and symbiotic designs.

Keywords
decision-making, biocracy, emergence, symbiotic design, emergent design, relational autonomy

Introduction

I inhabit multiple spaces of privilege and lack of privilege. I am a Black, disabled Nigerian in the United States from an immigrant family. I am also a cisgender, male, heterosexual, Christian U.S. American. I am from the African Indigenous people group Ibibio from the southeast of Nigeria in the Delta region. My people group is known as the first people to enter into present-day Nigeria. Our names are often phrases, sentences, or stories. In Ibibio, my name *Anietie* is a shortened version of the question "Who is like God?" When I work from an Indigenous perspective, I tend to work from an African indigenous lens which is different from indigeneity in North America, Europe, or Australia. Both pluriversal and colonial ways of being are inside of me. In all my work, I try to work towards the relational parts of me and the worlds I inhabit, in a way that peacefully co-exists with other worlds and systems. Sometimes, peace means calming, healing, and restorying harmful systems.

One of the key ways to calm, heal, and restory systems is through decisions. Decisions can seem small and unimportant; however, decisions are crucial parts of system interactions. One common myth in certain systems mythology is that the system purpose arises as an emergent phenomenon without anything in the system ever intending for that purpose to be (Meadows, 2008). In socio-human systems our experience has been different. Because power is distributed unevenly in systems, there are entities, often people, who wield great power in a system, power over all other life in a system. Often these people intend for the system to function the way it functions: because of their power, they can align the system purpose to their purpose. It is this contestation of visions of system functioning that creates the need for system healing work. If all life, including humans, were aligned in goals for system functioning or hopes for system purpose, there would be no need for system healing work. If we were all aligned,

what we visibly see, the system outcomes, system patterns, our behavior, actions, and thoughts would arise from our shared common interior values—common hopes, goals, dreams, metaphors, mythologies, stories, worldviews (Inayatullah, 1998).

Awareness-based systems change methodologies work at the deeper level, yet, one weakness is that many of these methodologies are working with people who already share a common hope or dream (Udoewa, 2022b). We need more awareness-based system change methodologies specifically for groups that still exhibit this contestation of goals, hopes, and dreams. How do such groups make decisions? How do the power dynamics between individuals affect such group decision making? To what extent are group decision making processes governed by power dynamics?

Given the profound effect and impact of human and group decisions on themselves, others, and the environment of which humans are a part, the politics of decision-making in systems remain an underemphasized part of systems change work. Many communities have lived out various decision-making practices since living communities have existed (Blunden, 2016; Deneubourg & Goss, 1989; Nitzan & Paroush, 1985; Udoewa, 2024). This paper builds on the exploration of various community decision-making practices and a radically biocratic (relationally autonomous decision-making modeled after certain biological systems) political ecology found in the fourth paper in my Radical Participatory Design series (Udoewa, 2024).

Political ecology is a term that others have used to convey the intersection of the environment and ecology with politics, society, and economics (Robbins, 2019; Watts, 2017). The term also highlights the socio-political and economic dimensions of environmental and ecological issues (Forsyth, 2003). I use the term to speak about the way that different conditions, components, or ingredients, similar to water or soil, can be protected and nourished in the terrain of decision-making and how certain ingredients can create the conditions for decision-making to emerge, similar to life and the relationships between lives in an ecological landscape.

Relationality is not always beneficial or helpful. I seek relationality that is mutually beneficial in a political ecology. Often socio-human political ecologies are filled with contested positions in which people with different opinions or desires must compete, deliberate, negotiate, or vote to determine whose individual will, desire, or volition will decide the path forward. This is a type of competitive political ecology where nutrients are distributed unevenly or one plant may choke another, preventing it from receiving nutrients or growing.

Instead, mutually beneficial relationality creates decisions that are not made from individualist positions but from the emergent wisdom of the social field of a community or group or team. I do not imply only awareness-based decision-making. I am ultimately describing a relational way of being of a community or group or team. A relational way of knowing, or the emergent fourth-person knowing (the knowing of the social field) that creates a particular way of

decision-making, is simply a result of a group of people embodying a mutually beneficial, relational way of being (Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024).

What politically ecological ingredients can interact to create such a different, relational way of being that results in relational decision-making and avoids negotiating individual perspectives? Through systems practice, community work, and reflection, we have uncovered three important ingredients—relationality, autonomy, and emergence. With these three ingredients, different kinds of designs and design decisions emerge without groups ever making explicit group decisions. This type of decision-making is an example of the system sensing itself to make the best decision, or an example of fourth-person knowing that comes out of fourth-person being. I call this relational autonomous approach to decision-making a Radical Biocracy (Udoewa, 2024).

In this paper, "I" refers to the author. "We" either refers to the combination of the readers and the author, or "we" refers to systems practice or design teams that have used a radical biocratic approach to decision-making. This paper briefly recapitulates Radical Participatory Design (RPD) because this paper is the fifth in a series of RPD papers in which the first two papers introduce RPD (Udoewa, 2022a, 2022b), the third explores a subset called Relational Design (RD) (Udoewa & Gress, 2023), and the fourth introduces Radical Biocracy (Udoewa, 2024) upon which this paper builds. This fifth paper briefly summarizes the analysis of different decision-making models using an RPD framework. Then we explore three key ingredients of a relational, autonomous approach uncovered through lived experience and reflection—relationality, autonomy, and emergence. We discuss each ingredient and what it means. Then, we share a being-based decision-making approach called Radical Biocracy, that emerges from relationality, relational autonomy, and emergent principles, producing emergent and symbiotic design. Lastly, we look at two example projects. One autonomous design project, designing a socially equitable and racially just Parent-Teacher Association at a school in Washington, DC, embodies emergent biocratic decision-making through relational autonomy. The second project is a NASA service design project to redesign a service that offers technical and financial assistance to small businesses and research institutions. The NASA project is still working towards biocracy as the research and design teams try to embody relational autonomy in a larger organization that has low relationality and low autonomy.

Radical Participatory Design

Radical Participatory Design (RPD) is not research and testing participation, a method, a way of doing a method, or a methodology similar to other Participatory Designs (PDs). RPD is an approach, an orientation, a meta-methodology (Udoewa, 2022a, 2022b). RPD can be used with any methodology. The word radical does not mean extreme. Radical comes from the Latin word "radix" which means root. Radical Participatory Design, then, is a PD whose participation is to the root, all the way down, from beginning to end, A to Z. Nothing happens apart

from the community members for whom the designers are designing because the community members are full members of the research, design, and implementation teams.

Participatory Design uses various models for the role of a designer such as designer-as-facilitator, designer-as-translator, designer-as-interpreter, designer-as-mediator, designer-as-agonizer, or something similar (Sciannamè, 2022; Zingale, 2016; DiSalvo, 2015; Wetter-Edman, 2014). In all of these models, the professional, researcher, or designer is facilitating. Though these PD models focus on empowering community members, facilitation is power, and they reinforce the hierarchy they seek to subvert (Udoewa, 2022a).

Unlike PD where the focus is on empowerment of community members, RPD focuses on professionals, researchers, and designers letting go and giving up power, including facilitation. The community will assume power and can empower themselves. This changes the role of the designer and the community member in multiple ways. First, RPD uses the model of designer-as-community-member. This means that the professionals, researchers, and designers sit equal to and alongside all of the other community members, and that the skills of facilitation, design, and research of the designer or researcher sit equal to and alongside all of the other giftings, talents, and resources of the other community members. Instead of the professional, researcher, or designer pushing their skills to the group, a pull model is used when the community calls on the specific skills of a specific person. Second, RPD uses the model of community-member-as-researcher and community-member-as-designer. This may seem obvious, but there are PD and Participatory Research (PR) toolkits and guides that do not require the community members to do any research, design, or implementation. Third, RPD uses the model of community-member-as-facilitator. If you change who facilitates, you change the outcomes.

RPD has three main characteristics. First, community members are always participating and leading. There are no phone calls, briefings, planning, or evaluation apart from them because they are full-fledged members of the team. Second, community members usually outnumber the professionals, researchers, or designers. Third, community members own the artifacts, outcomes, and data as well as the narratives around the data, artifacts, and outcomes.

RPD uses a participation framework in which three questions are asked: who initiates, who participates, and who leads (Figure 1)? Community design, community-driven design, Colonial Participatory Design (CPD), and RPD can be mapped along the three spectra or questions (Udoewa, 2022a). In the previous paper, I analyzed various types of decision-making models using the RPD participation framework (Udoewa, 2024). In Authoritarian models, no matter if it involves individual consultation, group consultation, or delegation, regardless who initiates, the authority or authoritarian is leading (Udoewa, 2024). Depending on how much consultation or delegation happens, participation can widen to include more people, but the authority, often a team lead, professional, facilitator, or executive, leads and makes the decision. Delegation seems to be

different as the authority delegates the decision to someone else, but the authority retains the right to overturn it, and ultimately scopes what and how much is delegated.

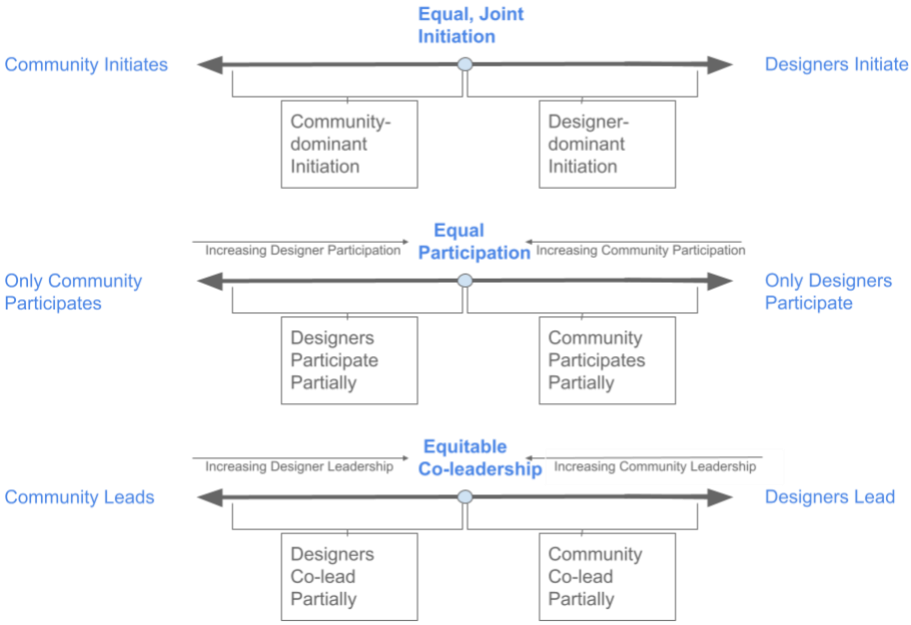

Figure 1*. Three axes of participation: initiation, participation, and leadership.*

Voting is similar whether voting on numerical or categorical options. Regardless of who initiates, everyone participates. Depending on the voting decision rules, the majority, supermajority, or plurality may be the one that leads the decision-making especially when collusion, cheating, conspiring, or suppression occurs (Udoewa, 2024). In certain cases when using representative forms of democracy for decision-making, minoritarian rule can occur when a minority decides; though in this case, the minority are a power majority in that the majority of the power lies with them due to disproportionate representation.

Consent-based and consensus-related models can suffer from similar political ecologies. The consensus achieved through Delphi methods, techniques that create consensus through synthesis and sharing of iterative rounds of expert panel responses or surveys, is initiated by a funder or facilitator. Only experts participate, and the facilitator leads by conducting synthesis alone and interpretively deciding (Udoewa, 2024). In sociocracies, consent-based decision-making models, and consensus, anyone may initiate a decision and everyone participates. However, in a consensus, minorities, even of one person, have a high amount of power to stop a decision by refusing to go along with a choice. Minorities have less power to do so in sociocracies and consent-based decision-making because the threshold for an objection is set high. In those consent-based

decision-making situations, the person who first suggests an idea to go through the consent-process has more power because people are not voting between options, they are deciding whether to consent to the first presented option.

In all these decision-making models, there is individualist contestation in the political ecology where some choices, needs, or opinions do not survive. Consent-based and consensus-based models include at least some movement in the direction of holism and consideration of the group in that they attempt to find an option that everyone is willing to choose (consensus) or to which no one is actively opposed (consent).

In RPD, teams first decide how to decide. They choose a decision-making process whose outcomes all team members agree to follow if the process is used. For full agreement, they use unanimity, consent-based decision-making, or consensus to decide how to decide. However, all of these various decision-making models still carry a deeply embedded individualism, fundamentally conceiving of group decision-making as a balancing act, selection, or power play between different individualist positions (Poznic et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2020; Sharma et al., 2021; Singh et al., 2022; Tan et al., 2017; Vermillion et al., 2017). What might a decision-making process fully based in the radical relationality of RPD look like?

As a subset of RPD, Relational Design (RD) uses a design-as-relationship-building model and provides an example of how to apply relationality to a new space (Udoewa & Gress, 2023). When I say RD, I do not mean designing in relationship, where design is done with people with whom you have an existing relationship and builds on that relationship. RD is not designing with relationship, where people build new relationships and relate to one another while designing. RD is not designing for relationship, where the goal or objective of the design process is to affect, create, or improve relationships. RD may involve all of those types. RD specifically means design-as-relationship-building (Udoewa & Gress, 2023). RD is a meta-methodology that uses relationship-building methodologies as design, itself, through which design emerges. It applies the same relationality of RPD to the actual methods and methodology used by the design team so that community members do not use extractive, transactional methods against their own people. How, then, can we further extend this relationality to the political ecology of decision-making among a group? Through practice, embodied wisdom, and lived experience, we have induced three key ingredients for a relational political ecology of decision-making.

Ecological Ingredients of a Relational Approach to Decision-Making

Relationality

A relational approach to the political ecology of decision-making can imply different kinds of relationality contrasted with individualism. Let us explore four levels of relationality.

One level of relationality is oppositional dualism. Oppositional dualism takes a structuralist view of the world and describes two separate, individual opposites—mind/body, nature/culture, emotion/reason, man/woman, etc. Each of the two opposing entities are distinct and independent of each other. They may relate in various ways like the mind telling the body what to do or the body influencing the mind to act out of passion.

Another level is complementary dualism in which two entities reciprocally interact to bring about a type of homeostasis or balance. This can be seen in the Chinese philosophical concepts of yin and yang in Taoism and Confucianism and the Yanantin in indigenous Andean cosmology (Girardot, 1988; Webb, 2012). Instead of opposition, there is a harmony between the two entities resulting in an outcome—balance—that cannot be achieved by either one alone. Again, each of the two opposing entities are still distinct and independent of each other, independently pre-existing and outside of the dualistic relationship, though their sum is greater than their parts.

Systems and network theories highlight another level—interconnectedness (García, 2017; Goodchild, 2021). There are many, not just two, interconnected entities. They are independent and interdependent, influencing one another, and creating system level behavior and purpose. Every entity is connected and affects every other entity. Still, all entities in this web of interconnectedness exist independently before or outside of the system relationships in which they participate.

A fourth level is radical relationality in which nothing exists outside of the relationships that constitute it (Escobar, 2018; Escobar et al., 2024;). For example, a flower can be thought of as a separate entity that exists independently from its surroundings. Through a radically relational lens, we realize that the flower cannot exist apart from the soil that supports its substrate and roots, the water that strengthens its form and nutritional delivery, and the sunlight that fuels its survival and journey upward. In other words, without the soil, sunlight, nutrients, and water and their interactions and relationships, the flower does not exist. The flower can truly be considered its relationships, an emergent property of those relationships. In relational, autonomous group decision-making, it is this level of relationality and emergence we seek.

Emergence

Justice worker adrienne maree brown describes emergence as "the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions" (brown, 2017, p. 17). There are many examples in which individual animals follow simple micro behavioral rules in certain situations. Schooling fish are an example. Another is murmurating starlings who follow three rules:

1. Move in the same direction as your nearest six/seven neighbors.
2. Stay comfortably close to your nearest six/seven neighbors.
3. Avoid collisions at all costs.

The three rules have a purpose in helping the starlings move together with agility as one unit, quickly avoiding threats and responding to opportunities. In following those three basic rules, starlings create some of the most beautiful multi-dimensional shapes, flows, and movements, interpreted by humans to appear like shapeshifting, recognizable objects—a shoe, a tiger, a giraffe, a gavel, etc.

It is the set of micro behavioral rules, or emergence-conducive principles, or emergent strategy principles, that are another ingredient to a relational political ecology and approach to decision-making. For human political ecologies, the principles should not be randomly selected. In the starling example, the three rules all have the joint purpose of cohesion (rules 1–2), agility (rules 1–2), and ultimately safety (rules 1–3). Though a group of humans may choose any set of behavioral principles to follow, RPD and RD groups usually use principles aligned to the purpose of justice, as RPD and RD serve as a means to design, research, and data justice. For this reason, RPD and RD teams usually use brown's (2017, 2021) six elements of emergent strategy. She associates five of them with emblems or symbols.

1. Ferns (dandelions, broccoli, etc.)—Fractal awareness: *Be the change you want to see*. Small scale work impacts the whole system. Start small with ourselves to build change at all levels and scales. Any outer change we want to see in the world, we first embody at the small scale. The large is just a reflection of the small.
2. Starlings (schooling fish, water, etc.)—Intentional adaptation and collective leadership: *Always be responding to your environment and the movements of others in your group*. Without a single leader dictating or orchestrating choices, respond to your environment and those around you. A single member can transform the movement of the whole group.
3. Mycelium (ants, trees, etc.)—Interdependence and decentralization: *Rely on each other by delegating and distributing power and functions.* Like oak trees that bind their

roots below ground or birch, ash, and mangrove trees that arise from one root below, practice collective sustainability. Like ants, we rely on each other in order to do our own work (cooperative work).

4. (Spirals, fiddleheads, compost, etc.)—Nonlinearity and iteration: *Always be learning*. Growth is always nonlinear and passes through learning pains. Everything, every (mis)step is part of the process. Find the lesson. Always ask how we learn from this.
5. Dandelions (starfish, mushrooms, etc.)—Resilience and transformative justice: *Create time to recover, restore, rebuild, and heal. Transformation will follow*. A caterpillar does not immediately become a butterfly but spends time in the cocoon in a process of metamorphosis. If the cocoon process is destroyed, the transformation never occurs. With resilient medicinal properties, dandelions transform in time from a flower head to a seed head, each seed using its parachute mechanism to spread far and wide, growing and establishing strong taproots in new locations that are hard to uproot. Move at the speed of trust. Move at the pace of community. Focus on resilience, relationship, and critical connections over critical mass.
6. Wavicle—Create more possibilities. *Always create more possibilities embracing diversity in the work and ways of being*. When faced with a binary choice, create more options, a third, fourth, fifth, etc. Always be experimenting. Embrace a diverse movement with diverse ways of doing, knowing, and being. The wavicle represents the dual nature of matter as both wave and particle. Uncertainty and mystery will always be with us. Value both natures of our work—the process and the outcome.

Autonomy

The third emergent strategy principle, interdependence and decentralization, is related to the third ecological ingredient for relational decision-making—autonomy. From an individualist perspective, autonomy is the right or condition of self-governance, self-determination, and self-authorization (Mackenzie, 2014). In workshops, when asked to map their group or organization on a spectrum between high relationality and high autonomy, leaders will attempt to mark the location characterizing their group. However, it is a false choice because relationality and autonomy can coexist within a group. A group can demonstrate low, medium, or high autonomy within itself, while expressing any level of relationality (low, medium, or high), creating a simplistic 2D, 9-cell matrix.

The individualist understanding of autonomy fails to account for decision-making as an ongoing process; non-Western understandings of the self as interconnected and a part of community and nature; non-Western understandings of identity that are group-based; a bigger, non-ableist vision of personal identity for those who may invite communal help especially when incapacitated; collectivist decision-making; and decision-making in consideration of others, that is affected by others and affects others (Gómez-Vírseda et al., 2019). We strongly define relational autonomy as collaborative self-determination that fundamentally emerges from constitutive relationships, or fundamentally exists in relation to others, balancing interdependent entities in community, or with overlapping projects (Donchin, 2000). The third emergent strategy principle hints at relational autonomy because it does not seek decentralization and independence (individualist autonomy), but interdependence.

Pluriversal Design

When the three ecological ingredients of relationality, emergence-conducive principles, and autonomy are mixed together, they can produce different kinds of design. Design in these situations may be unrecognizable to design in certain Western, academic contexts.

Indigenous scholar, Shawn Wilson, writes that:

> Indigenous epistemology is all about ideas [like design] forming through the formation of relationships. [Design] cannot be taken out of its relational context and still maintain its shape . . . it is not possible to know exactly both the context and definition of [design] at the same time. The closer you get to defining [design] the more it loses its context. Conversely, the more [design] is put into context, the more it loses its specific definition. (2020, p. 8)

Wilson is writing about any idea or concept; here we apply it to design. The Indigenous Uncertainty Principle is a perfect statement of pluriversality. There is no single definition of design. There are many designs (Udoewa, 2022a). If we define design, we do not know the context. If we define the context, we lose the universalist definition of design.

In other words, given any single definition of design, I can point to a context or world where that definition falls away. For instance, according to designer Victor Papanek, design is the conscious attempt to impose order (2005). However ontological design's first principle states that we design the world and the world designs us back (Willis, 2006). In other words, everything we design around us, designs us. Even though architects consciously think about how buildings design us, so that one could say it is really the architect acting through the building, there are many fields of design that do not think about or plan for designed objects designing us. Our phones and chairs do not consciously impose meaningful order, and yet they design. Or let us use designer Lella Vignelli's

definition of design as its own discipline that creates solutions and simplifies lives (Vignelli, 2010). In contrast, there are many worlds in which design is not problem-solving at all. For Māori designer Huhana Smith, design is a reciprocal relationship with the environment and ecosystems (2020; Allan & Smith, 2013). For certain Indigenous communities in Latin America who practice buen vivir, design is living in harmony with the land, ecosystem, and community (Escobar, 2017, 2018; Lang, 2022).

Emergent Design

With a pluriversal lens, we can experience different kinds of design that result from the ecological ingredients of relationality, emergence-conducive principles, and autonomy. Let us start with emergence. As mentioned earlier, following a minimal set of behavioral rules can lead to the emergence of design which allows us to create a definition for emergent design within the political ecology of decision-making on a team. Emergent design is a type of unplanned design that emerges when all individuals in a group consistently follow the same minimal behavioral rules. This type of emergent design is in contrast to the various individualist or network-based group decision-making models such as authoritarian, voting, consent-based decision-making, or even consensus. In emergent design, there is no group voting or deliberating between different individual positions. Due to shared behavioral principles, design emerges from the group's way of being and the resulting way of knowing—the fourth-person knowing, the knowing of the social field (Scharmer & Pomeroy, 2024). This is an example of one of the five shifts of emerging presencing approaches, from a focus on ways of knowing to a focus on ways of being (Gunnlaugson, 2023). For certain groups, especially Indigenous and hyperlocal groups, this shift is not emerging, nor new, but quite ancient (Goodchild, 2021). The decision-less decision-making that emerges is not from focusing on a new way of knowing, it simply comes out of a relational way of being that includes relationality and group principles of behavior toward a purpose.

Ecology and biology can provide inspiration for what decision-less decision-making and leaderless leadership could be. Let us look at the example of the human body's response to a bone fracture and how it exemplifies emergent design (Bartold & Ivanovski, 2024; OpenStaxCollege, 2013). In the inflammatory phase, the blood vessels broken by and across the fracture continue doing what they do: they pass blood which fills the cavity. The blood platelets in the blood immediately join together forming a clot eventually creating a fracture hematoma, achieving hemostasis. The disruption of blood flow to the bone causes the bone cells around the fracture to die. The platelets also release pro-inflammatory cytokines, chemicals to attract bone healing, neovascularizing, and fibroblast-recruiting cells to aid healing. Due to released chemicals, other pro-inflammatory mediators arrive that form granulation tissue (Bartold & Ivanovski, 2024; OpenStaxCollege, 2013).

In the soft callus formation phase, chondrocyte cells from the endosteum, the membrane lining the internal surface of the bone, secrete a fibrocartilaginous, protein-rich matrix between the two ends of the bone while osteoblast cells and chondrocytes in the periosteum, the membrane of vessels and nerves wrapped around bones, create an external callus of cartilage and bone around the outside of the break. This stabilizes the fracture for further ossification and remodeling. The platelets continue releasing growth factor chemicals that, for example, induce stem cell migration and multiplication.

In the hard callus formation phase, osteoclast cells break down and resorb dead bone cells. The proliferating stem cells differentiate into osteoblasts which, as stated before, continue forming new bone, this time harder, spongy bone at the site of the break.

In the final remodeling phase, an iterative process of osteoclast bone resorption and osteoblast-driven bone deposition occurs, each doing their specific job. After attaching to the bone surface with a special membrane structure and releasing a protein to aid in resorption, the osteoclasts experience cell death. The bone demineralization and degradation releases chemicals that stimulate bone formation creating the iterative loop. Through this process, the internal and external callus unite, and the spongy bone is replaced with harder, compact bone at the fracture site.

This is one of countless examples of emergent design within our plant and animal biologies. This healing process occurs without competing individualist concerns, voting, or debating between different cells.

There are four important components that we see in the political ecology of cells in the body around a fracture. First, there is differentiation of roles. Each cell has a certain purpose. Even pluripotent stem cells transform their potentiality into a specific purpose at a point in time. Second, there is strong relationality. The cells relate to one another, communicate with one another, send chemicals which are picked up and interpreted by others, continue work where others stopped working, etc. Third, there is high autonomy. No cell is forced to do anything; each cell simply does its own task, always doing its job, never conferring or deliberating what it should do. Fourth, there is emergence through adhering to simple principles. Each of the six high-level biomimicry design principles out of the 26 principles is followed (Baumeister et al., 2014). For example, they follow the rule "be resource efficient" with neutrophils, macrophages, and osteoclasts removing and resorbing dead cells and debris or even osteoclasts undergoing cell death themselves when no longer needed. They follow "be locally attuned and responsive" with pro-inflammatory mediators and other cells responding to the cytokines and other chemicals released by platelets. They follow "adapt to changing conditions" where osteoclasts and osteoblasts adapt to the amount of chemicals released by processes induced by the other. In following simple rules, still in their full autonomy, the autonomy of the entire body—the social field of the cells and tissue—emerges as if designed by group decision (Pomeroy & Herrmann, 2023).

It is important to note that this is different from other uses of the term emergent design. Emergent design has been used to indicate design created when researchers or designers use a flexible approach, intentionally adapting or responding to new or unanticipated learnings, concepts, and ideas (Cavallo, 2000; Hammersley, 2022; Pailthorpe, 2017; Thompson & MacDonald, 2005;). The emergent design described in the bone fracture is different. It is also different from the type of emergent design used in architecture and urban planning (Almazán et al., 2022; Brown, 2006; Brown et al., 2024; Dark Matter Labs, 2023; Porqueddu, 2022). In urban, regional, and architectural planning, emergent design is the result of individual designers consciously designing minimalistic, inciting, contagious, or activating interventions or designs that catalyze systemic forces for ongoing design that proliferates without further intervention, sometimes in predicted, sometimes in unpredicted ways. In this way, like a conductor of an improvisational orchestra, designers are facilitating emergence (Brown et al., 2024). In the emergent design I describe here, there are no designers intentionally activating emergence or introducing designs to specifically cause, direct, or facilitate emergence.

Symbiotic Design

There is another type of design that occurs when relationality and autonomy interact over periods of time. Symbiosis is the interaction between two organisms living in close physical proximity to each other, to the benefit of at least one. Though symbiosis may connote mutual benefit, there are many kinds of symbiosis including parasitism where one species is harmed, or commensalism where one species is neither harmed or helped.

When multiple organisms living in close physical proximity relationally co-evolve in mutually beneficial ways, design can occur that would not have resulted from a planned design process. Indigenous scholar Yunkaporta calls this symbiotic design (Yunkaporta, 2019). Let us examine the symbiotic relationship of humans and the Greater honeyguide bird.

The honeyguides eat eggs, beeswax, and larvae from bee nests, but have great difficulty accessing those sources due to the bees. The wild honeydew has evolved over time to have a demanding call that leads other animals to the bee nests to do the hard work. For example, when the Hazda people group of Tanzania hear the demanding call of the honeyguide it indicates that the honeyguide has found a bee nest. Over generations, the Hazda have learned to respond to the honeyguide call with a response call, and they begin to follow the honeyguide. When the honey-searching Hazda follow the honeyguide and reach the nest, they remove or capture the bees with smoke and eat the honey. Certain scientists have estimated that 8–10% of the Hazda diet is acquired with honeyguide help (Wood et al., 2014).

There are many more examples of mutually beneficial symbiotic, even tribiotic relationships we can examine. Similar to this example, they highlight three important components. First, just as in emergent design, there is strong

relationality. The humans and the honeydew live in close proximity and respond to each other, even communicate with each other, and eventually help each other. Second, there is high autonomy. Noone is forced to do anything. Each animal makes their own decisions and continues pursuing its own goals without sacrificing those goals. Third, and lastly, there is time. Symbiotic relationships are relationships that have evolved over time, so time is required to reach a state where each species has responded and continues responding both to the other species and the full environment, in ways that bond them to each other beneficially. In other words, without individualist planning or decision-making, relational autonomy between organisms in close proximity, over time, leads to symbiotic design.

Different from emergent design, symbiotic design does not require a set of emergence-conducive principles everyone follows. It just requires relationality, autonomy, and time. For now, we will not discuss the emergent design precondition of the differentiation of roles and the symbiotic design precondition of time. Most organizations and teams have a differentiation of roles. Role differentiation is not the main hindrance to a more relational political ecology on a team or in an organization. And the precondition of time for symbiotic design is simple. Though we cannot define the amount of time needed, we can say at least enough time is needed for evolution of relationships or entities, or both.

Radical Biocracy

The term biocracy is used in multiple ways: the exploitation of life by the political economy or workplace, the power and influence of life sciences on society and politics, and political models that include non-human nature as constituents with rights (Caldwell, 2016, 2019; Fleming, 2012; Muray, 2017). In 1933, Walter Cannon introduced the term biocracy as the most efficient and stable human society in which all the various cells are organized into functional tissue and organs producing a vibrant, dynamic, and cooperative democracy in which dictatorships lead to decline and collapse, a type of death (Cannon, 1933).

Using the emergent strategy principle of fractal awareness, we apply biocracy at the mesoscale level to organizations and specifically teams. Because organizations are complex, adaptive, living systems similar to human bodies, public health researcher Bloom (2020, 2023) applies characteristics of healthy human bodies to healthy, biocratic organizations, which I then apply to teams.

1. *Healthy teams have a vision and purpose*. Like the body, systems manifest a purpose. It is better to explicitly build a shared vision and purpose rather than let unconscious dynamics determine them. Also, emergent strategy principles a team uses should have a common purpose.
2. *Healthy teams maintain homeostasis*. The body maintains homeostasis in order to survive. Teams must be able to restore balance when faced

with disruptions and challenges that cause stress and destroy cohesion and purpose.

3. *A healthy start is helpful*. Like plants, ecosystems, and animals, teams who have healthy starts to their life/team experience are more likely to adapt and be resilient to challenges in maturity or adulthood.
4. *Healthy teams have continual checkups*. There are sub-functions that are constantly checking on the body's health and responding immediately. Problems found earlier are easier to address for teams.
5. *Healthy teams create safety cultures*. One purpose of the human body is to preserve life and maintain safety. The body distributes safety work and reduces risk or harm through preparation, learning, and healing. Teams cannot have full participation without safety.
6. *Healthy teams distribute power through radical participation*. The body is a deeply relational, participatory system with each cell doing its relationally autonomous part.
7. *Healthy teams are learning teams*. Like memory cells, the body learns, the brain is always rewiring. It is difficult to create a safety culture or make checkups useful without learning. Learning is an important part of evolving which is conducive for symbiotic design.
8. *Healthy teams have healthy digestion*. The body uses food for energy and cell repair while eliminating waste. Healthy teams continually let go of wastes for proper growth.
9. *Healthy teams have healthy circulation*. Healthy teams, like the body, exhibit deep relationality. They are full of constant communication and feedback loops in order to function, grow, and learn.
10. *Healthy teams have a healthy immune system*. Like the body, we cannot predict when harmful agents, processes, or forces will enter team communities. Healthy teams have processes, roles, and subsystems that automatically neutralize harmful forces.
11. *Healthy teams recover after injury*. Healing processes and work must be a function of a team or organization; otherwise, injuries will worsen and destroy it.
12. *Healthy teams have a collective autonomous brain*. This is the emergent design and symbiotic design that arises not from individual sentience but from collective, leaderless leadership like the starlings in emergence theory.

Cannon (1933, 1954) and Bloom (2020, 2023) envision biocracy as a means to democracy, or as a societal, organizational model that includes actual people in decision-making leadership roles. We go further, to envision a Radical Biocracy which also affects decision-making itself using a leaderless leadership model similar to the "involuntary" autonomous systems of the human body. In this model of Radical Biocracy, assuming there is differentiation of roles, decision-making is an emergent or symbiotic process that emanates from three ecological

ingredients—relationality, emergent strategy principles, and relational autonomy. Emergent design depends on all three while symbiotic design only requires relationality and relational autonomy, along with time.

As long as all members of a group of people are deeply engaged in relational practices, fully autonomous, and practicing the same set of behavioral principles aligned to a purpose, design decisions can emerge without the group using any traditional, individualist decision-making process. Similarly, as long as all members of a group are deeply engaged in relational practices and fully autonomous, with enough time, designs can evolve due to mutually beneficial relationships that slowly form. These symbiotic designs also occur without any negotiation, deliberation, voting, or any other individualist decision-making. When these types of leaderless leadership and collective knowing become the default way collective decisions are (not) made, a Radical Biocracy or radically biocratic system has been formed.

Designing an Equitable, Racially Just Parent-Teacher Association

I work on a project to design an equitable, racially just Parent-Teacher Association/Organization (PTA/PTO) at one location of a two-campus, bilingual, public charter school in Washington, DC. The school has three foundational pillars—biliteracy, sustainability, and expeditionary learning. There is an established history of socioeconomically and racially unjust dynamics in PTAs across the U.S. where voices and expressed needs of certain caregivers are prioritized over those of others (Anderson & Huron, 2023; Joffe-Walt, 2020; Levy, 2018; Nisbet, 2021; Posey-Maddox et al., 2016; Schaller & Nisbet, 2020; Syeed, 2018). Our goal is to create an equitable PTA across linguistic, socioeconomic, and racial lines. The social design project is also service design because the PTA provides services to teachers, students, administration, and the school community. In this example, the design team refers to the caregivers who are actively involved in shaping and forming the PTA. All caregivers are automatically members of the PTA, but only a subset are actively involved in tactically shaping its direction and doing PTA work.

Relationality

We began with an RD orientation. In small groups of 10-12 caregivers and staff, we began practicing sustained dialogue to deepen our relationality, the first ingredient (Udoewa & Gress, 2023).

Emergent Strategy Principles

Some of us were reading the book Emergent Strategy and shared it with the rest of the team. We adopted the emergent strategy elements as our principles for emergence, the second ingredient. These principles served as guides because our goal for this project was equity and justice—we want to create a racially just,

socially equitable PTA. The emergent strategy elements from the book work well because they come from social justice work.

Autonomy and Self-Organization

Lastly, we desire to see a world where various groups have relational autonomy. Following the emergent strategy principle "be the change you want to see," we wanted to exemplify the relational autonomy we seek in the world, at the small scale within our group. Therefore, we embody relational autonomy, the third ingredient.

The design team also practices autonomous design. Autonomous design is design as part of a communal struggle for autonomy or to strengthen autonomy in pursuit of group projects or life plans (Escobar, 2017). One way to understand relational autonomy is the autonomy groups pursue and express in the context of and in negotiation with multiple actors and groups in local, national, and global situations (Ulloa, 2011). We are struggling for autonomy in pursuit of our life plan for an equitable and racially just school community, starting with the PTA designing itself. We do this work in relationship and negotiation with multiple actors and groups—students, teachers, other school staff, administration, the DC Public Charter School Board, the DC State Board of Education, equity design consultants, school community residents, etc.

Preparing for Individualist Decision-Making

The first two design choices we wanted to make to realize an equitable PTA were the design of the organizational structure and the fundraising model, components of PTAs in the United States that traditionally disenfranchise Black, Brown, poor, and non-English-native caregivers and students (Syeed, 2018). Before designing the organizational structure or fundraising model, we wanted to decide how to decide. In RPD projects, we first decide how to decide before making design decisions. Usually this is done through consensus or unanimity so that all design team members consent to decisions even if the outcome was not each person's choice because each person supported the way of making that decision. Our team used consensus to choose the ranked-choice method of decision-making. Strangely, in the past five years of this experiment, we have never used this decision-making process, and yet we now have an organizational structure and fundraising model! The design of the fundraising model and organizational structure emerged from our relational autonomous approach to decision-making: emergent and symbiotic design.

Emergent, Symbiotic Organizational Design

Instead of a traditional design methodology of conducting research, analyzing needs, brainstorming structures that would address our equity needs or visions,

and holding a decision-making process on the structural options, people autonomously just worked on what they wanted to do in the PTA. There was no plan, no group decision-making, no traditional design. People self-organized, signing up to work on what interested them. Because one of the groups was a planning group, we thought a hub and spoke model had emerged with the planning group as the hub, and the other groups as the spokes. Originally we had six groups:

- *Celebrate*: organize and implement celebrations of various cultural groups, important days, and festivals
- *Communicate*: communicate information externally and internally
- *Include*: improve inclusion, equity, and belonging
- *Plan*: lead and facilitate the work of the entire team
- *Resource*: recruit resources (human, financial, etc.) to facilitate teacher, school, or student goals
- *Sustain*: improve and incorporate sustainability into school programming, student activities, education, etc.

We began operating autonomously. However, unlike the human body, each group was made of individuals with opinions, desires, and volitions. What emerged was not deliberations between those individual desires and opinions. Following the first characteristic of biocracies, we all had a singular purpose—equity. If your role is to fundraise or communicate, you only fundraise or communicate in equitable ways or for the purpose of equity or exposing and healing inequity. This had the effect of creating a community-wide, relational purpose within our PTA design team system, regardless of the autonomous goal of the particular spoke or person.

Embodying relationality, autonomy, and emergent design principles with a deeply shared purpose of equity had two emergent design effects. First, the biocratic ingredients led to the equitable structure we have today, a hubless spoke model. Second, the biocratic components stopped the creation of the typical government-registered nonprofit structure with an elected executive team, all without using any traditional decision-making framework.

We started our work. Like the nervous system, Communicate worked with each spoke proactively to communicate work done by each spoke to another spoke or the administration and vice versa. There were people in Communicate who were also Plan members, so Plan never needed to meet with any spokes. Communicate wanted to also communicate to caregivers through the Classroom Liaisons (CLs), parents who liaised with teachers and each classroom's caregivers. CLs were consistently communicating to caregivers information coming from Communicate, effectively becoming a spoke. Plan wanted to meet with the principal regularly, but the team members had other work, needed help, and wanted to embody decentralization. Caregivers not part of the design team

(not in any spoke) who were in relationship with Plan members, volunteered to meet with the principal, effectively becoming principal liaisons, like muscles, for collaborative work. The same thing happened when Plan wanted to meet regularly with the PTA (called *Padres*) of the other school campus. Again, embodying decentralization, people in relationship with Plan volunteered to be Padres liaisons. Similar processes repeatedly happened, creating new groups, changing functions of current groups, and changing the structure.

The process of adaptation over time in close relationally autonomous proximity, while embodying emergent principles, resulted in an emergent, symbiotic design—a hubless wheel with many more spokes.

- Celebrate
- Communicate
- Include
- Plan
- Resource
- Sustain
- Classroom Liaisons
- Principal Liaisons
- Padres Liaisons
- Safe Bikes & Traffic
- Caregivers of Black Students
- Caregivers with Special Needs
- Native Spanish Speaking Caregivers

We (the PTA) have fully and relationally autonomous decentralized groups that have a focused goal and communicate with whom they need to do their job. The role of the Plan spoke never became the hub, facilitating the work of the entire group. Instead, the role of Plan was really planning the meetings with the full caregiver body. In five years, we have never had a single meeting of all the spokes like one would expect with committees or offices in an organization. It is important to note that the other campus of the same school built a PTA that became incorporated as a 501(c)3, a government-recognized nonprofit structure. That campus designed a structure that has traditionally disenfranchised lower-income, Black, Brown, and non-native-English caregivers.

The relational autonomy has also served the group well. For instance, during a period when teachers were quitting due to a lack of support during COVID, a caregiver organized a petition delivered to the administration demanding changes in support of teachers and the teacher union. The Padres non-profit PTA organization could easily sign it without representing the full body of caregivers of the other campus due to the inequity often introduced by such an organization

making decisions and the acceptance by the administration that such decisions speak for the entire caregiver body. On our campus, due to the hubless spoke model, it takes a much longer time to reach a consensus with the caregiver body about whether we want our PTA organization, called Comunidad, to sign. This was a problem as the petition was going to be delivered in a few days. Due to the relational autonomous structure, however, individual spokes could sign the petition as a Comunidad spoke without (mis)representing all of Comunidad caregivers. Sustain and Include signed the petition as two Comunidad spokes; in that way Comunidad had organizational representation on the petition without pretending to represent all caregivers. Another example is faster communication and work. Normally, organizations have a point of contact for initial external inquiries. In Comunidad, if you know which spoke relates to your query, you can contact the spoke directly, if you chose. Due to our relationality, we all learn about the contact or request.

Our biocratic system also prevented a traditional structure from being created. Throughout the five years, there have been people who did not participate in the sustained dialogue groups but who wanted to participate in designing our PTA. A majority of this group approached the creation of a PTA from a traditional lens—creating a group to fundraise lots of money for certain priorities, not prioritizing equity. At various points, a majority of this group has voiced a desire to create a government-registered nonprofit like other PTAs at other schools. Through response and conversations in relationship, those members learned about the bad past experiences certain caregivers have had in that traditional structure, how it privileges certain voices, and how people feel unrepresented by them. Every time, the people advocating for the creation of a nonprofit have chosen to move at the pace of community and not to push further due to relational autonomy, autonomously making a decision that factors the effect on others and the collective well-being and leadership. They have opted not to call for a vote, even though it is within their power, and even when they actually believe it is possible to have a 501(c)3 that is run equitably. This symbiotic design works both ways. The design team members who participated or are participating in sustained dialogue groups also have worked to find ways to address the concerns of those who want a traditional structure. In relationship and conversation, the dialogue members uncovered that the members who wanted a traditional structure were looking for accountability and fundraising revenue. The accountability was addressed by building an understanding of other models of accountability outside corporations, models of shared, mutual co-accountability, mutual aid, and mutual care. Over time, team members who did not participate in dialogue groups began to understand these models through the experience of the hubless spoke, relational model. Every spoke has a team and co-facilitators that rotate, and each spoke takes collective responsibility for the work and outcomes. The fundraising model that evolved is an example of emergent, symbiotic design.

Emergent, Symbiotic Fundraising Design

Similar to conversations about starting a 501(c)3 non-profit, certain non-dialogue Classroom LiaisonLiaison team members ran or intended to run classroom-based fundraising campaigns for individual classroom needs. In conversation and relationship, they continuously learned how this introduced inequity as some classrooms had access to more resources, supplies, materials, and curricula than others based on different fundraising capacities and fundraised amounts. To create more possibilities, dialogue team members then ran a campaign that was not just campus-wide, but district-wide, across both campuses to which caregivers at either campus could donate. Then the money was split evenly by all teachers. We still use this resilient principle today: we fundraise for people at both campuses and split revenue equally. To this day, Classroom Liaisons can still run an individual classroom campaign if they so choose. They are autonomous. However, none has chosen to do so because, due to relationships, those dialogue members wanted to create more possibilities to address the fundraising concerns of those who wanted to bring in money for the school. In healthy relationships, each member attends to the concerns of the others (Udoewa & Gress, 2023). The dialogue-based team members created an alternative that addressed those concerns.

This same process repeated multiple times by embodying emergent strategy principles such as transformative justice, resilience, moving at the speed of trust, learning always, and creating more possibilities. Certain caregivers wanted to collect dues to raise funds, but that would alienate caregivers who did not have the money. Because of that potential effect and in order to move at the speed of trust while always learning, the caregivers that wanted it never asked for a vote on it; all caregivers are automatic members without paying any dues, and active participation and monetary contribution do not equate with voting rights. Membership is an identity of all our community caregivers. At our campus, ideas for an auction were never implemented because it prioritized caregivers who could donate in financial ways over those who could not. It is important to note that Padres, the other campus PTA not focused on equity, has implemented an auction. To care for the concerns of those who want more money for the school and create more possibilities, the dialogue-based team members worked with the administration to secure tens of thousands of dollars dedicated for the PTA from the school's development department. This allows PTA members to focus on giving in ways to which more people have access (time, volunteering, knowledge, language, etc.) instead of raising funds. In fact, the spoke that works on fundraising is named Resource because they search for and organize all kinds of community resources, not only money. Without group decision-making negotiating between different individualist desires, the fundraising model evolved over time as a result of different groups mutually responding to and caring for each other's concerns.

Service Design at NASA

My team at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), works on a service that helps innovators in small businesses or research centers to advance and mature their technologies by offering them financial and technical assistance (Gopalkrishnan et al., 2023; Udoewa, 2023). The goal is to transition the technologies and technologists to other funders—private investors and public investors, program managers at NASA and other government agencies (OGAs). The ultimate goal beyond transition is commercialization or infusion into a government project or mission at NASA or an OGA.

Service design is the design of a service and the mechanics behind a service in order to improve both the customer and employee experience across all interactions/touchpoints, online and offline (Udoewa, 2023). We conduct service research and design through participatory employee teams and separate participatory customer teams. I am the sole "professional researcher-designer" using the model of designer-as-community-member as we practice RPD (Udoewa, 2022a, 2022b).

Relationality

We embody relationality through regular relational experiences with different numbers of group members. These include but are not limited to 1:1 conversations, meditation, meals, facilitated awareness-based activities, retrospectives, critiques, socials, etc.

Autonomy and Self-organization

We embody relational autonomy through decentralization of our research and design team (Udoewa, 2023). The various research teams are below.

- Experiential team
- Quantitative team
- Customer interview team
- Employee interview team
- Asset-based competencies team
- Futures research team
- Market research team
- Analogous research team
- Positive deviance team
- Customer observation team
- Employee observation team
- Secondary research team

Though I report the research work to executives, internally, no one leads the overall research and there is no collective group decision-making about direction. There is a project manager who facilitates sharing. All groups are autonomous. They choose their own research questions and methods. Each team invites help and other perspectives when they would like it. We are united by the purpose of equity so that no matter what research you do, you do it for the purpose of improving the service equitably for all employee and innovator customer groups, especially for women-owned and minority-owned businesses as well as minority-serving institutions (Udoewa, 2023). The relational autonomy is evident when teams choose to work together or use each other's work. For example, through frequent interactions, feedback sessions, demos, critiques, reviews, and more, the futures research team used and built upon the findings of the market research, customer interview, and employee interview teams to aid in uncovering both market-based and ethnographic futures signals. The participatory employee team working on customer interviews, compared their customer journey map to the participatory customer team's customer journey map. The differences sparked conversation that led the participatory team working on customer interviews, to reanalyze their findings and conduct follow-up interviews helping to improve the customer experience.

Symbiotic Design of Employee Experience

One example of symbiotic design is an example of improved employee experience design. While working on the customer experience, the customer interview team developed a customer journey map and shared it through various relational share-outs. The project manager, focused on making sure people had the most up-to-date information, shared it with others. A team member who had been on the team for eight weeks was focused on trying to conduct synthesis of employee interviews but was finding he was misinterpreting words and phrases in transcripts due to a lack of context. When he saw what the project manager shared, he asked "Why wasn't this customer journey map shared before?" The project manager told the team member that the customer interview team had just created it. Others had a similar reaction. The team members who saw this for the first time mentioned it to some people who had only been on the team for less time, four weeks, who were focused on understanding the program while still in orientation. A month later, two teammates who were focused on getting another teammate up to speed quickly to help in their work, shared this journey map which helped orient the new teammate quickly after only 3 weeks on the new autonomously chosen assignment to help the two teammates. This happened multiple times. Then a month later, a teammate who autonomously focuses on team cohesion organized a bonding session for new interns on their first day. Having learned about the map when quickly onboarding to help the employee interview team who requested extra help, this teammate mentioned the customer journey map to the new interns on day 1. The new interns then asked about it during day 2 of their orientation. The teammate who organized the

bonding session then introduced it into the orientation session. We immediately noticed that within a week, those interns understood the complicated program better than people who had been on the team for 6 months. In fact, it dropped the average time to feel comfortable with the details of the complicated program from 1 year to 1 month, and over a year, it improved the employee onboarding experience for service design employees by 50%. The customer journey map became a part of the onboarding for all service employees.

It is crucial to note that the customer interview team was not working on improving the employee experience; their goal was to improve the customer experience. Improved employee experience was the job of the employee experience research subteams. The use of an improved customer journey map to illuminate a previously complicated and esoteric program was a type of symbiotic design related to the relational autonomy of various groups relating, focused on their autonomous goals in consideration and collaboration with others. There was no plan, traditional design, nor collective group decision-making.

Conclusion

This is the fifth paper in a series of papers describing Radical Participatory Design (RPD) and Relational Design (RD). This fifth paper focuses on the decision-making dynamics, Radical Biocracy, found in certain RPD or RD processes. This paper shares two example cases.

Using the RPD participation framework, we summarized the analysis in the previous paper of the multiple group decision-making models, noting their basis in individualism. They can fail to address all competing desires, such as in a disappointed minority after a majority-based vote. We explored how we can apply the relationality of RPD not just to the design methodology as in RD, but also to the decision-making process.

We noted three ingredients for a relational political ecology and approach to decision-making—relationality, emergence-conducive principles, and relational autonomy. With differentiation of roles, all three ingredients can lead to emergent design, while relationality and relational autonomy, along with time, can lead to symbiotic design.

We learned about example situations that involve relationality, emergent-conducive principles, and relational autonomy, like a bone fracture healing in the human body. By studying how the cells interact, operate, relate, and function, we noted that there is a design that exists for the healing of a bone fracture, a design that did not occur based on a contested political ecology—a group decision-making process of negotiation, deliberations, or voting between cells. Instead the design emerged—emergent design. Similarly, we studied symbiotic relationships between organisms like the human-honeyguide relationship. We noticed a design that had evolved without any contentious or multipolar political ecologies, no group decision-making processes based in individualist positions. This is an example of symbiotic design.

Biocracy uses human biology as inspiration for democratic organizational governance and decision-making. Radical Biocracy goes further using human biology as inspiration in a leaderless leadership model in which there is leadership but not from an individual making final decisions or collective negotiation between individual stances. Instead, the collective leadership is an emergent quality when groups allow the design to emerge from relationality, emergence-conducive principles, and relational autonomy. We shared two examples, designing a racially just PTA and service design at NASA.

In the design of a racially just PTA, I work as a community member at a school to create an equitable and just PTA across linguistic, economic, and racial lines of difference. We engaged in RD building healthy relationality through sustained dialogue groups; we pursued relational autonomy allowing individuals and subgroups to make their own decisions in PTA work; and we adopted emergent strategy principles to guide our PTA work. We discovered that the design of an equitable organizational structure and fundraising model emerged from our radical biocracy without using an explicit decision-making process inside the design process. Team members chose what work on which they wanted to focus, and through relational interactions our groups changed, grew, started, and joined to create our hubless spoke model. Likewise, a fundraising model emerged in which we always fundraise across both campuses and equitably divide the funds among teachers, classrooms, and campuses, while avoiding events that prioritize caregivers who can give financially. We also negotiated a financial support model where we receive revenue from the school development department, allowing us to focus on non-financial ways of giving, opening up more access to caregivers of all economic backgrounds.

The symbiotic evolution still continues. We are learning and applying more principles from our relationships to use for fundraising. And we are now looking at the design of our meetings and engagement because we do not want to lionize one stereotypical image of an engaged caregiver—someone who has evenings and weekends free for meetings and events, as well as workday times available to go to the school. Everyone does not fit in that description. How do we create an organization that has inclusive meetings and inclusive ways to engage caregivers in all different situations? Those designs are in the process of emerging as we build relationships with those who cannot engage in stereotypical ways.

In a second example at NASA, a team experimented with relationality and relational autonomy inside of an agency with low relationality and autonomy. The service design team used relationality and relational autonomy to create multiple research groups that pursued their own agenda with a common goal of equity and improving transitions of small businesses in the program. Without anyone focused on designing an improved employee experience, a symbiotic design for an improved employee onboarding experience developed over time through various subgroups naturally sharing, reacting, and adjusting to each other.

A Radical Biocracy allows relationality to transform decision-making explicitly to an emergent or evolved phenomenon. This is a relationally autonomous approach to decision-making, decision-less decision-making, a knowing and deciding by the social field and its health. More work is needed to see it extended to larger scales and groups.

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Peer Review Article

Absencing as Attentional Violence and Its Impact on Well-Being:

Loss of Resonance in Advanced Capitalism

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the impact of *absencing* on well-being. It explores the source of absencing in the attentional violence created by the logic of internalized capitalism: the belief that one's self-worth is linked to productivity, the consumerist model of well-being, and the instrumentalization of relationships. The worldview created through the internalization of capitalist values leads to a stress enhancing, alienating way of life with negative consequences for well-being. Attention is diverted away from the wholeness of self and other, from the quality of relationships, creating a social field where individuals relate to themselves, others and the world through the logic of absencing. When this logic dominates the subjective structure of the inner world it reinforces self-optimization and commodified social relations that undermine well-being. Critical awareness of the internalization of capitalism reveals that even transformative approaches for well-being can become instrumentalized by the capitalist logic. This article highligts the importance of a critical lens to understand how mindfulness and spirituality in organizations can become dominated by a capitalist worldview. It

uses *presencing* in Theory U as a case study of a transformative approach aiming to undermine absencing while being constantly haunted by its influence.

Keywords

well-being, absencing, attentional violence, advanced capitalism, alienation, resonance, critical awareness, instrumentalization

> *"Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity"*
>
> (Simone Weil, as cited in Pétrement, 1976, p. 462)

Introduction

The capitalist discourse on well-being highlights the importance of self-care: mindfulness practice, time for relaxation, healthy habits, etc. (Butler, 2019). These individual daily actions are important ways to reconnect to our embodied system and maintain a lifestyle that balances effort and recovery. At the same time, the unilateral focus on self-care obscures certain ideologies and systemic structures that are constantly undermining individuals' best intentions to experience well-being.

Well-being is a psychosocial dynamic concept that includes emotional, physical, cognitive, relational, and spiritual aspects (Hone et al., 2015). It is not only a psychological function but also one that involves relationships, cultural values, and social structures. This paper examines well-being under the ideological conditions of advanced capitalism. We use Butler's (2019) concept of advanced capitalism, which describes an ideological worldview based on self-interest, competition, and materialist values. The cultural values of capitalism contribute to the belief that one's self-worth is linked to the accumulation of resources and personal productivity (Hayden, 1999), and they frame relationships as instruments for self-optimization (Rosa, 2019). This worldview contributes to *attentional violence* by reducing the complex aspects of well-being to an exclusive focus on well-being as individual self-optimization through the accumulation of various forms of capital. In this worldview, individuals see themselves as separate from others and success is seen as the promised outcome of resource accumulation (Ng, 2016).

This paper relies on the concept of *absencing* as used by Scharmer (2008) to explore the impact on well-being of an ego-based capitalist worldview blind to the integral, intersubjective dimension of our humanity. Absencing is a form of attentional violence—an ignorance of the inherent wholeness and interconnected nature of self and others, not-seeing, not paying attention, de-sensing and disengaging (Scharmer, 2023). This mode of perception prevalent under advanced capitalism (Hayden, 1999) undermines the individual pursuit of well-being by reducing its complex dimension to a consumerist mode of self-optimization. The

choice of individuals to invest in themselves and aim to self-optimize through various "technologies of the self" becomes a personal, subjective choice (Foucault, 1993, as cited in Ng, 2016, p. 138), obscuring more insidious systemic forces based on absencing that alienate individuals from the most important sources of well-being. Critical analysis reveals that absencing informs the very structure of subjectivity within a capitalist worldview, leading to the unconscious reproduction of its fundamental assumptions and values (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014). This paper contributes to critical awareness about the logic of absencing in a capitalist worldview (Scharmer, 2023), and the narrow focus on productivity, profit and optimization, that may threaten even the best-intended strategies for well-being, such as mindfulness, workplace spirituality or Theory U.

Well-Being as Attentive, Caring Relationship to Oneself and Others

Despite an enormous increase in the wellness industry to 5.6 trillion, nearly 14% higher than its size in 2019 (GWI, 2023) and many large-scale strategies for social transformation, the grip of the capitalist logic continues to expand and dominate at times even the most promising change strategies. Approaches such as mindfulness, spirituality, and presencing aim to contribute to well-being by creating attention to the wholeness of the self and its relational nature. While these approaches are promising, they need to be considered with critical awareness about their potential to reproduce the very worldview they try to counter. We will start with a definition of well-being and its subversion by the capitalist worldview.

Well-being is a holistic concept that includes multiple areas of life. It has been defined by the World Health Organization as a "positive state experienced by individuals and societies. Similar to health, it is a resource for daily life and is determined by social, economic and environmental conditions. Well-being encompasses quality of life and the ability of people and societies to contribute to the world with a sense of meaning and purpose" (World Health Organization, n.d. p. 10). Well-being is a dynamic, psychosocial concept based on the interdependence between individuals and their social environment (Tay et al., 2023). It includes emotional, physical, cognitive, and relational aspects (Hone et al., 2015). Well-being brings attention to the importance of individual actions and decisions, together with the relationships and structures in one's social environment, based on a positive dynamic between subjective experience and interpersonal, social conditions (Maté, 2022).

Individual well-being is determined by three major factors: the positive functioning of one's inner world (mental health), the quality of interpersonal relationships (Wissing et al., 2021) and a sense of meaning and purpose (Seligman, 2004). Mental health can be influenced by cultivating positive beliefs and the development of one's potential for compassion, creativity, and self-realization (Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2004; Wallace & Shapiro, 2006).

Interpersonal and social relationships are also key contributors to well-being. Social inequality and oppression diminish well-being (Prilleltensky, 2008), as do organizational structures focused on productivity geared at financial gain, which contributes to stress and the loss of well-being (Quick & Tetrick, 2011). A worldview of scarcity and competition diminishes the subjective experience of vibrancy and well-being in relationships, as individuals fail to see and connect to each other as whole selves (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014, pp. 9–12). A sense of meaning is a fundamental aspect of well-being connected to motivation, resilience, and quality of life (Seligman, 2004).

Well-being can be elucidated through the prism of Daniel Siegel's (2016) interpersonal neurobiology framework. The metaphor of a flowing river captures a state of subjective well-being, as an integrated flow of energy and information with "the features of being flexible, adaptive, coherent, energized, and stable" (Siegel & Drulis, 2023, p. 6). The threats to the flow of this river of well-being are too much rigidity or too much chaos, which both create suffering (Siegel & Drulis, 2023, p. 6). Well-being is an emergent, positive state of interaction between one's inner world (psychology) and the external world (social relations), sustained by inner integration, interpersonal connection and engagement. Five of the traits of well-being are psychological: 1) body self-regulation, 2) emotional awareness, 3) regulation of fear, 4) response flexibility, 5) insight or self-awareness, while four are relational: 1) attunement, 2) empathy, 3) compassion, 4) ethics (Siegel & Drulis, 2023, p. 16). Psychological aspects of well-being imply an attentive, caring relationship to oneself while relational aspects imply an open, attentive and caring relationship to others. Attunement, empathy, compassion, and an ethical way of being in the world are relational qualities that contribute to well-being as a state of openness and mutual engagement with others, being in resonance. Well-being is sustained by the capacity to focus and sustain attention on meaningful goals, while paying attention to one's subjective state and that of others (Wallace & Shapiro, 2006, p. 695). This definition highlights the importance of expanded attention to diverse aspects of one's experience and that of others, versus the attentional violence of ignoring these aspects in the pursuit of self-optimization.

Rosa (2019) offers the concept of *resonance* as an experience of meaningful engagement with the world in contrast to the experience of alienation. Resonance is a mutually affecting, emotion-based relationship in which each party is touched, moved by, and transformed by the other in unpredictable ways and without an instrumental goal (Rosa, 2019, p. 166). Resonance creates a sense of open engagement with the world in which we feel and we are being felt by others, that vibrates with resonant wires of connections, in opposition to a mute or hostile world where we feel isolated and invisible (Rosa, 2019, p. 170). Resonance contributes to well-being because of its reciprocal, emotion-based, alive qualities of connectedness, an open and life-giving wire of connection between the self, others, and the world that creates a sense of safety, belonging, and self-efficacy (Rosa, 2019). These aspects of well-being and resonance can be disrupted by the alienating and stress-inducing worldview of advanced capitalism. In a stressful

pace of life and concern with self-optimization, attention becomes either scattered or alienated from one's embodied state and hyper focused on the elusive goals of productivity and accumulation as promises of well-being.

Well-Being Delayed: The Stress-Inducing Logic of Advanced Capitalism

Advanced capitalism is not only a socio-economic structure but also a cultural and psychological worldview based on the value of productivity and the definition of well-being as accumulation of various forms of capital (Butler, 2019). It influences cultural values and the organization of social relationships based on self-interest, competition, pursuit of financial success and consumption (Butler, 2019).

Butler (2019) shows empirical evidence about the social stressors of increasing employment and family instability in advanced capitalism and the psychological stressors of identity formation based on enhanced self-image, individualism, and consumption. The market driven logic is an essential aspect of identity formation that together with the loss of intimate, stable social bonds and social precarity creates a vicious cycle of increased stress and loss of well-being in advanced capitalist societies (Butler, 2019). Advanced capitalism has a negative impact on well-being in two interacting areas of life: 1) the insecurities of employment and weakened social bonds, and 2) socialization processes based on the logic of the market: self-interested pursuit of social status and instrumentalization of relationships (Butler, 2019, p. 202). These socialization processes weaken social bonds and reduce the likelihood of secure and trusting relationships that nurture well-being. They create a double alienation that impacts psychological and relational aspects of well-being: an alienation from one's inherent self-worth and immediate embodied experience, and an alienation from others that diminishes empathy and connection.

Ng (2016) uses the term *homo economicus* to highlight the structure of subjectivity under advanced capitalism "which universalizes the entrepreneurial logic of competitive self-interest as the matrix of all relations" (p. 144). As individuals' very subjectivity becomes structured by the logic of the market, it becomes difficult to extricate oneself from the capitalist worldview despite its harmful effects. This creates a contradiction between what is seen as the personal pursuit of well-being within a worldview and a cultural logic based on blindness to the most important sources of well-being: inner integration (wholeness), and interpersonal connection and meaningful engagement (Siegel & Drulis, 2023). The market-driven individualist and materialist worldview is associated with an increase in mental health issues (Dollard et al., 2019; Seligman, 1990).

Measuring self-worth through productivity and self-optimization enhances absencing by moving attention away from one's emotional, embodied, and relational experience. Well-being is projected far ahead in an idealized future, as the result of optimization efforts. As Rosa (2019) suggests, the ultimate goal in life becomes to optimize one's resources, a constant gesture of postponing one's life

by focusing attention on an ideal future image (p. 3). In the worldview of advanced capitalism, well-being is seen as the reward and achieved result of productivity and future optimization of resources, an elusive promise driven by advertising industries and consumerism. The individualistic, competitive, and alienating ethos of advanced capitalism creates a subject preoccupied with survival and success through accumulation of various forms of capital, which leads to a loss of resonance (Rosa, 2023).

In his explanation of the social conditions of late modern societies, Rosa (2019) refers to "crises of resonance" as an increasing compulsion for acceleration, consumption, and exploitation that have alienated people from a resonant relationship to the world (p. 426). "The secret of consumer capitalism lies in transforming the desire for relationship into a mute desire for objects" (Rosa, 2019, p. 256). This capitalist worldview leads to absencing as a subjective experience of disconnectedness from others and estrangement from one's embodied experience and needs with a negative impact on one's well-being (Arnold et al., 2007; Dittmar et al., 2014). Attention shifts aways from the fullness of embodied, emotional and interconnected experience becoming instead focused on self-optimization, consumerism, and the idea of future happiness. The next section discusses the impact of this worldview on the quality of attention, explaining the concepts of attentional violence and absencing.

Attentional Violence, Absencing and Alienation

Attentional violence is an invisible and subtle form of violence based on not noticing the inherent dignity, wholeness, and interconnectedness of self and others. It implies lack of attention to one's embodied emotional life and that of others, a social grammar of indifference and instrumentalization (Scharmer, 2023). Attentional violence can either manifest as a constant state of distraction,[1] or blindness to one's embodied and relational experience. When speaking about the importance of transforming the ego-system to an eco-system awareness to address current global challenges Scharmer (2023) outlines three forms of violence: direct, structural, and attentional. Attentional violence causes not seeing others for who they really are (Scharmer, 2023). I take further the idea of attentional violence as blindness to the truth of the other to argue that it also extends to not seeing oneself for who one truly is.

From this standpoint, attentional violence is less about inflicting harm, and more about failing to create conditions of well-being: ignoring one's embodied, emotional life and that of others, becoming blind to one's inner world the inner

[1] Distraction is another manifestation of absencing based on the pervasive interference of technology in social life. For more details about the impact of distraction on well-being, see McDaniel, B. T. (2015). Technoference: Everyday intrusions and interruptions of technology in couple and family relationships. In C. J. Bruess (Ed.), *Family communication in the age of digital and social media* (pp.1-24). Peter Lang.

world of the other and the interconnectedness of the two. This absence of attention makes it impossible to sense the wholeness and potential (of self and others), having a negative impact on resonance and well-being (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014; Scharmer, 2023). It makes individuals absent to their embodied experience and to the presence of the other, their attention narrowed to a sort of tunnel vision in the pursuit of resource optimization and consumerism. How is attentional violence related to absencing?

While attentional violence refers to limited awareness or even lack of awareness about embodied, emotional, interconnected aspects of the self and others, absencing is the behavioral and relational outcome of this level of awareness. Scharmer (2018) explains absencing as a mode of engagement with the world based on a closed mind, closed heart, and closed will (p. 30). The closed mind is the lack of attention to one's surrounding reality, an experience of ignorance and denial (Scharmer, 2018, p. 30). The closed heart is lack of attention to others, lack of empathy and compassion characterized by hate or indifference, while the closed will is a protective worldview that leads to actions and decisions based on fear and aggression (Scharmer, 2018, p. 30). Absencing is a state of engagement with the world opposite to *presencing*, one in which there is no resonance, no intersubjectivity, an ego-based narrow perspective.

Presencing defines an experience of being present to all aspects of one's embodied, emotional and relational experiences, while also sensing the emerging future, the seed of one's full potential (Scharmer, 2018). We will analyze more closely in the last section the tension between absencing and presencing in group processes. Absencing leads to a worldview of separation, disconnection and self-protection that creates destructive relational dynamics and "social coldness," based on three elements: ignorance, hate or indifference, and fear (Scharmer, 2018, p. 31). It undermines curiosity, connectedness and belonging, the human capacities for attention, empathy and compassion that inform well-being. A worldview dominated by absencing is characterized by desensitization, cynicism and apathy, condoning, denying or participating in other forms of violence. It contributes to the reinforcement of what Scharmer (2023, para. 2) calls "the ecological, social and spiritual divides." These divides increase harm and suffering and decrease well-being for the planet, social groups and individuals, creating a paradigm of "organized irresponsibility" (Scharmer, 2023, para. 2).

The firm grip of absencing is, for Scharmer (2008), one of the most puzzling questions of our time: "So if the dark space or cycle of destruction (absencing) is dysfunctional and nobody wants it, why is the world so firmly in its grip?" (p. 288). In an article exploring the difficulties of vulnerability in the creation of open interpersonal fields using Theory U, Cox (2014) offers two possible answers to this question: 1) the addictive compulsion for production and consumption as imperatives of advanced capitalism and 2) a psychosocial immune system gone awry that protects the status quo of the worldview of advanced capitalism and sees change as a threat (p. 33). The harmful effect of this worldview is kept outside of attention and denied because it is too threatening, a form of psychosocial "active

blindness" that pervades the social field of interactions (Cox, 2014, p. 33). Attention to one's embodied needs, emotions, and vulnerability, as well as an openness to share them with others—these very conditions that make possible social fields of connection necessary for well-being—under advanced capitalism instead become threats. Absencing keeps the heart closed due to the fear of vulnerability and dependency on others (Cox, 2014, p. 39). This vulnerability is a threat to the capitalist logic of individualism and the vision of well-being as optimization of resources, not of relationships.

Absencing is an outcome of attentional violence which manifests as lack of awareness about the very sources of well-being: emotional self-regulation, meaningful relationships, and experiences of resonance and meaningful engagement. Based on the three types of relationships to the self, others, and the world, in the following section we will categorize absencing as inner absencing, relational absencing, and social absencing.

Inner Absencing

Inner absencing is the inability to sense one's inherent worth, core value and potential (Pomeroy, 2022). It is based on thought, emotional, and behavioral patterns of being "small, overwhelmed and helpless," a state of self-contraction that prevents well-being (Pomeroy, 2022, para 10). Inner absencing keeps one stuck in stress responses of fight, flight, freeze, or appease, leading to the absence of a "broaden-and-build" approach behavior that contributes to well-being through positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2001, p. 220). The world is seen as a threat that the self needs to protect itself from, rather than a field of exploration, connection, and expansion. Inner absencing means lack of awareness of one's own wholeness and inherent worth, and instrumentalization of parts of the self or one's body.

Butler (2019) gives the example of the objectification of identity driven by advertising and social media technologies where the self is constantly managed to attain an idealized future image (p. 213). The narrow, obsessive attention to one's future goals and ideal image is a form of attentional violence directed at oneself by ignoring one's immediate, embodied, and emotional experience and delaying well-being as a future achievement based on resource optimization. Inner absencing is then a form of self-alienation based on ignoring one's emotions and needs, a general loss of one's authentic self, and difficulties to self-regulate (Dollard et al., 2019, p. 9).

Relational Absencing

Relational absencing is the inability to sense the inherent worth of others, the absence of connection, empathy, and resonance in relationships. It is based on separation, individualization and self-centered perspectives, where other people become either invisible or a means to satisfy one's needs. The logic of capitalist accumulation and competition turns relationships into instruments to strengthen one's position, power, or success in a competitive social field (Rosa, 2023).

Relational absencing is a form of disconnection from others, a denial of our inherently interdependent nature and thus the inability to create caring, compassionate, and reciprocal relationships that contribute to well-being (Dollard et al., 2019).

Self-worth and self-efficacy are pursued in relational absencing from a competitive, individualized search for status, power, or success as accumulation of resources. The relational concern becomes: how can the other help me achieve my goal? Interpersonal bonds are weakened by individualism, materialism, and inequality (Seligman, 1990). When relationships are instrumentalized for self-optimization, social attachment and belonging becomes precarious, leading to a loss of resonance and well-being.

Social Absencing and Alienation

Rosa (2019) outlines a philosophy of the good life through the relational concepts of alienation and resonance that define two kinds of relationship to the world: one that undermines well-being and one that enhances well-being. Alienation is "a specific form of relationship to the world in which subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility (repulsion) and thus without any inner connection" (Rosa, 2019, p. 252). Alienation is the experience of a world that is mute, cold, non-receptive, lacking resonance and thus undermining one's quality of life and well-being (Rosa, 2019). Alienation defines "a relationship of non-relationship" (Lijster et al., 2019, p. 70), a state of estrangement that destroys the intersubjective social field of belonging, recognition, and resonance. Alienation undermines the value of otherness and reciprocity. In alienation, the world seems hostile and indifferent, non-responsive to one's needs, an experience that diminishes well-being (Rosa, 2019, p. 118). Alienation means the absence of emotional involvement and connection, a muting of the resonant qualities of emotional exchanges among people that create co-regulation and well-being. Relationships of alienation are "either indifferent or repulsive," they create stress, anxiety, and loneliness (Rosa, 2019, p. 178).

Inner absencing and relational absencing create an ever-increasing feedback loop between the ego-based focus on self-optimization and instrumentalizing of others that reinforces social absencing as a cultural norm. The forces that pull towards self-preservation and maximization of individual resources increase relational absencing, a phenomenon Seligman (1990) called "the waxing of the individual and the waning of the commons."(p. 1) Relational absencing leads to individuals see each other as competitors or as instruments, which reduces their interpersonal connection and their mutual recognition. Relationships become a source of stress rather than one of well-being, by creating loneliness, fear, and discomfort (Ritchie-Dunham, 2014, p. 9). The social accelerating conditions of advanced capitalism create hardened, frozen, stagnant conditions of alienation that destroy connection and resonance leading to a rise in burnout and depression (Rosa, 2019, p. 42).

Inner absencing is a reductive way to relate to oneself, losing sight of one's inherent self-worth, wholeness, and embodied needs. Relational absencing is a reductive way of relating to others, in instrumentalizing ways as resources for one's own optimization and losing sight of their wholeness and potential. Social absencing is a self-reinforcing dynamic created by inner and relational absencing that contributes to a social field of alienation and instrumentalization of relationships. Absencing structures one's relationship to the self, others, and the social world, creating a worldview that reduces well-being and contributes to ever accelerating stress conditions.

Acceleration, Stress and Loss of Resonance

Acceleration is the constant intensification of the rhythm of production in advanced capitalism (Rosa, 2015). The speed of technological innovation and social change are accompanied by an acceleration of the pace of life, a speed up of processes of productivity that are increasing stress. This faster rhythm reduces the time available for relationships and the time to pay attention to the fullness of one's embodied, emotional experience which increases stress and alienation (Rosa, 2019, p. 180). Efforts to optimize oneself as "human resource" and the instrumentalization of one's body contributes to physical and psychological alienation that lead to burnout (Rosa, 2019, p. 105).

The constant acceleration of the rhythm of life and work also undermines the quality of relationships, contributing to isolation and depression (Borysenko, 2011; Bourgeault et al., 2021).

Stress has become a catch-all phrase for emotional and physical malaise and attributed as the main cause of multiple problems. Stress is the cause of negative feedback loops between social conditions and psychological responses. If we return to Siegel's metaphor of well-being as a flowing river, stress is the chaos and turbulence that disrupts this flow. Stress appears when the demands of the outside world overwhelm one's adaptive capacities. Work stress for example has been defined as "harmful physical and emotional responses that occur when the requirements of the job do not match the capabilities, resources, or needs of the worker" (Sauter et al., 1990, p. 6).

Acceleration creates an oversaturated, frenzied, and stressful rhythm of life and work. It contributes to attentional violence because it reduces the time to pay attention to one's wholeness and that of others. The tunnel vision of absencing based on lack of awareness about conditions that nurture well-being, associated with the ever-accelerating speed of work and demands of productivity create a pervasive dynamic of stress and alienation.

We can explore the impact of stress on well-being through empirical studies that showcase the global mental health crisis due to rising stress levels (World Health Organization, 2022). The most common symptoms of stress are burnout and mood disorders. They are different manifestations of the loss of resonance with oneself, others, and the world through built-up stress. Burnout develops

through a sustained accumulation of chronic stress, and it is characterized by exhaustion, negative perceptions, and loss of well-being and satisfaction (Maslach et al., 2001). In Canada, my own context, a report by Mental Health Research Canada (2023) shows that 1 in 3 working Canadians experienced burnout, with healthcare and education as the most affected sectors. Anxiety disorders manifest as constant, generalized feelings of dread out of proportion with real events (Statistics Canada, 2022). Generalized anxiety doubled between 2012 and 2022 from 2.6% to 5.2% in the general population (Statistics Canada, 2022). Fifty-three percent of all Canadians consider anxiety and depression as "epidemic" (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2018). Surveys in the education sector show a significant rise in post-pandemic stress levels that lead to addiction, anxiety and depression for students (Treleaven, 2022) and faculty (Bourgeault et al., 2021). Only 25% of young Canadians between 20-29 reported subjective experiences of well-being in a survey between 2021-22 (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Advanced capitalism creates a culture of competition, acceleration, increased work, managerialism, generalized sense of insecurity and instrumentalization that increases stress and reduces well-being (Dollard et al., 2019). The inner, relational, and social absencing outlined above contribute to alienation and lack of self-worth, while the acceleration of the rhythm of work increases stress, pressure, and time availability to pay attention to the very sources of well-being, such as emotional regulation, intimate relationships, meaning, and purpose. While the wellness industry continues to expand, the capitalist worldview subverts the most basic foundations of well-being and instrumentalizes change strategies. The next section offers a critical reading of two well-known transformative approaches for well-being and the danger of their instrumentalization.

Instrumentalization of Well-Being Change Strategies

The worldview of capitalism is created by complex interconnected sociocultural and psychological factors. The belief that one's self-worth depends on productivity and accumulation of capital is strengthened by the fact that social relationships under capitalism do recognize and reward status and power (Butler, 2019). It leads to hyper-individualism, the absence of deep, resonant relationships, and social structures based on competition and reward. This worldview places individuals in what has been called "the rat race," a stressful, frenzied pursuit of success in a faraway future that reinforces absencing. The metaphor of the race is relevant, since it captures the constant sense of acceleration, stress (Rosa, 2015) and the social grammar of absencing (Scharmer, 2018). This busy, time constricting and absencing way of being destroys attunement, empathy, and compassion, the essential relational ingredients of well-being (Goleman, 2008; Siegel & Drulis, 2023). How is it possible to free oneself from such a pervasive, self-reinforcing cycle of absencing? I will focus here on two transformation approaches for well-being, the use of mindfulness and spirituality in organizations, that have gained popularity in capitalist societies in the last few

decades, highlighting the danger of their instrumentalization by the logic of capitalism.

Mcmindfulness: Individual Self-care at the Service of Corporate Productivity

One well-being practice that has become common in the Western world is the practice of mindfulness as the cultivation of attention through the intentional slowing down of the stressful rhythm of life in advanced capitalism. Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of the experience moment to moment" (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). Mindfulness is a quality of expanded attention that allows things outside of us to unfold free from projections of ideas, beliefs and desires—the opposite of attentional violence. It is focused openness to present experience, awareness, and acceptance, a way to counteract absencing by bringing attention to one's embodied, emotional experience, cultivating more calm and acceptance as antidotes to stress (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Mindfulness practice is a self-regulation tool that improves the quality of relationships to our minds and bodies, other people and the environment, through the intentional cultivation of attention (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). A key principle in mindfulness is *slowing down*, taking the time to meditate, to become aware of one's body, emotions, and one's present environment. While mindfulness practice offers a powerful antidote to the acceleration of life and inner absencing, it also has the danger of becoming instrumentalized as a self-care tool meant to help people tolerate increasingly stressful conditions and enhance their productive capacities through focused attention.

Mindfulness has been embraced by the corporate world and instrumentalized for its role in emotional regulation, training of attention, and positive effects on mental health (Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017, p. 76). While mindfulness has indeed positive effects on well-being, its instrumentalization to serve the purpose of increased productivity and efficiency has raised many concerns (Ng, 2016). It can increase the capacity to tolerate and accept increasingly stressful work conditions through meditative practices that build small oases of calm and restoration. Mindfulness increases the capacity to tolerate stress and discomfort by regulating one's inner rhythm and expanding attention to one's body and inner experience. It also cultivates non-judgment and in this context more acceptance of power-based, harmful conditions, and structures. Instead of critical awareness of these harmful social conditions, mindfulness can be used to place responsibility solely on the individuals who would only need to change their minds and detach from a stressful reality to experience well-being.

Purser (2019) coined the term *mcmindfulness* to point out the instrumentalization of mindfulness by a capitalist agenda promoting individualist detachment and turning a blind eye to systemic suffering. Mcmindfulness is an example of the dangers of instrumentalizing a well-being strategy under the dominating logic of individualism and efficiency—a way to shift responsibility for

systemic inequality, stress, and burnout to individual self-care. If mindfulness is not accompanied by insight and critical awareness, it runs the risk of remaining an apolitical tool for one's individual well-being, or even to be used to increase stress tolerance and productivity (Sherrell & Simmer-Brown, 2017; Taylor, 1999).

The critique of mindfulness shows that despite its potential for well-being and reduction of attentional violence, it can become a technology of self-governance that serves capitalist interests of increased productivity (Ng, 2016, p. 148). Ng (2016) stresses the importance of critical awareness about the normative assumptions and power structures that frame mindfulness practice. Critical engagement with systemic power and capitalist hegemony is necessary when we examine the transformative power of mindfulness.

Workplace Spirituality: More Meaningful Work or the Final Frontier of Soul Commodification?

Another large-scale transformation strategy with the potential to contribute to well-being is workplace spirituality. Spirituality has emerged in leadership and organizational studies in the last few decades as a strategy for transforming the alienating and destructive worldview and values of advanced capitalism (Anello & Hernandez, 2014; Fry, 2003). It is a framework that centers transcendence and the recognition of the essential nobility of all beings (Anello & Hernandez, 2014); mindfulness, selflessness, and compassion (Hougaard & Carter, 2018); connections with self, others, environment, and a higher power (Howard, 2002); hope, faith, vision and altruistic love (Fry, 2003); meaning, fulfilment and belonging (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010).

The integration of spirituality in organizational cultures offers a hopeful possibility for transformation by facilitating holistic participation, a sense of community, and meaningful engagement (Tourish & Tourish, 2010, p. 208). Workplace spirituality comprises a set of values that hold the promise to change absencing conditions by creating awareness of the wholeness and inherent worth of all individuals, concern with well-being for all, promoting transcendence, compassion and joy, and cultivating an interconnected worldview (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz, 2010). The integration of spiritual values in organizational cultures shifts the focus from the unilateral profit driven mode of social absencing to a focus on well-being, collaboration, belonging, and collective creativity. The spirituality turn in capitalist organizational culture is seen as response to the pervasive alienation, instrumentalization, and lack of well-being in advanced capitalism (Taylor, 1996). But to what degree does this integration of spirituality in organizational cultures lead to well-being?

Workplace Spirituality as Manipulation of Beliefs and Values

A critical examination of workplace spirituality is necessary given the potential of the instrumentalization of spirituality in human resource development (HRD) at the corporate level to further advance the agenda of capitalist profit (Case &

Gosling, 2010; Tourish & Tourish, 2010). The danger of the instrumentalization of spirituality is the construction of worker subjects who will continue to advance the goals of capitalist corporations under a new guise of purpose-driven, selfless service (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 65). Spirituality becomes in the capitalist logic an untapped inner human resource that can be used to increase productivity and efficiency, similar to the use of mindfulness analyzed above.

If the preoccupation with spirituality, well-being, and meaning are means to transform stressful, alienating and instrumentalizing capitalist work cultures, then what exactly is the danger? The coupling of spiritual longing in an alienated and stressful world with promises of corporations that care for community, holistic development, higher purpose and well-being, is a dangerous one. The business discourse of spirituality seeks alignment between personal values and those of the corporation (Case & Gosling, 2010, p. 12; Tourish & Tourish, 2010, p. 209). The first danger is the potential manipulation of beliefs, vulnerability and spiritual longing in training people to surrender their egos to purposeful service (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 71–72), an "Orwellian" form of affective manipulation (Case & Gosling, 2010, p. 13). Spirituality, in this case, can shift from a vehicle for employees' emancipation, well-being, and personal transformation into a fundamentalist doctrine of unity created by people in power, that invades employees' most deeply subjective and personal dimension of experience, the final frontier of soul commodification (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 79).

The second danger is the promise of wholeness, higher purpose, and a sense of interconnected community to workers who feel alienated and threatened by precarious employment. The discourse of spirituality at work can turn into a stifling of dissent and cultivation of willing obedience under conditions of inequality (Case & Gosling, 2010, p. 15). The discourse about the values of community, interconnectedness, and collaboration can be used to make invisible the contradictions and disempowerment created by capitalist systems based on inequality, oppression, and domination (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 77). In other words, the absence of critical awareness about the gap between a spirituality-based vision and the reality of power-based work conditions under capitalism can become a capitalist driven ideology of false unity packed in a noble set of spiritual values (defined by people in power) and difficult to contradict (Tourish & Tourish, 2010). The social control of leaders becomes more pervasive with workers' uncritical internalization of these values (Tourish & Tourish, 2010, pp. 212).

The third danger is that discourses of workplace spirituality do not sufficiently account for the contradiction between spiritual values and the competitive, money and power-driven values of capitalism. "The creative process, which is at the heart of spiritual transformation, within the HRD nirvana of a learning organization, is distorted into innovation—ideas harnessed to the organization's advantage—and subjected to organizational norms of accountability and results-based measurement" (Fenwick & Lange, 1998, p. 74). Case & Gosling (2010) take this critique further by examining the scientific collusion in efforts to quantify the profit impact of workplace spirituality (p. 18).

Spirituality holds the promise and potential of transforming absencing into conditions that contribute to well-being through meaning, wholeness and deeper connections, but it cannot do so without critical engagement with the domination-based, instrumentalizing logic of capitalism. The last section will explore the tensions between absencing and presencing using the case study of Presencing in Theory U, developed by Scharmer and colleagues at the Presencing Institute as a method for awareness-based systems transformation.

The Tension between Absencing and Presencing in Theory U

Theory U is a technology for personal and social change based on deep awareness and collective creativity (Scharmer, 2018). It relies on the metaphor of a learning journey, shaped as a U, to the depths of one's inner Source, with the purpose of shifting worldviews and social structures. It is usually done in groups and it is a method for engaging people in deep learning, letting go of habitual assumptions, opening up to sensing the complexity of reality, and connecting to their inner Source. It uses diverse transformative learning methods to develop awareness of one's inner landscape, emotions, beliefs, values and meaning as the first step in initiating a process of collective transformation. Its aim is to create organizational cultures and systems that care for the well-being of all. It is currently used around the globe in leadership training, organizational change, and larger systems change initiatives, drawing on MIT's tradition of action research.

Scharmer uses the concept of *presencing* (2018) to explain the process of "sensing and actualizing of our highest future potential" (p. 30). Presencing depends on the capacity of participants for deep connection with themselves and others that would allow them to access the intersubjective field of collective intelligence. It relies on a process of group receptivity that envisions and actualizes future possibilities (Scharmer, 2018). There are two radically different aspects in this approach. The first one is the exercise of learning from the future, rather than solely from the past, which is the traditional way to learn. Learning from the future implies deep sensing about the kind of future that wants to emerge through people's actions, a way to pay attention to one's deepest aspirations in response to what is needed in the world. The second aspect is the invitation for individuals to tap into their intersubjective experience, to expand their ego based consciousness and enter a state of resonance with others. Intersubjectivity is the capacity to share collective meaning (Cipolletta et al., 2020) through experiences of resonance, vulnerability and connectedness that lead to transformation, well-being and creativity (Cox, 2014). Similar to mindfulness, presencing is an aspirational process, a process of stillness, resonance, and deep listening that is difficult to reach and sustain (Scharmer, 2008, p. 269). Presencing invites full attention to one's immediate, embodied and emotional experience, to that of others and to the larger intersubjective field.

Absencing is the opposite of presencing, a state of frozen rigidity, not listening, being out of resonance with others, caught in a closed, protective self (Scharmer, 2008). As shown in the section above, absencing is a state of limited

awareness based on fear, ignorance, and disconnection that is pervasive and habitual in a capitalist worldview. Presencing can easily turn back into absencing as a habitual condition. The first difficulty of presencing is the risk of vulnerability implied in opening the self to other in a public space. The second difficulty is that groups engage in presencing from a "social field *already created, shaped and controlled by* absencing conversations" (Cox, 2014, p. 34) that dominate social relationships in advanced capitalism. Presencing requires intentional commitment, critical awareness, and openness to transformation. Critical awareness in this case implies making the system see and sense itself as groups can reflect on the quality of their engagement and the way their engagement is shaped by absencing.

Absencing conversations are based on "silencing others' views," "blaming," "hubris," "harassment and bullying," and judgment (Scharmer, 2008, pp. 282–87). If absencing is the norm of socialization in the logic of advanced capitalism, then presencing is a practice for transforming the norm. The normalization of absencing creates both conscious and unconscious resistance to processes of deep listening, awareness, authenticity, and vulnerability that can potentially lead to well-being, but are initially deeply uncomfortable and unfamiliar. Scharmer's (2008) solution to the unconscious shift into absencing is to constantly return to awareness and the deep intention of the higher self, while Cox (2014) suggests a more radical gesture of making visible the forces of absencing by naming them and reflecting on their underlying mechanisms in dialogue. Scharmer (2008) highlights in a more optimistic way the human capacity for attention and return to one's deep intention and purpose, noticing when we shift into patterns of absencing, while Cox (2014) urges us to become aware of absencing as a reaction of protection against vulnerability and resistance to acknowledging one's true needs and emotions, a form of "active blindness" (p. 33). Cox (2014) encourages open engagement with emotions and relational risks based on the recognition of underlying patterns of resistance and a conscious commitment to face interpersonal vulnerability with compassion. Without this recognition and critical awareness of absencing, the process of transformation can turn into yet another experience of collective blindness (Cox, 2014, p. 36).

Mindfulness practice, spirituality-based organizational practices and the Theory U based method of presencing are three approaches that aim to transform the alienating and stress enhancing worldview of capitalism, creating more well-being, meaning and resonance. While there is no doubt about the positive intentions and the contribution of these approaches, they need to be accompanied by critical awareness about their potential instrumentalization.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed the impact of the internalized worldview of advanced capitalism on well-being. The worldview of capitalism leads to a structure of subjectivity that replicates the logic of the market: self-interest and competition, tying self-worth to productivity, attentional violence based on lack of awareness of

one's wholeness and potential, and instrumentalization of relationships. This worldview undermines well-being as inner, relational and social absencing: a way of being where self-worth is tied to productivity and social status, relationships are used for self-optimization and social structures are based on competition and alienation.

The individualization of well-being as personal self-care obscures the forces of inner, relational and social absencing that undermine the fundamental sources of well-being. Even transformative approaches that aim to counteract this pervasive worldview and contribute to well-being are in danger of being instrumentalized to further advance the capitalist logic of productivity and efficiency. Mindfulness, workplace spirituality, and presencing in Theory U create attention to the wholeness of the self and others, to well-being, meaning and resonance. While these approaches are promising, we need critical awarenesss about their potential to reproduce the very worldviews and values they try to resist. We can create better conditions for well-being through critical awareness, resistance to the alienating and instrumentalizing logic of advanced capitalism, and attention to the fundamental sources that contribute to it.

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Peer Review Article

Awareness-Based Design:

Bringing Design to Social Presencing Theater

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Abstract

To shift beliefs, values and practices, we need to design learning experiences that can transform our inner dimension—that is, our ways of thinking, feeling and being in relation with the worlds we are a part of. With a view to promoting transformative learning (TL), we must start with becoming aware of our experiences within a social field. Given that our experience is oftentimes intangible (i.e. non-verbal, felt, relational and emergent), this paper argues that making intangible experiences visible or tangible can support TL. This research asks: How might design practice support awareness of intangible experiences during the process of transformative learning? The paper emphasizes four kinds of intangible experiences: thoughts, emotions, felt senses and sensations. The methodology brings practice-based design research to Social Presencing Theater (SPT)—and SPT to design. The SPT practices foreground an embodied, gestural and felt contribution often sidelined in design; while design brings a material and visual contribution to the embodied awareness of SPT. Awareness-based

design (ABD) is the term introduced here for a design practice that learns from and engages with SPT. ABD is framed as a method-pedagogy aspiring to become a living curriculum. The set of relational, embodied and co-creative literacies, comprehensions and sensibilities outlined demonstrate how the acts of becoming aware and making sense of the intangible support the work of transformative learning.

Keywords

transformative learning, inner transformation, design research, social presencing theater, awareness-based design, social arts

Introduction

I often introduce myself as a social designer. I situate my design practice within the intersection of social design, embodied awareness, and transformative education.[1] My practice is transdisciplinary, situated, reflexive, relational, and emergent. In light of social, cultural and technological changes, designers might feel called to generate not only material objects but also systems interventions, services, and experiences (Buchanan, 2011; Davis, 2008). When I observe what my practice generates, I note the experiences and models of engagement I've designed, as well as the tools and processes that support the engagement. But I also attune to the spaces the practice opens up, the shifts, and the experiences it invites in myself and others.[2]

As a designer, I recognize that the materiality of *things* is intertwined with the intangible aspects of our life. By *things*, I mean material objects or visual entities that are part of our lived experiences and have some degree of agency, significance, resonance, and/or vitality (Bennett, 2010; Bollas, 2009; Brown, 2001; Miller, 1987). In my design practice, I often wonder: What are the relationships between the tangible and the intangible? That is, how do materials *evoke*, *prompt*, *initiate*, *surface,* and/or *sustain* intangible experiences in us? Is it possible to materialize our intangible experiences in tangible, visible forms?

[1] I consider social design as a field addressing social challenges and *wicked problems* (Buchanan, 2011) through design-led ways of knowing, being and doing. Social design can deliver various tangible as well as immaterial outputs: new routines, habits, behaviors; both at an individual as well as at a systemic level. Additionally, in education, I have worked with both youth development (e.g. agency, citizenship, empowerment, 21st century skills and future-making abilities; middle and high-school education) and adult learning (i.e. life-long learning through immersive experiences; higher education).

[2] You can read more about samples of my applied practice and work here: http://www.ricardo-dutra.com/.

In this paper, the key *hunch* is that making intangible experiences tangible or visible can take people on a journey of fresh discoveries and insights.[3] I, Ricardo Dutra Gonçalves, am interested in designing tools and processes that guide people towards becoming aware and making new meanings out of their felt and relational experiences (Ackermann, 2007; Rinaldi, 2009). Lisa Grocott, my co-author and PhD supervisor, is riding in the passenger seat. We share a foundational belief that the co-creative, affective, and generative practice of designing can play a significant role in enabling the hard work of supporting people to shift perspectives, mindsets, and the stories we tell ourselves. Lisa's research on designing transformative learning encounters animates the line of inquiry I chase in this paper. Here, I deepen her work by focusing on the important role awareness can play in scaffolding how we can engage with the intangible.

By intangible, we mean that which is unable to be grasped or seen because it does not have a physical or visible presence—therefore, being ephemeral, tacit, oftentimes unaware. This paper emphasizes four kinds of intangible experiences: thoughts, emotions, felt senses, and sensations. We argue that to become aware of our experiences, we need to attend to, and stay with the non-verbal and pre-reflexive qualities of these lived experiences (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2023; Petitmengin, 2007).

The importance of becoming aware of experience resonates with the theories proposed by other researchers. For instance, in the Transtheoretical Model of behavior change (Prochaska & DiClemente, 2005), becoming aware of our experience is indicated as a move from precontemplation (i.e. when we are still unaware) to contemplation (i.e. when we begin to recognize our experience).[4] Mezirow's 10 phases of transformational learning start with a disorienting dilemma and self-examination (Mezirow, 1991). For Senge (1990), transformation begins when we become aware of the underlying models that guide our thinking and action. Freire (1970) spoke of conscientization as a process of becoming aware of the social, political, and economic forces shaping our lives. However, none of these thinkers emphasize the process of becoming aware as an act of making that integrates material, embodied, relational, and co-creative literacies.

This research is situated within a broader field of education, and, in particular, of transformative learning (TL). Transformative learning here is the meaningful learning that connects inner shifts in awareness with outer changes

[3] I choose to use the word hunch instead of hypothesis to honor how designers often pursue intuitive knowing and being as ways of guiding their action—rather than trying to prove a pre-established hypothesis.

[4] The Transtheoretical Model (TTM) is a framework for understanding how people change their behavior (Prochaska & DiClemente, 2005). TTM suggests that behavior change is a process rather than a one-time event, and people go through a series of stages before they can successfully change and maintain new behaviors.

in actions and systems (Barrett, 2017; Dewey, 1938; Grocott, 2022; Henriksson et al., 2020; Sullivan, 1999). This paper argues that in order to address the complex issues of the present and emerging future, we need learning encounters that can transformatively nudge the inner dimension of our individual and collective actions. If we hope to unsettle the ways we act and respond to a world facing meta crisis, we need to not just think of behavior change, but to also imagine how we might shift our ways of being, thinking, relating, and collaborating. Through design practice, this research addresses this challenge by resisting a separation of mind from body and self from world. I (Ricardo) develop an expansive conception of what it means to design, to engage with the inner-outer dynamics of transformative learning. The recursive interactions between being aware and making tangible offer a continuous, reciprocal relationship that helps to shape current perception and future action (Barrett, 2017; Ingold, 2000; Noë, 2004).[5]

In the scope of designing for awareness within processes of transformative learning, this paper's main question is: *How might design practice support the awareness of intangible experiences during the process of TL?* Our focus is to offer a conceptual articulation of a design practice based on awareness—in which theory informs practice, and practice informs theory. By focusing on the process of becoming aware of experience, it is not our intention to discuss the resulting dynamics of transformative learning itself. Therefore, this paper's main contribution to theory is, ultimately, a method-pedagogy called *awareness-based design* (ABD)—including a set of literacies, comprehensions and sensibilities towards becoming aware and making sense of the intangible.[6]

This paper is divided into four main sections. The first section introduces the main research question and methodology. The next section clarifies the background context of a design research practice that aspires to make the intangible visible. Here, the awareness-based design prompts I developed by combining design methods with Social Presencing Theater are introduced. The third section of the article narrates how the prompts were developed and iterated on through applied research in two situated contexts and in reflective conversation with myself (Ricardo). The practice of Awareness-Based Design is articulated in the fourth and final section by way of a distilled set of literacies, sensibilities, and comprehensions.

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[5] Ingold's "dwelling perspective" suggests that people do not stand apart from their environments as detached observers but are deeply embedded within them. Perception and knowledge arise from direct engagement with the world, not from abstract, detached cognition. This view aligns with the non-dual concept, as the inner (perception, thought) and outer (environment, action) are not separate but co-evolving (Ingold, 2011) or as pointed out by Noë (2004), perception arises from our dynamic involvement with the world around us.

[6] By method-pedagogy, we refer to pedagogical processes that emphasize the *how* of learning—therefore encouraging, for example, learner-centered approaches, experiential learning, critical thinking and mastery (Bruner, 1960; Dewey, 1938; Freire, 1970; Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978).

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach to research through design (Frayling, 1993) is the primary methodology for this research. The practice-based orientation here goes explicitly beyond the material, artifact framing of research through design. To bring an awareness-based approach to design, we must design for the intangible by being in conversation with the body and one's own reflective backtalk (Hayashi, 2021; Schön, 1983).[7]

The research design includes a series of one-week-long experimental in-person and online workshops conducted in India (Mumbai, 2020) and Chile (Temuco, 2021).[8] In India, K-12 teachers explored how they perceive, notice, and make sense of emotions in the school. In Chile, university students explored how to make shared hopes and longings for their city visible—therefore, becoming aware of emergent future possibilities to engage in collectively.

Practice-based design research is a form of inquiry in which the creative design practice itself is the method of research (Candy, 2006). Social Presencing Theater (SPT) is a social art-based research practice drawing on embodied awareness and systems thinking—seeking to surface invisible social dynamics through the use of body-led and awareness-based social practices (Hayashi, 2021).[9] In the workshops in India and Chile, SPT practices (i.e. 20-minute Dance, Duets, Dance of 5's, and Stuck) were combined with practice-based design methods to support awareness of intangible experiences during the process of TL.

The resulting *awareness-based design prompts* I developed integrate design- and arts-based sensitizing methods. These prompts bring an awareness for people to experiences that might otherwise be hard to access, feel, or articulate. Using photographs, videos, imagery, drawings, and writing, these intangible experiences are given visible form. The workshops were followed up by micro-phenomenology interviews (Petitmengin, 2007) and qualitative surveys (Appendix I).

In this paper, references in the first-person, speak to my (Ricardo Dutra Gonçalves) grounded experience as a practitioner-researcher with a design and presencing practice. The first person voice critically acknowledges equal parts of embodied, material, emotional, and analytical rigor of a practitioner-researcher

[7] In this paper, we attempt to generate new knowledge through a performative artistic inquiry. Dutra Gonçalves considers his practice-based design research approach as performative because it values and uses embodied knowledge. For instance, by exploring embodiment as a creative form of knowing to articulate complex individual and systemic phenomena.

[8] The choice of working in these two countries stems from Dutra Gonçalves' own contexts of practice—having worked extensively in Latin America and India.

[9] Hayashi (2021) defines SPT as an individual and group practice rooted in embodiment, meditation, and systems thinking that engages the body's physical and spatial intelligence.

undertaking awareness-based inquiry in the social field.[10] Lisa Grocott, as second author, supports the conceptual framing and dialogic listening necessary when seeking new, sophisticated ways of "attuning" across diverse forms of "data" (Grocott, 2022). Just as a designer learns to attune to how someone interacts with a prototype or engages in a workshop, attending to the embodied and oftentimes ineffable qualities of SPT require new and disciplined modes of attuning.

The mixed-methods approach and practice-based orientation resists a methodological triangulation that declares "the data tells us" this. The awareness-based commitment calls for sense-making through and across the practitioner-researcher's insights, the qualitative data, and the emergent theorizing of practice. The intention here is not to offer a theoretical position, a prescriptive framework, or a suite of experiential tools. Instead, the set of literacies, comprehensions, and sensibilities presented offer a way to engage with the feedback loops of practice that will forever be evolving and reconfiguring.

Bringing Design to Social Presencing Theater

When working as an action researcher at the Presencing Institute (2016–2021), I was asked to collaborate with choreographer Arawana Hayashi to (1) organize Social Presencing Theater as a research methodology within the theoretical framework of Theory U (Scharmer, 2009); and (2) create case studies from the application of SPT in diverse global contexts.[11] Back then, I was the only designer at the Institute and my core intention was to bring design to embodied awareness and awareness-based systems change. The embodied awareness practices touched upon intangible aspects of personal and societal transformation. Otto Scharmer's work and the Institute's practice framed how these intangible aspects were essential to engage if we sought transformation (Scharmer, 2009).

With Lisa as my Ph.D. supervisor and Arawana as my collaborator, I came to see how Lisa's research practice of designing tangible tools and learning encounters could integrate with Arawana's embodied approach to systems change. By making intangible experiences tangible, we can encourage shifts in perspectives, mindsets, and action. This is how I came to explore the hunch that physical, tangible design probes could complement the inherent subjectivity of bringing awareness and shifting consciousness to transforming social fields.

[10] Scharmer (2009) defines social fields as the sum total and quality of relationships we collectively enact.

[11] Theory U is a framework for leading profound change by moving through a process of co-sensing, co-presencing, and co-creating. It emphasizes shifting awareness from downloading old patterns to accessing emerging future possibilities, enabling transformative action (Scharmer, 2009).

The Materiality of *Things*

In design research, I first experienced the connection between the tangible and the intangible when I encountered Mattelmäki's (2006) work on design probes. According to Gaver et al. (2004), probes are evocative tasks that elicit inspirational responses from people. I remember the first time I saw an image of a few design probes, all symmetrically placed on a table: a disposable camera, an audio recorder, maps, a workbook, and postcards. The image of the design probes communicated a subjectivity, open inquiry, and an embracing of ambiguity and playfulness, which drew me in.[12]

As a knowledge-creation method, I see probing as a means to enact Krogh and Koskine's (2020) notion of *drifting* that not just accommodates but values "actions that take design away from its original brief or question and lead to a result that was not anticipated in the beginning" (p. X). In this way, the design probes ask participants to engage with open-ended and ambiguous tasks and materials to express, reflect, and document their experiences, feelings and thoughts (Gaver, 2004; Hutchinson et al., 2003; Mattelmäki, 2006, 2014). After some early-stage prototyping when working at the Presencing Institute, I observed how *probe* could be a word that had intrusive connotations.[13] For awareness-based design I chose the word *prompt* to refer to these design invitations to drift.

Intangible Experiences

In this paper, I refer to *intangible* simply to indicate that something cannot be directly perceived by the physical senses or grasped in a concrete way. By *experience*, I refer to the wide range of sensory, emotional, felt, affective, and cognitive responses—resulting from the active, dynamic, and interconnected engagement with one another and the world (Barrett, 2017; Bortoft, 1996; Dewey, 1938; Ingold, 2011; Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

This research focuses on four types of intangible experiences: *thoughts*, *emotions*, *felt senses*, and *sensations*.[14] By *thoughts*, I mean the mental process of

[12] Mattelmäki et al. (2014) write that encountering "new types of challenges" has led designers to look for "new approaches to design—approaches that were able to dive into more ambiguous topics, such as experiences, meaningful everyday practices and emotions" (p. 67). While Gaver et al. (2004) write that probes value "uncertainty, play, exploration, and subjective interpretation" (p. 53).

[13] For example, like when a doctor probes a patient with an instrument.

[14] Here, it is important to observe that the individual experience is inseparable from the experience of a larger group—that is, our experiences are inherently social because we are always interconnected with others (humans and non-humans) within larger social and cultural contexts (Dewey, 1938; Haraway, 2016; Ingold, 2011; Kimmerer, 2013; Shiva, 1991; Viveiros de Castro, 2014).

thinking—including, for example, ideas, beliefs, assumptions, etc.[15] By *emotions*, I refer to constructed affective experiences by the brain in response to specific situations, based on past experiences, context, and cultural influences (Barrett, 2017)[16]. By *felt senses*, I mean the pre-reflective bodily experiences that are difficult to articulate in words. They often start as fuzzy and unclear experiences—which then can take form and change (Gendlin, 1978; Hayashi, 2021; Petitmengin, 2007; Rome, 2014).[17] By *sensations*, I refer to the initial, immediate, and elementary units of consciousness resulting from perceiving internal and external signals through the body-mind senses (Barrett, 2017; James, 1890).

Based on the practice of bringing SPT to multiple global contexts, I have observed five characteristics common to all these intangible experiences (Gonçalves & Hayashi, 2021). Intangible experiences include (a) non-verbal (i.e. tacit, pre-reflective),[18] (b) embodied (i.e. experienced through the body-mind system), (c) relational (i.e. interdependent), (d) subjective (i.e. experienced from the subject as a point of view and access toward the world), and (e) creative dimensions (i.e. emergent, unfolding, changing).[19] In this research, I used these characteristics as guideposts to inform how the prompts could elicit awareness.

Bringing Social Presencing Theater to Design

In this research, I combine the awareness-based, embodied, and relational practices of SPT with the *making* orientation of design (Cross, 2006; Grocott, 2022; Kolko, 2011; Mattelmäki, 2006). By *awareness*, I wish to evoke the sense

[15] Indigenous scholars argue that thoughts are not just the result of mental activity—but are rooted in people's relationship with community, spirituality, and the natural world. Therefore, they call upon the need for research approaches that respect and honor the interconnectedness of all aspects of life (Alfred, 2005; Little Bear, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

[16] According to Barrett (2017), the brain continually interprets sensory information to predict and make sense of bodily signals, integrating these with memory and social context. This way, emotions are categorizations the brain constructs to help us understand and respond to our internal and external world. One of the implications of Barrett's findings is that transforming emotional responses require shifts in the ways we make meaning of experience—that is, rewiring how we come to interpret and make sense of internal and external signals of the world.

[17] Barrett (2017) refers to felt senses as "affective experiences"—that is, basic states of arousal and valence (positive or negative quality) in the body, such as feeling energized or calm, pleasant or unpleasant.

[18] By tacit, I mean known without being directly expressed (Polanyi, 1967); and by pre-reflective, I mean that experiences are present prior to reflection and sense-making (Depraz et al., 2003; Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

[19] There could be a parallel between some of these five dimensions and Varela et al. (2016) 4E cognition framework—which says that cognition is deeply rooted in the body and environment, emphasizing that our minds are not isolated but highly interconnected with the world. Therefore, cognition is embodied, embedded, enactive, and extended.

perceptions of how we come to feel, experience, sense the world inside and all-around us while by *making* I evoke the embodied, conceptual, and material aspects of giving form to the intangible.[20] This combination forges two primary methods: (1) awareness-based design prompts for working with self within a social field; and (2) awareness-based design prompts for working with others.

Awareness-Based Design Prompts

Awareness-based design prompts are offered as non-intrusive sensitizing tools to support individuals (including oneself) to attend to and become aware of non-verbal and embodied experiences. In practice, this research combines embodied methods of SPT with producing material and/or visual elements such as photographs, videos, imagery, drawings, and writing. We recognize the potential of design prompts to support the investigation and communication of tacit and experiential knowing. Therefore, they can provoke and assist in the emergence of awareness and sense-making.

The core function of these prompts is an act of distancing, a moment to momentarily surface something otherwise intangible in a visual or tangible form (Ackermann, 2007). I agree with Edith Ackermann when she says that this temporary act of distancing is a paradox because it allows us to "objectivize our experience to better understand it" and "project it to better internalize it" (2007, p. 3). Lisa recognizes the act of making tangible as *temporarily fixing* while Akama and Agid (2018) make a distinction between "fixing to make static" and "freezing as a temporary state to trace and orientate our movements" (p. 800). This temporary freezing in a tangible form is a prototypical action that is not about making a tangible object or output, but rather about surfacing an awareness of an intangible experience.

This way, design prompts help sustain awareness by bringing one's attention to what Kegan (2000) refers to as *subject-object* shifts—that is, the process in which individuals transition elements of their experience from being subjects (identified with and unexamined) to objects that can be reflected upon, analyzed, and transformed. Therefore, the tangible/visible artifacts permit documentation and encourage reflection (Kegan, 2000; Rinaldi, 2009; Sanders & Stappers, 2014).

We argue that sustaining awareness of one's experience by making it (even momentarily) tangible contributes to what Loris Malaguzzi (1996) defined as a *pedagogy of listening*. By curiously listening to our experience with all our senses, we can cultivate the quality of our attention—therefore, returning to ourselves, to things themselves, and to phenomena (Depraz et al., 2003; Merleau-

[20] This way, I wish to respond to Varela's call for researchers to train in becoming black belts in first-person experience (Varela & Scharmer, 2000). That is, training in recognizing the value of subjective intangible experiences, attuning to them, and letting the awareness of lived experiences inform individual and collective choices and actions.

Ponty, 1945; Rinaldi, 2009; Varela, & Vermersch, 2003).[21] In returning to ourselves and others, we can counter the habit of trying to get rid of our experiences, particularly the difficult thoughts and emotions (Chödrön, 2003; David, 2016). In this way, the awareness-based design prompts are a relational site that can help people attend to and stay with meaningful aspects of their lived, non-verbal, relational experience(s) (Rinaldi, 2009).

Working With Self

A core premise of this research is that in order to work with others and the world, we must work with ourselves as well because self and others are interconnected (Bortoft, 1996; Grocott, 2024; Hanh, 2020; Hayashi, 2021; Ingold, 2000; Taddei, 2018). The inner work of being in conversation with oneself means developing the literacy to "read" our own lived experiences: thoughts, emotions, felt senses, and sensations. In this section, I bring poetry, sketching, and photography (design prompts) to make intangible experiences visible during the individual practice of two SPT methods: 20-min Dance and Stuck (explained below). My intention is to demonstrate how I use these awareness-based design prompts to develop and cultivate my own embodied awareness. This is not to offer a prescription for these prompts, but to share an example of how one may work with the self as the basis for working with others.

20-Min Dance (SPT) + Poetry (Awareness-Based Design Prompt)

The 20-min Dance, an embodied exercise I learned from Arawana Hayashi (Hayashi, 2021), is one of my most transformative personal practices. It involves lying on the floor and allowing the body to move freely for 20 minutes, interspersed with moments of stillness. This practice taught me to appreciate gaps, pauses, and intervals, revealing that movement emerges from stillness (Hayashi, 2021). I transition from lying down to sitting, ultimately standing up, giving my body the main stage while setting my thoughts aside. When I feel overwhelmed, lying down becomes a kind, self-compassionate act that helps me regain a sense of groundedness.

Practicing the 20-min Dance inspired me to use poetry to express my embodied insights. After completing the exercise, I immediately pick up a notebook to write a short, three-line poem (haiku-inspired). As I connect with the freshness of my experience, words flow into a sequence of three phrases. Over the years, I've maintained a personal notebook of these short poems, a few of which I

[21] In this research, we believe that our direct experience of the world (i.e., our perception) is the foundation of understanding how things are. That is, we challenge the idea that the world is simply something "out there" to be observed objectively, separate from the perceiving subject. Instead, we suggest that the world and the self are intertwined through perception.

share below. I believe they gently capture the essence of my embodied experiences, allowing me to recall and feel them anew each time I read them.

pain, resting pain,
lives in the body,
still.

clouded in thoughts,
wandering in a fog,
stillness whispers.

lying on the ground,
strength comes,
pushing me out.

—Reflective notes (2018–2023)

Stuck (SPT) and Sketching/Photography (Awareness-Based Design Prompt)

The Stuck (Hayashi, 2021) is an embodied method that helps me engage with challenging situations. It serves as a rich site for inquiry and discovery, holding the seeds of wisdom, and healthier conditions (Hayashi, 2021).[22] I begin by recalling a situation where I feel stuck, whether it's an inner experience (like a difficult emotion) or an outer one (such as a work relationship or systemic issue). I then focus on the felt quality of the situation, setting aside the storylines. I observe how this felt quality manifests in my body and stay in that posture for a few moments until words arise.[23] I finish by making a sketch. In group practice, I ask others to photograph my Stuck shape, which I later use to evoke the experience.

Reviewing my reflective notebooks and diaries, I find numerous sketches and polaroid photographs of embodied Stuck shapes. One photograph (Figure 1) is titled "Forces at Play." On the left page, notes describe how the Stuck felt: the shape is at ground level, attempting to move forward (future) but held back (past). The notes mention tight legs and an unbalanced, strained body.

[22] The Stuck is not ourselves—that is why I refer to the Stuck as *it*.

[23] Here it is important to notice that the Stuck shape is not a representation of a situation or feeling. It is its *embodiment* itself.

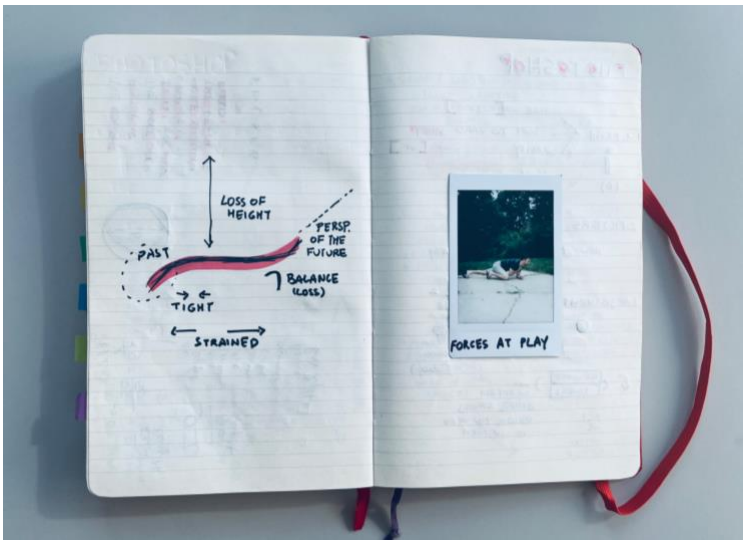

Figure 1: *Dutra Gonçalves's personal diary with sense-making notes on the Stuck "Forces at Play" (2018, April).*

Working With Others

As I begin writing this section, I hear my dear friend and mentor Sonali Ojha's voice. I met her ten years ago, then an Ashoka Fellow, educator, and founder of Dreamcatchers Foundation, an awarded education NGO in Mumbai (India). At major thresholds in my life, Sonali taught me the value of opening space for paradox, embracing not knowing, and attuning my senses to what wants to emerge. The work outlined in this section comes from a series of four experimental workshops Sonali and I co-designed and co-led for 60 teachers at a private school in Mumbai in January 2020. The workshops were intended to help teachers explore the social-emotional environment at their school by tuning in first to themselves and then to others.[24] In July 2021, Sonali passed away. Her loss/departure/disappearance has left a gap, pause, open, unfilled, blank space which continues to be present.

In April 2021, I was invited by the Universidad Católica de Temuco (Chile) to host an online workshop for undergraduate students as part of a seminar called *Co-Creando el Futuro Emergente* (Co-Creating the Emerging Future).[25] Building on learnings and emergent questions from the workshops in India, I

[24] We were invited to run these workshops by the principal of R.N. Podar Santacruz (Mumbai, India), Avnita Bir. I met Avnita through Sonali Ojha a few years before—and was impressed by how open and interested she was in design-led and whole-education approaches. Avnita came across as someone who was willing to try things out and who cared for teachers and students.

[25] The 5-day workshop was part of an online seminar—open to all students at Facultad de Arquitectura, Artes y Diseño (FAAD) and international guests. Due to the global COVID-19 pandemic, the seminar was completely online and featured speakers including Otto Scharmer and Arawana Hayashi (https://www.faadworkshop.com/workshops/faadworkshop2021).

designed a week-long session entitled *Imaginarios Futuros* (Future Imaginaries). In the workshop, I explored the act of sensing as the birthplace of emergent futures—including noticing, attending to, and tuning into our experiences and those of others (Scharmer, 2009; Hayashi, 2021).[26] In this workshop, the students followed a path of self-inquiry which ultimately led them into co-creating a collective artifact for the future: a design brief with their longing and hopes for the city of Temuco.[27]

The awareness-based design prompts outlined below were created and proposed in the context of the workshops with the K-12 teachers in India and the university students in Chile. In these workshops, I combined embodied SPT methods (i.e., Dance of 5's and Stuck) with material/visual design prompts (i.e., video, imagery, photographs, and photo-collage). The surveys and interviews which followed the workshops can be found on Appendix I, and the data analysis on Appendix II.

Dance of 5's (SPT) + Video (Awareness-Based Design Prompt)

Inspired by the Dance of 5's (Hayashi, 2021), Sonali and I created an exercise where teachers in India improvise interactions between emotions (Figure 2).[28] One teacher steps forward to embody an emotion silently, without naming it. Another teacher joins, embodying a different emotion in response. Others can join as they wish. The teachers are encouraged to move dynamically rather than remain static, responding to one another's embodied shapes. These short scenes are recorded, resulting in videos that became tangible artifacts showcasing how emotions can interact.

[26] One point of view which I gained while working with Arawana Hayashi and Otto Scharmer is to bear in mind what is at the core of one's intention for future-making—that is, do we consider the future as a space of hope and possibility? Are we inclined towards co-creating healthier futures (as compared to the present)?

[27] The students created a video by assembling meaningful parts of their self-inquiry process. The video was meant to be a design brief and be shared with stakeholders (government, companies, families)—therefore, making the students' longings and hopes for the future of the city visible.

[28] The Dance of 5's is a SPT method in which a group of five people co-create movement by using a shared vocabulary: sitting, standing, walking, turning, and lying down. With a simple movement vocabulary, the method emphasizes attention on the emergence of a shared social body—and its collective values, choices, behaviors.

Figure 2: *Teachers improvising how emotions meet and relate with each other. Mumbai, 2020.*

Stuck (SPT) and Imagery (Awareness-Based Design Prompt)

While working with the teachers, Sonali and I discussed how difficult emotions (e.g., anger, rage, fear) can feel like a Stuck. To broaden their awareness of emotions, I designed a set of nine Navarasa cards based on the Indian classical dance Kathakali (Gopalakrishnan, 2016; Zarrilli, 2012), where facial expressions represent different clusters of emotions.[29] We asked the teachers to select up to three cards and observe students' facial expressions and embodied behaviors in various locations within the school (Figure 3). They recorded their observations on the back of each card with prompts: "When I saw… I felt…" On the front, they marked the intensity of the emotions perceived. Upon returning, they co-created an emotional map of the school, specifying the emotions they had noticed and their locations.

[29] The Navarasas include: Love (Kāruṇyam), Rage (Raudram), Humor (Hāsyam), Fear (Bhayānakam), Courage/ Willpower (Veeram), Awe/Wonder (Adbhutam), Peace (Shantam), Aversion/ Disgust (Bībhatsam). To these, we added Hope—drawing from the work Sonali Ojha has done in India for over 20 years.

Figure 3: *Teachers picking up Navarasa Cards. Mumbai, 2020.*

Stuck (SPT) and Photographs (Awareness-Based Design Prompt)

In a variation of the previous method, we asked the teachers to embody various emotions and have a partner photograph them (Figure 4). They observed a moment just before the click when their embodied shapes took form, feeling that the camera prompted them to pause and clarify how they wanted their bodies to be perceived. When discussing the limitations of photography as an awareness-based design prompt, the teachers noted the challenge of capturing expressions quickly: "One has to be quick to photograph an expression" one participant shared. As they played with embodying different emotions, some wondered, "Could there be hidden meanings in the expressions and behaviors of students?"

Figure 4: *Teachers embody facial expressions and photograph one another. Mumbai, 2020.*

Stuck (SPT), Photo-Collage, and Video (Awareness-Based Design Prompt)

While working online with university students in Chile, we engaged in self-inquiry to co-create a collective artifact: a design brief reflecting their hopes and aspirations for the city of Temuco. The prompts guided students to first explore their own emotions, feelings, thoughts, and ways of knowing, gradually leading to a whole-group inquiry where they sensed into a relational space to make their shared aspirations for the city visible. This transition was grounded in the idea that our identities and the systems we create are interdependent.[30]

The students began by selecting an online news article that resonated with them—something occurring in their city or country that provoked, moved, or concerned them. Using an online whiteboard (Miro), they reflected on the question "how does the news article make me feel?" by posting the article and linking it to an emotion (Brackett, 2020). The next step involved embodying the emotion (i.e., Stuck) through a gesture (Figure 5). When introducing SPT to new groups, I notice that some people can feel self-conscious about making full-body shapes. To scaffold embodiment as a means of exploration, I found that using hand gestures helped reduce this self-consciousness in Chile.

Figure 5: *Students embody feelings with gestures. Temuco, 2021.*

Building on the insights gained from previous visual, written, and embodied prompts, the students wrote down one present longing (something lacking for themselves or their city) and one future hope (a desire or dream for what could

[30] This aligns with Senge's notion that the most systemic is the most personal (Böll & Senge, 2020).

be).[31] They then compiled their responses into a final video, framed as a design brief for the future of Temuco, based on their lived experiences. Together, the students identified city-wide stakeholders they wanted to engage with (e.g., the mayor, leaders, elders, Nature). The video was structured as a speculative letter addressed from the students to these stakeholders. Each student read aloud the sentences written by their peers, giving voice to the group as a creative collective (Figure 6).

"Soy una persona solitaria pero que adora la compañía de los que ama; observadora, introvertida, muy sensible, que se asombra con la simplicidad del mundo."

"I am a solitary person but I enjoy the company of those who love me; observant, introverted, very sensitive, scared at the simplicity of the world."

—Student. Temuco, 2021

Figure 6: *A student's writing sample.*

The purpose of co-producing the video was to shift awareness from individual perspectives to a collective understanding of the group as a creative ensemble. This approach moved away from individual authorship towards recognizing creativity as a relational, collective process. Thus, the video assemblage

[31] I learned from educator and Ashoka Fellow Sonali Ojha that longings and hopes are at the core of a human being's ability to engage with the future, as it emerges (Gonçalves & Ojha, 2016; Ojha, 2006).

exemplified awareness-based collective creativity, creating social reality from the perspective of the whole (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2023).

Awareness-Based Design

During the follow-up micro-phenomenology interviews (Appendix I & II), the teachers and students were asked to describe one meaningful moment from the workshop. Through guided introspection, we began by eliciting their sensorial memories (what they saw, felt, and heard) and gradually re-directed their attention to *how* they experienced that moment in time.[32] For example, a teacher's chosen moment was when she realized she did not know what wonder was. She shared that when another teacher spoke of wonder, she felt a need to recall in her own life a time when she had experienced it—and realized she could not locate it because she didn't know what wonder was.

The interviews also revealed that once prompted in the workshop, the teachers and students often performed tiny "inner acts" (Petitmengin, 2007)—that is, tacit, subtle micro-actions such as accessing information, tuning into others, noticing, reflecting, clarifying, and anticipating answers. For example, one teacher said that by "offering words to describe a feeling," she became aware of the very existence of an emotion. Another teacher shared that by "leaning into an uncomfortable feeling," she discovered something new. This way, subtle actions like "offering words" and "leaning into" are what I am referring to as tiny inner acts.

In addition, evaluation and analysis of the participants' qualitative responses to the survey (Appendix II) revealed these design prompts can support awareness and sense-making by: (a) offering diverse ways of engaging with one's experience (i.e. by combining embodiment with sketching, video-making, photography, and/or poetry); (b) helping surface pre-reflective knowledge; (c) introducing new questions, frames of thinking and ways of making sense; and (d) assisting meaning-making while in relationship with others.

I started this research with the understanding that design can help people ground intangible experiences in tangible and/or visible forms (Ackermann, 2007; Bollas, 2009; Diatta, 2015; Diatta, Gonçalves & Grocott, 2022; McEntee et al., 2016)—and that, in doing so, making visible helps us to become aware of the intangible. Therefore, the awareness-based design prompts were primarily designed to make intangible experiences visible. However, based on the interviews (Appendix II), the clustering of emergent themes revealed nuances in the act of making the intangible visible. That is, while designing to make the intangible visible, I discovered we also designed opportunities for teachers and

[32] The micro-phenomenology interviews focus on redirecting the interviewee's attention from the what (i.e., context and data surrounding the experience) to the how (i.e., their actual experience) (Petitmengin, 2007).

students *to make space for*, *to make* themselves *aware* of, and *to make sense* of the intangible. Here I draw inspiration from Lisa's Make Constellation (2022, p. 64) as the way of framing the research insights—and in particular, highlighting and defining words that most resonate with my practice (Figure 7).

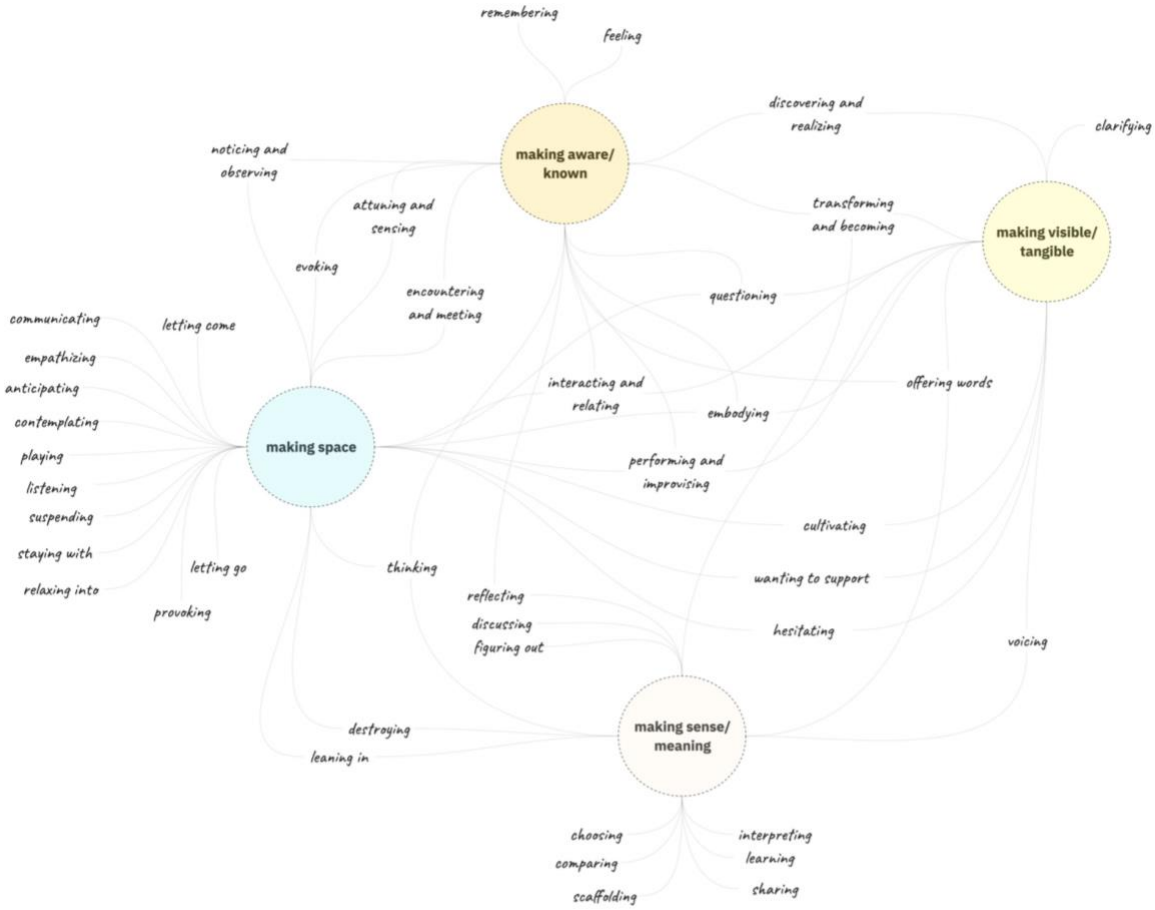

Figure 7: *Grouping teachers' tiny "inner actions" of awareness through the Make constellation.*

By bringing design to SPT and SPT to design, this paper's main practice-based contribution to theory is, ultimately, a method-pedagogy called *awareness-based design* (ABD)—that is, a pedagogical approach aspiring to become a living curriculum which includes a set of literacies, comprehensions, and sensibilities towards becoming aware and making sense of the intangible.[33] As a "form of craft" (Sennett, 2008), ABD is not about acquiring technical expertise but about learning a mode of pedagogy which emphasizes experimentation, adaptation, and

[33] We borrow these words from the Reggio Emilia pedagogy which is framed as a set of comprehensions and sensibilities (Rinaldi, 2009).

development of a set of material-based and embodied capacities (Diatta et al., 2022; Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2023).[34]

Literacies

Literacies are defined as the abilities to understand and apply systems of symbols and representations to generate meaning (Gee, 2010; Kress, 2010; Street, 1984; UNESCO, 2005, 2019). Visual literacies, for example, involve interpreting and manipulating visual information through elements like size, color, and composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Kress, 2003, 2010), while digital literacies use technology for accessing information, collaboration, and communication (Gee, 2010; Leu et al., 2004; Rheingold, 2012). We define awareness-based design (ABD) literacies as the abilities to become aware and make sense of the intangible.

We argue that ABD literacies could help educators and learners develop relational, embodied, and co-creative skills needed to navigate social dynamics (Gee, 2010; Fischman, 2015; Freire, 1970; Jenkins, 2009; Rheingold, 2012; Shiva, 1991; Thomas & Brown, 2011).[35] In today's world of AI and social networks, cultivating relational, embodied, and co-creative literacies alongside digital and visual ones is essential. ABD thus supports social fields where awareness-based collective creativity can flourish.

Based on the proposed sense-making of surveys and interviews with teachers in Mumbai, India (2020) (Figure 7), we propose the following acts of making as examples of awareness-based design literacies: (a) *making visible*: expressing the intangible in tangible/visible forms; (b) *making space*: staying with not knowing and opening up space for emergence; (c) *making aware*: noticing and becoming aware of the intangible; and (d) *making sense*: asking questions, drawing out patterns and co-generating new meanings.[36] These awareness-based design literacies are described in further detail below. To illustrate these literacies, we draw direct quotations from the sixty surveys and twelve interviews, which have been anonymized.

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[34] We are inspired by the notions that learning is experiential, dynamic and ongoing (Dewey, 1997), by how a pedagogy can sustain a political stance such as in Freire's work—reinforcing the importance of dialogic participatory processes towards the development of critical consciousness and empowerment of marginalized groups (Freire, 1970). Another pedagogy which inspires my research is the work of Vygostky and the notion that learning is socially mediated (Vygostky, 1978). Vygostky's work has helped me understand that awareness-based design is a process of social mediation.

[35] Most of these authors have emphasized digital literacies. Fischman (2015) and Freire (1970), though, explored the notion of critical literacies and Shiva (1991) coined the term earth literacies.

[36] These literacies draw on observations of my own practice—and in dialogue with colleagues, mentors, and theoretical literature.

Making Visible

A recurring theme in teachers' reflections was the importance of "looking deeply" and "not taking things as they appear." One teacher noted that by doing so, "we notice that there are emotions under emotions." Another observed that the prompts revealed how seemingly conflicting emotions, like joy and sadness, can coexist: "In our school, we see happiness alongside anger and sadness."

Making the intangible visible allows us to externalize (inter)subjectivity, turning it into something we can observe and understand. By making a mark, we play with what is made visible so it becomes an "object to think with" (Ackermann, 2007), creating a form of documentation that fosters deeper reflection.[37]

Making Space

Teachers reflected on how the prompts created space for both care (e.g., "When I observed the students' emotions, I felt like helping them or connecting with them") and ambiguity. They appreciated that the prompts allowed them to make new choices (e.g., "I enjoyed observing the cards and making a choice"). In this way, they shared that the workshops provided a "different kind of space" from their usual routines—opening up "new ways of relating and getting to know each other."

As an ABD literacy, *making space* means staying with situations as they are, allowing a pause or interval where nothing seems to happen (Ingold, 2011; Hayashi, 2021).[38] This way, by setting aside rigid storylines, opinions, explanations, and preconceptions, we make space for something new (Bohm, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; de Bono, 1970; Hayashi, 2021; Scharmer, 2009).[39]

Making Aware

Teachers noted that the prompts revealed what one called a "school full of emotions that are often overlooked," helping them become more observant and

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[37] From what is documented, one has to bring the meanings forward (Rinaldi, 2009). For example, Reggio Emilia Schools consider assessments as genuine offerings—because to assess is defined as to see and value what is seen (Rinaldi, 2009).

[38] Merleau-Ponty (1945) described the importance of noticing the intervals between *things*. He argued that noticing these gaps do not only provide for a new rearrangement of the perceived (as in a new form of linking or associating images and sensations)—but also provide the very constitution of a new world. By *things*, Merleau-Ponty (1945) meant *wholes*—i.e., that which we see to have some intrinsic aspect and the appearance of completeness.

[39] Suzuki Roshi (2011) wrote that if there is space in our minds—they are ready and open to anything. Roshi referred to this as the *beginner's mind*—one in which there are many possibilities as compared to the expert's, in which there are few.

nuanced: “Initially, I had an impression of the children’s emotions, but the more I observed, the more insight I gained” one teacher commented. Many also realized they had only experienced three or four out of the nine emotion clusters on the cards, highlighting a limited emotional vocabulary. This way, as an ABD literacy, *making aware* refers to using visible and/or tangible elements as a support to becoming aware of the intangible (i.e., thoughts, emotions, felt senses, sensations).

Making Sense

Some teachers valued the prompts’ ambiguity, noting that the variety in understanding and perceiving emotions sparked discussion and reflection. One teacher commented, “the prompts made us think in different directions.” Others appreciated how the prompts offered “opportunities for making sense” and “a method to begin from.” For example, the marking scale on the back of the cards helped them see the need to adapt their approach, as some emotions might be clear, others hidden or subtle. One teacher shared, “Marking the intensity on the card helped me see that even a mild expression can be important.”

In this research, *making sense* refers to drawing new meanings from intangible experiences. The prompts enabled sense-making in two phases: during the activity (reflection-in-action) and afterward (reflection-on-action) (Schön, 1983). Reflection-in-action responds to a situation’s generative potential, allowing what Schön (1983) called “back-talk”—a form of listening into an object or situation for what it wants to tell us.[40]

Comprehensions

Comprehensions are defined as core understandings or insights which allow a person (or a group) to operate from a different perspective. These meaningful insights are what enable a practitioner to maintain a *point of view* within a social practice. In this section we propose four comprehensions as the critical and foundational points of view for ABD—based on the analysis and sense-making of the workshops in India and Chile.

The Literacies are Interdependent

We learned that the different ABD literacies are interdependent (Figure 8)—that is, they are catalysts for one another. One implication of this is that we can

[40] What we *hear* in these situations then confirms or disconfirms preconceived ideas. For instance, it could be something completely new. As practitioners, we have learned to value disconfirming data because they often indicate the possibility of a fresh understanding of a situation (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2023).

design transformative learning experiences starting from any of these acts of making because one will naturally flow into the other. Therefore, we suggest that, when developing or co-creating transformative learning experiences, one must begin by clarifying an initial core intention for the activity. For example, one might think, *my core intention is to help participants make their mindsets visible*, or *I wish to make a group of people aware of the social field*, or *I want to support people to make sense of their emergent ideas*.

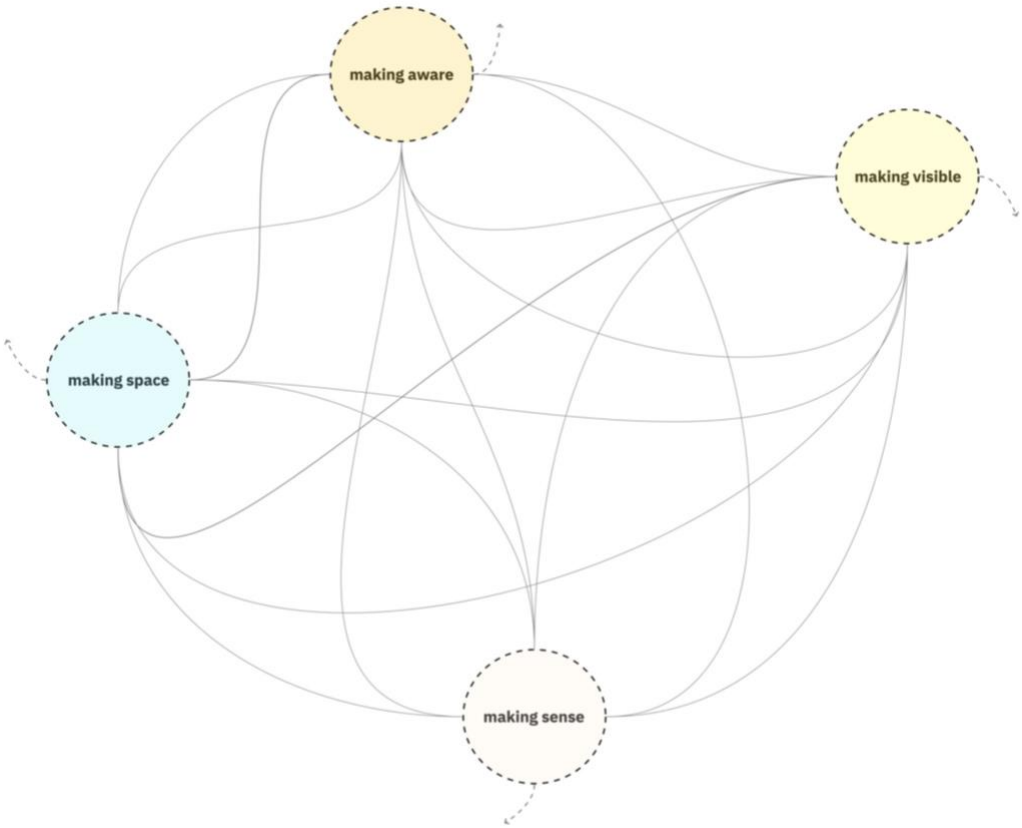

Figure 8: *The ABD literacies catalyze one another (Gonçalves, 2024).*

Making Aware Amplifies Transformative Learning

Although we believe that a learning experience can begin from any of act of making, we observed that most prompts started with making visible and/or making space, followed by making aware and sense-making. For example, making an intangible experience visible (e.g., sketching a feeling or embodying an emotion) often allowed workshop participants to make space for staying longer with the experience—being made aware of it, and therefore making sense of it in a new way. In this manner, making aware marks the transition from unconscious/unaware to conscious/aware (Prochaska & DiClemente, 2005). Therefore, we argue that making aware is a core lever for transformation of

individuals and groups (Figure 9) because awareness offers people an opportunity to initiate change.

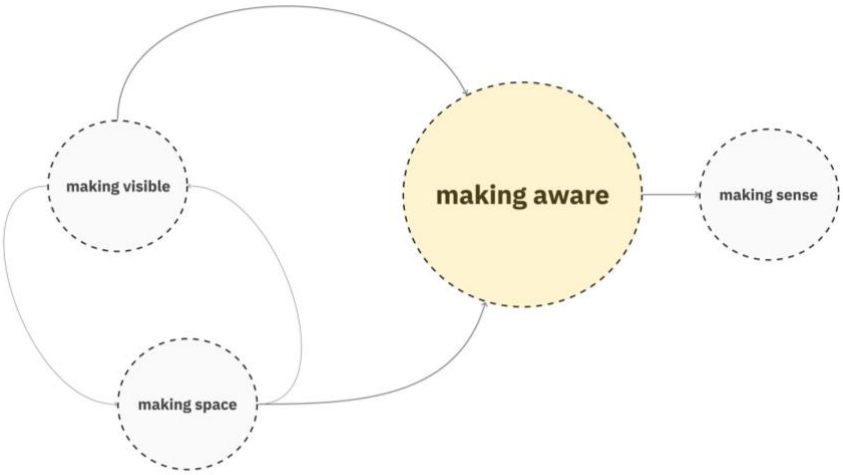

Figure 9: *Making aware as a lever for transformative learning.*

We Can Consciously Delay Meaning-Making

In the workshops, we often observed that staying with not knowing can feel uncomfortable. Therefore, some people rush into making meaning. This way, making sense is, at its best, a cognitive act of thinking and analyzing information. The main implication of rushing to meaning-making is that we skip altogether the value of other embodied, relational, and co-creative ways of knowing by emphasizing thinking and analyzing.[41] Therefore, we lose the opportunity of tapping into our embodied, relational, and co-creative intelligences.

Countering this natural tendency of pinning ideas and concepts down as soon as possible, we realized that the prompts were designed to intentionally delay meaning-making. That is, by holding our experience in suspension, we allow the time to be in touch with embodied, relational, and subjective aspects of our lived experiences—before ascribing or deriving meaning to/from it. Therefore, in awareness-based design, the prompts delay meaning-making by encouraging people to stay longer in a process of making visible, making space, and making aware.

[41] We would argue that making sense of reality without a depth of awareness of our embodied, relational and subjective experiences is a common default behavior in society (Barrett, 2017; Greene, 1978; Kolb, 2015; Scharmer, 2009). Scharmer (2009), for instance, refers to the notion of absensing to speak of how we come to make sense and give form to social realities no one wants to be a part of.

In the context of education, delaying meaning-making could be understood as a practice of resisting transmissional learning and memorization (i.e., the transfer of knowledge and disconnected facts without critical reflection) (Dewey, 1938; Dirkx et al., 2006; Freire, 1970)—as well as an act of advocating for the value of other forms of knowing, such as embodied, relational, and subjective ways of knowing.[42] This way, to consciously delay meaning-making is a form of resistance that can, in fact, deepen a learning experience (hooks, 1994; Mezirow, 1991; Santos, 2019). By delaying meaning-making we are, ultimately, assisting new sense and meaning to emerge, take form, and transform.[43]

Designing for Awareness is an Intentional Act

In summary, the previous comprehensions highlight that we can be intentional about designing for awareness and sense-making even if the people do not know what needs to surface. The significance of this insight for transformative learning is that it challenges the default practice of relying on what is most easily accessed and articulated.

Sensibilities

Based on what students shared in the surveys and interviews with the students in Chile (Appendix II), I propose a sense-making clustering exercise[44] which reveals five categories for grouping the inner acts that the students performed—often unconsciously—towards becoming aware and making sense of their inner experiences.[45] By practicing these embodied and co-creative capacities, I argue

[42] Freire (1970) argued that transmissional learning ultimately leads to oppression, dehumanization, memorization and dependency—therefore, reinforcing social injustice by maintaining the status quo and limiting the ability of students to be critical and creative.

[43] We believe this understanding counters Western notions of meaning-making—which are primarily goal-oriented. Looking at Indigenous ways of knowing and being, we are inspired by authors who emphasize the importance of listening in and attending to the ways meaning emerges through dialogue and ceremony (Wilson, 2008). One beautiful example of suspending meaning-making is Armstrong's essay *The Trickster Shift*—in which she embraces ambiguity within indigenous storytelling. Armstrong (1995) argues that stories can be told with openness, curiosity, and playfulness rather than trying to pin down meanings and moral values.

[44] Here I question my own attempt of clustering people's insights and subjectivities. I recognize there are multiple ways of grouping and what I present is one way (and therefore, not the only one).

[45] Subjective experiences have an internal dynamic—that is, they are always unfolding and shifting (Bohm, 1996; Petitmengin, 2007; Rome, 2014). According to Petitmengin (2007) subjectivity can include both (conscious and/or unconscious) passive and active inner acts. The inner acts are tiny and subtle inner movements performed by our body-mind systems. The passive and involuntary inner acts, Petitmengin (2007) calls *micro-moves.* For example, an involuntary twitch of a facial expression accompanying a feeling of confusion or surprise. While the active inner

that the students are practicing a form of relational sensibility—that is, a sensibility to the interplay of the inner-outer dimensions of creativity (Figure 10).[46]

Figure 10 represents the inner-outer dimension through an infinite symbol—indicating a sense of boundlessness.[47] This diagram invites us to: (1) consider the inner-outer interdependent dimension of creativity; and (2) be intentional about creating learning prompts that trigger specific embodied, relational, and co-creative capacities. For example, one might consider whether a learning prompt emphasizes accessing and discovering the intangible, or focuses on expressing and co-creating based on the intangible.

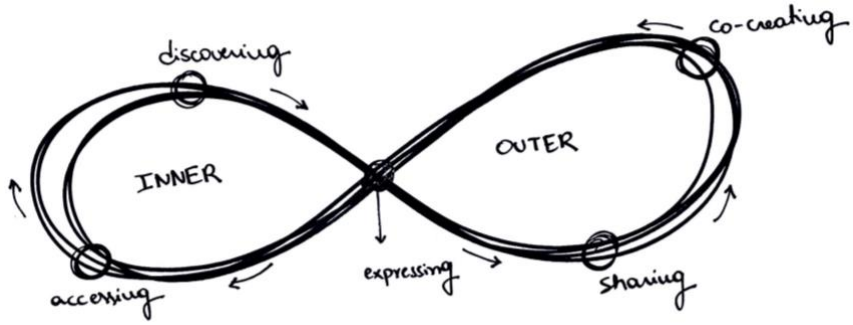

Figure 10: I*nner-outer sensibilities for working with individual and collective change.*

> *Accessing:* students spoke of "evoking and remembering" meaningful experiences; of "opening up to, noticing, seeing deeper and feeling" emotions, thoughts, and felt senses.
>
> *Discovering:* "recognizing, clarifying, identifying and labeling" aspects of their lived experiences. Students mentioned "searching for, framing, realizing, finding ways, and becoming aware of" important aspects of their lived experiences.

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acts towards becoming aware of our experience, she calls *interior gestures*. For instance, an active shift from attending solely to oneself to noticing others.

[46] That is, while attending to and working with oneself-others and the world (humans and non-humans—including, for example, our bodies, culture, history; as well technologies, objects, spaces and the larger ecosystems) (Haraway, 2008).

[47] Here we are inspired by the Auckland Co-design Lab's introduction of the Maori concept of Mauri, that is, the dynamic essence quality (energy) of anything (people, systems, Nature, objects). Humphries provokes: "If we work in systems change, what is it in my own Mauri that I need to bring into the Mauri of the environment or the system?" (Auckland Co-design Lab, 2022). We can see a link between what he introduces as Mauri Mai (i.e. the notion of "energy from"; the qualities of "being, reflection and input") with what we call the inner dimension, and "Mauri Atu" (i.e. the notion of "energy toward"; the qualities of "doing, action and output") and the outer dimension. We wonder then: How are these (Mai and Atu; Inner and Outer) joined together?

Expressing: when prompted to give material form to intangible experiences, students spoke of "enjoying, expressing, and communicating."

Sharing: students reflected on how they were "questioning, reflecting, connecting, bridging, thinking about, interpreting, and understanding" emergent experiences.

Co-creating: students spoke of "placing themselves in a situation"; "taking positions and finding interests"; and "holding optimistic perspectives, longings and hopes." When describing how they made something together, they mentioned: "by sharing, learning, adding, contributing and appreciating."

These co-creative, embodied, and relational inner acts are, in essence, forms of attunement-in-action. By being attuned to and working with one's thoughts, emotions, felt senses, and sensations within a social field, a group can allow emergent insights to guide collective actions, choices, and behaviors. This way, the inner-outer dimension is not understood as two separate entities but rather inseparable, interconnected, and mutually-influencing aspects of relational experience.[48]

Closing

This research asked how design practice might support the awareness of intangible experiences during the process of transformative learning. This question was explored by combining the embodied methods of Social Presencing Theater with the making orientation of practice-based design research. The creative prompts developed offer methods for this kind of awareness-based inquiry. The prompts present ways to access, discover, express, share, and co-create based on diverse non-verbal, subjective, embodied, and relational experiences. The combination of embodied practices and material/visual prompts offer approaches for supporting inner-outer transformation by highlighting the importance of becoming aware and making sense of what is oftentimes unaware.

Simply engaging with even memorable experiences does not necessarily lead to personal transformation. To shift a person's perspective in ways that leads to seeing and being in the world differently calls for not just a level of reflection, but

[48] Different social practices have emphasized *changing the world* while neglecting the inner dimension of individuals and social systems. For example, design thinking prioritizes problem-solving through collaboration and empathy (Brown, 2008); while human-centered design focuses on understanding user needs and designing products and services (Sanders & Stappers, 2014). In the context of awareness-based design, I argue that working with the relational self is the basis for working differently within a social field. The significance of this insight is that it counters a common pattern in systems change and transformational work—which is to emphasize the transformation of others; or even to impose change on others (Hayashi & Gonçalves, 2023).

a level of disorientation. Offering diverse ways of engaging with experiences and assisting relational meaning-making ensures the emergent insights do not float away, forgotten. When the pre-reflective knowledge surfaced is grounded by the meaning made, the insights invite the participant to question what this means for future action. Lisa locates the potential for transformation in the felt sense of unsettling a belief or narrative, inviting learning through a disorienting shift in perspective (Grocott, 2022).

In bringing design to Social Presencing Theater and Social Presencing Theater to design, a more attuned, relational practice becomes possible. Awareness-based sensing brings an embodied, gestural, and felt contribution which is less common in design; while design brings a material and visual contribution which is unusual to embodied awareness. This interplay between design and SPT amplifies the potential for designing workshops and encounters to support the courageous and vulnerable work of shifting mindsets, perspectives, habits, and ultimately action.

As a set of relational, embodied, and co-creative literacies, comprehensions, and sensibilities, awareness-based design cannot be reduced to a toolkit but rather is a way of practicing. The literacies of *making visible*, *making space*, *making aware*, and *making sense,* go beyond the design-based acumen of making objects and yet stay with the value of making tangible concepts that might otherwise feel out of our grasp. The comprehensions are introduced as meaningful perspectives that can inform how a practitioner might approach ABD. Finally, the sensibilities refer to the capacities to access, discover, express, share, and to co-create based on the relational and creative interplay of the inner-outer dynamics—thus contributing to the "generative quality" of the social field.[49]

The underlying commitment of ABD to becoming aware and making sense of the intangible will always be an invitation to keep wondering, sensing, and imagining. This closing also then leads to an opening. We wonder how we might move from cultivating awareness to developing relational agency. We sense there is more to learn about how embodiment and materiality come together to encode deeper learning. We imagine future prompts that explore embodied practices with photography, video, sketching, and object-making. We are aware there is more designing and sensing to be done. We look forward to the generative disorientation and welcome the perspective shifting to come.

[49] By generative, we refer to the group's ability to produce, create, or generate new content, ideas, or outcomes within a social field.

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Appendix I: Survey and Interview Templates

The data supporting the theoretical and practice-based reflections of this paper draw on Dutra Gonçalves' PhD in Design for Transformative Learning. The full dissertation can be found on: https://doi.org/10.26180/24932691.v1. The data presented in this Appendix refer to the qualitative surveys and micro-phenomenological interviews conducted during the experimental workshops in India (i.e., K-12 teachers in a private school) and Chile (i.e. university students). All participants have responded to the survey, and 25% of the participants volunteered for the interviews.

Qualitative Survey

1. Demographics: grade/ country/ gender/ age
2. In a scale from 0 (lowest/not useful) to 5 (highest/very useful), to what extent did the awareness-based design prompt (listed below) assist you in becoming aware of your experience?
3. For the prompt that was used in your workshop, what insight shifted for you?
4. How did the prompt shift something for you?
5. During your workshop, what surprised you when using the prompt?
6. What were the qualities of the prompt you enjoyed?
7. What were the qualities of the prompt you did not enjoy?
8. From everything we did in the workshop, what would you say is your greatest learning?
9. From everything we did in the workshop, what would you say it is something you could continue using as an educator?
10. What would have made the prompt used in your workshop (listed below) more helpful?
11. What other prompts do you think would be useful?

Micro-Phenomenological Interview

Beginning

Here are some printed images of the awareness-based design prompt we used in the workshop you participated in. I suggest you go back to your memory of our workshop session using this particular prompt. And write down three moments from the workshop that were significant for you. I would like you to think of the moment as if it had a beginning, middle, and end. This moment might be when you noticed something you were not aware of, a moment of surprise, or a sudden discovery or insight. When were they? Please write them down.

Thank you for writing them down. To begin, I will suggest the moment X for us to explore further in this interview. When was it? Where were you?

(X - moment using the prompt)

Questions to Clarify the Chosen Moment

- *Visual question:* When you were there at that moment, what do you see?
- *Kinesthetic and emotional feelings:* at that time, what is the position of your body? What are you feeling? Retrieve the bodily sensations and the emotions…
- *Beginning of the chosen moment:* how do you know how to begin? How do you start? What happens first? (questions could be one of these three)
- *Sequence of the chosen moment:* what do you do then?
- *End of the chosen moment:* what happens at the end? What do you end with?
- *Test:* did the prompt help you know when it was finished? And when you don't know, what do you know?

Questions to Deepen the Chosen Moment

- Could you come back to X? When you do X, what do you do? How do you go about doing X?
- Could you come back to this feeling / sensation? And when you feel this, what do you feel? If you had to teach me how to feel it, what would you tell me?
- How did the prompt shift something for you?

Ending of the interview

Please come back to this moment. Thank you.

Appendix II: Data Analysis

Survey data

Workshop	Prompt	0	1	2	3	4	5	Median
Mumbai, India (K12 teachers)	Stuck + Imagery				1	6	5	4
	Stuck + Photographs				3	6	3	4
	Dance of 5's + Video				1	4	3	4
Temuco, Chile (university students)	Stuck + Photo-Collage/Video				1	2	5	4.5

Table 1: *Survey data on how useful the workshop participants found the prompts to be.*

Sample of teacher's interview notes (Mumbai, India)

	Moment-to-moment	**Teacher's insights**
1	Stepping into the shoes of an emotion to give it voice	"I realized I can't find words", the teacher said.
2	The teacher began to read what the others had written down	The teacher noticed there was a wide range of words ascribed to an emotion, and thought, "we need to work on how to articulate, offer language to an emotion".
3	The teacher concluded by making meaning out of her memory	"It is important to see behind what is said. If I can't express, I can't assume others know either", she concluded.

Table 2: *A teacher's chosen moment of experience, "Walking around and reading the Voices of the Emotions."*

Sample of student's interview notes (Temuco, Chile)

	Moment-to-moment	**Student's insights**
1	At the beginning, everyone was putting up post-its and making up a structure for the video	Realizing, "usually we do not do things like this in groups. We often work alone".
2	She, then, noticed the "video was coming alive"	"We were reading, rehearsing, creating, sharing, being vulnerable. I realized it becomes more than the work or output itself—it is about sharing with each other". "Each one is different in a subjective, personal way". "I felt comfortable in the group. I discovered I can work in a group". "As the video was coming alive, I felt like an achievement and an unblocking".

Table 3: *A teacher's chosen moment of experience, "Making a video with everyone."*

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Book Review

Ritual and Systems Thinking:

Managing an Initial Encounter, by José-Rodrigo Córdoba-Pachón (Routledge, 2024)

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Keywords
ritual practices, systems thinking, systems practice, self-awareness

The opening page of this book suggests that "we need to rethink how we interact with each other and our natural environments" (summary copy). It is indicated that the book is aimed at offering "a way forward by proposing the use of ritual insight," which Córdoba-Pachón clarifies as involving "semi-coded patterns of thinking or actions to help us build a sense of community" (summary copy). The manner in which the opening summary is written already led me to start "rethinking" my own and others' interactions, including with what Córdoba-Pachón calls the natural environment (nature seen as a sacred life-force). It incited my curiosity as to how Córdoba-Pachón was going to discuss the regeneration of ritual practices in such as a way as to (attempt to) fulfil the stated purpose of the book.

In his Preface to the book, he indicates that some of the insights he is sharing are not new, such as the need for self-compassion along with developing compassion for others (e.g., through ritual practices), but the insights still

require "revisiting and enhancing" (p. xv). He indicates that he will be using a style of self-reflection on his developing thoughts and actions, interspersed with his comparisons of relevant literature in regard to both ritual and systems thinking, to take the reader on his journey. Ultimately, he states that "our societies have a great opportunity to make life better for us all" (p. xv). But he also reminds us in his Introduction that by adopting a systemic perspective to rethink the role(s) that ritual plays and could play in our life, we can also "support those who for one reason or another are left behind or marginalized" (p. 1). This is especially relevant in a modern (Western) cultural context where the cult of individualism has taken root, as defined also by authors such as Han (2020). In such a context, he considers rituals as "systems of conversations which we could co-design to rediscover reflection and a sense of interconnectedness/interdependence in our dealings with others" (p. 3).

At this point it is worth mentioning my own encounters with Córdoba-Pachón, starting in 1997, when he was doing his MA in Management Systems at the University of Hull's Centre for Systems Studies, and partook in my course on action research while I was working there (1993-2003). I had come from South Africa and also had worked in Eswatini before arriving in Hull. He had come from Colombia and later did his PhD under the supervision of Gerald Midgley, but we continued our conversations. I recall his curiosity in wanting to learn about systems thinking. After finishing his PhD, I learned that he started working at a university in London. At one point (2018) he wrote to me (somewhat out of the blue) and asked if I would agree to write a brief 3-lined recommendation of his book entitled *Managing Creativity: A Systems Thinking Journey* (Córdoba-Pachón, 2018), which I did. If I were to write a three-lined review of this new book of his, I would highlight that his familiarity with life on "two continents" and his drawing on memories from both (as he mentions in this book) lends particular richness to his writing.

As far as my own cultural heritage is concerned, I am defined as White in terms of the official racialized social groupings structuring South Africa after the Nationalist government came to power in 1948, which was dismantled later with the advent of democracy in 1994. At some point, I came to define myself as "Indigenous-oriented," appreciating the worldview of Ubuntu, which is domain to Africa (as a relational onto-epistemology), while I also embarked on comparing Indigenous worldviews from various other geographical contexts, which had been subjected to Western colonization. In 2024, I created an article for the journal *Systemic Practice and Action Research,* where I elaborated in detail on this onto-epistemology, and I cited Córdoba-Pachón's ethical perspective (Romm, 2024). After sending him the text (which I felt may be of interest to him), he wrote back to me indicating that he had written a new book on *Ritual and Systems Thinking*. I offered to review it for a journal. I mentioned to him that possibly the journal called *Journal of Awareness-Based Systems Change* would be a suitable venue and he agreed.

When I received the book in the post and started reading it, I realized that this choice of venue for my review is an ideal one. This is because Córdoba-Pachón's style of writing is such that he is able to connect his own increasing self-awareness attained through considering the relation between ritual and systems thinking with an understanding of "systems change," where societies can cater for people to "reconnect with our needs and social and physical bonds" (p. 21). Systems change means changing the ways in which many people (especially in Western contexts) enact their lives through what Córdoba-Pachón calls false heroisms, rooted in the belief that as individuals, we can and should become heroes to ourselves and others, with evidence hereof in the pursuit of status-based objects such as "the job, the car, the summer vacation, the daily routine and the religious fundamentalism" (2024, p. 20). Ultimately, these forms of heroism limit the full potential of human beings to be more than this and to express "more genuine, interconnected and meaningful forms of living" (p. 20). The pursuance of false heroism can create prisons for ourselves, which are culturally mediated by being culturally revered. In reality, they can act to stifle our awareness of possibilities for more genuine forms of being and interacting with others, while being able to "give to society what is needed from her" (p. 20). He expresses that "our creativity could become manifested in systemic actions to help us regain our lost status [this time not rooted in material possession and individual exploits] and hope in the future" (p. 21). An awareness of ritual as a way of connecting ourselves to something bigger than us (the power of life) is a route to this regaining (p. 20).

His overall position in the book is that such an awareness, which we can cultivate in various ways, means we recognize that we do not need to engage with the world in terms of individual achievements (which reinforce economies structured around self-interested pursuit) nor through voting in terms of individual interests (according to which most modern political systems are structured), but through (re)connecting with "genuine" forms of (collective) being. Through seeing ourselves as part of larger wholes and enacting this awareness, we perform what can be called "systems change" at the level of economic, social and political life, also in terms of reconsidering/experiencing our connection with "nature," of which we too are a part. To help the reader in their own self-awareness quests, Córdoba-Pachón offers many comparisons and many tables of comparison regarding the place of ritual in our lives and regarding ways of pursuing "identity." Throughout the book he also offers questions for readers to consider at relevant parts of the text, after he has provided his in-depth discussion of various authors' arguments, sprinkled with his own memories of his own engaging with "rituals" in different social contexts.

In his first few chapters, Córdoba-Pachón offers us a taste of how ritual can be revived, in view also of Han's account of the *Disappearance of Ritual* (2020), a book that he notes was very important for him on his journey of self-awareness. His focus on self-awareness means that he is also exploring forms of identity—or ways in which people may develop a sense of self—but not a self that is rooted in Western-styled individualism, linked to an instrumental reason that "drives us

to assess our thinking and action in terms of short-term individual costs and benefits." (In this regard he cites the work of Taylor, 2018.) When Córdoba-Pachón compares Han and Taylor later in the book, it is clear that they do not agree on all scores—but part of the way that Córdoba-Pachón's book is written is inviting readers also to create our own comparisons, to urge us to rethink how we wish to develop our identities so as to live "better" (more socially connected lives and also more imbued with a sense of the "power of life," including a sense of our communion with nature).

In his Chapter 2 entitled "Engineered Presence", he discusses networks where people who have not connected before become socially connected by *inter alia*, creating profiles to define themselves for others to see. He discusses in this regard the concept of profilicity, where we have come to engineer how we interact with others, partly influenced by ICTs which help us to mediate our remote interactions. He explains Moeller and D'Ambrasio's (2021) work in this regard, where a concern with our profiles (presentations for others) is not so much about sincerity (following social roles) or authenticity (trying to find our "true" authentic self) but is about defining an identity that might be seen as acceptable when presented to others (pp. 13–17). He points out that in his next chapter he will discuss in depth forms of identity that can complement profilicity (p. 18). He indeed takes the discussion further in his third chapter called "Pursuits of Identities." It is in this chapter that he provides detail on what he calls false heroisms, along with other potential ways of pursuing identity. He relates these to the potential of ritual in helping us to go back to the origin and to the non-dual nature of our existence, where "rational" as well as "mystical" are both incorporated (p. 26).

In his fourth chapter entitled "A Systems Map of Ritual Knowledge," Córdoba-Pachón (2024) explains, inter alia, the phenomenon of social blindness, which he links, following Morin (2020), to the "dominance of secularity and one of its manifestations in reductionist short-term thinking" (p. 34). This reference serves to remind us also of the individually-based instrumental approach to which he referred in his previous chapter. He now also links social blindness to the operation of power relations. One of the ways in which power relations manifest is when certain managers and scientists (who have powerful social positions) are able to "define problems and the knowledge to tackle them"—at the expense of other ways of framing and addressing issues of concern, including of concern to those most marginalized in the social and ecological fabric of our existence. He urges that we "need to let 'other' forms of thinking and acting (i.e., solidarity, seeing each other), creativity, collaboration, or simply imagination co-exist" (2024, p. 35). He cautions that the task is not an easy one—and the purpose of the book (by implication) is to offer ideas and practices that might help us on this journey.

Having outlined his systems map of ritual knowledge to help support this journey, he offers various questions for readers to consider, such as the question of whether the results of ritualized practices (imbued with meaning) can or

should be "measured" in terms of whether they fulfil the function of coordinating our lives while allowing us to learn new things (p. 38). He argues that we need to be careful of being nudged towards measurable social, economic, political or functional purposes, which he argues is anathema to what he is calling for in the book. The focus on measurement of outcomes implies a quest to control the world, rather than a quest to become co-present with others in the way we live our lives. He finalizes the chapter with the suggestion that the guiding of ritual practices (in whatever form) requires the support of a moral if not ethical theory or theories. This leads him to considerations regarding making ritual practice more systemic. He suggests that ritual could help integrate selves to societies, but we also still need to reconsider the purposes being served via such integration and to what extent power relations may be at play in our pursuance of "identity pursuits" (p. 47).

His discussion in this fourth chapter is very dense and, for me, required several readings and several attempts to answer the questions that he poses. After reading the chapter several times and also going back to the previous ones and looking at following ones, I began to realize that his point is that ritual practices are important for us to reconnect with ourselves, with others, and with wider forces "bigger than us," (p. 20) while we cannot expect too much from ritual (as a panacea). Nevertheless, reading and re-reading through the dense material, albeit time-consuming, was rewarding for me in that I regarded it as an exercise in grappling with the questions which he poses, which were a prompt for me to engage actively with his detailed deliberations. I felt that I gained insights through the requirement to indeed engage slowly with his text, where he also explicitly invites audience participation. Part of his argument is that we all need to "slow down."

In Chapter 5, he delves into the field of studies on creativity to enrich his discussion of ritual and to creatively explore paths that go beyond existing dichotomies (i.e., individual/collective, secular/religious, mundane/not-so-mundane). He suggests that a sociocultural lens with which to look at creativity, "could help us to [re]frame our human experiences, many of which we can [creatively] invest with ritual features" (p. 49). He proposes in the chapter that creativity is never an individual activity, but operates in cultural and social contexts (p. 50). In order to link his views with systems theorizing, he tells us as readers that he decided to revisit the theory of autopoiesis, which he had encountered earlier but had not connected with a creative approach to ritual (p. 50). He reminds us that autopoietic theory was developed by Chilean biologists Maturana and Varela (1992), and that the theory offers a specific view of human language as arising (as part of a biological process) out of our need to co-ordinate our actions with others. And language (a collective psyche) "influences how we 'enact' (with ourselves of others) our dealings with the world around us" (p. 50) (as observed through language).

Córdoba-Pachón draws from his reading of this theory that we can "learn to shape our interactions/conversations with others in new ways: *we can reshape*

our identities, be them individually or collectively attributed" [emphasis added] (p. 52). However, this does not mean that "anything goes," because we need to decide what type of society we "want to live together in" (p. 52). He points out that we need to be aware (when considering our involvements with others) of "what we are not allowed to think, do or be, individually or collectively," (p. 52) as a result of power relations threaded into our existence. This leads him to suggest again that a focus on sociocultural creativity is needed (p. 56). Again, this chapter is dense with insights; readers would do well to read and re-read it! It is in this chapter that he explores in depth the philosophy of pragmatism, which he argues can all-too-easily be too focused on trying to control the future. He suggests that this aspect of pragmatism would need to be challenged so as to provide for its co-existence with others ways of framing our experiences (p. 62).

Cordoba-Pachón starts Chapter 6 by recapping for us as readers that we are at the point in the book where we can conceive rituals as systems of interactions (conversations). In this chapter he elaborates on two ritual perspectives: the one supplied by Han (2020, mentioned earlier) and the one supplied by Seligman et al. (2008), who see rituals as enabling us to imagine "as if" forms of interaction in dealing with complexities (in Córdoba-Pachón, 2024, p. 64). While exploring and comparing their approaches to ritual (which he summarizes in a table on page 79), Córdoba-Pachón indicates the importance of memory in evoking "playful and timeless sources of creativity which can help to unveil constraints or possibilities for the individual or collective subject" (p. 65). He takes us on a path of his recalling some of his own memories, which he uses to reflect upon for himself, as well as to share with us as readers, how he has been pursuing his identities (in plural) to date, and whether "ritual has played any sort out role in this" (p. 65). In this chapter he draws us again into his journey of self-awareness while inviting us likewise to join the journey. He indicates that by inspiring readers in this chapter, he aims to "become the dance, not the dancer" (p. 66).

As in the various chapters before this one, he uses drawings that he has created in order to express in a different genre his self-development and his reflections. This chapter is studded with many such drawings, which indeed I found helpful, along with his reflective text and his tables. (On page 76 he offers a table comparing different types of ritual—namely, a type where the self retains control and a type where the self gives up control.) Towards the end of the chapter, he invites the reader to "co-exist with ritual" (of various types) and suggests that we should try to "reawaken memories of ritual" by asking ourselves specific questions, that he poses to us in six bullet points (p. 82). These all relate to the theme of creating systems change through our travelling together on journeys in which we re-explore our identities as individual and collective subjects, also taking into account our relations with the extra-human modes of being with which we share the planet. (This implies not treating "nature" as a resource to be commodified, but as a life force with which we are connected, to be regarded with awe.)

In Chapter 7, he deepens the discussion further by looking at the relationship between ritual and applied systems thinking. He provides an account of how we might re-enchant our world, systemically (p. 84). He discusses various systems thinkers in this chapter to get to the point of suggesting that we always need to consider the consequences of the way we as thinkers and actors are making boundaries when defining systems, which are not "out there", but which result from our interactions. He uses authors such as Ackoff (1978), Churchman (1968), Midgley (2000), and Ulrich (2001) to make this point in various ways, also calling on us to be open to revisit and expand the boundaries being drawn by us. In this chapter, he again returns to the question of pragmatism, arguing that any pragmatic focus on what works in practice must be aware of the selections being made in defining practical bearings, which indeed always have a normative content, albeit one that may be hidden from view unless reflected upon (p. 87). Therefore, self-awareness, defined as looking back at our normative assumptions, is key towards our co-developing a better society.

Interestingly, in a footnote in this chapter, he tells us that in storying his account of ritual knowledge in this book, "most of the authors consulted for this book belong to the English-speaking world. (p. 87)" He suggests that, perhaps, their views need to be subjected to critical review in regard to whether they are imposing their ideas without taking into account views on ritual as developed in the non-English speaking world. He wonders whether we might therefore wish as readers to look at some more non-English speaking authors' views on whether and to what extent pragmatism appears in their understandings of ritual practices. His own view developed from reading the authors mainly from the English-speaking world is that "ritual knowledge could help us better appreciate our present situation without having to directly influence our future(s)" (p. 98). This sentence of his comes from his final chapter (Chapter 8), where he provides what he calls his final reflections. He sums these up as that "rituals and systems thinking could help in making us feel at home with the unknown, but only so much, or only temporarily" (p. 97). With this qualification he still re-iterates that "ritual could offer us possibilities to reflect on who we are or others are. They could also help us enact our ethics" (p. 98). He adds that "we are all trying to make sense of the unknown, possibly helping others in the process" (p. 99). He ends the book with two final memories, one of them being fictional.

In summary, I found the book to be rich with insights, while leaving many openings for me as a reader to reflect on the issues and the questions raised in all the chapters. Córdoba-Pachón's own journey delving into the subject of "ritual" became a means (at least for him) for increasing his awareness of being connected with life forces bigger than ourselves. He invites us too to embark on such a journey, partly through engaging with his deliberations, but also creatively extending them. If sufficient people embark (with others) to extend our awareness of our mode(s) of being, we can co-create constructive systems change through enacting a more reflected-upon ethics, taking into account that our ways of thinking-and-being do not have to be framed using the frames of managers or

distanced scientists who (try to) control our lifeworlds. I therefore would encourage readers to take the time, slowly, to appreciate the depth of this book as a step to enhancing *awareness-based systems change*. Readers will probably also benefit from reading further literature (scholarly and otherwise) hailing from Indigenous communities where rituals are treated as core to the life of the community and are seen as important also for global healing processes (and relations with the cosmos). Ritual as a way of connecting with "spiritual flow" is regarded as crucial, as an Indigenous leader in Venda puts it, to "attract the attention of the need for holistic revival" (Mphatheleni Makaulule, cited in Makaulule et al., 2024). Córdoba-Pachón has noted in his Chapter 7 that most of the authors whom he consulted in writing this book belong to the English-speaking world. Hereby Córdoba-Pachón admits that this could be regarded as a gap that readers may wish to fill.

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In the Making

Generative Evaluation:

Learning With and For Living Systems

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Abstract
Evaluation has so much potential for learning, co-creation, and collaboration around more inclusive and regenerative programs and, ultimately, systems. Yet, currently, evaluations are often experienced as controlling and frustrating add-ons. Inspired by developmental evaluation, we have experimented with generative methods to make evaluation a space for stakeholders to come together, re-connect, re-fresh the purpose of collaboration and re-view the design. We see that such a generative approach to evaluation can help to (1) express and co-construct systemic issues that often remain hidden and destructive otherwise, (2) create connection and energy for collaboration and (3) open a world of possibilities to learn from the past and adjust for the future. Organizations that use a more generative approach can hope to change the mindset within to more learning, collaboration, and courageous experimentation.

Keywords
evaluation, systems change, learning, generativity, emergence, transformation

Introduction

Evaluation matters. How success is defined and measured drives how interventions are designed and implemented. If evaluation strives for expertise, judgement, and measurement of the past, interventions will be designed for confirmation, certainty and measurability.

Can we evaluate instead in a more warm, organic, and wide way in order to enable more daring, complex, and exploratory interventions? These kinds of interventions are needed for the transformative changes we seek in many domains, from energy to food to health. This is where Generative Evaluation is coming from: the desire to learn collectively from complex interventions in order to chart our way forward, towards more regenerative and inclusive societies and systems. We understand Generative Evaluation as a set of practices that enables users to learn with and from the living system. It starts from the observation that there are tensions between any project or organization's purpose, its design, and the living system—the interaction of stakeholders—and the related outcomes. The difference between an organisation's planned outcomes and the actual outcomes is due to emergence. This difference should not be taken as unwelcome deviance, but as welcome information about the dynamics in the system, where it may be blocked, and where it may want to move. Generative Evaluation embraces emergence and makes it fruitful for reviewing and adapting the purpose, design, and the living system of a project, programme, or organization.

This paper shares insights from our experiences with Generative Evaluation. We are still experimenting with the approach, and so the intention of the paper is to invite readers to share their own experiences with similar approaches. We know that many evaluators are experimenting with similar methods to facilitate learning and change. We hope this paper can serve as a useful starting point to organize the various methods in the evaluation space and consolidate our experiences. The paper draws specifically on three projects as case studies, where we used a variety of generative approaches. Our conclusions are preliminary, yet we can clearly sense that there is high demand and interest in doing evaluation differently.

It may be no coincidence that we as authors are not full-time evaluators but rather facilitators of systems transformation. We have been supporting complex programming, mainly in the domains of inclusive markets, food systems, and natural resource management the past two decades, from design to implementation and evaluation and experimentation. As such, we feel the needs of the designer and the implementor when we evaluate, and we seek to create spaces for collective reflection, learning, and adaptation.

We have embarked on a journey since 2019 to design evaluation that supports living systems to meet their complexities. This paper draws on three case studies where we experimented with generative methods in learning and evaluation:

1. An *intergovernmental donor organization* that engaged us to assess and improve the evaluation systems of its 18 agencies using generative and systemic approaches.
2. Evaluating and refining a Theory of Change aimed at behavioural shifts of farmers in Brazil for a *communications agency*.
3. Evaluation and learning for a *global partnership* aimed at systemic change in global supply chains.

Whilst we are still experimenting, we have learnt that Generative Evaluation helps to:

- *Express and co-construct systemic issues*: Unexpressed and often unintended dynamics are allowed to surface.
- *Create connection and energy toward purpose*: The process is reinvigorating for participants, who connect deeply with others with a shared purpose and often emerge with fresh momentum.
- *Foster generativity by opening a world of possibilities*: Generative Evaluation can help learn from living systems and emergence to re-shape our purpose and how we achieve it.

In this paper we describe Generative Evaluation and its key properties and practices, and then draw on our three case studies to highlight the learning from our early-stage exploration of this approach.

What is Generative Evaluation?

Evaluation has become prerequisite of most publicly funded projects and initiatives and is used in many contexts to understand "what is working and what is not." Evaluation is widely regarded as the key mechanism for enhancing accountability and informing program development and planning through reflective observation, formative processes, and summative assessments of social change (Stockmann & Meyer, 2016). Typically, the evaluation is conducted by a third party, with the idea of engaging a neutral and objective observer. In this approach, learning is outsourced to the evaluator and, as a result, learnings and recommendations are often not easily absorbed by the stakeholders implementing the project or initiative. They simply have not been invited to follow along the process and are often stuck in routines that feel necessary.

This prevailing belief in the “gold standard” of evaluation—emphasizing neutrality, objectiveness, and transparency—has been central to evaluation frameworks since the 1990s (OECD, 1990), shaping how success is defined and measured, which in turn influences project design and implementation (Mayne, 2008). In fact, any approaches, principles and measurement logic of evaluation require a specific design and lock the living system in a particular purpose. In this way, evaluation affects organizational operations, values, learning processes,

and the extent to which experimentation, innovation, and honesty are encouraged. In essence, evaluation drives organizational culture, shaping what is valued, the dominant leadership styles, symbols, procedures, routines, and definitions of success (Cameron & Quinn, 1999).

The notion that policy choices will become easier and programs more efficient and impactful due to a norm of neutral, objective evaluation has come under increasing scrutiny. Rather than rely on expert judgment, there is widespread understanding that participants of social change need to learn collectively and be bolder in their approaches to meet and experiment with the complexities and ambiguities of living in a globalised world (Patton, 2013; Senge, 1991). Further, in our era of rapidly changing communication, marked by fake news, conspiracy theories, and emerging learning technologies, citizens are questioning expert information and notions of neutrality or objective truth underpinning policy response (Hense, 2018, p. 3) as was the case with citizen responses during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The future of evaluation will require more than the expert evaluator or scientist as the sole arbiter of evidence and truth. Policy, programmatic, or citizen approaches aspiring to change systems through complex interventions involving a multitude of actors may need to ask themselves: how can these interventions learn both with and for living systems? Indeed, isn't systemic change fundamentally about how living systems are learning and responding collectively?

We have been engaged in generative practices in evaluation and learning, which have the potential to foster a more dynamic and supportive organizational culture. Generativity in our practices is the ability to produce or create something. In psychology, Erik Erikson first coined the term in the 1950s to describe the developmental stage where adults begin to guide the next generation (Erikson, 1978). American social psychologist Kenneth Gergen coined the concept of generative theory as a scientific approach to challenge common assumptions and open up new possibilities and forms of action (Gergen, 1979). Gergen argues for an approach to theorizing that is free from the immediate need for verification and facts and can thus "generate" desirable social outcomes. He links his proposal with the rationalist tradition going back, among others, to Kant and Hegel, who regard reason, rather than empirical facts, as the source of knowledge.

Peter Senge builds on this tradition in his seminal 1990 article (Senge, 1990). Generative learning, he writes, enhances our capacity to create. It requires new ways of looking at the world, seeing the systems that control events, and also seeing clearly where we want to be. Our "vision," and telling the truth about where we are in our "current reality," helps to foster a learning organization. Otto Scharmer, co-founder of the Presencing Institute, lead author of the Theory U approach, and a close collaborator of Senge, picks up these ideas in his concept of "generative dialogue" (2002). Generative dialogue transcends individual conversations to become a collective experience of meaning-making,

discovery, and transformation. Meaning flows freely, and a generative flow unfolds, unleashing collective creativity through authentic and evolving identities. It's a space where conversations cease to be routine and become a force for genuine, transformative change. Generative Evaluation builds on this tradition and leverages intuitive, systemic, and actor-based methods from various disciplines and practices, including psychology (Perls et al., 1951), ancient wisdom (e.g., Macy & Brown, 2014, Yunkaporta, 2019), coaching, Theory U (Scharmer, 2016, 2018), Design Thinking (e.g., Brown, 2008), and Systems Practice (e.g., Senge, 2014) (see Table 1). We integrate these generative practices into our evaluation work to foster more dynamic and transformative processes.

Our basic assumption in Generative Evaluation is evaluation as dynamic and transformative processes and, with this approach in mind, deviations from the purpose and design of a program provide useful indications of important factors in the living system (Figure 1). Traditional evaluation methods tend to see these deviations as failure that needs to be corrected. By contrast, a generative approach embraces emergence. Evaluation is utilized as an opportunity to explore the interactions between purpose, design, and the living system and to update and reinvigorate all elements, building on the work of Michael Patton (Patton, 1994). With Developmental Evaluation, Michael Patton has indeed introduced the concept of emergence into the evaluation of complex problems (Patton, 1994). This approach promotes organizational development and innovation through evaluation and learning, emphasizing the importance of facilitated processes (Patton, 2013). Generative evaluation builds on this lineage and enriches it with generative methods emanating from the work of Peter Senge (1990, 2014), Otto Scharmer (2016, 2018), and others. In other words, while Developmental Evaluation primarily relies on an analytical approach using qualitative and quantitative data, Generative Evaluation broadens this by incorporating intuitive, embodied, and co-creative practices to observe and move with emergence.

While still in development, some aspects of Generative Evaluation have become clear from testing approaches in our case studies. Generative Evaluation explores the possibilities of what is emerging or wants to emerge (Figure 1). Instead of solely focusing on explaining the past, it allows participants to investigate the interdependencies and interconnectedness within emergent processes. Generative Evaluation explores emergence in a living system, say a project, initiative, or organization, by observing the relation between the purpose, design, and living system (Figure 1). All three dimensions can be adjusted in the process to integrate learnings from the past and move towards a desired future.

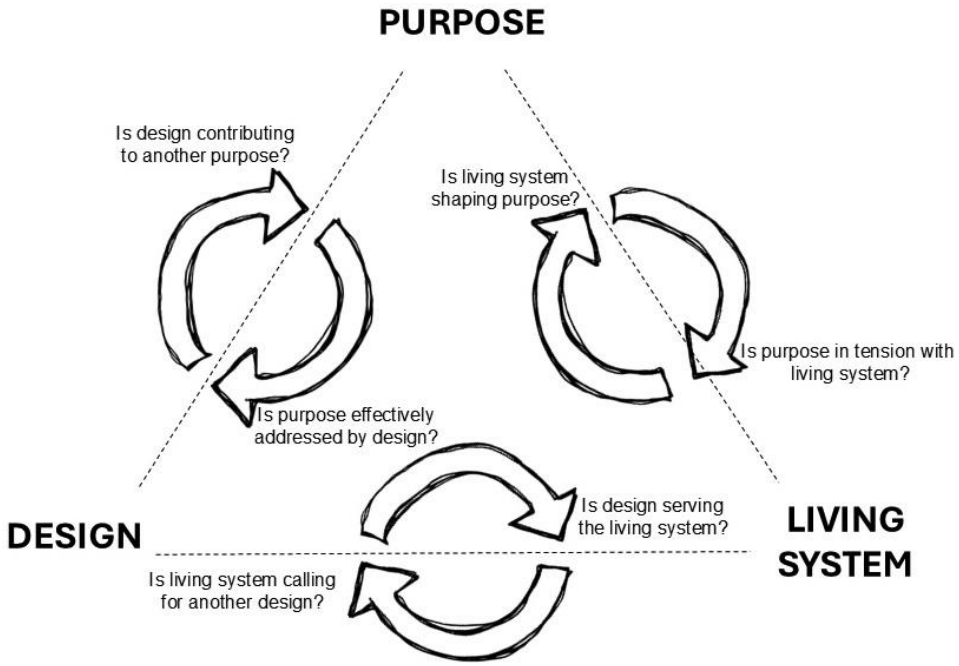

Figure 1: Interactions within emergent processes between purpose, design and living system.

Generative Evaluation explores and updates the interaction between purpose, design and the living system. The *living system* refers to the dynamic interconnections and interdependencies between the various people and contexts that are involved in or affected by the purpose and the design of the project. Values, power structures, needs, incentives, and constraints reflect in these relationships. The *purpose* is the explicit and implicit intention and function of the project or organization to be evaluated. In addition to any formalized purpose, we may observe different actors have at times different views of what the purpose of the project or organization is. The *design* of the project or organization describes the structures and processes to achieve the purpose and manifest it in the living system. This includes the Theory of Change, organizational setup, workplan and budget, procedures and so forth. Generative Evaluation helps us learn about how well the design serves the intended purpose in real life; to what extent the purpose is actually shared by various actors; and what the living system teaches us about adjusting the purpose and design.

Principles and Practices of Generative Evaluation

Generative Evaluation principles are co-creative, non-judgmental, intuitive, and systemic (Figure 2). The principle of *co-creative* helps to brings together diverse perspectives, encourages shared ownership, and fosters creativity and innovation, which all together help participants to keep an open mind and be *non-judgemental*. The principle of *intuitive* help builds perspectives, evidence, data, and interpretation not only from the lens of conscious reasoning, but also from feelings and felt sense. The principle of *systemic* looks at interdependencies and the whole. Some practices we used are more *systemic* while others are more

actor-centered, looking at a particular actor in the system. It is through a set of generative practices drawing from disciplines and practices, including psychology, ancient wisdom, coaching, design thinking, systems practice, facilitation and organisation development, that those principles are realised (Figure 2; Table 1).

Definition of those four principles in Generative Evaluation:

1. *Co-creative* practices enable participants to create outputs together. In addition to providing own input, the task is to listen to the input of others and to collectively develop an idea, a hypothesis, a proposal, an experiment, assessment, or other output.
2. *Non-judgmental* practices encourage participants to keep an open mind about the purpose, design, and living system features. In a constructive spirit, assessing what is "emerging" and what "works" is a shared process, rather than a benchmark against an objective target or ideal.
3. *Systemic* practices encourage participants to focus on interdependencies rather than on individual elements of a project, program, or wider system. These practices also enable participants to integrate issues or topics that are outside the defined scope of the project. This wider perspective helps to contextualize findings and draw conclusions about why things are working or are not working, including with relationships, values, power structures, needs, incentives, and constraints.
4. *Intuitive:* In addition to cognition, practices leverage the intuition of participants. Tapping into emotions, images, our sense of space, music, and poetry, as well as fantasy, enables participants to share insights that integrate their experience and insights that draw from processes other than conscious reasoning, regarding the complex living system and how it relates to the design and purpose.

We characterize each practice from Figure 1 briefly here in Table 1. A full description would go beyond the scope of this paper, but many useful resources on these practices are provided in Table 1.

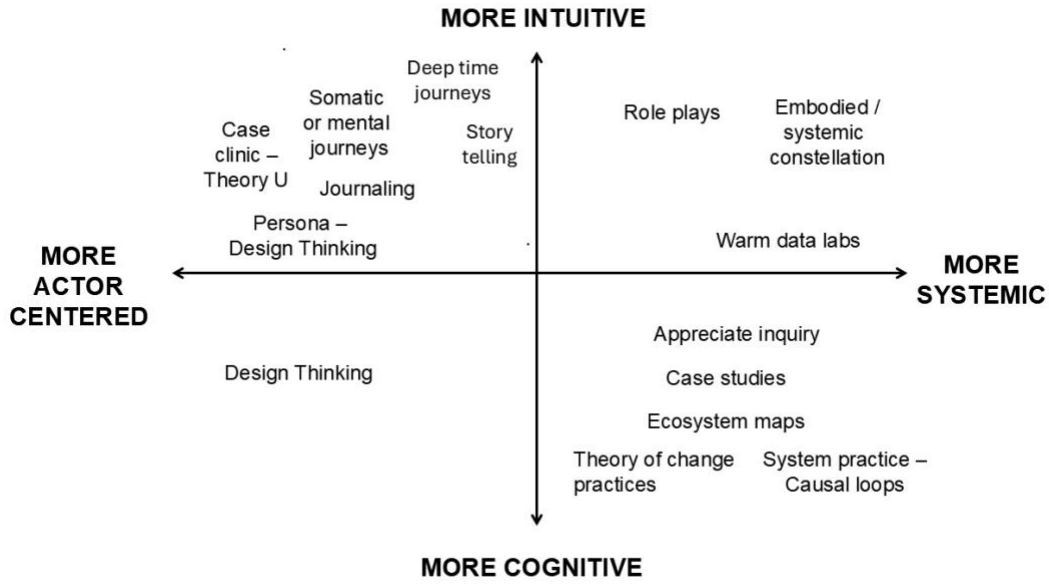

Figure 2: *Generative Practices in Generative Evaluation*

Practice	Description	Reference
Appreciative inquiry	Stimulates collective inquiry into the best of what is, in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling and thus does not require the use of incentives, coercion, or persuasion for planned change to occur.	Busche, 2013 Whitney & Cooperrider, 2011.
Design thinking	A process for creative problem solving. Methods put the user of a solution into the center. They also include many creative exercises that enable participants to brainstorm together and quickly produce tangible outputs based on real-life feedback.	Brown, 2008
Deep time journeys	Involves the process of experiencing our own personal lives as held within a larger context of space and time, widening our perspective to include the wisdom of our ancestors and our children's children. As a result, we open ourselves to a deepened appreciation of the evolutionary journey we have been through as a species. It is inspired by Indigenous practices such as the seventh-generation principle and practice which is based on an ancient philosophy of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois), or Aboriginal dreaming and storytelling.	Haudenosaunee Confederacy (n.d) Macy & Brown, 2014 Yunkaporta, 2019
Ecosystem maps	Portrays the actor landscape relevant for a specific project or question and the interrelations between these actors. They can also highlight barriers and incentives that work on these actors.	
Embodied/ systemic constellations	Uses our intuitive sense of space to map interdependencies between actors or topics. As representatives position themselves in the room, tensions, imbalances, alliances, and other	Whittington, 2012 Arts et al., 2021

E.g. 3 and 4 D mapping	"constellations" become apparent. Constellations can also be used to "prototype" changes and quickly see how they might affect other actors in the ecosystem. It is inspired from family constellation and embodiment practices.	
Journaling	The practice of writing down your thoughts, feelings, insights, and more. Used as a generative workshop practice, the facilitator guides the participants through a serious of questions. Participants write down their reflections onto their note pad, just for themselves. Questions connect participants deeper with their emotions and insights. A round of reflection in the group then enables others to benefit from the insights.	
Somatic/mental journeys	Used to connect participants with themselves and their emotions and ground them in the present moment. Mental journeys are also used to explore certain aspects intuitively, such as perspectives of relevant stakeholders, or future developments of a project. It is inspired from mindfulness and Gestalt therapy.	Perls et al., 1951
Story telling with metaphors and symbols	Used to synthesize insights into an intuitively accessible and meaningful "shortcut." For example, an evaluation of a project aimed at a regenerative economy may use the symbol of a seed to explore the theory of change of generativity during the evaluation.	
Persona	Holistic portraits or archetypes of fictional characters that represent customers, users, or other interest groups. Personas are used to personify the needs of the interest groups. This helps gain empathy and a better understanding of the users. Persona is a key aspect of Design Thinking.	Brown, 2008
Role play	Enables participants to explore different stakeholder perspectives as well as interdependencies between actors with empathy. Participants take on different roles and then interact around a certain subject or issue. Role play can also be used to quickly prototype solutions and explore how they might be perceived by different stakeholders. Role-playing helps with creativity, self-awareness, group cohesion and" out-of-the-box" thinking.	Bowman, 2010
System practice	A methodology to identify and map different forces related to an issue, subject or question, and the causal links between them. The output is a causal loop map that connects factors into self-generating cycles. Maps can be used to identify leverage points as areas for intervention.	Senge, 2014
Case Clinic of Theory U	An approach where a case-giver presents a case, and peers or team members act as coaches tapping into not only cognitive reasoning but generative and felt senses.	
Case studies	A detailed study of a specific subject that illustrates a certain point or enables participants to engage with a specific question or opportunity.	

Theory of Change	An approach that consists of a variety of ways of developing a causal model that links the program's activities to a chain of intended or observed outcomes, and then using this model to guide the evaluation. Participants can engage with the Theory of Change, explore assumptions, test causal connections, and adapt it.	Stein & Valters, 2012
Theory U	Theory U is a methodology that enables organizations and other groups of stakeholders to collectively move towards a desired future in five steps, or movements: co-initiating, co-sensing, presencing, co-creating and co-evolving. Processes using this approach are also often called "generative" processes. The U movement is the basis for all our facilitation design.	Scharmer, 2016
Warm Data Labs	Group processes in which information and formulation of cross-contextual knowing is generated—the "Warm Data." For example, to understand a family, one must understand not only the family members, but also the relationships between them, and the economic, education, media, health, and other systems they are embedded in.	Bateson, 2016

Table 1: Summaries of Generative Evaluation Practices Used.

Case Studies

We illustrate the principles and practices of Generative Evaluation by drawing on three case examples from our work including the evaluation task, what approach we took, and what we learned.

Case 1: Assessing Evaluation Systems

Evaluation Task

A large intergovernmental donor organization engaged us to assess and improve the evaluation systems of 18 international development agencies receiving their funds.

Our Approach

Our proposed methodology incorporated systems thinking to map the evaluation systems of different agencies, focusing on their learning and accountability processes. This mapping was informed by detailed case studies, which would identify learning opportunities for applying design thinking. We also proposed using design thinking to understand the agencies' perspectives and needs. This approach aimed to uncover systemic issues, identify opportunities for improvement, and co-create solutions. Additionally, design thinking included the co-design of solutions with the agencies to enhance their evaluation systems.

In our first co-design workshop, we invited evaluation managers to journal their pain points and the needs of their evaluation systems. This was a novel experience for staff who were typically focused on technical questions, evaluative opinions, and judgments within the context of evaluation. The exercise fostered a sense of community as similar pain points emerged across organizations. It became evident that everyone in the room deeply cared about evaluation, and the connection through this shared purpose was palpable.

Our generative practices throughout the co-design process included journaling exercises, with classic prompts such as “What excites you?” and “What frustrates you about your evaluation system?”

What We Learned

This approach allowed the agencies to be authentic and openly discuss barriers within the current compliance-based system. One significant issue flagged was that the system creates almost no direct incentives for candor with the donor or for deeper learning. Agencies questioned why they would be candid and foster learning when doing so could jeopardize future funding. Consequently, they revealed how difficulties and failures in projects might be concealed to protect future project opportunities, rather than using these experiences as valuable learning opportunities. By acknowledging such systemic issues—the elephant in the room—in their evaluation systems, agency staff were empowered to make their own recommendations during the design thinking sessions.

In addition to using design thinking and generative practices, we were also mapping the evaluation systems of the agencies. Our goal was to explore the feedback loop between the donor's evaluation system and that of their beneficiaries. However, from the outset of the contract, the donor made it clear that our mandate was to assess the agencies' evaluation systems, not the donor's own system in relation to its beneficiaries. Despite this, during the generative practices and design thinking sessions, agencies naturally revealed the real-life conditions and constraints of their evaluation systems, many of which were closely tied to the donor’s rules and incentives. Our approach generated honest conversations on barriers to learning due to asymmetric power relationships between donor and agency, and some solutions to overcome this.

Case 2: Making Theory of Change Personal

Evaluation Task

In another case study from Brazil, we were assisting a communications agency in refining their Theory of Change (ToC) in preparation for a multi-year intervention following a pilot phase. The initiative’s long-term goal was to reduce deforestation by farmers and agribusinesses in the region, with a focus on using communication to encourage behavioural change among farmers. Rather than

evaluating the pilot phase itself, our task was to assess the current Theory of Change using data gathered during that phase.

Our Approach

By fostering empathy and understanding for the target audience, we aimed to create a more responsive and effective approach to inviting behavioural change

As part of our methodology, we utilized data collected on the target audience during the pilot phase to develop personas—artefactual characters synthesized from the target groups' key attributes such as values, needs, pains, and longings. Personas help us imagine and empathize with the people targeted or affected by the change we aim to make. These personas were then employed to refine the Theory of Change, making assumptions about behavioural change more explicit. Additionally, we used role play allowing our client to take on and explore perspectives of the target group. This helped them to sense their own position in the system which had triggered resistance by farmers in the past. Empathizing with this resistance and connecting with values of the target group, our client learned that they would need to show up and communicate differently from the stereotypical environmental activists they had been seen as.

What We Learned

As a result of the generative approach, the client team achieved a new understanding of their target audience and the conditions necessary for change. Eventually, the communication agency jointly reshaped the Theory of Change to become more responsive to the living system they set out to engage with. This was particularly valuable in the polarized context of conservation and deforestation in the Amazon, where there was a risk of reinforcing existing assumptions and biases, potentially deepening the divide between farming and forest protection.

Instead of employing a one-way behaviour change model, the client acknowledged the agency of the target group. They could appreciate farmers, their views, values, and needs in a different way, thus informing their future approach of communicating for change.

Case 3: Learning for Systems Change

Evaluation Task

Our third case study is a learning and evaluation project for a global partnership aimed at systemic change in global supply chains. We served as evaluators for a midterm evaluation, and later as facilitators for systems change. This global initiative involved substantial investments aimed at reducing deforestation within major agricultural supply chains. The focus was on creating enabling

conditions for sustainable production, which included providing financial incentives and fostering demand for sustainable products. The partnership brought together some of the world's leading NGOs and UN organizations dedicated to forest conservation and sustainable agriculture.

Our Approach

This intervention started with a traditional mid-term evaluation of a large multi-country effort to create systemic change in global supply chains towards reduced deforestation led by multiple international development agencies. We expanded our intervention into system practices such as system mapping and embodied constellation of specific supply chain and their challenges and learning workshops, where we applied practices, such as appreciative inquiry and storytelling with metaphors and symbols, aligned to their Theory of Change, and prototyping through role plays of next possible design. We held systems practice workshops in the two intervention countries—Brazil and Paraguay—to map the system and identify leverage points. We held a global learning workshop at the end of the programme.

Figure 3: Use of Metaphors and Symbols in Generative Evaluation to Stimulate Storytelling.

In this case, the symbolic graphic depicted the global partnership's theories of transformation, which in our learning workshop, helped stimulate storytelling around the challenges of this Theory of Change.

What We Learned

The partnership struggled with its overall theory of transformation for integration of demand, supply, and production. We captured this struggle in the image we created for their learning workshop, which was a graphic of three hands (supply, demand and production) which strived to connect, but could not entirely be integrated (see Figure 3). This symbolic graphic evoked strong emotions during the learning workshop, even among staff from the donor agency who had been instrumental in designing the partnership and its theory of change. As a result, intuitive insights including pain points around the Theory of Change were revealed. For example, the donor's insistence on fostering collaboration between traditionally competing agencies through this project which aimed to promote the idea of integration, inadvertently constrained all parties involved. Despite these challenges, the partnership itself was still appreciated and welcomed.

The systems practice and learning workshops also revealed that the partners were overwhelmed by the complexity of global supply chains and their political, economic, social contexts. We were struck by repeated feedback from participants, including those with over 30 years of experience in development banks, NGOs, and similar organizations, that the "context for systemic change in global chain is too complex."

Nonetheless, systems practice gave a big picture of where each partner in the partnership was needed for systemic change in global supply chains (from demand, to supply, and finance) to work. It showed that different theories of change were needed as conditions for systemic change in global supply chains were challenging. This reduced competition among partners on the "right" approach. Embodied constellations and role plays helped the partnership understand the rationality of the stakeholders, their "why" of behaviours, and the conditions that lead to systems behaviours. This helped all partners improve the design of the partnership.

The biggest pain point of the partnership was the lack of flexibility and capacity to foster social innovation and experimentation with business actors within the existing design, given the complexity of supply chains. This was due to the rigid result framework of non-changeable targets and outcomes, which did not encourage experimentation, innovation, and adaptation. During the learning workshop at the end of the partnership, we organized a role play to test their ideas of more generative design—specifically, programs and partnerships that support greater experimentation, innovation, and adaptation. Participants highlighted design principles around being adaptive and iterative, about nurturing and facilitating collaboration and behaviour change processes and around co-creative design process for outcomes and impacts. For the design principles to be realized, participants identified the need for skills and incentives that support collaboration, facilitation, systems thinking, social innovation, and new approaches to monitoring, learning, and evaluation for systemic change. During our role plays, designed to simulate how the design principles would be

received, many participants playing the roles of donors and government representatives reacted negatively. They expressed concerns such as, "We're already locked into themes and indicators for the next funding cycle," or "We need to stay focused on results and impacts," or "Supply chain stakeholders and governments want practical solutions, not abstract design principles." Despite this resistance, seeds of possibility were planted while everyone still faced the realism of the hard conditions for change.

In this way, generative practices enabled the partnership to better prepare for and work more realistically with future initiatives. Generative practices highlighted the need for additional resources, enhanced skill sets, and incentives for collaboration, system approaches, and social innovation and experimentation.

Early Findings

We have only started to bring generative practices into evaluation processes. From our early experience, the results it yielded, the feedback we received from clients and participants, and the energy in our workshops, shows that these practices bring a new and highly welcome twist into evaluation. Most organizations now want to use evaluation for learning, in addition to accountability (Meyer & Stockmann, 2016). Often, this learning is conceived as an analytical exercise, where an evaluator draws conclusions and feeds them back as recommendations. We promote a more collective approach to learning, a journey from the past experience to the future design. We see in these and other examples how such an invitation to "generate" and to "re-generate" is changing the dynamic at three levels. It allows tensions to surface, invites connection in the group, and creates space for future opportunities.

Express Systemic Issues

In the cases above, generative methods have helped surface systemic issues, which, while they may seem obvious, are often obscured by unconscious "organizational silence" (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In the case "Assessing Evaluation Systems" for a donor (Case Study #1), it was quite obvious to all participants that candor was disincentivized by donor-agency power asymmetry and hence effective learning was obstructed. The process allowed this "elephant in the room" to be expressed, which allowed the group to look for solutions. Likewise, in the case "Learning for Systems Change" (Case Study #3), it was plain that a rigid result framework of non-changeable targets and outcomes was incompatible and non-conducive for experimentation, innovation, and adaptation. Acknowledging this pressure point enabled the team to look at their achievements with a new perspective and appreciate the learnings more. Finally, in the second case "Making Theory of Change Personal" (Case Study #2), the communications agency needed to realize that they were also part of the system, and from their target group's perspective, that they were even part of the problem. Becoming aware of this, they moved on toward acknowledging the

realities and agency of their target group. This allowed them to shift how and from which vantage point they would be advocating for change from then on.

Silence about tensions persists due to unquestioned belief systems, power structures, incentives, and a lack of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018). By enabling participants to co-construct these systemic issues in a safe enough space, they could surface them. In this way, these issues became seeds for designing meaningful co-improvement. By creating a safe enough space for participants to co-construct these systemic issues, they were able to bring them to light. In this way, these issues became seeds for meaningful co-improvement. For instance, in the first case study, agencies recommended cross-agency learning processes to encourage open dialogue and shared learning, ensuring this knowledge was accessible to all stakeholders. Such cross-agency collaboration can help overcome systemic barriers to learning, particularly when fear from power imbalances between donors and beneficiaries impede candor and learning (Case Study #1).

Create Connection and Energy for Moving Towards Purpose

Evaluation is often associated with judgment and criticism. But what if we introduced more appreciation into the process? In our work with multiple agencies and their evaluation systems (Case Study #1), we described and categorized the different evaluation systems and their best practices, rather than judging "what is wrong" or comparing "what is better." This appreciative approach encouraged evaluation managers from different agencies to engage with one another's evaluation systems in the spirit of connection and learning. We heard participants make comments such as "We don't use theory of change as part of our evaluation approach, but we want to learn how you have integrated evaluation of Theory of Change in your evaluation"; or "We conduct in-home terminal evaluation which brings quality but that leaves us no time for learning, how are you doing it differently"; or "Our rating systems are different, so how can we have similar ones to compare across similar portfolios" (various participants, Case Study #1). This appreciative approach fostered a willingness to learn from each other, identified common needs, challenges, and objectives, and led to brainstorming potential opportunities in their evaluation systems. These interactions also created connective tissue between the different parts of the living system, fostering a sense of shared learning and a collective journey.

We are finding that when a living system is stuck, Generative Evaluation can help actors experience each other, their work and their organization, in new ways. It revitalizes and strengthens the relationships within the system, reconnecting them with the purpose and design of the initiative. Because generative methods are highly co-creative and often intuitive, they provide stakeholders with opportunities to interact openly and share their perspectives. These intuitive practices allow participants to explore and express their own emotions, life experiences, insights, and dreams, making these personal reflections a key part of the evaluation process. For example, playful, intuitive,

and empathetic approaches with use of persona and role-play helped the communication agency reflect on their assumptions and biases towards farmers in their theory of change (Case Study #2). Owning these assumptions and biases made it possible for the communications agency to re-connect with farmers and adapt their communication and behavioural change strategy to a more relational one. In other words, the focus shifted from merely analysing data and insights to integrating each participant as a whole person including their experiences, mental models, and feelings into the Theory of Change and that helped to re-connect to stakeholders and move towards new strategy and purpose.

We also observe that clients and partners often lack a safe space and the opportunity to acknowledge and express the current reality, including pain points and collective dreams. This absence of space for recognizing "what is" contributes to a state of stagnation, as there is often excessive focus on "what should be." For example, in the case “Learning for Systems Change,” we created a symbolic graphic image (Figure 3) to depict the partnership’s struggle with their theory of change (Case Study #3). By incorporating symbolism and emotions into the evaluation and learning process, it allowed both donors and implementers to tune in on "what is"—that is the current reality—rather than being caught up in the judgmental aspects of "what should be." Traditional evaluation frequently reinforces this focus on "what should be," which is why it often fails to help organizations, teams, or projects overcome their challenges and get unstuck. Expressing the "what is" brings a sense of lightness, enabling more meaningful connections. This, in turn, fosters greater energy, enthusiasm, motivation, clarity, acceptance, and forgiveness for failures and constraints. Such meaningful connections enhance the potential for learning and pave the way for collaborative efforts and co-creating solutions. As a result, the living system becomes revitalized and embarks on a dynamic learning process, actively searching for its future potential.

Fostering Generativity in a World of Possibilities

In the *Art of Possibilities*, the Zanders write that “in the measurement world, you set a goal and strive for it” (Zanders & Zanders, 2002, p. 21). In other words, success or impact is viewed only from the point of view of that goal. In the universe of possibility, the Zanders continued, “you set the context and let life unfold” (Zanders & Zanders, 2002, p. 21). In other words, if we want to learn about how our intended strategies are playing out in complex systems, we would be wise to observe emergence in the context that we set.

In the case “Learning for Systems Change,” emergence and adaptation to deal with complexity in transforming global supply chains was much needed but not possible because of rigid results framework (Case Study #3). In reflecting on this, participants including implementation agencies and donors identified design principles they wanted to use for the design of the next program and funding cycle to foster systems change. When prototyping those design principles using role-plays, it became clear that the system was not ready to foster systems

change. We heard role playing participants, especially those embodying roles of donors and government representatives, making comments such as, "We're already locked into themes and indicators for the next funding cycle," "We need to stay focused on results and impacts," and "Supply chain stakeholders and governments want practical solutions, not abstract design principles." Generative Evaluation helped participants look at nourishing conditions for “ready-ness for change” (Bateson, 2022) as seeds of possibility while still facing the realism of the hard conditions for change. Nora Bateson calls this a theory of change that changes a theory of change (Bateson, 2022).

By observing emergent feedback and resonance of the living system, Generative Evaluation has the potential to connect evaluation with strategy. Honouring these responses and the agency of its actors allows us to co-create and update the purpose and design that can function more adequately with the living system—not against it. This is what we mean when we say evaluation needs to be a resource for the living system. Generative Evaluation invites the living system as the main source of generativity to help us re-define success and impact in line with its living complexity.

Conclusion

Generative Evaluation introduces tools and processes for stakeholders to explore how and why a living system targeted by a project or initiative is actually responding to its purpose and design. Inviting these learnings into a generative process allows people and organizations to jointly question and co-create why, what, and how a certain change may be brought about in the future.

In fact, conversations and insights in Generative Evaluation often revolve around the limits related to current design, including structures and processes, aiming to bring about change. Moreover, previously unvoiced, but highly influential aspects of a living system such as asymmetric power relationships become more tangible and demand their way into our why, what, and how we do things. These results are challenging. Changing mindset and culture does not happen with one evaluation. But if more people start to use generative practices and allow for these deeper systemic issues to be spoken during evaluation, the more we foster a culture of openness and learning among important institutions. While change is often met with resistance, generative practices create a safe space where change can be explored as a group.

We are only at the beginning of testing and exploring generative practices in evaluation processes, which can take place throughout the evolution of a project, partnership, community, or organisation. We already see that it brings value to the process at different levels and helps to synchronize the purpose and design while learning from and with the living system they engage with. It leverages the established routine of evaluation to learn together, articulate and dissolve tensions, strengthen relationships, and generate possibilities for the future.

Evaluation systems are what ultimately define how projects and organisations look. “What gets measured gets done” is a widely known management proverb. The indicators and measurement logic require a specific design and lock us in a particular purpose. Changing evaluation therefore means changing how projects and organisations look, but also what “success” or “impact” can look like. If we are truly aiming for lasting impact, we must become better at designing evaluation for living systems to meet their complexities rather than projecting our strategies onto them in a one-way street. If we do that, evaluation and strategy will not be separate processes. Generative Evaluation provides a concrete and practical way to move a step closer in that direction.

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Discussant Commentary

Commentary on Generative Evaluation

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Abstract
As the field of program evaluation has grown over the last six decades, new types of evaluation have emerged to meet different needs and serve diverse and distinct purposes. This article elucidates the important evaluation niche and contribution of Generative Evaluation

Keywords
evaluation, developmental, generative, utilization-focused

I appreciate the opportunity to share some thoughts about *Generative Evaluation.* To put my commentary in context, perhaps a bit of history will be helpful. I have been engaged in evaluation full-time for six decades, most of that time as an independent consultant. That is, I make my living as an evaluation professional. I have written eight books on evaluation focused on making evaluation useful, qualitative methods applied to evaluation, how to be both practical and creative in conducting evaluations, taking a global perspective, and

incorporating systems thinking and complexity theory into evaluation designs. As a former president of the American Evaluation Association and a founding member of the International Evaluation Academy, I am committed to supporting the development of the evaluation profession worldwide.

I have witnessed the emergence of multiple distinct approaches to evaluation. As the field of evaluation has grown over the last six decades, new types of evaluation have emerged to meet different needs and serve diverse and distinct purposes. The options chapter in the 4th edition of my book on *Utilization-Focused Evaluation* catalogued 80 different ways of focusing evaluations (Patton, 2008, pp. 300–305), from A to Z: accountability, accreditation, and appreciative inquiry through process evaluation and product evaluation to theory-of-change approaches and zero-based budgeting. There are goal-based versus goal-free evaluations; both process and outcomes evaluations; participatory versus connoisseurship approaches; real-world and theory-driven frameworks; internal versus external options; cost-benefit and transformative models; constructivist and realist evaluations. Engaging in evaluation requires distinguishing types, understanding options, and choosing among alternative approaches to evaluation that serve the distinct needs of those who will use the evaluation in a given context for a specific purpose. A recent video inventory listing distinct evaluation approaches identified 101 distinct types of evaluation—then stopped counting (Patton, 2022a). That video just provided a panoramic view of the great diversity of evaluation approaches but raised questions from viewers about why there are so many approaches. That led to a series of videos explicating evaluation's diversity:

- Why so damn many options? The 10 competing values that explain the panoramic evaluation landscape. (Patton, 2022b)
- From Evaluation Theory Tree to Theory Forest: A Framework for Depicting Alternative Evaluation Approaches (Patton, 2023a)
- The Periodic Table of Evaluation (Patton, 2024b)
- Evaluation's Story in Fable and Song: Greatest Hits Over Five Decades (Patton, 2023b)
- Honoring the 7 Directions: An Indigenous Framework for Designing and Evaluating Systems Change (Patton, 2024a)

As this collection of videos illustrates, evaluation is characterized by diversity. As different approaches have emerged, each gets a name, a brand, a label, a way of distinguishing it from other approaches. *Generative Evaluation* follows that tradition constituting a new distinction as conceptualized by Malika Virah-Sawmy, Christina Tewes-Gradl, and Pierre Golbach (2024) in the article to which this is a response. Where, then, does *Generative Evaluation* fit in the diverse evaluation landscape and what is its unique contribution? In part because of my work in tracking and cataloging diverse and emergent approaches to evaluation, Malika Virah-Sawmy contacted me to have a dialogue about

Generative Evaluation. That conversation is captured in two videos we did together about the distinctive niche of *Generative Evaluation* (Patton & Virah-Sawmy, 2024a) and *Unpacking System Change* (Patton & Virah-Sawmy, 2024b). What Malika and I discussed in those dialogues is extended in this commentary. First, however, I will share a bit more about what I see as the larger evaluation context to position and elucidate the important evaluation niche and contribution of *Generative Evaluation.*

Distinctions matter. Language matters**.** Terminology matters. One way of keeping track of developments in the field of evaluation is the field's major topical journal, *New Directions for Evaluatio*n, published quarterly by the American Evaluation Association. A special volume of the journal was devoted to *How and Why Language Matters in Evaluation* (Hopson, 2000). In my article in that volume (Patton, 2000), I opened by recounting a classic story from that great scholar and observer of all things human, Dr. Seuss (1961), a story that illustrates the consequences of not making distinctions. His children's story of *Too Many Daves* tells us that Mrs. McCave had 23 sons, and she named them all Dave. When she wanted one particular Dave, and called out his name, all 23 Daves came on the run. The same thing happens if you don't distinguish types of evaluations. You cannot just do an evaluation. You have to do a particular kind of evaluation.

From a Command-and-Control Project Mentality to Living Systems Complexities and Uncertainties

While evaluative thinking, inquiry, and judgments are as old as and can be thought of as inherent to our human species, formal and systematic evaluation as a field of professional practice is relatively recent. Evaluation in the United States grew up in the "projects"—federal government projects spawned by the Great Society legislation of the 1960s. The "War on Poverty" initiated by President Lyndon Johnson led to massive federal expenditures on a great variety of programs during the 1960s and 1970s. That programming gave rise to calls for accountability. This meant more than financial audits. Demand for systematic empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of government programs grew as government programs grew. That demand for accountability spread to philanthropic foundation initiatives, international development agencies, and nongovernmental organizations worldwide. Those wide-ranging development initiatives shared a common logic. Evaluation for accountability was, and still is, embedded in that logic.

The traditional logic of programming is a command-and-control mentality: *plan your work, work your plan, and evaluate the results*. Programs are planned to meet some need and achieve specific, predetermined goals. Program plans then have to be implemented. Traditional evaluation determines to what extent and in what ways the program works to bring about desired changes. Do students learn what they are supposed to learn? Do farmers adopt new practices

offered by agricultural extension programs? Do people in a community recycle appropriately when recycling services are offered? It all sounds pretty straightforward. Except, as the classic proverb cautions:

> The best laid plans of mice and humans often go awry.

Plans often must be adapted to the realities of a turbulent and uncertain world. A famous military adage is that *no plan survives first contact with the enemy*. This doesn't mean that planning is useless. As former US President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1957) observed, "Plans are worthless, but planning is essential." The point is to be ready to adapt plans to fit changing circumstances rather than rigidly implementing a plan without regard to changing conditions. *Generative Evaluation*, as defined in the volume this commentary accompanies, is built on a mindset of readiness for adaptation based on ongoing situation analysis, continuous evaluative questioning, responsive adaptation based on learning, and acute attention to emergence in complex dynamic living systems.

Two Contrasting Visions of Evaluation

Donald Campbell (1998), a pioneering evaluation thought leader, envisioned evaluation as the foundation for an *Experimenting Society*, a society that would vigorously try out solutions to problems, then evaluate those solutions rigorously, determining what works and what does not through ongoing innovation. *Generative Evaluation*, I would suggest, has inherited, builds on, and strives to contribute to that vision.

The problem is that the vision of an *Experimenting Society* has been undercut and overwhelmed by a contrary approach to evaluation characterized as the *Audit Society* (Power, 2011)—standardizing, routinizing, and mandating evaluation processes and procedures to ensure bureaucratic compliance and accountability. The *Audit Society* aims to control the world through standardized procedures, policies, and checklists that operationalize systemic accountability. The *Audit Society* strives to minimize risk and maximize certainty in the face of an increasingly chaotic and unpredictable world. The *Audit Society* establishes standardized protocols and mandated reporting mechanisms to maintain control and emphasizes accountability through paper trails and compliance monitoring. The *Audit Society* values standardization over customization, judgment over learning, consistency over innovation, and predictability over adaptation.

Judgment-oriented (summative) evaluation requires clear, specific, and measurable outcomes that are to be achieved through processes detailed in a linear logic model. This demand for upfront, preordained specificity does not work under conditions of high innovation, exploration, uncertainty, turbulence, and emergence. Indeed, premature specificity can do harm and generate resistance from social innovators, as, indeed, it has, by constraining exploration, limiting adaptation, reducing experimental options, and forcing premature adoption of a rigid model, not because such a model is appropriate, but because evaluators, funders, or other stakeholders demand it in order to comply with

what they understand to be good evaluation. *Generative Evaluation* offers an important alternative to standardized compliance-focused evaluation.

Purpose-Driven

Generative Evaluation is purpose-driven. The authors write:

> Generative Evaluation helps us learn about how well the design serves the intended purpose in real life; to what extent the purpose is actually shared by various actors; and what the living system teaches us about adjusting the purpose and design. (Virah-Sawmy, Tewes-Gradl, & Golbach, 2024, p. 136)

Purpose-driven learning, grounded in relationships, is inherently emergent and generative. It follows these premises:

- Purpose drives both program operations and execution—as well as evaluation responses.
- Different kinds of evaluation serve different purposes and occupy different niches in the world of programming and change initiatives. To contribute significantly within a niche requires understanding and serving its purpose.
- Generative Evaluation serves a distinct purpose in the broad and diverse evaluation landscape.

From my perspective, the language of *Generative Evaluation* suggests a purpose for evaluation that goes beyond simply looking at what was done and judging what was done through the traditional accountability lens. Rather, *Generative Evaluation* makes evaluative thinking and dialogue part of the ongoing, complex, dynamic, and generative process of program and systems change development. This involves bringing evaluative thinking and questions into the creation, innovation, and adaptation processes and connecting individual actors to systems change dynamics using, for example, *Theory U* (Scharmer, 2018). Individuals change as part of the generative evaluation process. Relationships are formed and nurtured, which are themselves generative and, in being so, affect the ongoing development process.

One of the controversies about *Developmental Evaluation* (Patton, 2011) is that the evaluator becomes involved in and has an impact on programming. The traditional Audit Society view is that evaluators are supposed to be external, independent, objective, and neutral which, in my experience, renders them clueless about what is happening developmentally. In contrast, *Generative Evaluation* makes it clear that evaluation can and should contribute to a generative process where everyone is transformed as part of transforming systems. That is pretty scary for traditional evaluators. But it is a welcome opportunity and positioning for evaluators who want to contribute more than just writing accountability reports.

The niche and contributions of *Generative Evaluation* are well-articulated in this article. The processes of dialogic co-creation based on systemic inquiry within a living systems framework is especially relevant and appropriate in a world where transforming systems to create a more sustainable and equitable future must be the overarching purpose of both programming and evaluation. That purpose will be well-served in striving to realize the vision of an experimenting society based on shared learning and collective action informed by truly *Generative Evaluation.*

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Innovations in Praxis Article

Shining a Light on Hidden Containers and Invisible Systems

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Abstract
This article presents an analysis from the perspective of a participant-observer in the "Rethinking DF 2030" project, conducted in Brazil. In this project, Theory U was applied as a journey to foster integration between policymakers and the citizens for whom these policies are designed. The article sheds light on the importance of building both hidden and visible "containers"—purposefully held environments where the quality of collective attention aligns with intention. Through the author's active engagement in this project, the article simultaneously explores the methodological and experiential aspects of Theory U, including its capacity to guide and weave into the application of various other methodologies. The findings highlight both the challenges and potential of a Theory U practitioner's role in a highly complex participatory process.

Keywords
Theory U, citizen, system transformation, container building, participatory process, innovation

Introduction

The planning and execution of the Rethink DF 2030 Project, involving around two thousand citizens across 12 cities in the Brazilian Federal District, and 46 dedicated facilitators from five states for one year, showed that innovations can transform the system with the citizen at the center. It was the first time that a project of this magnitude was carried out in Brazil, bringing together more than two thousand citizens and dozens of leaders, proving that it is possible to listen deeply to many people online and move towards transformative action using systems change methodologies. It also showed what for me was the most significant innovation of the project, which was the way we were able to create and maintain our Safe Container, to hold the space for everything that would emerge. Deep listening is not just a tool, but a necessity for change. In the Rethink DF 2030 project developed in the following case study, listening to the citizens was fundamental.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 I served as a lead facilitator and as a participant observer (Anguera, 1989) in the Rethink DF 2030 Project. The Fifth Discipline (Senge, 2006) and Theory U (Scharmer, 2007) guided my work described in this article. In recent years, I have been integrating my professional and academic life to create reciprocal learning between practice and theory, and the Rethink DF 2030 Project provided a valuable opportunity to apply Theory U to participatory processes involving large groups of participants. Due to the lockdown, the project was conducted 100% online. I relied on a solid theoretical foundation, drawing from Scharmer (2007), Habermas (1981), Cooperrider (2008), and Wilber (2000) to coordinate the sessions in Taguatinga, one of the 12 cities selected for the project. As I deepened my studies of these authors and engaged daily—albeit virtually—with dozens of people, I no longer felt isolated.

My Positionality and Finding My Work

Social exclusion shaped my life from an early age. I grew up in Brazil, in a White family of Portuguese and Italian ancestry, but I developed a deep awareness of social and racial exclusion through my close relationship with my primary attachment figure, an Afro-Brazilian woman who lived and worked in my home for 42 years. This relationship, with someone who was like a mother to me, shaped my worldview and my lived understanding of racial and social exclusion dynamics.

Even before my spiritual development—through studying and practicing Taoism, Raja Yoga meditation, and other traditions that helped me cultivate self-awareness and harmonize with life's natural flow—I was already surrendering my significant decisions to the universe. This allowed me to cross paths with people and opportunities that I embraced, often before fully understanding, rationally, what they were.

In 2005, at Lead, the communication agency I founded in 1991—Brazil's first agency dedicated exclusively to NGOs and corporate social responsibility

projects—a client referred me to a fellow's program. This program was being crafted by a small group at MIT, which included professors Peter Senge and Otto Scharmer. A coalition of NGOs, government agencies, and corporations supported it. By participating in the Emerging Leaders for Innovation Across Sectors (ELIAS) program, I began experiencing Theory U (Scharmer, 2007), created by Otto Scharmer, senior lecturer at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). At 37, I realized what my actual Work in this life was—for me, a small group of people, when well-supported and united by a common intention, can drive deep and lasting transformations. I experienced this during my adolescence when, as President of the student's association, together with four or five colleagues, decided to change the menu of our canteen to a healthier one. I strive to recreate this approach in my work.

Building the Foundations for My Praxis

I link my hopes to my ambitions. I hope for a fairer world with a systemic vision, where each of us, as systems and within systems, impacts in a chain reaction. In the last two decades, I invested in becoming a channel for Brazilians to access the U-journey. More recently, I was introduced to Action Research (Lewin, 1997) after deeply exploring this and others Awareness Based System Change methodologies.

Applying methodologies that facilitate systemic transformations, such as Theory U (Scharmer, 2010) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 2008), is one of the ways we help systems see themselves (Lewin, 1997), allowing them to take the first step toward their transformations, which are often complex and slow-moving. Many systems need transformation to evolve. Through facilitation, I've learned that we can spark some changes, beginning through small cracks where a small quantity of knowledge or compassion shines through, initiating relationships that later become the foundation for the necessary transformations. I learned this early in my career when I was already creating connections that became productive bonds in the future. When I worked as public relations (PR) of W/Brazil—a worldwide awarded advertising agency—I did pro-bono work on my own for NGOs I believe in, like Projeto Axé from Bahia state. When I quit to open my PR firm, Projeto Axé became one of my first paid clients. Today, we are still developing some change actions together. They recently nominated community leader from the periphery of Salvador to join the Ecosystems Leadership Program in Latin America, developed by the Presencing Institute.

Even though I am aware of the political, social, economic and climate crises, I believe in the world's capacity to transform positively, focusing on the changing social pyramid. I see this daily, across class divides. The old models are dying because the perceived majority is actually a minority. The 2022 Census in Brazil shows that, of the 215 million inhabitants, just 9.5 million are from the upper class. The middle and lower classes are recognizing their power, such as voting and refusing unfair jobs. For example, recently, we had a mayor and councilor election in Brazil. We have happily observed that candidates with simple

campaigns and little investment were elected in some cities where vote-buying used to prevail. People voted for those they believed in rather than for those who offered gifts or promised benefits to be delivered after taking office.

Facilitation plays a crucial role in supporting the transformation of organizations across all sectors. Today, I witness CEOs discussing love in the workplace—something unthinkable 20 years ago. I see women in decision-making roles without needing to masculinize themselves.

Writing from Tocantins, in the northern region of Brazil, I sadly observe the scarcity of a formal education for children and adolescents that values the development of relationships. What I hear from families is a narrative that prioritizes higher grades and students who excel by gaining admission to the country's top universities. It does not matter if this student does not even greet the school's doorman or mistreats the teacher, often offending them. In Brazil, a teacher is not supposed to fail a student; however, a student can initiate proceedings that may result in the teacher's dismissal. In this environment, I have endeavored to be an “island of coherence” (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), advocating for less commercial, competitive, and short-term values in the workplace.[1] However, before we can even begin to foster a productive climate, I find myself encouraging people to constantly seek new perspectives on the obstacles they face, and, above all, to feel and listen to what transcends them—to what the environment around them must teach.

The Rethink DF 2030 Project

Purpose

The Rethink DF 2030 project, created in 2019, aimed to develop a Strategic Public Policy Plan with a ten-year duration for the 35 administrative regions (cities) of the Federal District (DF), the administrative region of Brazil, where our capital, Brasília, and its surrounding cities are located. In the first phase, 12 municipalities were involved, including Taguatinga, which I coordinated as a Lead Facilitator. One of the coordinator's functions was to guarantee the quality of listening during the sessions with the participants. This practice was often done in online simultaneous rooms, a tool offered by the ZoomOnline conference platform. It was common to have more than 10 simultaneous rooms in the same

[1] Ilya Prigogine—Nobel Prize in Chemistry—in the context of his theory on complex systems and dissipative structures, describes "islands of coherence" as regions of emergent order within chaotic or highly disordered dynamic systems. These islands represent moments or spaces where system elements spontaneously organize in a coherent manner, allowing the emergence of stable patterns amidst entropy.

session. Rethink DF was idealized by senator Izalci Lucas (PSDB)[2], then president of the Federal Senate's Development and Tourism Commission. To create this strategic plan, a team of professional system's change facilitators (including myself) was hired through one of the governmental agencies, the Center for Management and Strategic Studies (CGEE), connected to the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Innovation (MCTI). The Rethink DF 2030 project process promoted an environment conducive to listening to citizens' concerns. More than this, our appreciative proposal has always been to help citizens understand that no one is better than them to suggest the necessary transformations in their city. Because they are there, inside and living in the city system, they are the most suitable actors to point out the necessary changes to be implemented on a large scale through public policies.

When structured, aiming for its effectiveness, the Project predicted that the problems pointed by citizens and their suggestions for solutions should be organized into themes such as Infrastructure, Health, Education, Housing, Transport, Social Well-being, Commerce, and Development, among others. For each topic, the Project invited an expert—someone related to the DF government (a district deputy, a professional with many years of technical career in the government, etc.)—who had two prominent roles: first, providing knowledge by bringing information on the topic, such as example data on housing conditions in cities; and second, by being a bridge between solutions suggested by citizens and law makers.

The facilitators were organized into subgroups as I will detail below. Our collective responsibilities included organizing our group's governance, proposing a process, and selecting the U-Journey as the guiding framework while incorporating other methodologies that support systemic transformations. This was a collaborative effort that involved the full team composed by 46 professional facilitators. Because of COVID-19, we carried out the project online using the Zoom online conferencing platform.

Our goals as facilitators were to: 1) show citizens they were being heard; 2) avoid judging any of the ideas; 3) welcome each suggestion; and 4) organize these suggestions in a way that gives them a real chance of moving quickly from ideas and paper into action.

[2]The PSDB (Brazilian Social Democracy Party) is a centrist political party in Brazil, founded in 1988, advocating for principles such as representative democracy, a market economy with social responsibility, and public policies focused on education and sustainable development.

From Seed to Project

The seed of the Rethink DF 2030 Project was planted more than one year before its initiation. Senator Izalci Lucas,[3] then president of the Tourism and Development Commission of the Federal District participated in a U-Journey, facilitated by Wilson Nobre, a former professor at Getúlio Vargas Foundation, one of the few institutions to hold the three most important international accreditations (AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA). Nobre is specialized in sustainability and innovation, focusing on systemic management and the interdependence between organizations, society, and the environment. There, on that U-Journey, the senator realized the U's potential to listen and promote the inclusion of citizens from the DF's municipalities when drafting laws.

Due to its magnitude and complexity, the Project required human, technological and financial resources before the first meeting. The research and invitation to local leaders and experts, the careful selection of facilitators, and the back office were all fundamental. The intention to listen to the citizens was declared and confirmed from the first step. Already internalizing that intention is the only force, as Scharmer mentions having heard from the economist Brian Arthur in one of the interviews for his book (Scharmer, 2007), our team experienced what some had only seen in theory or on slides: that the U-Journey is, in fact, a series of essential mini-U-journeys—a small-scale application of the Theory U process, where a group or individual quickly moves through the stages of opening the mind, heart, and will, enabling moments of reflection, insight, and action in specific and short-term contexts (Scharmer, 2014)—that consistently lead to the next stage. As a runner, I compare this process to a marathon, where one only reaches the finish line at 42.1 km after first experiencing the pain and joy of mentally and physically completing each of the previous kilometers. In running, most of the time, it's about letting go of real pain and letting in the motivating cheers from strangers on the sidewalk.

Our challenges included political polarization, with leaders recommending only citizens participate who supported their ideas. It was challenging to break the initial ego cycle among the leaders invited to the project. One of the most memorable mini-U-Journeys I experienced was when I persisted in seeking and inviting people who were against the project. In this instance, I found myself going through a mini-U, opening my mind, heart, and will, enabling moments of reflection, being opened to new insights, and acting in that specific situation. I observed the coincidence of everyone being in favor of the project; I sensed that I might be facing a threat to the success of what I was about to lead. I reflected on the advantages and disadvantages of stepping out of that comfort zone (the fan

[3] Izalci Lucas is a Brazilian politician, accountant, and professor, currently serving as a senator for the Federal District since 2019; he has previously held positions as a federal deputy and district deputy, with a strong focus on education, science, and technology.

list); I let go of the comfort and faced the courage to escape the list, even when I was questioned—"Why are you looking for other leaders if you have already received a list?"—asked one of the politically involved individuals. I paused, took a deep breath, and felt that my Work was to understand the system to support its transformation, and that supporters and opponents had to be part of it.

I stood by my decision firmly and went in search of other leaders for the Rethink DF 2030 Project. One of them, a doctor who, upon understanding my role as a participant researcher requested anonymity, contributed immensely by granting me a long interview, to which he also invited an internationally recognized sociologist. They both revealed to me the "backside of the tapestry" that I was about to begin weaving. I left feeling relieved, yet simultaneously worried and alert about our internal process. What were we genuinely serving? Which principles and values would I, Janine, not compromise? How far would my flexibility as a lead facilitator go?

The U-Journey of Rethink DF 2030

During the first phase of the project, 12 municipalities, in teams of citizens, facilitators, rapporteurs, and government professionals, carried out their U processes.

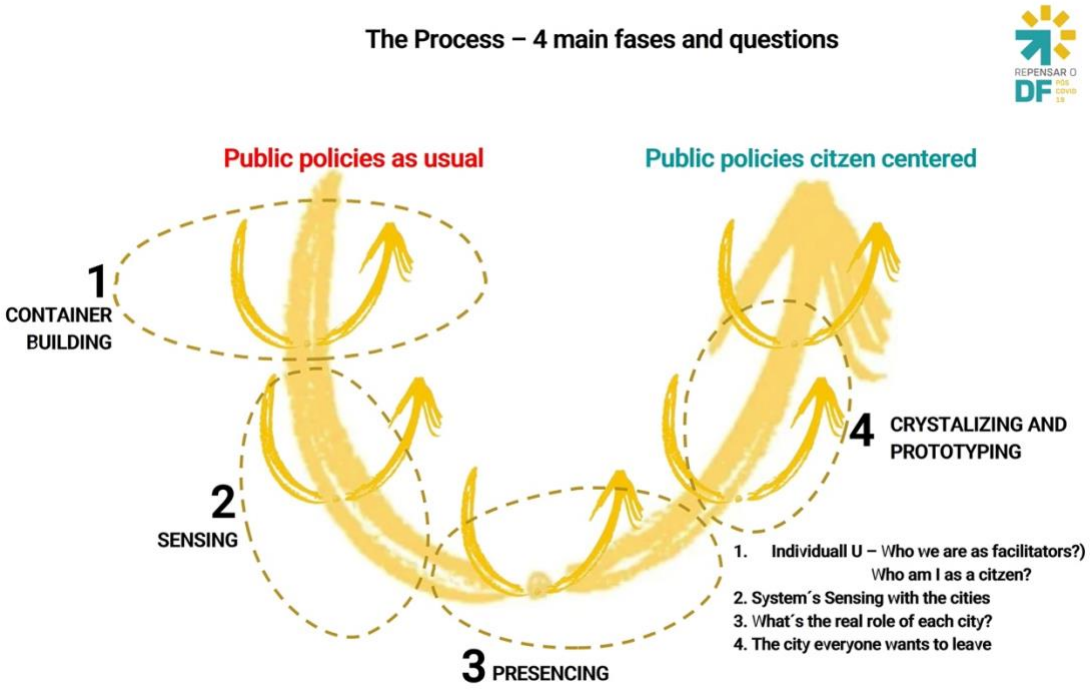

Figure 1: The four main fases of the U-Journey in the Rethink DF 2030 Project.

Figure 2: Rethink DF 2030 pathway – Taguatinga´s communication schedule for participants.

In each of the steps provided for in the U methodology, our team worked on an intention and sought a certain result. The figure below, referring to one of the municipalities, Taguatinga, summarizes this well:

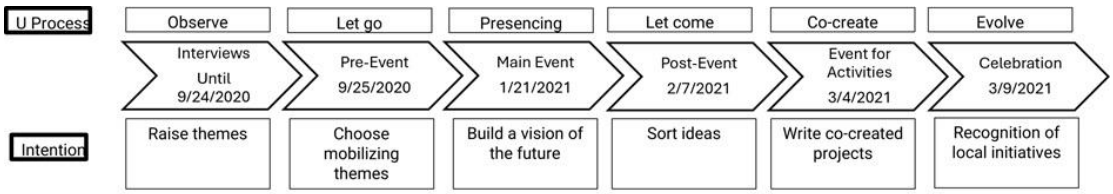

Figure 3: Organization of events according to U-Journey.

Co-initiating: We formed teams in each municipality to support the online sessions and maintain the engagement of local leaders in the development of public policies.

Co-sensing: With a small group of local leaders, we prioritized the mobilizing themes of each municipality, activating the citizen's intention for the collective intention.

Presencing: Meeting with 312 citizens prepared for Presencing—fully being in the moment and deeply connecting to the context and what wanted to emerge—reflecting on their role in the municipality and the project. In smaller groups, we collected 1,480 improvement suggestions to be worked on in upcoming events and transformed into projects using the Project Canvas Template—a visual management tool that organizes the key elements of a project, such as objectives, resources, risks, and deliverables, in a

simple and collaborative way to facilitate planning and team communication.

Co-creating: We grouped suggestions with the citizens, selecting the main ones for developing public policies, such as providing accessibility to disabled people in public parks. The final choice was made by the citizens.

Prototyping: Facilitated by our team, citizens selected the ideas with the greatest potential for practical actions using the Project Canvas Template. Many citizens left with meetings scheduled for next steps.

Evolution: Final meeting for the 12 municipalities to recognize participation and the co-constructed process. We celebrated the most viable projects presented by each municipality, with three out of six Taguatinga's projects partially implemented.

Building the Participant Container: Our Transformation System

> We called the "container" a safe space created to facilitate profound changes and collective transformations, allowing suspension of judgments, attentive listening, and deep connection to emerge new solutions. (Scharmer, 2018, p. 13)

> Providing the container implies creating a setting where the quality of collective attention is focused and can be made increasingly vivid, so that habits of projection and reaction can be systematically observed and inquired into. (Isaacs, 1999, p. 242)

Concentric Circles

The human and teams' structure of Rethink DF 2030 were organized in concentric circles with the citizen at the center. We had: 1) Care Team—a group composed of five (2 women and 3 men) of the 12 Lead facilitators (including me) with the mission of taking care of each other and taking care of the entire team to sustain the system internally; 2) Core Team—of five different people, 2 women and 3 men, from the Care Team which had the function of meeting to make significant and difficult decisions, such as whether or not to cancel a session with participants; 3) Lead Facilitators—12 facilitators (8 women and 4 men) who coordinated and led each of the 12 cities involved with the Project. 4) Host facilitators—the remaining 34 facilitators who, in the city sessions, were hosts of the simultaneous rooms in which we practiced deep listening and other activities; 5) Rapporteurs—group made up of 46 residents from the 12 cities, selected by the Project´s organization, that reported on the sessions and had the fundamental

mission of being a connection between citizens and the project organization. They also performed technical functions, such as recording sessions, preparing the list of participants and commenting on each person's attitude during the meetings. They participated in a Theory U course in eight meetings, taught by Nobre and myself, to facilitate better understanding of how the journey would work; 6) Government Advisors and Thematic Coordinators—the largest concentric circle, with around seventy people, included 12 advisors of Senator Izalci Lucas and fifty-six thematic coordinators—government professionals who are experts in topics such as Infrastructure, Education, Health, Housing, etc., invited to participate in the Project to bring knowledge about each theme and to provide the citizens ideas and solutions suggestions for the legislators.

These government professionals observed the demands of each municipality, evaluated improvements, and considered the demands into projects and proposed laws, with a goal to developing public policies to meet these needs to be presented to the legislature in the coming years.

Organized in this way around the citizens, we formed a System of Transformation (Waddock et al., 2022), with mutual respect, non-judgment, and connection, enabling our co-development. The group of 46 facilitators (Lead and Hosts) also held weekly meetings called "Pulse Meetings" to take care of ourselves and our concerns, like doctors taking patients' pulses to sense their conditions. We knew that "the quality of the intervention depends on the inner condition of the intervener" (Scharmer, 2020, p. 6) and we were always aware of this. Many of us, who didn't know each other before the project, are now friends or work colleagues. Our team was large and diverse—46 people from different cities, professions, and educational backgrounds, and we bonded like a family we chose during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown.

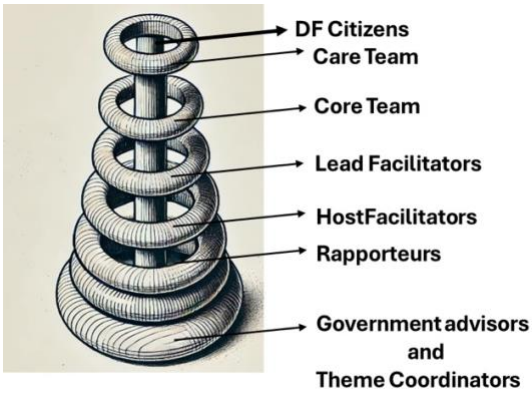

Figure 4: Citizen-Centered Team Structure.

Sharing Methodologies

We relied on facilitators with specific competencies. For example, Heloisa Biscaia delved into Appreciative Inquiry, which we used as a meta-methodology to discover what worked well in the cities and build upon those positive qualities

through appreciative and collaborative questioning. We were optimistic but without losing sight of our goal to guide participants toward Presencing, where we believed the most important individual and collective transformations would emerge, as we sought to provide participants with a safe space for self-reflection. As mentioned previously, the Project organizers chose the U-Journey to serve as a process through which facilitators would guide participating citizens from their situations of stagnation to the proposition of ideas and possible prototyping.

Theory U and World Café

From the beginning of the project, we were concerned that citizens might tend to bring only their complaints, potentially leading the entire process into a cycle of Absencing—a destructive pattern in which individuals or systems disconnect from reality, acting out of bias, selfishness, or ignorance, resulting in negative impacts on themselves and the whole—rather than Presencing—a process in which individuals or systems deeply connect with reality, opening themselves to empathy, collective vision, and co-creation, generating positive impacts for themselves and the whole (Scharmer, 2007). The cross-pollination of ideas through the World Café—a collaborative dialogue methodology aimed at engaging people in meaningful conversations and leveraging collective intelligence to address relevant issues in organizations and communities, was a crucial phase in setting the tone for the project.

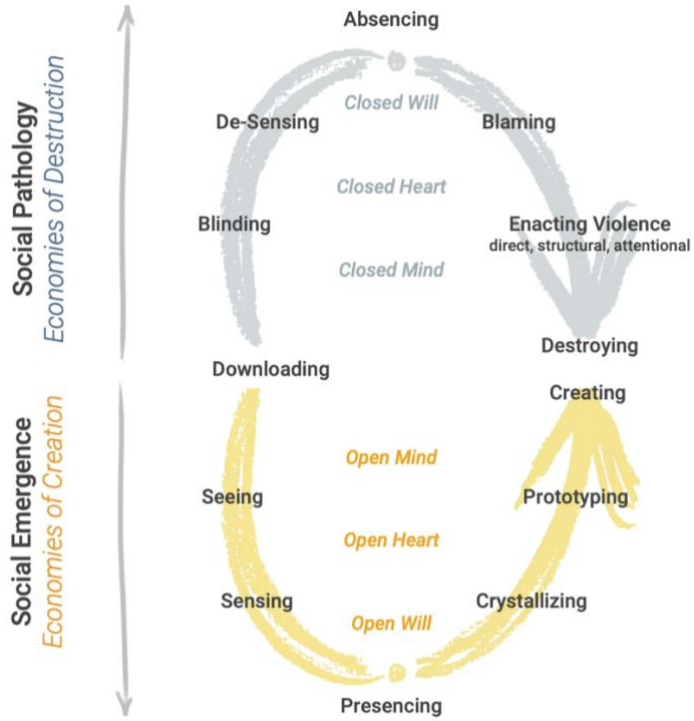

Figure 5: Opposite cycles: Absencing and Presencing (Scharmer, 2016, p. xxx).

1,800 Citizen Ideas

As a researcher, I recognized this as a precious chance for action research which, I must confess, filled me with excitement and anxiety. However, throughout the project, I realized that the systemic transformation methodologies we employed, such as Appreciative Inquiry and Theory U, were most effective when applied at the phases aligned with their strengths. For example, we used World Café to gather and cross-pollinate ideas in a welcoming yet dynamic environment with multiple simultaneous rooms. Through this, we collected and systematized over 1,800 ideas from around 2,000 citizens on improving life in the Federal District. To stimulate the citizen conversations further, we layered Appreciative Inquiry over the World Café process to avoid focusing solely on complaints and grievances. We acknowledged these grievances as expressions of the shadows, an essential part of the system, but we aimed to direct our attention to the leverage points for change.

Right away, we clustered these ideas using insights from Richard Barrett (1998) and Ken Wilber (2000), classifying them by their individual and collective impacts and the different levels of consciousness from which they originated. While I believe we were somewhat superficial in the analysis due to deadlines and the enormous volume of material, in the facilitator´s group we still concluded that the work was consistent enough for what we needed at that moment. The result was sufficient to support the next stages.

Sensemaking

Facilitators Ricardo Catto and Eduardo Giacomazzi also played a critical role. They introduced us to “Sensemaking,” a concept developed by Karl Weick (1995), through which individuals and organizations interpret and create meaning from ambiguous, complex, or uncertain situations. At the Rethink DF 2030 project, this was precisely our scenario. Sensemaking involves constructing a coherent narrative to make sense of events or environments, enabling individuals and groups to act effectively. Its use helped clarify for all the facilitators how people construct meaning from ambiguous and uncertain situations, individually and collectively. With their guiding and deep knowledge of Wilber's Integral Theory, the facilitators (Catto and Giacomazzi), along with others, helped us analyze the citizens' contributions more holistically, using Wilber's four dimensions: Interior-individual, Exterior-individual, Interior-collective, and Exterior-collective, corresponding to the subjective, objective, intersubjective, and inter-objective dimensions of reality.

Observer as Intervenor

Although we were an experienced group, we had to learn to observe. Observation and listening were fundamental, because, as facilitators, we were the catalysts for the desires of a diverse community. Taking a neutral position, suspending judgments and limiting beliefs was essential. In each conversation room, two of

us (one host facilitator and one rapporteur) documented everything, and these reports drove the process. If any facilitator allowed bias to affect the harvesting of content, the entire process would be harmed. Our responsibility increased as our involvement grew.

We learned that observing is an essential silent skill for accessing emerging ideas for necessary changes. Observers needed to be fully present with a clear mind and stay open to new perspectives; meaningful contributions start with seeing things from the perspectives of others. The risk of not knowing how to observe was the loss of perspective, focusing only on the details. Without the broad vision, we would not be able to strategically plan structures for new citizen-centered public policies. As facilitators we were managing all the time the balance between focusing (stillness) and landscaping (movement) like the vital equilibrium between the sun and the planets.

Building the Hidden Container

"Facilitators are human too," I remember saying in one of our weekly meetings—always a mini-U process for us—defending the idea that we would need to respect our limits and, if necessary, respond professionally, even in the middle of a session. And so, I stepped into the next kilometer with another mini-U under my belt. There were many mini-U-Journeys—both individual and collective—with the various professionals and participants, right up to the end of the project.

Creating and maintaining our own container was necessary and challenging at the same time. We organized a parallel safe space called the “Care Team,” to support our “Core Team” and, in a cascade effect, the other circles of the organizational structure and the participants. At the Care Team, compassion was essential; whoever was strong in a session could, in another, fall apart among colleagues who listened to him with an open heart. No information would come out of that space. The idea for the Care Team came from a conversation about the lack of support Professor Nobre might be experiencing, the project director, showing our perception of each other’s strengths and vulnerabilities. Professor Nobre was always the one among all the teams, seeking to support the balance of each team's multiple levels of demands and deliveries. Many times, it was up to him to make decisions that would impact the entire project, like the one he took at the end, to hold a last session with all the cities together instead of one for each city. Care Team meetings were called as needed, and generative conversation made time pass quickly in these meetings.

The combination of our team's intentions—to support ourselves before supporting the participants—was crucial to creating what we called a "safe container," a space where we felt secure enough to engage in deep reflection, authentic dialogue, and transformative learning. This environment was essential for Rethink DF 2030 project participants to let go of habitual patterns, judgments, and assumptions, allowing them to access more profound awareness. This safe space supported vulnerability, trust, suspension of judgment, and emergent conversations. This container involved intentional facilitation, mindful

leadership, especially from Wilson Nobre's role, and the cultivation of practices like active listening, presence, and empathy. By establishing this space, we ensured that the other facilitators and the participants navigated the "U" process—from sensing and presencing to realizing innovative solutions.

From my perspective, the way we were able to create and maintain our Safe Container, to hold the space for everything that would emerge, was the most significant innovation of the project. I realized that my personal and professional journey not only deepened my appreciation for transparent and inclusive communication, but also showed me how the experiences of other facilitators shaped their own approaches to these values. Each one of us brought our previous learnings and genuinely put them in service of helping others, so that no one had to reinvent the wheel during this process. Many of us facilitators shared the loneliness we felt as agents of transformation. During one of our weekly meetings, a colleague mentioned, "I eagerly await Mondays to be sure that someone else is feeling like I do: a pillar of organization in the middle of the chaos that all of this has become for my family." Some of us lost very close loved ones to Covid-19 during the time of the project. With each of these testimonies, it was as if my battery was recharged to do more, realizing we were trying to be an "island of coherence" (Prigogine & Stengers, 1984), in our habitat. In the unique historical moment in which all of this took place it felt important to create a space (a container) where united by a common intention, we could be our authentic selves—sometimes very strong, sometimes very vulnerable—without diminishing the respect or admiration we had for each other.

When professor Nobre invited me to participate as his right hand in the Rethink DF 2030 project, he already recognized the importance that the governance of the subgroups would have. The scale and diversity—46 facilitators from over five Brazilian states—and the lengthy timeline of over 12 months, conducted online and during lockdown, required us to define roles and responsibilities clearly. We had the necessary flexibility to understand and accept internal movements. After all, even within the group, new arrangements were naturally formed based on the affinities people developed with one another. For example, when a city lead facilitator needed help, they would turn to other facilitators with whom they had already developed empathy. Pairs and trios formed naturally, and we understood that not recognizing these natural human dynamics would have been a significant oversight on our part. As humans, we gravitate toward or away from people and things that bring us comfort and security.

On a spiritual level, we also encouraged practices like daily journaling, meditation, and access to courses that united us as a group of people—most of whom did not previously know each other but were brought together by a common intention and shared a great responsibility: to let emerge what needed to emerge during the project while pursuing a goal—to reach the Evolving phase of the U-Journey with prototypes to help public policymakers focus their following initiatives. One of the highlights of the process was the "Strengths and

Appreciation" course taught by Heloisa Biscaia. Frequently, we opened our meetings with moments of mindfulness, led by some of us. These practices provided us with a much-needed space to express our vulnerabilities and fears that accompanied us throughout the pandemic.

There was a day when I was about to lead a large and meaningful session, but I realized I wasn't in the proper internal condition. I sent a direct message to a colleague, asking for immediate help to regain my center. Together, we ensured that I could be Present during the session. I felt him standing guard in one of the Zoom windows, which gave me even more confidence to proceed. I knew I had a soft cushion to fall on if needed.

The freedom to embrace our weaknesses and celebrate our victories, combined with the intimacy we built with some of our colleagues, allowed all of us to become better members of the system of transformation we were creating. Looking back, I understand it was the generative conversations as well as the courage to admit that we all have our kryptonite days.

It is essential also to highlight that the technical factor, including the support from an online education company that organized all our materials (files, spreadsheets, recordings, links, etc.), made a huge difference in our ability to access data very easily, which was essential in the short time we had to carry out weekly tasks between meetings in each city.

Navigating Differences

Meanwhile, Richard Barrett's work on the Levels of Consciousness significantly expanded our respect for differences. At this point, I want to revisit something I mentioned earlier. I had the sense that we oversimplified the analysis of citizens' narratives. In doing the analysis of the citizen conversations, the work involved carefully analyzing isolated phrases from citizens. We searched for words that would classify the statements into levels from 1 to 7. Concerned about disregarding the broader context and analyzing only the phrases, I questioned the effectiveness this analysis, but I was outvoted within the group. As someone who works in groups, I know that we are all subject to moments of group self-preservation. In the name of maintaining harmony within the facilitators' group, I suspended my criticisms, accepted, and trusted in what the process was bringing us.

Each one of us facilitators needed to understand the big picture and feel the system (Scharmer, 2020), while acting locally. As facilitators, we had tough conversations, with freedom to help colleagues perceive their misleads. This happened a few times, and generally, facilitators would ask for help from their colleagues with whom they had developed stronger connections. In two situations, colleagues asked me for support in leading their sessions. This highlights the value of supporting each other in our roles.

Another situation I experienced was gently alerting a colleague leading an interaction in a breakout room that they were going beyond their role as a

facilitator and instead directing what the citizens were bringing to the table. It was challenging to intervene with lightness and empathy. However, it was necessary to ensure we kept the conversation at a generative level, always mindful of the space we created for the citizens. As coordinator, with the responsibility of ensuring the quality of listening during sessions, I observed the rooms and helped facilitators to qualify their performances, for example by alerting them to not interpret the citizens ideas, just collect them as they were. These attitudes were possible because we saw ourselves as a transformation system (Waddock et al., 2022) at the service of inclusion and listening to citizens. A colleague with a light tone of voice and a loving attitude felt that she was not being effective in facilitating her sessions. We worked to help her adopt a safer and firmer posture. We concluded together that it was not about her voice but rather her posture as the leader of that city.

Several activities in our transformation system were essential because they helped us evolve as individuals and, above all, as active parts of the container we created. I would highlight the following:

- Connection: we understand together the dynamics, structures, and relationships of the system.
- Coherence: we align the project's objectives with those of the citizens, incorporating their ideas and solutions.
- Amplification: we developed a transformation infrastructure with courses and technical support for citizens.

Learnings and Outcomes

I Am Heard; Therefore, I Exist

Our objective was to include citizens in the preparation of a strategic government plan for the next ten years, in 35 municipalities of Federal District. This was partially achieved with contributions of 36% of the project (12 municipalities), before it was interrupted by political changes.

My observations and deepening of studies after the end of the Project helped me to conclude that the emerged impacts relate to citizens experiencing a greater sense of being heard. We promoted deep listening to citizens and technicians, facilitating an exchange of information, feelings and perceptions, expanding awareness as intended. It is the first time a project like this happened in Brazil; the project proved that it is possible to listen deeply to many people online and move towards transformative action using systems change methodologies.

Through teaching and practicing deep listening—ranging from factual to generative levels (Scharmer, 2010)—with the citizens, they felt listened to and recognized their own voices, gaining an understanding of their role in collective transformation. People from all social classes participated, with equal speaking times, promoting awareness of their role in the system.

When we started the Project, we had both specific and general goals. During the 12 months we decide to trust the process and be open to its flux (Scharmer, 2010). Some outcomes outside our control appeared. These included the loss of participants and their relatives due to Covid-19; an outage caused by hackers; the reproduction of gender inequality with most participants being men; citizens in leadership positions trying to impose themselves, demanding attention in facilitation to maintain equal participation, and the departure of two of our facilitators before the completion of the project as they were not trusting in the Project´s purpose.

The project, initiated by a senator who ran for governor in the next elections (one year after), generated questions about whether we were contributing to a state strategic plan or to the senator's electoral campaign. There was a lot of reflection and discussions on this matter. The most decisive and unexpected consequence was the discontinuation of the project into its second phase, due to internal political issues within the government.

Evaluating Rethink DF 2030

At the end of the project, we hired Raro Treinamento e Desenvolvimento Profissional—consultancy specialized in research—to conducte a survey among the participants. The percentage of 21.3% of the participants responded by pointing us to the following data: 96% said they think more about their municipality due to the Rethink DF project, and 97% expressed a wish for the project to be continued.

When asked to rate their interest in solving their city's problems through the "Rethink DF 2030" project, 90.5% of those responding to our evaluation survey gave positive responses. Regarding their interest in sharing the project idea, 87% reported that they talked about Rethink DF with other people.

We received spontaneous positive and negative comments, the positive ranging from reflections on the importance of participating and making a difference, and the negative from participants who felt the meetings did not convey concrete information or generate visible results. Examples of comments included: "I thought it was important for other people to participate"; "I want to make a difference in my municipality"; "Little concrete information"; "I didn't see results from the meetings I attended."

We have already seen some impacts and recognize that there are other impacts on different scales that may not be as noticeable, such as some neighbors working together since participating in the Project to benefit the square in front of their houses. A case of direct impact happened in the municipality of Taguatinga, which has 280 thousand inhabitants. In one of the prototypes, the citizens' main concern was the concentration of public security efforts in the central region of the municipality. It was necessary to decentralize the execution of public security. Using the Project Canvas Template, a group of eight citizens, led by a woman activist, understood how to structure the objectives, value chain,

fundraising system, and so on to create conditions for the decentralization of public security. They created and implemented the Community Security Council (CONSEG) in the northern region of Taguatinga, a place with many social weaknesses. Particularly, five members of the group came together (one woman and four men) and activated the transformation.

Theory U in Participatory Processes

I wondered whether Theory U could contribute for participatory processes to be more inclusive. After participating and deepening my studies about it, I believe it can.

The inclusion of different stakeholders—even within the main container, the one composed by the different groups of facilitators and the citizens—enables everyone to reflect and transform at their own pace. Over nearly two decades of practicing the U-Journey with various organizations across sectors (governments, companies, and NGOs), I have observed that an experienced practitioner understands that there are multiple mini-U-journeys within a single U-journey. This awareness leads the entire process into constant iteration. When we recognize this spiral movement of iterations and allow it to unfold at its own pace, we ensure that each phase's expansion of awareness prepares for a deeper subsequent phase. There is a complexity in these simultaneous movements: following the journey as a path driven to arrive at a transformative moment, while also leaving space for the "mini-Us" to occur without guilt or haste. Their sum creates conditions for a greater expansion of awareness throughout the entire system—both within the individual agent and in the external field—allowing genuine transformation to happen.

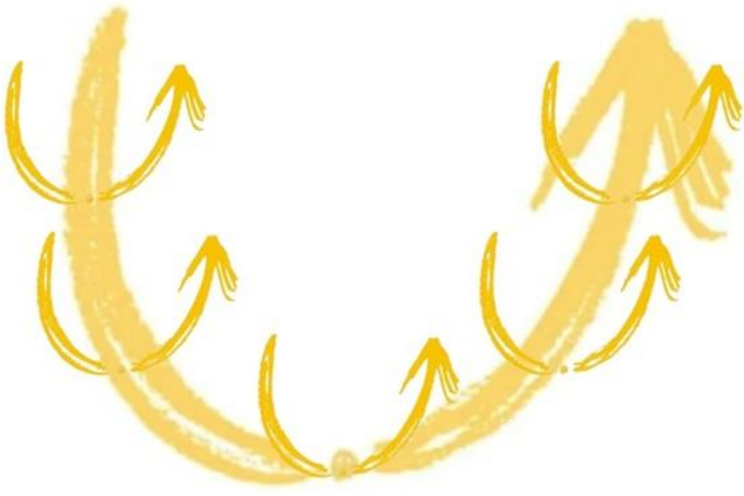

Figure 6: The mini-Us throughout the U-Journey.

In the Rethink DF 2030 project, the U-Journey also proved to be effective as a guide for weaving in the use of other specific methodologies in each phase, such as design thinking in prototyping as detailed before in this article.

Navigating Resistance Patterns

There was resistance. We recognized the risks, but maybe not how much effort we needed to make for the system to see itself (Lewin, 1997) and transform itself. Bringing citizens closer to the process of creating public policies was bold for the Federal District (DF) context. The project brought new perspectives in Brazil, using Theory U to articulate interactions between citizens and stakeholders (public servants, technicians, and politicians). However, there was resistance both among some citizens and civil servants. Not everyone engaged, and in the formation stage of the process, some in power pursued personal interests, resulting in a guest list that could have been more diverse in terms of ideas and political proposals for the municipality.

One of the challenges during the 12 months of the project concerned questions over the real objective of the project: whether it was electoral or genuinely sought to listen to the population and encourage participation. To strengthen the community, we ensured that diverse voices were heard and respected. We kept our heads and hearts open, respecting each person's personal position. However, two lead facilitators left the project because they were not convinced that the Project did not just have electoral purposes.

For Habermas, there is a fight for influence, differentiating organizers, speakers and listeners, between arena and gallery (Habermas, 1997). For him, the public sphere is "a *communicational structure* of acting guided by understanding, which has to do with the *social space* generated in communicative action, not with the *functions* nor with the *contents* of everyday communication" (Habermas, 1981, p. 211).

Another notable episode was dealing with a member of my Taguatinga municipality team, who defended his own interests. I relied on Habermas (1981) and Scharmer (2007) to understand that this kind of behavior is expected and drives to unbalance the process if not appropriately addressed. The authors helped me to understand the situation in which power was the reason for this man to defend his own interests. For Scharmer, power focuses on the transformative potential of presence and co-creation, whereas Habermas emphasizes the role of rational, undistorted communication as the foundation of legitimate power. He acknowledges that power is often exerted through strategic action and manipulation, leading to distorted communication. This was exactly the case. Both theories offer valuable insights into how power can be understood and utilized for meaningful change, though they approach it from different dimensions. For me, the constant back and forth between practice and knowledge, during the 12 months of the project Rethink DF 2030, was exhausting but enriching, like a chef adjusting seasonings.

Processing the Process

We learned on several levels. My concern about the continuity of the project was constant. The uncertainty about the future of a project in which I invested so much energy and time always caused me unease. Many times, in my professional journey, I volunteered to continue after our program´s budget ended. Seeing results, whether subtle or concrete, has always been my goal, and this concern was manifested in the Rethink DF 2030 Project. We start with an intention, but without certainty of implementation, letting the flow guide us and accessing our hidden intelligence—open mind, open heart, open will (Scharmer, 2010).

Even though we know we must trust in the process, there was apprehension. In three-hour sessions with around one hundred citizens, many questions arose for me as a facilitator: How to present myself? How much to share? How far to let the flow go? How to instill confidence in the times when I didn't have it? Our team had more and less resilient people; the most resilient supported or replaced the most vulnerable ones in the crises we had, including when one of the facilitators was insecure in continuing to conduct her sessions with participants.

The project had a transformative impact on citizens, government members, and our team, as highlighted by research conducted at the end of the project by Raro, an online education company. We built and strengthened relationships, and some facilitators established a study group that still exists today. Additionally, there was recognition and enhancement of professionals connected to Theory U in Brazil. Networking was structured between citizens of DF 2030, resulting in collaborations such as neighbors taking care of squares and groups calling for improvements in parks, which continue up to today.

The learning included intensive training on expanding individual awareness and responsibilities as change agents. This transformed me profoundly, valuing my talents and exposing, understanding, and embracing my vulnerabilities. I have many observations to believe many colleagues felt the same. I no longer accept being in teams that do not understand their members as complex beings. I learned that we move from the cycle of Presence to Absence (Scharmer, 2010) by not allowing for vulnerabilities.

The Absencing cycle is the counterpart to Presencing cycle in Theory U (Scharmer, 2010). While the Presencing cycle represents a process of connecting deeply to one’s highest potential and emerging future, the Absencing cycle describes the opposite—a descent into disconnection and destructive behaviors. I would highlight how individuals, organizations, and societies can fall into this cycle when they turn away from possibilities for renewal and growth, often leading to a harmful spiral marked by rigidity and detachment.

What’s Next?

Not having all the answers is always encouraging, at least for me! Thus, we left the Rethink DF 2030 project stimulated by unanswered questions, which moved us to seek continuous learning. I can summarize this: we still have a long

pathway to learn how to build safe environments quickly and more comfortably for all of us leaders, facilitators, and participants. I tend to believe that it is essentially about activating the learning and leadership of the ecosystem and what this involves, such as the daily need to exercise the expansion of consciousness to act in a more systemic way. Recognizing the influences caused by one stakeholder on another or others is a significant step forward. Three years after the end of the Rethink DF 2030 Project, I still feel challenged to observe and study how the containers that best support systemic transformations have been formed.

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In Dialogue

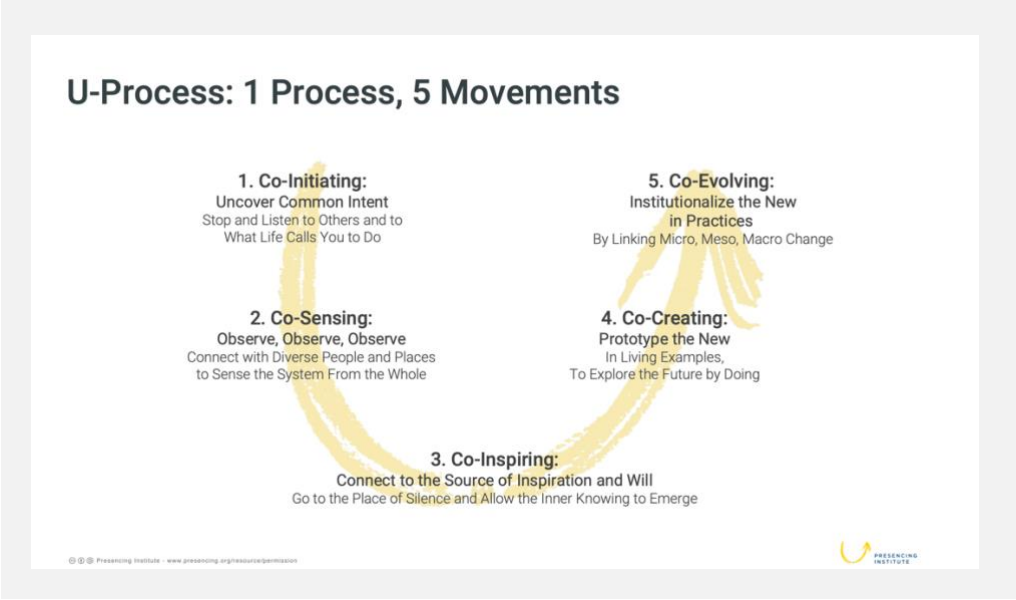
Being Awareness-Based Systems Change

Megan Seneque, Teo Lordache, Sharon Munyaka, Liz Alperin Solms

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Leadership Labs are initiatives offered by the Presencing Institute (PI) in collaboration with the United Nations Development Coordination Office (UNDCO), supporting the UN in systems transformation, leadership, collaboration, and innovation to advance the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The Labs bring together leaders from various UN agencies and external stakeholders for a systems change process structured around the methods of Theory U[1].

> Theory U is an innovation method for transformative systems change developed by Otto Scharmer that sits at the intersection of action inquiry, social change and consciousness. The U process integrates inner work and outer action though its emphasis on sensing and actualizing the emerging future. There are five phases of the U process, outlined below.

[1] For more information about Theory U see https://www.u-school.org/theory-u



Thirty country-based SDG Leadership Labs have been held so far. Each Lab was facilitated by a Presencing Institute Faculty team who worked with a core team from the UN to customize the process for the specific context of each country. One such Lab was held in Liberia and yielded significant and lasting action.[2] While the program itself was relatively short, a four-month process comprised of several online gatherings and two multi-day in person events, the prototypes for action emerging from the Lab are striking for their significance and scale. Each of the four prototypes was a practice in activating one of 4 key shifts the UN Country Team committed to as an outcome of the Lab. They include:

- *Shift*: "Power to All People: Everything we do is powered by you"
  Prototype: "Initiation without Mutilation" is an initiative to end female genital mutilation (FGM). The prototype de-centered the UN as the driver of change and put FGM practitioners at the center of designing and prototyping an alternative rite of passage for young girls, with NGOs and the UN in a supportive role. The key was holding the dignity and economic motivations of the FGM practitioners, who are community and spiritual leaders, as well as the social and cultural benefits of ritual, as key design criteria.
- *Shift*: "We Are One Liberia" shifting the UN's positioning from offering "programs," to investing in Liberians' story-telling and shaping a new national narrative.
  Prototype: The "We Are One Liberia" public relations campaign was created to engage leaders and public personalities to

[2] For an overview of the program, see https://vimeo.com/823838408

promote a common, positive Liberian identity, particularly in the face of an upcoming national election. The 2023 presidential elections mirrored this narrative and were heralded as an overwhelming success, marking a peaceful transition of power in a country historically plagued by coups and political unrest.

- *Shift*: "Advocacy for Resource Allocation"
  Prototype: Recognizing the resource constraints of government, the Lab developed the prototype "Self-Funding Innovative Finance". This prototype created a multi-stakeholder platform to enable sustainable financing, and is currently being embedded in new UN development contracts.
- *Shift*: *"Active Citizens, Empowered Communities"*
  Prototype: The "County Zwedru Hub" prototype provided a strong platform for decentralizing decision-making, resource allocation and operations to more local levels, and looking beyond government leaders to communities and civil society to demand basic services and drive the nation's development. A UN Hub was created in a region of the country cut off much of the year due to impassable road conditions, allowing resources to be directed locally rather than nationally.

The experience of the Liberia SDG Leadership Lab reverberated with the facilitation team well after the Lab was finished. Simply put, the team could not get Liberia out of their thoughts. One year later, remarking on the lasting power of the Lab in their own hearts and memories, the team wondered what impact the Lab had in Liberia. Did the Lab matter as much to Liberia as it did to them? Was it actually transformative? And if it was, why? What happened? The team committed to a deep dive inquiry into the experience of the lab, for participants and for themselves. They engaged in their own self-inquiry as a team, interviewed past participants individually and held a group sense-making session, inviting everyone who had participated in the lab. They then shared their experience in a presentation and internal report to the SDG Leadership Lab faculty group, of which dialogue host and JASC Associate Editor, Megan Seneque, is a member.

In this dialogue, Megan and the facilitation team explore the invisible conditions for transformative systems change work including what it takes individually and collectively to provide the quality of holding needed to support such work. The team, who call themselves "The Choir," turn the beam of observation back on themselves and reflect on living the tensions, aspirations, and realities of being a transformative and transforming system in service of transformational systems change. What follows is an authentic, frank and intimate look at the inner experience of holding systems transformation, including the willingness to look at one's own role in embodying the dynamics of power, race, and geo-politics.

Participating in the Dialogue

Teo Iordache is a Strategy and Organisational Development Consultant and a faculty member with the Presencing Institute. In his work, he applies approaches from awareness-based system change, ecosystemic leadership, and social innovation. He is increasingly curious to understand how collective and ancestral trauma healing plays a role in the transformation of social systems.

Dr. Sharon Munyaka is an Industrial and Organisational Psychologist based in South Africa. She is on the faculty for the Ubuntu Lab Institute, a part of the Presencing Institute. Accredited on various U-School programmes, Sharon is part of the global faculty for the Presencing Institute who facilitate on various programmes. Through the lens of her work in positive psychology, Sharon is a firm believer in focusing on what is right with people. Sharon is committed to contributing to large scale systems transformation, one conversation at a time.

Liz Alperin Solms, MPA is Co-founder of Insyte Partners, a Theory U based transformation consultancy that has been guiding and accompanying courageous organisations and leaders who want to innovate, align around shared vision, or take daring collective action for over 25 years. Liz began her career as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the south Pacific, and as a PI Faculty member finds herself today very committed to generating more Theory U capacity and presence in the US. She is excited to be part of the first Presencing Foundation Program in Philadelphia, USA, October 2025.

Dialogue Facilitator

Dr. Megan Seneque is Associate with the Presencing Institute and Research Associate with the Susanna Wesley Foundation at Roehampton University, London. She is a pracademic with a PhD in Systems Science, whose research and praxis explore what it means to intervene in complex systems to co-shape transformative paths. This informs all her research-creation.

Activating the System: Who and What is Being Activated?

Megan: Having listened to your conversation when we were all together as SDG Leadership Lab faculty, and from having read your report, what struck me was you saying that you were coming to understand the difference between “offering a program” and “being a transformation system.” That really had my curiosity, that shift from offering a program which, in some sense, the SDG Leadership Labs were—programs based on Theory U. That was the offer. What I heard you talk about was your collective journey of becoming a transformation system, as you were leading this process of systems transformation.

I thought this was an opportunity to turn the beam of observation back onto ourselves. As we think about “transformative” research, it is also we who are being transformed. There was a lovely piece in the last In Dialogue in the

Journal, where one of our conversants, Ioan Fazey, said: “Are we doing research on transformation? Are we doing research for transformation? Or are we doing transformative research”? [3] Sometimes it's all three, sometimes it's different ones, but it felt for me that for you guys, it was the transformative journey that you each and all went on.

So that's what I'd like to invite each of you to do—to set a context of your own intention and your curiosities around that. What did that shift feel like, that shift from offering a program to being the primary transformation system? Include your own positionality—however you want—in that introduction, because I think other things will unfold and emerge from that.

Sharon: What I wanted to add as a way of suggestion is maybe even sharing our “yes” to the assignment. I think the activation began right in the beginning, in acknowledging that the system where we (Presencing Institute) were intervening was in Africa, and that there was a need to include colleagues from Africa. The purpose for me, my yes, was about making sense of the space from the eyes of colleagues from the continent and creating a bridge between them and the facilitation team coming from the West.

So even my own inclusion in the team, I think that again was part of the activation by saying, “Okay, we have a core team, but actually we need to widen it a little bit more.” The work we did as Ubuntu Lab Institute[4] in preparation for facilitation on global PI projects, again points to the intentionality of how we dip into knowledge from different parts of the globe.

I think the activation comes right way back to: what are we (the team) wanting to do there? In our diversity, I was aware that I am entering the team as a Black woman, born in Africa, living in Africa and doing global work with colleagues from other parts of the world.

For me, it was definitely the curiosity of “I'm going to West Africa, I've never been to this country, I've heard all these stories. I'm going to be part of the broader PI system. I don't know these people, I wonder what it's going to be like.” I came in holding curiosity.

And if I just reveal “the Choir” back-end prep, there was lots of reading, there was lots of research about this place that we are going to. What is this place? What is happening in this place? So, for me, the activation started right at the onset.

[3] For more about transformative and transgressive research, see Koenig et al. (2024).

[4] Ubuntu Lab Institute, “which is the regional expression of the Presencing Institute's u-school, catalyses a dynamic community of African change makers committed to co-creating solutions to the continent’s most urgent social, economic, and environmental challenges.” (Ubuntu.Lab, n.d.).

Liz: It struck me that from the moment we entered that space, that world, we were reading, reading, reading. I read, of course, the autobiography of the former president and the history of the nation. But I thought, well, I also need to read fiction. And we were sensing, sensing, sensing, looking for where the energy was high and the openness was high to figure out how to position ourselves. I think that we were saying, from the beginning, where can we be useful?

I remember, too, when you start talking about the very beginning of the project, Sharon, for me not only had I never been in Liberia—I'd never been in Africa.

But from the beginning I also remember feeling love. I remember the first time I talked to the UN Resident Coordinator. When I told him our team would bring all we had to supporting him, he told me that the care in those words felt like a light coming through a cave shaft. I think his metaphor was, "when not dealing with our galaxy of partners, our go-to place among ourselves can seem a little subterranean at times." It felt like a little bit of a human connection.

I was thinking about that and realising what that signalled to me: that this is a leader who was just open to human connection. His words maybe *were* a metaphor for "come underground with us. We're really ready." This was shortly followed by "we don't want to do yesterday better." It was the combination of these things that sent this signal to me and to us that we're willing to go to the deep places, because it's that important and pretty much that desperate. I think so much about conditions: what are the conditions for transformation? I think we smelled them—I know I did.

I love your framing, Megan, how were we a "transformation system?" What I know about how to respond to that question is so general. I know a lot of it is about love and fear and surrender. I know all those things are so much a part of what was activated in me, when I think of being an agent of transformation versus offering a program. And also truth telling.

Teo: To continue on that, it's interesting because where my mind went first as well, was, "How the hell did I get into this? And what was there?" I got into this because another colleague couldn't travel. I wasn't even supposed to be there. It wasn't by design that I was going to do this.

The second time we went to Liberia, I was, I would say, at the "bottom of the U"[5] on another program I was attending with Thomas Hübl.[6] We had a woman who came into that program, someone who works on racial issues which is quite

[5] "Bottom of the U" is a reference from Theory U, denoting a phase in the process also called presencing. Presencing "is a blended word combining sensing (feeling the future possibility) and presence (the state of being in the present moment). It means sensing and actualizing one's highest future possibility—acting from the presence of what is wanting to emerge" (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013, p. 19).

[6] See Timeless Wisdom Training (https://timelesswisdomtraining.com/).

interesting, and I was sitting in Liberia. I had also just finished reading the biography of the former president as I flew in and I was in touch with the atrocities that took place during the 20-year war and the longer history of the country.

I was in the middle of that program just before we started our second Liberia event. I almost have this picture of a string of beads of different shapes or a stack of collective traumas that I was just witnessing and how for me, coming from Romania, at the receiving end of 'power over' for 2,000 years including recently 50 years of communism, being a victim or a subject of that, how that kind of applied to me. Then the layers of what happened in Liberia, from the slave trade to later on saying, "Oh, here's a piece of territory for you go back 'home' to, the 'freed people.' We've managed to free you and then completely replicated the trauma of that process by (re)colonising a part of the continent and the people living on this piece of land."

It was a really weird sort of space, internally, just being with all this. So, to your point that we are some sort of an apparatus of transformation or change, I think I've been hugely transformed by the experience, throughout the experience.

Catalyst for Transformation: On Being and Becoming the System

Megan: There's something there that you're tapping into—something that you were saying, Teo, about being in touch with atrocities, in touch with trauma and witnessing. You've spoken elsewhere that you felt like your accompaniment was one of pattern interruption. Disrupting patterns.

If you think about systemic intervention, it's that every interaction is actually an intervention—our way of knowing is an intervention, which is something that "offering a program" can forget. So that notion of noticing, observing, tuning in, noticing what was unfolding before you. You know what it made me think of is that quote from Bayo Akomolafe;[7] the question that he asks, "what if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?" This evokes the ethical responsibility of intervening,[8] and what that asks of us.

[7] In some senses this conversation around "being awareness-based systems change" continues the In Dialogue on Transgressive Knowing from the last journal issue (Koenig et al., 2024), in which Bayo Akomolafe was one of the trouble-makers. For more information about his work, see Akomolafe (n.d.).

[8] Rose (2011) states, "Connectivity ethics are open, uncertain, attentive, participatory, contingent. One is called upon to act, to engage in the dramas of call-and-response, and to do so on the basis of that which presents itself in the course of life" (p. 143).

Systemic Intervention

Systemic Intervention sits within the tradition of systemic thinking and action research. Flood (2001) comments, "systemic thinking is not an approach to action research, but a grounding for action research that may broaden action and deepen research. That is, action research carried out with a systemic perspective in mind promises to construct meaning that resonates strongly with our experience within a profoundly systemic world" (p. 143).

Midgley (2008) adds, "If intervention is purposeful action by an agent to create change, then systemic intervention is purposeful action by an agent to create change in relation to reflection on boundaries" (p. 66). This reflection on boundaries includes an inquiry into what constitutes 'the system', with particular attention paid to the issues, people and knowledges that might otherwise be excluded or invisible (Seneque, 2021).

Teo: I just want to name something. I am getting a very strong physiological response just now.

I see a lot of shame, my own shame…I'm sitting with a shame of being, like I feel ashamed of being a White person going to Liberia to run a process. I'm not saying I'm right or wrong, but physically I'm just in the narrative that we're having a particular issue or our own dynamic in the choir and how I showed up or even show up. There is so much stuff just going through my physical body right now as I came back into the experience and looking from where I'm sitting now versus where I was there.

Sharon: Thank you Teo. As I'm listening to everyone, I think we were mirroring what was going on in the system—in our own representation, in how we interacted with people.

Beyond just the facilitation team, I think what was evident is the default to Whiteness. It was apparent to me as a Black person who is part of the team but also part of the African continent where the intervention was occuring.

So while the intention right at the beginning was "We are in Africa, we need to bring an African voice and an African face to help bridge some of the nuances or help to activate something in the system," we just replicated what was already there. Perhaps that was the purpose—to hold up the mirror and say, "This is what is happening." The UN is trying so hard to support a country in West Africa. The UN colleagues were coming from different parts of the world to work in Liberia. They knew that at the heart of it, while they were committed, the work belonged to Liberians. The UN knew they were there to support, there to anchor. From the discussions in the Lab, people shared how some people in

Liberia perceived the UN almost being like God, “Help us, help us, help us, do this, give more, more, more, more.” Yet that is not their job.

The physiological response that Teo is transmitting through the screen. It's like, “Oh my gosh, we mirrored the system for people.” We were part of that system, knowingly and unknowingly. We represented so many layers that are there and still exist. I think that's why this work continues to matter. You can't just go in there and not be changed.

So the love, Liz, that you are speaking about. That's it for me. It's hard going through that fire. It was hard holding the complexity, but the work matters much more than our own discomfort. As a choir, we had to grapple through those many layers and try and figure out how we are with one another and how we show up in the Lab. In hindsight, we all participated in that transformation, through its ebbs and flows. The system demanded it.

If I think about the work that's needed in the world right now, it's those brave souls that are saying, “Yeah, I'm putting my hand up. I want to do this.” I think there's that signalling of hope. It's that saying “wood touched by fire is not hard to set alight.” The fire lives in all of us. It's just the nudging, whether someone comes with some big audacious idea about how we can enter a space, or someone saying, “This is what worked. Are you willing to try?” Or “can we really be brave and try something different?” “Yeah, we can be brave.” “Are you sure?” “Yeah, we can be sure.” It creates the condition for shifts to really happen.

It's that stepping into courage, which even when one is feeling like it's too much, there's someone else with a fire that's burning a little bit harder or a little bit brighter that ignites the next person to keep going.

Liz: A couple of things. Megan, when you said earlier that we witnessed something, it felt deeper than witnessing to me. I think we *felt* something. I feel like everybody was sitting on the edge of their seats hoping that it would go well or hoping to learn something. We could feel possibility moving through us and wanted to be vessels to activate something new, something difference-making. We didn’t want to “do yesterday better” anymore.

To Teo and Sharon’s reflections about us as a team and the racial and national complexity of our group...I mean, I'm White too…it’s impossible not to be hyper aware of race and nationality in a place like Liberia. In the Lab, though, I felt something else beyond my Whiteness. I felt a sense of bridging, of bringing our Theory U framework and practices and my American-ness to a place and group of people as a bridge from what is to what might be. I hadn’t recognized the deep history and connection between Liberia and the US, but once I did, I felt there was something useful in me being there and being American. As the oldest member of the facilitation team, and in what is probably the last season of my practice, in me is a sense of handing over, passing off and stepping back for others. I guess these factors mitigated feelings of being part of a “colonial” enterprise. Also, I guess I felt we were the best option this group of amazing

humans had at the time to see and sense the larger forces of development and shift them.

Revealing Shadows and Disrupting Patterns

Megan: I've just come across a really interesting book by Kira Celeste, called The Colonial Shadow.[9] It resonated when Teo was talking, and what you just said Liz. She says (in the context of Turtle Island) “may we unsettle and disrupt all the loose colonial rocks we find in the shadows along our way” (p.14). She also says, “may we find the golden vitality of integrity in our own hearts and souls” (p. 14). It’s not work for the faint-hearted. That's why I was so inspired when you presented. It was so heartfelt, the journey that the three of you had been on.

So to your inquiry, what is this asking of us? What is this asking of us as an organization, as change makers, as people deeply committed to making a global contribution? Let’s explore whatever you feel is going to be revealing and helpful for people who are wanting to navigate this kind of complexity, both local and global.

Sharon: I'll jump in again around activating those three intelligences, open mind, open heart, open will, and the comment around the Presencing Institute as an organization becoming more diverse. I think there's that open mind around recognizing that for the work that we're doing globally, our constellation needs to shift. I think there's some courage, but it's not consistent. I'll just reflect on our Liberia experience, where the stakes were high and the Lab needed to work. There's this understanding that we need to broaden our team. We need to make sure our team is representative of the space where we're going to work and, because the organization doesn’t have enough representation, new people are brought in. But at the same time, we're holding this need to make sure this goes well. There are lots of moving parts. We were dealing with dynamics of newness: we don't know each other. We're dealing with the complexity of the space we're working. We're dealing with our own blind spots. And we cannot ignore the realities of other diversity markers like race, gender, where we were coming from and how that contributed to the space we created.

I reflect on how we interacted as a team and how it influenced the rest of the system. The reflection for me was on how we either perpetuated or disrupted patterns. So, if we are there to disrupt, if we are there to change systems, part of our work is to continue to notice. Part of our work is to name those disruptions when we see them or experience them... I think there were missed opportunities when we remain silent because the disruptions are not scripted, it is happening in real time. This is real life, it's not a dress rehearsal.

[9] See Celeste (2023).

I think for us as a community, part of that movement to realize that possibility that there's so much that can be offered from our global community, and it is going to require large doses of courage to actually do the thing. Courage to move beyond just noticing and saying, "Oh, this under-representation is not great because the world is changing." How do we align with those shifts? How do we live out the work that we're trying to do? For me, it requires all of us. Our awareness is going to be critical in this work. We can't go in blind. There's something beyond the slides [used on a program]. There's something else that you are doing, something else that you are bringing that helps to take people from one place to the other. We are active players, and I think we keep going in with that responsibility and awareness of being active players in the system. That contributes to the change that we want.

Teo: I want to come in with a couple of things. Tuning back in, I think that it was uncomfortable and it felt to me we actually did honour or kept ourselves into a space of awareness. I think probably there were moments of arrogance and closedness, but there were a lot of moments of being open and also moments of basically dropping our plans, our pre-made scripts and mental models and switching into a posture of acutely paying attention—"What's happening here?" and "I have no idea but I'm just going to listen and see what's happening and then I'll respond to that."

It felt like we were heading through difficult terrain ourselves, along with the clients. There was this opening, opening and opening, opening. It was individually—but also collectively—kind of developing that muscle. We took our own medicine across the experience. We didn't preach something we were not doing, even if we were maybe less perfect and less than competent in moments. We made good use of our tools and approaches to connect with the system and with our own blind spots.

Liz: Speaking for myself, I had never been to the continent; I had led many Presencing Institute projects with my own team, but not many with the global team as faculty. I had never met Teo or Sharon before in my life. We were entirely new to each other and we're going into this place where, I think it's fair to say as Sharon did, it felt like the stakes were really high, on behalf of the organization and also because we did fall in love and cared very deeply about these people we had formed a relationship with. We wanted to do good work. It felt like there was so much fear and courage and bravery and sometimes panic—we were always on our edge—there was no settling into "let me just go through the motions" but rather we were attuned to what we were feeling, sensing at every moment. I know I was fully paying attention because I felt I just had to "read" the people, the shared space. I remember all of us saying it feels like we really planned a lot, but then in the moment we just paid attention to what was needed. We really did just let go and tried to see what would show up with each other. I remember just trusting the team that we would know what to do at each decision point as they arrived.

Everything Participates: Love in Times of Disruption

Megan: What I notice is unbelievable whole-hearted engagement. That's what I hear. Probably each of you, in different ways if we're talking about being pattern disruptors, disrupted your own patterns. Your own patterns of being, of working, of being in relationship, of being in non-hierarchical relationship, those patterns were disrupted also. I'm curious about your having experienced the depth that you have.

You allowed your own patterns to be disrupted. You surfaced them, made them visible, and you had the courage to explore those together and not allow relationships to be broken. And the trauma that you were stepping into—if we look at that question of Bayo's, what if the way we respond to the crisis is part of the crisis?

You stepped into an incredibly complex situation from a very complex place full of ambiguity of different kinds. You held it. You learned through that difficulty to become a container. You stepped into tuning into the space, tuning into one another with all the complexities that that takes, and modelling something for the whole.

That's what I notice and what I hear, listening.

Sharon: One of the things I think that worked in our constellation was the constant checking in. Even after the Lab, we had standing zoom meetings that we put in the calendar. There was a general willingness: we had a black belt in disruption with our own stuff. We could say, "Okay, we're not happy with each other right now, but you know what? We have work to do. Let's keep it moving." And we would still come back to it: "What could we have done differently?" Then carry on and try and make adjustments as we go. But I think the professionalism and ability to stay focused on the requirements of the assignment provided a container for us to keep working in. We had a job to do, which was much bigger than us and kept on being revealed by the system, especially in the second time that we went in.

One of the reflections also was in looking at the hotel where we were staying and then just outside looking at the conditions. Liz and I had the opportunity to go out and see. Man, that's a paradox and the complexity is alive and well. Knowing the stories of Liberia, witnessing it, listening, holding it, and trying to make sense of it even for me as an African was hard. I was never prepared for this kind of environment. The venue we used for the second Lab was built, as we discovered while in the event, on a burial ground for many slaughtered in the civil war. Knowing the history of that space, I still get chills when I think about it.

The love was there, the compassion for ourselves and for others was there. We were doing our own U-process over and over and over. So we are part of that crisis and we lived it. I don't know if we could have done it differently for sure.

And our group with all that fire that was burning within us, it really kind of held up the mirror.

Teo: This is probably the most perceivable—if I could put it like this—perceivable professional experience where I felt there was stuff happening beyond the visible. There was a lot of the invisible and a lot of the stuff that was in the in-between.

We had this conversation before between the three of us. Particularly with some cultures, and this is not specific to African cultures alone, there is this thing that you know what's going on here is not about you, you alone. It is not about us as three people and it's not even about the forty people that were in the second workshop. *Everything participates.*[10] There is a participation, a soup that is flowing through, that includes minerals and it includes electricity switching off and on again and it includes the Nigerian finance minister showing up at lunch randomly, unexpected. It includes me (actually, I remember freaking out) almost not making it to the first lab because of flight disruptions while having back pains, massive back pains. It was almost like somebody was saying if you're going to cross this threshold, it's going to be painful personally. So much is interstitial.[11] I remember that one of the first things I noticed, I think I've mentioned—the first morning after we arrived. I woke up and looked outside and thought, where is the sound of nature? Why is it so quiet here? Where are the birds? Where is nature? It was such a quiet place. It felt like a muteness, a huge absence. It felt as if the place itself was talking to us through that muteness and at the same time it was taking an active part in our work. There were many layers that felt palpable throughout the experience.

Liz: You're bringing something up for me. Megan, when you were talking about pattern interruption, I think it's important to say that one of the things we were able to do was to do a giant pattern interruption in terms of how the UN system sees its role in Liberia. It's probably the most important thing we did, and I don't want to forget about it, because I think, and here's where I want to give ourselves some credit, I think one of our capacities as a team is that we were pretty seasoned, all in our different ways, and we understood systems. We were able to hold a group of humans so that they could actually see the system that they

[10] For many Indigenous cosmologies, everything participates in (knowledge) creation. In such Indigenous paradigms, knowledge is seen "as belonging to the 'cosmos' and we humans are only interpreters of that knowledge" (Goodchild 2022, p. 55).

[11] Wikipedia describes interstitial space as, "a space between structures or objects" (Interstitial, 2024) while the Cambridge Dictionary defines interstitial as "relating to spaces between cells, tissues, or organs in the body; relating to connective tissue that supports the working parts of an organ in the body; and relating to the space or time between things" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.).

Teo shares, "I used it to point to the things that were happening in between more known and definable moments, elements of the intervention" (personal communication, November 11, 2024).

worked in and see the opportunities to crack it open and recast it. When you were talking about the ether, Teo, of what was moving through, the confidence to "be" a different system, and the knowing that it was necessary, that also moved through all of us.

You called our presence whole-hearted, Megan. But we were also very clear on what was our work and what was not our work. Our sense of purpose felt personal and yet we did not do work that was not ours to do. The system made its own decisions about what it was ready for… and what they were ready for was a pattern interrupt. We cannot claim credit for that. The UN leaders were suffering in terms of their frustration to break through the status quo.

Because they were at that place, and we were at that place of desperation, we were at a place of being so on edge, they could make some big decisions about how to recast the role that we were just useful for, in terms of helping them make those decisions and codify them.

I don't even know the right word for this—I felt so close to so many people in that Lab. It did feel like love, honestly. There's just something about how we touch sacredness coming together in such intimacy in a situation like this. It's kind of its own kind of terrain. It's got an intimacy that's different than others.

Megan: I actually noted that theme of love when I was thinking about and preparing for us. You speak about love and how it was manifest. I'm deeply curious about love, and love as part of content of what that means to be a container—to hold the fire, Sharon. What is the quality of love and being and relationality. That, for me, is a deep curiosity in relation to awareness-based systems change. If we say that it is relationship that is the unit of analysis and change, not the individual, what is that asking of us?[12]

I listen to you, you've been part of an alchemical process. It feels like alchemy. As much as it feels like anything else. Yes, you've had your professional expertise, your integrity, your experience, but there's something else that has been released. In the article in the last journal on Fourth Person Knowing[13] "high quality or generative social fields provide the conditions for making fourth person knowing accessible." I'm wondering if love isn't a key dimension of fourth person knowing. So, as Bayo would say, we don't own knowledge. We don't own intelligence. We don't own love. These are forces, they are generative forces. And to the extent that we are open to them, we can become tuning instruments and they move through us.

[12] For more on relationality in systems change, see discussion of Marilyn Strathern's work in Koenig et al. (2024, pp. 3–4).

[13] Fourth person knowing is an epistemology proposed by Scharmer & Pomeroy (2024) that is trans-subjective in nature. It denotes knowing that arises and becomes apparent in individual, subjective experience but originates from the source knowing of the social field.

When I listen to you, that is what I hear.

Love, Power and Justice

The theme of love runs through systems change and social justice work. Martin Luther King, drawing on the work of Paul Tillich, famously stated “Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” (p. 37–38). This frame continues to inform civil action and social change movements.

More recently, Adam Kahane has expanded on this theme in his book his book *Power and Love*, where he describes the complex and intricate interplay between these two impulses as we address tough problems together. Comparing systems change work to the experience of learning to walk, he states "at first falling, then stumbling forward, and finally moving purposefully toward true, lasting reconciliation and progress" (p. xi).

He further develops this thinking in Kahane (2023).

https://jabsc.org/index.php/jabsc/article/view/6709/5767

Sharon: One of the quotes that come up for me is from Liz in explaining compassion, “We have our hearts cracked wide open.” I can literally feel our hearts being cracked wide open.

For me, that's what Ubuntu is all about. Ubuntu means, I am because you are. In my view, Ubuntu is understanding that when it rains, it not only rains in my yard, but the rain will also fall in my neighbour’s yard. So my wellbeing, my happiness, my existence, all of it is intrinsically tied to the next person. I sincerely believe that Ubuntu is Africa's gift to the world.

When we access the world with the Ubuntu orientation, we get to understand that it is not only about me. Continuing with the rain analogy for Ubuntu, when it rains in my yard, it's also going to rain on my neighbour’s yard, even the neighbour that I don't like. That's how it works, right?

I'm so glad love is coming back into the world of work. Love is coming back into how we do things. Because it's forcing us to actually notice the opportunities to strengthen that core muscle up—let me care. Let me care so deeply. Let me care so I can navigate. I can show up. I can be with others in a different way. It changes you. You can't be the same. You actually have to show up differently. I know for myself loss, grief, drama have shaped me in incredible ways that couldn't have happened by just being at school and acquiring intellectual knowledge.

I think that also with the leaders saying, “I'm giving it all. My heart is in this. I love this country. I love my work. I love my colleagues. I am doing whatever I can,” it activated our ability, our confidence. What is at the back? The back is a leader who is saying we are giving it everything that we've got. This is it. The potential is here, and we’ve got to make it count. It’s not about ticking a box. I think that really infused the system.

So, for me, this is real life. Love has a space. Love is the thing. It's that secret sauce when we care about this work, when we care about one another, when we understand that we are connected. It helps move things. Liberia is etched in my memory for that. We did that thing. We did the whole U. We were curious, we were compassionate, we were courageous. We did the thing. And fourth person knowing is alive and, wow, we saw it.

Witnessing the Past, Re-Telling the Future

Liz: The other thing that's been striking me is all our work is about activating the highest potential future and tuning into the future that’s in need of us. Another part of our story in Liberia—and everything we did—was about history, about the past.

I think maybe it always is but here more than usual. I think we all read the history of Liberia. But we also interviewed [before the Lab] every single person on the leadership team and asked them their story. We spent time on their stories and we knew each of them. We knew each of their stories. There was someone who grew up during the giant civil war in Nigeria who said: “It was the people from outside who saved my life and brought us food and enabled my family to survive. I swore in that moment as a child that I would return that.” Everybody who was on that team had a story from their past that they were bringing to this moment that we were all in.

We also did something that we don't, at least I don't always, do in these Labs. We asked the group when they first convened, what is Liberia’s story of the past? And how does it want to be carried into the future? One of the first things we did in curating the culture of the space was we asked that question. We also asked everyone to say who they want to dedicate their work to. I remember one person—it was so important to him to dedicate his work to his mother. Everybody had somebody, and I think it just charged the space with the connection between the past and the future and charged the space with that feeling that this is it. This is our moment. This is our chance.

Sharon: I agree. It's part of the many stories that were there. Everyone had such a unique story that brought them to that place and people just willingly showed up. There was a signalling right from the beginning—this is not just a workshop. We're here to do this work. We are here to work. We are here to support. For me, it took a lot of courage because the context puts the UN on a pedestal. The context makes them the saviour and yet in this moment acknowledging, allowing the space for the Liberia story to surface and the

respect of knowing we are here to do something but acknowledging there are others who are of this land. For me, it was quite something.

Liz: It was one thing for everyone else to narrate Liberia's story, but for the Liberians to tell their story and be witnessed by others was a big deal. And that was when we got the first glimmer of the sentiment one participant voiced, "Liberia, you are my problem child." This "truth telling" from a Liberian participant opened up a permission structure to re-tell Liberia's story of the future.

Teo

Yes, I recall that moment. It really felt like we brought the system into the room. It was a panel session early on where we had UN heads of agencies and other senior staff, we had a couple of senior government members, both local and national and one of the key diplomats in the country. These were people who met many times before, in maybe more traditional, more formal settings. We were sitting in a circle, in a room just big enough to fit everyone but not more. There was a perceived feeling of intimacy that one could not avoid. The physical set up made sharing these sentiments almost unavoidable. The conversation was very fresh, very open, quite uncomfortable at times. It couldn't stay only mental, there was a lot of emotion in the room which in the end brought that message forward with a lot of force. It was a form of witnessing what maybe everyone knew, but for the first time in an open and collective way. It opened the space for the group to move together towards the future as you mentioned, Liz.

The Power of Storytelling to Unlock Time—and Bring us to our Present Story

Megan: I have a curiosity. You created the conditions for those personal stories, the Liberian story, to be told, to be heard, and to be meaningful. I'm curious about that. I'd like to pursue that thing about time; the non-linearity of time. So, deeply understanding the past. But as Bayo Akomolafe (quoting Karen Barad)[14], says "what if the past is yet to come?" He's speaking as a Nigerian—a Yoruban conception of time.[15]

Many of us in Western contexts have a dominant, very linear orientation to time. There are many cultures that don't have this concept of time. They hold a view that everything is flowing through, everything participates, that all participates and is interconnected. There's some very beautiful work, on Three Horizons,[16] on futuring work, where Tony Hodgson talks about the ontology of the present

[14] See Barad (2007), p.ix.

[15] See https://www.bayoakomolafe.net/post/a-slower-urgency.

[16] For more on Three Horizons, see Sharpe & Hodgson (2019) and Koenig et al. (2022).

moment.[17] The present moment is infinitely "thin" if you believe that time is just a real-world arrow from the past into the future, rather than a feature of our experience and level of awareness, which allow for 'thicker' present moments. What this calls for is an anticipatory future consciousness, an alertness in the present moment to knowing that other futures are possible. So I'm listening to you describing this presencing and futuring at the same time; what Scharmer describes as "leading from the future as it emerges."

Liz: The other aspect of time, the convergence of the past, present, future, is the power of storytelling to unlock time. When you were talking, Sharon, about the future, I think one of the moments in the Lab was when people realized that the story Liberians tell themselves about who they are and what their country is about, is a problematic story, and that it's a story that is stopping them from activating what's possible there. I mean, everyone in Liberia seems to know that they are a place of riches, in the land, in agriculture, mining, their culture, but that they can't get at it. They can't get at it. The corruption, the lack of roads. They can't get at it.

I think in the storytelling of past, present, future, when they realized the story we're telling ourselves is a problematic story, and we should try to change that story. The UN can't change that story, Liberians need to change that story. There were four strategic goals that came out of this lab, where the UN essentially said we are going to break our pattern of how we operate in this country and we're going to choose different approaches to intervening—to shift the way we create the conditions for development to happen.

One of them was about supporting a different story by getting the women leaders, the cultural leaders, and the influencers in society to talk about a united Liberia with a strong future. You saw a lot happen after that—a lot of energy. That's when one agency leader who had just arrived in the country said "Who wants to come over to my house between the first Lab and the second Lab and we're going to figure out how we're going to do a prototype on this. I'm going to make you dinner and we're going to pull together a team who is going to do something different." That was a huge moment—because remember when we got there these people didn't know each other's personal lives. They didn't know who had kids, who didn't have kids, and all of a sudden, I'm inviting you to my house to make a meal for you and we're going to create the conditions for a different story to be told.

That was huge. It brought in humility.

Sharon: They were more connected after the Lab. I think just seeing themselves beyond their roles, sharing at that level, I think just enabled so much connection and possibility. And because it was a shared language, it also created

[17] See Hodgson (2013).

momentum. So, timing. Everything converged. The elections were coming. We went in knowing that new leaders are coming and so that whole concept of time comes alive because we could have deferred the whole thing and said, this is not a good time. Everything is working against it, but actually it turned out to be a beautiful thing.

Teo: Sharon, what you share brings up for me another aspect relating to timing and storytelling. There was a particular quality of layering in the timing, or the river of time of our journey in Liberia. Different, I am going to call them, "participating energies" showed up at different moments, as in a snowballing movement, nudging forward and amplifying the work of the collective. Take Liberia's Honorary Cultural Ambassador, for example. She shows up with her entourage in the middle of the agenda during the second workshop and she bestows on the departing RC the cloth symbols of a traditional chief. Then at the end of the day as the group is building up commitment to take the prototypes forward, she brings everyone together with song and dance. The next day, in the middle of a systems 4D Mapping session (a Social Presencing Theatre approach that helps participants have a deep sense of the system they attend to), the Minister of Interior Affairs walks into the room and after witnessing the process, voices a strong commitment on behalf of the Government of Liberia to support the work of the Lab.[18] There were many such "unplanned" events throughout the journey and it seemed they all fitted with the emergence in the system.

Confident Vulnerability: Creating the Conditions for Transformation

Megan: There's something about transition and transitioning, shaping a new shared identity together. That requires incredible courage and vulnerability together. It's sort of like a kind of a confident vulnerability. It's holding a vulnerability, but feeling it without fear or shame.

When we think about synchronicity, that is a function of understanding how everything is connected and all participates. We are in participatory moments all the time and we don't notice them. We don't tune in. So there's something, you know, when things happen and you go, my goodness, I mean, how could that have possibly followed from that?

A friend recently quoted this Rumi poem, which I'll read to you, because it so speaks to me about your experience.

[18] See https://www.u-school.org/4d-mapping

"The way of love is not
a subtle argument.
The door there
is devastation.
Birds make great sky-circles
of their freedom.
How do they learn it?
They fall, and falling,
they're given wings."

Liz: The term you used, "confident vulnerability," I think that's good language for the feeling of being present in the moment. The other thing is that you *know* when you're in that space. You know that kind of confident vulnerability. I guess that's a more nuanced way to describe authenticity, when you're really present for whatever is going to show up. I think that is really what we are all moving in and out of accessing in our roles. It feels like something you dance with.

Teo: While we're speaking of birds and wings, finally an image is crystalizing for me, or more of a felt sensation, which speaks to our experience as "the Choir" and also that of working with the group and the system, the field in Liberia. Though I am not a starling and therefore I cannot claim first person knowing, our "dance" did feel like a starling murmuration, the way starlings swarm, particularly in winter here in the Northern hemisphere. What kept me in flight was a constant sensing with my nearby fellow birds and with the bigger body that was in movement. This was a lot more important than—though critically collaborating with—pre-existing knowledge and competence. It ties in with this notion of "confident vulnerability."

Sharon: There's a quote by John Schaar that I have referenced over the years. "The future is not some place we are going, but one we are creating. The paths are not to be found, but made. And the activity of making them changes both the maker and the destination."[19] Something is happening. You will get touched.

It's being okay with not knowing. So that shift, you're kind of playing in that shift, I guess, that bottom of the U- type place where something is going to come up. I don't know what, but I need to go there. I need to just put one foot forward.

Megan: There's some beautiful literature about how we are changed through our intra-actions. So we talk about interaction, but Karen Barad, the quantum physicist I mentioned earlier, talks about entanglement, intra-action, and how

[19] See https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/7132358.John_Schaar

we are constantly being shaped through every interaction.[20] In the book that I'm reading at the moment called The Minor Gesture by Erin Manning, her description of a pluriverse of practices is what struck me when I was listening to you.[21] She describes a pluriverse of practices or an ecology of practices: "…the ecology of practices is not straining toward homogeneity, but toward a bringing-into-relation of difference. An ecology of practices activates the relational field at its point of inflection, creating a new composition that is capable of keeping difference alive" (p. 234).

People are writing about it, you've practised it.

It's a deep privilege for me to have been in your company and presence today, really. In some sense, I feel that you have a good idea and that you have no idea what you actually did—and the word is not succeeded—what it is, that you lived, what you enabled, what you were catalyst for, in yourselves, amongst one another, and in the whole.

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[20] See Barad (2007).

[21] See Manning (2016).

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