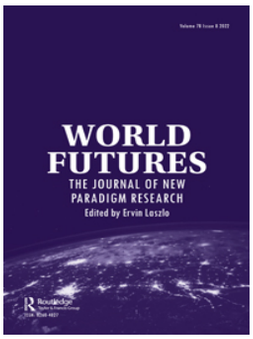

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Our Own Metaphor: Tomorrow is Not for Sale

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ABSTRACT

This article is an invite to re-envision the future together. An invitation that extends beyond that small segment of privileged few who have commonly dominated decision-making and paradigm. Truly collective imaginaries would listen to and account for successive generations, encompassing their desires, purpose, and aspirations. Here making, knowing and reflection is not about fortifying the lines of defence for the end-times. Instead, a thriving tomorrow belongs to communities able to learn to adapt, in modesty, measured courage and sensible reorientation of taken-for-granted priorities.

KEYWORDS

Collective futures connective aesthetics; design anthropology; pluriverse; sensory ethnography

Tomorrow is Everybody's Business

This position paper invites everyone to re-envision the future together. The authors discuss ways to explore creative futures that help move beyond "social chaos, generalized misgovernment, loss of quality of life and degraded relationships" (Krenak, 2020, p. 35). Like others before, we imagine doing this by moving beyond the notion of homo economicus, the economic man (Bateson, 1972, p. 285) who sells off our common tomorrow in the belief that everything must be resource, product, or merchandise. This invitation extends beyond that small segment of privileged

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people who have historically monopolized human history narratives (Krenak, 2020, p. 13). Alternative collective imaginaries would encompass successive generations, together with their desires, purpose, and aspirations (Krenak, 2020, p. 31). As authors and persons, we share this vision through our research processes that aspire to manifest new possible worlds through radical interdependences. We will share examples of our research, alongside an imaginary intergenerational conversation with a 1968 conference led by Gregory Bateson and synthesized by Mary Catherine Bateson (1972) in her book *Our Own Metaphor*.

We first engage with ideas from the conference to extend their value and enlivenment principles that we believe are critical for life-affirming futures. And by enlivenment, we mean to live within fuller integrity, cultures of aliveness both inside and outside of us (Weber & Kurt, 2016). This integrity was exemplified by the profound understanding amongst conference participants of constant intrusions into the nitrogen cycle by human beings who do not acknowledge the consequences of their interference in the environment (Bateson, 1972, p. 121–125). Andreas Weber and Hildegard Kurt (Weber & Kurt, 2016) declare in their *Toward Cultures of Aliveness Manifesto* that climate change has proven humans' inescapable relations to Earth systems. Scientists today are finding traces of nitrogen fertilizer, pesticides, nuclear fallout, and microplastics in Arctic ice crystals and in soils of the Amazon.

In our research, we experiment with methods that facilitate these cultures of aliveness, such as a workshop in Bali, which came to be known as "blue alchemy" (Indigo dying), and the "handcraft of soil-building" (bokashi composting) in Hong Kong. In these high touch practices, the hands, senses, and intuition of fermenting humans and their community are brought into a revelatory environmental dynamic of awareness. It is a process of exploration and social bonding. When fermenting with plants, the community keeps propagating – or culturing, quite literally – at the same time microbial richness, sensual lives, and the knowledge intrinsic to the process that enables it in the first place. The maturation of Indigo and bokashi entail deeply embodied temporal and societal qualities. Fermentation as a form of intergenerational transmission and renewal of food and fiber traditions relies on learning by rote; doing things together, in close relationship with each other, again and again. In fermentation, the language of culture is brought to life in a double meaning, culture as a social site of attention and a microbial work alliance. When humans and microbes mutually cultivate each other, it is conducive to developing a sense of self in a profound relationship with natural timelines and conditions. Aligned to Weber's and Kurt's (2016) descriptions, it is a research process that entails embodied symbolical imagination with its existential experiences of lived values.

Mary Catherine Bateson (1972) describes the conversations at the conference in the subtitle of her book as concerned with the *effects of conscious purpose and human adaptation*. Reflecting on Bateson's synthesis, we imagine her asking whether things changed much over the last five decades. We would reply "not that much". One reason for this is the domination of the global North over other cultures that flatten the conceptual landscape and outlook of the future through a homogenizing worldview. For example, aside from her perspective, the conference itself consisted of a small group of predominantly white male anthropologists, linguists, psychologists, and philosophers. This meant significant absences at the conference, from the lack of representation for specific and diverse ways of knowing. These omissions are actively created through hegemonic processes. For example, consider the absence of women and or the absence of social groups that could be labeled "ignorant, primitive, inferior, local or unproductive" (de Sousa Santos, 2018, p. 27). Here, we draw on the work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos' (2018, p. 25–34) "sociology of absences" by opening space up and away from unitary ways of relating to the world. These approaches limit our conceptual understanding of the world, and or these ideologies neglect ancestral wisdom or indigenous knowledges. The failure to accommodate and represent plural perspectives (Glăveanu & Beghetto, 2020) is no longer excusable. Humanity may well jeopardize its future by persisting in life-negating, analytical models that approach futurity as a commodity while side-lining the complex, interlinked planetary systems of world economics, biosphere, and communities.

We can respond in ways that move beyond unequal globalization dynamics, and by this, we mean the relationship between wealth and power that leads to global inequality. Rosi Braidotti (2013, p. 164) refers to this potential as the vital energy that propels a transformation of values into actionable affirmation. This potential requires a commitment to engage with the plurality of the world and places emphasis on relationality. By plurality, we mean to counteract the absences by inviting the experiences and proliferating the voices from the marginalized, indigenous, non-western ways of life. It also requires resisting the conventional view that only "the next new thing" can produce social transformation. Fixated on novelty, individuals and whole cultures can care about the wrong things through desires and beliefs that, in the long term, increase human suffering and environmental devastation. Thus, the critical lifeline from then to now is how to carry forth the essence of the conference's interactions that converged around the intricate continuum of "learning to care in new ways" (Bateson, 1972, p. 45). Radically adapting this essence to the present context, we ask, what can constitute the shared understanding

of living inside a diversifying world that opens rather than closes the collective future potential?

Our aim is to facilitate a creative experience for our audience and cohabitants to participate in and wonder with the 1968 conference whilst making it relevant today. In this context, cultural inheritance is understood as the transmission and memory of information and learning across generations that regenerates its value and essence. We take inspiration from indigenous communities who place importance on cultural inheritance (Barrett, 2020, p. 48) as an evolutionary strategy, an intergenerational collaboration foundational to both individual and the broader community's thriving. And for this reason, we seek to better understand the interactions during the conference, which Bateson (1972, p. 45) described as "learning to know each other at all of these different levels, often coming into conflict as we tried to express our different levels of awareness". Knowing each other means diverging from the conforming format of encountering our humanity by exposing the dominant paradigm that has created the problems in the first place and that become instrumental to practices of exclusion that block tomorrow's vision.

When we (as design researchers and beyond) seek to locate shared sentiment or inspire imagination toward the joint inquiry in a collective of fermenters, we talk about community literacy. When we invite the expertise of senior practitioners to pick indigo plants or bamboo roots with just the right maturity level, we talk about plant literacy. Being able to balance environmental presence with intuition and walk into a field for recognizing what is edible and what is not is about landscape literacy – for example, Tiantaru in Bali, a living space and jungle studio. A place to regenerate creative practices through fermentation processes and constant attunement to ever-changing conditions, thus literacy to seasons. It is a type of knowledge that gets inside the practitioner and implicates her deeply with the world. More than any other animal, humans have developed their ability to make sense of and categorize the world because of the need to forage, ferment, and weave for survival (Zilber & Vaughan-Lee, 2019). Through the fermentation processes in the living design space, the seemingly disparate fields of biology and anthropology can converge in cultures of aliveness, a metaphor for revealing a poetic way of shaping reality together.

Both authors explore crafting, tinkering and playfulness as low-tech modalities that help incubate and foment these cultures of aliveness. According to Weber (2013, p. 9), it is critical to move beyond our modernist metaphysics of dead matter and acknowledge the intensely creative, poetic and expressive processes embodied in all living organisms. Thus, an intergenerational mobilization entails opening of perspectives within life through the fluid exchange of roles as listener and speaker, caretaker and care

receiver, learner and teacher. Through this biology of wonder (Weber, 2016) and shared narrative, the very poetics of our existence opens up an arena of emergent possibility that simultaneously is grounded in the physical, social and psychological. The cultivation of aliveness puts humans decidedly back on equal footing with the processes of their biophysical foundation. Within this deeply ecologically embedded outlook, we stay focused on hands-on, personally involving places of connection with the shared world, not as a parallel world, but a world that embraces other-including, emergent potency (de Sousa Santos, 2009). Socially enacted practices make the person wonder about the position of the self, inside thriving (or deteriorating) otherness beyond the here-and-now, drawing guidance for our actions in the waking world from the dreams that visit our slumber (Krenak, 2020, p. 29). Glăveanu and Beghetto (2020) denote such shared wondering within creative practice, pedagogy and collective activism as a social manifested activity. These activities foster new coalitions across philosophy, the arts and science as crucial building blocks for this qualitative reimagining of previously unthinkable perspectives. In these processes, feelings and emotions, far from being superfluous to the study of living systems, are the very foundation of life (Weber, 2016, p. 20).

A new commitment to futurity requires the analyses of the interaction between self, society, and nonhuman otherness, seeking ways to think from within our surprising, unsettling, and wondrous relationships inside the natural world. A relational orientation that works with possibility and complexity acknowledges Mary Catherine Bateson's (1972, p. 286) insight: "we can't relate to anything unless we can express its complexity through the diversity that exists within ourselves." Cultivated by the oscillation of inner and outer diversity, a person's subjectivity can expand life experiences alongside the world's circulation. It is well documented how such circulatory interactions and integrations with the matters of Earth reaches beyond symbolism. It comes to life from the self-implicating friction that enables people to depend on one another and stay creatively attuned to the given condition (Krenak, 2020, p. 16). Creative actions in the realm of the ordinary thus can tangibly inform responsible conduct. We illuminate everyday creativity within the realm of embodied activity and contingent relationships understood by Montuori and Pursuer (1997) and Glăveanu (2016, p. 520) as part of the social turn. This socially obliged, culture-inclusive understanding of creativity is about building courage and momentum for diverging human actions from the relentless mantra for wealth accumulation and limited means-end schemas that exploit the natural world. The price of modernity's is one of a narrowing perspective that drives the Global North further out of touch with reality and questions the notion of radical human adaptation. As acknowledged in those 1968 discussions, "we actually are much less well off than the Kalahari

Bushmen in relationship to our environment, and this relationship will determine our survival" (Bateson, 1972, p. 55). It is a call to explore every means possible to enrich the world's intelligibility by supporting diversity and new patterns of organization. Here the role of creativity advocates for equality in its relationships, a deeply embedded position in the social and natural worlds (Montuori, 1998).

An intergenerational bridge with Bateson's 1968 conference on human adaptation can affirm our coalition toward a shared, critical dialogue with each other that reasserts our extended metaphor: the future is not for sale. A pause to sincerely reconsider the idea of a preferred condition (Fuller, 2008) within which tomorrow's business becomes everybody's concern. We can no longer accept the status quo unthinkingly; there is an urgent need to move from a knowledge economy based on what we can do to a wisdom economy based on what we ought to do (Walker, 2013). Adapting to new responsibility toward long-term logics of thriving for all, rather than the short-term logic of profits for few. This reframing proposes an infinite re-composition of life (Weber & Kurt, 2016) that keeps human activity focused on the mental image of a living reality. The current living conditions require evaluating the underlying essence of our existence to reconstruct our relationships with technology, economy, or ecology (Weber & Kurt, 2016) beyond the status and language of "user" (Subrahmanian et al., 2020).

Practices of (Re)Making Intergenerational Ecologies

As design researchers, we seek to reclaim the creative process and design for alternative world-making purposes by translating human value into tangible, possibility – opening occasions and practices. Notably, we believe that the materials involved cannot be separated from the hands that create or the minds that envision. In other words, materials and bodies are not siloed themes or static matter but part and parcel of intricately interlinked developments in person, society, and Earth. In our design practices, we investigate and instigate the possibility of aliveness situated in the here-and-now. Attaining the mastery of material skills involves the maker and her community in a delicate, experiential balance of immersion that is mutually transformative and revelatory for all involved.

Britta uses artful and performative methods, such as storytelling and sensory cartography, to explore haptic and somatic-experiential dynamics of the body as a tool for relearning how to register, become sensitive to, and be affected by the outside world. Hands immersed together in indigo dye baths become symbolic of social bonding. In Bali, Indonesia, with Tiantaru and Pagi Motley, experts of Indigo, her experimental study is narrating alongside a group of eclectic participants. Markus addresses the lack of bio-ecological integration in our current householding arrangements

implemented in the hyper-dense, urban context. His research borrows from age-old agroecological traditions of Tanka (蜑家) and Hakka (客家) people around Hong Kong's Pearl River Delta (粤江平原) for reactivating the social and regenerative potential of the shared metabolism. The proposition of his urban ecology adventures entails upskilling, craftivism, and rediscovery inside the ordinary. In the bokashi "soil-building craft", the microbial interaction between the person's skin and the enzymic life of rice bran (米糠) and bamboo rhizome (竹根) leads physically and metaphorically to mutually contamination coalitions all entities involved, humans or not, equally influence the outcome. Microbially super-charging rice bran entails kneading bamboo mycelium into it, a process that exposes delightful ethereal qualities, honey-sweet odors, and a silky touch.

Both researchers engage with research practices where "the world and its inhabitants, human and nonhuman, are our teachers, mentors and interlocutors" (Ingold, 2011, p. 238). Both authors create collaborative, social learning experiments that foster dialogical and tangible contexts described by Suzi Gablik (1991, p. 74) as "connective aesthetics." These connective practices are conducive to unprecedented opportunities for exploration, reflection, intuition, and imagination, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Fermentation as a mutually transformative process and design method open understanding and possibilities on a deeper level, where the relationships between generations, place, and ecology all come together, a process of becoming. In cultivating coevolution awareness practices, the sensory qualities of knowing with our hands and bodies always remain pertinent to constituting the human. Here, physical activity, along the cultural connotations related to materials involved, need to be considered in tandem with (virtual) technologies that increasingly govern daily life and society. In this perspective, we all are co-designing participants in a 14-billion-year process of the universe that becomes conscious of itself (Swimme and Tucker, 2011, p. 77–81). Creating for us is not about fortifying the lines of defence for the end-times but adapting, in modesty and measured courage, to ensure the collective thriving of tomorrow. This social creativity translates into the "emerging synthesis of artist, inventor, mechanic, objective economist and evolutionary strategist" (Fuller, 2008, p. 176) that demands the radical inclusion of otherness across hierarchical, geographic, and spatial boundaries.

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Figure 1. Manifesting connective practices. The photographs on the left side feature a research workshop held with Tiantaru (Indigo visionary) and Pagi Motley (Indigo experts) in Bali, Indonesia. The images also feature environmental activist Liina Klauss who participated in the study. The photographs on the right show a collective bokashi research session at the University of Hong Kong's rooftop garden organized with permaculture practitioners Six Hang and Wanho Tam. Both works created under International Creative Commons License (CCO) for the purpose of sharing research in the public domain.

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