

The Visitor's Hut: An Integrative Methodology

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Britta Boyer

Loughborough University

International collaborative projects can export inequalities and power dynamics across borders. The Visitor's Hut offers transformative possibilities in knowledge recovery that advance other ways of knowing through its active, other-seeking dialogic approach. Visiting prioritizes more equitable and community-grounded ways to mitigate power imbalances in international design research, where the methodology can become the site for repair by negotiating and translating, through design. In this paper, I showcase the methodology, first theorized in my PhD thesis and further put into practice through research on weaving ecologies in Myanmar, illustrating how knowledge is dynamic, created alongside others in a shared third space between cultures, languages, and people. This ongoing decolonization discussion invites us, as academic researchers, scholars, and practitioners, to actively reflect upon 'me', 'us', and 'them' within different temporal dimensions, remote relations, and the increasing use of technology.

Keywords

decolonizing design

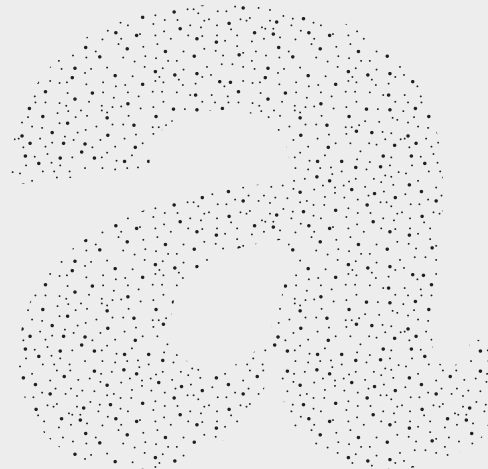
community-based action research

nomadic intersubjectivity

visiting

radical ethics

Britta Boyer—Visiting scholar at the Institute for Design Innovation at Loughborough University London. Ph.D. in Design Innovation, Loughborough University London. She completed a BA in Fashion Design at Central St. Martins and, after a twenty-year career in the fashion industry, she pursued an MA in Sustainable Design at the University of Brighton. Her research develops upon a decolonial aesthetic informed by design anthropology and critical thought, exploring social change's ethical and artistic dimension through cultural relocations and multi-perspective storytelling. She specializes in methods of change that foster freedom and equality by readdressing the balance of power through multisensory and participatory ethnography. Some of her latest publications include "Breathful' Design in Breathless Times" (co-authored with M. Wernli; *Strategic Design Research Journal*, Vol. 14, Issue 1); "Our Own Metaphor: Tomorrow is Not for Sale" (with M. Wernli, M. Koria, and L. Santamaria; *World Futures*, Vol. 78, Issue 8); and "The Story of 'The Spirit of the Hibiscus': World-making Activities from Bali" (*Pivot 2020*). She received the Whistles New Designer of the Year Award, the IDEA Award, and the Barker Brown Creative Industry Award.



The Visitor's Hut: An Integrative Methodology

Britta Boyer

Loughborough University
Institute for Design Innovation
London, United Kingdom
b.boyer@lboro.ac.uk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4051-5231>

INTRODUCTION: CHALLENGES AND TRANSFORMATIVE POSSIBILITIES IN KNOWLEDGE RECOVERY

An ongoing challenge in the field of design research is the need to push beyond standard methodologies to create more inclusive knowledge ecologies. Some methodological choices may not always do enough to ensure that design research is profoundly ethical, meaningful, or valuable for the individual or community being researched (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 223). The Visitor's Hut is an active, other-seeking, dialogical research methodology that requires a commitment to self-awareness and attunement to the relationships inherent in knowledge recovery processes as well as a willingness for unsettling deep-rooted systemic discriminations. This research paper aims to discuss both the challenges and transformative possibilities of the Visitor's Hut methodology and its nine principles, to explore how 'doing enough' translates in this community-based action research project.

The paper starts by exploring the non-western context in which the methodology was initially theorized through my doctoral thesis, *Many Worlds Meeting* (Boyer, 2022). This is followed by a short explanation of the nine interconnected theoretical concepts that make up the Visitor's Hut critical prompts in no specific order, that can be applied to design research. I then turn to experimental evidence and practical application in a project titled 'Weaving Ecologies: Stories of Material Culture and Community from Myanmar'. I briefly explain the generative methods and how the research project was extended through a series of design conversations with Central St Martins' (UAL) MA Regenerative Design program (MARD) and a small multi-located student cohort, over a two-month period. These guided conversations testified to the potential for alternative narratives that challenge established norms, even when working remotely. Integral to this approach is to make connections between context, framing, positionality, perspectives, worldview, and associated design activity to facilitate the conditions for decolonization. This will be further discussed throughout the paper.

MANY WORLDS MEETING: A THEORY-BUILDING APPROACH TO VISITING

1 By exploring unsettling, we return to the foundational cracks themselves. I acknowledge citing work in my thesis that now troubles me, and listening to the “whisper network” (Viaene et al., 2023, p. 209). Like others working in the space of decolonization, I self-reflect on my feelings of “frustration, doubts, hopelessness, anger” (Suzina, 2023) and wonder if this footnote can keep the whispers alive and amplified for the purpose of continued collective healing. For me, the point of mentioning this is to extract meaning from those cracks, to make something out of them by designing inclusive academic environments that address and mitigate power dynamics. As Bayo Akomolafe (2024) offers on the matter of cracks, “something about ‘them’ marks deterritorializing tensions” through which oblique traces of new realities may emerge.

The methodological approach of The Visitor’s Hut is built on the combination of fieldwork, bottom-up narratives, theoretical foundations,¹ and my own living experiences of mobility, which resulted in self-search, self-discovery, deep listening, reciprocity, and sensitivity to inter-cultural relations. Although I write from a privileged nomadic transnational perspective, much of my background has positioned me as disadvantaged and this has fluctuated throughout the course of my life. At times, a lack of rootedness has resulted in an existential-ontological basis to the processes (Madison, 2006) of unsettling and living as a nomadic subject: this dislocation required the suspension of my own paradigm of truth (Hirmer, 2023) for the purpose of connection. However, it is important to note that not all ‘nomads’ are world travelers; significant journeys can occur within one’s own mind. In essence, a ‘nomadic state’ (Braidotti, 1994, p. 17) is an ability for transposition, to be able to subvert established norms, not merely in physical travel. In summary, *Many Worlds Meeting* mobilized Rosi Braidotti’s nomadic subject (1994) to expand the understanding of the ethical and artistic dimensions of social change through cultural relocations and the multi-perspective storytelling of transnational designers in Bali. This included my own auto-ethnographic lens of lifelong relations with Indonesia, the wider Southeast Asian context, and Bali itself as a complex ethnocultural positioning that encompasses a multi-located upbringing, diverse lifestyle, and a view of knowledge ecologies based on movement rather than stasis. Bali represents a place of both becoming and unbecoming: a receptiveness to alternative modes of being. I navigated a career in the fashion industry over an eighteen-year period living in Bali and eventually moved beyond fashion-related activity towards the deeper relational connections between people and their environment (Williams, 2018). Industry and living experiences influenced my practice, leading to what Dilys Williams describes as “a revision of [my own] fashion design practices, techniques, and—critically—outcomes, while drawing on fashion’s creative, practical, and communicative elements” (2018, p. 78). Reflective practice and living change in this way help develop critical consciousness beyond consumer culture, favoring exchanges that place environmental and social responsibility directly into design work.

In relation to my study findings, Bali provided an intensification of material experiences where designers—in the study—spoke through differing language, a tipping point that led to changes in their practice, beyond industrial definitions of design. This corresponded to an unsettling that could be understood as pattern interruption contesting Western cultural norms, described by study participants as “unworkable systems such as colonialism, racism, violence, and corporate monopolies (...) structures (...) lifestyles (...) jobs (...) people (...)

cultural mixed messages and gender inequalities” (Boyer, 2022, p. 143-144). Elsewhere in the design literature, unsettlement is described as both homelessness and nomadism (Willis, 2022). Willis (2022) posits the question of what is then important about the term ‘unsettlement’ and what, affirmatively, can be made in/from/with it?

The specific concept of a ‘Visitor’s Hut’ emerged during a life story interview with one of the research participants. He described traveling for his work as a critical filmmaker and coming upon Visitor’s Huts in West Papua: informal cultural and communal spaces in the region. The participant described this as a shared third space between cultures, languages, and people, where ideas and experiences are exchanged. This is akin to Homi Bhabha’s concept of the ‘third space’ (2004, p. 56), which stresses the importance of ‘inter’ as a communal space of translation and negotiation (2004, p. 55). This space enjoys autonomy from the binaries that Dewey (1997) labeled as an ‘either/or’ thinking—a type of thinking that is unable to recognize any intermediate possibilities of the ‘between’. However, it is less about the occupation of structures already built in the literal sense and more about being open to the immersion in currents of the lifeworld, without which activities such as designing could not take place (Ingold, 2011). Design, in this sense, becomes a social practice of immersion, visiting specific relational contexts and materiality, enabling us to feel our ‘other’ within (Braidotti, 2014) and emerge as the others of ourselves (Bhaba, 2004, p. 56), as principled design researchers.

A SHARED THIRD SPACE BETWEEN CULTURES, LANGUAGES, AND PEOPLE

Visiting is an approach that fosters recognition of the ethical imperatives of design research, given the increased interconnectedness between the movement of people, ideas, and cultures. Elsewhere in literature, visiting is “an indigenous feminist practice and a way to develop and sustain relationships (...) through accountability, vulnerability, and mutuality” (Tuck et al., 2023). This becomes a methodology where researchers gain insights into the lived experiences of others by recognizing the complexities of their worlds and the way cultural values can impact the design process. Thus, the methodology acts as a reminder to create conditions for radical inclusion. For example, a healthy political ecology (Ingold, 2005) is essential when working remotely and when one is dependent on technologies to provide technical support to ensure participation of the marginalized, in addition to the researchers’ need to be receptive to alternative modes of existence (Hirmer, 2023). It is the researcher’s responsibility to apprehend the meaning of things from a participant’s perspective, and allow for their ongoing life. Clark Moustakas (1990) describes this as a way of being informed; a way of knowing by deepening knowledge of the phenomenon and accommodating the struggle, defeat, and closure (Ingold,

2005, p. 503) when dealing with temporalities, remote relations, and technology.

The next section discusses how to operationalize the integrative methodology and its nine critical principles through the lens of a nomadic subject, while acknowledging the mutual construction of reality that moves away from individualistic viewpoints. In the context of design research, this perspective shifts the focus from isolated objects or individuals to the complex networks of interactions that shape socio-cultural contexts.

THE VISITOR'S HUT: AN INTEGRATIVE METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach of the nine principles, depicted in Figure 1, embraces difference, diversity, and hybridity as sources of creativity and resilience (Boyer, 2022; Braidotti, 1994, 2014). It is an immersive dwelling² perspective that Tim Ingold (2005, p. 501, 2011) describes as cultivating in-depth change by becoming aware of our own situatedness within broader socio-political contexts, whilst simultaneously valuing the diverse perspectives and experiences of others. The practical application of such radical ethics has the potential to create cultures of repair through presence and shared livelihoods, while acknowledging that human lives are lived collectively, within fields of power, and within multiple realities. This inter-epistemic positioning can be understood as an attunement to other ways of knowing through deep reflexivity and willingness to unsettle our own inherent biases, assumptions, and the power dynamics that shape research processes.

² In 14th century Old French, 'conversacion' was a "place where one lives or dwells (...) [and] general course of actions or habits, manner of conducting oneself in the world" ("Conversation: Etymology of Conversation," n.d.).



Figure 1: The Nine Principles of the Visitor's Hut. Source: Boyer 2022, p. 55. Credits: Graphic translations by Issy Cheung & Britta Boyer.

This approach is not just a theoretical stance, but a practical commitment to making each participant feel valued and integral to the research process. This includes sensitivity to language by valuing diverse linguistic backgrounds and legitimizing other forms of knowledge. Equally, researchers are thinking-feeling persons (Fals Borda, 1999, p. 22), and one is always translating the language of the other, which inevitably becomes a limitation. Integrating the nine principles facilitates a criticality that allows to evaluate information and develop multimodal literacy by using a variety of means of expression such as images, text, and sounds. The results speak to the final, and perhaps most important point in this section: the principle of 'openness to unplanned effects'. This raises Willis' (2022) question of what can affirmatively be made from 'unsettlement'. It results in a position change that allows for meaning-making to happen within qualitative relations, to have space for emergence and discovery beyond preconceived notions. Ultimately, it is the route to conflict transformation, as it cultivates plurality by fostering inclusive knowledge ecologies.

WEAVING ECOLOGIES: STORIES OF MATERIAL CULTURE AND COMMUNITY FROM MYANMAR

Weaving requires navigating tensions that are translated into this project as decolonization and strategic subversion of a colonial form through the Visitor's Hut principles, which were incorporated into the proposal. The proposal's acceptance was based on a decolonizing research approach that centered marginalized weaving voices; however, once we were up and running, this continual re-centering created resistance within the relational process that couldn't be reconciled. On the surface our proposal made sense, yet the structural inequalities within the social enterprise where my co-collaborator worked led to misunderstandings. My insistence on empowering my Burmese co-collaborator (named on the paperwork) to dispel structural biases initially led to challenges between us for differing reasons. I was a remotely located, UK-based, decolonizing design researcher with socially driven interests in the material practices of weavers; and my Burmese co-collaborator worked in the UK-owned organization (a social enterprise), struggling to survive the military coup and its financial impact on their business. The differing realities between us resulted in conflicting motivations and gate-keeping that hindered dialogical opportunities and affected decision-making. The lack of proximity, and being unable to meet face-to-face, may also have contributed to the inability to fully develop trust and project alignment.

The preceding account is my own perspective, informed by setting up and co-leading the project and the subsequent partnering with Central St Martins' MA Regenerative Design (UAL) program (MARD) to facilitate design conversations.

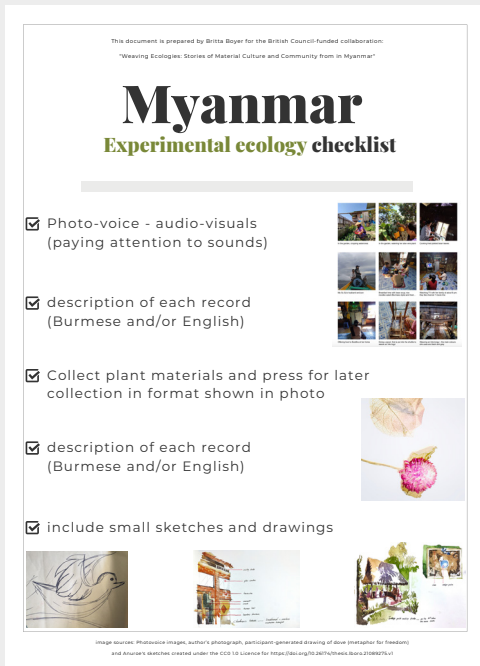


Figure 2: Methodological instruction for the project: 'Weaving Ecologies: Stories of Material Culture and Community from Myanmar'. Source: Boyer, 2024c. Credits: PDF created by Dr Britta Boyer under a Creative Commons cco 1.0 Universal license.

I guided the collaboration to be set up as a participatory design project under a Creative Commons CCO 1.0 Universal license agreement, that was operationalized through the Visitor's Hut principles: a multi-modal approach using creative arts practices (CAPS) that included photovoice, artists' sketches, and audio-visuals to foster language equity. Photovoice visual instructions can be seen in Figure 2, which includes examples from my previous research. This transparency and reflection are not meant to diminish collaboration, but rather to make explicit the level of rigor of the project and subsequent archive. As a social enterprise, the co-collaborators were seeking ways for the project to become generative, and we couldn't agree on what that looked like. My anthropological design lens was pushing to foster cultural capital that could empower the indigenous communities we invited to the project. However, Tuck et al., (2023), remind us that visiting may not always be a welcomed activity.

Alongside regular meetings and updates with my co-collaborators in Myanmar, I invited Judith Van Den Boom, MA Regenerative Design (UAL) course leader, and four multi-located practitioner MA students: Aly, Bruna, Francesca, and Karoline (situated in Brazil, Bali, Denmark and the UK respectively), to engage through the lens of the Visitor's Hut. Through weekly meetings over a two-month period, we 'dwelled-with' the project materials and each other, creating a virtual studio space (a Miro board) as an accessible forum that enabled our communications and engagement with the nine principles. We reflected upon reciprocity and intercultural exchange and questioned what 'design' meant in this context, while receiving photovoice materials throughout. On several occasions, the Myanmar co-collaborators joined the conversations as we tried navigating inter-epistemic exchanges and the concern for mitigating inequalities that can be reinforced while working with remote communities, especially as we could not have direct access to the extended communities. This provided further reasons for our radical ethics and a dialogical approach, to place emphasis on the contextualization and setting of tone, stressing language and translations whilst being open to the direction that naturally unfolded. Judith described the process as "placing the dialogue at the center of the research (...) even when the dialogues are not complete or fully understood, they can still stimulate processes and entry points to engage or raise awareness."

More importantly, it instilled a deliberate slowness—that we felt frustrated our Myanmar co-collaborators—to the design process; we kept focus on the worldview brought to the project. For example, Aly reflected on how "the role of a designer can be met with some perceived superiority and dominance in

the Global North (...) I have been educated to ideate and then specify and instruct others to create a product." She then observed that our virtual studio space, where principles and materials were explored, led to a "practice of patience and listening to conversations, and respecting and reflecting on the needs of others." The photovoice method provided a way to 'dwell with' the local perspective of those situated in Myanmar, by creating proximity to and inter-epistemic exchange with the expertise of the community practices. This was an alternative to institutional knowledge-based understandings and allowed for a plurality that guided our virtual studio space. Despite my co-collaborators in Myanmar not fully understanding how essential this bridge was to their worlds, the impact was clear through Aly's reflection on

the need to be visible; to be valued and have a life of meaning and significance on your own terms; to be understood and humanized. I could see and feel the lives of the women by their participation and through what they chose to share—the aspects of their lives that they are proud of.

Engaging the guiding principles of the Visitor's Hut was especially important as the student cohort was unfamiliar with some of the decolonial concepts. It provided us with an opportunity to be "humble learners seeking good relationships with all beings, in all of our practices and relating" (Tuck et al., 2023, p. 154); however, it often felt that the reflection and remote visiting was a one-way process. Aly once again reflected how it "shift[ed] away from my unwanted and unneeded colonial perspective and preconceived ideas and presumptions of what the needs of the community might be—or even what I thought it should be." Ma Su Su, one of the photovoice participants, showed her daily activities as a keen gardener (Figure 3), aside from weaving traditional Inle Longyies. Figure 4 shows plant specimens

Figures 3 and 4: 'Weaving Ecologies: Stories of Material Culture and Community from Myanmar', created under a Creative Commons cco 1.0 Universal license. Sources: (3) Boyer, 2024b; (4) Boyer, 2024e. Credits: (3) Photovoice by Ma Su Su; (4) Plant specimens collected by Ma Su Su, translated by Khin Lin Naing, and graphic translated by Issy Cheung & Britta Boyer.



1. Mango flowers & leaves 2. Arrowhead vine 3. Indian almond leaves 4. Mustard 5. Strawberry
6. Aloe vera 8. Curry leaf 9. Salitetrasperma flowers

submitted by Ma Su Su from her garden with hand-written descriptions, which we translated into graphics in both English and Burmese languages. This represented her in the way that she wanted to be represented, telling a story on her terms.

This level of remoteness and visiting from afar meant we were acutely aware of the potential for cultural appropriation of the textile design images we received from the remote communities, and we collectively rebelled against the conventionalities of design by committing to an active production of alternatives. This unconventional reflection and storytelling centralized participant voices as best as we could, not forgetting our privileged design school positions, by continuously questioning who benefits from such a project. It became apparent that mere dialogue was not enough—it tends to privilege those already privileged, especially when there are clear access limitations. One response to the photovoice was Francesca's translations of the value of our exchanges that depicted sharing the embodied experiences (of the photovoice weavers) by experimenting with Myanmar plant materials (that had been sent to us).

Figures 5 and 6: 'Weaving Ecologies: Stories of Material Culture and Community from Myanmar', created under a Creative Commons cco 1.0 Universal license. Sources: (5) www.brittabooyer.com; (6) Boyer, 2024d. Credits: (5) Poetic subjectivity of Francesca Baur: experiments with cactus, lotus, and banana fiber; (6) Bruna Cerasi's template for reciprocity with Myanmar photovoice participants.



Madder Experiments with Banana, Cacti and Lotus fibres

I harvested a crop of Madder from my dye garden. After 3 years of growth the roots are ready to use as a dye.

The fibres took the dye well with variations in colour for each plant fibre.

1. Cactus fibre- Pink tones
2. Lotus fibre- Red tones
3. Banana fibre- Orange tones

Researcher - Francesca Baur
@fableandbase @kent_cloth

SHARING

Individual Sharing

MY NAME GOES HERE

<i>Ritual 1:</i>		<i>Ritual 2:</i>	
How do I call this ritual? How do I describe this ritual? <i>How often does it happen?</i> <i>What does it say about me?</i>		How do I call this ritual? How do I describe this ritual? <i>How often does it happen?</i> <i>What does it say about me?</i>	
picture goes here	picture goes here	picture goes here	picture goes here
picture goes here	picture goes here	picture goes here	picture goes here

Weaving Materials and Resources close to me:

picture goes here	picture goes here	picture goes here	picture goes here
What is it called? <i>How can I use it?</i>	What is it called? <i>How can I use it?</i>	What is it called? <i>How can I use it?</i>	What is it called? <i>How can I use it?</i>

This reciprocity, experienced while dyeing plants from her own garden (Figure 5), holds the emotional undertones of subjective poetry and subverts the incomplete perspective of objective science (Weber, 2019). We were never sure if the photovoice participants had been made aware of our responses. As stated by Bruna, design actions, of heart and head, were a

way of exchanging with the [remote] community something from our lives and routines (...) the importance of sharing with the Myanmar community our rituals and materials was to make the creative process more collaborative, and engage them in their storytelling while we tell them our ritual stories.

3 During the writing process, I learned from Arturo Escobar about an alternative to *sentipensar*, "acting with the heart using the head" (Botero, 2019, p. 302), which he described as "sentipensaractuar (...) used with movements in Colombia" (A. Escobar, personal communication, March 14, 2024). There was insufficient time to unpack this concept and develop understanding, but it felt important to acknowledge this 'not knowing', and ponder on how it may relate to the nomadic subjectivity of this paper.

The 'sharing ritual structure', depicted in Figure 6, is perhaps an example of the *sentipensaractuar* that Arturo Escobar described (personal communication, March 14, 2024). This version of *sentipensar*³ stays true to Fals Borda's (1999) participatory action research (PAR), centering feeling-thinking-doing in an integrated way, without separating mind, body, reasoning, and emotion (Escobar, 2016, p. 14). Bruna's cosmological influences from her native Brazil would allow for the embodiment of such a concept. It really pushes against the conventional establishment, empowering participants to generate new knowledge through inclusivity and reflexivity instead. From that perspective, I think the project fell short of fully engaging the

remote community, resulting in their unequal capacity for decision-making, which fell to the more dominant collaborators. However, this incompleteness can inform future projects and invite other design practitioners and researchers to contribute to the ongoing process of defining the Visitor's Hut through their (your) own social practices. Aly's reflection encapsulates the relationality inherent in the process, as she describes it as "different to how I have been trained to do initial research. This gave me space to slow down and take my beliefs out of the forefront, which felt positively disruptive and more connective and humanizing".

CONCLUSION: AN ACTIVE PRODUCTION OF ALTERNATIVES

This paper concludes with a note on how the resulting archive embodies the rebellion and vision of the feminist project through the translatable methodology of the Visitor's Hut. Remote visiting becomes the ultimate act of hope by accommodating the struggle and recentering the perspectives of marginalized weaving communities, amplifying their voices so that their stories can be thought and felt beyond the dominant narratives of civil unrest and armed conflict. It also moves

Figure 7: Opening page of the digital archive for 'Weaving Ecologies: Stories of Material Culture and Community from Myanmar', created under a Creative Commons cco 1.0 Universal license. Source: Boyer, 2024a. Credit: Digital archive by Britta Boyer.



beyond the problematics of fashion's 'responsible exiting' of Myanmar due to an increase in reported allegations of gender-based violence and worker abuse under military rule (Business & Human Rights Centre, 2023).

My final reflection on weaving through the tensions is that we all participated in conflict transformation by weaving alternatives such as the digital archive, which grants ongoing life to (all) weavers. Equally, the Visitor's Hut may continue to act as a guiding set of principles for engaging in practical and effective approaches to prioritize decolonization and foster radical ethics through its invitation. It can continue to shape a theory-building decolonizing design research perspective by inviting people(s) to define their own experiences and advocate for their own needs and interests, adding to multi-modal literacies through contextualization. Thus, design actions become an act of rebellion that weaves alternative, culturally relevant stories and processes that may not typically find a place in conventional design projects or sustainability narratives.

The resulting archiving of the full six-month project, seen on its opening page (Figure 7), underscores the active production of alternatives that continues to unfold by inviting connection, engagement, and visiting locally situated, differently located perspectives.⁴ The archiving process required meticulous labeling, attribution, and documentation, to counteract the potential for distorted altruism that can occur by romanticizing Indigenous communities. When providing the context to all materials and processes, the aim was to stay true to the *sentipensar* that Fals Borda (1984) imagined (and is one of the guiding principles of visiting), to empower participants during the research process to generate new knowledge by representing their own processes, realities, challenges, and aspirations, thereby demonstrating real-world impact through the simple act of caring to be principled. If ever there was a time to care, in design, it is now. **D**

4 See "Complex Textile Systems" at www.brittaboyer.com

Acknowledgments

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