

# Ancestors' Dreams: Transitioning to a More Equitable Post- COVID-19 Economy

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**Abstract:** One of the areas of co-evolving knowledge and skill-sets in the Transition Design framework is visioning. Through visioning, transition designers can set an ideal state—one to which they hope to transition. However, if the role of visioning is to allow us to shift our trajectories toward ideal futures, then those futures must include often excluded individuals and people groups.

Historically, visioning has been a difficult process for Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) communities because they often struggle to see their hopes and dreams represented in the version of the world that the visions depict. The challenge raises questions around representation: how do we ensure that visioning exercises allow for a multiplicity of lived experiences?

This paper outlines a series of transition design workshops conducted with BIPOC community leaders in the greater Seattle area in the U.S. The project, which was funded in part by the city of Seattle, included a mapping of the regenerative economy as a transition problem to include often unheard voices. It culminated with a collective visioning through a regenerative future gallery walk and an establishment of communities of practices around the core intervention points highlighted in the sessions. This paper summarizes how the challenges and key considerations from these workshops may have future implications on the transition design framework. Further, it argues that for us to shift paradigms as we emerge from the COVID-19 global pandemic, our preferred futures must make space for the hopes and dreams of those who are often left out of the conversation.

**Keywords:** Transition Design - Futures - Pluriverse - Equity - Regenerative economy - Alternative economics

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## Introduction

Ibi kan soṣo kọ́ la ti ní ọ̀run. / The sky is not seen from only one single spot.  
[Alternative approaches exist; there are many ways to achieve a goal: do not be fixated on one.]—Yoruba Proverb

Transition Design exists at the end of a continuum of design approaches, where speculative, long-term visions of sustainable futures fundamentally change existing paradigms and enkindle short- and mid-term solutions (Irwin, 2015). The framework proposes four critical areas of inquiry and action that allow the practitioner to engage with socioeconomic, cultural, and natural systems: new ways of designing; theories of change; posture and mindset; and visioning (Irwin, 2015, p. 232). At the tail end of that design continuum (because of its orientation toward the future), visioning allows transition designers to set an ideal state and work their way back to how that future might influence the present, while addressing essential milestones along the way. Traditionally, visioning has been a critical part of most systemic design and strategic planning processes within organizations. More specifically, governments, companies, and non-profit entities have utilized visioning as part of their problem-solving process through different forms of design and speculation. For example, the Royal Dutch Shell used scenario planning in the 1970s to predict the future competitive landscape and see how the company might perform with rivals in the future. Here, they modeled alternative, near-future global situations to predict the possible impact of changing political paradigms (Dunne & Raby, 2013). When faced with the challenge of determining the post-WWII projects to fund, the US Department of Defense (DoD) employed scenario planning to “capture consensus of information” and arrive at a degree of certainty. They used a combination of facts and logic to apply a methodology based more on “wishful thinking” rather than “reasonable expectations” (Bradfield *et al.*, 2005). However, these future casting methods, including those used by the DoD, are markedly different from the vision stage of Transition Design. One distinction is that transition designers not only engage stakeholders in the process of visioning

but also work with them to ensure that these futures are sustainable, inclusive, equitable, and desirable. Here, the scale and scope of this endeavor both highlight the importance of exploring stakeholder boundaries. Additionally, Transition Design also localizes visioning to the scale of the everyday (Irwin, 2015). At this scale, creative communities (being localized, small, connected, open, and inclusive) challenge the traditional ways of doing things (Manzini, 2013; Sachs, 1999, Tonkinwise, 2015; Kossoff, 2018). Moreover, to connect to pluriversal narratives that promote interdependence, transition designers must be clear about the futures they bear the risk of omitting as well as pasts they might erase. The focus here is to drive toward clarity over certainty. Thus, they must work alongside their stakeholders to “deal with questions of vision, futures, and how they relate to the present,” and they must continue to expand the vocabulary of visioning to ensure that “new ways of doing and seeing go hand in hand” (Lockton & Candy, 2019).

## **But, Whose Future is it Anyway?**

### ***Omitting Futures***

Many in the discourse have long contended that design is synonymous with future-making. These academics and practitioners see design as a pan-disciplinary framework that leverages the social to create possibilities (Yelavich & Adams, 2014), or a multiplicity of situated practices revealed in heterogeneous communities and with marginalized publics (Ehn *et al.*, 2014, p. 392), or a space where new ideas and ideals are explored to provide alternate context to a future that is driven entirely by market forces (Dunne & Raby, 2013). These conceptual approaches highlight the role of belongingness as important and raise the following questions: Who gets to participate in this world-making to which design is so entangled? How might orienting toward the future cause a designer to shift trajectories toward a different kind of ideal? Moreover, if designers are creators of possibilities that presume a future and suggest a way to live (Onafuwa, 2018), they must occupy “the dialectical space” between how the world is and where it could be (Margolin, 2007). Designers have traditionally been seen to operate in this middle ground. In other words, they comfortably oscillate between planning the present and the future outcomes they want to influence.

As several perspectives from the Global South (Schultz *et al.*, 2018; Ansari, 2019) highlight, the future presented in the dominant design paradigm has systematically erased (and continues to erase) subaltern knowledge and expertise. The narratives of the dominant design tradition prop up design as follows: a disembodied activity comprising of universal subjects (Herbert Simon); an individualized discipline that comprises of reflecting and acting (Donald Schön); even a solution-oriented practice that emphasizes politics of action that sometimes require technological solutions (DiSalvo). However, it fails to describe design as correcting past narratives (Rosner, 2018). Moreover, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC) communities struggled with seeing their

hopes and dreams represented in societal visions since they had (and still have) to fight a system that has consistently oppressed them for histories. It seemed like, during the pandemic, these communities were dealing with challenges on multiple fronts –from social injustices and the effects of structural racism to higher rates of diagnoses and deaths from COVID-19 (Millett *et al.*, 2020). In this context, we saw the spillover effects of the demand to be seen brewing in the streets all across the U.S. As a case in point, the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement served as a harbinger of the different movements that advocated for the lived experiences and futures of communities of color to be recognized, affirmed, and even sustained. For that to happen, assumptions had to be challenged, and historically excluded groups had to be empowered to reclaim the right to participate in remaking futures that acknowledge their right to exist.

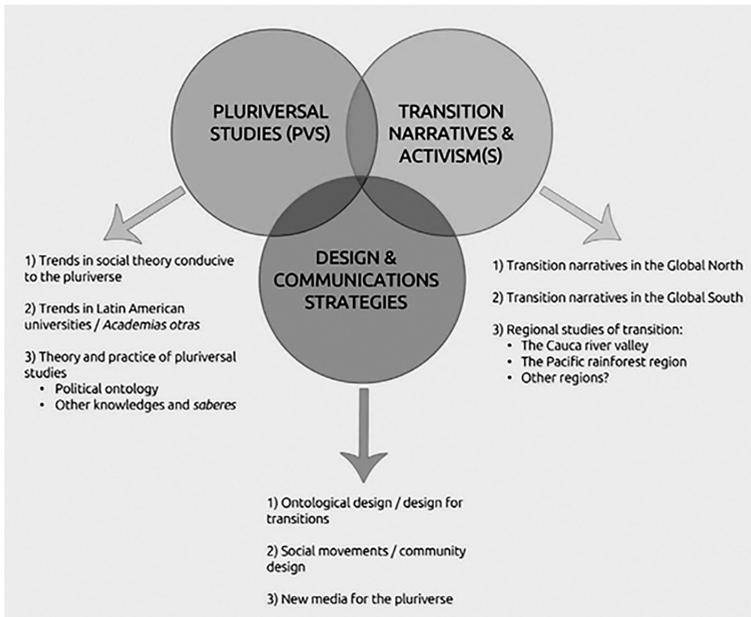
### ***Erasing Pasts***

Remaking futures requires an acknowledgment of the existence of multiple worlds (Escobar, 2018) and reclaiming narratives that have been ignored through the years (Rosner, 2018). Sankofa, one of the Adinkra symbols of the ancient Ashanti tribe in Ghana and Ivory Coast (West Africa), can be loosely translated to mean “go back and get.” Represented as a bird with its head facing backward, Sankofa is a rallying call to African descendants living in the continent and the diaspora to protect their ancestors’ dreams –histories and narratives of the past– and ensure that they are not left behind. Here, it is important to note that one must look back into the past to be able to determine visions for the future where they too can participate. Moreover, ensuring that visioning exercises allow for a multiplicity of lived experiences means that design, in its application, must be a “generative and just encounter” rather than one where only a few presume the future for others. To accomplish this, transition designers must commit to remaking the stories that we often “neglect to tell,” but that allow us to rework the margins of the discipline (Rosner 2018). Some of the stories needing to be told include those that reject the notion that the multiple identities of the Global South must be brought into the culturally dominant European traditions. It is a notion that falsely assumes that Europeans are the sole bearers of all that is new or modern. These histories are perpetuated in a neo-liberal culture that prioritizes economic growth over collective sustainment. However, we have the opportunity to tell a different story. We can carefully redefine what we mean by the term “modern” to include advancement of all that is new, rational, or scientific (Mignolo, 2007). This definition reveals a different path from the western dominance to one that reconnects us to those narratives that need to be rewritten.

### **Reconnecting to Histories**

The issue of rewriting narratives raises a challenging question about representation: How do we ensure that we include multiple lived experiences in the Transition Design process

and framework? Arturo Escobar’s *Transiciones* project intended to bridge that gap. Formed in 2013 as a research and design space in Cali, Colombia, *Transiciones* explored the intersections of contemporary ecological and social crises with theories and practices that advance transitions to the pluriverse (Escobar, 2015). According to Escobar, the pluriverse is a vision of the world that is patterned after “the autopoietic dynamics and creativity of the Earth” and the radical interdependence that keeps its inhabitants together (p. 14). Thus, *Transiciones* implied a paradigmatic shift out of epistemic and institutional boundaries to envision a world that engages the diverse histories and practices in the majority worlds. Further, Escobar also acknowledged that the boundaries of this form of ontological politics extend beyond the academy (p. 16). Additionally, we have seen different movements and initiatives emerge across the globe and in practice, including the Sawyer Seminar on “Indigenous Cosmopolitics: Dialogues about the Reconstitution of Worlds,” convened by Marisol de la Cadena and Mario Blaser at the University of California Davis. Thus, the three overlapping dimensions of *Transiciones* (pluriversal studies, transition(s) activism, and design and communications) are points of entry into engaging with the world. We also see those intersections of design, activism, and the pluriverse in practice, including the “Transition Design Mapping of the Extractive to Regenerative Economy,” conducted through the Peoples Economic Lab and funded by the City of Seattle’s Equitable Development Initiative, and which is the topic of this paper. In this context, we ran a series of workshops with BIPOC community leaders in the greater Seattle area in the U.S. (See Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** A Visual Representation of Arturo Escobar’s *Transiciones* Project (2015), Showing the Overlapping Areas of Practice and Pedagogy.

## The Workshop: Mapping the Extractive Economy

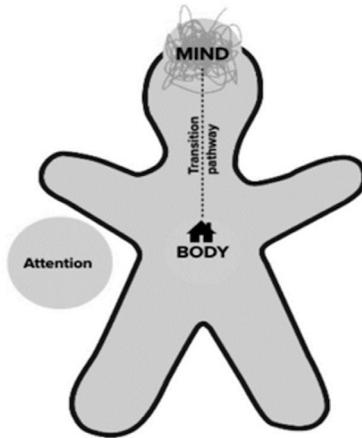
Transition designers orient toward local-level interventions. They intimate that the current capitalist-based extractive economy is unsustainable and propose a shift to local forms of engagement (Arnold Mages & Onafuwa, 2019). The Extractive Economy Mapping project started in Seattle, Washington, with that presumption. The objectives were to re-map a regenerative economy that includes historically excluded communities. Over fifteen community leaders attended. Their organizations included a Black-led neighborhood action coalition, a multicultural coalition serving East African and refugee communities, an Indigenous women action group, an African community housing and development group as well as community, labor, faith, immigrant, and refugee communities. The project culminated with a collective visioning activity through a regenerative future gallery walk and establishing communities of practices around the core intervention points highlighted in the sessions. The mapping workshops were conducted remotely from late 2020 to early 2021 (in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic) over six non-consecutive days. The City of Seattle's Equitable Development Initiative funded the project. The authors of this paper served as moderators and co-facilitated the sessions with members of the People's Economy Lab.

The authors began the workshop by articulating the process and agenda, using the Transition Design methodology and extending it to new approaches, mainly because most of the sessions were remote and in the middle of a pandemic. While participants contributed extensively to all the sessions, facilitators gave them the space to engage to the extent that their situation allowed them to do so. Some attendees had children to cater for, while others had pets, partners, and other distractions. At the beginning of the workshop, the facilitators established the remote meeting channel as a safe space and invited everyone to "come as they were." This mode of working affords a transition designer the posture they need to adopt when working with historically underrepresented groups.

### *Establishing the Problem Space*

The facilitators started by asking the participants to articulate their goals for the workshops. Some participants expressed the need to share ideas and best practices within their a. Others wanted to learn how to build stronger communities of practice that will work together on a common goal. Lastly, a few of the participants wanted to use the workshops as a benchmarking tool that helps them learn what others are doing to revisit their vision and have clarity on how to solve their organizational challenges.

The realities of the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the sessions were all held remotely. To ensure that participants felt physically and emotionally present, they went through a virtual somatic body check-in every day of the workshop. Each participant turned their cameras off on the virtual conference meeting and engaged in breathing exercises that were led by the facilitators (See *Figure 2*).



**Figure 2.** Illustration of the Somatic Body-Check in and Breathing Exercises.

### ***Day 1: Mapping the Problem***

The first workshop day saw a collective mapping of the local extractive economy in Seattle as a wicked problem. These issues are considered unsolvable due to their complexity and interconnectedness (Irwin, 2012). Participants worked across the five core categories: economic, technical, social, political/legal, and environmental. They started by working on an issue related to the problem in one of the five categories and then asking, “what are the connections and ramifications to other categories?” To do this, participants worked together to highlight primary root causes, secondary root causes, and consequences of such an economy. They worked quickly but thoroughly across each category. More specifically, when we considered each category, we worked closely together to understand how each of the primary and secondary root causes related to the core category. As the team worked on mapping the wicked problem, they began to see their different projects emerge at the intersections (See Figure 3).

# An extractive economy - Wicked Problem Map with interventions

Community root-cause analysis of an "Extractive Economy"

## Map Legend

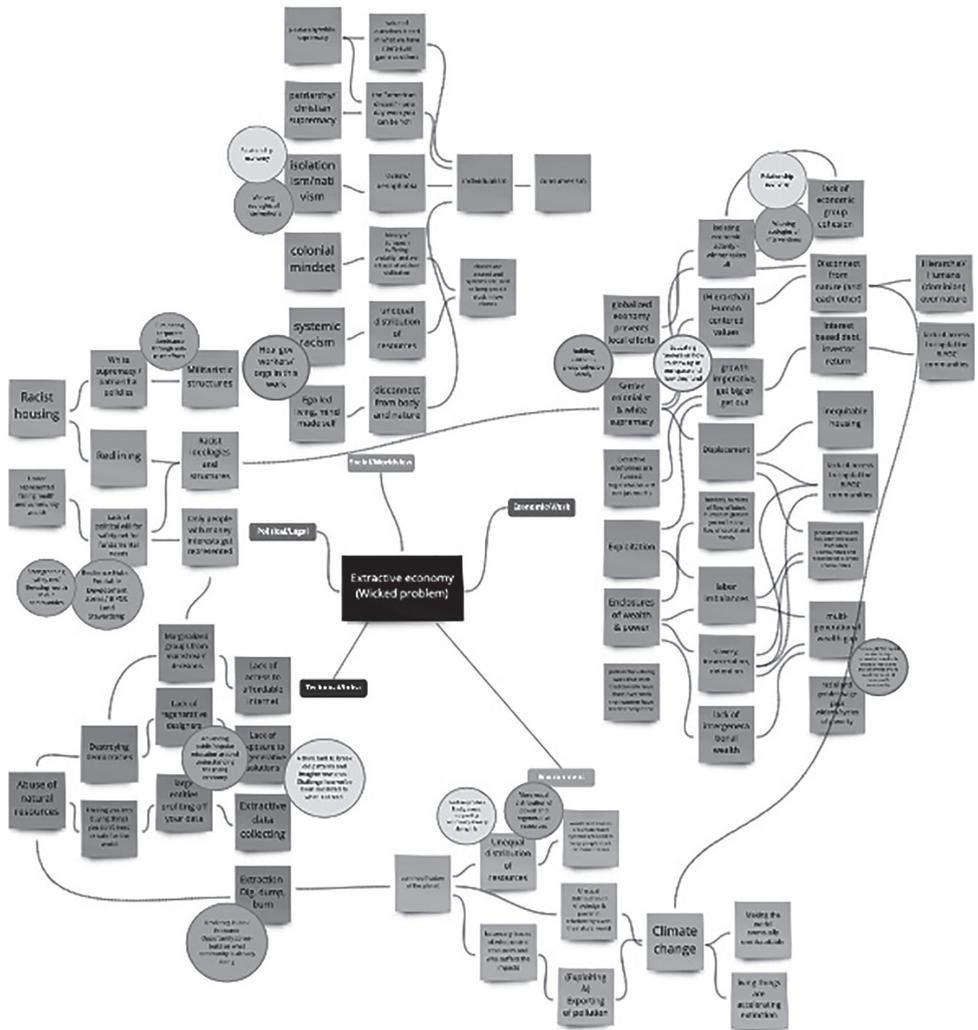
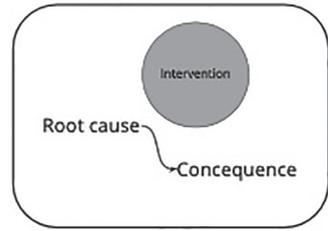


Figure 3. The Extractive Economy as a Wicked Problem as Mapped by Stakeholders from Fifteen BIPOC Communities in the city of Seattle: Identification of the Root Causes as well as the Consequences of the Identified Issues.

### ***Day 2: Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) and Two Futures***

The second day marked a collective activity around the creation of the CLA, which is a method that seeks to combine different learning modes across empirical, interpretative scales to arrive at alternative futures. The model consists of four levels of engagement: the litany, social causes, worldview, and myth/metaphor (Inayatullah, 2004). The CLA exercise was done with two futures (a utopian and a dystopian one) in mind. It allowed the participants to understand the scale of the issues that the group highlighted on day one and what the future would look like if those issues were resolved versus if they were not. The day's outcome was a CLA map that shows the hierarchies of the problem to be solved as well as the myths that perpetuate the status quo.

### ***Collective Visioning - Day 3: Narratives of the 'Not Seen Yet'***

On the third day, the team projected the stated wicked problem into the future by envisioning the long-term vision and brainstorming what transition might resemble. One of the facilitators (Jéhan Òsanyìn) served the role of a shaman and led the team through the collective visioning exercise, asking the group to collectively embody what the bodily experiences of future generations would look like and telling stories with images on a vision wall—a gallery of ancestors. Each participant had the space to tell their story of a future regenerative economy that included historically excluded voices. Some of the narratives that emerged from the gallery included ensuring that Indigenous communities are recognized, Black joy and the right to be present, community-owned infrastructure, systems that support Black businesses, and Latin community support and recognition. The team used the visions on the collective wall to draft a long-term vision statement. They also worked carefully together to situate the vision in an ideal future, and created milestones that would guide that shift to the present. Thus, the exercise allowed the participants to begin to see what they called “clusters of intervention”—not just individual interventions but groups of interventions that could be identified together. They named these clusters together. Through the visioning process, the stakeholders were able to leverage the narratives of the ‘not seen yet’ into defining their desirable future and identifying intervention clusters (See *Figure 4*).



**Figure 4.** The Collective Visioning Exercise, Which Stakeholders Went Through, that Started with an Embodiment Exercise: Exploring the Potential Experiences of Future Generations as well as a Gallery of Hopes and Dreams that led to the Formulation of the Future Vision.

**“Clusters of Intervention” - Day 4: Mapping the Interventions**

On day four, participants started to identify and map out clusters of intervention. Using the ecologies of intervention method (Kossoff & Irwin, 2021), the process began with participants identifying engagement points on the CLA map and how they relate to intervention clusters across infrastructure scales –individual, city, state, regional, global– and within the different scope categories: political, governance, social business, etc. However, the group found this work quite difficult since some of the interventions they identified existed in more than one dimension on the matrix. They embraced that difficulty and challenge by having multiple discussions about where to highlight the points of intervention and how to address problem clusters together (See Figure 5).

# Ecologies of Interventions

V1

Regenerative economy interventions indicated in early 2021

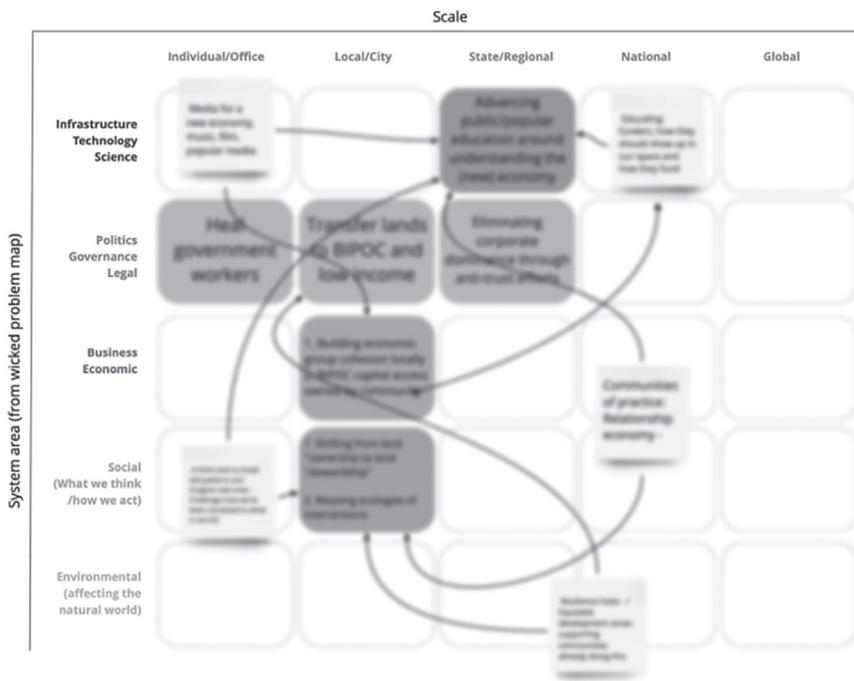
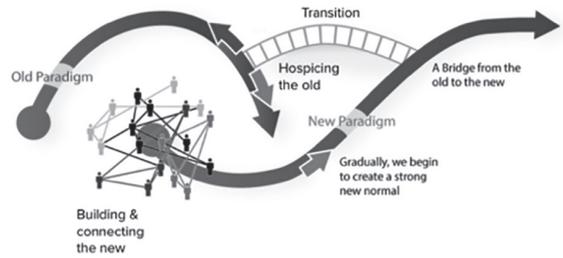


Figure 5. The Ecologies of Intervention that Stakeholders Worked Together on Across Levels of Scale as well as Different System Areas.

### ***Day 5: Connecting the Dots***

On the workshop's final day, participants connected the dots, starting with understanding and identifying barriers and enablers. The group wanted to call these out by name –almost as a ritual– as if doing so would help determine their collective challenges. As they addressed each of the problems, they also collectively identified the resource needs, the process changes, policy changes, attitudinal and cultural shifts (and other non-material factors), and the potential barriers that could prevent the problems from being resolved. Afterward, the team brainstormed ways to connect and amplify everyone's work by thinking about cross partnerships. One of the solutions that surfaced in the discussion was the establishment of communities of practice (as different pods) using an online social coordination tool called Hylo.

In conclusion, the group came out of the workshop with renewed commitment to collaborate on projects. They saw connecting threads in their work that mapped to the long-term vision to short-term milestones, with one participant using the analogy of the thread that stitches a quilt. They identified how to collectivize funding opportunities and explore cross-functional engagements with the city and other external stakeholders.

### **Looking Forward**

Àgbẹ̀ tó jẹ ọ̀ṣu tán, tó tún jẹ èbù ọ̀ṣu pẹ̀ lú rẹ̀ , kí ló máa jẹ lààmọ́ dún?  
 What will a farmer who has eaten all his yams and seeds eat next year?  
 [Always keep the future in mind]–Yoruba Proverb

The conversations and exercises are still ongoing, but the team has started to work together to build on accomplishing their collective vision and translate clusters of interventions into tactical projects that they can work on together. However, the work of a transition designer is never complete. We are still finalizing this work of threading tactical projects together and scaling the effort by building platforms for the groups to engage and providing them with actionable data to make collective decisions that will benefit their communities. Immediate next steps include staying on as resources to support the delivery of tactical solutions focused on the clusters of interventions. Additionally, to broaden efforts, the facilitators are working to systematize the data from the workshops and build them into templates for future engagements. Community groups are often under-resourced. The mapping work and subsequent projects have enabled them to build strength in numbers, with multiple organizations working together at different scales and sometimes with slightly different motivations.

## Reflection

Designing “for transitions” means designing “within transitions.” In this context, the reality of the COVID-19 pandemic shows us that humanity does not follow a logical, orderly timescale. Transitions are always happening around us and are messy, especially since designers working to shift these systems are working within them. As a result, in this space, they should be comfortable with working with changing models of expertise and project ownership –those that are shifting to more open or collective forms of participation, instead of those built on traditional processes and practices, or that leverage the expertise of underrepresented communities as the bearers of their own truths. These new models might help society avert collapse and lead us to resilience.

Before his death, Chinua Achebe (a Nigerian author and historian) frequently shared this Nigerian proverb, “until the lions have their historians, the tales of the hunt shall always glorify the hunter.” Our responsibility as transition designers blends into recognizing the lion’s (or lioness’s) side of the story. And telling the story from that vantage point can only be accomplished if we situate ourselves in other worlds to amplify the narratives and legitimize them with our advocacy.

Finally, the collective visioning process with Seattle’s BIPOC community led us to realize opportunities to expand the boundaries of the discipline by making space for stakeholders (who are now transition designers in their own right) to tell their story. Here, it should be noted that theirs is a story about a future where their communities feel included. For us to shift paradigms as we emerge from the COVID-19 global pandemic, our preferred futures must make space for the hopes and dreams of those who we have historically left out.

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**Resumen:** Una de las áreas de co-evoluciones de conocimientos y conjuntos de habilidades en el marco del Diseño de Transición es la visualización. A través de la visualización, los diseñadores de transición pueden establecer un estado ideal, uno al que esperan hacer

la transición. Sin embargo, si el papel de la visión es permitirnos cambiar nuestras trayectorias hacia futuros ideales, entonces esos futuros deben incluir a personas y grupos de personas a menudo excluidos.

Históricamente, la visualización ha sido un proceso difícil para las comunidades *Black and Indigenous people of color* (BIPOC) porque a menudo luchan por ver sus esperanzas y sueños representados en la versión del mundo que representan las visiones. El desafío plantea preguntas en torno a la representación: ¿cómo nos aseguramos de que los ejercicios de visualización permitan una multiplicidad de experiencias vividas?

Este documento describe una serie de talleres de diseño de transición realizados con líderes comunitarios de BIPOC en el área metropolitana de Seattle en los EE. UU. El proyecto, que fue financiado en parte por la ciudad de Seattle, incluyó un mapeo de la economía regenerativa como un problema de transición para incluir a menudo voces no escuchadas. Culminó con una visión colectiva a través de un paseo por la galería del futuro regenerativo y el establecimiento de comunidades de prácticas en torno a los puntos centrales de intervención destacados en las sesiones. Este documento resume cómo los desafíos y las consideraciones clave de estos talleres pueden tener implicaciones futuras en el marco de diseño de la transición. Además, argumenta que para que podamos cambiar los paradigmas a medida que salimos de la pandemia global de COVID-19, nuestros futuros preferidos deben dejar espacio para las esperanzas y los sueños de aquellos que a menudo quedan fuera de la conversación.

**Palabras clave:** Diseño de Transición - Futuros - Pluriverso - Equidad - Economía regenerativa - Economía alternativa.

**Resumo:** Uma das áreas de co-evolução do conhecimento e dos conjuntos de habilidades na estrutura do Transition Design é a visão. Por meio da visão, os designers de transição podem definir um estado ideal – um para o qual eles esperam fazer a transição. No entanto, se o papel da visão é permitir que mudemos nossas trajetórias em direção a futuros ideais, esses futuros devem incluir indivíduos e grupos de pessoas frequentemente excluídos. Historicamente, a visão tem sido um processo difícil para as comunidades *Black and Indigenous people of color* (BIPOC), porque muitas vezes lutam para ver suas esperanças e sonhos representados na versão do mundo que as visões retratam. O desafio levanta questões em torno da representação: como garantir que os exercícios de visão permitam uma multiplicidade de experiências vividas?

Este artigo descreve uma série de workshops de design de transição realizados com líderes comunitários do BIPOC na área da grande Seattle, nos EUA. O projeto, que foi financiado em parte pela cidade de Seattle, incluiu um mapeamento da economia regenerativa como um problema de transição para incluir frequentemente vozes não ouvidas. Culminou com uma visão coletiva através de uma caminhada regenerativa pela galeria do futuro e um estabelecimento de comunidades de práticas em torno dos principais pontos de intervenção destacados nas sessões. Este artigo resume como os desafios e as principais considerações desses workshops podem ter implicações futuras na estrutura do projeto de transição. Além disso, argumenta que, para mudarmos paradigmas à medida que emergimos da

pandemia global do COVID-19, nossos futuros preferidos devem abrir espaço para as esperanças e sonhos daqueles que muitas vezes são deixados de fora da conversa.

**Palavras-chave:** Design de Transição - Futuros - Pluriverso - Equidade - Economia Regenerativa - Economia Alternativa

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