Jun 4th, 12:00 AM

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Citation

Boyer, B.(2020) The story of 'The Spirit of the Hibiscus'; worldmaking activities from Bali, in Leitão, R., Noel, L. and Murphy, L. (eds.), *Pivot 2020: Designing a World of Many Centers - DRS Pluriversal Design SIG Conference*, 4 June, held online. <https://doi.org/10.21606/pluriversal.2020.030>

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The story of ‘*The Spirit of the Hibiscus*’; worldmaking activities from Bali

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doi: 10.21606/pluriversal.2020.030

The spirit of the Hibiscus is a creativity story of design otherwise, or design for other world making purposes that is a strategic response to the violence of universalism and Western imperialism. This participatory action research (PAR) approach facilitates storytelling through an intimate entanglement – thinking with the soil. Chakra, a Balinese sacred activist, and autonomous change agent directs his experiences to find relevant knowledge that both transforms himself and the community. Through his story, an epistemology of the South, we come to understand soil as a living infrastructure and one that is crucial for plant, animal, and human wellbeing. Framed in this way means to re-politicise the design literature through counter-narratives of creativity and worldmaking activity. To present new ways of understanding plurality through integrated thinking that links the organic and sociocultural worlds through a synergy of biological, social, and political perspective. A shift in consciousness that understands humans as soil-forming and soil-destroying agents; worldmaking is a matter of life and death.

Creativity, Participatory action research (PAR), Plurality, Situated knowledge

1. Introduction

This paper is a Research Note based upon recent fieldwork in Bali, Indonesia from December 2019 to February 2020, at the start of the Pandemic. The fieldwork was part of a work-in-progress for a Doctoral thesis due to be completed by June 2021.

This paper explores one of the stories from the field in Bali, Indonesia. It aims to decentre and challenge the functional rationalistic and industrial tradition from which design has emerged by offering a bottom-up narrative focusing on embodied ways of knowing and situated processes of change. Illuminating the human lives themselves, the life stories and creativity, we begin to understand how the responsibility of people can bring about opportunities based on alternative economic models, production systems and

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ideas of wellbeing (Manzini, 2011). In this case, to understand soil as a living infrastructure and one that is crucial for plant, animal, and human wellbeing (Salazar et al., 2020).

Chakra, a Balinese permaculture designer, helps us gain insight through his self-titled life story called *"The spirit of the Hibiscus"* (Chakra, 2020), a strategic response to the violence of universalism and Western imperialism (Mercier, 2019). A sacred activist, and autonomous change agent, who has defined his own project and knows how to direct his experiences to find relevant knowledge that both transforms himself and community. This opens up the field of aesthetics, traditionally confined to art and beauty, to everyday life and its different manifestations (Mandoki, 2007) helps identify sites of transformation and the motivations for change behind Chakra's worldmaking activity. The paper explores how we can create alternative social structures, in society using language, thoughts, actions and objects, illustrated, both literally and figuratively, through the soil ontologies of the Balinese rice field.

This story told from Bali, a Hindu animist culture, through a relationship with native Balinese soils. It is through the soil ontologies that we come to understand the connection to social life, not determined by a geographic location, but one at the nexus of human-nature relations. Chakra has his own experience of the Anthropocene, and it is vital to consider the historical appropriations of stories from Indigenous people. In listening to Chakra's soil affiliations, the study gain insight and find alternative ways of decolonising *"narratives of conservation and attentiveness to land, nature, and the geological"* (Salazar et al., 2020). *For us, as the (designer) listener, to develop a response-ability towards 'socio-ecological entanglements in a time of ecological crises'* (ibid). Framed in this way as a means to re-politicise the design literature through counter-narratives of creativity that move beyond frames of colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy. A worldview, and *building of future relations* (Light, 2018), that offers alternative ways of understanding design beyond the geopolitics of current knowledge and for other worldmaking purposes through understanding the relationship with social life. Salazar et al. (2020) describe this, within soil theories, as *'thinking with soil'*. Thinking with the soil, a *sentipensar* (Think-feel), advocates for a paradigm shift that requires re-inhabiting and embracing the entire living ecosystem, to include the non-human. It requires us to align with a relationality between what we design and the impact this has on all life forms. Victor Papanek, also deeply moved by his time in Indonesia and Bali, himself, advocated for design to be firmly placed within its social context and made a claim at the time that *"the social context of design, as well as the public and lay reader, is damned by omission"* (ibid). Thinking with the soil forces us to think about the stories we purposefully neglect; who and what elements are missing from the story.

A designer's worldview and practice are connected and frequently changed through intercultural and international experiences. Yet, the "change-thinking", or change in worldview, through the encounters and aesthetic experiences of those who make and change things, are absent in existing debates on sustainability. Sustainability in this context is understood through Arturo Escobar's explorations of design as *other worldmaking* purposes (Escobar, 2017), Ann Light's *structuring of future relations* (Light, 2018) or designing otherwise (Calderon Salazar & Huybrechts, 2020). Like Escobar and Light, Calderon Salazar describe the 'otherwise', as used in this text, as representing a *'ruse for dislocating the dominant knowledge structures'* (Ibid). Likewise, the attention of this paper aims to move beyond narratives and knowledge structures that dominate in the global North towards an understanding of lived experiences as a way to embrace the communal and relationality from an alternative perspective. More specifically, looking at the lives of those who are willing to change their own priorities and lifestyle. This alludes to the concept that it is the very thinking (worldview) that can be problematic with regards to unsustainable practices in design. And for these reasons, the work draws upon a life-story narrative from Bali, Indonesia, to illustrate a design for other worldmaking purposes. A life story shaped by the land and culture of the storyteller and the research participants; Chakra, the Balinese permaculture designer, Anuroe, the Sumatran witness and artist (whom I hired in the fieldwork), and myself, the design

researcher with an auto-ethnographic perspective from a multi-located upbringing. This participatory action research (PAR) approach facilitates storytelling through an '*intimate entanglement with soil aliveness: biological wonder, interdependent livingness, sensual enlivenments and life as regeneration and animatedness*' (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019).

The spirit of the Hibiscus is a call to action. A composting narrative (Haraway, 2019) of soil ontology that exemplifies how it "*matters what stories tell stories, it matters whose stories tell stories*' (Ibid) – in this case, matters of life and death told through the intimate entanglements of human-soil imaginaries. There is life in the soil, soils are living worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2019). The post-human paradigm, beyond anthropocentrism, invites us to search new forms of social bonding and community building (Braidotti & Bignall, 2019) seen through the lens of the age-old irrigation system of Balinese Subak, Balinese animist culture and Balinese Tri Hita Karana philosophy. New ways of understanding the pluriverse through integrated thinking that links the organic and sociocultural worlds through a synergy of biological, social, and political perspectives. The story reminisces of childhood imaginaries, "*playing with the frogs*", "*collecting geese eggs at 5am*" and visits with his father "*carrying a large torch to catch the eels for selling at the market*" (Chakra, 2020). As we listen to a life of playing in the rice field, it reanimates the life within them. It transforms our own contemporary human-soil affections by developing a sense of shared aliveness (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2015, 2019) through Chakra's soil entanglements.

Figure 1: The spirit of the hibiscus – soil entanglements

In addition to the "*Spirit of the Hibiscus*", Bali's very own Tri Hita Karana philosophy can offer a new foundation for the soil ontology explored through the relation between design, animism, and spirit to open an alternative development by and from the South. Tri Hita Karana is a commitment to a symbiotic relationship with the communal demonstrated through civic, and religious, participation. Rajendra and temple (2016) describe the Balinese Tri Hita Karana philosophy as a threefold principle, one that advocates that serenity and happiness result from harmonious relationships between individuals and the gods, between humans, as well as humans and their surroundings. The root of Tri Hita Karana can be

found in the Hindu scriptures, The Bhagavad Gita (Rajendra & Temple, 2016). This commitment to the temporality of life exemplifies alternative social structures that embrace profound corrective principles that could drive how we perceive, think and act in design. Communities like Bali, that already have substantial social capital can demonstrate a collective future making (Light, 2018) through a commitment to thinking in terms of generations and lifetimes. As understood through the "*Spirit of the Hibiscus*", these traditional social systems are having to contend with the imposition of modernised agriculture through the imposition of the Green Revolution and, almost simultaneously, Bali's status as a popular tourist destination.

2. Background of researcher

My own personal journey has been one of creative entanglements across various geographical locations and borne through networks across nations and borders. As a result of this lived experience deeply enmeshed within globalisation, I have become increasingly aware of the competing discourses in design through observing a profound lack of understanding in the design of non-Western realities. It is this, in combination with my own discomfort at exploitation through the perpetuation of out-of-date attitudes through the design field, that led to my interest in Design's intersection with development(s). This has created a path back into academia which acts as a renewal of my own personal responsibility towards sustainability and research through design at complex intersections.

The original contribution comes from an auto-ethnographic perspective; sometimes referred to as insider anthropology and one which is built from feminist epistemologies of situated knowledge. The fact that I am a woman also fills some missing gaps in design literature, in combination with the upbringing, has meant that I identify with being an immigrant through the many experiences of transitions between countries, and often, a view from in-between. I lived in Sumatra as a young child and then in Bali as an adult in the creative industries. I was a practising design consultant in the fashion industry, operating out of both the UK and Bali for almost 20 years. For these reasons, the work is both personal and political, fashion and textile industry experience opened my eyes to the soil entanglements and impact of industry.

This multi-located upbringing, and lifestyle, is fundamental to my worldview, having never lived in my birthplace and growing up across three continents. My interest lean towards an "*inside*" and what has been described by Karen Barad as a *meeting the universe halfway* (Barad, 2007) or Donna Haraway as *intra-relations* (Haraway, 2006), Homi Bhabha describes as the *in-between* spaces in which we find meaning (Bhabha, 1994) and Yoka Akama as being awake to Ma (Akama, 2015). These *in-between* spaces illuminate alternative, middle-ways of being beyond western notions of design and development (Sen, 1999). They offer mutually beneficial alternatives and hybrid modes of living beyond neoliberal ideologies and a place where inner and outer worlds coincide (Sacks, 2017). Whilst I have a natural affinity with these in-between spaces, I acknowledge that a life of global mobility as a third culture child (TCK) still remains a privileged position.

After consideration and the systematisation of my own experiences (Calderon Salazar & Huybrechts, 2020) a return to academia and careful development of my methodology has felt an appropriate way to respond with responsibility and autonomy through my own life story of in-between spaces. According to the vast body of sociological literature devoted to children who spend a proportion of their developmental years outside of their birth/passport country, known as a third culture kid (TCK), the classic profile is someone with "*a global perspective who is socially adaptable and intellectually flexible*" and has also been described as a '*prototype citizens of the future*' (Pollock & Van Reken, 2001) due to the flexible mindset and an intrinsic ability to "*reconcile different points of view*" (Reken, 2008).

Most importantly for this study, I have an intimacy with Indonesia and have been deeply affected by my life there. Escobar describes being affected as the most profound human change – it is distinct from thoughts and knowledge as it means thinking and feeling with the earth (Escobar, 2016); Sentipensar. The diversity of my own experiences has translated into the research by using particular methods, for example, ***Othering the Other*** which plays on connections between aesthetics and a response-ability of representation of others. A political aesthetic which will be discussed next.

3. A reflective practice; Othering the Other

Bruno Latour describes experiences in terms of forging new pathways through the articulation of connections between modes of existence and generating a ground to negotiate reality in the present; Latour labels this a political aesthetics cultivated through a sensitivity which only art can provide (Latour, n.d.). Antonio Damasio draws visionary links between mind, feeling, consciousness and the construction of our cultures and claims that "*science alone cannot illuminate the entirety of human experience without the light that comes from arts and humanities*" (A. Damasio, 1999)(A. R. Damasio, 2018). The use of aesthetic connectors in the research such as artist illustrations is supposed to push the study beyond the formal branch of aesthetic philosophy, that deals with theories of beauty and fine art, into every day as a way of becoming sensitive to others. Thus, it is a critical component to consider who has access to and owns the life story of the participants – it matters whose stories tell stories (Haraway, 2019). Another's story is a crucial factor for sovereignty and integrity.

Haraway (2019) suggests collaborative narrative is needed for our vulnerable planet (Ibid). Our collaborative narrative is undoubtedly a messy methodological space, full of tensions, contradictions and one in which I found myself being framed in its process. Despite the messy approach, it was essential to explore ways through which I could decolonise myself in the process. The collaborative narrative or co-participatory process was an epistemological stance. The autoethnographic method, insider anthropology, is one that takes seriously Edward Said when he states that "*there is a profound difference between the will to understand for the purpose of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purpose of control*" (Said, 1978). This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats analysis as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). For these reasons, I worked with a local artist, Anuroe, to accompany me on the research journey and illustrate what he saw and heard. His presence, a silent witness, facilitated a self-reflective mechanism in place for me to look at the sketches and have an alternative interpretation of the storytelling as well as framed me as the Other in the process.

Design anthropology is operationalised through this study. It is a collaborative and participatory process of socio-cultural exploration and transformation through intercultural communication and 'listening' at sites of hybrid ways of living and acting in the world. The three considerations—the auto-ethnographic perspective, participatory action research (life story), and technological—each continuously influencing my decisions at each stage of research. As this overall project is still a work in progress, I have not yet resolved the tensions between the three forces. There are no conclusions but allowing a space – "continuing evolution of discussion and a multisensory approach and contributes to a rich understanding of people and the social world from multiple perspectives" (Boyer, 2018); a plurality through collaborative interpretation and meaning making.

4. A participatory global commons

Participants were recruited using a conceptual framework of the Beyonder, a term coined by Paul Torrance, *the Creativity Man* (Millar, 1995). Torrance's work on creativity has stood the test of time having been translated into over 35 different languages. Most importantly, there is little racial,

socioeconomic or cultural bias in the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking (TTCT) (Kim, 2006). His research, the most extensive longitudinal study of creativity, determined what other factors influence, predict, encourage or sustain creativity over time. In 2002, Torrance followed up this 40-year research with a manifesto based on the life experiences of his research participants. It was as a result of the follow up that Torrance coined the term *Beyonder*. There were shared characteristics of those that sustained their creativity over time that had more to do with mindset and being open to a diversity of experiences. In the context of this paper, creativity is an action-oriented framework and improvisation (Ingold & Building, 2010) of the *Beyonder* participant; creatives who seek diversity of experience along with the other characteristics such as "*going beyond where you have been before and going beyond where others have gone*" (Torrance, 2010). However, it is important to note some of the initial findings from the field; whilst participants were located as individual creatives, the common denominator amongst them all was a willingness to work collectively and viewed choice of the communal as a system change.

Participatory methods underpin the research and the concept of authorship and representation a significant component to break through cognitive empires of the West (Santos, 2018). Much thought was given to the ethics of this research and to find disruptive ways in which to conduct the ethnographic study; methods that could be both disruptive and reflective and considered how easy it could be to misrepresent fieldwork through the retelling of another's story. For these reasons, we, the participants in the research, and I collectively agreed to operate under an International Creative Commons license as a tool through which to create transparency and the shared meaning created through the work. The creative commons is built from a private and voluntary tool that allowed us a way to create a 'public good' (Commons, 2007). In this text, we are defining the public good as a pool of cultural, educational and scientific context that can be legally and freely accessed, used and repurposed.

This type of participatory inquiry is a way to think narratively about experiences and move between the field, and the telling of stories, to field texts (data) to interim and final research texts (Clandinin & Huber, 2010). It exemplifies a responsibility towards ethical matters that we put into the public domain. The point of sharing research into the public domain, through global commons, is to create knowledge transparency and encourage greater participation. For example, as we engage with the narratives, new insights could be discovered, or shared meaning created rather than just my own. Most importantly, it is usual for studies such as this to be a closed process, especially as it is one of many stories conducted as part of the PhD research and so may not be in the public domain for some time. It is my belief, inspired by Viktor Papanek (1985), that transparency is an essential strategy for building equity and social justice in the world. Papanek took this a stage further to state that he was also opposed to patent and copyright on the basis that it is wrong to profit from the needs of others (Papanek, 1985).

5. Indonesia; the roots of decolonisation

Perhaps it is no coincidence that a story of plurality through "*The Spirit of the Hibiscus*" should emerge from Indonesia. Generations of soil entanglements with deeply embedded ancestral roots, are kept alive through the official motto of Indonesia, *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika*, that comes from an old Javanese poem dating back to the 14th century. The official translation is '*out of many, one*' (Tantular, 2008).

Indonesia is the place in which the very notion of decolonisation was birthed in 1955 at the Bandung conference. Political leaders from 29 Asian and African countries gathered on the initiative of the leaders from China, Indonesia, India, Pakistan, and Myanmar, to address the issues about economic co-operation, self-determination, decolonisation and the peace (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2015). The historical conference resulted in contributing to the creation of the non-alignment movement (NAM), a consciousness, and global solidarity, among the countries located in the Global South (Lumumba-Kasongo, 2015). However, as the Green Revolution clearly demonstrates, NAM was later penetrated

from within. Powerful forces of imperialism such as structures of dictatorships and authoritarian regimes supported by the United States, the Soviet Union, the former colonial powers and their local cronies, weakened its position. Global capitalism, driven by the industrialised countries in Europe and the USA, determine the power relations and undermines attempts for self-determination by the Global South. In the case of Bali and the story of *'The Spirit of the Hibiscus'*, the continuous development, exogenous top-down chemically intensive soil strategies from the West are certainly taking its toll. However, the current pandemic may be the tipping point at which some people in Indonesia reclaim autonomy through the integration of social practices and participants in the making and maintenance of a flourishing more-than-human soil community, rather than as users or exploiters of its produce or services. The alternative perspective of Chakra's sacred activism, through his soil affiliations and education programmes, exemplify one way in which this could happen.

In light of above, it is easy to understand how designers and designed objects, systems, and buildings have enhanced and prolonged our lives yet also aid, abet and enable great acts of violence to each other and the planet. For example, Chakra's life story exposes a subtext of violence and death through the hidden social and ecological costs of the Green Revolution in Bali, Indonesia. The Green Revolution, designed as a techno-political strategy for peace through the British-American sponsored Colombo plan of 1952. A philosophy development intended to create abundance by breaking out of nature's limits and variability; the underlying assumption being that technology is superior to life. In other words, a deliberate social and political planning (in the Green Revolution) aimed at both engineering of not just seeds but social relations too; a policy that, by design, omits plurality and variability. Vandana Shiva (2016) argues against the drive of modernity, which she explains as a contemporary society that perceives itself as a science-based civilisation that provides logic and propulsion for social transformation (Shiva, 1991). In the case of the Green revolution, Vandana (2016) describes it as a policy of planned destruction of the diversity of nature and culture to create uniformity demanded by centralised management systems of agriculture. Yet simultaneously, the *'The spirit of the Hibiscus'* exemplifies a resilience through social engagement that challenges the top-down approach. Chakra creates new social structures based on a localised community whose values and practice are embedded with permaculture principles. The Tri Hita Karana Foundation, a hybrid community as illustrated below, is represented by people from all around the globe (farmers, students, educators, professionals, volunteers, children, adults, activists and change-makers) so local is not insular but small, local, open and connected (Manzini, 2011).

Figure 1. Chakra and his volunteer team illustrated by Anuroe.

6. Worldmaking; *The Spirit of the Hibiscus*

The failure of development as an idea and its unequal distribution of progress is exasperated by the current health pandemic, environmental destruction and near economic collapse. Design has been complicit in the continued role of neo-colonialism and imperialism that has led to the simultaneous crises; depleted and degraded soils through industrial and agricultural practices. Thus, the crises are not due to ecosystems mal-function, but how our ethical systems function (Das, 2017). However, according to Salazar et al. (2020), soil activism is creating community healing through gardening and composting that strive to recreate the conditions for plant growth and life flourishing in the ruins of capitalist ways of life. A shift in consciousness that understands humans as soil-forming and soil-destroying agents (Ibid).

Chakra describes his land conservation projects and attempts to take advantage of Indonesia's new CSR programmes. Policy and structures put in place by the Indonesian government to exercise responsibility towards the very soil in which hotels and development projects sit upon. However, he describes being turned away "*they kick us out and say that there are too many co-owners*" (Chakra, 2020) which translates as the money is not coming into Bali. Chakra explains how there are some new visionaries prepared to make the change away from the remnants of Western politics of nature and matters of soil which can't be separated from open-ended questions of colonialism (Salazar et al., 2020). These visionaries, such as Chakra, and the new Balinese governor, leading a rethinking of human–soil relations at this critical juncture (Ibid) and as a path toward alternative structures crucial for plant, animal, and human wellbeing.

Some of the life story memories are illustrated by Anuroe, below. Chakra, the son of a rice farmer, recalls an abundant childhood. Already demonstrating entrepreneurial tendencies at age ten, marketing eels at pregnant women and collecting the hard-earned cash in bamboo piggy banks. Chakra describes an abundance of coins playfully, his joy at seeing them accumulate through eel sales as "*you can't buy anything*" (Chakra, 2020) there were no shops in the 1970s. The subtext; over-consumption was not an issue.

A serendipitous encounter of a homeless English woman in Bali, in the 1970s, as illustrated below, meant he was later invited to the UK to gain his degree in sustainable development. Chakra now works as a permaculture designer - trying to preserve his native soils against an ever-increasing development on the island. Permaculture design is a practice concerned with sustainable human settlements as well as protecting and extending natural systems (Mollison, 1988) it is a philosophy embedded with values and ethics. This alludes to a practice of personal responsibility and, in the case of Chakra, sacred activism within his community gently diffusing away from the failures of development happening on the island through actions that bring life to the soil, not destroy it.

Figure 2. Chance encounters of care and personal response-ability by Anuroe

7. Understanding the pluriverse through soil ontologies

The time has come for design to *meet the universe halfway* towards a shared livelihood; one that embraces the commons as building blocks for ecological and social transformation.

Upon reviewing Chakra's life story, I understood the significance of his story concerning the "*before and after*" the green revolution. His explicit detail of everything in the rice field, instantly dying overnight, including farmers themselves. A distinct memory of how Suharto's dictatorship forcibly introduced green revolution packages in Indonesia: farmers were forced to use new "*improved*" rice seeds produced by corporations which required high levels of fertilizers and pesticides. Those who refused to use the seeds were imprisoned. As a result, the cultivation of Bali's traditional seeds declined, the water became polluted with agrochemicals and families were made dependent on the '*black powder*' or '*Obat*' (Chakra, 2020), the Indonesian word for medicine. The echo of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* comes to mind and re-engages with her questions of who decides who lives or dies, to poison or to destroy human and non-human life (Carson, 1962)?

Figure 3 Fieldnote sketches of Chakra's childhood memories - before and after the Green revolution – by Anuroe

This *otherwise*, in this context, may not typically be recognised as design from European design tradition but one that calls for the role of design to be challenged for its position deeply embedded within the colonial matrix of power. This work is building upon others who call for the decolonising of design (Fry & Willis, 2017) (Schultz et al., 2018) (Akama & Yee, 2019) (Botero, Gaudio, & Borrero, 2018) (Noel, 2015). Consequently, the combination of a theoretical review of the scholars as mentioned above, amongst others, and the analysis of this particular story, *The Spirit of the Hibiscus* (Chakra, 2020), the data in combination with an exercise of wisdom helps facilitate a new type of thinking known as synthesis, which moves from data to wisdom (Ackoff, 1999). Wisdom deals with values and is the exercise of judgement based on experience, not a theory. Through the *systematisation of experiences* (Calderon Salazar & Huybrechts, 2020) of human-soil relations in this story we can shift our imaginations beyond the specialities and silos of design. This can restrict thinking when working in highly creative and interdisciplinary ways.

This story explores relational knowledge frameworks to help develop care-full soil practices as an analogy for care-full design practice embedded with profound principles of enlivenment (Weber, 2019). *"The Spirit of the Hibiscus"*, facilitates a shift in perspective towards life rather than the *"race to the bottom"* which Chakra (2020) describes of the many tourism development projects trying to find water for their swimming pools. Worldmaking activities through movements illustrate the performative and prefigurative nature of rebellion (Santos, 2018). Chakra and his Tri Hita Karana permaculture programmes assist in dissolving the tradition of duality and market-driven economies towards a transcendent paradigm of shared livelihoods. There can be no doubt of the significant subtext of Chakra's storytelling, the before and after the Green revolution. Soil Ontologies that asks of design - How may we think of design practice not suited just for one body but something that links many bodies, be them human bodies, animal bodies, vegetable bodies or mineral bodies?

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to Markus Wernli, Laura Murphy and Vicky Gerrard for last minute critical insights. This work is supported by supervisors, Mikko Koria, Laura Santamaria and Amalia Sabiescu, alongside a Doctorial studentship from Loughborough University, travel bursaries from the Design Research Society (DRS) and Santander travel award to conduct the fieldwork in Bali.

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