

A RE-ENCOUNTERING OF THE ANCESTRAL INDIAN OCEAN

NYANGALA ZOLHO

Mozambique/Spain

ARJUNRAJ SHAKEELA

NATARAJAN

India/Germany

Nyangala is Policy Learning Designer, Strategist and Decolonial Futurist. They support policymakers and innovation communities to use evidence and experimentation at Innovation Growth Lab (IGL) based in Nesta UK and Barcelona School of Economics. Nyangala is a PhD Candidate and Lecturer on Social Innovation and Collaborative Design at BAU.

arjunraj Shakeela Natarajan is a visual anthropologist, filmmaker, and educator currently working as a doctoral researcher at the University of Hamburg. They developed Körperkino, a collaborative and embodied storytelling methodology that disrupts the unequal conditions under which stories are told, heard, and circulated.

Acknowledgements

Sincerest gratitude goes to the Indian Ocean ancestors who in spirit guided reflections and deliberation of their stories as artefacts now carried by living relatives. A special thanks to the Adamo Abdula family who agreed to provide access to photographs from their private family archive for publication in this paper, and to all formal and informal "archivists" who continue to preserve untold stories, and who bravely shared them with the authors as part of this research project. Thank you also to Anjana, Shakeela, and Natarajan for the many stories that nourished and inspired this piece. Finally, sincere gratitude to Prof. Dr. Jonas Bens for encouraging Arjunraj to think through and embrace Indian Ocean connectedness, and to Dr. Cecilia de Marinis and Dr. Mafe Moscoso for their contin

Corresponding authors

Nyangala Zolho

nyangala.zolho@gmail.com

Arjunraj Shakeela Natarajan

ashaan.raj@gmail.com

Schedule for publication

Accepted for Publication: 28th October 2024

Published online: 31st December 2025

ABSTRACT

Vasco da Gama set foot on Ilha de Moçambique and Calicut (present day Kozhikode) in March and May 1498. Da Gama's arrival on both these coastal lands on the Indian Ocean opened the floodgates to centuries of colonial exploitation, not only by the Portuguese but also by the Spanish, British and other European empires that followed. The footsteps taken in 1498 set the course of a new imperialist era that would span the entire globe. The stories we tell have a profound effect in directing the course of history as an art of collective memory. But who has the power to shape the narratives we tell and retell, and how might erased histories help us reencounter a new sense of the future? This article explores decolonial futures as an unravelling of the past that leads us towards a different shared story. Two transboundary explorations take place to recount the past, present and speculative future of two coastal places linked by Da Gama's arrival in 1498. The authors of this paper explore how one might translate filmmaking approaches to policy design related to the creative and cultural industries. Both authors are queer immigrants from the Indian Ocean, living in Western Europe and recounting stories from the places they are from: transformed by the arrival of Vasco da Gama, their ancestors and speculative imaginings of their own future as ancestors to come. Their personal stories of identity, culture and family history unearth a revolutionary re-encounter with coloniality through the singular story. This research project acts as a design provocation testing the boundaries of decolonial methodologies. 'Körperkino' - a collaborative storytelling practice - acts as a basis for blending film, archival materials and interactive games to dismantle hierarchies in the re-encounter with colonial history. Later, reflections on design practice take insights derived from 'Körperkino' to reimagine an alternative space for cultural policies on the Iberian peninsula. The result is a speculative project captured as an article, and delivered as dialogues where the reader is taken back in time and towards the far future: from da Gama's encounter with the African and Indian coastline to the re-emergence of stories from a tropical paradise that is still unknown (from the Indian Ocean's ancestral future).

Keywords *Decolonial Theory; Cultural Policy.*

a. Close your eyes and imagine the sea. The deep blue you see, is the same body of water that carried Vasco de Gama from Portugal's coast to encounter Mozambique and India, as opposing bays on the Indian Ocean. De Gama returned back from one point of land to the other on the circular winds that had historically carried many merchants before him, from the Arabian Peninsula, India, and as far as China. Trading routes for all kinds of objects, which this time carried De Gama's boat boarded with amongst many things the mango fruit. The seed of the first mango tree to leave the Indian subcontinent that would later be planted on the coast of Mozambique.

AUTHORS' PREFACE

When Vasco da Gama came to Calicut, I imagine he felt a mix of triumph, awe, confusion—triumph at having scaled the unknown, confusion at not being met with the reverence he expected. He had arrived in a place that already knew the world. Calicut was not waiting for him. Calicut, no, Kozhikode, the city that I was born in.

I felt something not that far from it being here in MUDE¹. A museum now, but it was once a colonial bank. A space that managed the flows of empire, of trade, of bodies.

★

arjunraj and I were asked to present this paper. There is a certain paradox in having had the opportunity to present a paper on decoloniality on the very stage that reeks of the legacies of colonialism. Two coloured bodies in a space once built to serve the empire. Our presence interrupts because Europe has long been about a single story, one narrative, stretched

and repeated until everything else was forgotten. We are not here to fit in. We are here to be present. And in being present, we disrupt the idea that there is only one way to belong.

INTRODUCTION

The research presented here was set up as an experiment and in drafting its findings for submission in a special academic journal, we (the authors) have chosen to maintain the integrity of our research that exposes the traces of coloniality in creative and cultural practices in Europe by taking an experimental approach to this paper itself. In this written collection of stories, you will find and be prompted to reflect on a number of insights our research project has unearthed. In summary:

1. The story is a focal point of our research collaboration, as we argue it is the central way that we, as a society, *make* and make sense of the world. Stories go on to, in many ways, freeze time; becoming infused in the objects, artefacts and symbols that are loaded with a constructed reality of the past or a speculative future. In this way the story (as reference to individual and collective perspectives) might be viewed as a temporal and flexible object (Nogueira, 2023).
2. The Indian Ocean holds many stories (archival footage accompanying this experimental essay serves as an example of these many stories; both the dominant and the untold - decolonial documentary films, colonial and postcolonial statues and murals versus the personal individual story of a great-grandmother). By adding this mix of stories in the Appendix, you as the reader are asked to reflect on the following: *what happens when we decenter one story to account for all stories?*
3. The collaboration of the authors of this paper attempts to

¹ MUDE - Museu Design Lisbon - is a design museum situated in the historically listed building of the Banco Nacional Ultramarino (Portugal's old colonial bank). The museum hosted the panel where this paper's research was first presented.

disentangle a hegemonic story² to reclaim and celebrate a plurality of stories from the past, present and future.

4. Experimental design research methodology is used to spatially and temporarily connect three distinct and seemingly separate points; two that sit from a cartographic standpoint "directly" across each other on the Indian Ocean (India and Mozambique on the Indian Ocean, and Lisbon at the edge of the Iberian Peninsula). The exercise acts as a chronotope of sorts, de-territorialising the continent, nation-state and using the ocean as a body (not a void) to connect.³
5. *Körperkino* is a method developed by a filmmaker (one of the authors of this paper) and is brought to this experimental research project to shine a light on how we "*live the stories we create, we create the stories we live in*".
6. The author's collaboration - referenced as the practices of arjunraj and Nyangala Zolho - moves towards a design for the liminal.
7. The combination of the collaboration of experimental design research with *Körperkino* allows for the project to firstly highlight how Europe reproduces frozen narratives that we might witness in place - in physical objects and architecture encountered in plazas and squares across the Iberian peninsula - and time. Time accounting for the continuation of tropes we might observe in policy related to Cultural and Creative Industries (CCI) in Europe today. Secondly, the project demonstrates how these stories might be re-encountered to make space for new policy ideas, for a new vision of what it means to be in collaboration within Europe and the world.

Story is used throughout this paper to demonstrate that these reflections are derived from human bodies - living examples of the story's ultimate ability to liberate, when it is allowed to. That is, to exist in the grey zone (neither fact nor fiction). The authors end by reflecting on how CCI policy through

'*Körperkino* x Policy Design' might make space for alternative future visions from the Iberian peninsula.

INTERLUDE I

Nyangala: arjun where does your *Körperkino* method emerge from⁴, what is it? And tell me about how it allows for liminality to exist?

arjunraj: *Körperkino* is a made-up word, a hybrid, a German invention of my own. German is a language that has become a container, one my body is asked to inhabit, to express through. It's like wearing someone else's shoes—borrowed, slightly off-sized, not quite mine, but now I am tasked to familiarise it, move with it, in it.

8. I first came across the word *Kopfokino* in one of those blogs listing "15 German words that have no English equivalent." *Kopfokino*, literally "head cinema". I interpreted it as the endless stream of moving images, thoughts, and imagined futures that play in our minds like a film reel—scenes of what could be, should have been, or never was. Scenes of imaginations of the future, redemption of the past. In this cinematic loop, don't we often miss the present moment entirely. Is *Kopfokino*, then, an analogy for the way we escape now?
9. From this reflection emerged *Körperkino*, a word born from the realization that the stories I carry, the cinema I experience, are not just in my head. They happen in my body. In my breath. In the quiet twitch of my muscles as I recall a memory, in the loss of breath when the past invades me, in the blurriness in front of my eyes when I hope for a free future. And in that realization of what is happening in my body and what is making it happen the way it happens, I somehow am in the present.

2 This paper uses the journey of Vasco de Gama to the coast of Mozambique and India in March and May 1498.

3 Bremner, L. *Folded Ocean: The spatial transformation of the Indian Ocean world*. (2013). *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*.

4 See the trailer in the Appendix section.

Körperkino is not just a concept; it is specific, embodied moments. If a trigger of the past, or a hope of a future can inhabit my body, what happens when the moment of stimulus is a story of someone else. What happens when the sudden recognition of oneself in someone else's story occurs. The visceral "aha" when you feel, not just hear, that another person carries a truth as solid, weighty, tangible, as your own.

Körperkino is a feeling. It's the acknowledgment of the feeling, that moment, that precedes empathy, it the summation of understanding of someone else's situation while understanding your own.

Because *Körperkino* begins with one's own story. But it doesn't rest there. It comes with the acknowledgement that while this is my story, the story I hear of someone else will ignite, push, influence, or is a seed to acknowledge my own story and the weight it carries on me.

It is, essentially, the act of knowing the self through the presence of another. And in that act, we do not stand alone. We witness ourselves *with* someone. But *Körperkino* doesn't stop at self-recognition. It resists self-absorption. Instead, it pushes further, it invites both you and the other to shape your individual experiences into something larger: a shared, collaborative story.

That's what *Körperkino* is, a process. A journey of acknowledgement. Of seeing one's own story reflected in another's, of carrying the weight together, and then gently setting it down—by transforming it. Through this magic of encounter, *Körperkino* imagines a collective narrative born in the space between two people — a liminal space.

arjunraj: What does *Körperkino* mean to you?

What is that liminal space where you first sensed the potential to shape many stories?

What are these stories? How do they connect to Cultural and Creative Industry policymaking? And what possibilities do they open up for you and your practice?

Nyangala: *Körperkino* lands as an invitation. I have seen how it is a vehicle that quickly helps many people recognise what sets individual stories apart, while also acknowledging what deeply connects them. The liminal space from here becomes an opening to try something new.

In my work, I am mostly engaging with policymakers; people in charge of making decisions about how public funding is used to support innovation, creative and cultural industries. This is an environment where creativity and new ideas are desired as an ultimate outcome but seldom are given room to be the starting point. In the absence of room to (re)imagine, policies as key drivers of how we design, the world remains stuck on old narratives. It is no wonder creatives of all backgrounds find it so difficult to sustain their work with the kind of freedom needed to truly build things in radical new ways.

I see collaborative storytelling as an experienced and embodied practice that can support anyone to better understand how plurality exists. From this starting point, I was curious what might be explored differently from a CCI policy perspective. When I heard your story, your words resonated with me: I *understood*. I wondered, "could a policymaker also encounter this resonance and embed it into their ways of working, just as data and evidence would?" The story here becomes a vehicle for searching for new possibilities, for questioning assumptions and ultimately (re)encountering old narratives that no longer serve Europe today.

In this collaboration, we began with my great-grandmother's story and your story. Later, so many other people were touched by our personal stories that they re-encountered their own erased histories. Wow! One story led to many multiple stories that folded time, space and experiences without

reducing any single account. This is a huge lesson for my practice - how might I bring these multitudes to policymakers making decisions, how might policymakers also engage with multitudes that evidently exist (when given the space)? These are all open questions.

b. *"Foste ao fundo do baú?" said my aunt in the family WhatsApp group, as the familiar picture of my great grandmother standing proud with her children and a selection of her grandchildren was shared⁵. She looks equally frail and triumphant. It is 1975 and I'd like to think Mozambique has now finally declared its independence from the Portuguese colonial regime. The 16 year civil war hasn't yet begun, and the bi-polar-world leaders haven't yet made the fully "liberated" African continent a battle ground for their proxy Cold War. My grandmother stands holding my mother's hand tightly. My mum says she adored her grandmother Elisa, who spoke softly. My great-grandmother is the descendant of Indian and African heritage. She was raised Catholic, Elisa Carolina da Piedade, but converted to Islam after marrying my great-grandfather, becoming Habiba Jivane. I was told by my mother stories that she'd told her grandchildren, of having been sold to a white Portuguese man whom she fled with her first child. At some point her second husband also disappeared, and she raised her children, my grandfather included, as a single mother during that colonial regime. She spoke softly I am told, and was revered for being sweet, gentle, and loving. Her eyes speak to her heritage and her sweet character. Triumphant matriarch. "Nós chamávamos vovó Baixinha <3" - "We called her little-short grandmother".⁶*

INTERLUDE II

arjunraj: Nyangala, What is the story that you carry in you that you wish to share in this article? Whose story is it? What happens when I listen to it?

The story I carry I feel cannot be reduced to one. My work as a designer in policymaking spaces always deals with the topic of evidence, and my story reminds me that oftentimes what counts as evidence in spaces of power does not account for my personal story. This inability to divide the multitudes that make up my story is what I wish to share through my experimental design practice, and what I hope this article might shed a light on.

I am the product (the "object" and perhaps someday "artefact") of "mestiço" policies of the old Iberian empires, and of wandering souls that landed on the ancestral shores of my part of the Indian Ocean prior to that. Tracing my lineage back to that of my great-great grandparents, I have the blood of African, Indian, Arab and European bodies. I hold all these parts – or rather their stories within my body – alongside others that have been written in my lifetime. The story of my lifetime, I see as only emerging from the body of all these other collective stories. My existence is plurality in the embodied form.

I find it interesting that the story of my European heritage is entirely lost; a genetic passing down of heritage with no name or face – zero evidence one might say. I have no ancestral European story that I claim as my own, aside from the one I am writing as an immigrant body that now resides on the continent. My African and Indian heritage on the other side is abundant. Stories passed down to me from my mother and father, tias, tios, avós and avôs. Alongside these stories are rituals, scents, spicy recipes and embodied knowledges that

⁵ See the photograph in the Appendix Section.

⁶ This story was delivered at an academic conference held at MUDE, Lisbon in 2025.

have allowed me to feel at home in spaces and places I have never been to before: the joy of sitting beneath a mango tree under a hot summers day, the sweat beads that run down my temple as I bravely taste the “achar de manga”⁷, the smell of incense burning mixed in with the smell of vibrantly coloured spices that have travelled from the kitchen to the street - the private to the public so pleasantly blended as my heritage is in me. In a way, this is the story I want to tell. I hope that when you listen, you hear your story. In writing an article for a journal based at the Lusófona University in Portugal, Europe, I want an ode to our shared history to exist as evidence of the bodies that made our bodies exist in Europe today.

Nyangala: How does this story land with you arjunraj, does it resonate at all. Tell me what new openings have emerged for you from this collaboration of ours –from this reencounter with the Indian Ocean?

arjunraj It resonates deeply, in the gut. It stirs in me how the scent of wet earth stirs up things you didn't know you were storing.

Reading your story, I felt held in the familiarity of contradiction. That multiplicity of being, where names, smells, songs and silences overlap, is something I know intimately as well. I, too, carry stories that don't quite belong to me and yet live in me. Stories that have travelled across generations without passports or documentation. Stories that were never written down but pressed into skin, into gesture, into the way a body knows how to mourn or celebrate. Ghost stories living in living bodies.

I think of the mango tree. In Malayalam, *manga* is mango. And somehow, this fruit becomes a portal, into memory, into the legacy of a place. A place where stories are told, overheard, slurped and swallowed. Under a mango tree which

your grandmother told your family stories of sweet and sour migration? Stories that were never one, never whole, never linear, just like yours. And yet, they persist. They shape the voice with which you speak, that you and I and the many have inherited.

Your story, your reencounter with the Indian Ocean, makes me look again at my own coastline, Kerala, where the Arabian Sea carries centuries of trade, exile, romance, resistance. The ocean between us is not a separation but a mirror. What opens up for me through this collaboration is a way of seeing that doesn't demand resolution. It allows me to remain in the in-between. It affirms for me that our stories are not linear. They are tidal. And in writing, in telling, in listening, especially listening, we begin to ebb and flow toward each other.

So yes, your story is yours, but I also heard my own echo in it. And maybe that's the point. To hold space where our pluralities can be witnessed without needing to be fixed.

arjunraj: What stories emerged when this same story was presented at MUDE?

Nyangala: Presenting this story within the walls of the old colonial bank felt symbolic in a way – to bring in a personal story within a formal setting drenched in policies from the past (such as the 1962 Guilherme Camarinha mural, which can be viewed as you come into the hallway). I was there to present at an academic conference and in this space I shared my great-grandmother's story alongside mine. I spoke of what it felt like to be a black body entering this space. I mentioned cultural policies as living objects and artefacts; alive in the bodies within the corridors of a space (a museum), in contrast to existing solely in formal documents. This placing of a personal story, my story, unravelled so many others.

⁷ Achar de Manga derived from Goa is lemon pickled mango with peri peri chilli and spices, a condiment to many dishes along the shores of the Indian Ocean.

I heard of the personal stories behind why the mural in the design museum was maintained in its original form, despite the colonial bank no longer existing. I heard about personal stories of others who had similarly complex mixed heritage related to Portugal and the Iberian peninsula's colonial past, and those who felt they had no personal link to the colonial legacy but felt the shared history when they passed monuments and other public objects depicting that past. The stories that emerged were all deeply personal to each individual who spoke to me, and yet there was a real-life sense of the shared history – the embodiment of so-called policy that was no longer abstract and distant but alive in our bodies.

By sharing a personal story, I had the sense of breaking the walls that maintained formality in that space and bending time to blend past and present. Yet, I was left feeling like all these important strands needed to be weaved together – that the sharing process alone was insufficient to nudge a different future scenario. This feeling of unfinished work was uncomfortable.

Nyangala: What sparked in you when you heard these stories from MUDE?

arjunraj: Both of us come from that strange, liminal league, those who speak in rooms meant to keep us out. Academic rooms. Gated rooms. Places where knowledge is measured by citation counts and cloaked in the language of rigour and authority.

And yet, we speak from elsewhere. We may be researchers in esteemed institutions, but our knowledge begins in the body. In the plural, messy, inherited stories that we didn't just hear, we absorbed. We live them. They live through us.

There's a need, of course, to translate this knowledge into academic terms. But standing at MUDE, I realised something

that I think I always knew: translation alone is not enough. Academic rigour will not carry the weight of what we are trying to say.

I stood before the mural at the entrance, Camarinha's mosaic. MUDE, which once held accounts of plunder. Of jewels stolen and stored. Of numbers that quantified entire nations- India, Mozambique, Angola, as colonial possessions. The air was thick with memory.

I wanted to look at the mural up close, to trace the tiles, to read what was being said through the arrangement of bodies and colours. But I was held back by a gate. Security. Uniformed guards, all people of colour, perhaps with roots in those very colonies, now tasked with protecting a mural that glorifies their own historical subjugation.

There they stood, between me and the image of Indigenous bodies bowing to the cross – submitting to civilization. The mural celebrates that moment. It still stands, quietly loud, in what is now a design museum. MUDE. The site where our first collaborative work on decolonial storytelling was presented earlier this year.

In that room, drenched in the glow of the empire, the paradox hit me fully.

That our work cannot and must not live only in elite journals. That even when we *do* enter those journals, we do so in defiance. We speak in accessible tones not because we lack sophistication, but because we refuse to obey rules that were designed to exclude those who "didn't know them."

We show up knowing the format, and then we break it. We stretch its edges, letting our stories leak through. This is the game we play: To prove we can speak the language. And then to choose when not to.

c. *Not that long ago, I was strolling along Juhu Beach with a European friend, a renowned haven in Mumbai, and we found ourselves immersed in an intense conversation. Despite the beach's reputation for serenity, it is marred by the sea's return of filth to the land—stark but poetically just. As we conversed, our chosen language was English, a shared mode of communication. Amidst our dialogue, seemingly intensified by the amalgamation of two different races, a young man was captivated enough to approach me. In Hindi, he earnestly inquired how come I was so good in English. I was flattered by the compliment but taken aback by his subsequent request; he asked if I could teach him the language. His sincerity left me pondering whether he believed acquiring English proficiency could secure a better job or foster friendships with those of fairer skin. While I could only speculate on his motivations, I do distinctly remember the image of him running away with mighty speed across the sands the moment I declined his proposal, disappearing in the crowd.*

My fluency had provided me with an edge in Indian society where English language proficiency had become synonymous with social standing. That short interaction dawned on me, perhaps I confronted the narratives that both he and I carried—stories that upheld the belief that white skin and the white tongue held a superior status than others.

My education started within the corridors of an English-medium school, where the teachings of Stevenson, Tagore, and Achebe—all children of the former empire resonated across the classrooms into a shared educational experience for the modern minds in the making. I remember distinctly that the linguistic exposure not only honed my English language skills but also opened doors to inter school activities and competitions. Growing up, I found myself inadvertently subscribing to the notion that proficiency in English somehow equated to a superiority complex—a belief instilled not just in me but in millions who even today aspire to learn the language.

This conditioning runs deep. The yearning to climb the social ladder, intertwined with the tangible benefits of enhanced job prospects, has made English a currency for upward social mobility. English language classes dot every corner of the city, and every fifth advertisement promises a brighter future through mastery of the language. Like the love of cricket and tea, it remains one of India's notorious colonial hangover—the romance over English. It won't be a stretch to link the roots of this phenomenon in India's colonial history. The British administration, through the English Education Act of 1835, intentionally established English as the primary medium of instruction. Thomas Babington Macaulay, a politician, was the key architect of this policy, envisioning forming a class of individuals "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." His aim was to replace native languages, which he deemed unworthy, with the refined eloquence of English.

One of the many consequences of this policy has been that English persisted as the lingua franca of India amid its linguistic diversity. But it cannot be stripped off from the intention with which this policy was implemented and its ensuing consequences. There's no one better to make these intentions clearer than Macaulay himself. He once claimed that: A single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia.

For Macaulay and the empire that endorsed his actions introduction of English was essentially, a civilizing mission., evident in Macaulay's words "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for con-

veying knowledge to the great mass of the population" It becomes clear that the language that once served as a tool for governance has evolved into a symbol of social stratification. The quest for fluency is not just about mastering a language but about navigating a societal structure perpetuated by historical biases and the enduring legacy of colonial ambitions. Othering is the dehumanising process of portraying someone as fundamentally different from oneself often based on social factors such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, bodily traits, abilities. From interpersonal hierarchies to international boundaries, the enduring silence surrounding the implications of stories and the mechanisms of othering allows for the perpetuation of such debilitating paradigms from generation to generation. The consequences of othering thus reverberate through time, echoing within the shared stories and lived experiences of communities, shaping perceptions, and molding realities in ways both subtle and profound. The sentiment of "othering," ingrained by Macaulay's vision, continues to shape billions of Indian lives today. The gentleman who sought an English teacher in me on Juhu beach reflects the enduring impact of this sentiment, transmitted through stories and societal narratives for over two centuries and many generations.

Nyangala: We returned to Lisbon once more and together led a workshop at Hanger. By running this final workshop in Lisbon, I believe we wanted to reach a more satisfactory ending to the story. HANGAR is such an incredible space. Walking in, I was immediately greeted by their publications 'Atlantica'. Picking up the volume on Contemporary Art from Mozambique and its Diaspora, the Indian Ocean's influence is immediately mentioned as a cornerstone for the cultural flavour of my ancestral land. I felt seen.

With this, we set about delivering a workshop on *Körperkino* to explore where we might land when the lecture style imposed at the academic conference was removed, what might emerge

instead with the same starting stories - our stories. So tell me what stories emerged at Hangar after the workshop?

arjunraj: You and I came to Hangar from varied lineages and schools of thought, but what united us was that desire to speak from the body, without the need to be decoded. To let stories exist in their plurality. Not to extract a single, cohesive narrative, but to hold the contradictions, to let them breathe, ferment, tangle. When I think of our collaboration at Hangar, I think of this standing beneath this proverbial mango tree, like the one which your great grandma sat under, metaphorical and grounded. A canopy where strangers came to sit under. People with stories stuck in their throats, curious, searching for a reason, or permission, to speak.

Within the workshop, as we asked the participants to search for the story within them that they want to work with, I felt as if the participants were all reaching for the many metaphorical mangoes, the many stories within us – some easy to spot, dangling low and ripe, others hidden deep. We aimed. We missed. We aimed again. And sometimes, we struck something real. A story close to the surface, or one buried deep in the tangled branches of who we are.

But then came the harder question: Now that the mango has fallen, now that the story has surfaced, do I dare to share it? In the awkwardness and the silences that were present in the room, the collaborative storytelling space that *Körperkino* facilitated, stories were told, stories were listened to, and then were transformed, into something shared, something plural. A third story, shaped by the interplay of the voices in the room.

And as those collaborative stories were ripening, I was thinking about what you said –that the European story in your body exists without a face or name, just presence. It strikes me that even the absences in our stories are stories. That silence, too, is an inheritance. And in its own way, it insists on being heard.

So yes, I hear your story. And I hope that in mine, you hear yours, too.

And maybe, as we write, speak, move, we're letting new mangoes ripen for those who came in contact with us, at Hangar and the ones who will come after us. Not only to pickle and preserve, but to share.

METHODOLOGY

The European colonial project can be seen to impose a monolithic story of the past that has a flattening effect on plurality. This phenomenon is produced and reproduced in art and design practice at different scales. From depictions of the "native" in filmmaking practices to the selection of "exotic" objects in museum curation, creative and cultural industry policy as the design of processes and practices that shape the world (Escobar, 2018) also remain deeply entangled with the European colonial tradition. Collaborative storytelling and inclusive policy design practices as emergent decolonial tools and experimental design research methods open space to critically re-encounter European history. A pluriversal lens that upholds cultural diversity acts as a direct alternative response to 'counternarratives' (Giroux et al, 1996) that place difference in opposition to that which is default. The methods presented in this paper moves away from "re-telling" history to instead introduce decolonial methods as an inherent collaborative and inclusive tool to "re-encounter" the past as a way to reimagine the future.

To begin, a starting story, a dialogue, is used (in this paper and in the performative intervention that informs this research). The story acts as a window to bring audiences into role play, and into a dream-like state. The dialogue between the authors sets the tone of this article that is intentionally rupturing with tradition –with unwritten rules.

In launching the performative intervention using story as the medium, this paper goes on to highlight the resulting immediate effects – dialogue between the authors and feedback from the audience. This paper is predominantly concerned with tracing the nature and agency of designed things: such as stories, films, spaces, policies (Willis, 2006) that exist at different scales but are inherently entangled relationally. The focus on a single object to begin with – e.g. the mango fruit –acts as a symbolic piece used to spark and lead the opening of existing narratives that might, once observed, be transformed. This approach can be compared to Dan Hill's strategic design tool that also borrows from the film-inspired use of a "MacGuffin"⁸. The MacGuffin is often used in fictional storytelling such as in films by Alfred Hitchcock where the object is placed as a necessary but insignificant part of the plot. So to begin and center the story, this paper later moves on to the bringing together of multiple stories, stretching across territorial space but tied together in a policy design process. Using *Körperkino*, the performative intervention connected to this paper aims to expand the inclusion of new ways of being and knowing in policy making spaces –specifically those connected to creative and cultural industries.

Körperkino is a methodology used to critically engage with who gets to tell whose story, for whom and why (arjunraj, 2024). It is launched in the context of an academic conference and maps liminal space between existing policy (set within the museum, the stage where the performance takes place), an old colonial legacy (the monolithic story reproduced in objects within the space) and what lies beyond (the opening of space for future stories that depart from a European colonial past). *Körperkino* and decolonial futures as a policy design tool are combined and positioned in alignment with decolonial practice. Decolonial practice in this paper is defined by Breny Mendoza's comparative work⁹, namely as: *'the investigative work of the colonial as part of an effort to*

8 Hill, D. Dark Matter and Trojan Horses: A Strategic Design Vocabulary. (2012) Strelka Press.

9 Mendoza, B."Decolonial Theories in Comparison." *Journal of World Philosophies* 5 (Summer 2020). 43-60.

break the monologues of western academics and to create alternative spaces for the production of knowledge based on other epistemic logics'. In this paper, the story is brought in as equitable evidence for which to base decision making on. The result is an example of how CCI might rethink ways to create alternative spaces for the production of knowledge based on other epistemic logics. Finally, it is not lost on the authors that their intervention takes place within the institution, discipline and form of the colonial master¹⁰. Findings from this short intervention reveal that decolonial practice can quickly open space for new solutions, be they objects, spaces or policies of cultural and creative industries - but that this work is a continual process with no end.

'Difference must be not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic' - Lorde (1984)

Within this paper you will encounter many stories. (We) the authors of this paper, use personal stories to (re) encounter histories. The distinction being that history attempts to reflect that which we call fact or truth, while story centers on the subjective, that which is always situated and multi-dimensional¹¹. There are many stories within the European historical canon that have encapsulated horrors from the European colonial project, carried out along the Indian Ocean and beyond. That is to say that the collection of facts - the history of the Iberian Peninsula - that this paper attempts to depart from can be (re)viewed if we revisit the stories of the past. (We) the authors of this paper would like to bring two stories from our own biographies into the conference and

into the academic discipline through this written paper. (We) the authors bring these stories to reiterate how embodied memories, such as our own, are fertile sites for showcasing the very aftereffects of the colonial project that has shaped both individual and collective upbringings and worldviews. Objects, like stories, can also freeze time. This sense of stopping time in Europe tends to freeze one narrative that goes on to influence the stories we carry from the past into the present (in mindset and behaviours) and the policies (as design of culture and meaning). The stories centering this research project, together with the accompanying object that unites them (the mango) serves as a device (the MacGuffin) to open up possibilities in a different location (the Iberian peninsula). Objects can be deceptive, but it is in this trickery that there is room for different relationalities and the liminal.

The approach of using objects as carriers of stories that might transform space and place can be seen at different creative and cultural practices. Grada Kilomba's 'Opera to Black Venus'¹² exhibition in Madrid in 2025 uses the speculative fiction of the draining of the Atlantic Ocean to explore the multitude of histories that lie on the ocean's seabed. The Seed Archives in London¹³ brings together a collection of objects and books of African and Caribbean artistic traditions and cultures. The collection tells the story of where these objects came from but also the stories that led them to be in London. Both 'Opera to Black Venus' and Seed Archives are examples of what decolonised cultural and creative policies might look like: the recounting of old histories, without easing them, and the inclusion of a multitude of voices. Another example might be seen with the policies of the CIRCE network, a funding

¹⁰ Lorde, A. (1984). *Sister outsider. Essay's and Speeches*. The Crossing Press.

¹¹ Haraway, D. (1988). *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.

¹² Kilomba, G. 'Opera to a Black Venus. What would the bottom of the ocean tell us tomorrow, if emptied of water today?' (2024-25) <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/gradakilomba>

¹³ Katta, J. 'Physical Spaces, Community, and Photography: Kadi Jatta in Conversation with Seed Archives' Christian Cassiel' (2024). *Then There Was Us*. <https://www.thentherewasus.co.uk/archive/kadi-jatta-in-conversation-with-seed-archives-christian-cassiel-on-physical-spaces-community-and-photography>.

programme set up to explore social impact enabled by creative practices from 2023 - 2025.¹⁴ This unique programme provided funding to all creatives who resided in Europe, not only citizens of Europe, as a way to truly account for the many ways creative and cultural practitioners were driving positive social impact across the European continent. This approach to open access to funding remains a disputed topic amongst many jurisdictions, where funding is often ringfenced for one group over others - driving the narratives of large funders and government agendas.

Decolonial Futures as a policy design tool

Futures methods, originally conceived to support companies and governments in the developed world to navigate uncertainty, can now be encountered through decolonial lenses¹⁵. Rupturing the Western capitalist view of time and future as a linear and ascending process, decolonial futures approach time through indigenous and ancestral ways of perceiving the process of being in space. Here past, present and future are often not separated, presenting a basis for rethinking and re-counting historical narrative and their impacts in the present day. As a method already used in policymaking, futures methods sit within the boundary of the subjective story and the attempted process of evidencing fact and truth. Futures methods are used to support strategic decision making, role playing what one might do with a version of a speculative future (a signal, projection or prediction) based on existing data and evidence.

Similarly, architectural and design practices seeking to better understand transboundary space, for example land and ocean, look to mixed approaches to investigate spatiality. Lindsey Bremner 'Folded Ocean' multiplies differing lenses (evidence) to project and explore potential consequences for architectural and urban practice and scholarship.

'If one folds a map of the Indian Ocean about a north-south axis running down the length of the Maldives archipelago, it is almost symmetrical and a number of cities map more or less onto one another. Dubai (United Arab Emirates) folds onto Kolkata (India) along the Tropic of Cancer, Mogadishu (Somalia) folds onto Singapore along the equator, and Durban (South Africa) folds onto Perth (Australia) along the Tropic of Capricorn. These cities mark the symbolic geographic extremities of the Ocean. At its central point lies Diego Garcia (British Indian Ocean Territory), which, as Malta is to the Mediterranean, is equidistant from all points This cartographic image of the ocean is the iconic one for this paper. It portrays the ocean as a figure, not a void, de-continentalising territory and de-nationalising space'

Bremner's approach of folding the map of the ocean was used as a tool to place the Object of this research project in front of the audience. Ilha de Moçambique, Calicut and Lisbon - part of Da Gama's voyage - are reimagined as the de-continentalised territory and de-nationalised space which have been exemplified by the stories told previously (that will later be presented in the following sections of this paper). The map, as an evidentiary tool most are familiar with as legitimised knowledge is used to set up space to open new possibilities. That is to say there is an alternative way of imagining space, place and object should decision makers want to legitimise alternative ways of designing creative and cultural policies.

Conclusion: Our Practices as the Practices of Future

The arrival of Vasco da Gama in Calicut initiated a colonial project that sought to flatten diverse perspectives, imposing monolithic narratives that have left a legacy of violence and erasure. This historical wound continues to ripple through the present, shaping cultural and social frameworks in ways that call for urgent reimagination.

¹⁴ <https://creativeimpact.eu/en/creative-impact/>

¹⁵ Zolho, N and de Brouwer, Z. (2024) Decolonial Futures. Driving Design.

In response, the authors, as descendants of this lineage of oppression, are engaged in a futures-oriented practice that seeks to counter these impacts by reclaiming and amplifying plurality. Our work envisions a world where multiplicity is not only recognized but becomes the foundation for how we shape creative and cultural ecosystems. By drawing on the rich diversity of our histories, we craft spaces where intersectional identities can flourish, fostering resilience and innovation in the face of systemic erasure.

Embracing plurality as a future's practice means embedding it into the policies and structures that govern creative and cultural fields. What if artistic production and cultural policy prioritized the interconnectedness of stories, traditions, and experiences? Imagine an Iberian Peninsula redefined as a thriving mosaic of its many layered histories, actively nurturing collaboration across linguistic, cultural, and historical divides. This vision of plurality transforms cultural policies into tools for equity, sustainability, and shared prosperity.

By practicing plurality as a forward-looking framework, we challenge the ongoing legacies of colonialism and create the conditions for systemic transformation. This is not just an act of reclamation but a deliberate strategy to build futures where diverse perspectives are a source of strength. How might the world be enriched if plurality became the blueprint for our shared cultural and creative endeavours? The answer lies in rethinking power, prioritizing inclusion, and envisioning futures where multiplicity is the guiding principle.

APPENDIX

ARCHIVAL FOOTAGE AND IMAGES

1. Koperkino Trailer: <http://vimeo.com/944714647/fbd1b002f9>
2. Guilherme Camarinha (1962) BNU Mural: https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilherme_Camarinha#/media/Ficheiro:Guilherme_Camarinha_1962_img_6401.jpg
3. Photographs from the Adamo Abdula family archive.



4. Goran Olsson's documentary 'Concerning Violence'.
5. Ron Hallis 'Samora Machel, Son of Africa' interview.
6. José Godinho, Photograph 'O edifício principal do Clube Naval de Lourenço Marques, anos 1950.' <https://delagoabayworld.wordpress.com/2012/06/29/o-clube-naval-de-lourenco-marques-anos-1950/>
7. Stone monument marking the spot at Kappad Beach in Kerala, India, where Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama landed in 1498





8. Kozhikode, India over the years Left: Kozhikode-Street Scene Year:1900s photo; <https://marymeert.wordpress.com/2013/03/25/thali-temple-kozhikode-street-scene-year1900s-photographer-unknown-sourceuniversity-of-souther-california-digital-library/> Right: Calicut Mini Bypass in the city of Kozhikode, India. photo: wikimedia commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Calicut_mini_bypass.jpg



9. Maputo, Mozambique, over the last decades Left: A vintage image of the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception in Maputo, Mozambique. Right: photo: <https://www.bandcstaffregister.com/page1864.html> Right: Samora Machel Statue located in the Praça da Independência (Independence Square) in Maputo, Mozambique. photo: wikimedia commons [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Unabh%C3%A4ngigkeits-Platz_mit_Samora-Machel-Statue_\(25805078117\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Unabh%C3%A4ngigkeits-Platz_mit_Samora-Machel-Statue_(25805078117).jpg)

REFERENCES

- arjunraj. (2024). *Körperkino: An interactive toolkit and app prototype for collaborative storytelling*. CIRCE. https://creativeimpact.eu/wp-content/uploads/arjunraj_circe-report.pdf
- Bremner, L. (2013). *Folded ocean: The spatial transformation of the Indian Ocean world*. https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19480881.2013.847555?casa_token=YJKtkuF4yIQAAAAA%3A4PgKxY6S5VpRmfDcRkWN8O3kGiFwnsXOk5aAiedwPGJ3WI85kFC-t_XJldXslTvKgUCPXwPpB-WLf#d1e110
- Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the pluriverse: Radical interdependence, autonomy, and the making of worlds*. Duke University Press.
- Giroux, H., & McLaren, P. (1996). *Counternarratives: Cultural studies and critical pedagogies in postmodern spaces*. Routledge.
- Grada Kilombo. (n.d.). *Opera to a Black Venus* [Exhibition]. Museo Reina Sofía. <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/exhibitions/grada-kilomba>
- Hill, D. (2012). *Dark matter and Trojan horses: A strategic design vocabulary*. Strelka Press.
- Lorde, A. (1984/2007). *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*. In *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches* (pp. 110–114). Crossing Press.
- Mapping the Indian Ocean Region. (2023, June). Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2023/06/mapping-the-indian-ocean-region?lang=en>
- Then There Was Us. (n.d.). *Kadi Jatta in conversation with Seed Archives' Christian Cassiel on physical spaces, community, and photography*. <https://www.thentherewasus.co.uk/archive/kadi-jatta-in-conversation-with-seed-archives-christian-cassiel-on-physical-spaces-community-and-photography>
- Willis, A.-M. (2006). *Ontological designing*. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 4(2), 62–92.
- Nogueira, Gustavo. (2019) 'Time the most valuable resource' <https://medium.temporalitylab.com/time-the-most-valuable-resource-9ee1fce5c9db>
- Vaughan-Lee, Emmanuel. "Stepping into the Liminal: A Talk by Emmanuel Vaghan-Lee" *Emergence Magazine* (2023): <https://emergencemagazine.org/interview/stepping-into-the-liminal/>
- Haraway, Donna (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies* 14 (3):575-599