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Situated Relational Designing: Re-Discovering Relational Fragments towards Pluriversal Contact Zones by Examining Nordic Mythology

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Abstract

This paper explores a situated approach to developing one's relational design practice by using critical fabulations to support ontological re-working. Fabulating is used as a tool to re-discover and embody relational elements from the authors' own culture and history. We engage with Nordic mythology and folklore starting from Arturo Escobar & Marisol de la Cadena's propositions for pluriversal design and Pluriversal Contact Zones to guide our search. The work takes a critical stance against how the modern episteme shapes design and reinforces anthropocentrism, patriarchalism, and colonialism. Crafting critical fabulations was a co-labouring, idiotic practice of *not knowing* that allowed us to question dominant narratives and be critical towards our own design practice. It enabled exploring and imagining alternatives from elements of situated relational knowledge that have been obscured by modernity, allowing us to embed local ideas of relationality into our design practices. Our contribution lies in the use of old cosmologies, mythologies, and folklore to give such insights. Through this, we offer a prototype for designing relationally within, as, and for Pluriversal Contact Zones and invite designers to reimagine their own practices beyond modern dichotomies.

CCS Concepts

• Human-centered computing → Interaction design theory, concepts and paradigms.

Keywords

Critical Fabulation, Pluriversal Contact Zones, Not Knowing, Co-Labouring, Animism

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1 Introduction

“What are the stories one tells in dark times? How can a narrative of defeat enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future?” [23]

This research proposes a way for designers to engage in an ontological re-working and generate situated, relational insights from within their own cultural traditions. It does so by examining local cultural phenomena and historical ideas through critical fabulation, guided by epistemologies of the South, aiming to move away from design's perpetuation of Western Modernity. Moreover, this research presents an effort to extend our participatory design practice into multispecies “Pluriversal Contact Zones” (PCZ) by exploring the implications of participation, consent, cohabitation, and interdependence in more-than-human worlds.

To be better able to contribute to tackling the entangled polycrisis of disconnection, conflict, and ecological demise, we must, as Western designers, actively work toward building more relational and pluriversal design practices [13, 15, 17, 36]. This undertaking includes tackling the current status of the modern project of design and making it “humble”. The ‘modern project of design’, otherwise referred to as “Design-as-Modern” or ‘modern design’, are all terms used to describe design's complicity in “monopolis[ing] the relationships with tomorrow under the idea of ‘project’”, [19] being a reproduction of Western modernity's denial of other worlds and worlding practices and the domination of marginalized peoples and design traditions [14, 15, 42, 50]. We must acknowledge the failure of the modern episteme that has been and still is informing design, making it anthropocentric, patriarchal, dichotomous, and colonial. A serious operation of critique of the colonial underpinning of design is currently ongoing. Relational thinking has globally been obscured and erased by the modern episteme, cancelling past histories and geographies, but also geographies of bodies. Traces of these relational pasts might nevertheless still be present, even within the western context. Though difficult to define, Escobar et al. provide us with a non-univocal understanding of relationality that builds on radical interdependence: “Relationality then is a particular way of knowing, being, and doing—it anchors a distinct onto-epistemic formation, [...] it is the key to a new story of life.” [15, p. 9]

Traces of relational pasts in pre-modern traditional histories can be brought forward as “pearls and corals”—things from the past that have been obscured, mystified, and un(der)seen [1]. Over time, these have turned into “crystallised fragments” that can inspire new ways of being and designing [2]. This type of crystallized knowledge is

not essentialist or universalistic, but may serve as the backbone for a personal ontological reworking. This provides designers born in Europe, as in our case, with the possibility to look within their own culture and engage with their history without ending up in cultural appropriation—but only after serious acknowledgement of the criticality of the Modern, recognizing its ancestry and legacy within Western history of culture, including its many histories of oppression. To access the crystallized relational knowledge, our explorations are supported by the use of critical fabulations, a form of storytelling [23, 39]. Critical fabulations combine the obscured *pearls and corals* with speculative storytelling that can illuminate what is potentially transformative for the present and the future. “By throwing into crisis ‘what happened when’ and by exploiting the ‘transparency of sources’ as fictions of history,” [23, p. 11] critical fabulations can help challenge dominant narratives by allowing us to interrogate Design-as-Modern as well as to envision ways to design relationally [39, 42].

Our approach acknowledges that our engagement through critical fabulation is not neutral, as our forms of knowledge and practices in designing are always partial, embodied, and shaped by positionality. As such, the outcomes will differ greatly from designer to designer. Engaging with a feminist, embodied, and situated idea of knowledge [20], we take a stance in our personal cultural history by using Nordic mythology and folklore as the main seed for critical fabulation. Although the choice may sound controversial, as modern readings have presented Nordic mythology as dichotomous and violent, it was chosen because two of the three paper authors grew up in Scandinavia. Having grown up hearing these tales as part of our cultural history through school curricula, children’s entertainment, and popular media such as films and novels, we were already quite familiar with Nordic mythology’s characters and stories. We engage here with critical fabulation to uncover the obscured relational elements that might be there. An example of such a relational element is animism, which holds potential for designing and engaging in meaningful multispecies relationship. Our research is specifically trying to answer: How can we recover traditional relational practices of our Scandinavian ancestry to situate our design practice in a more feminist and decolonial position? What value can it bring as a humble prototype (not a universal method) for designing relationally?

The research is also a search for—and a step towards—a configuration of Pluriversal Contact Zones; where design as *a moment of the Modern* [42] and non-modern forms of traditional knowledge encounter. PCZs are described by Escobar & de la Cadena [14, p. 32] as “sites of encounter among divergent worlds that are suffused with excess; nevertheless, emerging beyond the onto-epistemic limits of the one-world world (present at the contact zone as well) [...]” They contain a temporary convergence without assimilation, where different world-making practices coexist while maintaining their distinct ways of being. In design’s struggle to emancipate from the Modern, designing relationally looks for and encounters what resists and reacts to the Modern [42], such as traditional world-making practices. Designing with/in PCZs requires “what Marisol calls excess, and which she conceptualizes as what is beyond the limit of what can be” [14, p. 30]. It refers to what exists beyond the onto-epistemic limits of people’s respective worlding practices.

Similar to excess, we use the epistemological stance of “not knowing” [7] in our approach to designing relationally. It includes an openness to the unknown and exceeds modern epistemological boundaries in designing, which is a prerequisite for us to achieve ontological excess and avoid imposing reductive and dichotomous frameworks [7, 13, 14].

At the core of our critical stance in the fabulation are Arturo Escobar & Marisol de la Cadena’s sixteen propositions for pluriversal design and PCZs that encourage us to design relationally and pluriversally by resisting modernity’s ontological constraints and enabling autonomy and planetary care [14]. The propositions include: avoiding dualisms (proposition 1); designing on the premise of radical interdependence, necessitating adopting “not knowing” as an epistemic stance (proposition 2); moving beyond “notions of representation, object, and project and their associated practices” (proposition 3); “caring for the web of interrelations” (proposition 4); contribute to re-communalisation (proposition 5); healing the ontological *desarraigo* (uprootedness) (proposition 6); moving away from anthropocentrism (proposition 8); practicing “a politics in the feminine” (proposition 9); and designing within PCZs to open up “conversations of care across divergent worlding practices” (proposition 10).

The experiment was conducted between two of the authors as an emergent co-exploration in informal sessions in/between our everyday work. Though unstructured, the process consisted of three important components: (1) Reading about Nordic mythology, (2) while being informed by Escobar & de la Cadena’s propositions which enabled us to recognize the un(der)seen relational elements, (3) and fabulating with these elements to embody a situated understanding of them and expand our ontological boundaries. These newly identified and embodied relational elements will serve as a compass for our own practices in designing that look for ways to emancipate from a Modern episteme. By presenting this research, we hope to inspire others to engage in a similar path of re-discovery of their own traditional understanding of relationality.

This paper contributes to design research by opening up the space in which designers can enter into a (more) relational design practice, avoiding modernist ways of designing through relational imaginaries, by drawing from decolonial and feminist scholars and theory. The research is both imagining possible PCZs and seeing the act of fabulating as a PCZ in and of itself. Our novel contribution lies in our use of old cosmologies, mythologies, and folklore to give us insight into other ways of knowing and being.

2 Necessity of Design’s Self-Critique

Famously, Papanek called industrial design one of the most dangerous professions in modern times [36]. Three decades later, Tony Fry’s concept of defuturing encapsulated how “our current extractivist, industrialist, and modern capitalist mode of life [...] actively erodes the possibility of a livable future” [15, p. xiv]. Opposite of a pluriversal practice, design is still actively defuturing and acting as a converging of worlds [13]. This is the case not only in the practice, but also in the cultural values held in each object that acts back on us [54]. Fry urges us to change the design practice from being one that defutures to one of re-futuring which allows for multiple worlding practices [16, 17], or what Escobar calls a

pluriversal practice [13]. While Papanek and Fry's statements still holds true, as large parts of design still perpetuate a defuturing culture, it is also important to acknowledge the currents that are actively fighting against the flows of defuturing.

Being individuals under modernity, we are confronted with questions of how to work against the modern episteme while working from a discipline that has been mainly forged by this same episteme and, as in our case, also being socialized within this framework. However, according to Escobar, "alternative Wests or nondominant forms of modernity" exists even within the West [12, p. 23]. We ask ourselves: How do we access these alternative Wests and their relational knowledge as designers? We believe it is a matter of being self-critical and seriously acknowledge the shortcomings of the Modern and our discipline (as being a vector of the Modern). We wish to move beyond the social imaginary brought forth by modernity and its episteme through design; so that designing can become a concrete example of PCZs and have transformative thoughts and actions made possible in the encounter with elements of relational thinking.

We, as Moderns, whether intentionally or not, tend to generate new dualisms rather than dissolving them by privileging one over the other, ultimately trapping ourselves in the same schema—such as in the dichotomies of human/nature or body/mind [27]. In our case, it becomes imperative to avoid demonizing the Modern and/or "equating relationality with good (opposed to bad)" [15, p. 106], which would mean a reproduction of modern dichotomous violence and thinking. To design relationally requires finding a middle ground instead of establishing new dichotomies [42]. Having an awareness of the habitual "ontological slippages", meaning the ways we unconsciously revert "back to the default setting of Western modernity", is crucial in our engagements toward a relational ontological turn [15]. As designers, we should strive for *staying with the trouble* [21], accepting that reality is thick and muddy and filled with contradictions. Relational designing must find its place in a space that is in-between, where design as a modern instance encounters its *other*, such as relational thinking present in some traditional forms of knowledges that have been erased or obscured by the modern episteme. To bring design beyond its modern constraints might mean to act, in hybrid and messy ways, from within this encounter. We take here the concept of PCZs from Escobar & de la Cadena [14] as this uncomfortable space of in-between-ness.

One of the first requirements of making the transition towards designing relationally is to discuss the (political) role of the 'designer'. Escobar & de la Cadena helps us to reframe the design profession from the manipulation of discrete objects to the pluriversal definition of ontological co-emergence [14]. Likewise, Dunne and Raby call for "more ontological plurality within design, to expand the design imagination" and avoid continuously reproducing a "broken reality" [11]. By departing from the object-subject dualism, designing becomes a process of becoming-with and "heal[ing] the ontological *desarraigo* ([the West's] uprootedness)" [14, 15, 19], acknowledging and reacting to modern design as a representational practice that excludes unrepresented others. The ethos of designing relationally is a practice that resists modernity's reductive logics and opens up space for diverse, pluriversal, and regenerative ways of world-making.

2.1 Positionality

As designers, and in our case, designers coming from Scandinavia, we must critically consider our positionality when engaging with decolonizing practices and theories. Nordic countries are often seen as marginal to colonialism, but "were and continue to be complicit in (post)colonial processes in various ways: through national imaginaries and racialization intimately tied to the Nordic welfare state models and notions of gender equality" [49, p. 291]. This makes it essential to address how these forces have been shaping and still shape our design practices and how their logics still infuse our ways of thinking and acting even when we seek to escape them [35, 53]. Even this small experimentation reflects a privileged stance within Western hegemony, where design is often justified as 'helping' others while diminishing local cultural practices [19, 50]. Our position lies within a system of historical and ongoing colonization, where we are simultaneously colonizers and being colonized by the modern West, being trapped in a toxic, anti-human defuturing culture [17]. Resisting colonialism is not a form of altruism but a necessity for our collective liberation. We cannot excuse complicity in perpetuating hegemonic practices. Instead, we must recognize our privileges within the existing hierarchy, enabling both ourselves and other designers to resist colonial and modern frameworks effectively [5, 41]. We write as white, cisgender, Scandinavian designers educated within a Eurocentric and modern industrial-design canon. This position grants us considerable academic and cultural privilege while simultaneously implicating us in the modern/colonial project we critique, rendering us both beneficiaries and agents of its defuturing logics. From our personal positionality, it is about seeing the limitations of the West and design as-is, acknowledging its shortcomings, but not wanting to be paralysed by them and get into an impasse. Instead, it is about looking for ways to respond by exploring one's own political "response-ability" [21] and envisioning forms of "re-existence" [52] in relation to the modern and colonial framework.

3 Re-Storying Towards Relationality

A reconfiguration of modern narratives and material culture is needed to design relationally [15], which would allow us to approach what Escobar & de la Cadena [14] describe as designing within, as, and for a PCZ, where entangled histories and ontologies co-exist. It will require designing for another ontological position and what Escobar et al. [15] refer to as "re-storying", because the dominant story shaping our reality has become a dysfunctional one: "[O]ne can describe the dominant story as the making of non-, or anti-, relationality, given that it banishes profoundly relational life-worlds and knowledges to the margins or death, while simultaneously enshrining an ontologically dualist worldview in which either/or, subject/object, good/bad, spirit/matter, body/mind and so on, not only dominate but seem natural." [15, pp. 3–4] Relationality is a radical response to counter the dominant hegemonic story, since it "is a different foundational story of life and reality, and hence a different point of departure." [15, p. 6] Secularism has resulted in the removal and loss of the sacred and the spiritual, essentially disabling us from considering and relating to the natural world [15]. We believe it is imperative to expand the ontology of designers to

enable new ways of designing, as a counter-measure to the ontological flattening that has happened under modernity. In order to do so, designers need to be made aware from which stance they are designing from, because “[...] if our narratives are designed and if our designed narratives design us, then the question of re-storying is a central task of designing.” [15, p. 14] This is especially true, since our social imagination is affected by the material culture that recursively feeds our interactions, values, and ontology [9, 27, 54]. An ontological re-working serves as a stepping stone towards new material designs, offering a way to think and act beyond modernity’s constraints: “These transformations may appear as painfully small-scale, even cosmetic, against the backdrop of the ‘dark times’ we live in [...]. Yet [...] alternative imaginaries enabled by aesthetic experimentation and critical thinking practices may be fugitive but by no means futile: for change to become possible, it needs to be imaginable in the first place.” [38, p. 90] We need to re-imagine what futures we want to contribute to [15]. Critically fabulating on our design practice is a prototype of what it might mean to re-story, which is a precursor to the re-design of material culture (physical, rituals, practices).

4 Not Knowing and the Idiot Designer

Marisol de la Cadena’s anthropological and ethnographic approach provides a crucial framework for this study, particularly through her engagement with “not knowing” as an epistemic stance [7]. Her work, which has explored relational ontologies within Indigenous (Andean) world-making practices, is here brought into the domain of design, in line with what she developed with Escobar [6, 14]. Drawing from her work, as well as Saidiya Hartman’s idea of critical fabulation [23, 39] and through a research-thought-design approach, we explore critical fabulations’ potential to assess self-criticism alongside opening up towards “not knowing” as the embodied, partial, and situated form of knowledge needed to design for the pluriverse. Not knowing can emerge from what de la Cadena terms co-labouring: “Co-labouring was my name for the practices among us (conversations, sensations, feelings, observations, intuitions) that composed a complex togetherness: a contact zone [...] in which we understood each other and did not understand each other. This second ethnographic mode, which I call ‘excess,’ was as important as understanding and could be simultaneous with it.” [7, p. 248] Co-labouring becomes a way for knowledge to emerge through engagement rather than detached observation. Our exploration investigates how critical fabulations can function as a designerly form of co-labouring: an ongoing, reciprocal process of exploring relational ontologies and unsettling dominant narratives. We take de la Cadena’s relational epistemic framework to inform our approach to designing relationally and to position critical fabulation as a method for engaging with not knowing, extending it into our own design practices.

Not knowing departs from modernity’s demand for objective and universalistic knowledge, challenging the reductionist tendency to dominate and fully define the world [3, 53]. Designers who assume they can fully ‘know’ a problem risk oversimplifying complex realities, reinforcing modernity’s ontological flattening. By embracing the act of not knowing, we can acknowledge that there is always something that escapes us, something that we cannot know, and

thus we need to recognize the limits of what can be controlled and understood. This opens space for relational thinking, a thinking that escapes rigid conceptualizations, from which to build towards regenerative narratives beyond the Modern that actively cultivate other ways of being and designing. In addressing the not knowing, designers can take on the metaphor of the “Idiot” [8, 46]—the one who is always out of their comfort zone, who is constantly feeling out of context. The Idiot is to always exist in ontological excess without having to follow the objectivist tradition [33, 42, 47, 48]. By recognizing our work as idiotic, we are enabled to see through the ‘masquerade’ of design-as-modern, without being afraid of failing or asking questions. By questioning, we confront contemporary views and ultimately challenge the idea of a One-World World with a “common good” for all, poking holes in its patriarchal construct [29]. By embracing this idiotic approach to designing, we are also stepping away from the role of the designer as the expert [42, 47]; a role that has been part of diminishing the importance of local cultures in the modern project of monopolizing design [19, 50]. This leaves room for relational designs to appear, while also avoiding creating ‘solutions’ to things that cannot be ‘solved’ [47] and “humbling” the designer(’s position) [14]. Instead of demoting “other-than-Western design” to “craft”, we need to let other ways of designing “grow” to escape the monoculture of the West’s project of design [19].

5 Fabulating as a Generative Methodology

Daniela Rosner brought Saidiya Hartman’s concept of critical fabulations into design, arguing that they “are ways of storytelling that rework how things that we design come into being and what they do in the world.” [39, p. 17] By combining historical and present elements with speculative storytelling, it enables challenging dominant narratives, particularly where archival data falls short, allowing for a retrieval, reworking, and unsettling of histories that have been erased or distorted [23, 39]. They can be used to discuss and reimagine worlds and go in direct contact with the present social imaginaries and converse with them, creating friction between what is, what could be, and what might have been [9, 39]. Critical fabulations can investigate the limits of design, and thereby provide a “scaffolding for material production” [39].

Critical fabulation is valuable for retrieving and reimagining forgotten histories and lost lives [23]. They allow us to re-story the unseen, under-seen and mystified, drawing from what already exists within the fabric of modern culture(s), but remains overlooked. By engaging with overlooked histories within the West, such as traditional storytelling around relationality, critical fabulation becomes a way to design from the awareness of relational ontologies that have been obscured by the Modern and yet lingers as traces of alternative ways of knowing and being [2]. It concerns unearthing ways of living- and making-with in traditional cultures within the non-Western-centric West [12].

Hartman teaches us that the modern work of oppression is also an oppression of imagination [22]: “So much of the work of oppression is about policing the imagination.” The Western social imaginaries have historically been detrimental to marginalized groups of people, with clear remnants of colonialism in today’s stories [9, 23]. This highlights the critical value of re-defining the

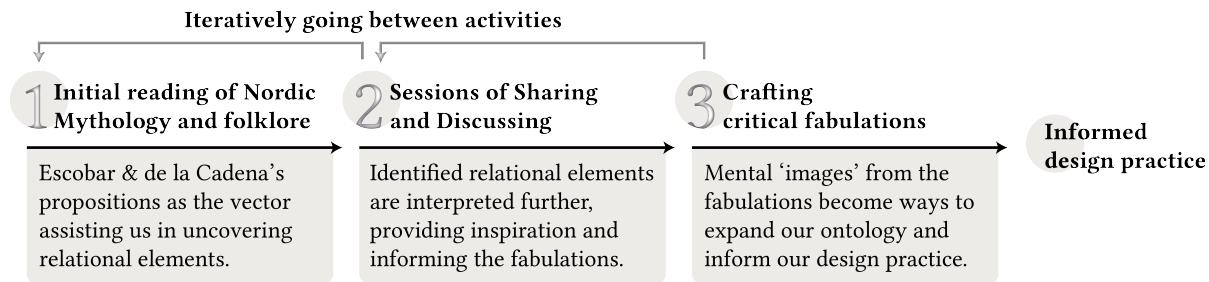


Figure 1: Diagram of our process, starting from literature and ending at informing our design practice.

current defuturing narratives with their “false inescapability of capitalist realism that posits the now as extending endlessly into any and all times-to-come.” [10, p. 14] Critical fabulations may allow us to prototype what a redesign of contemporary material culture could look like through imagined scenarios, while simultaneously challenging its embedded associations and bias.

By voicing the oppressed and bringing it in relation to a specific topic of fabulation, both criticalities and possibilities can finally come to light. In this critique, there lie affirmations of radical new possibilities through experimenting with what-ifs, allowing us to question what can come after what we have now [38].

5.1 Pearls and Corals as Seeds for Fabulations

Instead of appropriating forms of relationalities belonging to other worldings and situated contexts, we seek what has been oppressed by the modern episteme in *our* context. Not as static and unchanged remnants, but as “crystallised fragments” of meaning that, over time, have turned into the “the rich and the strange, the pearls and the corals” [1]. While this relational knowledge can and should be reactivated to re-direct design processes [13], it makes little sense to preserve them as fixed historical truths [2]. As Arendt states, this is “not in order to resuscitate it the way it was and to contribute to the renewal of extinct ages.” [1, pp. 205–206]

By *diving* for crystallized fragments from the North, we work with something already present within a contextually familiar ground, avoiding abstractions into purely speculative futures. By fabulating, we re-claim relational aspects of our Scandinavian ancestry, as: “many myths are relational, yet this has been obscured by dominant retellings shaped by Christian, patriarchal, and dichotomous interpretations.” [40, p. 4] These often present the pre-Christian North through stories of domination and violence, such as stories of the Vikings focusing on their masculine deities (e.g., Thor) with masculine tools (e.g., his hammer) over care and communal life. Likewise, the powerful and influential goddess, Freyja, is often seen through the male-gaze, “reduced to patriarchal archetypes (goddess of beauty and seduction) rather than acknowledged in her full complexity: a deity of love, seiðr (magic), war, and fertility.” [40, p. 4] We seek to decipher these mystifications and look toward the relational potential of these pearls and corals through critical fabulation.

6 Our Designerly Approach: A Process Overview

The process of crafting the critical fabulations was a co-labouring journey among the paper authors. Over the course of five months, the activities took place both in our regular workspace, in/between our everyday work, and at home. The research activities iterated between individual reading, sessions of sharing and discussing, and sessions of fabulating. These activities were engaged in iteratively several times a week (see Figure 1). During the first half of the process, reading accounted for a greater share of our work, alongside regular sessions of sharing and discussion; while in the second half, fabulating took precedence instead. In the following three subsections, we describe each of these activities in more detail. It is important to note that the exact process was not premeditated, but emerged naturally through mutual curiosity and a desire to expand our ontological position through fabulating.

6.1 Individual Readings

The individual readings were twofold: (1) Reading Escobar and de la Cadena’s work supplemented with other de-colonial and feminist scholars; and (2) reading about Nordic mythology and folklore in books and on webpages. Nordic mythology and folklore was merely chosen because of our cultural context, and would change depending on the person conducting a similar experiment.

Our inquiry was carried out as an exploration guided by an intent to locate traces of relational thinking rather than to produce an exhaustive historical account of the pre-Christian Scandinavia. As such, our search is both partial and fallible. Inspired by Arendt [1], we dived for “the pearls and the corals” to retrieve relational fragments from Nordic mythology and folklore, seeking elements that could be revitalized and reinterpreted within a fabulation. As previously mentioned, we were already familiar with the stories and characters in Nordic mythology, having grown up with them in school curricula and popular media. It is therefore important to note that being informed by Escobar and de la Cadena’s work, but also many others, such as Le Guin’s and Haraway’s work, was what enabled us to recognize and interpret the under-seen and unseen relational elements.

6.2 Sessions of Sharing and Discussing

Several times a week, we shared and discussed what we had read, often on walks. In these talks, we practised what we call *talking*

in stories, by which we mean two things: (1) using story elements from our “mental images” and fictional narratives to make sense of the world [40], and (2) telling stories ‘automatically’ by constantly asking: *What if this happened?* or *What does that mean?* as a means to adhere a narrative together. Talking in stories was a part of interpreting the relational elements we had found, while also exploring how these elements could take shape into larger narratives or fabulations.

6.3 Sessions of Fabulating

After reading and having conversations, we possessed an urgency to write and expand on what saplings of stories we each held. After collecting notes, ideas, and fragments of stories in physical notebooks, post-its, and voice memos, the main writing was performed in a shared online document on Google Docs. We started having sessions of sitting together while writing small pieces of fabulations; sometimes writing solo, and other times collaboratively writing on the same piece. Often times, one author continued the other’s story. Throughout this part of the process, the reading and discussing still took place, and thus all the activities continuously informed each other. We initially wrote ten separate fabulations, from which we chose to expand five and weave into a combined narrative, as showcased in our previous work [40].

6.4 Co-Labouring and Not-Knowing through Ambiguity

In crafting the fabulations, we intentionally made use of poetic language, introducing gaps and suspensions in our own story and not filling in all the spaces. This intentional ambiguity is a basic element to help spark imagination, as it requires the reader (and the writer) to interpret and find their own meaning within them while avoiding delivering a prescription [39]. It helped us resist the illusion of objective truth and enabled us to co-create the imagined worlds by allowing each author to imagine it differently while still agreeing on its existence. This type of co-creation became an exercise in *co-labouring*, as multiple fabulated worlds could co-exist simultaneously.

Ambiguity was especially helpful when engaging with spiritual-ity and more-than-human relations, since encompassing strange and foreign *Umwelts* (how a being experiences the world [3]) is hardly possible through language and phenomenology that sticks to Western logics of categorization. The ambiguous nature of our critical fabulation facilitated the openness of *not knowing* as the epistemological framework needed to address relationality. Reading cannot fully convey the embodied experience that happens during writing [51], as may be the case with reading this critical fabulation; but this is precisely the point: language, as one of the possible tools for fabulation, should not serve as a definitive vessel, but as a tool that opens space for imagination, reflection, and relational meaning-making.

Ultimately, our approach reflects a designerly, research-through-design learning process that enables imagination, exploration, and criticality around relatively abstract concepts, such as ontologies, PCZs and relationality, allowing us to develop situated mental images and embodied understandings of these to bring into our own practices. In a quite literal sense, this is a process of re-storying,

taking parts of our cultural and local histories and weaving them into new narratives. This designerly approach comprised two main moves, namely, a critical and an affirmative one. Concretely, it facilitated (1) critiquing the dominant patriarchal readings of these myths, exposing their limitations and challenging the narratives that have erased their relational dimensions; and (2) allowing us to go beyond critique and actively reimagine radical alternatives, affirming and bringing to light the relational possibilities these pearls and corals still hold [23, 35, 39, 42].

7 Situated Reflections on Designing Relationally

“I’ll make my report as if I told a story, for I was taught as a child on my home world that Truth is a matter of imagination.’ ... And Truth is not what it at first appeared to be. Let me explain. I would like to tell you the story of when I finally left the city to visit my grandparents’ place in the far North, only to never return. Or maybe to return twofold...” [40]

Throughout our fabulations, we, the authors, ‘travelled’ through the tapestry of life to experience various scenes of Nordic relationality. This provided rooted personal insights into relationality situated within our Nordic ancestry and personal life experiences. The first thread, from Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Left Hand of Darkness* [30, p. 1], was a seed for our story, and presents a discussion on the subjectivity of the often depicted objective truth through instruments such as the belief in Science [13]. We clustered our discoveries from generating the fabulation into six interconnected themes: 1. Pluriversal Contact Zones as Interwoven Tapestries of Tensions and Contradictions; 2. Non-Dualism in the Muddy In-Between; 3. Queering & Walking in the Muddy In-Between; 4. Reciprocity & Cycles of the Wheel of the Year; 5. Spiritual Care & Invisible Cohabitants; and 6. Animism & Material Agency.

In the following paragraphs, the six themes that emerged through prototyping our critical fabulation are unfolded with a presentation of elements from Nordic mythology and folklore, accompanied by excerpts from the fabulation. The critical fabulation has been presented recently to the international research design community (see [40]). The fabulations explore multiple interpretations of being in and/or designing as a PCZ. It is pivotal to note that these insights are not definitive conclusions, but critical self-assessments and new mental images that will help inform our future design practices towards designing relationally. This exercise of fabulation allowed us to explore alternative imaginaries in which pre-modern traditional understandings of relationality could emerge, and to identify both their generative potentials as well as their potential limitations for personally exploring situated forms of relational designing.

7.1 Pluriversal Contact Zones as Interwoven Tapestries of Tensions & Contradictions

Guided by the weavers of fate, the three Norns: Urðr (that, which once was); Verðandi (that, which is becoming); and Skuld (that, which shall become) [44], we came to understand PCZs as interwoven tapestries of tensions and contradictions. In our fabulation, these took form as three inconceivable ledgers woven by the Norns. Inspired by Hartman’s *Venus in Two Acts* [23], ledgers reflect a

tension between the entangled (tapestry of) reality and the illusion of objective historical data, for example, found in historical book-keeping ledgers. Like ledgers, PCZs are entangled and situated in broader realities and are inseparable from their surrounding context, each containing a different story (or multiple stories) with a different nature (or several).

In Nordic cosmology, a person's fate is interwoven into the tapestry of existence at birth, humbling the modern ego and supporting an acceptance of the mundane and a less individualistic path, entangled with the world. This requires approaching PCZs with respect and humility, acknowledging each other's "fates" as interwoven into the same tapestry of life, while coming from, and continuing along, different threads in the fabric. When designing with/in a PCZ, we found it important to invoke a sense of curiosity, while anyone who enters should be ready to come to terms with the fact of *not knowing*.



Figure 2: Material recreation of an inconceivable ledger from the fabulation with a tightly-knit cover.

7.2 Non-Dualism in the Muddy In-between

"I was sinking, no, swimming - in a space that was neither solid nor fluid, guided by [the voice of] Verðandi: "You see, here, we swim around in the mud, full of messiness and the contradictions of life. Can you feel it simmer on your skin? We are in the in-between. Chaos and Cosmos, or Order and Un-order as we sometimes call it, are in everything, everywhere. [...] It is muddy. I know it can feel heavy and suffocating sometimes, but if we accept the messy and entangled flows of the complexities, it can feel soft, flexible, and meaningful. The worst thing you can do here is to force Order. That will break you. Eventually, everything around you will become stiff and stagnant, and you will dry up with it. When it all breaks - and it will at some point - you will break with it. Instead, try holding the paradoxes inside you. Well, yes, I admit that that can also break you. It is all very unpredictable

in here, so just try and flow with it all. Enjoy the thickness of the mud. Come, let's swim over here, there's something I want to show you. [...]" [40]

Nordic mythology has a foundational cosmology of Cosmos (order) and Chaos (un-order), in which everything is co-constituted by the perpetual tension and negotiation between the two; where the world is becoming with and in its tensions [43]. This logic rejects binary opposition, favouring a both/and paradigm rather than an either/or dichotomy [15]. We need to accept that we have to continuously work with/in the problems [27]: Chaos and Cosmos are entangled and cannot be separated, and should not exist in purely one form or the other. Ragnarok, the apocalypse event, is caused by Chaos overwhelming Cosmos and becoming all-encompassing, at which point, the world ends. We drew inspiration from Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* [21] by looking at the 'muddy in-between' and accepting that reality is thick and muddy. Yet, instead of fleeing it, we need to learn to work—or swim—with(in) it by recognizing that our globalized present is entangled and muddy, resulting in different contact zones constantly forming. However, not all contact zones are pluriversal. Designing relationally means seeking to foster pluriversality by allowing messiness and nuanced tensions to exist rather than erasing them, including avoiding dichotomies and embracing paradoxes as generative friction by understanding the world as muddy, layered, and full of contradictions that do not negate each other [32].

Chaos and Cosmos has become a familiar embodied imagery of balancing, rather than binary extremes, that helps us to approach excess, to stay with the trouble, and find comfort in the in-betweenness. This imagery helps us understand reality's issues *inside* the mud, reminding us that our systems must be designed to move with complexities rather than reduce them to binaries.

7.3 Queering & Walking in the Muddy In-Between

Loke, a complex figure in Nordic mythology, embodies a multiplicity of identities, defying fixed categorizations, resisting binary gender roles, and introduces an element of unpredictability, essentially queering the world of Nordic mythology and enabling transformation [31]. Loke becomes the 'walker' of this in-betweenness, a kind of liminal space. We see this as necessary for "designing pluriversally [...] with/in/from a world of many worlds" (proposition 1). Loke often takes on the role of the instigator of action and becomes a force that propels movement and exploration of the unknown.

... Loke walks. Neither male nor female, not both, and not neither. A god, but also a Jættir. An embodiment of the balance in the tension between Chaos and Cosmos. [...] When Balder, the epitome of all 'good' in the worlds, was murdered by the Mistletoe, was it really Loke's fault? [...] By removing Loke, the walker between worlds, we removed the friction. We became blind to walk the forest, never to leave our city.

We take the idea of being a walker between worlds into our practices, remembering to allow conflict and to bring a sense of queerness. It is both balancing and disrupting: It challenges norms and moves fluidly between perspectives, thriving in *not knowing*. This enables us to navigate complexities rather than erasing friction.

We recognize that PCZs can take on many forms: Like Loke walking the liminal space, the PCZs resist rigid categorization.

7.4 Reciprocity & Cycles of the Wheel of the Year

The pre-Christian Scandinavia followed a cyclical temporality based on the Wheel of the Year, divided into eight segments, each marked by a seasonal shift and an associated celebration, contrasting the modern linear perception of time [4, 26]. Here, rituals like Blót were carried out as communal celebrations to help the gods and reinforce reciprocity with the more-than-human world [34]. This was important since the relationship with a living world was not solely reverential but also encompassed fear and awe towards the mysterious beings and harsh environments. Among these beings were the Landvættir (nature spirits and other beings) and the Jættir (dangerous giants), whose presence shaped human experiences [25, 45]. These ceremonies can be seen as regenerative practices affirming the dependence on divine and ecological forces while also strengthening social bonds in the community. A relationship that builds on care and kinship with our planet—a planet that strongly reacts to our modern ways of living—is necessary in our search to re-find belonging to the Earth [21, 28].

Our fabulation explores a radical and relational future with communities that focus on transitioning from a toxic into a healing existence by ritualistically practising interdependence, care, and reciprocity, by communing with Yggdrasil, the Tree of Life, in rooting the community. This was a literal exploration of what it means to oppose the modern “desarraigo (uprootedness) from body, place, and landscape” (proposition 6). In Nordic cosmology, the universe consists of nine interconnected worlds with blurry boundaries between them [18]. These realms exist in a dynamic, relational network connected through Yggdrasil, forming a kind of living infrastructure between everything.

“... Elders, adults, young, and children come together beneath the ancient ash tree, its roots tangled deep into the bones of the Earth. Yggdrasil’s bark hums faintly, whispering forgotten songs to those who will listen.” [40]

This gave us insight into what designing for entanglement and re-rooting might entail. Here, it means to cultivate human-to-human relationships as well as human-to-non-human (and possibly non-human-to-non-human). Yggdrasil’s undefined and complex function of connecting multiple worlds gives us an image of how PCZs are blurry in their construction: individuals in a PCZ become entangled with their aligning intentions, while these still encompass different ontologies and worlding practices. PCZs become the living infrastructures between worlds. It makes us ask: Can communal rituals be a way to access PCZs?

7.5 Spiritual Care & Invisible Cohabitants

“With her hand, [the woman] gently touched the wall. ‘What do you need?’ she quietly asked, ‘You seem unhappy these days.’ There was no clear answer from the wall, but still, she sensed it was time for mending with the spirits of the home, the ‘gnomes’. [Later], when her hands touched the yarn, she felt it. ‘Of course,’

she whispered, ‘the gnomes require an atmosphere of love.’ As she knitted, each stitch with careful kindness, she realised that she was not only knitting for the lady; she was knitting for the gnomes and herself. As she knitted, she felt the gnomes’ warmth. It felt meaningful, and from then on, she would lovingly respond when the gnomes called for her attention and care, and they, in turn, would help the family feel safe.” [40]

We get a glimpse of what spiritual “care” could mean [37] through relational practices with household spirits (gnomes). The Nordic myths reflect a respect for non-human entities, suggesting that people “felt at home in a world of aliveness” (proposition 8). It was important to maintain a good relationship with the non-humans, the spiritual, and the divine, which was nurtured through rituals and offerings. One such practice involved making offerings to the gnomes, spirit-beings believed to protect the home from external forces [45]. If neglected or disrespected, however, they could become mischievous, bringing misfortune. This PCZ exists between the objectivist world and the spiritual, suggesting that care, maintenance, and repair could contain spiritual dimensions. These practices align with a transition into feminine politics of care (proposition 9) and advocate for more attuned design that helps us slow down [46]. However, a tension arises: Does representing gnomes through energy, warmth, and emotions translate their existence into a Western rationalist framework? Or does it reclaim an alienated relational practice?

Later in the fabulation, we bring spirituality into focus as a collective grounding force. A community’s seasonal rituals serve as a critique of our disconnected, linear temporalities and way of life. With this, we also ask ourselves: Do spiritual community rituals still have a place in our society? Can technology become a meaningful bridge between us, the more-than-human, and the spiritual?

“The völva, a seeress and village shaman, kneels at the base of the great tree and plants her staff deep in the soil. Her hands wrap around the staff, and its engravings light up as electrical impulses are sent from the net of roots, via the staff, into her body. Her spiritual helpers’ song cuts through the air and becomes one with the wind and the murmurs of the forest. Her trance spills over and extends to all, connecting everyone deeper to the non-human wisdom among us. In this state, we feel the unity in our differences. [After the ceremony] children and other curious souls gather around the völva to feel the roots through her staff with their own bodies.” [40]

By integrating spirituality into our design practice [15], we believe it will be easier to bridge the onto-epistemic barrier for designing relationally, including embracing a more-than-human centred design practice.

7.6 Animism & Material Agency

Animism is ever-present in Nordic mythology. Everything was understood to be alive. Non-human entities such as metal, fire, plants, and animals have often been depicted as being alive, autonomous, and agential [18]. In a Solarpunk-esque scenario where patchwork

aesthetics carry traces of each material's previous lives, we explored what animism means to designing beyond the era of mass production for both the designer and the materials that need to be used repeatedly. The present animism would require the designer to surrender to the material, let it be in control, and gain humility towards the material as a non-human actor:

... I ask the steel what it thinks of the plan. I think it approves because it cheerfully bends along with my twisting hands. Ours is a delicate relationship as we don't speak the same language. We do share a language, though. A non-spoken language of embodiment, of being material. Full of unknowns but still rich with exchanges. We craft together to break down the myth of boundaries between artificial and natural. Our new form carries an aesthetic of patchwork. A mesh of old abundance in reused materials of new ideas. I try to hear what the steel wants to become, once one among thousands of identical twins now in a mesh of uniqueness and plurality. Weaved in new conjunctions with others of similar but different fates.

The introduced animism highlighted a new blind spot in our practice, and we had to ask: What constitutes a functioning Pluriversal Contact Zone? The translation of the material's will and consent is happening on a range of assumptions of the designer. There are undertones of the Western habit of imperialistic, hegemonic design and its overruling of local cultures, and in this case, forcing an ignorant translation of something outside our understanding, while also failing to become non-object-centred (proposition 3). In a way, this contention reflects de la Cadena's observation that one never fully achieves Excess, even when immersed in non-modern ontologies for long periods of time, showing that a PCZ acts as a site of mutual exchange and convergence, only to diverge again afterwards. A critical question arises: Does it risk feeding into the modern ego of believing you understand 'others' whilst you have only got a glimpse into another world? Here, the fabulation helped us gain insight into one of design's criticalities (e.g., executing control over non-humans) and potentials (e.g., redefining aesthetics and production/consumption culture).

8 Discussion: Critical Fabulations as a Tool to Re-Work Ontology

We experimented with critical fabulation as a tool to ontologically detach from modernity. As Escobar et al. [15] argue, thinking ontologically is an important analytical move when working within Western contexts, as it reveals how deep-seated our assumptions are and why transformative revisions must be more than ideological shifts. By using critical fabulations, we attempted to work with our ontology "as a conceptual raw material" [11, p. 5], possibly embodying a deeper "ontological turn" [13]. It was useful as a designerly tool because it afforded interrogating the status quo and intervening with our own imagination, opening other possible futures by playing with parts of "the real and the implausible" [39, p. 17]. It enabled engagement with anthropological and philosophical frameworks, theoretical design concepts, and Nordic traditional cosmology through a reflective, imaginative, and embodied lens.

Fabulating functioned as an embodied tool, as in the moment we authored the story, it felt as if we were experiencing and acting it out, which aligns our experience with Rosner's work [39]. In the act of fabulating, it is important that the reflection does not become "an abstract, disembodied activity" but turns into "an embodied (mindful), open-ended reflection" [51], especially when fabulating critically on something as sensitive and urgent as designing for the pluriverse. We believe that the recurrent and prolonged engagement has been pivotal, as it allowed the embodied images that emerged to entangle into our everyday lives in ways that blurred the boundaries between reality and fiction, slowly expanding our ontological limits. At home, we started to feel the presence of a gnome and indeed the connection felt strengthened through activities of care, like knitting, cleaning, or feeding the sourdough starter. An animistic perception of the world is slowly maturing while not negating our scientific understanding—the two can beautifully co-exist, just as different ontologies can in a well-functioning PCZ. Our embodied image of Chaos and Order in the muddy in-between is used daily in making sense of the world.

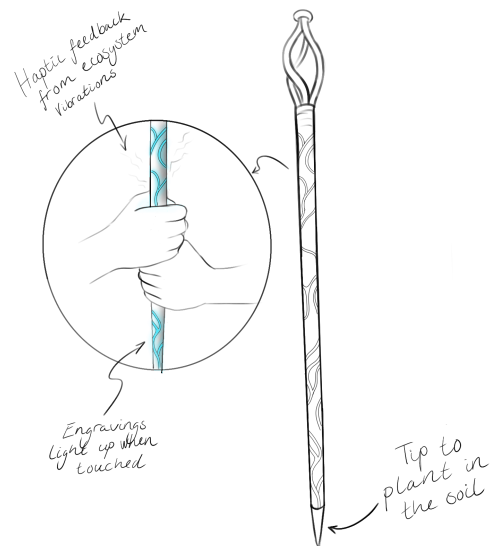


Figure 3: A sketch of an idea for material design, inspired by our fabulations. The sketch portrays a Völva's staff, used to connect to the surrounding ecosystem by translating Earthly vibrations into haptic feedback.

While we partook in collaborative imagination and fabulation, it happened that it triggered a new sense of urgency to engage with material co-speculations. One time, this urge hatched a physical artefact (see Figure 2), and at another time a drawing of what our speculations could look like if we were to create material manifestations (see Figure 3). This reinforces our belief that fabulations can serve as a generative starting point for material-making processes. Through fabulating, through prolonged engagement and attention, we had the possibility to access understandings of relationality that have been oppressed by the modern episteme within our traditional culture; tracing for us a situated way to design relationally. However, while we are experiencing a gradual, idiotic, imperfect,

and fallible ontological shift in our own understanding of what it means for us to design relationally, we are also uncovering new blind spots and realizing that our imaginaries remain shaped by Western paradigms, revealing how difficult it is to fully step into pluriversal perspectives.

This research aligns with what Heitlinger and colleagues [24] describe as the Entanglement lineage of Participatory Design, “with branches in care-based and co-ontological being”. Work in this lineage includes a philosophical undertaking in which embracing more-than-human relationalities is central. Although what we are proposing is not directly a participatory method, this work contributes to Participatory Design by showing a way of engaging with such a philosophical undertaking to re-orient one’s ontological position to provide another starting point for participatory practices. Potentially, this approach can also be used in participatory design processes; however, this is yet to be tested. This has been an example of a situated engagement through which we were able to question modern/colonial and anthropocentric assumptions embedded in our own practice and ontology, and to cultivate more relational ways of understanding participation as something that emerges from existing entanglements. In this way, the work can be understood as a model that might hold transferable—rather than generalizable—knowledge for designers who want to re-orient their practice towards situated relationality. This is important, since there is no universal way of designing relationally.

9 Conclusion

This paper presents critical fabulations as a prototype of how to engage with relational practices beyond Design-as-Modern, informed by relational thinking coming from an alternative West. This work contributes to ongoing discussions on how designers can engage with situated, embodied, and partial perspectives on designing pluriversally and relationally in a way that resists appropriation and universalism. However, we acknowledge the fact that the risk is always there, as we are embedded in the Modern.

This work operates on two moves, (1) critiquing the inherent colonial, patriarchal, and anthropocentric underpinnings of design and questioning its dominant narratives and (2) opening up possibilities for imagining radical alternatives for designing to engage in non-colonial, non-patriarchal, and non-anthropocentric ways of thinking and acting. We argue that critical fabulations can function as a tool to support expanding the ontology of designers through being an embodied and intimate experience. Through our critical fabulation, we have attempted to retrieve and reinterpret past traditional relational knowledges and practices by drawing on traces from Nordic mythology and folklore that have been obscured and silenced by the modern episteme and its instrumental reading of Nordic mythology. We have positioned this process with Escobar & de la Cadena’s [14] propositions for Pluriversal design and Pluriversal Contact Zones as a starting point. Supported by de la Cadena’s epistemic stance of *not knowing*, we took on the attitude of the *Idiot* designer, meaning we know that we do not know and can fail. Therefore, we acknowledge that the relationality we have accessed through the fabulation is idiotic, muddy, and entangled with the Modern; making the act of fabulating a Pluriversal Contact Zone in itself.

Our process functioned as a designerly co-labouring, allowing knowledge to emerge through engagement with relational traces. This helped us embed ideas of relationality that originated from our traditional culture. These alternatives can serve as a compass for our future practices in designing. Importantly, the aim was not to create a universally applicable method or fixed outcome, but rather to prototype on how to distil relational knowledge from our own positionality to guide our ongoing designerly orientation beyond modern constraints. Our exploration yielded different interpretations of being in and designing as/for a PCZ. Six themes emerged that will help continuously inform our design practice: 1. Pluriversal Contact Zones as Interwoven Tapestries of Tensions & Contradictions; 2. Non-Dualism in the Muddy In-Between; 3. Queering & Walking in the Muddy In-Between; 4. Reciprocity & Cycles of the Wheel of the Year; 5. Spiritual Care & Invisible Cohabitants; and 6. Animism & Material Agency.

By sharing these insights with the Participatory Design community, we invite others to undertake their own journeys of exploration, engaging with critical fabulation and their traditional knowledges from their unique positionalities, to similarly orient their design practices toward relational possibilities beyond modernity. We thus see this work as an open invitation, encouraging others to co-labour, critically reflect, and collectively discover pathways toward more pluriversal and relational ways of designing. In learning to design relationally, we believe that facing conflict internally is foundational, whereby we must also acknowledge the many blind spots existing in our current imaginaries.

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