

—| futures reframed

Darkness Reframed in Future Studies

Review Synthesis: *'Living-with' Transformative Change: Exploring Affective Entanglements When Working Towards More Just and Sustainable Futures*

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Reflection Emily:

I found this article thoughtful and engaging, and I think it has the potential to make a valuable contribution. The topic is important, and the paper raises questions that feel timely and relevant. At the same time, I think there are several areas where the argument could be strengthened further. My comments below are intended in that spirit.

1. *Positionality and collective autoethnography*

Because the paper is framed as a collective autoethnography, I think it would help the reader to understand more clearly who the authors are in relation to the project. Throughout the article, the term “we” is used often, but it is not always clear who this refers to in a concrete sense. I found myself wanting more detail on the positionality of the authors and how their different standpoints shape the analysis.

For instance, it may be useful to say more about the authors’ social and geographic locations, their relationship to the method, and their connection to the literature they draw on. I do not mean that every personal detail needs to be included, but some clearer sense of who is involved in this collective “we” would help readers better understand how the analysis is being formed.

2. *Key concepts would benefit from clearer definition*

There are several important concepts used in the paper that would benefit from more explicit definition within the text itself. At times I found myself unsure how certain terms were being used analytically. Examples include “transformative change,” “storying,” and “multispecies.”

“Storying” in particular seems central, and I think the paper would be stronger if the authors clarified how they understand this term. How does storying differ, in their view, from narration, narrative, or storytelling? Is it being used as a method, a conceptual approach, or both?

I was also interested in the mention of “multispecies,” but it seemed to appear only briefly and was not fully connected to the rest of the paper. This left me curious about why it was included and what work it is doing in the argument. Since this is a rich and specific body of scholarship, it may help either to develop this point further or to clarify its relevance more directly.

3. *“Staying with the trouble” needs a little more unpacking*

I appreciated the use of “staying with the trouble,” and I agree that it is a productive concept for this kind of work. At the same time, I think the paper assumes a familiarity with Haraway’s text that some readers may not have. It may help to explain more clearly what the phrase means in this article and how the authors are using it in relation to their own project.

This feels particularly important because the meaning of “staying with the trouble” can shift across contexts. In my own work, for example, I use it to think about the discomfort of living with flooding in places repeatedly hit by disasters linked to the climate crisis, where no easy repair is possible. In this article, I wanted a clearer sense of what “staying with the trouble” looks like for the authors. What kind of trouble are they staying with, and how are they engaging it?

Related to this, the article seems to rely quite heavily on Verlie's work. This scholarship is clearly relevant, but the argument may become stronger through a broader engagement with the literature alongside it.

4. *Emotional demand could be developed further*

The paper notes that transformation can be emotionally demanding, which feels like an important point, especially given the article's attention to affect. I would have liked to see this developed in more detail. What makes this process emotionally demanding in this case? How does that demand show up in practice? More reflection here would deepen the discussion and help readers understand the affective dimensions of transformation more clearly.

5. *Temporal differences in engagement seem important*

I was also interested in the temporal differences between participants, especially around the shrine activity. Some authors seem to have completed this quite quickly, while others took much longer. This struck me as potentially meaningful, and I wondered whether the paper might reflect more on what shaped these differences.

For example, were they related to grief, vulnerability, discomfort, or emotional readiness? Or were they more practical, such as differences in time availability? Even a brief discussion of this would help the reader understand how participation unfolded across the group.

6. *Some structural points could be clarified earlier*

Finally, I think the paper would benefit from some structural tightening. There were moments where key ideas or methods were introduced relatively late, which made the argument harder to follow. For example, the reader does not learn what a cultural probe is until page 9. Bringing this kind of methodological explanation earlier into the paper would help orient the reader and make the later analysis easier to engage.

Overall, I think this is a promising paper with a compelling topic and a strong foundation. My sense is that it would benefit from clearer definitions of its core concepts, more attention to positionality, and a little more development of some of its central analytic claims. I also think some restructuring would help readers follow the argument more easily from the outset.

Reflection Maïen:

7. *Types of transformative changes*

I am very intrigued by the transformative changes that are studied in the manuscript and how they are reflected upon by the authors/participants of the study. In the beginning of the introduction, it seems like the transformative changes meant are on a societal level (e.g., p.4: "transformations toward more just and sustainable futures or predicted collapses of environments and civilizations), moving to a stance that work within ("inner work") may be needed for transformative change on the outside (p. 7) - already highlighting a tension between work on a more individual vs. societal level. On page 8, the authors state "To live-with means recognizing that we are not outside of transformation but within it, shaping and being shaped by its unfolding in every moment of our life", which, for me, would be much easier to understand if it was put into context: (1) What kind of transformative changes are the authors working on? (2) What transformative changes are they experiencing, are they "living-within"? And (3) how does this translate into their everyday lives?

While the tension between inner work and societal change is also shortly discussed in the discussion, I would be interested in learning more about the authors' experience with this tension: What were their reflections of doing inner work/taking space to "live-with", on their engagement with broader societal transformations? Relatedly, it would be valuable to know how the cultural probe was framed for the authors: Was the transformative moment in step 3 "Encountering" to be seen as a moment of transformation of the individual, of a moment in which they noticed societal transformation, or was this not framed/described at all? Depending on these instructions, different transformative moments may have been chosen that could potentially influence the emergent reflections of the authors (e.g., which emotions were central, how were the emotions experienced and reflected upon).

8. *Tensions between individual/collective/societal change*

Related to this point, the tensions between individual, collective and societal change and -work could be elaborated on even more. Especially given the type of exercise the authors engaged in and reflected upon, I think it would be valuable to describe in more detail how the different levels from individual to societal (change) may have played a role in choosing the exercise, and subsequently influenced emergent reflections. More specifically, the authors engaged in an exercise individually, but they might have been prompted to (collectively) reflect through the interviews, and the writing process. I assume that quite different insights might have been gathered if the exercise would have been more collective of nature, and would be interested in reflections on this by the authors, especially because some of them have experience with such design work in group processes it appears. And while it was mentioned in the discussion that some authors noted they might have preferred some collective exercise, I think it would be worthwhile to reflect on how this might have influenced the outcomes. This seems especially relevant in the contexts these exercises might be relevant, such as education settings, or when working with groups that are actively engaged in bringing about transformative changes.

9. *Cultural probes and design choices*

I would appreciate an earlier and clearer definition of “cultural probes” in the manuscript. I was not familiar with the term and found myself guessing what it referred to until p. 9. It might also help to briefly clarify what “culture” refers to here. Is “cultural probes” used as a general methodological term (even when not directly exploring different cultures), or is there a specific understanding of culture that is relevant to this study?

In addition, some of the methodological choices could be explained in more detail:

- Why was “letting go” chosen as the theme for the cultural probe?
- How is “letting go” related to the transformative moment that participants were prompted to engage with?
- How did the authors relate to the use of shrines? Could other design choices have been considered - perhaps ones less influenced by current life events (e.g. the loss of a loved one, as mentioned)?
- Which reflective questions were used, and how were they linked to the exploration of emotions in your transformative work contexts?
- How might the work and reflections have differed if other emotions (e.g., anger, fear) had been prompted instead of “letting go” (most likely prompting grief)?
- More detail on these points would strengthen the methodological transparency and help readers understand how specific design choices shaped the reflections and findings.

Minor point: Concerning the write up of the results, I was wondering how the different sources of information were reported: Are all the quotes stemming from the interviews, or are some of them based on reflexive notes? Would it be possible to indicate where the quotes are drawn from?

Reflection Andrew:

10. *Building a stronger link with the theme of the journal: Darkness Reframed*

Could an ‘affective entanglement’ be characterized as either dark or light? And is there a difference in how ‘dark’ affects and ‘light’ affects shape how current times are perceived, experienced, and acted upon? It would be great to read more about this. I read a claim that the global North is predisposed to ‘light’ affective entanglements and ‘the promise of happiness’. Since when? Melancholy was fashionable there during the Renaissance. Why did this change? The idea of ‘happiness duty’ triggers associations with ‘false hope’, ‘cruel optimism’ and, perhaps a little extreme, also ‘weaponization of hope by capitalism’. I read quite a long line of reasoning: If people are (i) conditioned to avoid dark affective arrangements, then they (ii) remain attached to the comforts, identities produced by (iii) the structures and cultures, which caused (iv) the challenges of our times, which could be considered consistent with (v) dark affective arrangements. Would it be helpful to illustrate it as a sort of causal loop/complex? And is it (i) the

structures and cultures, and/or (ii) the comforts, identities and/or (iii) the happiness duty that doesn't fit with the zeitgeist?

It would be interesting to reflect briefly on an example of a particular 'affective entanglement' that is related to the challenges of our times and transformative changes. For example, how does deep solidarity with those suffering directly from climate change relate to personal anxiety of researchers resulting from anticipatory loss of privilege associated with climate mitigation measures? I would like to understand how such an affective entanglement is better understood via the cultural probe method.

11. *What aspects of the challenges are becoming more tangible?*

The claim that the challenges are becoming more tangible is interesting. What are the grounds for this claim? What is making the current challenges more tangible than was previously the case? Is it the frequency, the magnitude, the awareness, ... that is making them more tangible? Is it that we are linking phenomena that were previously considered unrelated with one driver; i.e. climate change? Is it that a privileged few have space to attend to their affective entanglements? The claim that 'living with' is a form of epistemic responsibility for researchers is interesting and may deserve a spot in the abstract. Also, the link with pedagogies of collapse – across generations. The ethics are fascinating.

12. *"Staying with the trouble" needs a little more unpacking*

In addition to **comment 3**: The differences and similarities in meaning between 'living with' and 'staying with' were unclear to me during the first few pages of reading. As I read further various related terms were also introduced, including: 'living', 'dealing', 'staying', 'playing', and 'sitting' with, as well as 'facing' and 'remaining present'. We at least need to differentiate between 'living' and 'staying' with. 'Staying with' immediately triggers associations with Haraway's "Staying with the trouble." Basically, people need to accept that the world is messy, damaged, and unfinished. I understand Haraway's ethical stance of 'staying with' as a commitment to refusing escapes such as 'light' tech-fixes and 'dark' apocalypses. This might also be an interesting line of thought for strengthening the links with the 'darkness reframed' focus of our journal. Does Verlie's concept of 'living with' concern resisting (dark or light) emotional paralysis, whereas Haraway's concept of 'staying with' concerns resisting denial and (dark or light) escape narratives?

13. *Defining (the relationships between) the contemporary conditions that make this research relevant*

Related to **comment 8**: It would be helpful to the reader if we could tie together the concepts of "challenges of our times" and "sustainable futures" and "transformative changes" early in the introduction. "Transformative changes" and 'multiple challenges' are almost used as synonyms here. I understand (i) challenges to concern (ecologically, socially) unsustainable states, (ii) sustainable futures to be alternative, target states, (iii) transformative change as what is needed to move from the unsustainable to the sustainable states, and (iv) eco-anxiety is what happens when people realize that the necessary changes are not taking place. For the link with emotions, it might be interesting to differentiate between the sphere of interest and the sphere of influence/agency: Some transformations are more like initiatives towards a target future state, like the transformation of the economy to be more circular, whereas challenges could also include negative situations caused by autonomous, external developments, such as global pandemics. I can imagine that the emotional strains would differ across these types. Within the 'challenges' category the emotional strains are also likely to differ across phenomena: ecological collapse is quite a different beast to political radicalization. I imagine that there is not an implicit premise that (all) transformation is positive. Depending on the definition of transformation, this need not be problematic, but statements like "to support transformation" do raise alarm bells.

14. *Are 'probes' suitable for the purpose of witnessing?*

In addition to **comment 9**: Would it be useful to begin with the broader approach, namely "participatory and imaginative design tools" and then zoom in on cultural probes? The combination of Verlie's three 'practices' (encountering, witnessing, and storying) reminds me of

Dadirri: an Indigenous place-based research methodology (Ungunmerr-Baumann, et al. 2022), perhaps also since Verlie is Australian. Verlie's 'encounters' are embodied and situated events that are experienced and lead to the person being affected. If encountering is a deliberate practice, then it involves being aware of and open to emotional responses. Witnessing is a deliberate, ethical approach, practice, activity used during encounters. So, encountering leads to an emotional response and witnessing is an approach to resist emotional paralysis in that situation? I wonder whether 'probes' are suitable for the purpose of witnessing. They could be seen as 'self-inquiry' and maybe even therapy? And the probe materials (shrine, candles, fabric) are so important and influential that they deserve more attention, reflection in the paper. Were the chosen probe materials only justifiable because it was an autoethnographic method? How would these materials differ if it were not autoethnographic? For example, a candle could be more of a cue for grief than a probe for existing emotions, and that would be a serious methodological issue. How could the "physical and temporal space for affective-reflective practices" be made more empty, like a sort of designed absence? For example, the Ngangikurungkurr approach of Dadirri involves "stillness" and "waiting"; that is, the absence of talking and the absence of acting. In this sense, a material 'probe' is quite the opposite to a 'space'.

Dear editors and reviewers, dear Andrew, Emily and Maïen,

Thanks a lot for all the thoughts and work you put into reviewing our paper. Based on both the collective reviewer/editor comments as well as the conversation we had, we implemented the following revisions into our paper:

Revisions concerning concepts / conceptual overload and structure:

- We drastically reduced the number of concepts and made the definitions or understandings of the concepts we use clearer in the text (see, e.g. concept 'affective entanglements on page 4, 'transformative change' on page 4). We also clarified the connection between the concepts. This conceptual clean up includes removing concepts that we still love and see as connected but that do not add much more than the original concepts or that we, given the word count, cannot explain in enough detail (e.g. staying with the trouble). Since this was not a probe solely focused on loss, we removed the references that related to grief/loss, given that this created confusion. Instead, we refer to transformative changes more broadly.
- To better explain how the authors relate to the project we added an extensive positionality statement on page 11. We explained from where the research was conducted and which systems influenced the work we did.
- We build a stronger link with darkness both by referring better to it but also by adding a paragraph in the reflection & discussion section.

Revisions concerning (the practices of) living-with:

- We acknowledge that the paper strongly builds on Verlie and that Verlie's work offers nice connections to other people's work (e.g. Andriotti with Hospicing Modernity or ...). We tried incorporating other literature around living-with, however we decided that including theoretical background on other affective-reflective practices was more relevant for the general embedding of the paper. Therefore, we focused on this, instead of adding more literature expanding on the work of Verlie. If the word count would have been higher, we would definitely have added a connecting paragraph of work related.
- For the practices of encountering, witnessing and storying we added explanations of how we understood and worked with the practices in our process.

Revisions concerning the probe:

- As suggested, we introduced the probe earlier (in the introduction already on page 5) and centred it more in the whole paper.
- We also added more detail about the probe and the booklet, that is explanation of the precise instructions the participants received (see page 10).
- We made the argument more structured, that is: we try to avoid darkness in our engagements with the world, but we need to afford and train our affective-reflective practices to be able to live-with in a world that always also includes darkness (see e.g. page 5).
- While we totally get the confusion the word "cultural probe" can create, for the sake of respecting the context this word and concept originated in (also the field of the first author) we decided to stick with the original wording.
- We thought a lot about how exactly to incorporate the notes on temporality (also as the second author is working intensively around questions of temporality and temporal justice). We added some comments on temporality throughout the paper, e.g. in the positionality statement on page 11.

We hope that these revisions address the concerns raised and strengthen the paper. We hereby submit our revised article. Should you have any remaining questions or require further clarification on any of the revisions, please let us know. We look forward to hearing from you!

Kind regards,

Femke & Kristina, and all the other co-authors.

The background of the image is a complex, layered composition. It features a perspective view of a series of concrete arches that recede into the distance, creating a sense of depth. The arches are made of a light-colored, textured material, possibly stone or concrete. Above the arches, there is a distorted, wavy reflection of the scene, giving the impression of looking into a pool of water or a warped mirror. The overall color palette is muted, with shades of grey, beige, and blue. The text 'futures reframed' is overlaid on the left side of the image, in a clean, white, sans-serif font. A small white line is positioned above the letter 'f' in 'futures'.

futures reframed

‘Living-with’ Transformative Change: Exploring Affective Entanglements When Working Towards More Just and Sustainable Futures

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ABSTRACT

As the multiple challenges of our times become more tangible, so too do the emotional strains entangled with them. Emotions shape how transformative changes are perceived, experienced, and acted upon, yet many of us have been conditioned to especially avoid, escape, or seek rescue from emotions around discomfort. While affective entanglements and inner complexities in relation to transformative change are increasingly acknowledged, we often still lack concrete and tangible 'how to'. In this paper, we explore how design can offer tangible invitations for reflective-affective practices through developing and engaging with a cultural probe. Using an autoethnographic approach that positions all authors as co-researchers, we examine how material artifacts can support embodied engagement with personal emotions related to transformative change. Our engagement with the cultural probe revealed a fundamental paradox: we need practices that help us to live-with, stay with discomfort, yet the very act of creating and engaging with such practices can reproduce the conditions that prevent us from doing so. The cultural probe is offered not as a model to be standardized and replicated, but as an imperfect tool to be critically played with, adapted, refused, and transformed – an invitation to cultivate the emotional capacities transformation requires, while remaining attentive to how affective conditioning shapes our attempts to do this work.

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INTRODUCTION

“[L]earning to live-with (transformation) acknowledges that ‘the’ world is not ending, but ‘a’ world is, and that some worlds need to end in order to allow others room to breathe. Which worlds we nurture matters.” (Verlie 2022, p. 12)

As the multiple challenges of our times become more tangible – droughts and floodings, biodiversity loss, ecological collapse, poverty, political radicalisation – so too do the emotional strains entangled with them. Emotions, feelings and affects¹ shape how current times are perceived, experienced, and acted upon. As Global North societies, we are starting to feel not only the effects, but also the affects of our times (Ojala et al. 2021). These *affective entanglements* – how our emotions, bodies, and identities are co-constituted through relational, more-than-human interactions with our worlds, rather than existing as separate or purely individual states – are not merely byproducts of the changes unfolding around us (Verlie, 2022). Transformative changes are shaped by these very affective entanglements, and vice versa – whether these being transformations towards more just and sustainable futures or predicted collapses of environments and civilisations (Servant-Miklos, 2024). How we feel shapes how we experience, interpret, and act within unfolding socio-ecological changes. We shape transformations as much as they shape us (Koistinen & Teerikangas, 2021) – the affects we carry are part of the very fabric of change itself.

Yet, these affective entanglements do not emerge in a vacuum. How and what we feel, desire and fear is always conditioned by cultural norms, in particular so-called *orders of feelings* (Stodulka, 2019): socially and historically produced norms prescribing which emotions can be felt and expressed, by whom, and in what contexts. These orders have impressive functionalities for social order as they “ensure that persons and collectives “fall inline” through more or less subtle societal, economic, legal, political, cultural, and affective arrangements.” (Stodulka, 2019, p. 310). Many societies in the Global North have been conditioned to especially avoid, escape, or seek rescue from emotions around discomfort, and to gravitate towards that which validates our desires (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). Ahmed (2010) refers to this as a conditioning to fall for “the promise of happiness”, where happiness functions as a promise – a future-oriented reward that attaches itself to certain ways of living, being, and relating. This ‘happiness duty’ and the avoidance of discomfort at all costs does not equip us with the ability to sit and engage with what is often perceived as ‘darkness’. Yet this darkness – discomfort, hopelessness, loss, grief, rage, uncertainty, and the unknowns of the future – is precisely the ‘unavoidable companion’ of transformative change (Coops et al. 2024a). Western societies’ inability to live and deal with discomfort effectively works to maintain practices, cultures and structures such as exploitation of humans and more-than-humans or overconsumption and (unsustainable)

¹ When discussing affect, emotions, or feeling, we follow the tradition of the critical thinkers this paper builds on, who understand emotions as more than internal individual states, ‘just’ reactions or appraisals, ‘inside-out’ or ‘outside-in’ (Ahmed, 2013). Emotions are socially and culturally conditioned, procedural, and political (Bogner et al. 2024).

We do not engage in definitional debates about the precise distinctions between emotions, feelings and affect. Following the tradition of critical feminist thinkers as Ahmed, Butler, Head, Verlie and hooks, we recognize and appreciate that each chose different words for different, well-thought-out reasons, even when talking about similar things (see, e.g., Ahmed on why she uses emotion over affect (Schmitz & Ahmed, 2014)). For us, this reflects not definitional imprecision but rather attention to the histories of words, traditions and political positioning. Second, like Ahmed (2013), we are less interested in defining what emotion (or feeling, affect) is and more in what it does. As Dixon (2023) notes “Psychologists have continued to complain, at regular intervals, right up to the present, that “emotion” is utterly resistant to definitional efforts (Izard, 2010a, 2010b). This is hardly surprising for a term that, from the outset, was defined as being indefinable.”. Following Dixon, we take the history of the different words seriously and keep the original wording of the authors when referring to them.

production. This conditioning creates deep attachments to the comforts, securities, and identities these practices, cultures and structures provide, despite their growing misfit with the zeitgeist. We are entangled with the systems we built and inhabit, meaning we remain entangled with them even as we critique them. Thus, those working towards more just and sustainable futures may find themselves simultaneously desiring, longing for, and grieving harmful practices while aspiring to dismantle them. Machado de Oliveira (2021) refers to this as ‘inner complexities’: experiencing a multiplicity of different, sometimes seemingly contradictory emotions at the same time.

As scholars working towards more just and sustainable futures, we too are confronted with these inner complexities. Operating within the same orders of feelings and often unaware of our own inner complexities, we work in institutions infused with these conditionings. They shape research on, approaches to, and the imagination of transformative futures, manifesting itself in, amongst others, a strong ‘pro-innovation bias’ (Godin & Vinck, 2017): innovation is framed as the problem-solver, technology as salvation, and transformation as the avoidance of discomfort. Scholarly practice often reinforces this distancing. We have been trained to teach and research transformations as if we ourselves are not part of unfolding changes, risking what Haraway calls the God trick of “seeing everything from nowhere” (Haraway, 1988, p. 581), creating an academic disengagement with the worlds we study. As a result, we risk interpreting transformations as external phenomena – as technologically solvable innovation challenges rather than relational processes that also require grieving and letting go (Coops et al., 2024a). When we fail to recognise and acknowledge how orders of feelings shape our emotions in and about transformative change – and that we too are conditioned to avoid discomfort in imagining and working towards futures – we become ill-equipped to navigate inner complexities, both our own, but also those of the people we work with: be it our students, colleagues or other stakeholders. This has consequences for 1) how we engage with the many ongoing transformative changes we have no choice but to face, such as climate change and biodiversity loss and 2) our ability to work towards transformative changes that we aspire, such as more just and sustainable production and consumption, which themselves require embracing losses and letting go.

Encouragingly, these challenges have not gone unnoticed. Recognising the important role of emotions and difficulties in engaging with them has prompted growing awareness of and research on emotions in transformations (e.g., Feola & Jaworska, 2019; Martiskainen & Sovacool, 2021). This includes the recognition that transformative change also requires cultivating emotional capacities and practices alongside analytical ones, especially in relation to loss and letting go (e.g., Bogner et al., 2024; Coops et al., 2024a). In this context, a variety of concepts, frameworks, ideas and practices around ‘inner emotional work’ has emerged, building on different strands of literature and practices. Yet while affective entanglements and inner complexities are increasingly acknowledged, and inner emotional work is increasingly called for, we often still lack a concrete and tangible ‘how to’. That is: situated practices, materials or rituals for practicing staying with discomfort. Many frameworks offer conceptual ideas and reflective questions but rarely provide tangible objects or spaces that help us afford these practices and navigate accompanying emotions. However, inner emotional work can never only be a conceptual call – it is an exercise that requires practice(s). As Machado de Oliveira (2021) explains, such practices are “like training for a marathon, this process requires us to use muscles that most of us have neglected – and in some cases, that we don’t even know we have”. Scholars

hoping to “stay with the trouble” (Haraway, 2020) face the lack of concrete practices and tools for doing so themselves, with their students or with their societal partners, especially given the emotional conditioning commonly affirmed in academia.

As authors, we see engaging with these practices ourselves as essential. Our affective entanglements and inner complexities directly shape how we as scholars imagine, desire and shape futures through our work; ignoring them risks inadvertently reproducing dominant (affective) patterns in research and practice. We see attending to our own affective entanglements as a form of epistemic responsibility, shaping the integrity and relationality of our research practices. Moreover, before asking, e.g. students, research participants or stakeholders to engage with their affective entanglements, we feel the responsibility of having experienced it ourselves.

Therefore, in this paper, we ask:

How can we, as transformation scholars, learn to ‘live-with’ transformations? How can design (research) help us in practicing to ‘live-with’ transformations?

To address these questions, we build on the work of Blanche Verlie (2022) around ‘living-with’ – paying attention to the intimate ways we are emotionally enmeshed with transformations, involving “the cultivation of appropriate ways of relating to and engaging that world” (p. 114), “continuing to act for a future which is desirable despite being different” (p. 114), and, most importantly, developing “practices of bearing worlds: enduring the pain of the end of the world (we) have known, and labouring to generate promising alternatives” (p. 113). Describing transformations as ‘living-with’ allows us to see and experience them as “patterns of affect; as flows of feeling; as repertoires of relating; as a sensational phenomenon; as multispecies enmeshment” (Verlie 2022, p. 6). This understanding foregrounds the cultivation of capacities and practices that allow people to stay with discomfort, ambiguity, and loss without retreating into denial or paralysis. Aiming to translate Verlie’s work into an actionable and tangible practice, we explore how the design of a cultural probe can offer concrete invitations to practice emotional capacities in embodied, situated ways.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The growing attention to ‘inner’ life, emotions and ‘inner’ emotional work in research around societal transformations has sparked debates around how change unfolds within and through us and how that supports ‘outer’ change² (see, e.g., Global Grassroots, n.d.; Inner Development Goals, n.d.; Ives et al., 2023; Wamsler et al., 2021; Bristow et al., 2024). Research informed by inner-outer transformation perspectives explores different dimensions that involve individual and collective mindsets, values, beliefs, worldviews, and associated human qualities and capacities, and investigates how to nurture this inner ‘potential’ to support transformation across individual, collective, and systems levels (Wamsler et al., 2021; Ives et al., 2023). Across scholarly, activist, professional coaching and educational contexts, there is a shared recognition that cultivating (reflective) practices around our affective entanglements and inner complexities is essential for facing, navigating and shaping transformative change. Simultaneously, there is a growing recognition that ignoring these entanglements may

² We do not see inner and outer dimensions of emotional work as binary and separate but only use the wording in this paper to be able to refer to what we did and why. We recognise how the disciplinary splits, e.g. between psychology and sociology, have often overstated the separateness of these dimensions, while empirical efforts consistently challenge it (Wamsler et al. 2021).

threaten the wellbeing and ability to work of those involved, as evident through growing research on eco-anxiety (Ojala et al. 2021, Verlie 2022).

In this paper, we use the term 'affective-reflective practices' to describe the intentional engagement with one's inner world: becoming aware of, understanding, and constructively engaging with one's emotions to foster reflection and regulation, with the goal of being able to meaningfully contribute to 'outer' change (Global Grassroots n.d). Importantly, inner work is never solely about 'the emotional', but also encompasses the imaginal, spiritual, relational and other dimensions. Crucially, we understand inner work not as an exclusively 'individual' or self-centred endeavour, but as a relational and political practice that enables individuals and collectives to remain present with discomfort, loss, and uncertainty, while acting with greater integrity and care in the 'outside' world towards more just and sustainable futures.

Within this growing field of 'inner work', scholars and practitioners have developed diverse approaches. We identify three broad approaches that differ in their scholarly grounding and engagement with materiality.

First, there are contributions that engage deeply with the conceptual and political dimensions of inner work as supportive and necessary for transformative change, often rooted in critical pedagogies and feminist studies, see, e.g. Freire (2021). More contemporary research on sustainability, climate change, or societal transformations increasingly acknowledges the often societally 'tabooed' or 'outlaw' emotions (Jagger, 1989) such as pain, grief, fear, and anxiety. Blanche Verlie (2022), for instance, conceptualises 'living-with' as a necessary practice of "bearing worlds", i.e. explicitly facing and enduring the pain of endings and learning to stay with grief, ambiguity, and hope. Servant-Miklos (2024) articulates pedagogies of collapse which invite students and educators to face systemic breakdown and uncertainty, fostering humility, care, and emotional endurance in educational practice. Vanessa Machado de Oliveira's *Hospicing Modernity* (2021) reframes inner transformation as a process of self-unmaking, requiring people to face complicity and unlearn harmful desires. Rather than aiming to "fix" what is collapsing, she calls for letting die peacefully within and around us, an affective process that dismantles habits of control and reactivates capacities for humility, accountability, and care (Machado de Oliveira, 2021). Here, emotions such as grief, fear, and shame are not seen as obstacles but as guiding us toward deeper relationality and maturity. While these perspectives offer powerful conceptual frameworks and often include reflective exercises and practices (e.g. thought experiments and questions as in Verlie (2022) and Machado de Oliveira (2021)), they typically do not engage with material components or tangible design interventions.

Second, more standardized and operationalized frameworks have emerged that seek to translate inner work into accessible tools and methods for broader application in professional and private spheres, such as, most prominently, the Inner Development Goals (IDGs) (Inner Development Goals, n.d.; Rhodes et al., 2023). The IDGs describe "inner skills" across five dimensions (Being, Thinking, Relating, Collaborating, and Acting) that bridge inner emotional work and collective transformation, and is increasingly used in educational and leadership contexts to foster empathy, complexity awareness, and courage for change (Engel & Janssen, 2023). These frameworks are often employed in workshops and organizational settings and include standardised material components such as canvases, worksheets, and facilitation tools, though they tend to be less explicitly based in critical scholarship.

Third, there is an emerging movement in design research, that bridges the critical with the tangible, connecting conceptual depth with material practice. For instance, Coops et al. (2024a, b) design ‘spaces for letting go’ in sustainability transitions, which afford engaging with the emotional dynamics of letting go, phase-outs and transformations. Lindström et al. (2024) foreground grief and uncertainty as unavoidable companions of systemic change, while Lockton et al. (2023) emphasize the use of participatory and imaginative design tools that help researchers and practitioners ‘playing with the trouble’, staying open to discomfort as a source of creativity and collective imagination. These design-oriented approaches offer a distinctive contribution: they combine critical perspectives on transformation with the creation of material artifacts, spatial interventions, and embodied practices that make inner emotional work embodied and tangible.

Engaging with this literature highlights the need for approaches that support engagement with reflective-affective practices, despite orders of feeling and emotional regimes that hinder such engagement. Design-oriented approaches are promising, in creating a ritual refuge, where participants can come into contact with aspects of their experience that are systematically sidelined. To do so requires building on insights from critical literatures, but at the same time demands specific practices and material components that invite a different way of relating to emotional landscapes. With our work, we aim to contribute to the growing body of work that bridges critical scholarship with embodied and material practices.

Living with as foundation of our affective-reflective practice

Taking the work of living-with (Verlie, 2022) as our conceptual and practical foundation to affective-reflective practice helps us illustrate that transformative change is lived, embodied, and relational. To live-with means recognizing that we are not outside of transformation but within it, shaping and being shaped by its unfolding in every moment of our life. These transformations bring a variety of emotions that we have to engage with, especially as transformations always entail ‘dying worlds’ (Verlie, 2022). Importantly, living-with is not the same as “just live with it” or “deal with it.” It is not about resignation, coping, or detachment, but an active and ongoing practice that calls for cultivating emotional and relational capacities to stay present with what is difficult, uncertain, or painful. As Verlie (2022, p. 114) writes, living-with involves the cultivation of appropriate ways of relating to and engaging in dying worlds. It is an invitation to act, sense, and care within transformation, even when futures feel fragile or unclear. As we work towards dismantling systems of oppression, we still benefit from them, are emotionally attached to them and may need to grieve them – which will inevitably create inner complexities and tensions.

Verlie’s framing resonates with our own experiences as researchers and educators. We increasingly encounter the emotional weight of transformation in our daily work; be this in class, when students express eco-anxiety and how this freezes their ability to engage in sustainability transitions (Pihkala, 2020); emotions arising when researching climate change, up until traumatic experiences (Pihkala, 2020); or when confronted with emotions of the societal groups we are engaging with (Bogner et al., 2024). Feelings of grief, frustration, or disorientation are part of our shared experience, yet academia rarely offers space to engage with them. Living-with gives us not only a language but also a practice to do so, building on three interrelated affective practices introduced by Verlie (2022) that constitute living-with: **encountering**, **witnessing**, and **storying**.

Encountering refers to facing what is difficult, such as grief, anxiety, and disorientation, and allowing these emotions to surface rather than suppressing or rationalizing them. It unsettles dominant emotional norms that demand positivity or composure and instead invites emotional honesty as a starting point for relational responsibility. It is a step we often overlook when trying to 'sit' with difficult emotions, that is, that we actually have access to them.

Witnessing is the act of staying present to what is happening, even when it is painful or uncomfortable. It asks us to face the realities of loss, injustice, and transformation without turning away. This practice requires openness to being affected and cultivates what Verlie (2022) calls "knowing-through-relation", an embodied and accountable way of understanding the world through connection rather than distance.

Storying creates a space for meaning making. Stories connect (back) what is felt with what is 'known' (in how we traditionally understand it) and weave personal experiences with collective sense-making. Through storying, the ambiguities of transformation can be articulated, contradictions can be held, and alternative ways of living together can be imagined. It allows emotions to move from the private to the relational.

Together, these are not to be understood as fixed linear steps but interwoven affective-reflective practices that help cultivate relational awareness. Given that certain emotions are especially difficult to access in our societies, we explicitly emphasize the need for 'encountering' emotions. The practice therefore begins by creating conditions for accessing or affording emotions – for encountering them.

A METHOD FOR PRACTICING 'LIVING WITH'

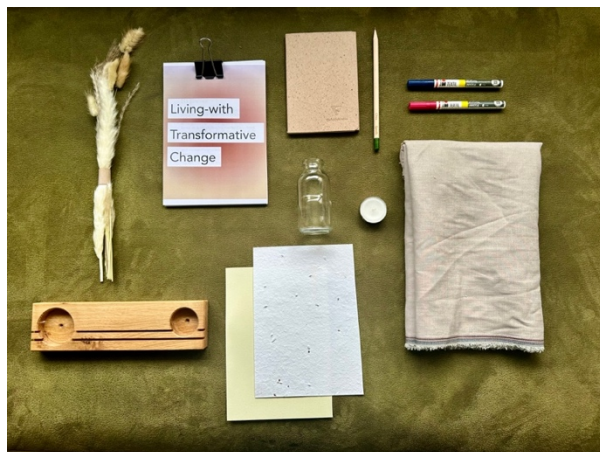
To translate the three affective-reflective practices (encountering, witnessing, and storying) into a more embodied and situated experience, a cultural probe was designed. Cultural probes, as originally introduced by Gaver et al. (1999) take inspiration from artistic movements such as the Situationists, and have developed in many directions in design and human-computer interaction research. Cultural probes are affective and relational tools to provoke inspirational responses. Rather than intending to offer a method for objective data collection, probes invite personal, ambiguous, and emotionally rich responses (Çerçi, 2024). This openness makes cultural probes particularly suited to explore emotional entanglements with transformative changes. By inviting participants to engage through sensing and creating, e.g., by listening, drawing, writing, or making, they create room for experiential and emotional multiplicity, where feelings of grief, hope, confusion, and care can coexist without needing to be resolved. Probes' value in practice is often as much, or more, about how they enable participants to explore their own experiences and responses, as they are a data collection method for researchers. Increasingly, first-person and autoethnographic probes (Desjardins et al., 2019; Lockton et al., 2020) blur boundaries between research tools and semi-structured creative methods for self-inquiry; equally, reflective practices such as bullet journaling have made their way into academic research (Ayobi et al., 2018).

While heterogeneous and diverse in form (Çerçi, 2024), probes usually comprise a kit of materials and prompts, which support particular forms of reflection and response by participants, around topics and experiences. The kinds of prompt can be playful, intentionally open-ended, provocative, and speculative (e.g. Desjardins et al., 2019;

Oogjes et al., 2018; Gaver et al., 1999), affording engagement with emotions and creating space for complex, entangled responses rather than clear-cut answers. For example, while a conventional survey or interview with a standard coding regime would make it very hard for a participant to express anxiety, grief, hope, and confusion simultaneously, a probe would be designed to support the expression of this very emotional multiplicity that Verlie argues we need to learn to sit with, rather than resolve. Some work on probes for mental health (e.g. Luria et al, 2021) has included explicitly an intention for participants to express emotional multiplicity, tensions felt, and even ‘compound emotions’ through constructing abstract forms or new words.

In this paper, we approach culture probes as a research, a self-inquiry and a pedagogical instrument. The three affective-reflective practices from Verlie (2022) were translated into a set of reflective questions that allowed us to explore affective entanglements in our own transformative work contexts, holding spaces in which the emotional, cognitive, imaginative, and relational dimensions of transformations could be felt, expressed, and reflected upon. The cultural probe contained a set of materials (fig. 1) that encouraged participants to create a do-it-yourself space for letting go, based on previous experiences in designing spaces for letting go workshops (Coops et al., 2024b). The materials (shrine, candles, fabric) were chosen based on our own cultural embeddedness related to practices for engaging with grief and loss (i.e., candles and shrines as symbols for memorials, fabric as symbol for burial shrouds).

Figure 1. Materials used for the cultural probe



The research process followed an autoethnographic approach (Chang et al., 2016) positioning all authors as co-researchers whose first-person experiences and emotional engagements became both the site and the source of inquiry. Rather than distancing ourselves as observers, we engaged in this cultural probe ourselves as a form of situated, embodied, and relational research in which our affective and reflective experiences are central to knowledge creation.

The probing process

Each participant received the cultural probe in a physical package. The box contained the curated materials intended to support sensory engagement and emotional reflection (fig. 1). Participants were instructed to begin by preparing a space in which they felt able to engage with the exercise, gather a few additional items for personal

comfort (e.g., a cup of tea or a blanket) and to turn their phones into off, to guarantee radical presence.

The process unfolded through seven elements, documented in the booklet:

1. **Prepare your space** – setting up the shrine and materials, making the space feel like ‘your own’.
2. **Guided meditation** – listening to a meditation about one’s inner space to foster presence and openness, explicitly designed for this experience.
3. **Encountering** – drawing a transformative moment as it was experienced.
4. **Witnessing** – adding contextual and emotional detail to the drawing.
5. **Storying** – using the fabric and textile pen to express what the transformative moment represented, what was felt, and what traces it left behind.
6. **Closing** – reflecting on the experience in the journal and symbolically closing the exercise.
7. **Evaluating** – documenting insights, photographing the space, and preparing for the follow-up interview.

Figure 2. Shrines of two participants



Participants were invited to revisit their reflective space over the following weeks, journaling freely about thoughts and emotions that surfaced, and sharing photographs or journal excerpts if they felt comfortable. Engagement periods varied considerably, from three weeks to one year, depending on when participants found time and readiness to engage with the emotionally demanding process.

After all participants completed the exercise and returned the reusable components, the two first authors conducted 60-minute semi-structured interviews with each co-author and with each other. These interviews focused on participants’ experiences, emotional responses, and reflections on the practice of engaging with transformations through the cultural probe.

We base our insights on (1) the interview transcripts, (2) written and visual materials produced during the culture probe process (drawings, textiles, journal entries, photographs), and (3) researchers’ reflexive notes. The analysis followed a collaborative, iterative approach combining open, thematic, and emotional coding (Saldaña, 2021; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Coding was both inductive and guided by

Verlie's (2022) conceptual framework of living-with, which informed how we interpreted emotional engagement and sense-making across materials.

RESULTS

From our analysis, two big themes emerged. The first theme reflected the original research question, that is on the design of the cultural probe, the materiality and instructions, the process and how it afforded (or obstructed) living-with. The second theme foregrounds a critical reflection on legitimacy, the privilege and the politics of inner emotional work in academia and beyond.

The cultural probe as a practice for inner emotional work

Concerning the design of the cultural probe, the materiality and instructions, the process and how it afforded (or obstructed) living-with, a broad variety of different experiences and perceptions emerged. All of us engaged with the cultural probe in very different ways. This diversity was both fascinating and challenging. Fascinating, because it revealed how varied our emotional landscapes, needs and learning styles are, and challenging, because it shows there is no single way to invite or sustain inner emotional work. While some followed the suggested elements closely (I5, I6), others adapted the process to their own needs (I2, I3, I4, I8, I9), and some did not engage with the proposed (material) form at all (I7, I1). These differences reflect the diversity of personal rhythms, emotional readiness, and working contexts in which each participant found themselves.

For some, the cultural probe's materiality, its aesthetic quality, its tactility, the way it arrived as a package, created an atmosphere of care and intention. It invited slowing down and treating reflection as a meaningful practice. *"It felt like a present. It felt really special. And I took it home and I put it next to my desk on a very prominent place and I was happy every time I saw it. And I said, okay, this is so special. I want to dedicate good time to it."*(I4) At the same time, this sense of specialness could become a barrier. *"Having it so special felt really cool. And at the same time, it hindered me to get started. I was like, okay, and then I need to have an uninterrupted afternoon because I had no idea what to expect."*(I4)

Others deliberately changed the process to fit their own form of reflection. *"I didn't use any of the materials provided because the situation in which I was in, was not appropriate for using them in this way. And also, I didn't feel that it would strengthen me because it was too much out in the open. Whereas for me, it's very much about introspection, which for me works well through drawing."*(I1)

Some participants (I7) described a more emotional kind of resistance, as engaging with the cultural probe felt too confronting in a period of personal grief, especially since its materials were explicitly inspired by a practice that engages with loss: *"I can notice that there are many times that I was like, I'm going to start it now. And there was a sense of resistance towards that. And I was curious about the resistance... why have I not been able to do this? ... I was grieving my beloved one."*(I7)

These accounts show that starting the process itself was part of the emotional journey. It was not a neutral methodological step, but a decision that required readiness and care, and for some, it exposed the limits of their emotional capacity at that time. This shows that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the design and use of cultural

probes for affective-reflective practices, and highlights the importance of attending to the temporality and phases we find ourselves in during these moments.

Difference in transformative moments and their meanings

This variety was equally evident in the transformative moments participants named, ranging from highly political to very private. Two of us felt transformation unfolding in moments of political change, in particular the first election of Trump as US president (I2, I5). Similarly, one of us reflected on the election of an extreme right party in the Netherlands (I9). One participant felt transformation unfolding in relation to farmers' protests and street blockages (I4), while another participant described a very personal experience, feeling transformation unfolding when reflecting on their engagement with a beloved person who was suffering (I3).

I4, for instance, described the emotional embodied experience of being caught in the middle of political upheaval, and highlighted the importance of connecting to their body and emotions: *"Basically it is around the farmers' protests in Germany in the beginning of 2023... I had to be on the highway before six o'clock in the morning because that's when they would block the highway and I would not be able to be at work on time."* (I4). The moment became a metaphor for losing control and being drawn into 'feeling' transformation: *"what I instantly had [when revisiting this moment] was the emotion. The anger. The emotions instantly came and brought me back."* (I4).

In a similar vein, I2 reflected on the moment of Trump's first election, describing it as *"The moment that really, I think, I was like: 'Oh, okay, shit, this is like ... it.'" (I2),* which they experienced as expressive and embodied *"a kind of endless, sort of drumbeat you know... Like a dark cloud. It's this sort of tightness in my chest, which partly came back from doing the cultural probe again and thinking about it. It was this kind of feeling of tightness. Like nothing's ever relaxed anymore."* (I2). This moment changed how they related to their work: *"It definitely made me think there's no point in doing all this academic stuff if it doesn't in some way seek to sort of help bring more justice about."* (I2).

Others brought personal experiences of transformations related to both suffering and relationships of care, showing how multiple, often perceived as opposing emotions, shape the same transformative moment. What is more, this moment connected the private to the political, as I3 recalled: *"Someone I love was in a deep hole, not doing well at all. (...) In my culture, there is a strong expectation of being responsible to take care of loved ones, no matter what. So I felt very responsible, indeed, even though it very much affected me and my life (...) I was frustrated with the lack of some ethical guideline on what is the right thing to do? (...) Then someone I had a conversation with told me about some things we could learn from Buddhism and one metaphor really stuck with me: a big black hole that someone is in: you cannot help them if you enter that hole as well. I felt very understood by this person. (...) he offered an additional layer that feelings can co-exist: yes, I can love and I can feel responsible, and especially then, I also have to take care of me and love myself."* (I3).

Across all these reflections, despite their diversity, multiple emotions and their embodied experiences played a significant role. Especially more 'taboo' emotions (grief, anger, frustration) seemed to have strongly influenced perception and action.

The cultural probe as an affective-reflective practice

The cultural probe helped participants surface, experience and stay with emotions and work with their discomfort. It did not aim to resolve feelings, but to make them accessible for reflection and action.

I4, for instance, described how the cultural probe revealed a new emotional truth: *"(My transformative moment) has become the picture for the feeling of anger. I don't consider myself an angry person at all... It's not something that comes natural to me. So, I was quite surprised. It's like 'hey, actually, you are angry'. You didn't put the word to it, but you were angry."* Through journaling and drawing, this anger evolved into understanding and a renewed sense of meaning: *"The exercise made me make sense of how I felt and what was going on. Before, I just didn't know what was happening, and now I could give words to it and could give meaning to it in a different way. That helped me quite a bit."* (I4). In addition to that realisation, for I4, this process even extended into professional practice: *"One of my questions was: how are you dealing with it now? So, I basically put it into a research proposal. The cultural probe made me realise: oh, that's what happened. I've written a research proposal on polarization to regain agency."* (I4)

In this sense, the design of the cultural probe, its dedicated time and space, temporal openness, and reflective prompts, allowed participants to slow down and attend to emotions that face the risk of otherwise remaining unarticulated or hidden. It held space to listen to what these emotions wanted to tell us, offering more in-depth emotional inquiry. I4 described how the engagement with the cultural probe helped reach a point of acceptance: *"I think I'm at peace with it now. The peace at the end is really part of it. When I was doing the journaling and writing it up, after that I felt closure. A feeling of closure and emotion of peace."* (I4). These reflections illustrate how a cultural probe can create spaces for staying with discomfort, turning emotions into insight such as orientation and action. The cultural probe offered a *practice of living-with*, a way to experience transformation as something that happens through and with our emotions. As I3 stated: *"(for me) it really also confirmed that (knowing about something in) theory is not the same as feeling it. It's also such a cliché, but people need to feel it."*

The cultural probe as no one-size-fits-all

Unsurprisingly, the cultural probe as a practice did not work for everyone (in the same way). Participants reflected on varying aspects they were a misfit. Some participants found it too individualistic, abstract, or emotionally demanding. I4 observed: *"I miss a bit the collective aspect of it because I would be very curious to share and see how others have experienced their transformative moments."* (I4). Similarly, I7 reflected: *"I think some people might be more able to engage with emotions about this in a collective setting than they might be in an individual setting. I find conversations to be really powerful in this regard."* For others, the cultural probe's language felt too restrictive. *"You say, think about a phase in your life or a situation in which you felt societal transition or transformation unfolding, and stress to focus on a moment. And for me, transformation is not about a moment. ... I took the liberty of focusing on what transformation was for me during that period, but I was slightly hindered in the cultural probe because you continuously referred to moments."* (I1). And one participant (I7) noted that the cultural probe's emotional focus could be overwhelming in moments of personal loss: *"Thinking about grief on the world scale that we were*

trying to address with the cultural probe was very different because I was experiencing grief so intimately, personally in my own life at that moment.” (I7).

Especially the last point raises important questions around the ethics of inviting people to affective-reflective practices and how much can be asked of someone without, e.g. causing harming or re-traumatisation. As I8 reflected on ‘how much is too much’: *“it feels like you don't want to disturb people's inner worlds, I for sure do not want to harm or re-traumatize them. But you also kind of do want to disturb them a little bit, because you want them to sit with the pain to start moving”*.

These reflections underline that affective-reflective practices depend strongly on context, timing, capacity, and culture. The cultural probe can invite and support, but it cannot guarantee practicing living-with. Different people need different entry points, paces, and forms of engagement: collective and/or individual, embodied and/or reflective, structured and/or more open-ended. As one participant put it, *“Every person needs something different... For some it might be meditating or journaling, for others it might be painting, walking, or running.”* (I4) What works for one person could be inaccessible or even painful for another – this is a constant balancing act.

The cultural probe revealed both the potential and the limits of (designing) cultural probes for affective-reflective practices. Such a process requires openness and flexibility, holding space for differences and incompleteness rather than seeking standardization or generally applicable frameworks. Cultural probes require, but also allow for, agency. As the differences in approaching and using the cultural probe showed, all participants made the cultural probe ‘work’ for themselves in one way or another, ranging from working closely with the given materials to fully reshaping them. This highlights the importance of first and foremost offering the physical and temporal space for affective-reflective practices, as well as general willingness to engage with the overall purpose of the cultural probe, rather than adherence to step-by-step instructions or individual material.

The legitimacy and politics of inner emotional work in academia and beyond

Engaging with the cultural probe revealed how difficult it was for many of us to make space for affective-reflective practices for living-with within the logics and institutions of academia. Participants described how these forms of reflection often clashed with how they had been conditioned to think, work, and evaluate their professional doing and productivity.

For some, the process conflicted directly with academic routines. One participant explained: *“It took quite a long time before I managed to do it. (...) I'm used to doing things very fast, faster than others. (So, I planned that I would) just finish it like the academic style, right? So, I'll just make it. I made the commitment. Thursday, I'm going to block two hours to do the first step. (...) And then I started reading, I was like: no way. (...)”* (I3). The participant described contradictory feelings about treating such work as part of their professional responsibilities: *“Another thing that I felt during this exercise is a deep gratitude that I have been invited to do this exercise. It is very inspiring and also self-nourishing. (...) So, to be encouraged to do this as part of work and partly during work time feels incredibly empowering and special. It also makes me feel a bit guilty. Is this really work? Is it not too self-indulgent to be work? Which are*

interesting thoughts to unpack, because if not during work, then when? Is meditating not an inherent part of knowledge creation? But is that worth taxpayers money?" (I3).

These reflections show how reflective-affective practices challenge dominant academic norms of productivity and legitimacy. Participants noted that even when they recognised the value of the cultural probe, the structures of academia often made it hard to fully engage without feeling guilt, doubt, or pressure to justify the work as "academic."

Alongside concerns about time and legitimacy, and the question of who can do such work when, participants also reflected extensively on questions of privilege and the risks of personal transformation without societal transformation. They recognised that opportunities for reflective-affective engagement are unequally distributed, often depending on security, context, or personal circumstances and to what extent 'fleeing' into inner work can be harmful. As one participant noted: *"I kept thinking: who else could actually do this? I have the flexibility and safety to take time, but many people don't. It's a luxury to have space to feel."* (I7). As I4 reflected: *"this raises questions around who can 'afford' such inner work at work times."* Another participant reflected on the same tension: *"It's interesting how easily something like reflection becomes an expectation for those of us who already have more freedom, while others are struggling just to keep up."* (I3). Going one step further: *"Having the political energy to fight for justice highly depends on being able to let go of personal matters even if just for a while, which really emphasizes the point about how transformation requires personal transformation."*

Participants also questioned the assumption that 'personal' transformation is a prerequisite for societal transformation. *"There's this hypothesis that everybody needs to first personally transform in order for society to transform. I am not 100 percent buying into it. But I think for those seeing this as one of the paths to contribute to societal transformation, that this is really, really a very good path."* (I4).

These reflections underline that while affective-reflective practices can open important spaces for awareness and accountability, they also raise questions about institutional logics, legitimacy, privilege, access, and the risk of recentring already privileged actors.

DISCUSSION

Our engagement with the cultural probe revealed a fundamental paradox at the heart of 'personal transformation' or affective-reflective practices in academia: we need practices that help us to live-with, stay with discomfort, yet the very act of creating and engaging with such practices can reproduce the conditions that prevent us from doing so. This paradox manifested across two interrelated dimensions in our process: the radical diversity of what different people need to practice living-with, and the troubling questions of legitimacy, institutional fit, privilege and power that emerged when we attempted to make space for this work.

The impossibility of one-size-fits-all approaches

The radical diversity in how participants engaged with the cultural probe (or in some cases, could not engage with it at all) demonstrates that there can be no one-size-fits-all approach to affective-reflective practices. Different people need different entry

points, paces, and forms of engagement: collective or individual, embodied or reflective, materially rich or minimalist, structured or open-ended. While Verlie's (2022) framework of encountering, witnessing, and storying provided a conceptual foundation, our experiences revealed that the ways these practices can be afforded vary between individuals. What worked as an invitation for one person became a barrier for another; what created opportunities to hold space for some felt restrictive or overwhelming to others.

This diversity is not a methodological limitation to overcome through better design, but a fundamental characteristic of affective-reflective practices themselves. Verlie (2022) emphasises that living-with requires cultivating "appropriate ways of relating," yet our process highlights that appropriateness itself is irreducibly contextual, relational, and plural. What Machado de Oliveira (2021) describes as exercising "muscles that most of us have neglected" takes on new meaning when we recognise that these muscles are differently developed, differently atrophied, and require different forms of training for different bodies, histories, and contexts.

This finding challenges the current proliferation of frameworks, toolkits, and models for 'personal transformation' and affective-reflective practices that promise scalable, replicable approaches to emotional capacity-building. Our findings suggest that this impulse toward generalisable, modular frameworks may be fundamentally at odds with the nature of affective entanglements itself. If, as Verlie argues, living-with requires us to stay present with ambiguity and multiplicity, then perhaps our approaches to supporting this work must themselves remain ambiguous and multiple, resisting the temptation to codify "best practices" or create replicable models and 'one-size-fits all'.

For educators and scholars hoping to 'stay with the trouble' and cultivate practices for living-with, this means designing not for consistency but for multiplicity, offering diverse practices while acknowledging that none will work for everyone. It asks for a focus on inviting and creating a space for practice, rather than finding the 'perfect' process or materials. It requires a kind of pedagogical humility that Western education systems rarely cultivate, treating frameworks not as prescriptions to be followed but as conceptual provocations to be adapted, resisted, and transformed in practice.

'Personal transformation' as a privilege project and its risks for societal transformation

Reflections on our cultural probe pointed out how affective-reflective practices for 'personal transformation' may risk functioning as a privilege project, potentially sidelining societal transformations and political change. As authors and participants, we are aware that engagement with the cultural probe promotes a privileged way of engaging with the world, especially since many of us engaged with it from the comfort of our homes in the Global North, having permanent contracts, where the multiple challenges of our times remain largely intangible. As Cooper & Gibson (2022) highlight, "untethered from moral and ethical guidelines as well as caring understanding of local and global prospects for lasting wellbeing, mindfulness programs, workshops, and interventions for inner transformation can inadvertently strengthen unsustainable systems and deepen inequities." Additionally, Verlie (2022, p.122) warns, if not taking historical systems of oppression and privilege into account, focussing on emotional resilience "reaffirms and re-enacts the needs, identities and feelings of climate-complicit people".

Beyond questions of privilege and position, we should consider that the very act of engaging with and displaying emotions is not neutral. It takes up space, redirects attention, and grants or hinders access to resources (Bogner et al., forthcoming). This is why some scholars also criticize the ‘unbearable whiteness of climate anxiety’ and note that foregrounding white people’s anxieties once again serves to “devoting resources toward appeasing the dominant group” (Ray, 2011). As Ahmed’s (2010) work demonstrates, emotions do not simply emanate from individual interiority but emerge from within specific systems of power. Therefore, we must ask: Who is allowed to express emotions? Whose emotions are validated, and whose are dismissed? Which and whose emotions do we foreground as reasons and arguments for political action? And: Which and whose emotions related to societal transformations then shape said transformations? While all emotions are valid, not all emotions are equally situated, nor do all emotions equally influence access to or exclusion from spaces or power (Ahmed 2010, Bogner et al., forthcoming).

Without attending to these questions, affective-reflective practices risk providing those already privileged with sophisticated vocabularies for disengagement, enabling a sense of “doing the work” while avoiding the discomfort of actual political struggles. This creates what we might call a “personal transformation elite”: those who have seemingly done affective-reflective practices, developed the reflexive capacities, and can speak the language of transformations, yet whose actual (material) relationships to systems of oppression remain largely unchanged. Personal transformation efforts could potentially function as a form of distinction, a way to signal moral and emotional sophistication while remaining comfortably positioned within structures of privilege. It allows us to feel transformed without being displaced, to experience discomfort without losing comfort, to process complicity without actually divesting from what makes us complicit.

Moreover, even when trying to unlearn and work with our own complicity, focussing most or solely on ‘personal transformation’ can defer societal transformation and political action. There is always more personal transformation to do, always another layer of conditioning to unlearn, always deeper emotional capacity to cultivate. This infinite work serves, in contrast to its aspirations, the perpetuation of the status quo perfectly: we remain perpetually in preparation, perpetually not-yet-ready, perpetually working on ourselves rather than working to dismantle oppressive systems. Affective-reflective practices must not be exercised or misunderstood as atomised self-improvement projects up to burnout (Han, 2015). As the crises of our times accelerate, as ecological collapse intensifies, as inequalities deepen, we cannot afford to mistake emotional processing for political struggle.

CONCLUSION: Holding space for inner-outer complexities

The findings presented in this paper suggest that designing cultural probes for practicing living-with requires holding spaces for multiple, often conflicting, complexities. We invite readers to approach affective-reflective practices for living-with in academic contexts with profound ambivalence – neither fully and uncritically embraced nor outright rejected but held in productive tension. Crucially, holding space for inner-outer complexities calls for a deeper engagement with the question of how to prevent personal transformation efforts from becoming the very self-soothing mechanisms they aspire to overcome.

The cultural probe is offered not as a model to be standardized and replicated, but as an imperfect tool to be critically explored, adapted, refused, and transformed. For scholars aiming to 'stay with the trouble' and to create spaces for living-with transformations across the various contexts they operate in – research, teaching, or stakeholder engagement – we call for approaches that resist standardisation and remain accountable to questions of privilege and power.

We encourage those designing probes for affective-reflective practices to bridge the individual and the collective, the private and the political. While this specific process started with exploring personal affective entanglements, it should not stop there – it must extend beyond the self. Learning to live-with transformations requires staying with contradictions and working with the discomfort they generate, rather than seeking premature resolution. The challenge lies not in perfecting affective-reflective practices, but in using them as complementary to the difficult, collective work of political transformation.

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Data can be obtained by contacting the first authors of this paper.

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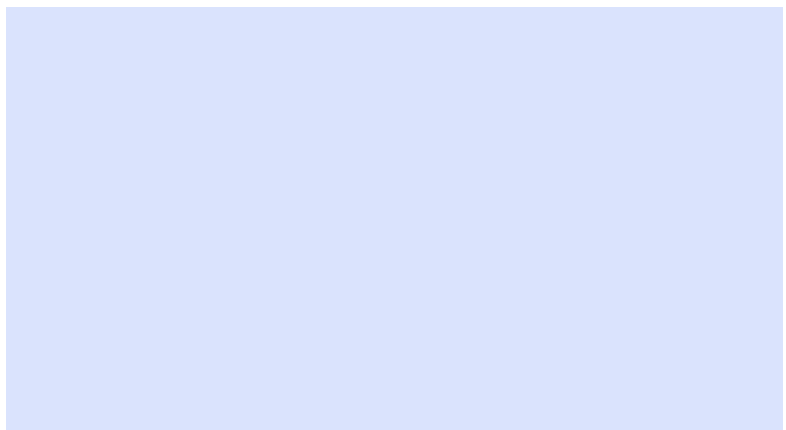
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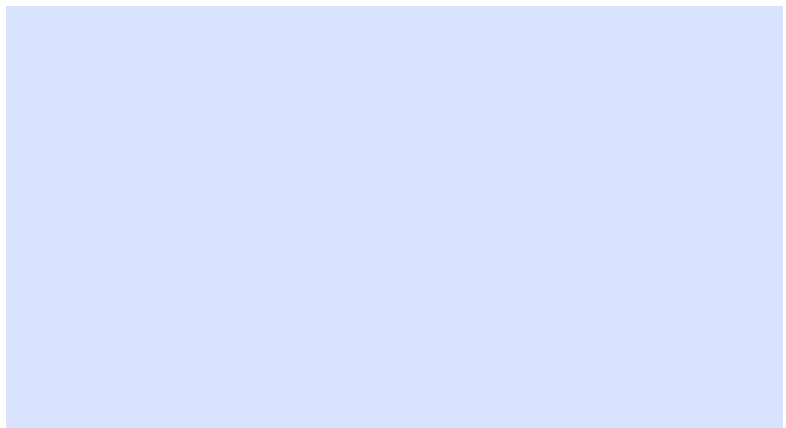
Caption 1



Caption 2



Caption 3



Caption 1



Caption 2



ABOUT THE JOURNAL

futures reframed is an innovative English-language academic journal aimed at scholars and researchers in the field of futures studies, anticipation studies, possibilities studies, futures anthropology and related disciplines. This publication aims to provide a meeting platform for in-depth discussions, critical analyses and original insights that meet the growing demand for knowledge exchange within this dynamic field. The journal builds on, and goes beyond, current journals around this topic. The field is relatively young, and thus has the potential to work 'on the edge' of science. A major strength of future research is the scholar's open-mindedness. They bring together knowledge and expertise from various disciplines and work with a broad palette of methods on various socially relevant themes.

In practice, however, discussions of the field have yet to be sufficiently inclusive. Some voices are excluded, sometimes because of the high abstraction in the discussion, sometimes because of the high costs associated with publishing academic work through traditional publishing platforms, and sometimes because of the blind spots of future thinkers themselves.

futures reframed aims to break with this. We deliberately work with a diamond open access model, give authors copyright, offer readers full transparency regarding the peer-review process (which is open and offers the possibility to read-along). We specifically invite authors to write articles that can make blind spots visible, and translate their findings and ideas to our field: how can futures research become more effective, inclusive and progressive?

With an emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration, we want both established and emerging voices to be heard so that we can develop a richer understanding of possible future scenarios. In doing so, **futures reframed** takes an explicitly non-normative stance: the journal draws on the greatest strengths of scholars in this discipline, namely breaking open dominant narratives, exploring original alternative ideas, naming gaps in knowledge and imaginaries, and contributing critical, academic and practical contributions to the debate about the future. This journal will be a valuable addition to the current landscape of academic publications and a source of lively debate for futures researchers in the Netherlands and abroad.



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