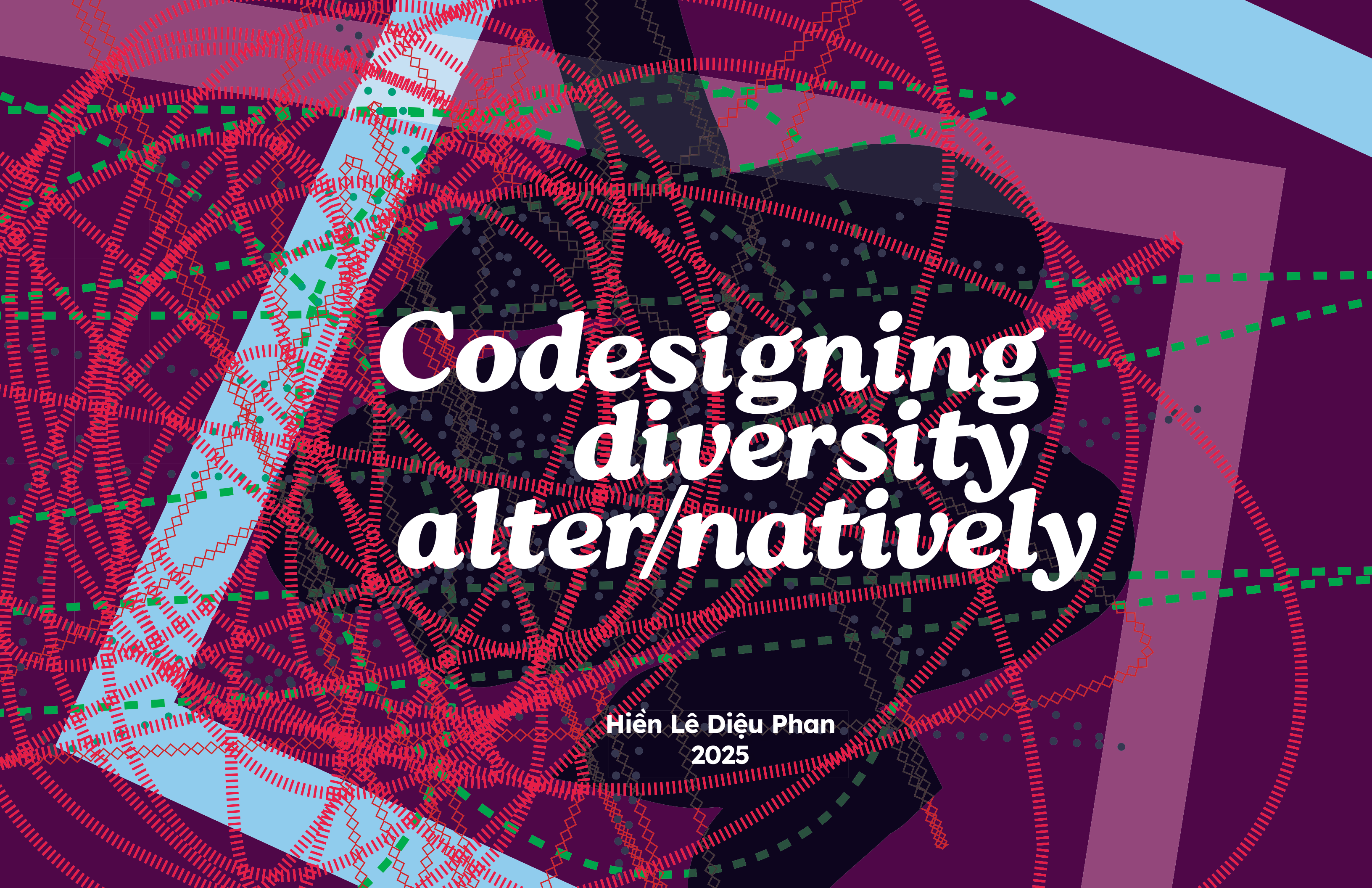


The background is a complex, abstract composition. It features a dark purple base with various overlapping elements: a light blue diagonal band, a dark grey curved shape, and numerous red and green dashed lines forming intricate, overlapping patterns. Small dots in red, green, and blue are scattered throughout the design.

Codesigning diversity alter/natively

Hiền Lê Diệu Phan
2025

Summary of Performance Option in Lieu of Thesis
Presented to the Graduate School of the University
of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

CODESIGNING DIVERSITY ALTERNATIVELY

By
Hiền Lê Diệu Phan
May 2025

Committee chair
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Committee members
Dori Griffin
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Margaret Galvan

Major
Design & Visual Communications

Codesigning diversity alter/natively

Abstract

This thesis investigates the contradictions of institutional diversity in the USA design higher education through an autoethnographic and codesign-based design research practice. Situated within the context of Florida's public education system—where anti-DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) policies have rapidly undermined critical social studies—this project explores how diversity is both institutionalized and dismantled within neoliberal multiculturalism. Drawing from Sara Ahmed's theory of institutionalized diversity (2012), the research questions the polarizing responses of predominantly white institutions (PWIs) toward diversity, which is either joyfully welcomed or angrily abandoned.

As a Viet immigrant and design graduate student at the University of Florida, the researcher positions herself within a diverse design graduate student body, 77% of whom are from the Global South. Through autoethnography and codesign methods, this project investigates how marginalized student labor sustains institutional structures while remaining underrepresented within them. Understanding each design body as a culturally embedded self with design knowledge and capabilities, the intersection of design and anthropology in this project seeks to both understand and act upon the possibilities for cultural change—beyond the institutionalization of diversity.

The autoethnographic design research is informed by postcolonial scholars such as Edward Said and Viet Thanh Nguyen. Low-tech materials, used within codesign, critical, and speculative design practices, draw from the decolonial movements of Latin American scholars, including the Design & Oppression network (2021). Accordingly, the thesis seeks an alter/native approach (van Amstel, 2023) to designing diversity, challenging coloniality in design such as institutionalization and diversification in design higher education.

The design of alter/native diversity asks the diverse institutional body to acknowledge the design privilege in underprivilege positionality. Thus, the diverse institutional body is suggested to acknowledge, collaborate, and codesign with the diverse non-institutional body. Rather than reinforcing the multiculturalism attracted, fostered, and institutionalized by the institution, alter/native diversity calls for solidarity among many marginalized design bodies—who hold dialogues, collaborate, and act toward equal futures for all.

/ SECTION ONE /

Research context

Understanding the United States of America against the historical geopolitical backdrop

The United States of America (USA) is built on Western/European settler colonization (Mamdani, 2015) in the Turtle Island: discrimination of Indigenous people, Black people, and People of Color. The USA was once a colony of European empires such as British, France, and Spain. After independence, the USA entered several wars while expanding its territories, including the Civil War with the southern states, the Cold War with Alaska, the Vietnam War, and other militarist interventions in Middle East.

During this colonialist, capitalist development of the USA, the following social group is granted with privileges: Christian, English-speaking, white, male (Mercer & Moses, 2023).

Moreover, USA's involvement in World Wars, the Cold War, and the Middle East affirms its "exceptional interventionism", which has been built on militarism, asylum attraction, and med. Immigrants has contributed to the USA multiculturalism, which projects the USA's impactful ideology in liberalism (Joppke, 1996; Giroux, 2013) Neoliberal multiculutralism is one of the responses of the capitalist institutional structure towards the minority populations, including the hyphenated American and working class.

Since the first Trump presidency (2018-2022), the USA citizens been deeply divided (Haider, 2018). In November 2025, Trump won the second presidency at the USA, affirming the fascist turn of the institution already engraved with white supremacy, Christian nationalism, and oligarchy. Geopolitically, the USA has been under trade war with China, threatened Canada and Greenland with the colonial attempts, while holding controversial relations with Europe, Ukraine/Russia, and Palestine/Israel.

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**From Florida to the USA,
the anti-DEI policies spread
across higher education.**

The USA was the most populated destination for students to study abroad, where 54% of international students majored in STEM fields. Around 50% of international students in the USA came from China and India. The countries with the most graduate international students in the USA are India, China, South Korea, Canada, and Taiwan (Statista, 2022/2023). The USA has attracted students from many other countries, including Global South countries, for STEM majors.

In the context of the university in Florida, USA where this research was hosted, international students came from Global South countries such as India, China, Brazil, Bangladesh, Iran, and Nigeria (International Students Dashboard, 2024). As of 2024, there were around 4,400 graduate employees, 50% of whom are international students (GAU at UF). These statistics show that the diverse student body not only adds to the cultural aspects of university college life, but also an important workforce in sustaining the university’s narratives and resources.

Regardless of the diversity rate, institutional racism is manifest through the racist policies of Florida: The threat to gender, race studies on professors, post-tenure reviews (c.2022). International students from seven countries of concern are being denied education. DEI programs have been demolished, staff left (2024). The establishment of Hamilton Center and the attraction of conservative multiculturalism (c. 2022). The abandonment of DEI also applies to the excuse of resisting racism against whiteness, which is the dominant population. These state policies are enforced on the public education system in Florida, later on, followed by other conservative states in the USA. Performative institutional diversity has been scraped out of the educational systems, where the existence of the diverse student body has been threatened by the pungent approaches of institutional whiteness.

In response to the state policies, the university staff has joined the student body in protesting against discriminatory rights: Professor protests against Seven Countries of Concern policies; student protests against the Palestine genocide by Israeli; police brutality in response to such protests; and graduate research on institutional fascism and meritocracy (Buadze, 2024). However, as these bodies occupy the institutional spaces that are determined by the institutional policies, the DEI efforts have been stripped out of the institutional spaces. This removal of the commonized cultural and historical legacy has denied the collective efforts made by the diverse student body and staff population. This removal was cleaning the non-white minority efforts from the dominant institutional whiteness, and was replaced by the meritocracy neoliberal claims of the system.

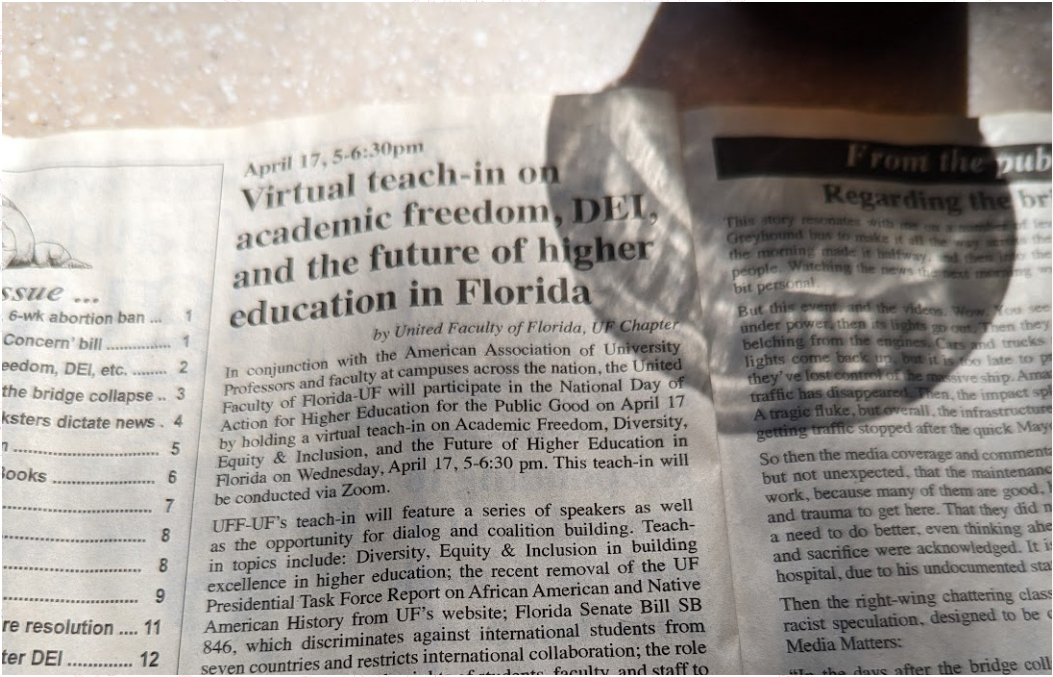


Figure 1: Local news in Iguana, viewed in May 2024, at a local coffee shop in Gainesville, FL

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/ SECTION TWO /

Design research object

*Through design research,
institutional diversity is unveiled
as a contradiction.*

To analyze the contradiction of institutional diversity as it manifests in Florida's design space, I rely on Sara Ahmed's postcolonial feminist scholarship expounded in **On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life** (2012). This book is a phenomenological study on institutional diversity in the relation of institutional whiteness, racism, and excellence, through the lenses of diversity workers in Global North universities.

Institutional diversity means racial, social, cultural, sexual, and gender diversity co-opted by the institution's goals, statements, and stable practices (2012, p.24). Institutionalized diversity seeks to change non-white's perceptions of whiteness as less oppositional. Thus, non-whites are permitted to enter, occupy, and work in predominantly white institutions. The language of diversity is used to replace the words "equal opportunities," "affirmative action," or 'anti-racism' in the statement of institutional values and commitments (2012, p. 52).

While diversity is included as an institutional effort in repairing the issues of colonialist, racist history, institutional diversity does not perform the anti-racism commission as promised. Rather, its celebratory tone gives a false signal that institutional racism is already overcome, further concealing the in-depth engraving of racism in the institutional structure. This celebratory diversity hinders the institutional lack of commitment to systemic changes, avoiding confrontations from the marginalized diverse bodies (2012, p. 52 - 53).

Through institutionalization, diversity is essentialized, otherized, and racialized as the opposite of whiteness, yet being exploited to represent institutional excellence (2012, p. 105-111). Instead of conforming diversity as the co-optive solution for whiteness, Ahmed suggests being the radical problem (2012, p. 152-157; 184-187). This implies the crucial role of the diversity body in persistently resisting the institutional narratives at the standpoint of the other. Following Ahmed's suggestion to be the studied problem, this design research adopts an autoethnographic method.

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This project in-lieu-of thesis spans from Spring 2024 to Spring 2025, in Gainesville, FL, aiming to answer the following questions:

Main research questions

1. How is **diversity institutionalized** and dismantled in the neoliberal multiculturalist higher education of Florida, USA?
2. How is **institutional diversity** manifested in the diverse student body of the MxD graduate design program, University of Florida?
3. How can we codesign self-representations of diverse student bodies as an alter/native to **institutionalized diversity**?

***** We, as the diverse student body. This collective body is then specified as the MxD graduate design students who participated directly or indirectly in this design project.

This design research is built on autoethnography and codesign methods, supported by critical design and speculative design. In anthropology and education, autoethnography is used to study the experience of marginalization as a **culturally embedded self** who claims autonomy in speaking about the world from their own lenses (de F. Afonso & Taylor, 2009). In design research, autoethnography is used to foreground the political implications of design in private lives (Keshavarz & Patchineelam, 2012), the emotional journey of institutional services (Catoir-Brisson & Paixão-Barradas, 2025), as well as a particular way of informing or guiding product design (Xue et al., 2025). Autoethnography is increasingly used in design research to incorporate the designers' emotions, actions, and reflections in the integrated research of design and anthropology (Fuller, 2022).

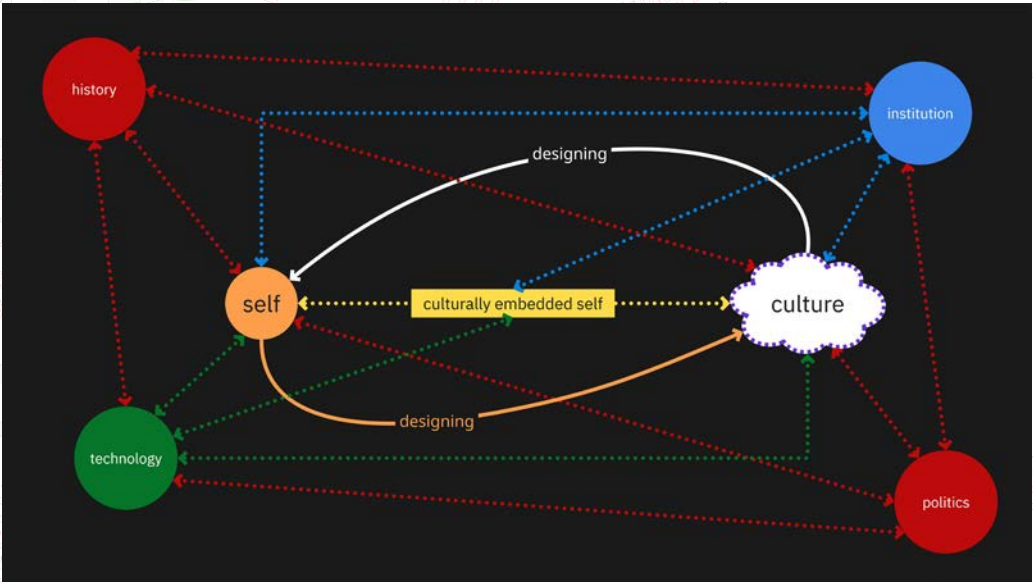


Figure 1: Visualization of culturally embedded self (de F. Afonso & Taylor, 2009)

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Positioning the diverse design student body

I was admitted to the MxD design graduate program in the University of Florida in March 2022. Knowing that I would be granted with the Graduate Teaching Assistant appointment, I was excited. This was the main reason that made the MxD program standing out from other programs that I applied to: financial support.

Being physically in the program, I was embraced by the emotional support from the MxD cohort. It was the first time in the USA colleges that I received the support from classmates. It was also the first time that I was not the only non-USA citizen. Altogether, we compose a diverse cohort, with diverse cultures and knowledge of not only the profession but also student life and citizen life.



Figure 2: The group work in Karma Kreme, 2024

I was impacted by this collective, as I learned to live with the cultural differences while we share the commonality in our identities and positionality in the predominantly white institution (PWI) in Florida, USA.

As of 2024, from the small unit in the graduate design studio MxD, there are

77% of the student population who are from Global South countries,

including China, Iran, Vietnam, Bolivia, Kenya, and Ghana. From many design experiments collectively inside and outside of the design studio, we were able to reflect on the positionality of the diverse graduate student body, from the collective body at the graduate studio.

As the diverse student body, we shared the motto in design research **design better together**, emphasizing codesign with local community for social equality.



Figure 3: The North-up global map with the pink dots as the national origins of students in the MxD program, updated March 2025, collected with Professor Maria Rogal and Santana Nyanje (2024).



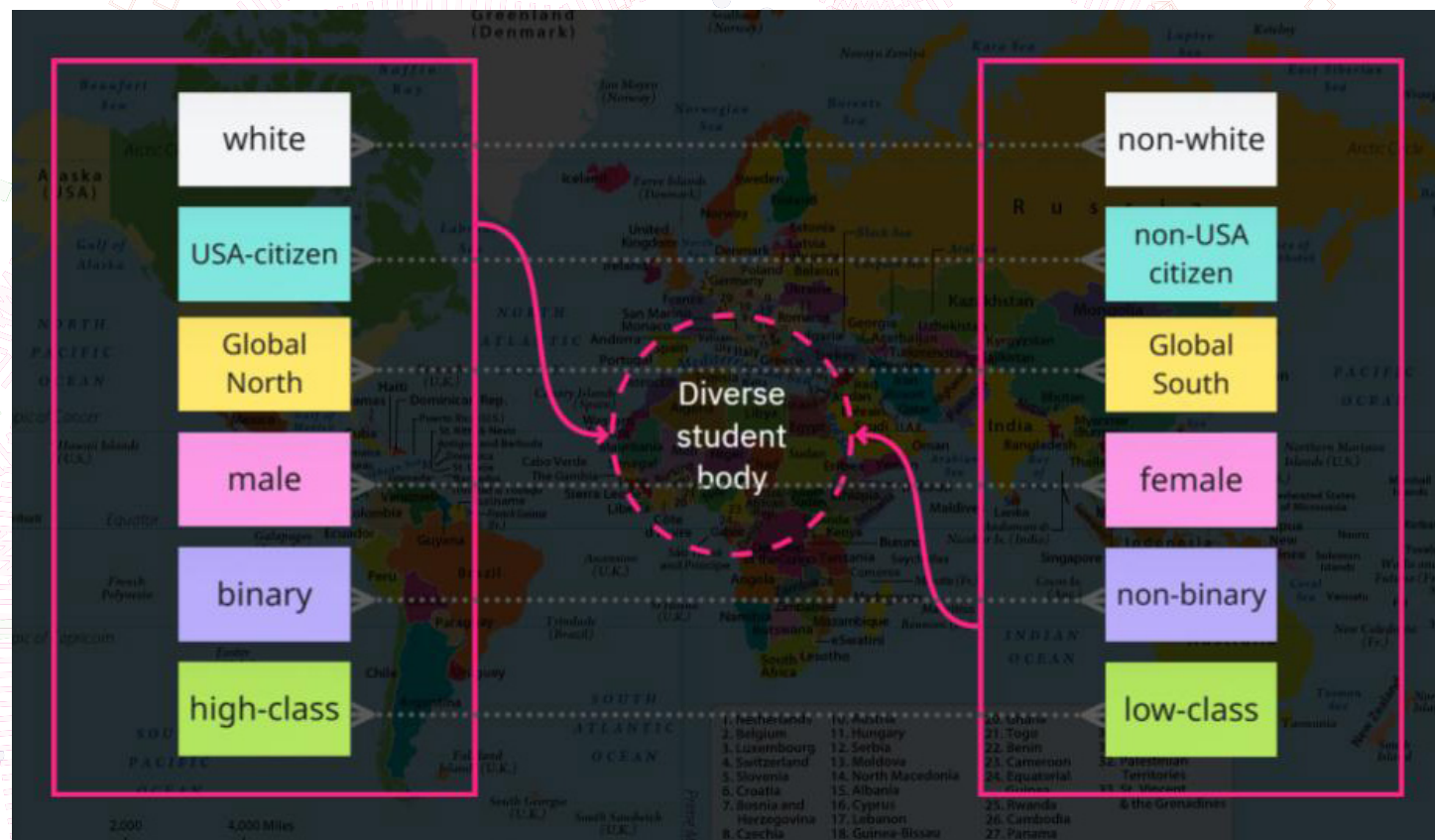
Figure 5: The circle made of many hands and feet in the MxD studio, in the (Design) Research & Practice course, taught by Dr. Frederick van Amstel, 2024



Figure 4: The fieldwork with the City of Gainesville, as a part of the design ethnography excercise, in the (Design) Research & Practice course, taught by Dr. Dori Griffin, 2022.



Figure 6: Branding design of the MxD/MFA graduate design program, School of Art + Art History, at the College of the Arts, sourced arts.ufl.edu



While the far-right politics impose conservative policies on higher education, abandoning the DEI programs, getting rid of critical race theories, as well as immigrants and LGBTQIA+ communities, the university includes a great number of workers who share these minor identities. This population includes us as the diverse student body whose position was mostly Graduate Teaching Assistant at the College of the Arts, University of Florida.

Besides, there are student organizations established by races, nationalities, genders, besides majors, and for professional development. From the graduate studio MxD, most of us are assigned graduate teaching assistant positions where we teach undergraduate students in the department. The diverse student body is responsible for **providing the diverse educational services** as a part of the university infrastructure, as well as small businesses of diverse cultures in the campus town.

Regardless, this collective body is also **the customers of the diverse educational services** under the meta-structure of higher education under USA neoliberal multiculturalism. This hybrid position has made as a part of the institutional(ized) diversity while not representing the institution.



Autoethnography as meta-design of the design body

CODESIGNERS

My family members, friends,
specifically MxD cohort (2022-2025),
and professors in the USA, especially
Dr. Frederick van Amstel

DESIGN OBJECTS

This MFA project in-lieu-of thesis

CONTEXT

This project in-lieu-of thesis consumed
a large part of my life project as a
Viet immigrant design student in the
USA. Through settler colonialism, the
USA turned into a predominantly
white institution although this country
is originally made by many layers of
immigrants, projecting the geopolitical
history of the world through centuries.

I am trained by the K-12 Vietnamese
education to put heart into what I do,
while disciplining myself even in the
challenging scenarios. I inherited my
ancestors' culture and institution of anti-
imperialism, anti-colonialism, and (inter)
national communism. The ancestors could
not dare to think about the individualist
happiness when their relatives and
neighborhood were marginalized by the
colonizers, fascists, and imperialist. Thus,
many generations of the Vietnamese
ancestors fought against the global
empires, even if that means life sacrifices.

I practices this project in Florida, USA as
my way of returning gratefulness to my
ancestors, family, teachers, and friends
who have been a part of my life journey,
from Vietnam to the USA. This serious
commitment projects the reality of
critical design research of Global South
autoethnography in the Global North.

2024 - 2025
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

Figure 9: Speculative design of autoethnography,
through B.akka, Crises deck, and color markers.



**Lego Serious Play as an
autoethnographic craft material**

Lego Serious Play (LSP) is the metaphorical material for the design body to describe the research object through crafting the Lego structure that resembles the design body’s understanding of the research object. With the playful metaphorical role, each Lego piece resembles certain materials and actors in designing the research object. The proximity of the Lego pieces unveils the connections between these aspects, allowing the design researcher to understand the research object more vividly. When the player described the Lego structure as the crafted world to colleagues, it was a chance for the collective to re-read the design research object vividly through the Lego structure.

LSP is the critical medium for dialogues among the players. As the players observe the structure from different angles, they describe the Lego world differently and share different understandings of the research object. When the conversation takes place with playful metaphorical materials, the players can also make adjustments to the Lego structure to demonstrate their understanding of the research object. This active change

*Figure 10: The autoethnographic design research,
conducted through Lego Serious Play (2024 - 2025)*



reveals the changing reality where the research object takes place, allowing the players who are design researchers to be curious, ask questions, and constantly seek to understand many manifestations of the design research object.

This way, the Lego structure holds the possibility of projecting the worldviews of the players. The structure is built directly from the player’s hands, lived experiences, remembered memories, viewed world, and biases. When it is a part of the dialogues, it is the projection of many ideas and many worldviews, fulfilling the missing pieces of the design research object that one player might not be able to see through. Thus, the LSP allows room for interpretations of the research objects, as well as questions and speculations to expand the possibilities of the object in reality.

The LSP language is, to me as a non-English native, more accessible than autoethnography in writing. LSP could be understood as a double stimulus, which is ambiguously compacted with narratives, conflicts, and the embedded institutions of thoughts for a qualitative data analysis. The playing and building are based on the player’s lived experiences, which played an important role in visualizing autoethnography in a short yet playful way.

Often times, LSP is questionable as it looks childish. That, I confront, is often the overlook of the privileged towards the underprivileged, high culture towards low culture, elites towards non-elites. There is a hierarchy in worldviews and a lack of sympathy in dialogues if the examiners tend not to engage in the Lego Serious Play with the players, designers, or amateur researchers. Since this Eurocentric childish-looking design material could visualize complex systems that the critical social theories fail to communicate through public education, I am still keen on dialogues with colleagues and professors through this metaphorical, playful material.

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Dr. Frederick van Amstel
MxD cohort including:

DESIGN META-OBJECTS

DESIGN SPACE

MxD graduate design studio

In the MXD Seminar course taught by Dr. van Amstel (2024), we as the diverse design student body practiced metaphorical design objects in representing our design research. During this process, Lego Serious Play (LSP) has been used as a playful metadesign toolkit in reading and rereading design research interest and confining research object.

This process has been particularly important as I was building the MFA thesis proposal, while forming the MFA committee.

**February 1 -
March 7, 2024**
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

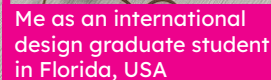


Figure 11: On Feb. 1, 2024, we described our positionality through LSP models. We then used LSP pieces and animals in metaphorically representing actors in our design research networks. Rubber bands were used in mapping the relations of all students' networks, creating a metadesign network.

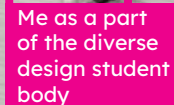


Figure 12: On Mar. 7, 2024, we built LSP models about the design spaces which documented our design research trajectories. We then used the crises deck (Zukowszki et al., 2024) to reflect our designerly positionality.

Text read as “Being in my tube and feeling scared
↔ Talking to people, opening my eyes, staying
out of my bubble.”

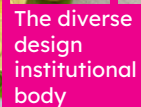


Figure 13: On Mar. 27, 2024, we built LSP models about the design research object per our research interests. We then used notecard to synthesize the object.

Text read as “Autonomy of the oppressed bodies in the oppressive meta(design) space.”

local institution
collective
struggles
international
student
neoliberal
multiculturalism
institutional
services
design thinking

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

In the span of more than one month, we have many design toolkits in supporting of the LSP building, including low-tech materials, metadesign toolkits, as well as literature review. This encouraged me to get closer to my design research interest which is built on the common positionality of many colleagues in the MxD cohort: international graduate student.

Through LSP, the design research object was described through the world where such object emerged and was perceived by the players. As a designer, the abstract form to find ways and describe the research context and object was unfamiliar yet filled with excitement. At the time, cultural alienation was commonly described in all LSP models, which refereed to reflect my positionality as an immigrant body in the neoliberal multiculturalist institutional structure. While this body is affirmed by the colleagues and teachers in the local institution that she was included, there was a gap in the inclusion that she felt not.

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Zukowski, Alanis Louise de Mello; Kosake, Maria Vitória Ribeiro; Amstel, Frederick Marinus Constant van; "Codificação gráfica de crises existenciais: reflexões sobre um experimento de educação crítica em design", p. 1756-1763. In: Anais do 11º Congresso Internacional de Design da Informação e 11º Congresso Nacional de Iniciação Científica em Design | CIDI+CONGIC 2023. São Paulo: Blucher, 2024. https://doi.org/10.5151/cidiconcic2023-121_649945



Lego Serious Play
as critical &
speculative design

CO-DESIGNERS

Dr. Frederick van Amstel
Hien Phan

DESIGN META-OBJECTS

B.akka archetype library
Crises deck
Lego sets DUPLO
Wooden dolls

DESIGN SPACE

Fine Arts Building C

CONTEXT

In the advising meeting with Dr. van Amstel, we positioned the MFA thesis project as a part of my existential project also known as my life. Through many metadesign toolkits, this daunting process was invited as a part of my academic trajectory. The process, however, was not daunting thanks to constant dialogues with Dr. van Amstel.

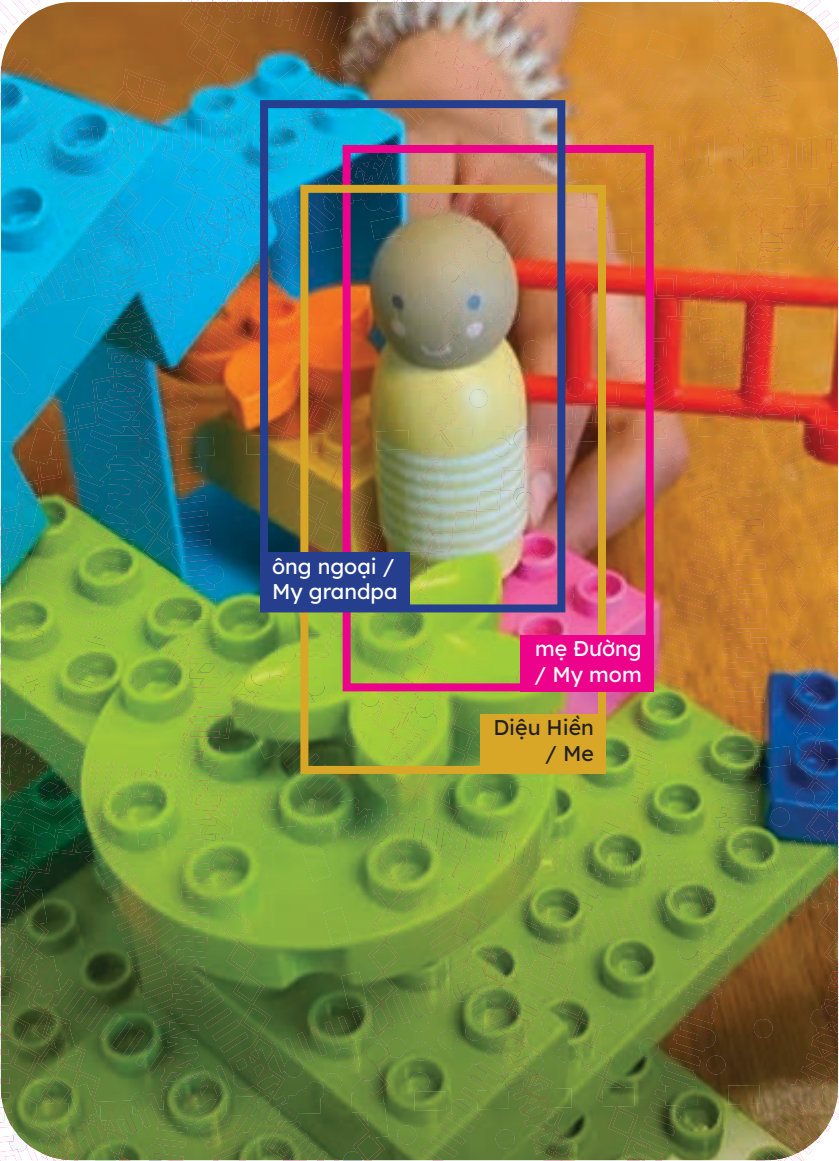


Figure 14: I was telling many stories of my family members embedded in one body, including many struggles and effort in recovery. This body was metaphorically represented in the yellow wood doll. This color choice represented my perception of self, family members, as well as Vietnamese identity in the USA multicultural fabric.



Figure 15: Through the B.akka archetype library, I imagined and reflected on my existential trajectory, beyond the scope of the MFA thesis. This has been a part of Dr. van Amstel's pedagogical commitment in advising student (2021).



Figure 16: Then, I have built two social structure through Lego Serious Play: one is the structure in Vietnam that my family and I experienced; another one is the design education structure in the USA that I have studied at so far.

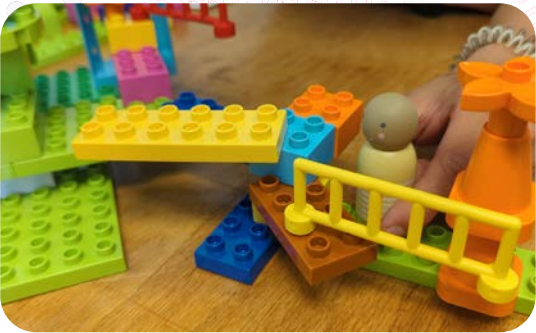


Figure 17: The intergenerational trajectory upheld many hopeful possibilities. My ancestors have sacrificed their personal dreams and struggled during their time, yet their descendants' lives were built from that. We climbed through the social ladders, gradually.

diverse
student body
speculative design
ancestry
postcolonial body
hybrid
identity
neoliberal
multiculturalism

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

As a Vietnamese young female, I have already been conditioned with many expectations of performing personal and professional lives well. Reflecting on the history opened up embarrassments or sorrow while speculating the future of self seemed to uphold many promises. Thus, I was initially hesitant for this autoethnography design, which projects not only my trajectory but also my ancestry and the political history of our cultures.

At the end of the meeting, Dr. van Amstel suggested me sharing a message that aligns with the collective trajectory in my mother language, Vietnamese. I then responded with a question "Mom, if I live and act like this, will you (still) be proud?" The question was generic, yet project my confusion in design education that is impacted by the USA neoliberal multiculturalism.

After this advising meeting, I revisited the history of my ancestors in writing and visual ethnography, through which I gradually recognize the gap between our history and my design practices.

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Dr. Frederick van Amstel
Hien Phan

Lego sets DUPLO
Wrestling action figures

Fine Arts Building C

In the design research process of design education, we recreate the institutional structure that upholds the diverse institutional body, including many designers, faculty, and administration staff. We engaged with the playful LSP in order to understand the power dynamics among the diverse institutional body, which are conditioned in the institutional structure.

Higher education in the USA is analyzed as just another industry, where neoliberal multiculturalism is manifested through the diverse institutional body. While the diverse design institutional body contributes to the institutional design through educational services and collaborations with local communities, they experienced systemic oppressions in the institution.

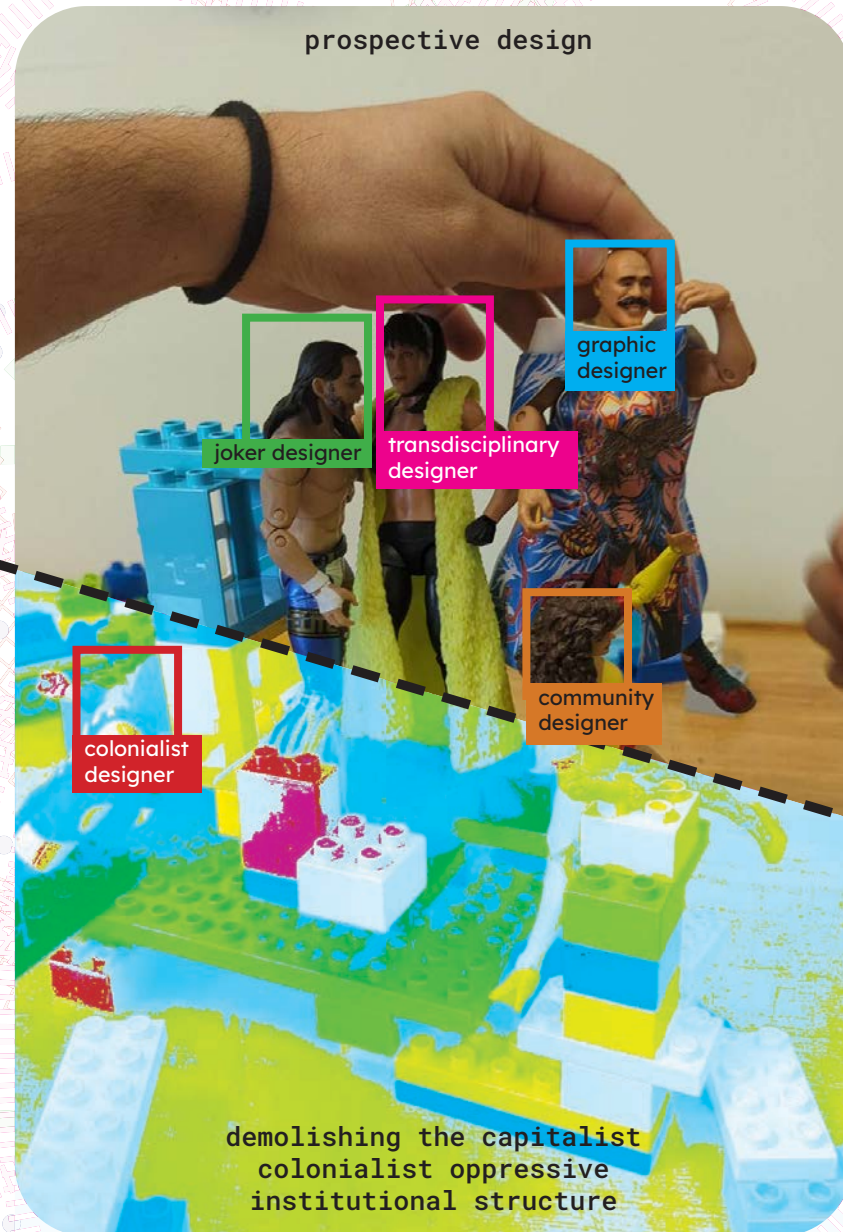


Figure 18: Through LSP, we were speculating the new way of designing the democratic, equal, and communal design institution, which demolishes historical privilege of certain social group. Image was processed and annotated through Adobe programs.



Figure 19: Recreating the design education that was built as a part of the neoliberal multiculturalist institution

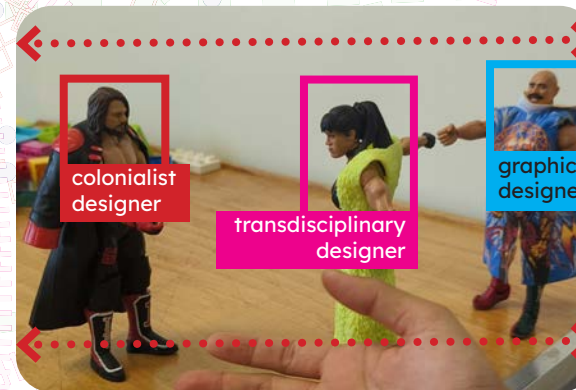


Figure 20: Affirmative language such as equitable, inclusive, and accessible became common goals not only in the organizational culture in the institution but also in the codesign partnership between the institution and local communities.

local institution
DEI policies
neoliberal
multiculturalism
community building
alter/native
institution

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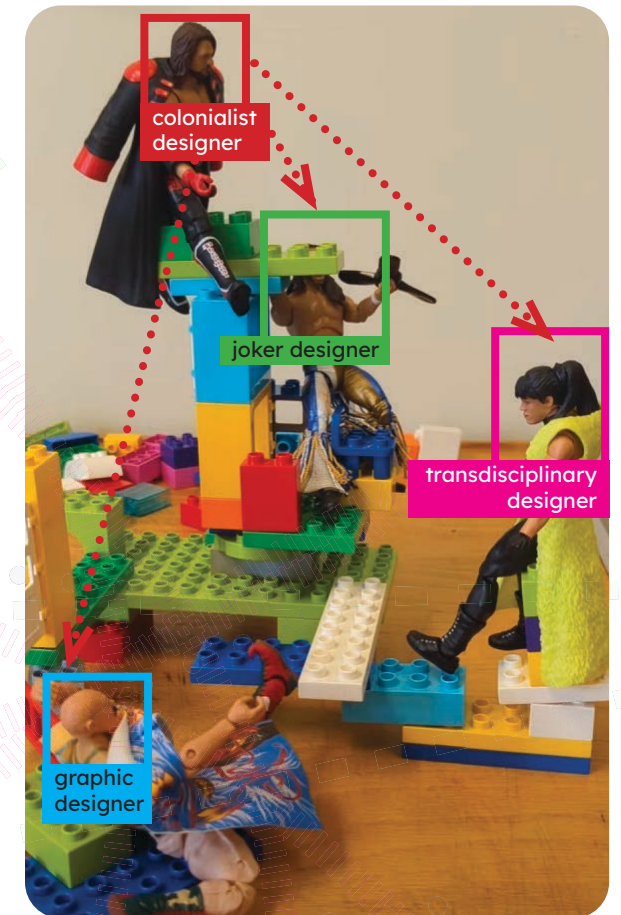


Figure 21: The affirmative language has hindered hierarchies in the institution, perpetuating the systemic inequalities among diverse social groups. In this affirmative institutional culture, the marginalized design bodies are also silenced.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Institutional statement is embedded and extended through personal connections among the institutional body (Ahmed, 2012). Although the affirmative language was adjusted or even abandoned per the anti-DEI initiatives, they remained a part of the cultural language of the design institutional body on the personal level. Regardless, the affirmative language does not perform due to the hierarchical structure of the neoliberal multiculturalist institution, which is a part of capitalism.

In speculating the alter/native institutional structure where institutional statement aligns well with its institutional structure, we imagined the horizontal structure, where many design bodies shared the same level of resources and infrastructure. There, the colonialist designer at the high rank of the original institution would not involve in the communal, democratic way of rebuilding the institution.

July 10, 2024
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA

Dr. Frederick van Amstel
Hien Phan

“Everyone is awesome” lego set
Finger puppets

Fine Arts Building C

In order to understand diversity in the institution, we engaged in the Lego Serious Play dedicated to diversity. Through colors in design, the diversity is essentialized as many consecutive colors, which could be seen in rainbow flags in LGBTQIA+ community and their supporters.

As we the players did not share the similar identities as the community, we engaged with these colored human figures mainly as representations of many races and nationalities. The adjustment in worldview and play-view encouraged us to understand the diverse design student body as the projection of geopolitics and the long history of Western/European colonialism and cultural imperialism.

Figure 23: The color setup of the LSP structure has vividly represented the neoliberal multiculturalism of USA higher education. There, each color represented the pure version of cultural identities, which are organized neatly per the specific position of Lego pieces on the floor. In any angle of viewing this LSP structure, each of the diverse body stood independently in the previously designed space. In hindsight, the arrangement of many pured body (McClintock, 2005) implied colonial aesthetics (Angelon & van Amstel, 2021), which is inherited from Western/European colonialism.

Thus, we attempted to break this coloniality in design through repositioning the bodies differently.

July 17, 2024
GAINESVILLE, FLORIDA



Figure 23: The color setup of the LSP structure has vividly represented the neoliberal multiculturalism of USA higher education. There, each color represented the pure version of cultural identities, which are organized neatly per the specific position of Lego pieces on the floor. In any angle of viewing this LSP structure, each of the diverse body stood independently in the previously designed space. In hindsight, the arrangement of many pured body (McClintock, 2005) implied colonial aesthetics (Angelon & van Amstel, 2021), which is inherited from Western/European colonialism.

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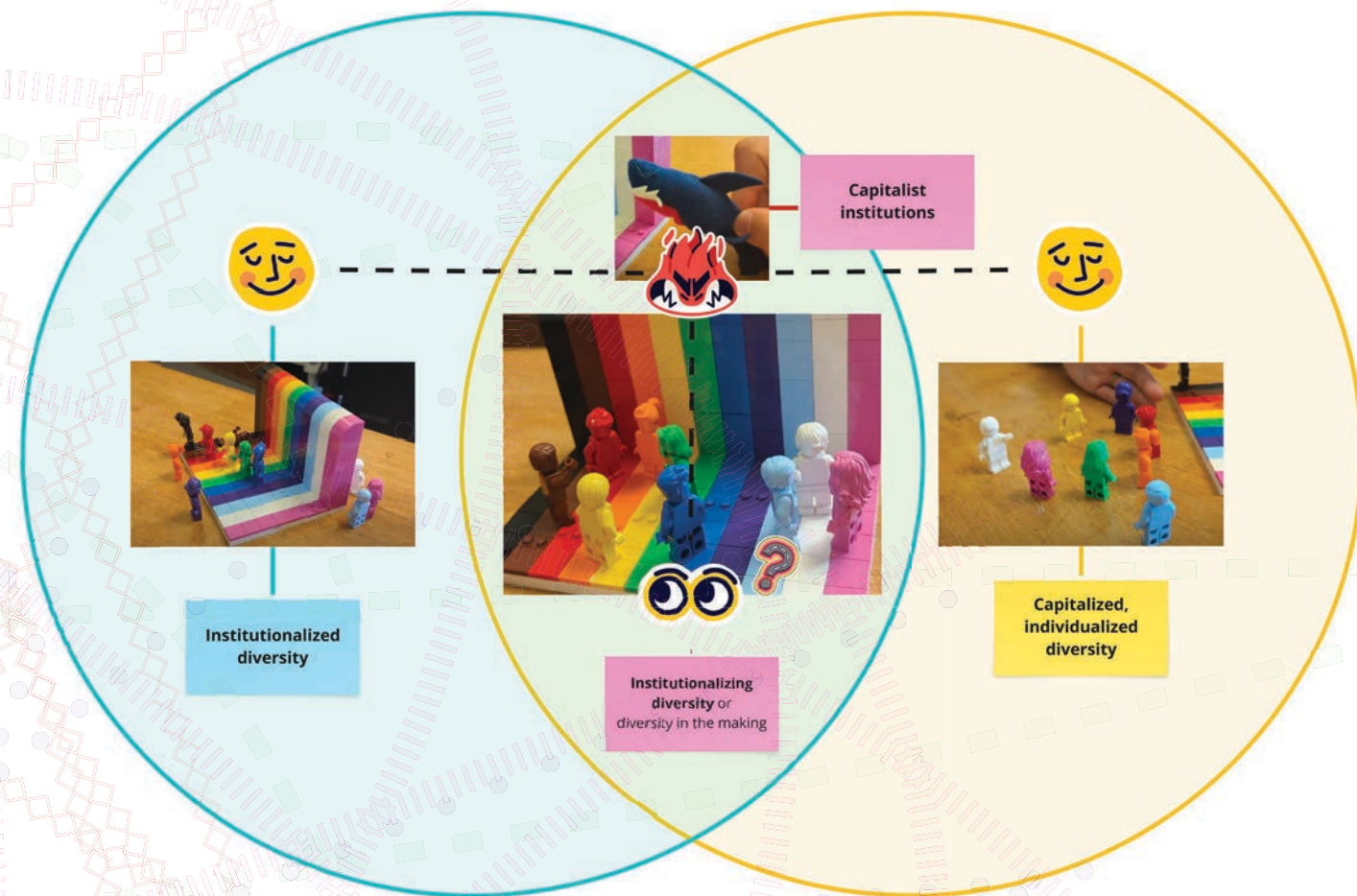


Figure 24: Digital annotation of the Lego Serious Play experiment, in dialogue with Dr. van Amstel, October 2024

institutional
diversity
institutional
inclusion
meritocracy
neoliberal
multiculturalism
diverse body
diverse commodity
identity expression

REFERENCES

- Angelon, R., & van Amstel, F. (2021). Monster aesthetics as an expression of decolonizing the design body. *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 20(1), 83-102.
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ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

The celebratory tone of institutional diversity and excellence was conveyed through the name of the Lego set. The Lego set came with instructions in the specific ways of building the Legos, as well as its function as a part of the main character's backdrop. Per this design process, diversity is institutionalized through the design materials as well as the messages that this structure aims to convey: Everyone is awesome, whoever and wherever they are. Thus, there is no need of changing their positionality as well as knowledge.

This implied the pointlessness of changing any body or any institution, even when it was embedded with racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination. The contradiction of “everyone is awesome” is manifested through institutional diversity (Ahmed, 2012): The diverse body perpetuates the institutionalized identity while being included by the institution; Without the institution, the diverse body plays by the rule of meritocracy, inhabiting the individualist life style regardless of their identities.

This contradiction had led my way in continuing the design research on institutionalized diversity.

By not being aware of the alienated positionality and design consciousness, the diverse design student body risks allying with the institutional racism and exclusion. The institutional design welcomed diverse body but not Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC).

Autoethnography
as meta-design of
the design body

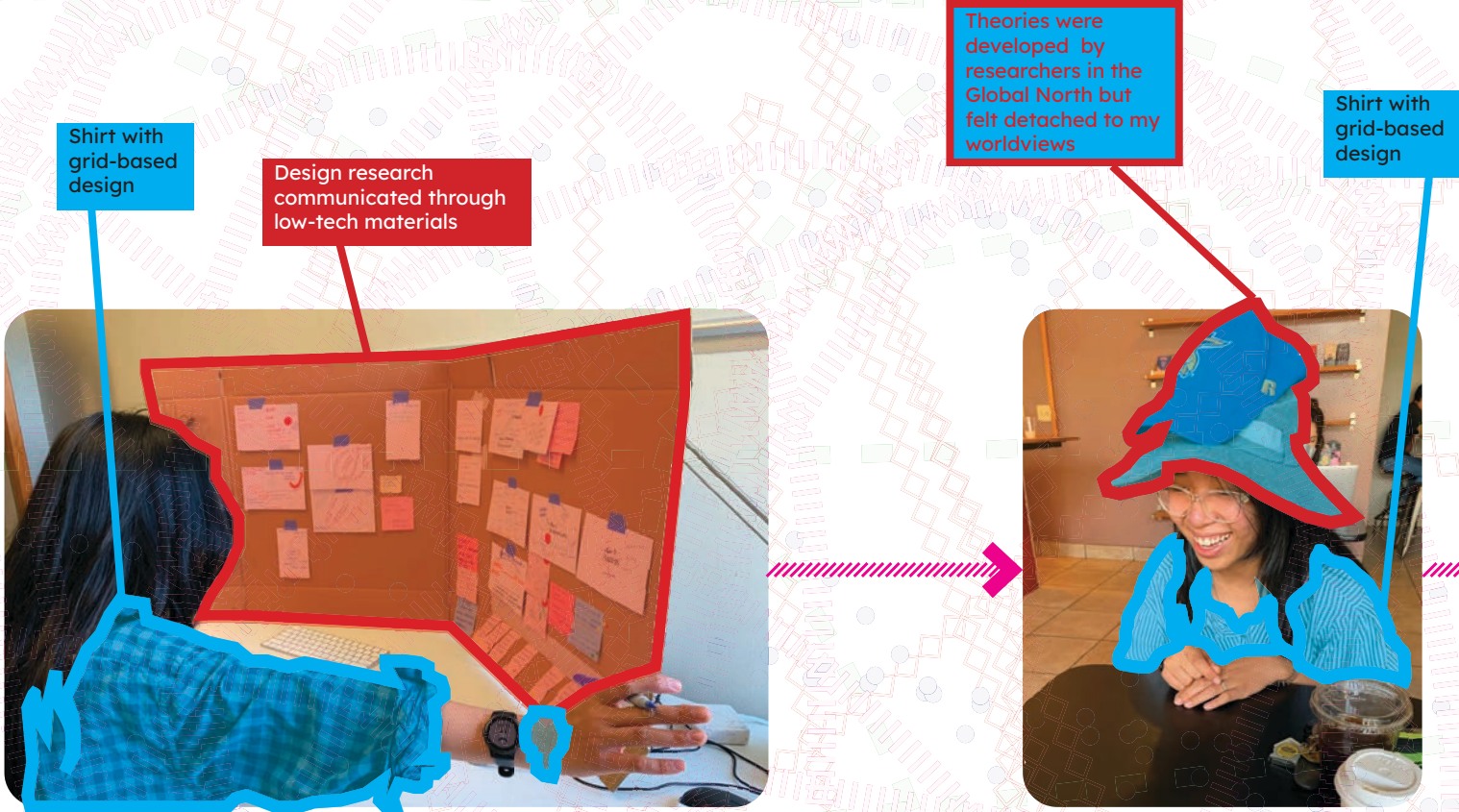


Figure 27: In the advising meeting with Dr. van Amstel, on Apr. 18, 2024, I shared about my research process with nervous excitement. With low-tech materials, colonial aesthetics was set aside, allowing ideas to be visualized, displayed, and communicated with not only the design objects but also the design body.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

After reflections and dialogues with my committee, I realized that my worldviews and actions in design research have been changed through this thesis project. I became more sensitive to contradictions in institutionalized diversity, which I support and critique. Autoethnography method in design research has constantly changed my worldviews as a design student, teacher, and staff in the organizational culture. By designing and researching from the viewpoint of self, I learned to be honest and admit the biases from this positionality. The biases from self correspond with the other per the organizational culture. Thus, this thesis project approached autoethnography from self as an individual impacted by culture and as a collective body approaching, designing, and redesigning that culture.

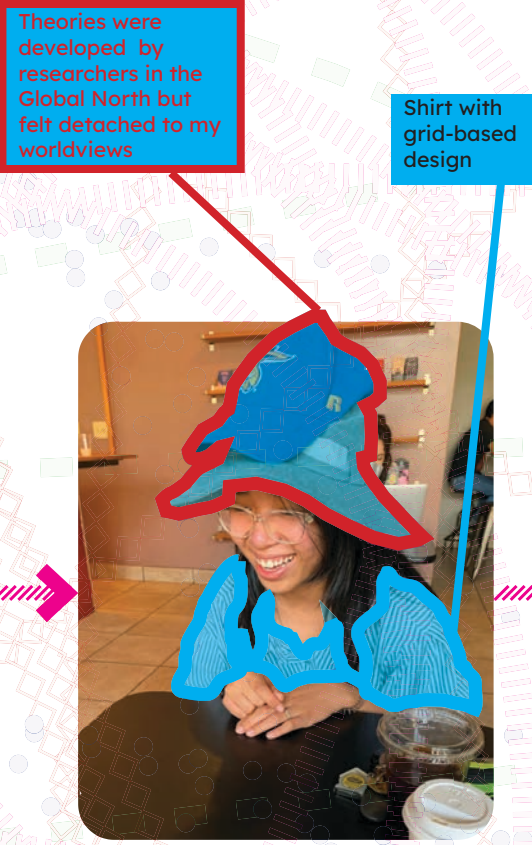


Figure 28: In the autoethnography practice with Dr. van Amstel, on May 7, 2024, I brought two hats in representing myself through Intersectionality (blue cap, top) and Postcolonial theories (gray bucket hat, bottom). Although I learned the theories, I found it challenging to understand my positionality as an Asian female immigrant in the USA.

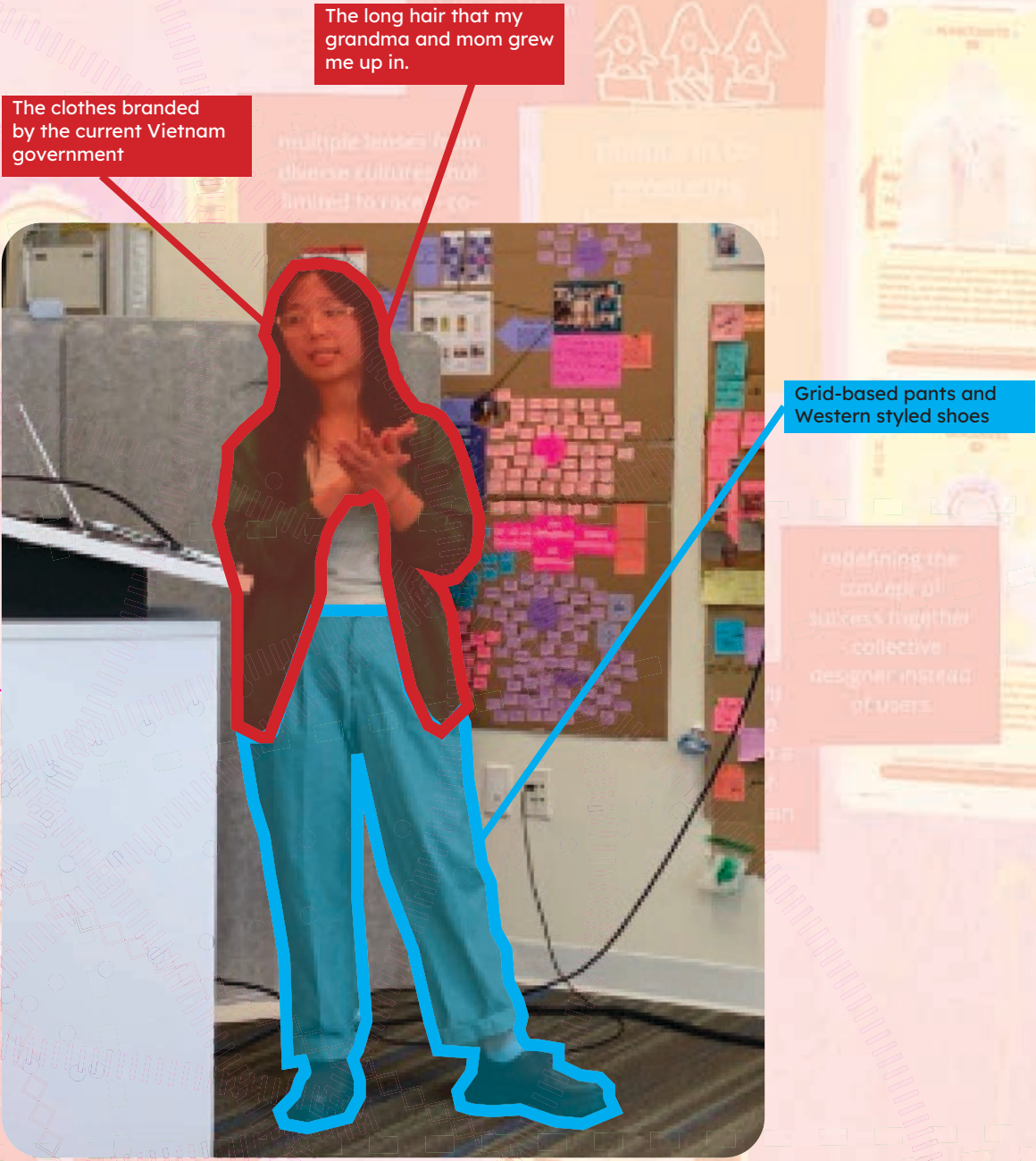
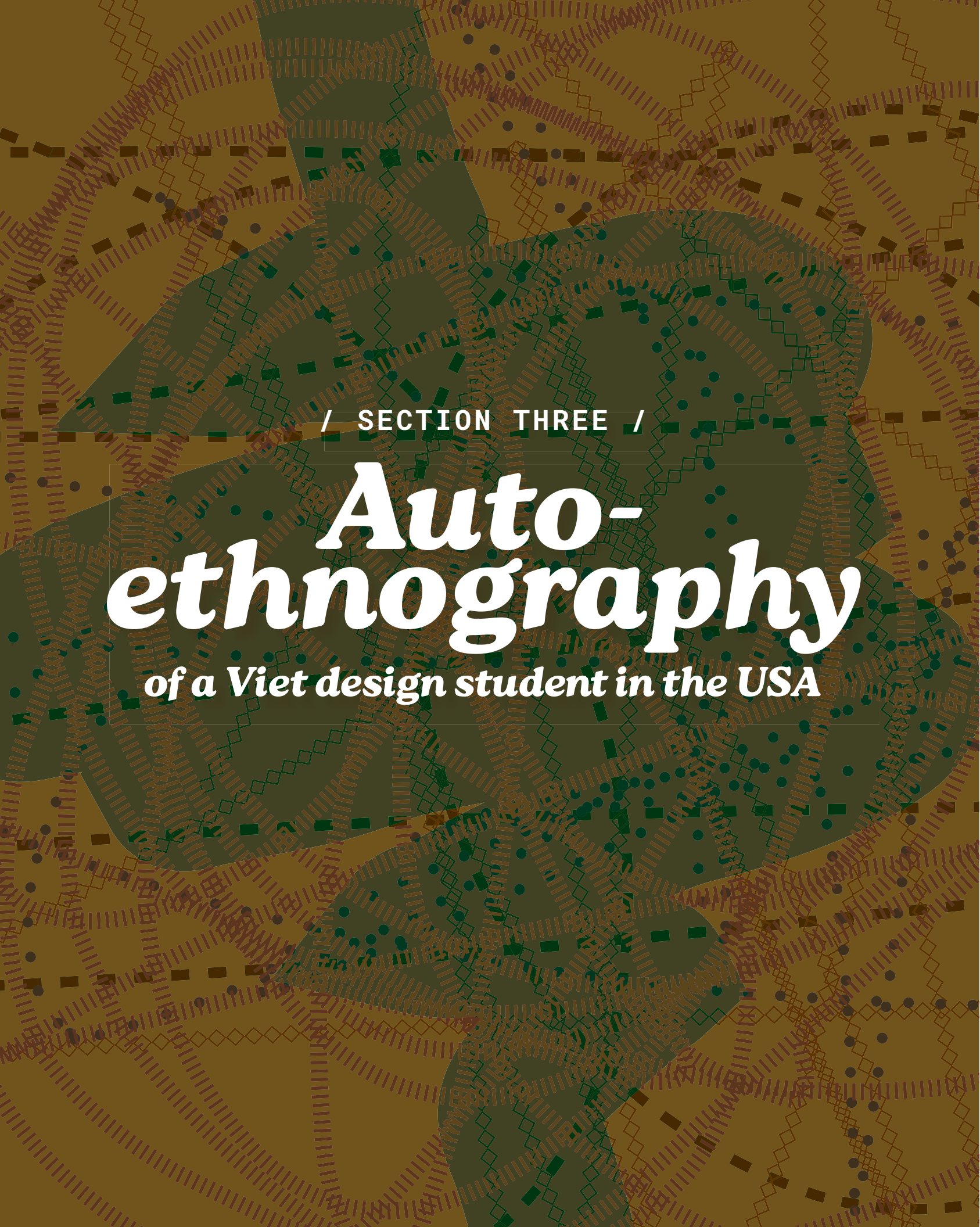


Figure 29: In the thesis defense, on Mar. 28, 2025, I dressed seriously for the first time during the thesis project. I was able to unveil a different narrative as a part of the diverse student body to my committee members. Besides being an Asian female immigrant, I am also a granddaughter and citizen of a small country Vietnam with the anticolonial nationalist history. This ancestry has been hindered, misrepresented, and even discriminated in the USA neoliberal multiculturalism.

It was once lost when I pursued graphic design. This thesis project in autoethnography method represent the constant struggles to relocate and understand this narrative as a contradiction of my positionality.



/ SECTION THREE /

Auto-ethnography

of a Viet design student in the USA

In part three, I will be briefly sharing autoethnographic design in the USA higher education. This spans from Tennessee where I pursued undergraduate studies at (2017-2021) to Florida where I pursued graduate studies at (2022-2025). Identity and positionality has been a part of my design practice, under the impacts of design education and social life in the USA neoliberal multiculturalism. The USA along with other Global North countries have gradually grown global impacts on Vietnam social structure, including education.

Thus, I have been in dialogues with many individuals (Vietnam, USA) as well as ethnography practices (Gainesville, FL) to understand the gap between personal dialogues and cultural materials, as well as local space and global geopolitics. Thus, digital public and private sources, where I archived my design research and practice, are referred to in this project in-lieu-of thesis.

The autoethnographic design documentation in this section aims to answer the following question:

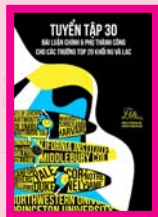
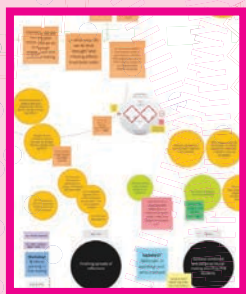
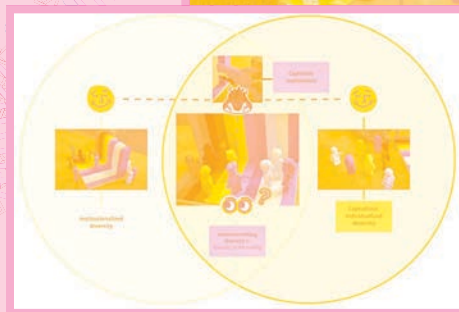
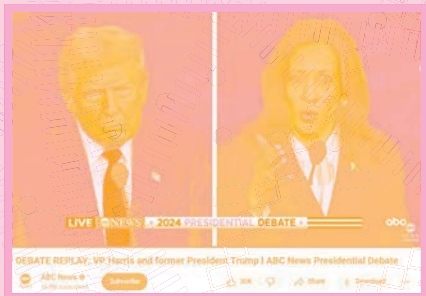
How is **diversity institutionalized** and dismantled in the neoliberal multiculturalist higher education of Florida, USA?

Figure 1: Documentation of autoethnography on Google Doc (2024-2025)

A screenshot of a Google Doc titled "AEG-methodologies" with a menu bar (File, Edit, View, Insert, Format, Data, Tools, Extensions, Help) and a toolbar. The document contains a table with columns: Date, Photo, Media links, Materials, Location, hr, Content, and tags. The table lists various autoethnographic entries with dates, photos, links, materials, locations, durations, content descriptions, and tags.

	Date	Photo	Media links	Materials	Location	hr	Content	tags
36	11/23/2024		https://photos.aeg.goo.gl/HFHB5LgA8Z6v3n8A	my camera	Around UF	2.5	market, passing through the Massey Park, traces of homeless folks, children with parents in the park, children with no parents looking for road support, and giant lines of Gator cars after the game	ethno observation
37	11/22/2024		https://photos.aeg.goo.gl/HFHB5LgA8Z6v3n8A	my camera	Around UF		Lucia commented that it's interesting that I studied decolonization in design and now I was holding the toy gun towards the arcade game machine against nature and all kind zombies. As we were immersed by the songs in foggy music-filled dance floor, I found it's hard to resist the individualist, well-designed space, the language "immerser" is indeed the escaping hippie form of design - to revisit the word "hippie" and understand the stereotypes that are locally based in Gainesville FL	MxD aetherious
38	11/22/2024		https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1e49cd-0E4JEN2U51B-A70202eTV0KuFh3sp2drive-link	bodies, my camera	MxD studio	4	Cultural Friday, design experiment planned by Hien, Cassie, and Fred, people attended, fun complicating ironic ways to understand the US politics on the nation and state level, reading materials in engaging in conversations help, as a compicator I still have limited understanding in politics to complicate	design experiment MxD aetherious
39	11/20/2024		https://photos.aeg.goo.gl/XM0C-a807ubx77866	Azadeh's paper in blue prints, color markers, sticky notes, tracing paper	MxD studio	2	we were reviewing both data and Azadeh's first draft submitted to Fred. Her paper was great, while Fred suggesting finding links among them, the paper abstract was then submitted to icdhs in India on the next day that we work on it in this google doc criticalpluriversaLicdhs different styles of working, which seems great when working together in studio.	codesign data analysis
40	11/19/2024		https://photos.aeg.goo.gl/FW7V-c68v8V63K32x2	printed 100 principles in typography, students' works in printed papers, markers, sticky notes, and newsprints	FAC 310	3	Students gathered their works in the same platform, then using markets and sticky notes to annotate on the visual works, then using the cards from 100 principles in type to reread their works through the lenses of principles in design then we took photos of the works as a way to analyze them for their portfolio	GTAtaching
41	11/18/2024		https://photos.aeg.goo.gl/HFHB5LgA8Z6v3n8A	my camera	UF	0.5	the AEG that I wanted to avoid but usually reproduce - pungent, personal, surrealist, individualist, overwhelming, and terrifying. I can imagine the artist's POV, but the radical move like this either captures someone with the similar POV or creating binaries with those of different opinions. The bridge was broken as the	ethno observation

COLLABORATION OR
PART-TIME JOBS
GRADED ASSIGNMENTS





A Viet design student through autoethnography, collaborative writing

CO-DESIGNERS

Hien Phan
Dr. Frederick van Amstel

DESIGN META-OBJECT

Google Doc

CONTEXT

After the Lego Serious Play activity, I was curious of the intergenerational trajectory of my grandpa, mom, and me. I often held conversation with Dr. van Amstel through meetings and Teams, where verbal languages placed important role in sharing autoethnography. Thus, in the past few months, I have conducted the autoethnography in the writing form, besides visual design and codesign experiments.

diverse
student body
speculative design
ancestry
postcolonial body
hybrid
identity
neoliberal
multiculturalism

May 2024 - present
GOOGLE DOC

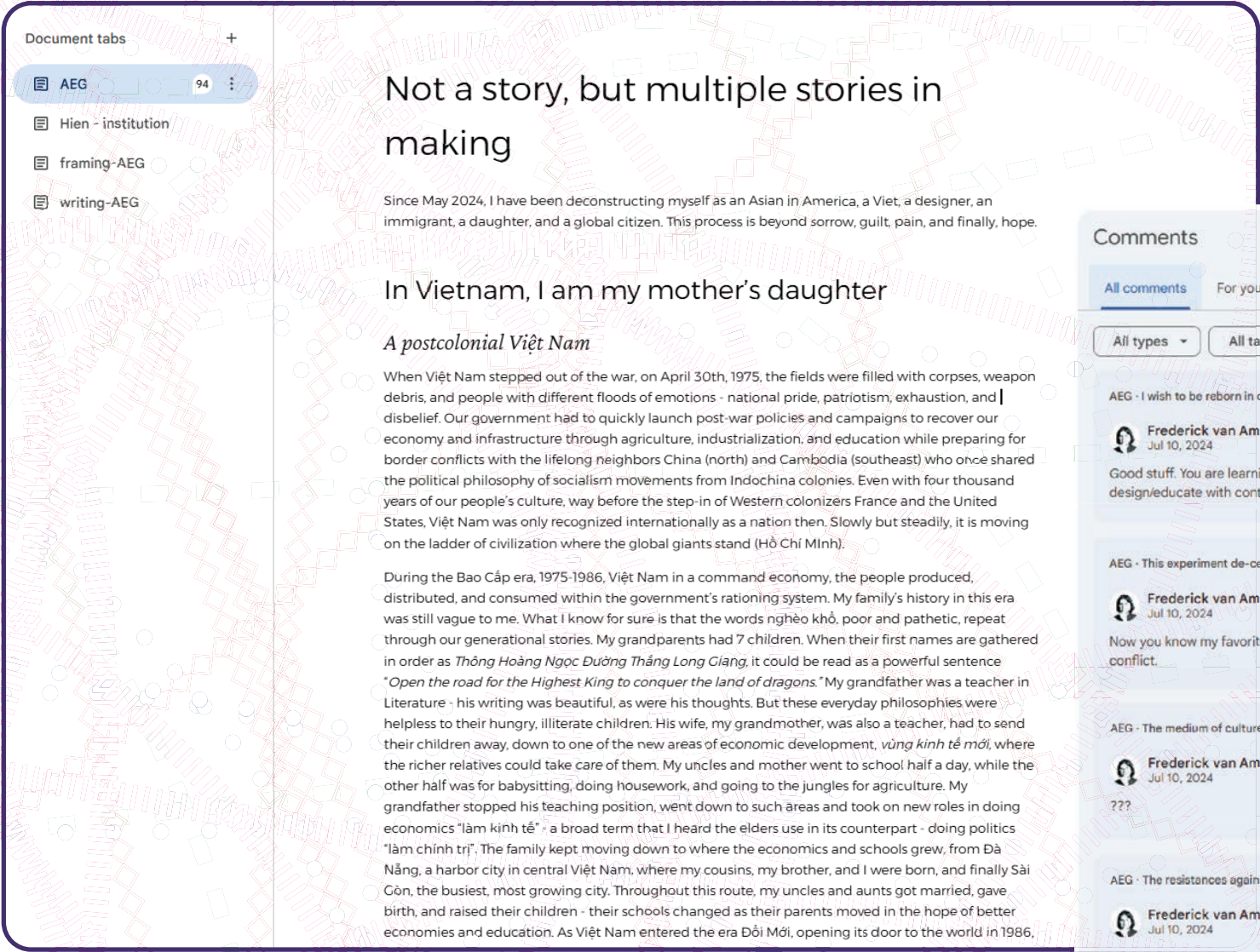


Figure 2: Through writing, I traced to the memories of my family, friends, and me.

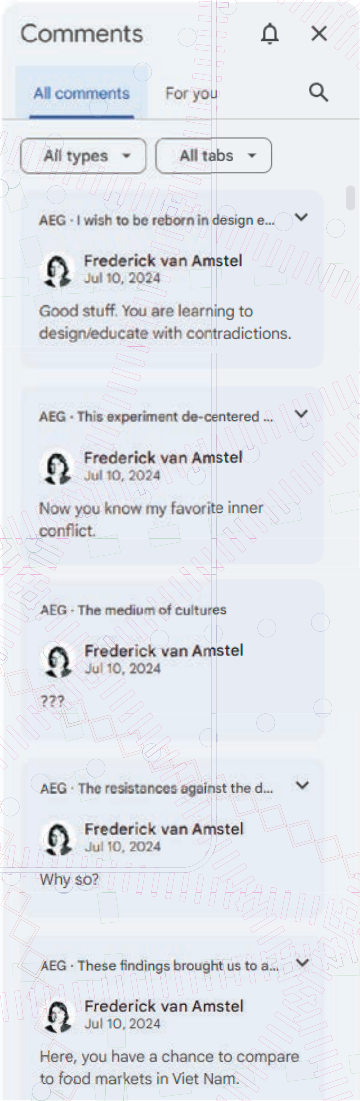


Figure 3: Dr. van Amstel entered this autoethnographic design space with Google Doc comments. This application has been designed for accessibility in collaborations, thus allowing rooms for me as the grapher to revisit and edit in response to the other's comments.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Through writing and collaborating with Dr. van Amstel, I got a better understanding of autoethnography practice, highlighting the culturally embedded self. This writing has supported me in describing the cultures through the viewpoint of self.

When graphing the trajectory of self chronologically, there were many gaps in such trajectory. Such gaps implied the absence, lack, or loss of self-reflection, -perception, and -consciousness. In response to such gaps, I often called my mom or friends who might have observed such gaps. Sometimes, patching information from the website could be an option, but it might have been institutionalized.

The conversation with Dr. van Amstel who might share different positionality has been important during the autoethnography. His comments proposed some gaps that I often took for granted. In the summer 2024, this document has been viewed and revised at least 6 times as a dialogue between two graphers who tried to understand many culturally embedded selves: my grandpa, uncles, mom, me, friends, and the MxD cohort.

Through deconstructing many selves, institutionalized diversity is observed and researched along the trajectory of a diverse body. This process was full of conflicts, as I read and reread these selves under the impacts of cultures, whether they aligned with my worldviews.



A Viet design student
through design education
in the USA neoliberal
multiculturalism

As I finalized this project in lieu of thesis, I was asking mom about the upcoming days, when Vietnam celebrated 50 years of reunization of northern and southern halves of our country.

When far away from home, I have seen Vietnam in many ways: social media when the young Vietnamese shared about their birthplaces and nation; my family members in their everyday news; national news such as vnexpress and kenh14; as well as the Vietnamese American literature and media resources. The last source is always the most pungent, insightful, yet polarizing. It was polarizing because I was born and raised in the peace era granted by the anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist ancestry. The peace is reminded to be grateful for through our K-12 textbooks about the long history that our country was in wars against colonizers and civil wars. We learned to know that even our country is small but heroic. We would be friends to everyone but would fight against those taking advantage of us, including China, Mongolia, France, Japan, and the United States of America.

Before I even developed my consciousness, I was grown in such anti-imperialist nationalism. My family was originally from Thanh Hóa, a nothern central city in Vietnam. Although this city is poor during my mom’s time, it is known as the original land of nationalist heros such as Lê Lợi. Its geography is next to Nghệ An, a hometown of Quang Trung - Nguyễn Huệ and Hồ Chí Minh. I grew up, listening to my grandma’s nationalist lullabies. They were the common patriotic songs, including the previous anthem of a pre-1975 Northern Vietnamese government:

Giải phóng miền Nam, chúng ta cùng quyết tiến bước.
Diệt Đế quốc Mỹ, phá tan bè lũ bán nước.
Ôi xương tan máu rơi, long hận thù ngất trời.
Lông núi bao nhiêu năm cắt rời.

Đây Cửu Long hùng tráng, Đây Trường Sơn vinh quang.
Thúc giục đoàn ta xung phong đi giết thù.
Vai sát vai chung một bóng cờ.

[...]

Giải phóng miền Nam,
by Huỳnh Minh Siêng

Many years after 1975, when Vietnam won in the fight against the Western/European colonialism and imperialism, patriotic songs were lullabied for the new generations, by the old generations. Nationalism and anti-imperialism has been institutionalized during my childhood, by my grandma, mom, and sister. In school, I was immersed by the literature and history about these wars and how Vietnam won. Plus, I majored in Vietnamese literature in the middle school and high school, officially embedding the anti-imperialist culture and history into my worldview. The K-12 textbook could be understood as bible of nationalist patriotism, which featured nationalist poets, writers, and artists. The following poem is by Y Phương, a poet in Tày ethnicity, who writes to his son as a father who loves his nation as loving the indigenous land, river, his wife, and son:

[...]
Người đồng mình thương lắm con ơi
Cao đo nỗi buồn
Xa nuôi chí lớn
Dẫu làm sao thì cha vẫn muốn
Sống trên đá không chê đá gập ghềnh
Sống trong thung không chê thung nghèo đói
Sống như sông như suối
Lên thác xuống ghềnh
Không lo cực nhọc
Người đồng mình thô sơ da thịt
Chẳng mấy ai nhỏ bé đâu con
Người đồng mình tự đục đá kê cao quê hương
Còn quê hương thì làm phong tục
Con ơi tuy thô sơ da thịt
Lên đường
Không bao giờ nhỏ bé được
Nghe con.

Nói với con,
by Y Phương
(1980)

“Head up, straight back, and eyes up,” mom reminded me to fix my posture in studying and working, just like how Y Phương reminded his son not to be small and not to be dependent, whether it was the giant colonizers and imperialist. Through everyday life, my way of growing up has been trained by family members and teachers. It was until I went to the United States of America, I met many Vietnamese who critique this nationalist anti-imperialism as the intellectual indoctrination and distorted worldview.

In the apartment of three, and then four people, I lived with other Vietnamese friends who had mixed knowledge and feeling about the American War (or in the USA and Global North countries as Vietnam War). When one of my best friends, X, shared about her knowledge of the pre-1975 Southern Vietnam government, her patriotism and pride appears differently. Her family was divided by the wars many times: Her family was from the northern region of Vietnam who then moved to the southern in 1954, before the nation was split in halves; A part of her family then crossed the border, becoming the boat people after 1975, when Vietnam gained reunification. To her and the opposite side of the official Vietnam government, April 30th, 1975 is the Fall of Saigon, the Black April, and memorial day of the lost nation.



Figure 4: X (right) and I (left) in the graduation photo shoot in April 2022. While I wore the flag of current Vietnam government, X decided not to wear it. She was afraid that her Vietnamese American relatives would find the current flag problematic. In the other hand, I insisted wearing Vietnam flag, trying to show the yellow band and the flag band at the same time, even in a weird way. In this image, we were probably arguing about my way of wearing the Vietnam flag.

At first, I disagreed and tried to perform my disagreement to her. In several attempts in arguing with X, I gave up realizing that my knowledge in Vietnam politics and cultures was limited. When X traced back to the history that led to the Southern Vietnam government and Vietnamese refugee in the USA, I only knew to claim that anti-imperialist nationalism is important for Vietnam. When she emphasized the Vietnamese identities through the Yellow Music performed by artists in Paris by Night, street food, and media, I grew up with Red Music and the K-12 textbooks. Instead of the word Mỹ Ngụy and puppet government that my K-12 textbooks labeled such government, she praised the Southern Vietnam authorities, such as Ngô Đình Diệm and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ. Instead of Hà Nội Vietnamese accent that my family often looked up to, she praised the Sài Gòn accent of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ Duyên and Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn, the Vietnamese American hosts of Paris by Night.

At the marginalized position who was often misrepresented after 1975 in Vietnam, X has been raised to understand the contradictions of nationalism. Nationalism is acted on differently in the Vietnamese K-12 textbooks and Vietnamese soft culture in the USA. At the privileged position whose family has sided with the current Vietnam government, I only knew one side of the history. Through cultural materials, my family and I knew the culture of Vietnamese refugee but not the different politics of the southern Vietnamese or Vietnamese American. My family enjoyed the artistic culture of Paris by Night through the CDs bought from the live market, but we did not even discuss to unpack the opposite side. However, X knows both sides.



Figure 6: Quang Lê was one of the well-known artists in Paris by Night. He was also my grandma’s and mom’s favorite singers.

Figure 5: Nguyễn Ngọc Ngạn (left) and Nguyễn Cao Kỳ Duyên (right) as the hosts of Paris by Night, which were built by Vietnamese American artists.

I knows X as one of a few most trustworthy and supportive Vietnamese friends in the USA. Thus, in respect of her and her relatives who had supported me in my first few months in Tennessee, USA, I resumed learning the Vietnam histories of both sides through YouTube and blog posts of Vietnamese American. This attempt has opened a new discourse of knowledge that I then committed to through my design trajectories below:



Figure 7: In summer 2017, before I went to study abroad in the United States of America, I registered for design technical courses ColorME. During these courses, I learned the basis of Adobe programs, Pinterest mood board, as well as Behance design feed. With the design training in two months, I got a head start in graphic design major in the Middle Tennessee State University where I pursued a Bachelor's degree at.

With modernist, simplistic design in black and white, I practiced editorial design based on the southern Vietnamese Thanh Tâm Tuyền.



Figure 9: In a course taught by professor Michael Baggarly, I conducted a sculpture design that represented self, from anything cardboards. I have been inspired by the structure of Howl's moving castle by Studio Ghibli. I then represented many aspects of emotions, in paralleling with natural resources: yellow, green, blue, and black.

Since then, the complementary color palette orange/blue has been commonly used in my graphic design about cultural identities and materials. Little did I know, this color palette is inherited by orientalism, where the Eastern region is known for its cultural and natural diversity. This ideology persists Western/European colonization in the Eastern region.

SUMMER 2017

FALL 2017

SPRING 2018

FALL 2018

UNDERGRADUATE STUDIES BEGINS

Figure 8: In 2017 - 2019, I was working remotely as a graphic designer for Elite Prep - an agency in studying abroad. In hindsight, this collaboration has further my perception of Global North countries as the promising station of prestigious higher education.



Figure 10: In 2017 - 2018, I was also collaborating with the SEEDS Vietnam, an organization in supporting Vietnamese students in studying abroad as well as female in technology field. This collaboration was organized by many Vietnamese international college students in the USA and Vietnam, funded by the Babson College and Cốc Cốc.

This marked my graphic design practice in branding design, information design, editorial design, as well as social media collaboration.



Figure 11: In a course taught by professor Kathleen O'Connell, I sometimes engaged Vietnamese urban aesthetics, cultural identities, and food in the pop-up book art project. It was then complimented, encouraging me to persistently pursue the designerly identity.



Figure 12: In a course taught by professor Evie Woltel Richner, I used the Viet fridge magnets in illustrating stop motion. The figures wore the traditional Viet custom Áo Dài. The magnets were of my Viet roommate who brought these souvenirs to gift their friends and teachers in Tennessee, USA.



Figure 14: In a course taught by professor Sheri Selph, I designed a quick 15-second GIF that engaged both texts and images. I then illustrated a human figure that resembled me, opening the restaurant door and then enjoying the noodle bowl. In hindsight, the figure was embedded with stereotypes of Asian: eyeglasses, noodle, chopsticks, happy face, and the orientalist color palette. As a Viet designer, I perpetuated the stereotypes while trying to excel design technical skills.



Figure 16: In Nov. 2019, a container truck was spotted in the UK, where 39 Vietnamese illegal immigrants were found dead. The smugglers have run away from the scene. I have practiced motion design through speculating a Viet woman's last few minutes of life in the container. This is a part of fall 2019, taught by professor Sheri Selph.

SPRING 2019

SUMMER 2019

FALL 2019



Figure 13: With the support of professor Kathleen O'Connell, I designed and installed the first solo exhibition about all things Vietnam. The design process included data collection, research about the history and culture of Vietnam. This design process challenged my identity as a Vietnamese who had not known the representative cultural materials of Vietnam as a nation.



Figure 15: In 2018 - 2021, I was working as a graphic designer in a Recreation Center of the university. The mission was delivering the message of welcoming many diverse student body into the institutional space. Since then, I practiced the design habit in including student representations of different looks in the graphic design to convey the institutional inclusion and diversity more vividly.





Figure 17: In a course taught by professor Sheri Selph, I designed the package that repurpose chopstick for other social cultural meanings. In hindsight, this graphic design project marked the versatility of cultural materials while also risk appropriating other cultures.



Figure 19: In a course also taught by professor Sheri Selph, I designed a book titled "Five things I treasured". In hindsight, through illustration and book arts, this book marked the designerly approach in autoethnography.



Figure 20: In a course taught by professors Noel Lorson and Tony Rodriguez, I designed Vietnamese identity through branding design, packaging design, and typography. The advertisement of Chè, a kind of dessert, was dedicated to English-speaking customers who might be hesitant towards the Viet cuisine. This cultural sensitivity is the concealing response to the historical bloody battles of the USA-Vietnam (1954 - 1975).

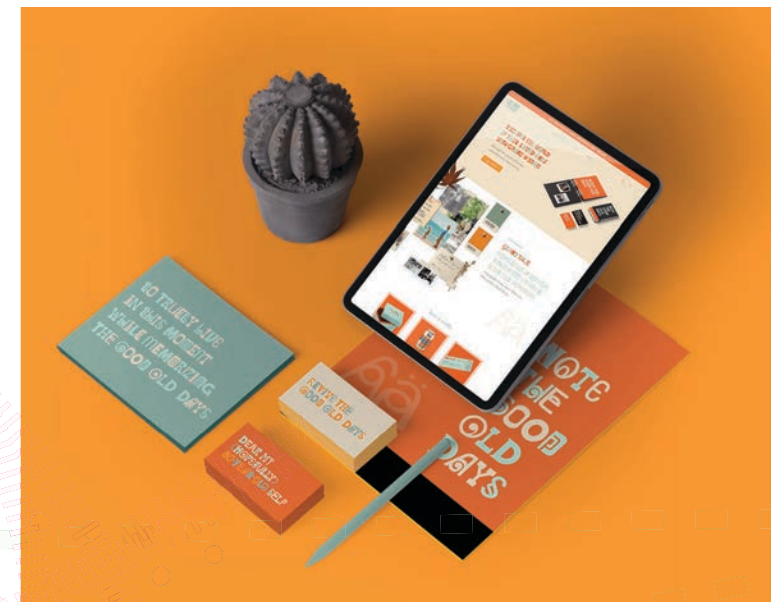


Figure 21: In the package design course, taught by Professor Noel Lorson, I designed an intergenerational branding design GrandTalk, implying dialogues between my grandpa and me. While using the common color palette as in other graphic design projects, I explored the visual design of hybrid identity through mixing typefaces in branding typography. Through the new branding of old cultural materials and through intergenerational conversation, this brand served to bond the family members even time passed by. This marked the intersection of storytelling and speculative design.

FALL 2019

SPRING 2020

FALL 2020

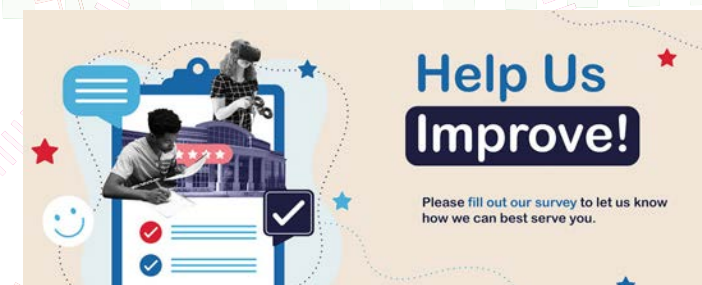
SPRING - FALL 2021



Figure 18: In 2018 - 2021, I was working as a graphic design intern at the Career Development Center, committing to representing the diverse student body as a compelling prospective workers. With graphic design as visual communication among many institutional bodies (employers, students, and universities), I learned to portrayed the diverse student body in representation of the institutional excellence.

Figure 22: In 2020 - 2021, I became a graphic designer of the James E. Walker library, where I illustrated the promotional design in engaging the student body with the institutional resources and spaces.

This includes a call for filling out the survey to ensure institutional inclusion (top right) as well as the design of exhibition "Free to Be" in the library Fall 2021.



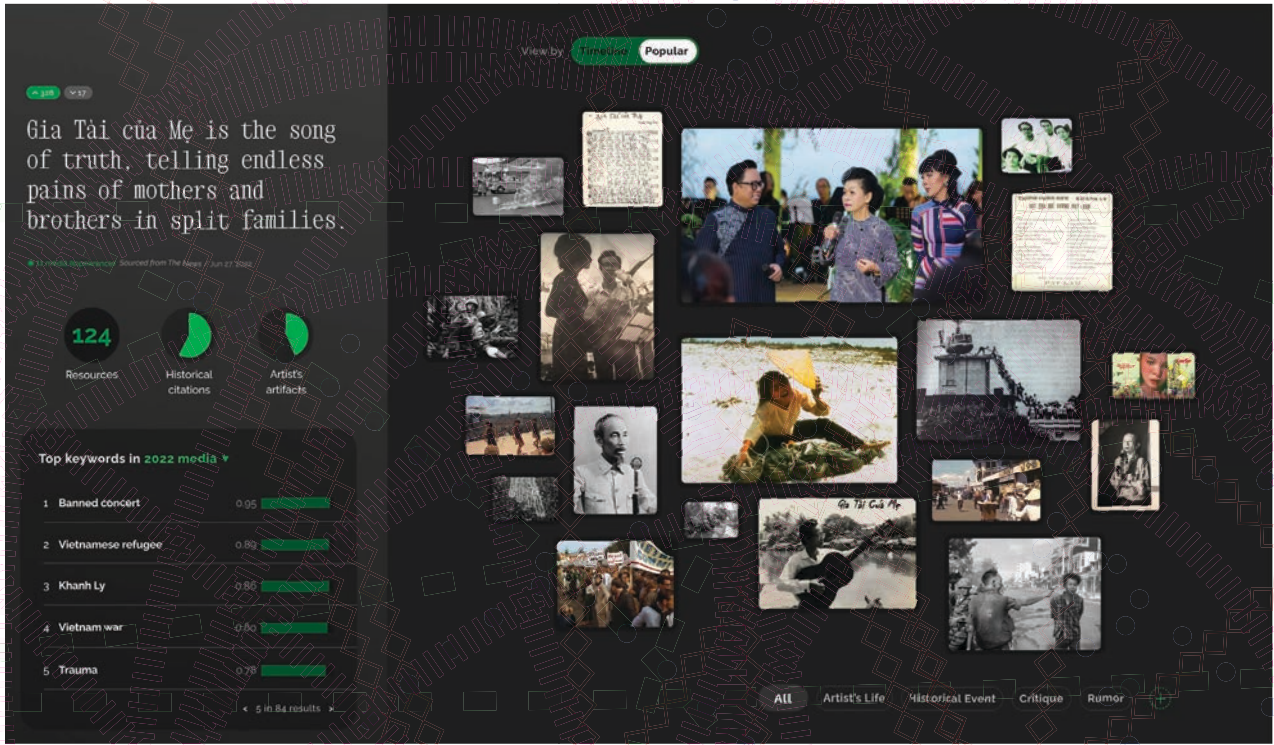


Figure 23: In the MxD Seminar course, taught by professor Victoria Gerson, I redesigned the music app UX/UI to be communally contributed. Above is the sample song “Gia Tài của Mẹ” which has been banned in Vietnam. However, Khánh Ly, a Vietnamese American artist who returned to Vietnam, has sung this song, composed by Trịnh Công Sơn. This controversial has been perceived differently by many Vietnamese.

Through artistic freedom, Khánh Ly represented the USA imperialism who perceived the “Vietnam War” as the civil war of Vietnam, between the North and the South Vietnam. The nationalist effort of Vietnamese in fighting against the USA imperialism was neglected. The community design encourages the listeners to contribute to the historical contexts of songs, artists, and singers.



Figure 25: In the Graphic Design History course, taught by Dr. Dori Griffin, I studied the design history of Asian American body. Through media and arts, this body of minor ethnicity found creative embodiment in reserving their generational cultural practices while adding personal touches of neoliberal multiculturalism. This could be understood as the archival hybrid identities of and beyond Asian American.



Figure 27: In the Asian American & other impossible objects course, taught by Dr. Malini Schueller, I have documented the mental stages of Vietnamese refugee and then Vietnamese American who went through identity crises, political controversies, and social expectations.

GRADUATE STUDIES BEGINS

FALL 2022



Figure 24: In the MxD Research and Practice, taught by Dr. Dori Griffin, Isabella Arrozola and I collaborated in engaging participatory design to understand the Project Youthbuild students’ knowledge of community, culture, and gun violence. Design research has turned into opening the community members, instead of the product or services.



SPRING 2023



Figure 26: In collaboration with APIDSE and Flora Wang, we attempted to understand students’ trajectories in higher education. The database of students’ POV, thus, is important for the redesign and expansive institutional resources for the APID community (bottom). Before the design experiment with APID community, the MxD cohort also engaged in this experiment, as an event test run. The database from MxD cohort, however, set the foundation for this thesis project.

SUMMER 2023

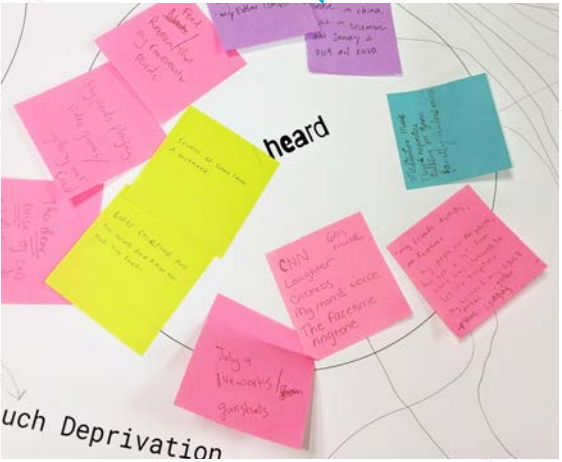


Figure 28: In collaboration with Dr. Kole Odutola, I facilitated a sensory participatory design experiment. In this process, the participant body, all of whom are UF students, have revisited their observations, feelings, and insights during the COVID era, per their sensors. Through institutional resources, the experiment was host in the Turlington Hall, supported by the student body, local artists, as well as the university staff.

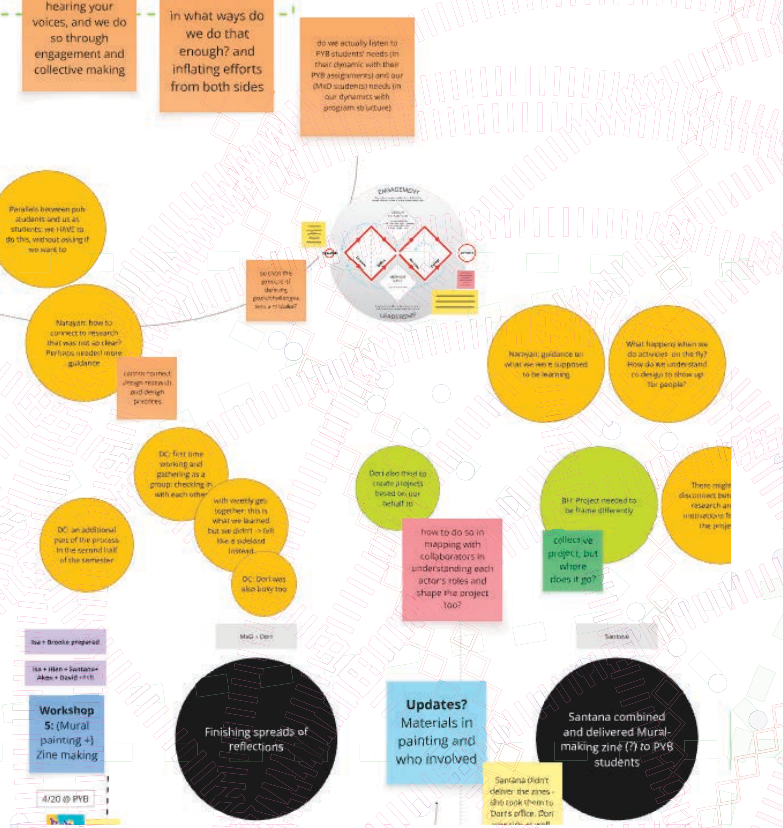


Figure 29: In collaboration with Isabella Arrazola and professor Maria Rogal, we reflected on the struggles in conducting codesign research with local community. We recognized the problems of visual communications, as well as power hierarchy in collaboration.

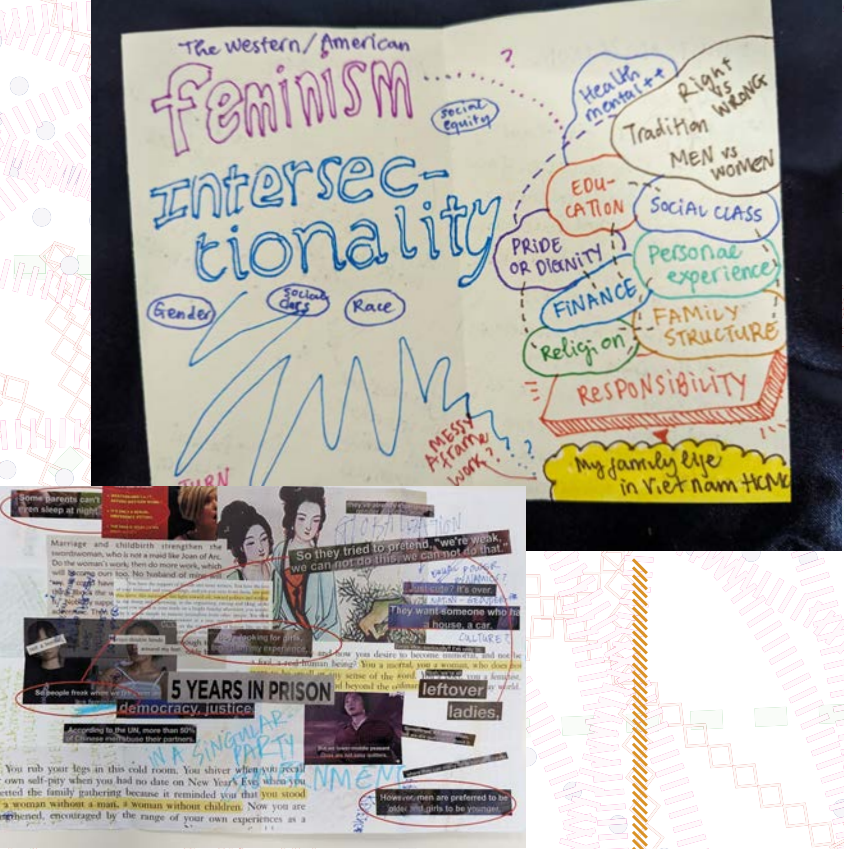


Figure 31: In a course taught by Dr. Margaret Galvan, I learned about Black Feminist intersectionality. I engaged this theory into the Asian culture context, where patriarchy was taken for granted. I also applied this theory in understanding the trajectory of the female in my Viet family. However, there was a gap between the Global North theories and Global South practices.

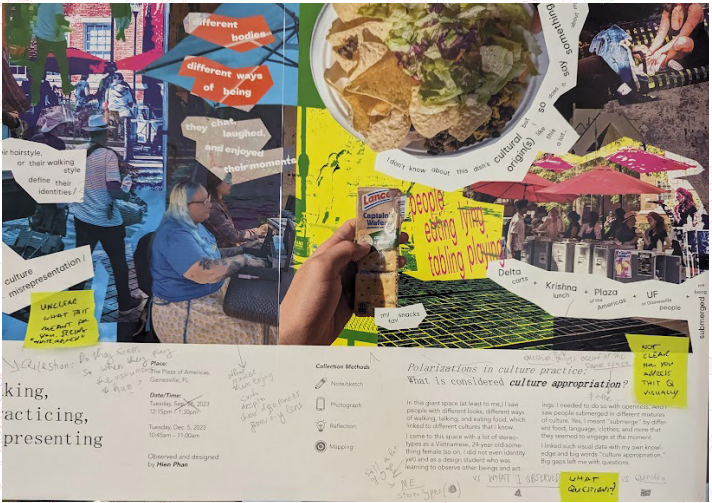


Figure 33: In November 2022, I observed the Plaza of Americas, where the Krishna Lunch was host every weekdays. In the visual documentation, I have questions about the positionality of many bodies in the campus areas, including race and gender. However, the raised questions were not necessarily answered in our MxD studio. There seemed to be avoidance or lack of shared knowledge on this matter among the diverse design student body.



Figure 34: In the MxD Seminar course, taught by Dr. van Amstel, we practiced many participatory design methodologies, which engaged our bodies, low-tech materials, and Lego Serious Play as design object, body, and space.

FALL 2023



Figure 30: In facilitation of the codesign experiment in the APIDSE leadership meeting, I observed the genuine, comfortable, yet welcoming workshop facilitation of the AASU leaders with other student organizations. As a professionally trained designer, I humbly recognized that designers do not need to perform their institutionality in design facilitation, other than complicating while siding with the codesign participants, who are the design body themselves.

SPRING 2024



Figure 32: In November 2023, the APIDSE community hosted the 3rd Annual Cultural Fair, which engaged many student organizations under this umbrella of cultural identities to participate and codesign the fair. I supported this fair by facilitating the Zine Open Call, where the student body would make zines, submit, and get voted to be among the winner.



During this process, I prepared codesign materials as both low-tech materials as well as editorial design. However, in community engagement, low-tech materials, bodily conversations, and situated complications are important, encouraging collective thinking and making. This comparison encouraged me to focused on low-tech materials during the thesis project.



Figure 36: Advised by Dr. van Amstel, Madison Roberts, Elsie Ofori-Addo, and I facilitated an experiment in decolonizing design. This process engaged with low-tech materials and cloth, conveying the message in critique of coloniality in design through abstract communications.

Although more than half of the student body were from the Global South countries who shared the history of being colonized by the Western/European, we found coloniality in design hard to explain or pinpoint. The gap in our positionality as historically colonized body and our knowledge of coloniality and colonialism became the foundation for me to research about epistemic injustice from the marginalized positionality.



SPRING 2024



Figure 35: Santana Nyanje, Cassandra "Cassie" Urbenz, Professor Maria Rogal, and I collaborated with UFIC in researching the lived experiences of the international student body. We organized these experiences in Eisenhower Matrix and then engaged with the journal issue in increasing the representation of this student body.

Due to the restricted timeline, the project has been paused while we reflected in the codesign partnership in the institution.

SUMMER 2024 -
SPRING 2025

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

In the past trajectory, before the project in-lieu-of thesis, there have been changes in how I perceived identities and cultures in design. These have been a large part of my design trajectory, due to constant cultural alienation in my staying in the United States of America. Although the institutional body, including professors and staff, has been very supportive in this staying, I always felt in refugeetude.

Design of minor ethnicities in the predominantly white institution is an attempt to soothe the cultural alienation. This design practice was made possible with the privileged access to design and visual communications major. In Vietnam which emphasized education and technical skills, this access was granted to me as a design student. In the USA design education, however, the design of marginalized identities manifest the modern aesthetics.

These aesthetics are made possible due to the lack of local learning, attachment, and knowledge. This lack is naturalized due to the available of digital knowledge, remote working and learning, globally cultural materials, and the boom of digital technology and artificial intelligence. The convenience of remote, global knowledge substitute for the lack of constant updates for local spaces, observations of changes, and democratic, respectful dialogues.

Thus, in the following pages, I explained the recognition of coloniality in design research, practice, and deliveries which manifested the colonial aesthetics in Vietnamese design. I also acknowledge the impacts of design space onto design body, which explained through visual autoethnography in the following pages of section three.

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- Bakara, H. (2022). Time, Sovereignty, and Refugee Writing. PMLA, 137(3), 442-457.
- Nguyen, V. (2019). Refugeetude: When does a refugee stop being a refugee. Social Text, 37(2), 109-131.
- Said, E. W. (1977). Orientalism. The Georgia Review, 31(1), 162-206.

However, by laying out my design trajectory against the history of French colonialization in Indochina, I realized the coloniality in design that I engaged subconsciously. The color palette inherited from French colonial worldviews: warm tones in representing the local lands (Chinese cultural imperialism) while the cold tones in representing the new wind (European settler colonization). The French colonial architecture in Vietnam has reflected the country in postcolonial stage, through which colonial aesthetics are preserved and extended with the local knowledge and efforts after national independence. Postcoloniality in design is embedded in my design trajectory, which are naturalized due to my positionality as the only Vietnamese in design education that I engaged with.



1. French colonial buildings, Hoi An
2. Sai Gon Opera House
3. Sai Gon Central Post Office
4. Sai Gon People's Committee Building
5. Thien Hau Pagoda
6. Sai Gon Notre Dame Cathedral
7. Ancient railway station, Da Lat
8. Chợ Lớn: Sai Gon's Chinatown
9. Bến Thành Market
10. Long Biên Bridge, Hà Nội
11. Hà Nội Opera House, Hà Nội
12. National Museum of Vietnamese History, Hà Nội

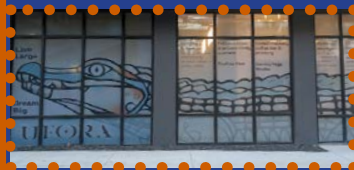
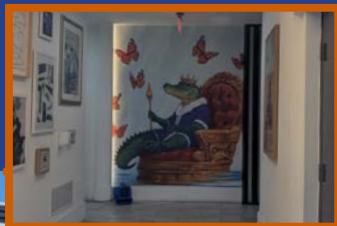
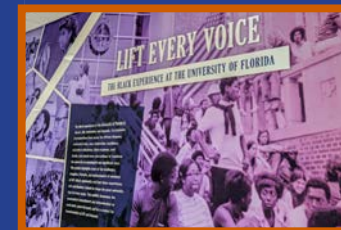
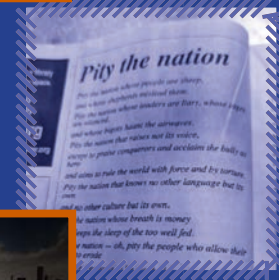


Figure 37: French colonial architecture in Vietnam



Figure 38: Pixelation of figure 37 as a signature color palette of French Indochina since 19th century.

LOCAL COMMUNITY



Google Pixel phone camera

University of Florida

At the MxD program, I was trained to intersect design profession with ethnography since August 2022. When I committed to the autoethnography method, with the guidance of Dr. van Amstel, I revisited the photo album of Gainesville in my mobile app Google Photos in summer 2024.

Ever since, I recognized University of Florida architecture and student service as the immersive design world (Papanek, 1972). Inclusivity and accessibility was coded in the institutional design space, so much so that many or any students could engage automatically.

While the institutional design is accessible to anyone, branding design marked this world in belonging to one of the most prestigious public universities in the USA - University of Florida (UF). Thus, university policies are embedded in the institutional resources. In hindsight, the contradiction of institutional design has conditioned the student body's perspective and action in this design world.

Papanek, V., & Fuller, R. B. (1972).
Design for the real world.

2022 – 2025
GAINESVILLE, FL



Figure 40: Century Tower and University Auditorium at night with red and blue color lights, processing image in Adobe, Feb. 3, 2025 (processing image)

Figure 41: The giant “Gators” in front of the glassy escalator, at the Reitz Union, on Mar. 7, 2025 (processing image)



Figure 42: “Smathers Libraries Say Go Gators,” banner at the Library West, Nov. 24, 2024



Figure 43: The statement wall of many institutional encouragements including “Design Your Life” “Choose Your Adventure” at the Career Connections Center, Reitz Union, Mar 7, 2025



Figure 44: “Human progress has no finish line,” Shands Hospital, Mar. 7, 2025



Figure 45: “Shaping the Student Body” in the Southwest Recreation Center, Apr. 17, 2025

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Branding message of institutional inclusion and institutional excellence (Ahmed, 2012) is repetitively and immersively embedded in the institutional design, in order to support the student body in academic performance, career development, health care, and fitness. Through visual design in the interior and exterior design of the university buildings, students are encouraged to actively “discover your strength” “design your lives,” “bridge inspiration to action” and “choose your adventure”. Everywhere I stepped through the campus, I see the message about student body’s activeness in designing and being designed by the institutional excellence.

At first, it was exciting because I felt as if I was a part of the prestigious University of Florida. I was included and represented through the successful, diligent human and lively, humorous Gator.

However, in the past three years, I have gradually felt the institutional design irrelevant and annoying. When the DEI initiatives have been banned in Florida, I still see the Black figure representing a PWI, which became an irony. The diverse body has represented the institutional excellence through visual design while being dis-acknowledged through institutional policies.

Institutional design, in this case, can represent institutional diversity (when DEI policies are valid) or institutional excellence (when anti-DEI policies rose). The call-to-action was short, ambiguous, yet pungent, implying that institutional statement can be understood in many ways, depending on the institutional body such as student body. Thus, institutional statement through visual design became accessible for many body, sustainable regardless of institutional policies, and encouraging as student body needs institutional excellence for our own lives.

local institution
institutional
inclusion
institutional
excellence
institutional
statement
neoliberal
multiculturalism
institutional
design

Figure 46: In front of Hesman Plaza, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL on March 4, 2025 (processing image)



Figure 47: Interior design of the Ben Hill Griffin Stadium, Aug. 7, 2024

Figure 48: Exterior design of the Katie Seashole Pressly Stadium, Feb. 28, 2025



Figure 49: Drink vendors in partnership with PepsiCo, outside of the Library West, Nov. 17, 2024

Figure 50: The truck of UF Gator Band, in the campus center, Feb. 15, 2025

institutional
services
institutional
design
neoliberal
multiculturalism

REFERENCES

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Institutional design (Vol. 43).
Springer Science & Business Media.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Living in the past 3 years in Gainesville, FL, I realized that the city pace depends on the university calendars: The traffic increased whenever the semester started, to the point that there was no parking spot around the campus area; The traffic also increased around the football games when Gators played with the other in the local university stadiums; The traffic decreased whenever the university entered the seasonal breaks.

UF is known for its impacts not only in the USA higher education, but also soft cultures such as sport and drink. These technology expanded the institutional design. **Gator Nation** is beyond the scope of higher education, implying its students, faculty, and staff as the citizens who have certain rights and responsibilities in this nation. This might imply alligator (?).

Figure 51: The university-centered student-centered messages in the off-campus residence, on Aug. 19, 2024 (processing image)



Figure 52: An advertisement banner “LIVE YOUR BEST GATOR YEARS HERE!” near the campus, on Mar. 10, 2025



Figure 53: Alligator became a part of the private business in off-campus residence, on Mar. 18, 2025



Figure 55: The monarchy of Gator as a mural in an off-campus residence building Monarch on Mar. 17, 2025

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

While the nation’s citizens were not alligators, the branding design of the institution often mentioned Gators. “Thousands of Acres, Thousands of Possibilities,” UF said so through [news](#), emphasizing the importance of the university in Florida lands and natures. In hindsight, institutional expansion is embedded with coloniality in design (Saito et al., 2024). Gator mascot as an institutional representative implied the natural presence in the design world in absent of nature. Gator is the affirmative diversity in institutional design.

Branding design of the institution has also been applied in the design of local businesses in this campus town. This implied the local embracement of the institutional figure, as besides institutional resources, local services are designed for the local citizens in this campus town, almost a third of which are the diverse institutional body (UF News, [Census Reporter](#)).

REFERENCES

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- Saito, C., Gonzatto, R. F., & van Amstel, F. (2024). Anticolonial prospects for overcoming the coloniality of making in design.

local
services
institutional
design
diverse body
white skin Gator mask
neoliberal
multiculturalism

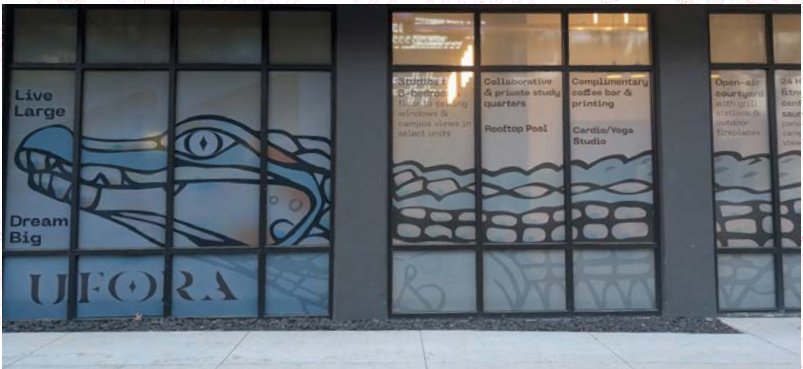


Figure 54: The giant alligator “Live Large / Dream Big” on the glass walls of an off-campus residence building UFORA, on Mar. 10, 2025

Figure 56: UF Plaza in Gainesville midtown, with private businesses yet with institutional branding design, on Mar. 8, 2025 (processing image)



ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

When the local businesses extended the branding design of the institution, they immersed in the institutional design, expanding the Gator design world. Every night, especially the weekends, the local businesses are filled with EDM music, crowd noise, many young people, as well as the moving lights. While the university is filled with people on the daylight, outside of the university is busy during night time instead.

I sometimes walked on the midtown big road, passing by these business and the university. Then, the road is out of light and less people walked through those areas. However, whenever I passed by this road, there was at least one police car parking or speeding noisily. Off-campus life became the important backdrop of the **institutional student life**, which determines student's perception and engagement in work-life balance "Work hard, play harder".

local services
institutional
design
diverse body
institutional
representation
neoliberal
multiculturalism



Figure 57: The branding design of a local business based on the swamp as a natural icon and Gator as an institutional representative, on Nov. 21, 2024



Figure 58: "RU HUNGRY?" with the Gator decorations, logos, and flag at the food truck, on Feb. 6, 2025



Figure 59: The beer Modelo in partnership with UF, Feb. 15, 2025



Figure 60: "Chop Cheese" as the Gator food, on Mar. 8, 2025



Figure 61: China in Gator version in Florida, which it was politically concerned in this state, on Apr. 12, 2025



Figure 62: Wall display at the Library West, Nov. 17, 2024



Figure 63: Kiosk at the Library West, Nov. 17, 2024



Figure 64: Southwest Recreation Center, Dec. 10, 2024



Figure 65: Near Lake Alice, Jan. 25, 2025



Figure 66: “Tow Away Zone” in the UF branding design, Feb. 28, 2025



Figure 67: Door display of a UF building, Nov. 17, 2024

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

In the Gator Nation, the design world is filled with the institutional design, branded with the Gator visual identities. These institutional design is branded with certain color palette, mascot, and welcoming messages. The repetitive appearance of this welcoming messages have made institutional inclusion become the norm of this design world. Institutional service, thus, is commissioned with delivering the institutional structure and message in a inclusive, satisfying way. The policies of the institution are, thus, expected to be inclusive or at least delivered in an inclusive way.

Institutional inclusion is embedded in the institutional service in many ways: Information design embedded with the institutional branding, protocols are designed with the Gator mascot; and technological devices in the university ask for the Gator’s ID for login. UF as a public university restricted their resources and services to certain body that entered and registered as citizens of this Gator Nation. Institutional inclusion in public university is dedicated to institutional body, who entered, get naturalized, commit to success with the institutional resources and services, and return their gratefulness to the institution in many ways.

Through design, institutional inclusion implied the presence of institutional exclusion, who took place when the diverse student body do not commit to the pre-determined trajectory of institutional body.

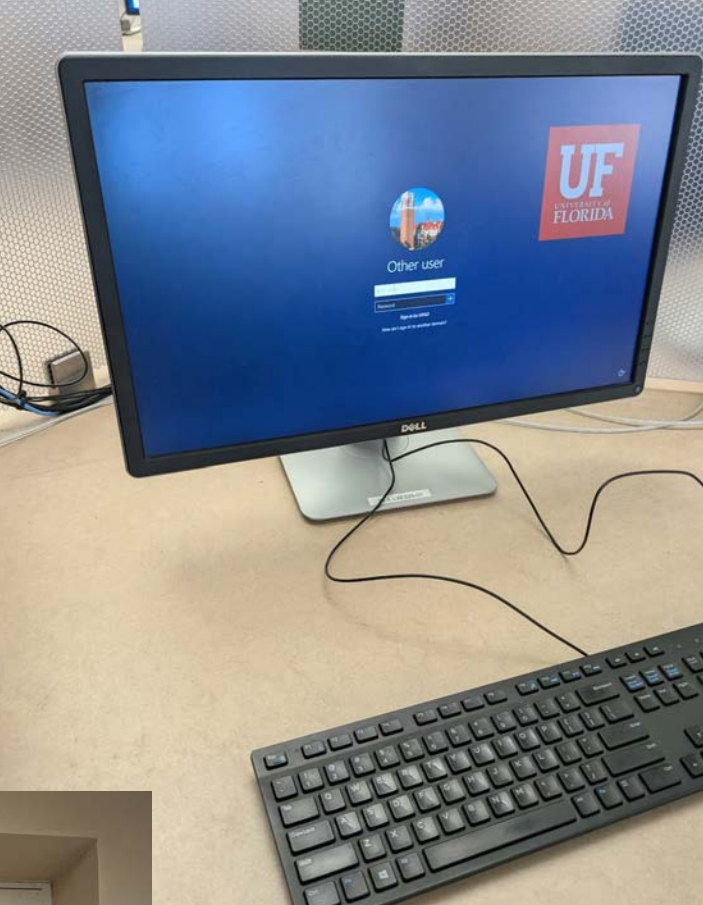


Figure 68: Windows computer login at the Library West, Nov. 17, 2024



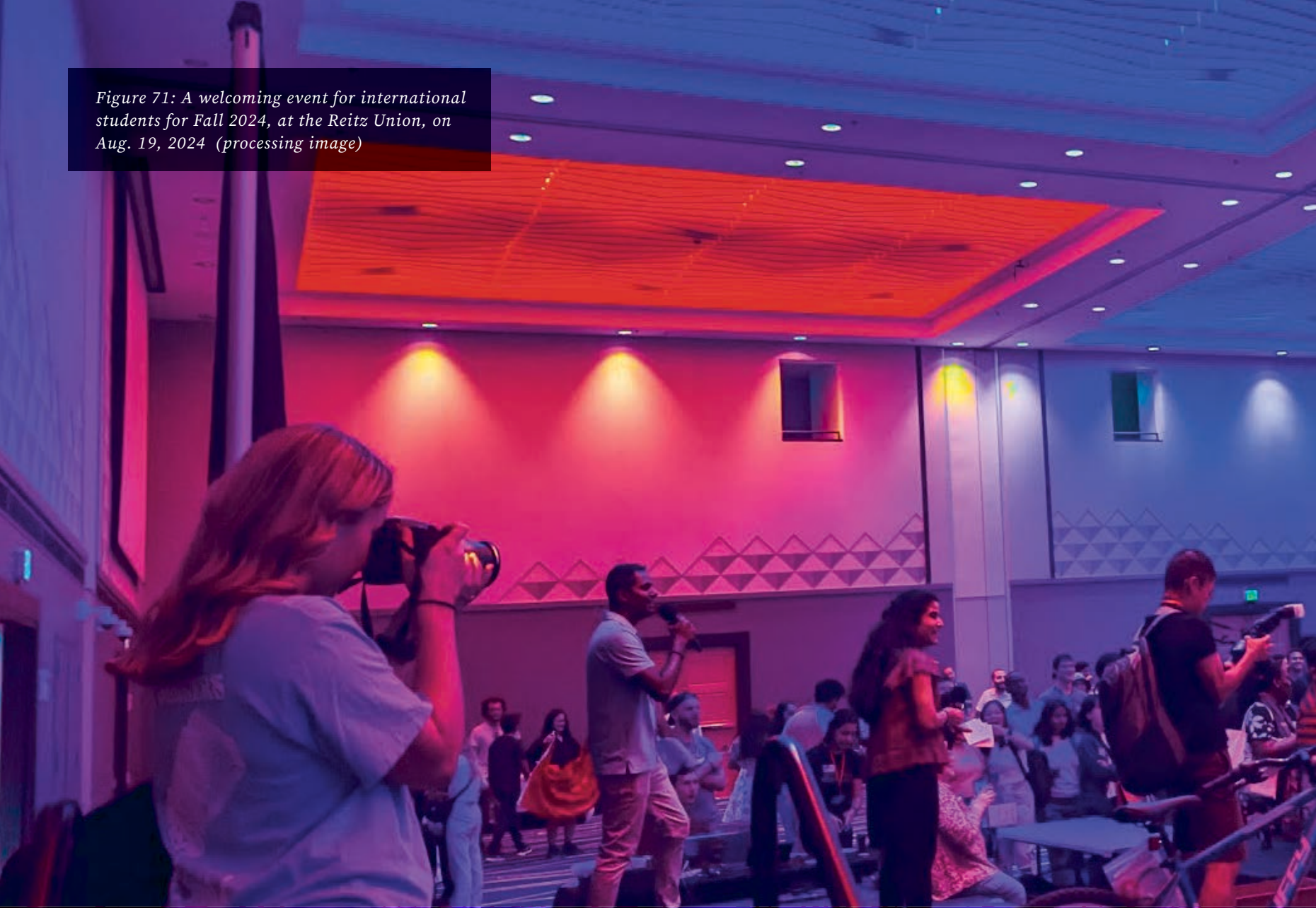
Figure 69: “Please have your physical or mobile ID ready,” at the Library West, Nov. 17, 2024



Figure 70: “Gator Nation Giving Day”, Norman Hall, Mar. 6, 2023

local institution
student services
institutional
policies
institutional
design
institutional
representation
branding design

Figure 71: A welcoming event for international students for Fall 2024, at the Reitz Union, on Aug. 19, 2024 (processing image)



ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Inside of the higher education University of Florida, the identity expression was different. The design was neatly decorated on the building walls, in the branding design and affirmative statement of the institution.

In celebration of many identities of the institution, thanks to the co-existence of many diverse student body, there have been many events in celebration. Many languages have been displayed in the institutional space, signaling the available language and cultures in the institutional resources and events. On the other hand, many languages and countries in the institutional design aims to make the institutional statement accessible and inclusive to many bodies.

The institution represents many cultures, as long as they aligned with the design elements of institutional design. The celebratory culture, thus, is built to welcome new members of the community, embracing the members with the “feel good” cultural materials, stories, and vibes. The institution is easily opened to diverse body as long as they joined the “feel good” cultures.

local institution
institutional
inclusion
institutional
diversity
neoliberal
multiculturalism
networking
pop culture

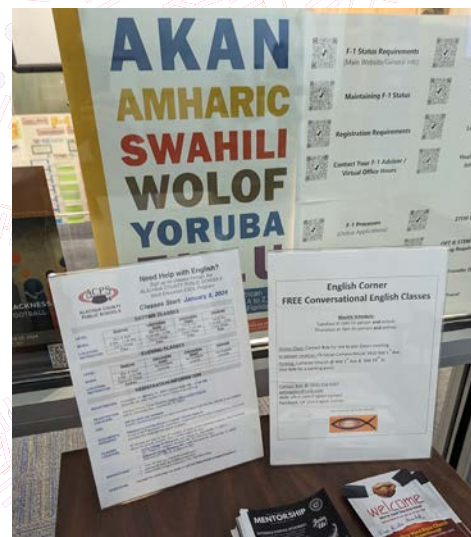


Figure 72: Services for international students and families, at the International Center, Feb. 16, 2024

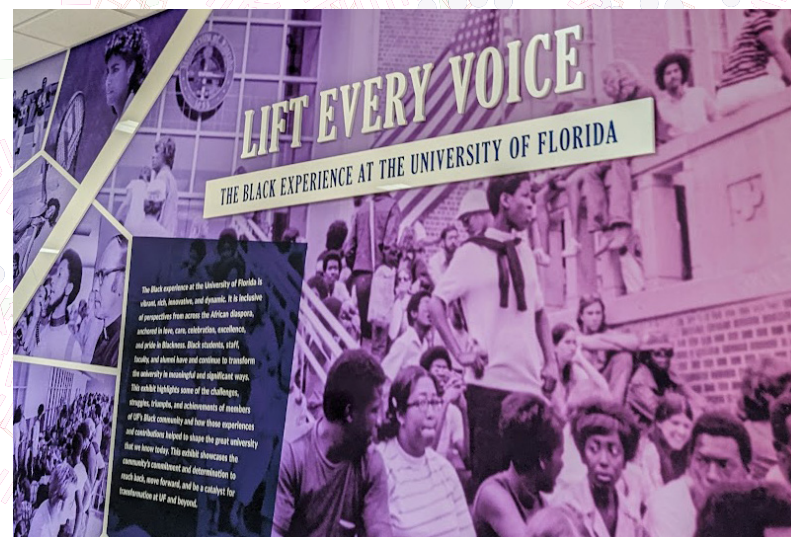


Figure 73: “Lift Every Voice” at the Reitz Union, May 30, 2024



Figure 74: “Where have you learned?” Display at the Library West, Nov. 26, 2024



Figure 75: Many languages of welcoming in the wall display at the Reitz union, Mar. 7, 2025

Institution skin, nature mask
 through visual ethnography



Figure 76: The sunset in
 Butler Plaza, Feb. 5, 2025

DESIGN OBJECTS
 Phone cameras
 Low-tech materials

LOCATION
 Fine Arts Building C
 Gainesville downtown
 Butler Plaza
 Gainesville parks and trails

CONTEXT

The institutional design of University of Florida aligned well with the French Indochina color palette, impacting on my ways of designing. Since UF and local services have designed their organizational identities based on natural resources such as swamp and gators, I wonder if the UF color palette was inspired by the natural resources as well.

If so, orange implied the rising sun while blue implied the sky and ocean, which are offered by the mother nature in Florida, USA.



Figure 77:
 Colors in the UF
 branding design
 "CORE BLUE /
 ORANGE"
 as well as
 "DARK BLUE /
 ALACHUA"
 sourced by UF
 Brand Center



Figure 78: The spring sky near the Fine
 Arts Building C, Mar. 8, 2023

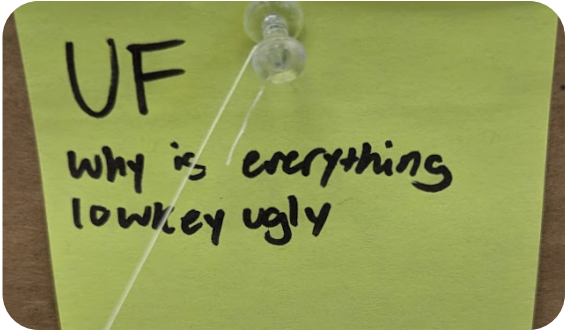


Figure 80: Feedback on UF branding design by
 graphic design students, Aug. 2024

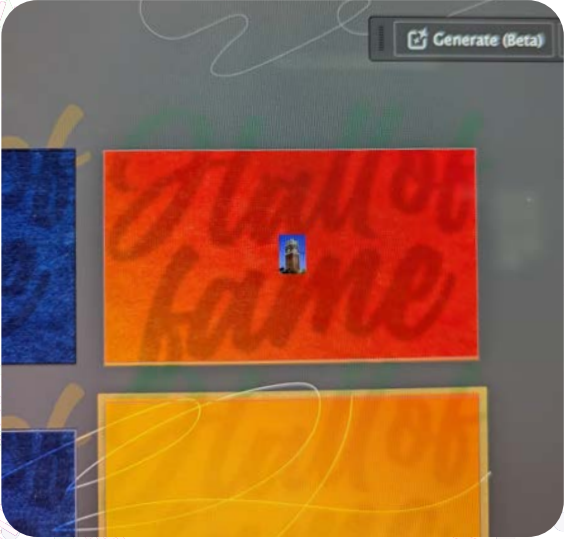


Figure 79: Graphic design in progress, on
 UF Hall of Fame 2025, as a part of UF
 Student Life, Jun. 18, 2024



Figure 81: "Florida Portable
 Services", Apri. 18, 2025

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Cultural and natural identity is designerly experimented, while also being used as institutional representative, imaginary character, and cultural commodity. Through visual ethnography practices, I observed the similarities in color choices of natural phenomena and institutional design, such as branding, social media, and portable services. While the design process was conducted by diverse institutional body, branding design is guided through persistent use of branding elements and signature layouts.

While the institutional design might be undermined as lack of aesthetics, this might be the intention of administration staff and branding strategist. Branding design became the metadesign where any center or office of student services could accessibly follow. Thus, modern, simplistic, classy, and energetic design is highly recommended. Graphic designer became the extension of the institutional design, who might not ask for creativity but consistency in sharing and promoting the institutional statement and resources.

local institution
 tourism
 postcolonial
 nation-state
 neoliberal
 multiculturalism
 pop culture
 patriotism
 otherization

Diverse hybrid identities through visual autoethnography

DESIGN MATERIALS
Google Pixel phone camera

CONTEXT
As a part of the diverse institutional body, I paid attention to new kinds of snacks in superstore, new national version of Starbucks souvenirs, and persistence of non-USA trucks. There has been no need or pressure in understanding the social context of certain food. Thus, cultural consumption without social and political conscious has been normalized through every life. The process was effortlessly done, when I simply looked at the aesthetic packages, ingredients, or price tags of food ingredients to purchase.



Figure 82: The packages of Vietnamese instant coffee has been a part of my auto/ethnography trips, as they are economically accessible, on Jan. 4, 2025



Figure 83: A kitchen shelf of many condiments from diverse national origins, on Jan. 4, 2025



Figure 84: The sandwich tucked with cream cheese and kimchi. The flavor bomb was enjoyable as I am familiar with both cultures Western/ European and South Korean, on Jan. 7, 2025

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Through this visual autoethnography, hybrid identity is shown through the co-existence of many food origins. This was made possible through the available local and global food (fig. 13 - 21). Food is an important part of culture, just like how culturally embedded self can be understood as culturally consuming self and designing self. The self, thus, does not hold a fixed positionality or identity.

Van Amstel, Frederick M. C. 1/17 8:46 AM

you are now realizing that identities are socially produced

and politically disputed

economically exploited

designerly shaped

artistically expressed

and so on and so forth

Figure 85: A Teams message from Dr. van Amstel, Jan. 17, 2025

local & global culture
commodified identity
hybird identity
positionality
neoliberal multiculturalism
diverse body
diverse cultures



Figure 86: Eight countries in a chocolate package, at the local Trader Joe's in Gainesville, FL on Nov. 29, 2023



Figure 87: A local food truck in Gainesville, FL with 3 national flags: Colombia, USA, and Venezuela on May 5, 2024



Figure 88: Latin American food truck in Gainesville, FL on May 5, 2024



Figure 89: Yellow Florida in Starbucks, Gainesville, FL, Nov. 24, 2024



Figure 90: Local Trader Joe's in Gainesville, FL on Jan. 25, 2025



Figure 91: Gator now has multiple citizenship, on Mar. 8, 2025



Figure 92: "DAVAO PHILIPPINES" in Whole Food, Gainesville, FL on Apr. 26, 2025



Figure 93: "No. 1 Asian Food Delivery Platform / Hungry Panda", in an Asian restaurant, Gainesville, FL on Nov. 27, 2024



Authentic identities amidst the institutionalized diversity through visual autoethnography



Figure 93: “Always True” or “Stay True to Yourself” represented the contradictions of neoliberalism and being a diverse body, photo by Dr. van Amstel

elitism
local services
struggles
positionality
neoliberal
multiculturalism
social class

COLLABORATORS

Dr. Frederick M.C. van Amstel
Hien Phan

DESIGN OBJECTS

Phone camera

LOCATION

Volta, Gainesville (closed)

CONTEXT

Autoethnography design has been conducted several times in the University of Florida. Gainesville as a campus town, however, is known for wealth difference across neighbors with the campus as one of the wealthy neighbors.

We went to Volta, the coffee shop closed soon after this practice, which is located in a parking building. We conducted autoethnography in visual diaries, covering design research object, context, and method.

Then, we relocated to the parking building, where contradictions of diverse body are exposed through the arts across this space.



Figure 94: “HOMELESSNESS IS ULTRA DIFFICULT” on my way from the MxD studio to Volta, which remained until April 2025



Figure 96: Nature in the parking building, photo by Dr. van Amstel



Figure 97: “Inner Peas” in the parking building, photo by Dr. van Amstel

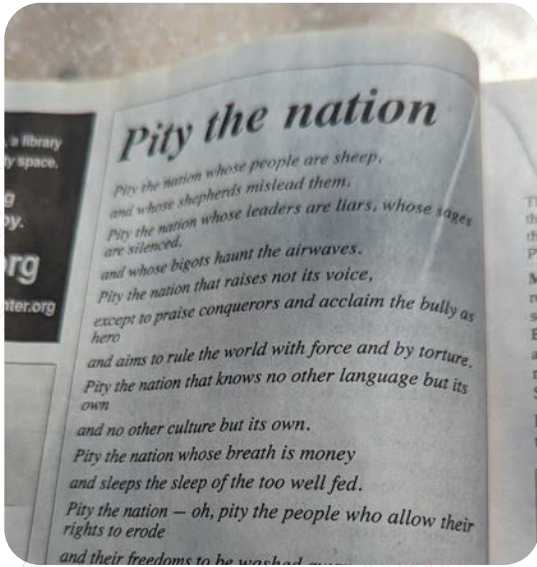


Figure 95: “Pity the nation” by Lawrence Ferlinghetti, on Gainesville Iguana, placed in Volta coffee table

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

The art and design in the building was the expression of the artist, overlaid with community design. In the first few floors, the artists’ works were displayed as the nature has entered and stayed at the building. They are always labeled with the names of the artworks and artists. When we stepped up to one of the top floors, the art was more chaos, implying that there were many layers of arts by possibly various design bodies.

While the official art pieces represented the peace of human body, the community design emphasized the marginalized positionality that was often alienated, undermined, and ignored. Artistic elitism followed the commodification of peace, nature, and authenticity through their works (Kapur, 2011). On the other hand, the community design embodied the monster aesthetics implying that the design body was desperate and tired.

Authentic identity expression and honest was highlighted, even sorrowful statement are delivered by the marginalized body. This identity expression of the diverse body is a contradiction: while its authenticity was religiously celebrated, its financial consequence might be daunting in the neoliberal multiculturalism.

This raised another question: In the design education at UF, would the contradiction of identity expression be manifested through institutional design?

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Native American in the local tourist services through visual autoethnography



Figure 98: The fashion of Native American was often displayed at the window glasses in the souvenir shops that we passed by, Scottsdale, AZ, May 21, 2024

COLLABORATORS

Santana Nyanje
Azadeh Jalali
Hien Phan

DESIGN MATERIALS

Our phone cameras

LOCATION

UCDA education summit
(Arizona)

CONTEXT

It was the first time that we went to a design conference together! It was exciting that we drove to Orlando and went through airport, airplanes, and hotels together. We got to know more about each other's personality.

Besides, we went to a tourist town Scottsdale in Arizona, where we ate, visit the souvenir shops, and walk around the empty roads. There, I observed Native American cultural materials are fashionable pieces or house decoration.



Figure 99: The IKEA that the diverse design student body look up to, Orlando, FL, May 19, 2024



Figure 100: Native American culture is commodified as decorations in the tourist area Scottsdale, AZ, May 21, 2024



Figure 101: "The West's Most Western Town" one of the best advertisement of local space, located on the wooden bench, May 21, 2024



Figure 102: "Welcome to HISTORIC OLD TOWN SCOTTSDALE" featuring the cow boy, May 21, 2024

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

When we booked an Uber, the driver introduced the places in Arizona to us. He then drove us to Scottsdale, the entertainment tourist spot for the rich. He ensured that we would enjoy the space, guaranteeing that the town was safe for us as female to pass through during night time.

At the time, I did not have much knowledge about Native American, other than waving the white flag for surrendering the White American population (Tom & Jerry). In a history class in Tennessee, the professor did not mention the Native American, American Indian, or Indigenous People. I studied about the Hawai'ian kingdom in which was intervened, colonized, and adopted as one of the 50 states in the USA. There was a gap in local knowledge that I then gained from tourism, postcolonial studies, protests, and political turmoil in the USA (2020 - present).

As immigrants, temporary and prospective settlers, while also being tourists, we risked ignoring the local marginalized knowledge when only seeing them as cultural materials to wear, eat, or embody in many ways. The culture was also political and existential as Native American was often undermined in the USA design education.

academic field trip
essentialized
identities
commodified culture
orientalism
capitalist tourism
positionality
neoliberal
multiculturalism
institutional labor

May 19 - 23, 2024

ORLANDO, FL → MESA, AZ → SCOTTSDALE, AZ

Native American in the local services through visual ethnography



Figure 103: Public arts by the muralist Reinier Gamboa, as a part of the City of Gainesville’s 41st Annual Downtown Festival and Art Show (2022). This art was about the three Native American figures from different times, as an accessible way for public education of arts. According to his instagram account @reinergamboa (2022), this mural “Generations” was about the Seminoles. Photo on Jun. 1, 2024

DESIGN MATERIALS

Google Pixel phone camera

LOCATION

The Volta parking building, Gainesville downtown, local museums, and nearby trails

CONTEXT

After the autoethnography practice with Dr. van Amstel, I felt that there was a gap of local knowledge in my design research. I then conducted several solo revisits in the local areas outside of the University of Florida campus. I found traces of the Native American as well as the geopolitical controversies Palestine / Israel / USA. These are the knowledge advocated by local communities, artists, organizations, and businesses that I hardly saw in the university campus.

In between the trips, I also researched about the images in Google and published articles, while holding dialogues with Dr. van Amstel.



Figure 104: The dialogues between “PRO USA” and “STOP ISRAEL,” at the back of a building. Photo on Jun. 1, 2024



Figure 105: “FREE GAZA” seems to be drawn, erased in black, and redrawn for many times, Jun. 1, 2024



Figure 106: Natural tobacco advertised as “Natural American spirit”, on Mar. 17, 2025



Figure 107: Decorations of a local shop, on Aligator and Native American being threaten by the pirate, on Mar. 22, 2025



Figure 108: “Florida’s future. It’s up to us” at the Florida Museum of Natural History, Aug.3, 2024

essentialized identities
cultural appropriation
capitalist tourism
positionality
neoliberal multiculturalism
art education
accessible elitism
community voices



European colonialism in the local tourism services through visual autoethnography

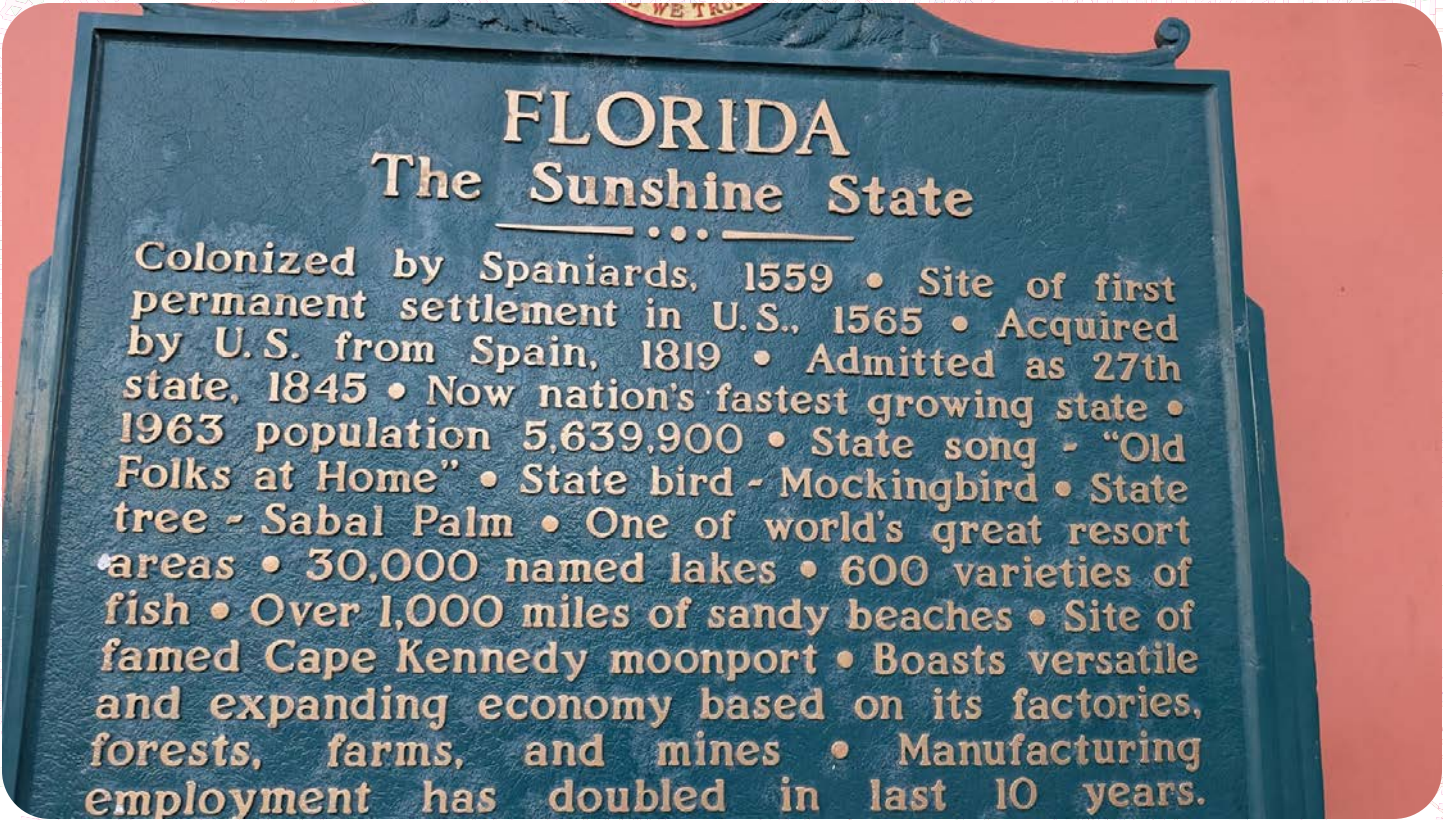


Figure 109: “Florida / The Sunshine State” in the information board. The label reflects the coloniality in design, which projects the European colonial worldviews of Florida at the Turtle Island.

CO-TRAVEVELERS

Mohammed Sharif Umar
Cassandra “Cassie” Urbenz
Hien Phan
Santana Nyanje
Jamie Zhang
Azedeh Jalali
Lucia Londono

TRAVELLING OBJECTS

Our cars, phone cameras, and wallets

LOCATION

International Airport in Michigan and Atlanta

CONTEXT

As international students who have restricted budget and transportation, we were looking forward to the trip to St. Augustine. Urbenz was kind and supportive that she as the Floridian local has gone along with us to this city. St. Augustine was known as the oldest city in the United States of America, established by the Spanish in 1565.

There, we went to understand the history and culture of the city through going to the tourist areas and the beaches.

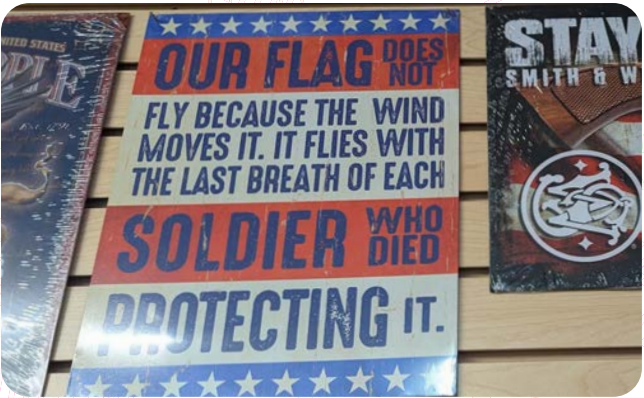


Figure 110: “Our flag does not fly because the wind moves it. It flied with the last breath of each soldier who died protecting it.” I was suprised to see a patrotic statement in a pop culture souvenir shop in St. Augustine.



Figure 111: The standing alligators in the souvenir shop, wearing blue or pink hat, implying the engendered nature. This manifested orientalism in postcolonial design.



Figure 112: “Medivial Torture” “Are you brave enough?” was another example of manifesting liberalism, colonialism, yet through the neoliberal multiculturalism. A tourist service in St. Augustine.



Figure 113: Colonial experiences as a Living History Tour (?) in St. Augustine.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Going back from the fun trip, I kept thinking about the embracement of coloniality in design at St. Augustine, which highlights colonial experience at the intersection of historical education and thrilling entertainment. Every traveller seemed to enjoy the fun atmosphere.

In comparison to Vietnam which material condition is still developing, we often learn about the Western/ European colonization through textbooks and national museums. The services in education and entertainment was limited so I have not experienced similar services embedded with colonial cultures. Different responses towards colonial history caused me some questions on the role of branding design, service design, and nationalist history of Vietnam versus the United States of America.



Figure 114: One of the apartments in Gainesville, FL, in nostalgia of Spanish coloniality in architecture and lifestyle.

January 17, 2025

GAINESVILLE, FL → ST.AUGUSTINE, FL

Celebrating Orientalism
 (?) with globalized
 Asian cuisine through
 visual autoethnography

DESIGN OBJECTS

Cultural materials
 Phone cameras

LOCATION

MxD graduate design studio
 Chung Ching market

CONTEXT

As a diverse design graduate cohort,
 we often seek to celebrate each
 other’s cultures. The late January 2025
 marked the Chinese / Lunar New Year
 where my classmates and I commonly
 celebrated. This marked the first time
 that we celebrated Chinese / Lunar
 New Year in the design studio.

January 30 -
 January 31, 2025
 GAINESVILLE, FL



Figure 115: As we lived far away from home, Zhang, Won,
 and I planned to host the Chinese/Lunar New Year at the
 MxD design graduate studio. We went to Chung Ching
 Market (top) to buy ready-to-microwave food (bottom) as
 we all were busy with the semester. We then taught other
 members in using chopsticks (bottom).



Figure 117: (left) Sticky notes that marked the produce
 names and prices were organized chaotically in the
 Chung Ching Market. This aesthetic was opposite
 to other grocery stores such as Walmart or Kroger,
 aligning with the welcoming noise of the store. This
 monster aesthetics, although of Chinese-American
 owners, brought me the nostalgia of live market at
 home, Sài Gòn or Hồ Chí Minh city.

local service
 minor ethnicity
 positionality
 neoliberal
 multiculturalism
 gathering
 monster aesthetics
 cultural imperialism
 cultural sensitivity



Figure 116: (right) Londono was
 guiding Jalali with her knowledge in
 chopsticks. While she understood that
 Jalali did not often take risks, she
 supported her regardlessly.

ETHNOGRAPHY NOTES

During this Chinese New Year’s celebration, Won,
 Zhang, and I wanted to host the celebration for the
 MxD cohort, as a way for us to learn about each
 other’s cultures. The preparation prioritizes food,
 snacks, and decorations that are quick to cook, put
 up, and enjoyed. The fast food version of Chinese
 / Lunar New Year took place in our studio due to
 our common positionality as international students
 who were busy yet homesick. The event became a
 multicultural celebration, through which we ate and
 enjoyed dumplings as signs of the new, welcoming,
 successful year.

As a Vietnamese, this way of celebration was not
 common in our culture. Yet, I also understand that
 culture is delivered and commonized through media
 and technology, through which South Korea and China
 accelerated much better than Vietnam. Thus, I tried
 not to question too much, observing the common joy
 at the beginning of the Lunar Year of the “Snake”.

/ SECTION FOUR /

Co/auto-ethnography

of a diverse student body in
the USA design education

In section four, I will be briefly sharing autoethnography in codesign practices. Autoethnography has been approached in the MxD program, including the projects in-lieu-of thesis by MxD alumni, including Isabella Arrazola and Flory Sanabria. Meanwhile, codesign has been among the design research initiatives of the program, where designers of diverse cultures connect, facilitate, and collaboratively design with the local marginalized communities, including Project Youthbuild and City of Gainesville.

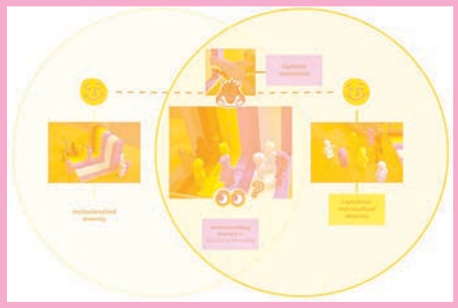
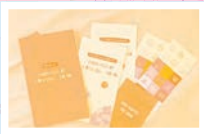
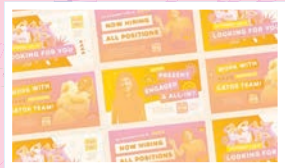
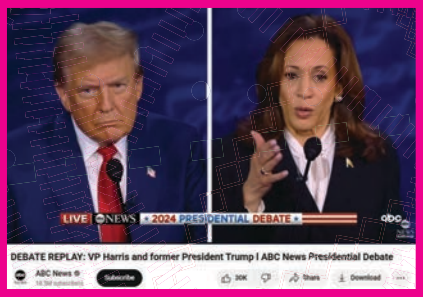
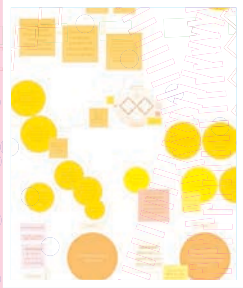
Following the history of the MxD program, there have been considerable efforts in engaging with co/autoethnography method. In hindsight, my MxD colleagues and I have been researching about us as the diverse student body before we built design consciousness about our positionality. These efforts are documented as the initial commitments to co/autoethnography in the MxD cohort.

The co/autoethnographic design documentation in this section aims to answer the following question:

How is *institutional diversity* manifested in the diverse student body of the MxD graduate design program, University of Florida?



Figure 1: A photo of a field trip, MxD cohort in the Design Research & Practic course, taught by Dr. Dori Griffin (Fall 2022)



International graduate design students through codesign experiments

CO-DESIGNERS

Santana Nyanje
Hien Phan
Lucia Londono
Azadeh Jalali
Isabella Arrazola
Flory Sanabria
Elsie Ofori-Addo
Alex Hackett
Cassandra “Cassie” Urbenz

DESIGN OBJECTS

Paper, sticky notes, color labels, white board, markers

LOCATION

MxD graduate design studio

CONTEXT

There has been design partnerships between the MxD program and the University of Florida International Center (UFIC). The center has constantly seeking for improvement in student services, especially with international students who often do not vocalize their voices to the university.

As a part of the collaborative initiatives with UFIC, we have conducted a design research about the international design graduate student at the MxD cohort as the proof of concept.

★ Design facilitator and complicator, guided by Professor Maria Rogal



Figure 2: A collective reflection on the common positionality “Being international graduate students in the USA,” on Feb. 23, 2024



Figure 3: We then redesigned the institutional services to better respond to the struggles of this student body. This codesign took place on Feb. 28, 2024.

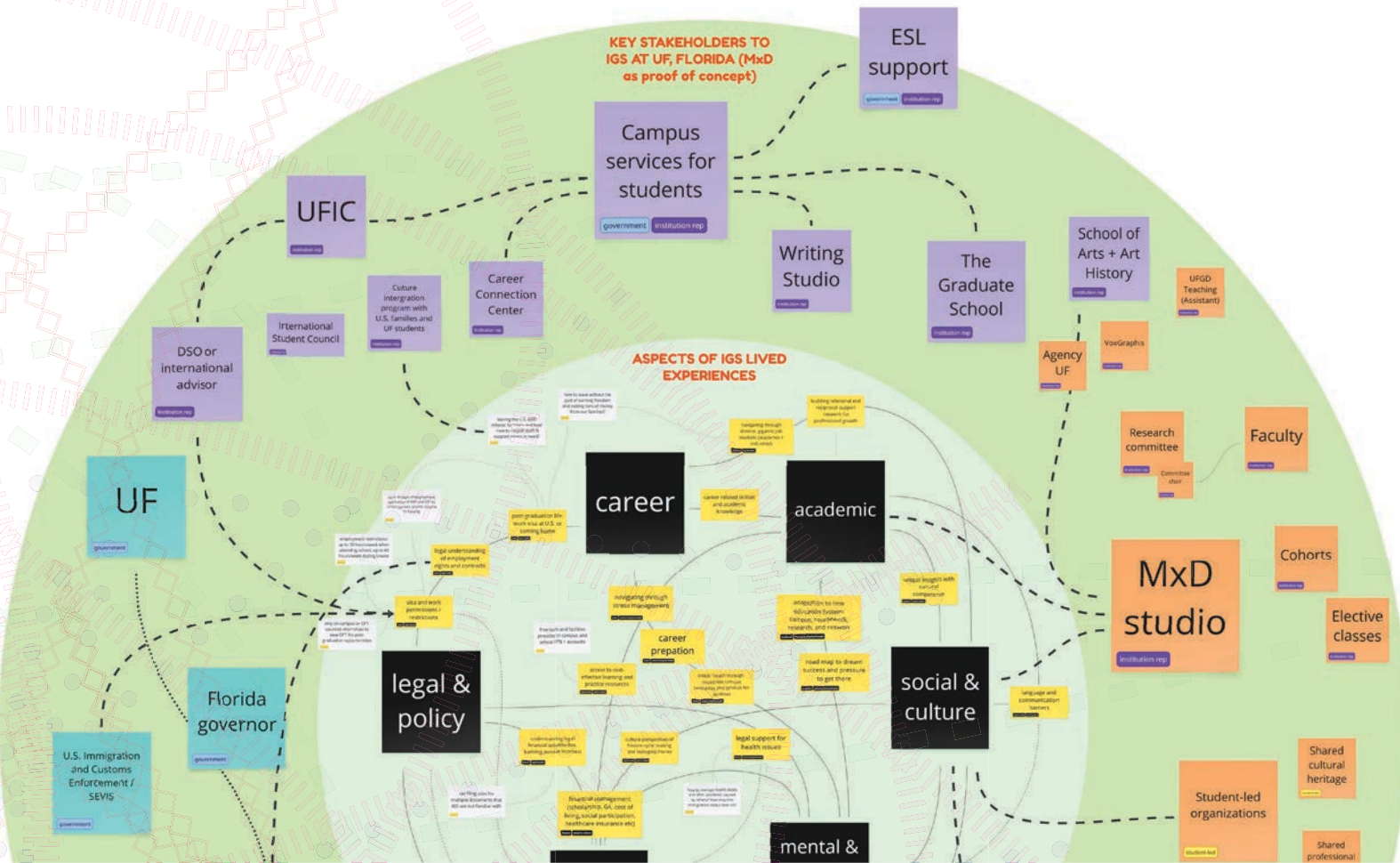


Figure 4: Digital documentation of the experiences of the international graduate student body, in response with services in USA higher education.

local institution
higher education
institutional service
immigrants struggles
positionality
neoliberal
multiculturalism
institutional labor

REFERENCES

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ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

As international students who are not familiar with the USA higher education, we tried to navigate through yet often struggled in this institutional structure. We felt alienated yet pressured to continue and conform. In hindsight, this structure is complexly designed in order to manage immigrants meticulously.

When applying the design thinking in codesign experiments, we pinpointed many aspects that we felt excluded and alienated. Each aspect, however, is approached to be solved by many institutional entities. These aspects are often hidden in the visual design of institutional inclusion. As international graduate student, we not only navigate through the protocols of the university but also other institutions such as the ICE, IRS, and USCIS.

The gap between institutional branding design and metadesign is often hard to notice, especially to the (infra)users of such institution (van Amstel et al., 2025). By centralizing inclusion in the institutional service and branding design, this international student body risks not knowing the complexity of the institutional structures. As immigrants, any unknown unknown could risk changes in legal status.

February 23 - February 29, 2024
GAINESVILLE, FL



Metaphorical trajectory of the immigrant design student body

CO-DESIGNERS

Hien Phan ✨
Flory Sanabria
Elsie Ofori-Addo
Azadeh Jalali
Santana Nyanje

DESIGN OBJECTS

Lego set DUPLO & Animal world
Sticky notes
Low tech materials
Crises deck (Zukowshki et a., 2024)

LOCATION

MxD graduate design studio
The Plaza of Americas

CONTEXT

In the collaboration with UFIC, I was suggested by professors to map the trajectory of international graduate student's lived experiences. This documentation would be important when pinpointing and reflectin on the differences in knowledge, emotion, and action of the students before and after arriving in the USA for higher education.

I conducted six visual interviews in total with four members individually in the MxD studio. The private dialogues opened up more space for each member to memorize and visualize their trajectories. However, the lack of dialogues and reflection could be delimited in codesign experiments.

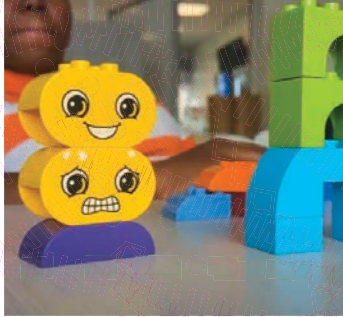


Figure 5: With Ofori-Addo, Mar. 25, 2024



Figure 6: With Jalali, Mar. 29 (left) and Apr. 10, 2024 (right)

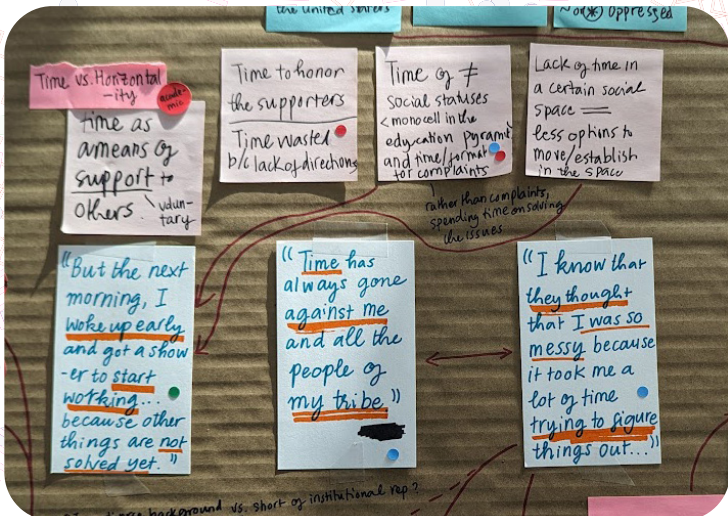


Figure 7: With Sanabria, Mar. 25 (left) and Apr. 15, 2024 (right)



Figure 8: With Nyanje, Apr. 12, 2024 (left and right)

✨ Design facilitator and complicator, guided by Professor Maria Rogal and supported by Dr. Frederick van Amstel



ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Through many metadesign toolkit, the diverse student body mapped their trajectories that led to the USA which promised the world with the American dream. Thus, they shared the common response towards the admission news of University of Florida MxD program: joy, pride, and hopefulness.

However, when tracing through memories, they also shared that they were overwhelmed when arrived in the USA and starting the educational trajectory. That was because of the pile of paperworks to be completed, the complex system that would not let them work if not going through many rounds of paperwork approval, as well as the healthcare system that bothered them as Global South female.

The visual interviews were filled with emotions after at least six months that they have been to Florida, USA: worried, disappointed, waiting, drained, "what?", "haiz", and more mixed feelings of expecting the better yet worrying about the im/possibilities of getting jobs after graduation in the USA.

The legal status of immigrant student in the USA has restricted the time of the diverse design student body. The time was measured by the regulations of managing immigrants in the paperworks, always in comparison to prioritize the USA citizens. To this body, time is counted by days: 30 days, 60 days, 90 days, 20 hours max for part-time while 40 hours max for part-time, F-1, J-1, H1B, stipends, tuition fee, and annual tax filing. Along with the time pressure of academic performance, these numbers alarmed the body of their restrcited time and labors at the USA.

Not sure what to move on next, we shared the complaints towards the institution, who turned out not welcoming as they promised. We complained as we were not sure what can be done, considering the gap between the institutional branding design and metadesign. Mainly as graphic designers originally in the Global South countries, which heavily emphasized technical skills, we were hesitant in the transdisciplinary design approach, which integrates design, social sciences, as well as other fields such education or business.

local institution
higher education
institutional service
Global North
Global South
anti-immigration
immigrants struggles
positionality
neoliberal
multiculturalism
institutional labor

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March 25 -
April 15, 2024
GAINESVILLE, FL



The codesign of diverse design student body through the USA presidential election debate

CO-DESIGNERS

Hien Phan ★
Azadeh Jalali
Madison Roberts
Lucia Londono
Mohammed Sharif Umar
Dain Won
Jamie Zhang

DESIGN OBJECTS

Trump vs. Harris presidential debate (ABC, 2024)

LOCATION

MxD graduate design studio

CONTEXT

As immigrants studying in the USA, Trump presidency was especially daunting. Anti-immigration has been a prominent part of his presidential run, promising the return of a Great America. USA presidency and policies, however, had not been discussed officially in the MxD studio.

This codesign activity marked the first time we engaged with political news in the USA as a part of the design research process.

★ Design facilitator and complicator, in support by Dr. Frederick van Amstel



Figure 9: We sat comfortably at the sofa, getting ready for USA presidential election debate



Figure 10: A Screenshot of Trump vs. Harris debate, by ABC News (2024)

geopolitics
local
institution
sustainable
neoliberal
multiculturalism
institutional
labor
immigrant

Our country is being lost. We're a failing nation. And it happened three and a half years ago. And what, what's going on here, you're going to end up in World War 3, just to go into another subject. What they have done to our country by allowing these millions and millions of people to come into our country. [...]

In Springfield, they're eating the dogs - the people that came in. They're eating the cats. They're eating the pets of the people that live there. [...]

Our elections are bad. And a lot of these illegal immigrants coming in, they're trying to get them to vote. They can't even speak English. They don't even know what country they're in practically. And these people are trying to get them to vote. And that's why they're allowing them to come into our country. [...]

Quotes by Donald J. Trump about immigrants in the presidential debate, by ABC News transcript (2024)

They allowed criminals. Many, many, millions of criminals. They allowed terrorists. They allowed common street criminals. They allowed people to come in, drug dealers, to come into our country, and they're now in the United States. [...]

They've destroyed the fabric of our country. Millions of people let in. And all over the world crime is down. All over the world except here. Crime here is up and through the roof. Despite their fraudulent statements that they made. Crime in this country is through the roof. And we have a new form of crime. It's called migrant crime. And it's happening at levels that nobody thought possible. [...]

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

We watched the first 30 minutes of the debate video, which we analyzed the debaters and discussed on the news. We realized that the working class and women's rights are not the highlights of Trump's emphasis. Rather, immigrants were mentioned as his strategy in getting the nation back on track.

During this process, we generally felt irrelevant to this debate video, while analyzing this video as qualitative data in research. All of us were immigrants, knowing that our voices would not matter in the election process. As the global citizens yet "aliens" in the USA, we understand that we would be impacted by the Trump upcoming presidency even when we could not speak up.

This marked political ignorance as an existential response to political climate in the USA which often holds controversial responses to immigrants.

/ SECTION FIVE /

Codesigning alter/native diverse student self- representations

In section five, we as a diverse design graduate student body seek to design diversity beyond the essentialized categories of identities. In section four, we recognize the gaps between the local political climate (Florida, USA) which has global impacts and our political consciousness in design research. This projects a contradiction in design consciousness of a diverse design student body who designs from our positionality to elevate marginalized voices, while choosing not to care about the institutional structure that holds both the dominant and marginalized narratives.

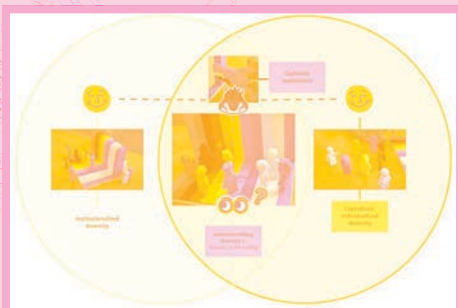
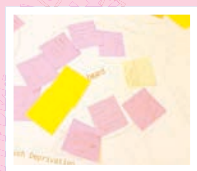
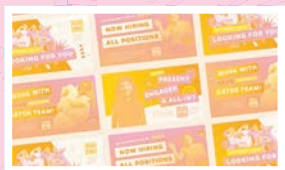
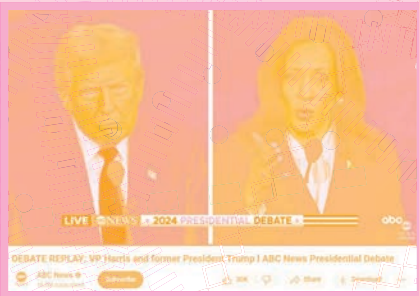
At the intersectionality of designers (who design with non-designers), students (who also teach other design students), and non-institutional body (who work and live in many institution of thoughts and profession), we recognize the shared challenges as a collective body. The challenges stemmed from the shared positionality of being global citizens who are directly impacted by the turn of far-right policies in Florida, USA. In this nation-state, diversity is weaponized by the populist as the threat to the USA capitalist democracy, in return to the USA neoliberal multiculturalism. Diversity is misunderstood in Florida, USA through design and by design.

The co/autoethnographic design documentation in this section aims to answer the following question:

**How can we codesign
self-representations of
diverse student bodies
as an alter/native to
institutionalized diversity?**



Figure 1: A photo of many hands in the MxD Research & Practice course, taught by Dr. van Amstel (Fall 2024)



The codesign of diverse design student body through MxD organizational culture

CO-DESIGNERS

Hien Phan ★
 Jamie Zhang ★
 Mohammed Sharif Umar
 Flory Sanabria
 Lucia Londono
 Tatiana Glakhova
 Saeideh Lotfigogarchin

DESIGN OBJECTS

Low-tech materials
 New Metaphor toolkit

LOCATION

MxD graduate design studio

CONTEXT

The MxD program is socially constructed, culturally sensitive, and designerly sustainable. There are the common gaps between the MxD design research and commercial design that could take some time for the diverse student body to adjust, connect, and precise their thesis project.

As we welcomed the new cohort to the MxD studio, dialogues between the current and new diverse student bodies will take place during the long-term design research and collaboration. During this process, the diverse student body discussed their trajectory that led to the design research program. Then, we discussed the relation of as well as their design positionality in research and practice.

★ Design facilitator and complicator, in support by Dr. Frederick van Amstel



Figure 2: The visual invitation (white board, left) in the MxD design graduate studio



Figure 3: We chose up to 5 New Metaphor cards to describe our trajectories that led to the MxD program.



Figure 4: Then, we answered the prompts (fig. 9) with the design objects in the MxD design studio.



Figure 5: From the design process and materials (fig. 9-12), we placed our visions on the table and discussed about our being and making as the diverse design student body in Florida, USA.



Figure 6: We then visualize our understanding of the MxD culture and our future selves with the low-tech materials.

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

During the codesign experiment, personal lives of the diverse design student body are reflected and embedded in their design profession. Through autoethnography in visual forms, we reflected on our trajectories under the impacts politics and cultures in Florida, USA. These impacts implied the hybridity in the diverse design student body, per our political consciousness.

At some parts, the question about diverse student body under anti-DEI policies was raised and how can this body responds to the legislation. There have been hopeful responses about the importance of diversity in the institution whether there was DEI policies or not.

This response implied the importance of the diverse design student body in persistently pursuing design research as existential project. That also implied the solidarity of other institutional body in mutually supporting each other's existential project in counter-respond to the systemic oppressions in any forms. The autonomy, persistence, and solidarity among the diverse institutional body implied sincerity, responsibility, and commitment to design research.

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The codesign of diverse design student body through geopolitics

CO-DESIGNERS

Dr. Frederick van Amstel ✨
 Hien Phan ✨
 MxD cohort:

Alex Hackett
 Azadeh Jalali
 Madison Roberts
 Cassandra “Cassie” Urbenz
 Lucia Londono
 Tatiana Glakhova
 Saeideh Lotfigogarchin
 Mohammed Sharif Umar
 Dain Won
 Jamie Zhang

✨ Design facilitator and complicator

DESIGN OBJECTS

South-up global map
 Low-tech materials
 Lego animals

LOCATION

MxD graduate design studio

CONTEXT

In the MxD studio, we mainly shared the common positionality as non-USA citizen, immigrant. The hybrid positionality of being non-USA citizen, while being physically in the country, the diverse student body’s trajectory might be impacted by the geopolitical news and the policies of each institution that the body was inbetween of.

This design experiment aims to understand the diverse design student body’s perception of self and anstry against the geopolitical backdrop. We engaged with the local news in Florida, USA, which however might project the global knowledge due to the leading role of the USA in the global economy and politics.

October 15, 2024
 GAINESVILLE, FL



Figure 7: Local newspapers sourced from the Repurpose Project and Infinity Hall



Figure 8: We located the news that mentioned other countries else the USA



Figure 9: Then, we answered the prompts (fig. 7) with the design objects in the MxD design studio.



Figure 10: From fig. 7-11, we placed our visions on the table and discussed about our being and making as the diverse design student body in Florida, USA.



Figure 11: A We chose up to 5 New Metaphor cards to describe our trajectories that led to the MxD program.

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immigration
 cultural imperialism
 geopolitics
 local culture
 local institution
 positionality
 neoliberal
 multiculturalism

ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

Through the newspaper, the diverse student body located the viewpoint of the local institution Florida, USA. Other countries were represented as the threat of safety to the USA, with the diverse minor ethnicities co-existed and launched local businesses in the USA. The USA neoliberal multiculturalism has been keen on representing itself through others as the exceptional hero, empire that is not built of the European colonization, but the militarist and soft-culture imperialist in supporting others in their roads towards democracy and freedom.

As a diverse design student body, none of us was the Indigenous People of the local land Florida. Regardless of our citizenship status, all of us were originally the immigrants to this land, who were captured and stationed at the USA neoliberal multiculturalism through higher education. This structure historically built from African slavery and massacre of Indigenous people.

When we recognized the commodification of cultural identities through sport, food, and arts, we started positioning our trajectories and future design research in the USA institutional structure and geopolitical climate. Through speculating our futures, we shared our worries and many possibilities of engaging with geopolitics from the POV of a diverse design student body.

Intersectional identities became an important note of each social group's positionality. The presidential speeches represented the dialectical-existential collective body who affirms their actions through media representations. Dialogues between these bodies unveiled how these bodies made sense of their existences with the other. These dialogues are often undermined while polarization in politics is naturalized due to artificial intelligence, such as algorithm in social media and news.



The codesign of the diverse design student body through speculative design

CO-DESIGNERS

Mohammed Sharif Umar ★
Hien Phan ★
Alex Hackett
Lucia Londono
Azadeh Jalali
Tatiana Glakhova
Jamie Zhang

DESIGN OBJECTS

Transcript prints
Sticky notes
White board
Acting probes

LOCATION

MxD graduate design studio

CONTEXT

Through speculating the desirous future of the high-tech, non-DEI initiatives in the USA higher education, we imagined ourselves as affiliated educators at the University of Florida, USA in 2030. Similar questions were raised “Who will we be? And what we will be doing in response to the escalated far-right political wave?” By engaging with speculative design and critical design, we imagined and reimagined the future for social interventions in the institutional structure.

★ Design facilitator and complicitor, in support by Dr. Frederick van Amstel

March 14, 2025
GAINESVILLE, FL

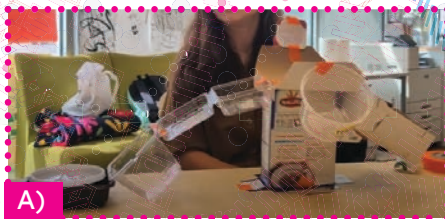


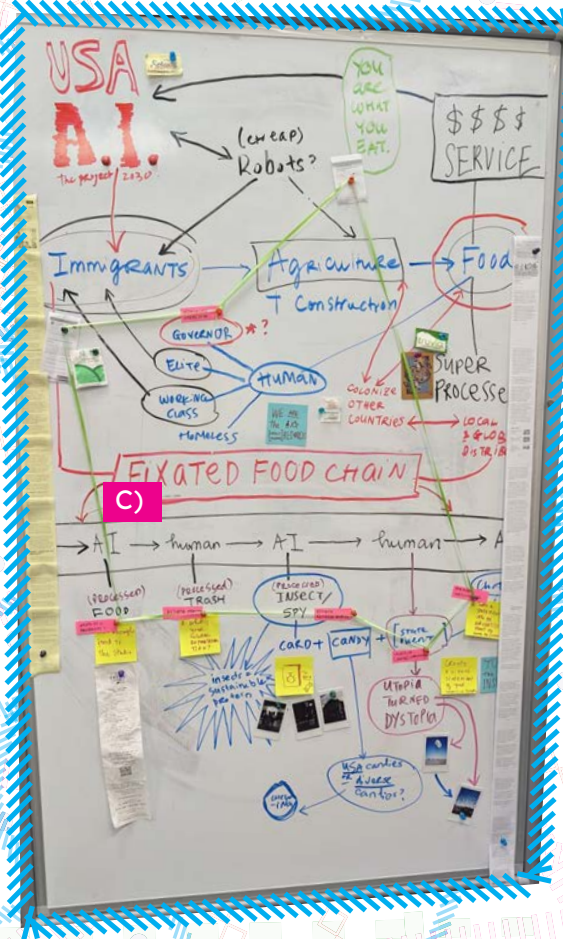
Figure 16.A: The diverse design student body is speculated to become honored members of the University of Florida which would adapt non-DEI super-tech as the new norm in the design program. With the present trash, we designed our future self.

Figure 16.B: The institutional body and local communities would be facing challenges of automation in education, food chain, art, and design. This, again, would cause a new wave of laid-off. The institutional body would be composing a manifesto, in solidarity with bugs as nature soldiers, in counter-response to this dystopian institution.

super-tech
government
local
institution
sustainable
design
positionality
neoliberal
multiculturalism
institutional
labor

Figure 17 (right): When one of the institutional body unveiled his mask, he made others in awe with his meta-design oppressor positionality.

Figure 18 (left): The brainstorming board of the meta-design oppressor, in exploiting the labor while silencing the diverse institutional body with super-tech.



ETHNOGRAPHIC NOTES

“What will we be doing now?” That is often a comment among us as the diverse student body in Florida, USA. In response to the current anti-immigrant political climate, we tried not to ask the question knowing that it might lead to freezing effects or discomfort in the dialogues. The future of non-DEI high-tech may propose similar reactions among the diverse design institutional body. We sought to understand the meanings of this future through the plot twist: the diverse design student body may manage to overcome the anti-immigrant challenges, the meta-design oppressor is still a part of our future institution.

Through the collective statement, we realized that our academic trajectory is built on privileges offered from the institutional structure. Being students, staff, teachers, or diversity workers in general at the institution granted us the privilege to be fulfilled. That also means being generally detached from the local communities and struggles.

Speculative design, through AI-generated images and theatrical oppressor, has immersively validate the future of non-DEI meritocracy in design education. To be together with local communities means to make space for local struggles in the institutional space. This implied the constant dialogues and collaborations between the institutional bodies and non-institutional bodies, who constantly build new institutions to challenge the current institutions.

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/ SECTION FIVE /

Discussion

Rethinking the positionality of the diverse design student body.

In this project, I reflect on my positionality within the U.S. design education system and the contradictions that come with being part of a diverse student body. Design institutions in the U.S. often celebrate multiculturalism, yet this celebration is deeply shaped by neoliberal logics of inclusion. “Diversity” becomes an institutionalized performance—something to be measured, displayed, and made legible to institutional goals—rather than an open space for conflicted, uneven lived realities. I saw this contradiction unfold through codesign experiments with the diverse design student body, where, unintentionally, the room was made up entirely of female. We happened to complain about the patriarchy in the intersection with Western/European colonization, which tormented us in many ways. Yet, institutionalized diversity and codesign often discards the perpetuated social hierarchy due to the manifestation of historical oppression.

Even within a majority-immigrant student group, I began to recognize how easily we replicated ideals of the American Dream. We speak of freedom, exploration, and global citizenship, but sometimes in ways that echo the institution’s need to brand itself as inclusive and accessible. One participant talked about leaving the U.S. to study in Europe, citing British English as superior than American English. These small comments reflect a deeper discomfort—perhaps a desire to escape from the so-called low culture and language—but they also reveal how our privileges in education intersect with our marginalization here. The desire for so-called high culture, language, and education implied the gap between many social groups in a shared society, made possible by the history of colonialism and imperialism. The desire to be better manifests the oppressed body to look, behave, and be free alike the oppressor (Freire 2020, Fanon 2007).

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Figure 1: Photo shoot of the MxD cohort at St. Augustine, 2025



Figure 2: The black swans that were imported from Australia by the middle class in Gainesville, FL. They could not mate, while one of them with a fungi disease on their feet.

Neoliberal or fascist multiculturalism can be done institutionally or personally. They resembled the attracted diverse student body to some extents.

While 77% of the diverse student body is from the Global South, all of us shared the history of coming from the nations under the Western/European colonialism or cultural imperialism. This resurfaced Ahmed’s critique of diversity as a “traveling word”—a performance of representation without systemic change. Within our diverse student body, our desire to “explore the world” or “gain global knowledge” is entangled with institutional narratives. We are encouraged to see ourselves as global designers, yet this globalization of diversity often flattens the intersectionality of our positions, which projects the colonial histories.

Plus, as the diverse design student body, we shared experiences of being “other,” yet we shared different privileges. This is because of our various citizenships from different countries that side or against the Western/European imperialism. The neoliberal multiculturalist institution welcomes the diverse body because our bodies, our stories, and our languages serve as the diverse commodities that enrich the institution, perpetuating the colonial histories. I used to joke, “They care about us because we’re cool,” not realizing that this “coolness” was itself a form of commodification—where our difference is palatable, even

profitable, as long as it doesn’t disrupt the structure. In that way, casual compliments became the affirmative extension of institutionalization, which is gratefully embedded in the diverse institutional body.

Without questioning this institutional affirmation, the diverse institutional body became the diverse workers that welcomes and co-opts other non-institutional body. Our diverse student body faced this firsthand when working with local institutions like the City of Gainesville and Project Youthbuild. We mistook institutionalized partnerships of institutional expansion for horizontal community engagement. We struggled to recognize hierarchies in institutionalized partnerships, which further marginalized local communities. The lack of mutual reflections, shielded us as the diverse design institutional body in collaborating with the diverse non-institutional body. That confusion bred mistrust in codesign, unfortunately.

The confusion was difficult to navigate through. Through autoethnography and codesign, I came to realize the privilege in under-privilege of the diverse (non)institutional body, and vice versa. Often times, the under-privilege in each of our own positionality prevented ourselves in locating the shared under-privilege of a collective diverse body, which were made possible by the remaining issues of the institutional structure. The struggles made us question each other instead of building solidarity among the non-institutional and institutional bodies. The struggles made the white homeless people project racism against immigrant elites under the capitalist populist institutional representatives that blame everything on immigrants.

The diverse body has been embedded with cancel cultures, who thought of other’s different worldviews of the institution as the attempts to challenge and even eradicate the other. Design principles included accessibility, equity, and inclusion, because the institution and diverse body have been lacking of mutual empathy and efforts in codesigning an inclusive institution of all. The diverse body is diverged and lacks of democratic solidarity due to the rise of cancel culture, which is a part of neoliberal multiculturalism and capitalist institutional structure.

As Ahmed analyzed (2012), the existence of the diverse body in the institution covers the history of institutional exclusion. The existence of the diverse institutional body disregards the coloniality of design in the institutional structure, further inviting and welcoming the diverse non-institutional body. This contradiction unsettled my understanding of diversity as a collective existential project. This raised a harder question: **can a diverse design institutional body challenge the coloniality in design from within the institution, collectively thinking and making with the non-institutional body?**

Re-making diversity in the institution with low-tech materials

This thesis explored the use of low-tech materials as a form of critical design that resists and reimagines institutionalized approaches to diversity, technology, and design education. In contrast to the dominance of high-tech—associated with computation, control, and institutional power—low-tech offers a more tactile, embodied, and user-defined mode of making. While high-tech is often celebrated as progress, its structures are deeply embedded in economic systems, institutional agendas, and digital abstraction. In everyday life, high-tech functions as a metaphor for obscured and systematized modes of knowledge—engineered to serve broad populations, but not always inclusive of diverse lived experiences.

Low-tech, by contrast, engages with physical materials that can be touched, reshaped, and repurposed. It centers the user as an active participant rather than a passive recipient of design. In this project, low-tech materials—tapes, transparent films, cardboard, markers—became tools for reclaiming space within the high-tech institution. Though these materials are often dismissed as art supplies or associated with amateurism, they created opportunities for diverse student bodies to articulate identities, stories, and resistance through making.



Figure 3: Automated coffee shop in Gainesville downtown, displayed with the TV of Ghibli soundtracks, a Gator football helmet, and self-service coffee machine, 2024



Figure 4: The current construction of the Architecture building (top), with various metals, machines, and other construction materials. The construction site was veiled with the future image of the building (bottom), which includes the architecture, students, and natures.



Figure 5: Low-tech design materials in statement against super-tech non-DEI in higher education (2025)

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In these moments, they risked being dismissed or reduced to decorative gestures. Yet it was precisely in this friction that their power emerged. When diverse student bodies extend design beyond institutional functions—through messiness, through material improvisation—they begin to reshape what design can be and whom it is for.

Making low-tech during a high-tech, anti-DEI era was not only a creative act but also a political one. In doing so, I encountered support from diversity workers and began to recognize the foundational role of diverse people—construction workers, staff, students—in sustaining the campus itself. These interactions deepened my understanding of solidarity and presence.

Ultimately, this project positions low-tech design as an accessible and decolonial practice in designing diversity alter/natively—one that critically reflects on the material conditions of making and challenges the modernist, colonial aesthetics upheld by both Western and postcolonial institutions. Through autoethnography and codesign, low-tech materials became a way of designing against coloniality—both in form and intent—and imagining new possibilities for collective design within and beyond the institution.

Designing diversity challenges the boundaries of institutionalization

Creating space within and beyond the institution through decolonizing design means rethinking not only what design is, but how diversity is practiced and where it unfolds. In this thesis, designing diversity alter/natively involved using low-tech materials to create mobile, improvised interventions—unfolding in hallways, kitchens, sidewalks, and other overlooked spaces. These gestures invited participation not through polished outcomes, but through presence, questioning, and shared making.

Low-tech became a spatial strategy: reclaiming visibility where institutions often overlook embodied knowledge. Refusing permanence and hierarchy, these ephemeral practices created openings for collective engagement and care. In this way, designing diversity alter/natively is not just about representation—but about loosening the institutional grip on what counts as design, and for whom it matters.

This work emerged alongside broader tensions: at the University of Florida, high-tech initiatives were celebrated while anti-DEI policies were being implemented; AI was expanding, while arts funding and community-oriented programs were shrinking. In this context, turning to low-tech materials became a political response—an effort to critique the consolidation of power under the guise of technological advancement.

Through collaborations with local communities such as Project YouthBuild and Spatially Fed, the diverse student body in the graduate design studio used low-tech practices to co-create physical artifacts and open space for collective dialogue. These processes foregrounded embodied engagement—through touch, gesture, and proximity—over technical proficiency. As a result, low-tech objects became more than just design outputs: they became metaphorical stand-ins for the designers themselves—materials through which questions, contradictions, and identities were expressed and shared within institutional settings.

However, this work did not always fit comfortably within institutional norms. At times, low-tech projects were viewed as unstructured, overly emotional, or aesthetically irrelevant.



Figure 8: The low-tech design materials in transition from the Fine Arts Building C to the MxD graduate design studio in Infinity Hall, delivered through the wagon. This process has been frequently supported by Michael Christopher. The request in design materials has encouraged me to be in touch with the staff better, supported by, as well as supporting them on managing institutional resources.

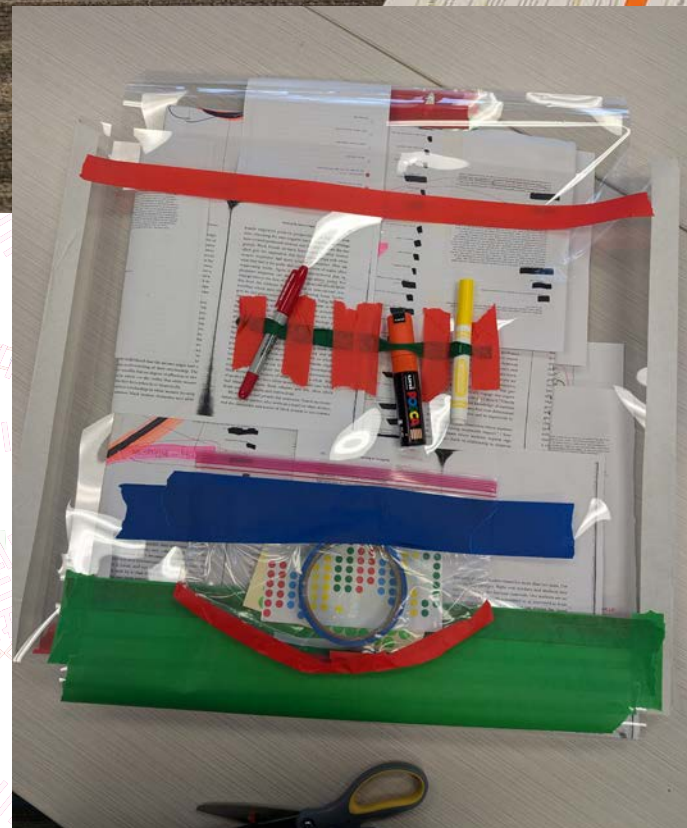


Figure 6: (top left) The detective analysis on institutional racism, made from low-tech materials, was laid in the ground of the Infinity Hall during the research process.

Figure 7: (bottom left) The transparent comic holder of the detective analysis, made from colored tapes, transparent films, balloons, and other stationeries.

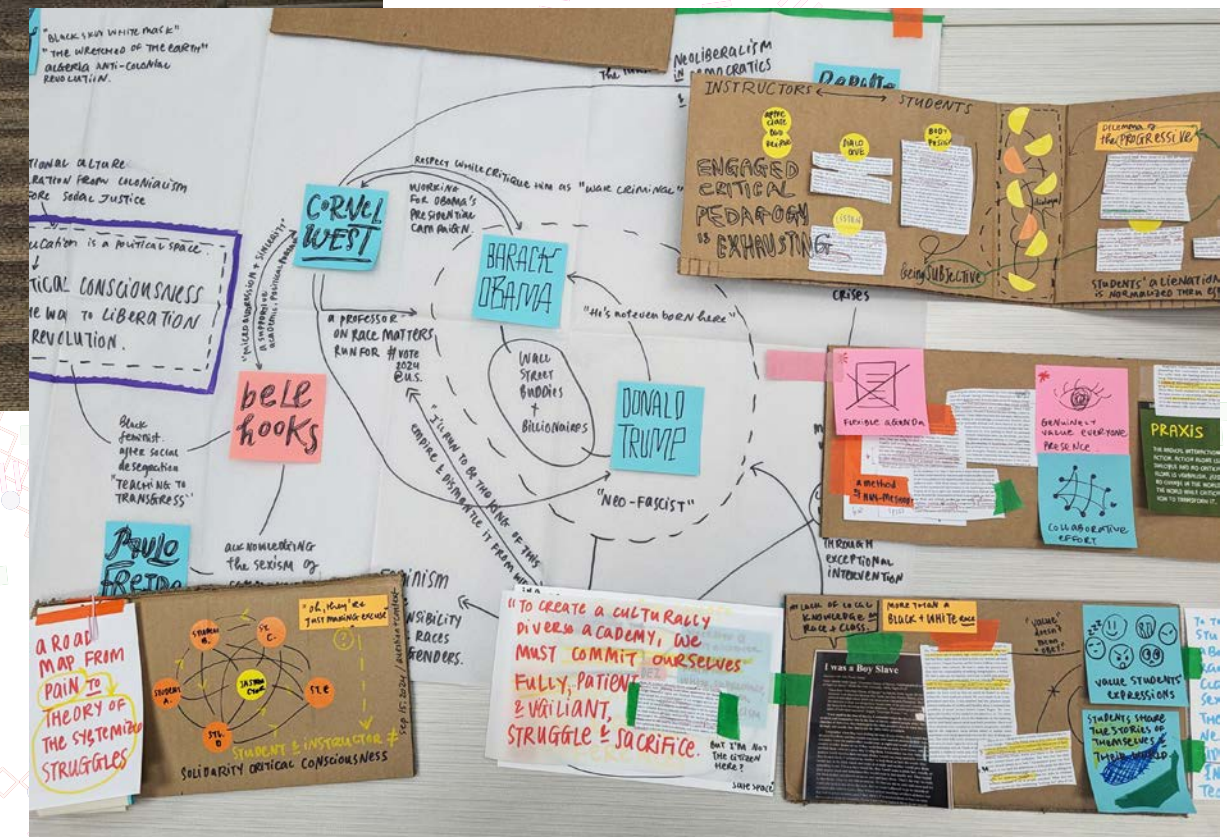


Figure 9: The presentation of *Teaching to Transgress*, by bell hooks (2014) and the theoretical applications in design teaching, shared in the (Design) Research & Practice, taught by Dr. Frederick van Amstel, Fall 2024.

Designing diversity alter/natively from the positionality of Otherness

I propose that we design diversity—not just as a concept, but as an making of critical consciousness. Because without deep reflection, visual design that celebrates diversity risks flattening complex histories. It can erase the colonial legacies embedded in our institutions and alienate both ourselves and others who share our positionality. When design becomes merely a tool for visual inclusion, it may reproduce the same structures of power it seeks to resist. In doing so, it risks pressing down on the very people it claims to uplift—reinforcing subordination under the guise of representation.

To do diversity work, then, is to encounter resistance—but also to respond to it. It is about turning institutional resistance into action, rather than stopping at critique. Throughout history, resistance to institutional oppression has emerged in many forms: from the protests against the Vietnam War, to the Black Lives Matter movement—even in Tennessee—to today’s student-led demonstrations against the violence in Palestine. These acts of resistance—local and global—have shown us that opposing institutional oppression is not simply a matter of political stance, but a lived practice. It is to love what imperialist, colonialist, capitalist, and racist institutions hate.



Figure 10: Russell Cheyne / Reuters (2017)
Protest against the inauguration of Donald Trump, Scotland or the alter/native design of diversity body

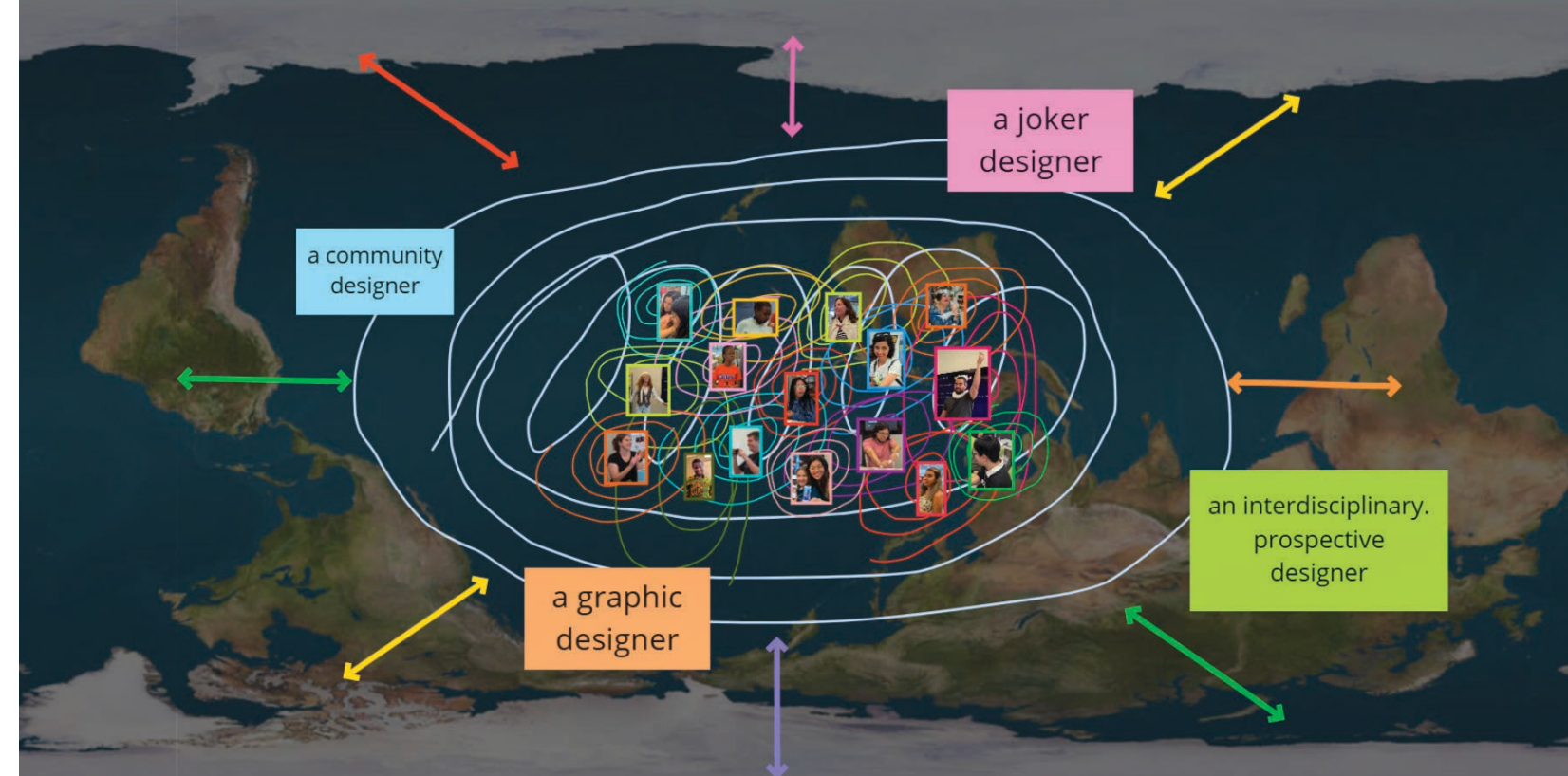


Figure 11: Prospective trajectory of the diverse design institutional body

This love—from the positionality of otherness—is both radical and necessary. It is what drives this design research: a love for bodies, communities, and narratives that have been systemically silenced or ignored. In trying to understand the history of international solidarity—from Vietnam to Algeria to Palestine—I came to see that resisting power also means designing differently. It means refusing dominant structures, refusing normative aesthetics, and refusing to be neutral.

Dismantling institutions in design that are built on patriarchy, capitalism, colonialism, and racial hierarchy (Fanon, 2007) cannot be done by critique alone. It must be done through practice—sometimes from within, and sometimes from the outside. It means empowering the diverse student body not just as an institutional check-box, but as a political collective, aware of its power to act not only in local design spaces but within larger geopolitical frameworks.

So, the question I leave with is this: **What does it mean to be a designer—of communities, of graphics, of diversity itself?** To design from the margins is to design with intent. It is to act with consciousness. It is to create what institutions have long ignored. It is to love what they hate—and in doing so, to refuse erasure, and to imagine something else entirely.

/ SECTION SIX /

Alter/native diversity maps

Paranoia disclaimer

This design research is conducted by a Vietnamese female design researcher in Florida, USA, who is a gen Z, USA immigrant, Global South citizen, design teacher, and previous student in the banking education inherited by Confucianist feudalism, Western/European colonization, Internationalist Communism, Postcolonial government, Neocolonial “Exceptional” Interventionism and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in the USA, as well as the global history of settler colonization, including Florida and Viet Nam. This design research on diversity is controversial due to the current political attacks on the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) policies in the USA, while the “woke” risk being attacked, kidnapped, encamped, and deported. Regardless, this research is granted by the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America (1776), the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen of France (1789), and the Declaration of Independence of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (1945), where all human are created equal by the Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. By participating, guiding, and assessing this MFA design research, you understand the basis of human rights and the dialectical-existential role of the research, amidst the political controversies and mental distress.

PARANOIA DETECTIVE ANALYSIS

On institutionalized diversity through *metadesign toolkits*

PART A: Reading the relevant metaphors

SIZE
102 x 22 (inches)

DESIGN MATERIALS
Lego card deck about
organizational culture,
New Metaphors

LOCATION
MxD graduate design studio

TIME SPAN
Oct. 2, 2024
2 hours



On institutionalized diversity through *metadesign toolkits*

PART B: Analyzing the USA design education

DESIGN MATERIALS
Sticky notes, color labels,
markers

TIME SPAN
Oct. 2, 2024
2 hours



On institutionalized diversity through *visual auto/ethnography*

SIZE
130 x 36 (inches)

LOCATION
MxD graduate design studio

TIME SPAN
Oct. 28 - Oct. 30, 2024
15 hours



On institutionalized diversity through *visual auto/ethnography*

PART B:
The manifestation
of postcolonial
studies in
institutionalized
diversity

SIZE
130 x 36 (inches)

DESIGN MATERIALS
Yellow cellophanes,
Sharpies

LOCATION
MxD graduate design studio

TIME SPAN
Oct. 30 - Nov. 3, 2024
3 hours



On institutionalized diversity through *visual auto/ethnography*

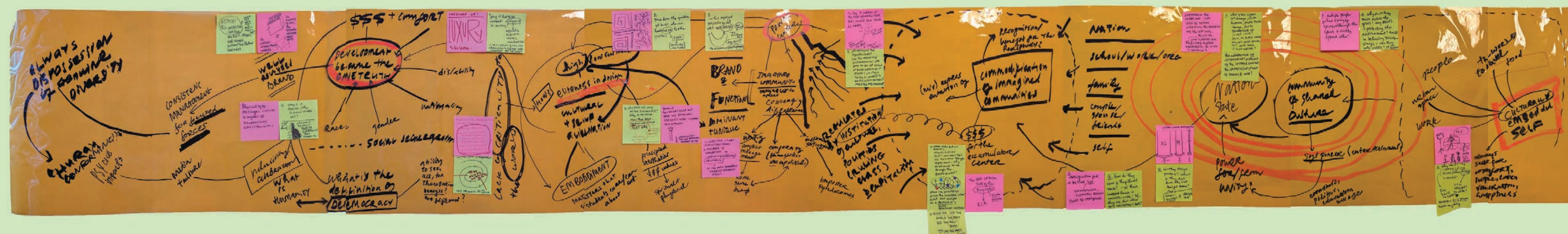
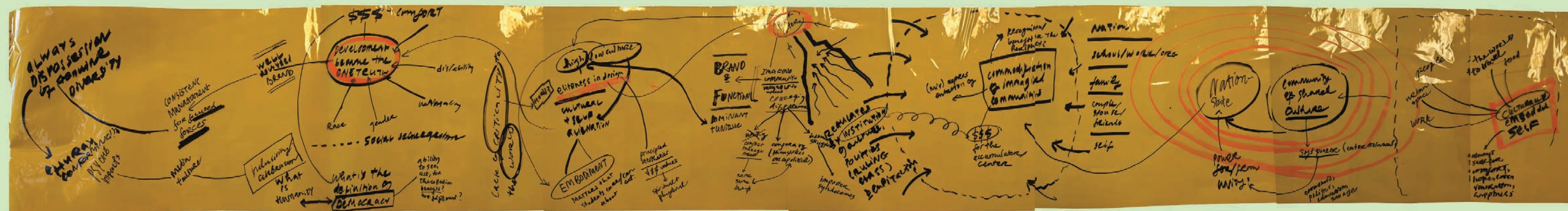
PART C:
New metaphors
in reading
applied
postcolonial
studies

SIZE
130 x 18 (inches)

DESIGN MATERIALS
Yellow cellophanes,
Sharpies, sticky notes

LOCATION
MxD graduate design studio

TIME SPAN
Nov. 3, 2024
3 hours



PARANOIA DETECTIVE ANALYSIS

On institutionalized diversity through **visual auto/ethnography**

PART D:
Conclusions on institutionalized diversity as coloniality in design

SIZE
40 x 50 (inches)

DESIGN MATERIALS
Transcript prints, color markers, tapes, sticky notes, and color labels

LOCATION
MxD graduate design studio

TIME SPAN
Nov. 6, 2024
6 hours



PARANOIA DETECTIVE ANALYSIS

On institutionalized diversity *through the MxD* organizational culture

SIZE

40 x 50 (inches)

DESIGN MATERIALS

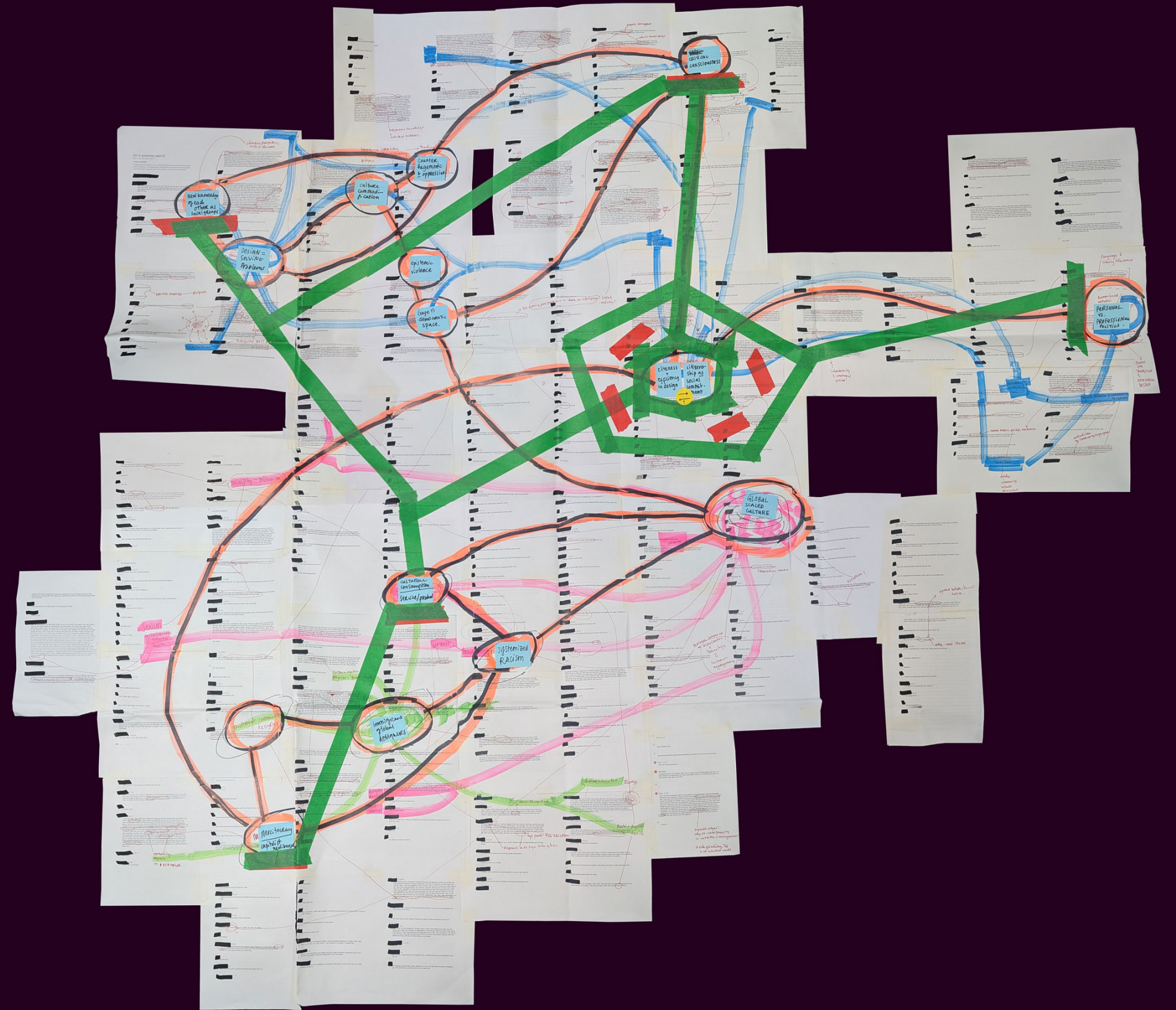
Transcript prints, color markers, tapes, sticky notes, and color labels

LOCATION

MxD graduate design studio

TIME SPAN

Nov. 6, 2024
6 hours



PARANOIA DETECTIVE ANALYSIS

On institutionalized diversity through Lego Serious Play autoethnographic craft materials

SIZE
125 x 50 (inches)

LOCATION
MxD graduate design studio

DESIGN MATERIALS
Transcript prints, color
markers, tapes, sticky notes,
and color labels

TIME SPAN
Jan. 23 - 24, 2025
8 hours

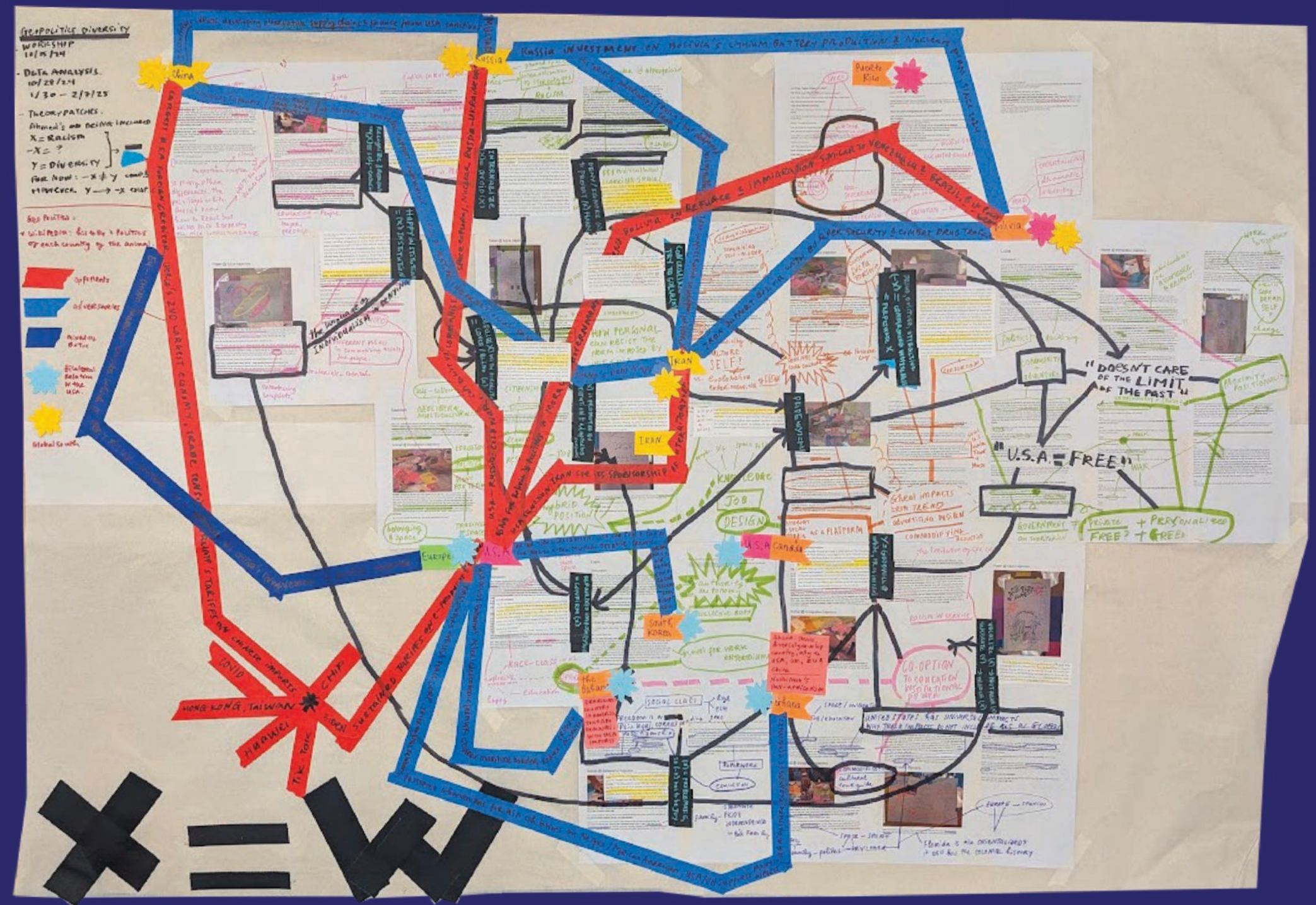


On institutionalized
diversity through
**geopolitical
representations**

SIZE
80 x 45 (inches)

LOCATION
MxD graduate design studio

TIME SPAN
Feb. 6 - 8, 2025
8 hours



PARANOIA DETECTIVE ANALYSIS

On institutionalized diversity through geopolitical representations

PART B:
Contradictions of the institutionalized diversity in the USA design education that adds on to Ahmed's book (2012)

SIZE
80 x 45 (inches)

DESIGN MATERIALS
Red cellophanes, color markers, color labels

LOCATION
MxD graduate design studio

TIME SPAN
Feb. 8, 2025
1 hour



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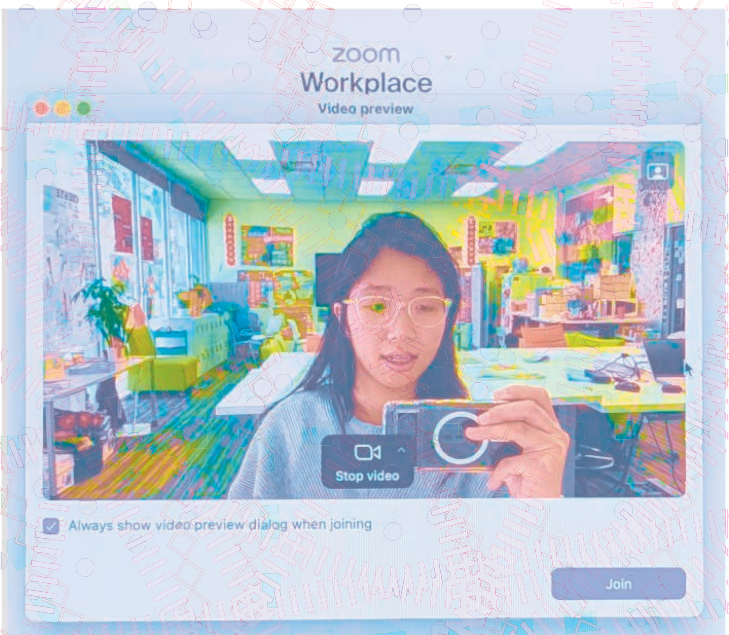
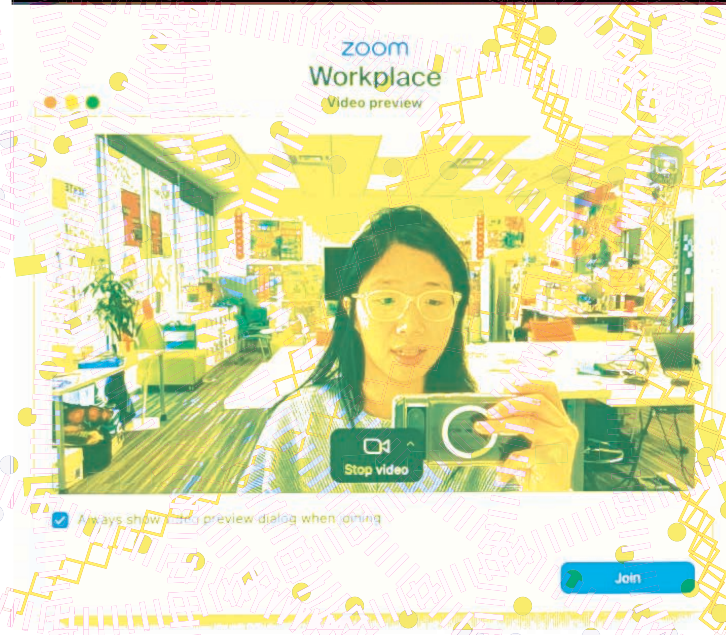
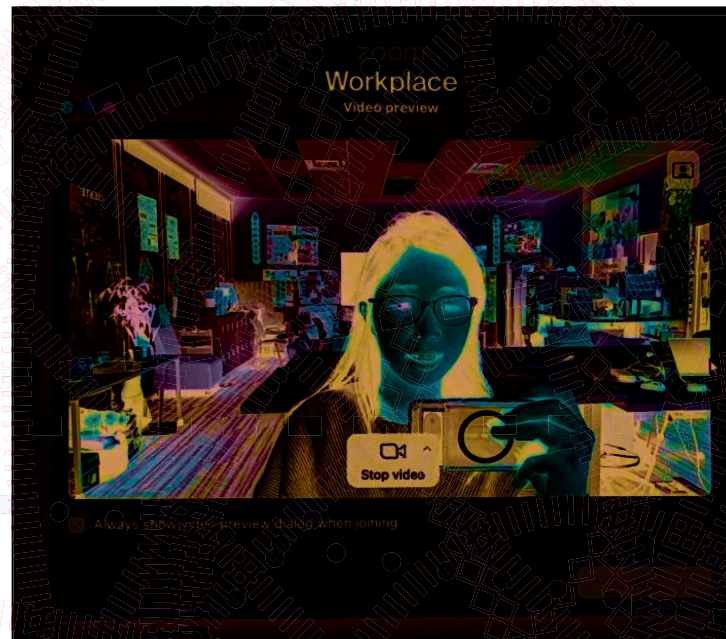


Figure 1: Self-portrait in the waiting zoom sessions, color played through Adobe InDesign

Hiền Lê Diệu Phan (she/her), Hiền, or Hien Phan is a Vietnamese designer and researcher who pursues design as an artistic form of creative expression, democratic communication, and political actions for social transformation.

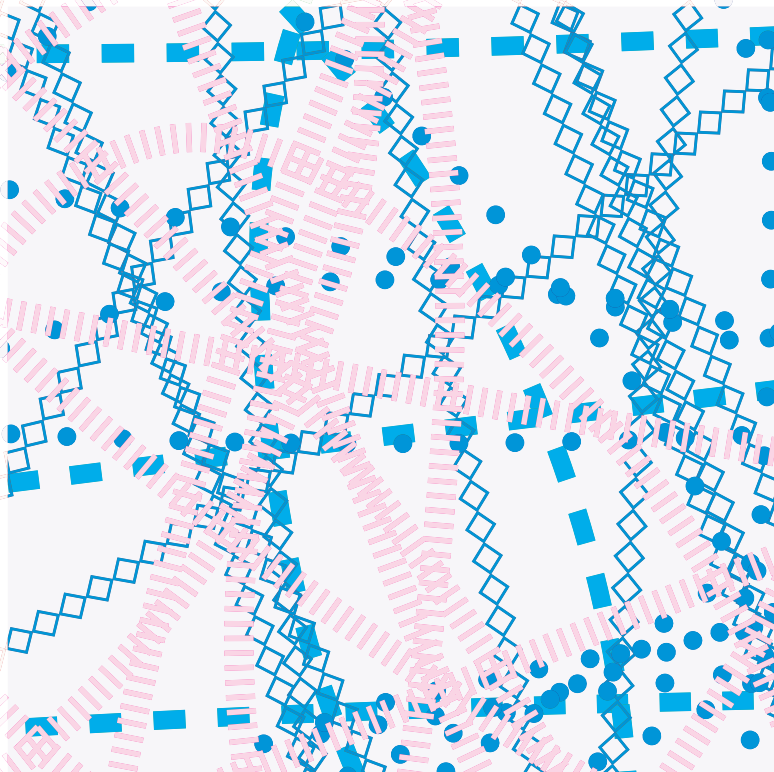
Her work in the past few years have focused on institutional service design, branding design, and social media which aim to distribute and enhance institutional resources for the public communities. Her design research approached the intersection of design and anthropology, where autoethnography and participatory design have been engaged for democratic dialogues and social expressions.

Through transdisciplinary design research and practice, Hiền seeks to engage the local community in exploring the intersection of self-representation, community-building, and ethical, autonomous organizational culture. Her design philosophy is rooted in Freirean critical pedagogy and the global, progressive movement of the Design & Oppression network. Hiền is committed to challenging the boundaries of commercial design by rejecting surface-level, efficiency-driven solutions in favor of more critically engaged approaches to design consciousness and equality.

Hiền will graduate from the Master's degree in Fine Arts in Design and Visual Communications (MxD), University of Florida in 2025.

View more of her works at pldh.page and be.net/pldhdesign

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April 2025

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