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Article

Sawali Weaving as Decolonial Design Futures Practice

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Abstract

This article explores sawali—traditional Filipino bamboo weaving—as both metaphor and methodology for feminist futures practice grounded in decolonial principles. Drawing from the author's narrative bricolage study with Filipina educators and personal experiences, including her relationship with her own mother, the paper introduces the Decolonial Design Futures framework, a six-phase collaborative approach that can be used for scholarly research or community-based projects. The framework integrates Indigenous Filipino concepts including kapwa (relationality) and non-linear temporalities with established foresight methods such as the Futures Triangle. Like sawali's interwoven bamboo strips designed to provide shelter, this approach emphasizes the interweaving of past-present-future narratives, centers marginalized voices, and prioritizes hyperlocal, community-based design solutions. It shows how colonial mentality—reconceptualized from an individual psychological construct to a global systemic problem—can be addressed through transdisciplinary collaboration and design justice principles. Drawing parallels between feminist futures work and maternal labor, the author proposes that one of the gifts of the sawali weaving process is post-gender Maternal Love: a universal, spiritual force that can guide us in hospicing coloniality while midwifing just and sustainable futures.

Keywords

Decolonial Design Futures, Decolonial Feminism, Indigenous Knowledge, Colonial Mentality, Sawali Weaving

Introduction: Sawali Weaving

I grew up in a house wallpapered in *sawali*: from the cathedral ceiling to the walls of our living and dining rooms, the crisscross pattern of flattened strips of bamboo surrounded me during my elementary and teenage years. Visitors would look up in awe as they entered our home; beholding it for the first time can take your breath away. Some would glide their hands over the walls, their fingers rising and falling with the grooves and ridges; one foreigner even pressed her nose against it, deeply inhaling its earthy smell. It was an unusual design for a home built in the 1990s, and I felt proud of our unique abode, which resembled a modern version of a *bahay kubo*, a traditional Indigenous house with a steep roof and windows made of *capiz* shell, letting in sunlight and the crisp mountain air. Little did I know that the logic of the *sawali* would return to my consciousness decades later. In this essay, I explore *sawali* as a metaphor and method for feminist futures practice grounded in historical knowledge, concretized by the Decolonial Design Futures framework (Rodriguez-Fransen, 2023, 2025) that can be used in either scholarly research or community-based design projects. This framework was derived from my narrative bricolage study with Filipina educators living in the Philippines, as a result of weaving individual stories of decolonial feminists with the larger colonial history of the country.

Primarily practiced by women throughout the Philippine archipelago since pre-colonial times, *sawali* reflects the interweaving of past, present, and future stories of women. Resilient and versatile, it represents their layered stories and relationships with family, the community, the country, and the world. It invites us to consider what futures might emerge when we take seriously vernacular, humble technologies as modes of worldbuilding, particularly

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those long dismissed as peripheral, parochial, or irrelevant within dominant modernities. This idea was artistically brought to life by the Philippine Pavilion exhibit at the Osaka Expo 2025, a large-scale international fair that brought together more than 160 countries that featured the theme, "Designing the Future of our Lives." Representing the largest collaboration of Filipino community weaves in one project—with 2,133 weavers in 121 communities creating 212 handwoven textiles—the title of the pavilion displayed from April to October 2025 was "Woven: Nature, Culture, and Community Woven Together for a Better Future." As Chief Operating Officer of Philippine Tourism Promotions Board Maria Margarita Montemayor shared: "Every woven panel, every performance, and every flavor is part of the continuing narrative of the Filipino people. In a world driven by innovation, we're here to show that tradition still matters—that human connection and cultural memory can shape a more inclusive, meaningful future" (Chi, 2025). According to the pavilion architect, "We wanted the structure itself to breathe and move with the stories it holds. It reflects who we are as Filipinos—always in motion, always evolving, always expressive" (Tinga, 2025). Similarly, unlike concrete or steel, *sawali* breathes: it lets in light and air, expands and contracts, wears and repairs. As such, it models feminist values of adaptability, care, and community-building that Abdullah (2025) emphasizes in exploring the relationship between feminism and futures studies.

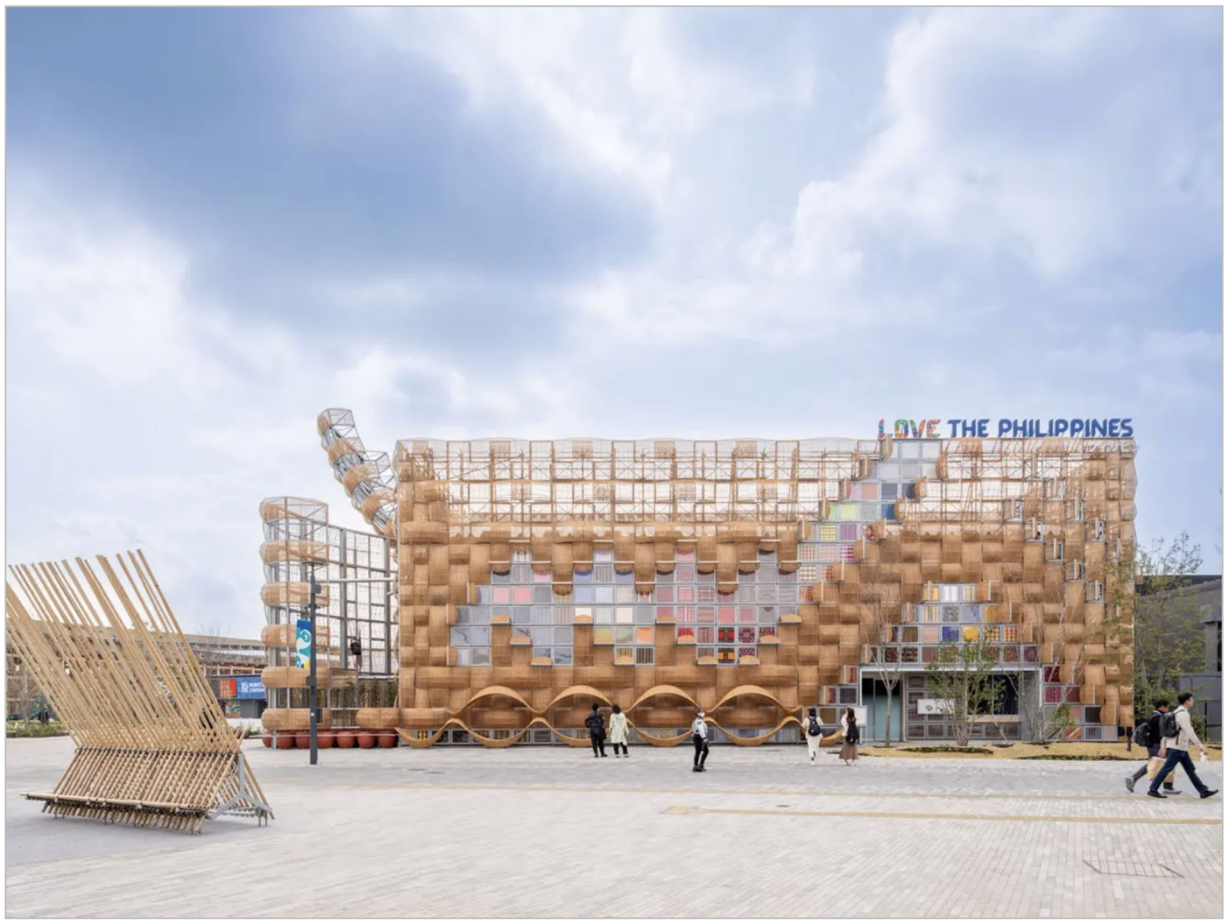

Fig. 1: Philippine Pavilion at the Osaka Expo 2025

Note. Exterior of the Philippine Pavilion at the Osaka Expo 2025, built around the theme "Nature, Culture, and Community: Woven Together for a Better Future." Photograph by Ed Simon of KLIQ, Inc. (https://lifestyleasia-onemega.com/arts-and-culture/osaka-expo-2025-dancing-to-the-threads-of-time/)

Aside from showcasing the country's rich textile heritage, the pavilion communicates the interconnectedness of

Filipino communities across the archipelago and serves as a counter-narrative to technological determinism. "As we design future societies, as we go into the tech of these things… what we are telling the world is that what we value the most is our human connection," Montemayor shares. "What we want to do is to continue really empowering our people" (Tinga, 2025). I propose that *sawali* offers not just symbolic insight, but also methodological guidance for weaving together *pakikibaka*—acts of resistance—hope, and speculative possibilities from the margins.

My Mother, The Futurist

I begin by weaving the story of the first futurist I ever encountered: my own mother, Mila. Back then, I did not have the term "futurist" in my vocabulary; but looking back, I now recognize how she embodied what it meant to practice foresight intuitively, without any formal training. She was able to clearly imagine and articulate preferred futures for all of her seven children, through her own observations and maternal hyper-intuition called *kutob*—a Filipino concept that refers to a sense of what may happen (Cervantes, 2025). I remember how she smiled at me as she declared with conviction, "You will be a motivational speaker and author." At the time, I didn't believe her. Almost three decades later, I found myself delivering a talk on the TED stage, in the heart of New York City, sharing insights from my own work about decolonizing education. Even more impressive was her ability to reframe a potential collapse scenario: back in 1979, I was an unexpected child, the sixth of seven children, and my parents had only 500 Philippine pesos in their bank account. Instead of despairing and worrying that I was another mouth to feed, my mother chose to look at me lovingly and declared out loud: "*Swerte 'tong batang 'to*!" This child is going to be lucky, she said. She and my father then asked for a loan from my godparents, who told my parents to pay it back whenever they can, and to not worry about a deadline or any interest charges. My pregnant mother proceeded to work hard even more, working a day job as a secretary at a high school and moonlighting as a Tupperware dealer. Her worldview reminds me of Pryor's (2025) notions of "womb knowing" and "Futures Doula" (p. 87), where the feminist futurist trusts in her body as she travels "down the foggy path of uncertainty…comfortable in the unknown," allowing her to be at ease as her birthing journey unfolded. Like a Futures Doula, my mother served as a space holder, "a seer in the dark, illuminating the path forward," (Pryor, 2025, p. 87) carrying me inside her womb and an optimistic outlook despite an uncertain future riddled with their struggles to make ends meet.

My mother was a feminist in many ways: she challenged the conventional gender roles of her time, working her way out of being a secretary at a high school to becoming a full-fledged entrepreneur, quickly rising from being a Tupperware dealer to a distributor within five years. In 1984, she asked my father to take the leap with her to co-found Ermil Inc. He quit his job as a salesman for the SC Johnson multinational company and applied his marketing degree to complement my mother's ability to connect with and lead people from all walks of life. Together, they worked towards transformative futures not only for their family and relatives, but also for hundreds of low-income women and their families. Their goal was not to sell products per se; instead, they used the business as a vehicle to train people to develop a positive mindset and the skills needed to lift themselves out of poverty. She and my father resisted the status quo by continuously innovating, even influencing Tupperware headquarters to adopt their creative marketing ideas. At one of the Tupperware Distributors' Conferences, my father was asked to speak. He shared, "I'm so proud of our achievements, but I'm most proud of my wife Mila because of what she has achieved… We have been there for each other through the downfalls and successes of this distributorship. Prior to Tupperware, I was the one who had the knowledge and experience in sales and marketing. My wife was a school secretary before becoming a Tupperware Distributor. I don't mind telling everybody, and I'm not ashamed to say, that Mila has outgrown me in my own field." My mother spoke, too, saying, "I want everybody to know that my husband Ernie is my mentor. He gave me the support and confidence to become successful in this field" (Rodriguez-Fransen's father, personal communication, October 29, 2013).

Like Hernandez-Toro, Neuhoff & van Dam (2025) who wrote about feminist futures across their life experiences, I observed how my mother also felt "the constant pull of tension of being stretched between competing demands, expectations, and desires…actively searching for ways of transcending them, building bridges that connect the seemingly opposite" (para. 19). I remember looking at pictures of her beauty pageant days, and she would tell me that she never liked pageants. She dreaded preparing for them, especially when she practiced walking in high heels

while balancing a book on her head; but her mother was adamant that she joined them, so she participated in the contests reluctantly. While she didn't seem to care too much about flaunting her own aesthetic beauty, it was obvious that she was concerned about my own appearance: when I was a young child, she would gently pinch the bridge of my nose, repeatedly, in attempts to heighten it. It was only later that I understood why: she merely wanted what was best for me in a society that discriminated against flat noses and preferred the Eurocentric notion of beauty. Colonial mentality was, and still is, ubiquitous in the Philippines.

Decolonial Design Futures

According to David & Okazaki (2006), colonial mentality is a multifaceted psychological construct that is a consequence of colonialism: a specific form of internalized oppression, it is characterized by a perception of cultural and ethnic inferiority, and involves an automatic rejection of anything Filipino and an automatic preference for anything American; and I would add, particularly White American. My previous research (Rodriguez-Fransen, 2023, 2025) revealed key stories about colonial mentality in the Philippines, one of which is growing up with the notion that White is beautiful, and associating whiter skin and aquiline noses with higher economic and social status, as evidenced by the existence of SkinWhite Skinnovation Center (SkinWhite Philippines, 2023) that promotes their "NationWhite Sale" (SkinWhite Philippines, 2024) and billboards that advertise skin whitening products with taglines such as, "kutis-mayaman," which translates to "skin of the rich" (HWL Incorporated, 2017). Like many others, I grew up learning to be ashamed of my flat nose, and many girls used whitening creams, including my sister. I still remember how she told me, with a nostalgic smile, of how she used to bleach the hairs on her arms and legs: she would mix hydrogen peroxide and ammonia in a spray bottle, spray it on her limbs, and stand in front of the electric fan. Just ten minutes, and everything was dry and blond, she said.

While colonial mentality has been defined as an individual psychological construct, my study about Filipina college professors in the Philippines was able to re-define it as a global systemic problem. In the process of weaving the individual stories of Filipina educators and the larger colonial history of the Philippines, I reconceptualized it as a *complex, hegemonic matrix of oppression rooted in Western colonialism and sustained by political, economic, and sociocultural institutions that perpetuate inequalities* (Rodriguez-Fransen, 2023, 2025). In shifting the way we view the problem, we consequently expand the ways we can address colonial mentality, particularly beyond an individual psychological intervention. In other words, the onus is not on the individual Filipino to overcome this as a mental health issue; rather, the underlying material, economic and political dimensions must be problematized and addressed not only by educators, but also by and in collaboration with decision-makers and leaders in industry, government, and civil society.

The Decolonial Design Futures framework depicted in Figure 2 (Rodriguez-Fransen, 2023, 2025) can support those who desire to address this long-standing systemic problem. An approach guided by the Futures Triangle (Inayatullah, 2008) and narrative bricolage methods, as well as decolonial feminism and Freire's (1970) notion of praxis—reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it—it was created by interweaving the individual stories, emotions, insights, and imagination of Filipina college professors, the larger colonial history of the Philippines, and decolonial values and concepts of time. A method that can be used by educators and practitioners in various sectors in both scholarly research and community-based design projects, it is defined as a collective, iterative design approach that acknowledges the interconnectedness and multiplicities of the past, present and future; activates bold imagination; and co-creates hyperlocal, preferred futures with Indigenous and marginalized communities. It consists of six phases: *kuwentuhan* (story circle), *pagmumuni-muni* (reflection), *hiraya* (imagination), *panghinaharap na artifact* (artifact from the future), *disenyong makatarungan* (design justice), and *paulit-ulit na pagsubok* (testing and iteration). Whenever I introduce this framework to various groups, I invite them to use their native language to name these phases.

1. *Kuwentuhan* involves convening an interdisciplinary group of five to 10 individuals who share stories about a particular problem. As the researcher or facilitator, you would then compare and analyze their individual stories within the larger history of the community, looking for patterns and revising meanings of these stories as needed. In essence, you are looking far back in history, digging for root causes of a particular pain point in the present, in order to look farther into the future of the community.

2. *Pagmumuni-muni* involves convening the same group to share their specific emotions and insights while listening to one another's stories. As the researcher or facilitator, you notice any themes or patterns and articulate their collective insights.
3. *Hiraya* once again convenes the same group to use their shared insights to catalyze their imagination of possible futures for their community, at least 10 years from now. This is where various foresight techniques can be used, to encourage bold imagination. Examples include 100 Ways the Future Could Be Different (McGonigal, 2022), where you list up to 100 facts today concerning your topic, then write the opposite of each fact to challenge current assumptions) and Futures Triangle (a method originated by Sohail Inayatullah, 2008, that facilitates a discussion on the pushes of the present, weights of the past, and pulls of the future to articulate possible futures).
4. *Panghinaharap na Artifact* engages the same group to choose one of their imagined futures that they believe can highly impact the problem and represents a preferred future, and then create a rapid prototype: either a tangible, physical or digital artifact that might exist in that preferred future.
5. *Disenyong Makatarungan* invites participants to ask three questions that design justice practitioners ask: who will be included in the design process (emphasizing the inclusion of Indigenous and marginalized communities), who might benefit, and who might be harmed? When anticipating potential benefits and harms, consider the long-term consequences not only for the people but also for the planet. I recommend using the Futures Wheel (Glenn, 2021), which brainstorms both positive and negative consequences of a particular change in different domains.
6. *Paulit-ulit na pagsubok* means collaborating with community members to test and iterate the idea until you achieve your preferred future.

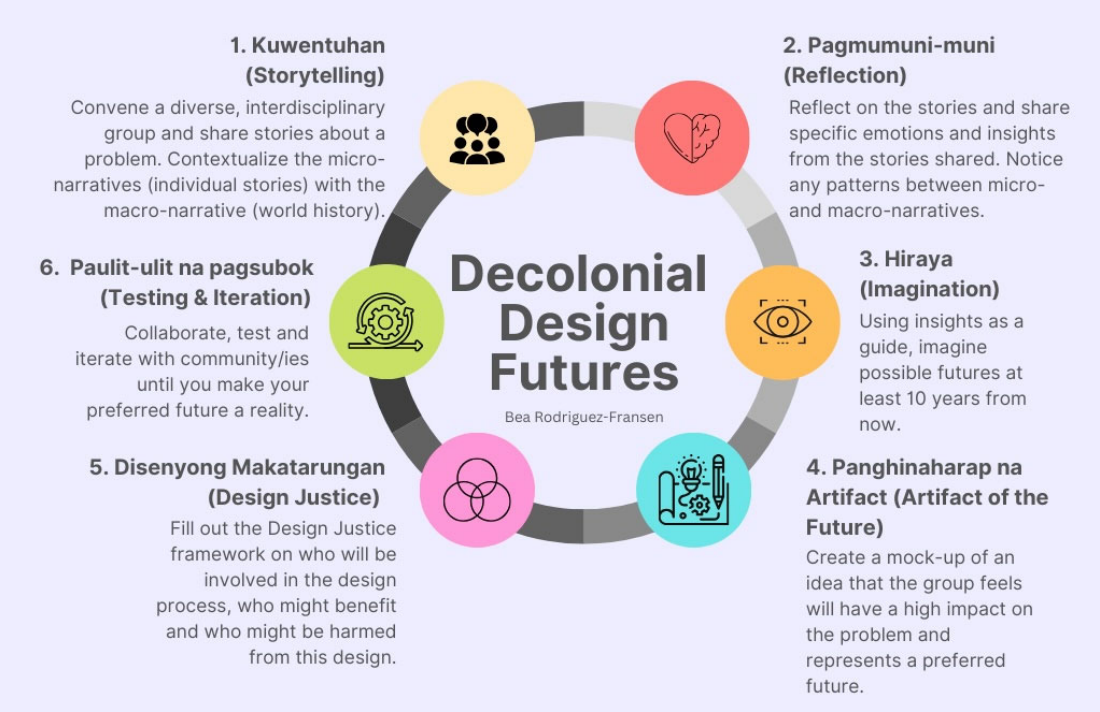

Fig. 2: Decolonial Design Futures Framework

Note. A method that can be used by educators and practitioners in various sectors in both scholarly research and community-based projects

This framework is underpinned by six values and mindsets: *kapwa* (the Filipino core value expressing relationality), non-linearity and synchronicity of time, multiple futurities, bold imagination, hyperlocality, and transdisciplinary collaboration. Through storytelling, participants share their inner selves and express *kapwa*, which stems from the collective values of humanity and the deep respect for the dignity and inherent worth of a fellow human being (Enriquez, 2008). When I facilitated a design charrette with more than 100 stakeholders throughout the African continent to imagine the futures of the Young African Leaders Initiative organization, we used storytelling to surface their Indigenous values similar to the essence of *kapwa*; what emerged was the concept of *Ubuntu*, expressing the notion, "I am because we are." The circular graphic in the framework represents the method of story circles and relationality, and also communicates the non-Western concept of time. In opposition to the Western metaphor of time as a uni-directional linear arrow where past, present, and future events are discrete from one another and where the future is superior to the present and past, the Decolonial Design Futures framework functions from the idea that past, present, and future events are non-linear, interconnected, and can influence one another. The mindset of multiple futurities acknowledges that there are many narratives or points of origin in the past and present, instead of espousing a singular, universal future. This also considers the long-term consequences of our actions, including the harms and benefits to our environment. Decolonial design futurists emphasize the importance of being aware of our emotional reactions to a particular problem, because our intuitive emotions can give way to clarity, depth, and substance when boldly imagining preferred futures. Hyperlocality assumes that solutions are always contextualized to the hyperlocal community, recognizing that these solutions can influence global issues and vice-versa. Finally, given that colonial mentality is a systemic, interconnected problem, only if there are cross-disciplinary, cross-sector, and cross-country collaborations can we realize any of our imagined futures (Rodriguez-Fransen, 2025).

Decolonial Feminism as Agentic Process

The Decolonial Design Futures framework is aligned with the notion that decolonial feminism "is presented here as an active and agentic process, an act of overcoming oppression, liberating each other, and (re)creating from scratch the worlds we want to see." (Nassiri-Ansari et al., 2025). All of the participants in the study who informed this framework embodied the feminism as defined by Abdullah (2025) and Milojevic (2024), particularly the idea that it "is a call to action… It can never simply be a belief system" (Hawxhurst & Morrow, 1984, as cited in Milojevic, 2024, p. 74). The participants did not stop at interrogating the problem; they have and continue to lead their own initiatives inside and outside of the classroom to decolonize minds and continue to imagine possible futures using design justice principles. Some of their initiatives include contextualizing and revising the core curriculum of the Mangyan Indigenous community to include hunting, weaving, and business negotiations with lowlanders (and categorizing English, Math and Science as electives), leading a discussion on the dangers of skin whitening creams, defying the English Only Campaign in the classroom, speaking in front of Philippine Congress to retain the subjects of Filipino Language and Philippine Literature in higher education, and starting a research and advocacy nonprofit that advances the well-being of the Sama-Dilaut Indigenous community.

This process of making the Decolonial Design Futures method and practice also answers the questions posed by Nassiri-Ansari et al. (2025):

1. *Futures-as-practice*: futures by and for whom? Amplifying the voices of Filipina female educators, I visioned with and about fellow Filipinas by intertwining their past-present-future stories, in *sawali* fashion; they also continue to imagine and resist against colonial mentality, co-designing futures with Indigenous and marginalized students across the Philippines.
2. *Futures-as-methods*: based on what and why? Encouraging plural and multiple futurities, the Decolonial Design Futures method not only communicates a non-linear, synchronic concept of time; it is also fueled by non-Western values such as *kapwa* and embracing more expansive ways of knowing, including lived experience, *kutob* (hyper-intuition), and using specific emotions as a pathway to insights and imagination.
3. *Futures-as-visions*: to what end and how? Departing from traditional design thinking, the Decolonial Design Futures framework expands our time horizons, looking far back in history to look farther into the future. Traditionally, in design thinking, the designer focuses on immediately addressing the pain point of the end user in the present, often without looking at the systemic causes of the pain point and without

considering the solution's long-term consequences, not only for the people but also for the planet. The Decolonial Design Futures method is particularly attentive to power dynamics, centering Indigenous and marginalized voices, concentrating on co-designing hyperlocal solutions and imagining just and sustainable futures of the community.

Conclusion: Sawali and post-gender Maternal Love

It is my hope—and my own call to action—that communities around the world can use and build upon this method and practice. As we interweave, in *sawali* fashion, our past-present-future stories with our collective values, imaginations, and actions in our respective communities, may we also consider Machado De Oliveira's (2021) notion of hospicing coloniality/modernity that inspired Pryor's (2025) concept of being a Futures Doula. Machado De Oliveira proposes that we recognize the "eventual inevitable end of modernity's fundamentally unethical and unsustainable institutions… as we witness and help midwife the birth something different" (p. 101). In the same way that she suggests that we regard modernity with compassion as we witness its slow death and hospice it, may we also have compassion for ourselves as we transition and prepare our own bodies, minds, and spirits to new ways of thinking, being, and doing. Tools such as the Decolonial Design Futures might serve as a method that can help us, as gracefully as possible, to let go of the values and mindset that fuel coloniality, *while* guiding us to practice collective, ethical imagination that shapes our ongoing transition toward just and sustainable futures. This method acknowledges the liminality of our existence, the multiplicities of time and our knowledge systems, and the need to anchor ourselves in values such as *kapwa* as we navigate these powerful shifts in our ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies.

Much like midwifing or giving birth, it is not an easy task; it is oftentimes non-linear and messy, and always uncertain. Yet, as Pryor (2025) proposes, "there is a strong call yet to be widely acknowledged for a post-gender Maternal Voice; a spiritual voice calling for Interbeing and for love and care for all life—human and non-human. It is the voice of Earth Mother; it is the voice of the womb" (p. 87). Perhaps it is this unconditional, infinite source of what I call Maternal Love that can help stabilize us in this liminal, transitional space. As Machado De Oliveira (2021) asserts: "At the interface between this death and rebirth is the imperative to walk steadily into and with the eye of the storm without knowing where it is headed: move either too fast or too slow and one gets swept up and thrown around violently in the vortex of the change" (p. 101). Put simply, Maternal Love can be an infinite source of strength and wisdom, across time and space, so that we can intuitively and somatically sense when to slow down or when to move fast. This idea is concretized by Pryor's trust in her body while giving birth: "I had prepared well for the journey and was comfortable in the unknown, allowing me to be at ease as the journey unfolded" (p. 86). It requires attunement not only to what is happening within our own bodies, but also connecting it to the rhythms of the universe.

I was 27 when I started becoming more attuned to somatic sensations and the rhythms of the universe: my mother suddenly passed away, due to asthma. Doing grief work has a unique way of crystallizing what is truly essential, of opening new channels of awareness, for the self and for life in general: it helped me understand that vulnerability and strength can inhabit my being simultaneously. Similar to the way that the Philippine Pavilion at the Osaka Expo 2025 was built to breathe and move with the stories it holds, I continue to move and evolve as a Filipina, as a woman, as a human being—and now, as a mother to my three-year-old son. The paradox is that while asthma took my mother's physical body away, her Maternal Love continues to breathe through me, across time and space. Today, I continue to breathe in and out, through my beautifully flat nose, knowing that one day, my body will leave the Earth. When that time comes, I know I will continue to lovingly hold my son throughout his own life even when I am physically gone, in the same way that my mother held me as a child and continues to hold me now.

And this Maternal Love, I argue, is one of the gifts of the *sawali* weaving process: it is undeniably a labor of love that can be passed on from generation to generation. It requires an attunement to the cycles of the bamboo and embodied knowledge of the art, including the wisdom to sense which bamboo strips can be used based on their natural curve and give. It needs community collaboration to harvest, cut, dry, and prepare the bamboo strips to weave them together into a house. This process results not only in beautifully woven walls that endure and hold the stories within the home, but also in a thoughtful design that lets nature breathe with the house, letting in light and

air that sustains us. Wherever we are in the world, may we get inspired by the *sawali* process of interweaving our futuring efforts together, using practical tools such as Decolonial Design Futures. In the end, weaving practices such as the *sawali* does more than provide shelter; it also midwifes and gives birth to true transformation in the ways we relate to one another, the planet, and the universe.

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