Manicure Mixer

Design lessons from the Black Beauty Salon

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MANICURE MIXER: DESIGN LESSONS FROM THE BLACK BEAUTY SALON

By

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Bachelor of Science

Covenant University, 2020

A CRITICAL AND PROCESS DOCUMENTATION THESIS PAPER SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF DESIGN

EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

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Acknowledgement

Thank you:

To my Parents, Arc Tolulope and Lara Martins, whose unwavering love, care, and support have been the pillars upon which this thesis stands. Your faith in my dreams has been a constant source of strength, and for that, I am eternally thankful.

To my Partner Yomi, words cannot describe how much your love and support over the years have meant to me. I am forever grateful for your feedback, insights, and support throughout the entire journey.

To my uncle Dehinde Akinlolu, my small daddy, you have been a constant support in every stage of my life. I hope I have made you proud.

To my supervisor Craig Badke, your invaluable assistance, late-night feedback, and genuine concern for my well-being and growth have been a guiding light throughout my master's journey. You prioritized my work and advocated for my voice to be heard throughout this process and I appreciate all your kind words and support.

To all the beautiful Black Women who came out to support the community, sharing their personal journeys and thoughts, without which this research would not exist– thank you for your trust.

To Avery Carmichael, you have been my rock, supporting me tirelessly through the final stretches of my work. For every unwashed dish I left in the sink and every meal you prepared while I was deep in the trenches writing, my love and appreciation for you know no bounds.

To my girls, Chioma, Helen, Misimi, Pelumi and Rejoice, distance had nothing on our friendship, thank you for always showing up for me even though we were separated by oceans.

To my friends, Eden Luna, Natasha, Priyanka and Siddhant for walking with me through this journey, for the late nights, brainstorming and the support, we made it!

Dedication

To my late grandparents, Mallam Abdulasis Olatunji Abdulsalami fondly called Baba Awo, and Chief Mrs. Sarah Omorinola Martins. You never got to see me graduate, but your love and prayers will always be in my heart. This is for you.

Abstract

This research challenges the conventional approach to inclusive design by challenging the notion of universalism and placing emphasis on understanding the unique perspectives and values of diverse communities. Through community engagement, interviews, and theoretical exploration, this research aims to explore alternative approaches to designing-with communities.

At the core of this research is a culturally sensitive approach to designing-with the Black community, intertwining elements of Black cultural heritage (hair, nails, lashes) with Pluriversal design concepts that transcend traditional inclusivity notions, acknowledging diverse worldviews, experiences, and cultural perspectives.

In Vancouver, a city where spaces for vital communal discussions within the Black community are limited, this project seeks to empower Black women in Vancouver while deeply respecting and ethically engaging with their communities. The project aims to bring together and foster a deeper understanding of how to respectfully and ethically 'design with' the Black community, filling a critical gap in communal spaces and services.

The primary objective is to uncover alternative approaches for designing-with and prioritizing the needs of these communities, emphasizing the significance of culturally informed design processes and highlighting the essential skills, time, and community building required for ethical engagement.

Keywords

Pluriversal Design, Designing-with-Communities, Community Engagement, Community Building, *Manicure Mixer*, Interaction Design.

Introduction

"Design creates culture. Culture shapes values. Values determine the future." - Robert L. Peters

01

Introduction

In a world where multiple world views are accepted, a unique opportunity arises, one where the richness of multiple worlds can thrive. This envisioned world is one of Pluriversalism — *where multiple ways of being and world-building are embraced* — marking a definitive shift from a singular, dominant design paradigm. It's a space where communities and cultures, particularly those marginalized or sidelined, reclaim their narratives and their power to design life stories that resonate with their unique identities.

This world, however, is not one I ever envisioned or knew I could envision while working as a product designer. During my professional career as a product designer in Nigeria, I focused on designing "clean" products, which, at the time, meant imitating the look and feel of world-class Western products. Our approach was to imitate Western products in the same field as ours extensively, with the belief that this would one day earn us recognition as creators of world-class products. I followed that strategy and studied every Western product that was creating similar products. I copied, modelled, and analyzed their products to understand why they worked the way they did, so we could replicate that.

The designs I created during this phase were sleek and functional, yet I felt that they lacked a distinctive character; they lacked the cultural specificity and personal touch that would set them apart from the countless similar products in the market. This approach, while it may have appeared successful, left me questioning the true measure of our achievements.

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This narrative leads to a persistent question that echoed throughout my time working in Nigeria and subsequent master's thesis research:

"Why are we trying to design for everyone when we're all so different?"

The conventional wisdom in design — *cater to the 80-90 percentile, the so-called 'average user', and regard everything else as an edge case* (Holmes, 2018)— suddenly seemed inadequate. Aimi Hamraie (2017) critically examines this notion through the lens of universal design and the politics of disability, illuminating the substantial gaps within universalism. Hamraie's argument for a "crip technoscience" underscores the need for designs that embrace rather than erase the differences, particularly in the context of disability, which further substantiates the idea that if we are all so different, then in truth, we may all be considered 'edge cases' in our unique contexts.

The more I reflected, the more it became plain that designing for the 'average' is a flawed concept, because it overlooks the rich tapestry of human diversity.

This thesis follows a journey of introspection and discovery, bridging the gap between personal experiences and professional practice in the field of design. It unfolds through the lens of my dual journey: on one hand, a professional evolution from common UX design practices in Lagos, Nigeria to the exploration of notions of inclusion in a Western context. On the other, a personal quest for cultural identity and community in my new home of Vancouver, Canada. This dual journey is not just a narrative of transition but a convergence of paths where my personal experiences inform and enrich my professional practice.

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In weaving this narrative into my thesis, I invite you to consider a world where design is not a search for a shared universal ideal, but about celebrating the multitude of differences that define us. A world where the power to design is democratized and our unique stories and experiences are valued. It is a personal journey of unlearning and relearning, of questioning and discovering, and ultimately, of envisioning and creating a world where design outcomes embody and mirror the diverse and pluralistic world we inhabit, a world that is not often reflected in the cleanly designed offerings of a globalized modern design industry.

There is no average

> An edge case implies the existence of a normal, average human. When it comes to design, what if this average human is simply a myth?

– KAT HOLMES

02

There is no average

The pursuit of universality has been a longstanding ideal, aiming to create products and spaces that cater to the needs of the "average user," a hypothetical entity that supposedly encapsulates the needs and behaviours of the vast majority. The goal of universal design has been to devise solutions that are inherently useable by the majority, thereby simplifying the world around us and making it more accessible to a wider range of people (Burgstahler, 2020). However, while universal design has laid a strong foundation for inclusivity, it risks overlooking the rich tapestry of human diversity. The notion of an "average user" is a simplification that may not adequately capture the experiences and requirements of all users. It is not a question of the merit of universal design or its intentions, which are undoubtedly noble, but rather an acknowledgment that there are layers and complexities to human needs that a singular design philosophy may not fully encompass.

The book "What Can a Body Do?" by Sara Hendren offered a turning point in my understanding of design and inclusion. Hendren's concept of “body plus” challenges us to reconsider the capabilities of a body without tools, thus reframing the idea of disability not as an anomaly but as a common human condition (Hendren, 2020). The 'average user' model assumes an ableist homogeneity that simply does not exist, ignoring the incredible diversity of human bodies and their changing capabilities over our lifetimes

When considering the varied nature of inclusion, we might question, if the very principles that strive for inclusivity in design are unintentionally rooted in a worldview that fails to accommodate cultural diversity. This inquiry leads us to Arturo Escobar's critical concept of the "One-World World" (OWW), a critique of the prevailing notion of a single, predominant

worldview that positions Western norms as the default, relegating other cultural perspectives to a secondary status. Escobar’s concept unpacks the homogeneity of a Western-centric worldview that often dominates design practices, suggesting that this approach to universality can marginalize the rich tapestry of non-Western cultures (Escobar, 2018)

This dominance of a single perspective in design relates to the cautions spoken about by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her renowned TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story," where she points to the profound misunderstandings and reductions that arise from viewing individuals and cultures through a singular narrative lens (Adichie, 2009). Through the OWW concept and Adichie's "single story," we begin to view the complexities of designing in a world rich with diverse, multifaceted stories—each deserving recognition and inclusion within our designed environments.

The concept of 'design for all' might seem inclusive at first glance, but in practice, it often flattens diversity under the guise of simplicity and efficiency. This often happens because it operates under the assumption that there is a homogeneous user experience or a set of needs that applies broadly to everyone. In striving for a general solution, the "design for all" methodology may overlook the nuanced differences between individuals—such as cultural backgrounds, abilities, and preferences—which are essential to creating truly inclusive products (Ackermann, 2023).

This is where culturally sensitive design methods come into play. They are crucial in preventing the erasure of diverse perspectives, especially in the pursuit of inclusion. Culturally sensitive design methods serve as a counterbalance. They recognize that design cannot be abstracted or separated from the cultural contexts of its users. They take into account the intricacies of cultural identity, ensuring that designs are not

just superficially inclusive but deeply resonant with the users' lived experiences (Saunders, n.d.; Arcilla, 2019). This approach recognizes that diversity should not be seen as a problem to be solved, but rather as a strength to be embraced. Without a deep understanding of cultural nuances, well-intentioned inclusive designs can inadvertently lead to cultural homogenization, stereotyping, and even harm.

An example of cultural homogenization is in the digital sphere, particularly within the scope of major tech companies like Facebook and Google, it is a multifaceted issue that intertwines technology with cultural identity and economic power dynamics. The aspiration to create a global digital network is often driven by a Silicon Valley-centric vision of connectivity that may not resonate universally. This drive towards a homogeneous digital experience can inadvertently impose Western digital and consumer culture over diverse local, sustainable cultures and value systems. This imposition is often critiqued as 'digital colonialism,' a term that refers to the dominance of tech giants in dictating the terms of digital engagement and commerce, which echoes colonial power structures (Hynes, 2021, pp. 39-54).

These perspectives are backed by a growing body of research (Fitts, 2023). Studies in fields ranging from ergonomics to user experience have shown that there is no one-size-fits-all solution that can cater to all needs. Everyone interacts with their environment in ways that are shaped by a myriad of factors, including cultural background, personal preferences, physical and cognitive abilities, and social contexts.

The shift away from designing for an 'average' user is not just a design consideration but a broader cultural and ethical stance. It is about recognizing the unique narratives of individuals and communities and ensuring that these narratives are not just included but are central to the design process.

The Familiar– Industry

"Innovation doesn't come from the known, but from the unknown, from the margins." – Nnedi Okorafor

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The Familiar– Industry

Working in the design industry, with my background rooted in the conventional practices of interaction design, my interest in inclusive design prompted me to scrutinize not only my design approach but also to delve into the guidelines put forward by major corporations. The design industry often promotes and publishes established guidelines and vision statements as their North Star for creating user interface accessibility, environmental policy, equity and inclusion statements, etc.

Working with 3 of my peers, we set out to look into what inclusivity meant in the corporate sphere, Investigating the guidelines of three major tech companies - Apple, Microsoft, and Google - to uncover how they promote accessibility and engagement for a diverse user base.

The initial phase involved interpreting the guidelines from each company to identify areas for improvement and possibly provide clear contextual cues for designers

However, during the research, it quickly became clear that this direction would not lead to any significant change or innovation. The inclusive design guidelines provided by these corporations, though well-intentioned, were restrictive. They were predominantly centred around accessibility and disability, with a heavy emphasis on the business rationale for inclusivity — the 'why' was anchored firmly in the domain of profitability and market expansion. What seemed notably absent was the ethical imperative for inclusivity, the argument for accessibility and inclusion as a moral obligation, not just a business strategy.

The Unfamiliar– Finding Community

"Building community is at the heart of African design. Our creations are not just for use; they are about fostering connections and belonging." - Chuma Anagbado

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The Unfamiliar– Finding Community

The first few months of moving to Vancouver from Lagos, Nigeria was the most isolating time of my adult life, I felt like I was yanked away from the life I knew and was replaced by this foreign land where I couldn't find people who looked like me. Before moving here, I had known that Vancouver had a very low population of Black people, 1.2% at the time of writing this, but I was not prepared for what that actually meant. What this meant was, that out of every 100 people, there could be only 1 Black person, it meant that I walked for 20 minutes to school and sometimes saw no other Black person, it meant that I got on the bus and immediately scanned for any other Black person on the bus to offer some sort of comfort to me. As I write this I am reminded of the feelings of loneliness and anxiety I felt the first few weeks I moved, I am reminded of the tears I cried in the bathroom during class when I felt overwhelmed.

My quest for my community drove my thoughts and actions, I waved and smiled at every Black person I saw on the road, filled with delight because it was a reminder of the times when I longed to see a familiar face, but I found none.

Amidst my struggles with finding my community, I was dealing with a more pressing and time-constraining issue. I was schooling and living in one of the most expensive cities in the world, and spending in a currency that is worth 1000 times my own currency. Before I moved here, my mum always said to me, "If there is something every person must have, it is a hand work". I call it hand work because that is the direct translation of the Yoruba word *Ise Owo*, Ise Owo is the work of your hands, it is the skill that you do with your physical hands that no one can

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take away from you. My mother believed that no one can be truly poor if they have Ise Owo. This was why she encouraged me to learn how to do nail services in Nigeria so I could use this skill in Canada.

I spent most of my summer behind the desk at a nail table doing people's manicures and I met a lot of people. One day as one appointment was running overtime, I ended up with two ladies in the room at once, an elderly Ethiopian woman and a Trinidadian lady about my age who was scheduled after her. While I hurried to finish up the appointment, the two women began to talk and delved into conversations about their culture, country, and experiences in ways that they had not discussed with me in any of their previous one-on-one manicure sessions.

While the discussion between them progressed, I listened and I could tell the exact minute that the younger client dropped her “acceptable” accent which she had always spoken to me with and started talking in her proper Trinidadian accent. This encounter made me think about the ways we all repackage our identities, perhaps subconsciously, to fit into the world's “acceptable” moulds. It left me thinking: If we were unapologetically accepted and embraced, would we still need to “*codeswitch*” or try to put ourselves into neat acceptable boxes when approaching the world?

I knew for certain I wanted to feel the same warmth I felt while in that room with two Black women who, even as strangers, were connected through a community and beautification.

AfroPick

“The Afro pick is not just a tool; it's a symbol of pride, resilience, and beauty in the Black community.” - Walé Oyéjidé

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Afro Pick

Hair care has always been a profound aspect of the Black community's cultural identity and one that I have been navigating personally since I arrived in Vancouver. The challenges of adapting to a new climate, coupled with the absence of hair care services tailored to afro hair, highlighted a gap that resonated with me. in speaking to other Black diasporans experiencing the same thing, it became clear that hair care could be the thread that wove the community together, a starting point for conversations about broader issues of inclusion and identity.

So I reached out to the Black Women Connect Vancouver (BWCV) community on Facebook with a proposal: an app designed to support Afro hair care, explore styles, and navigate the intricacies of our hair maintenance. The enthusiastic response was both validating and enlightening, confirming the need for such a platform.

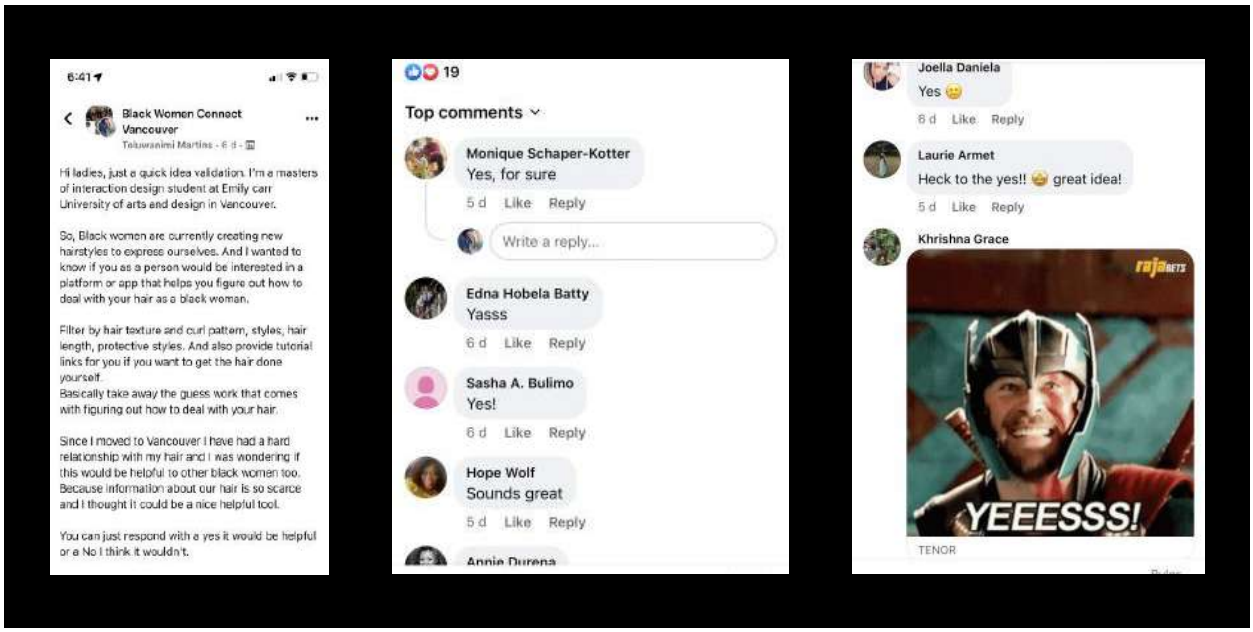

Fig 1. Reaching out to the BWCV community for idea validation

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Finding the BWCV community was a grounding experience for me. BWCV is an alliance of Black women in Vancouver who are dedicated to fostering a sense of community through various actions such as events, mentorship, wellness support, and resource sharing (Black Women Connect Vancouver, n.d.). I had joined a host of other Black groups on Facebook, but in the BWCV I found a group of women who were genuinely committed to being there for the community and for one another. I shared my Project ideas with the community, and they provided feedback and idea validation.

Two pressing questions guided my inquiry: What does inclusive design mean when tailored for a specific community? More importantly, What does inclusive design mean to the Black community—not as defined by external interpretations, but as understood within the community itself?

In my research, I found that while there were apps related to Black hair, they often fell short in execution or lacked features that addressed specific needs. This gap informed the design process for my app, leading to the prioritization of features that would enhance the user experience for the Black community, such as:

- A one-handed mode to accommodate users with mobility challenges or with situational and temporal disabilities.
- A comprehensive 360-degree view of hairstyles to aid in visualization and planning.
- A smart estimation tool to calculate the number of hair extensions required for various styles.
- Screen casting functionality, that enables users to see the back of their heads on a larger display during styling sessions.

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The outcomes were interesting as a focus on a very specific community resulted in innovative features that would likely not have occurred in an app meant for a wider user base.

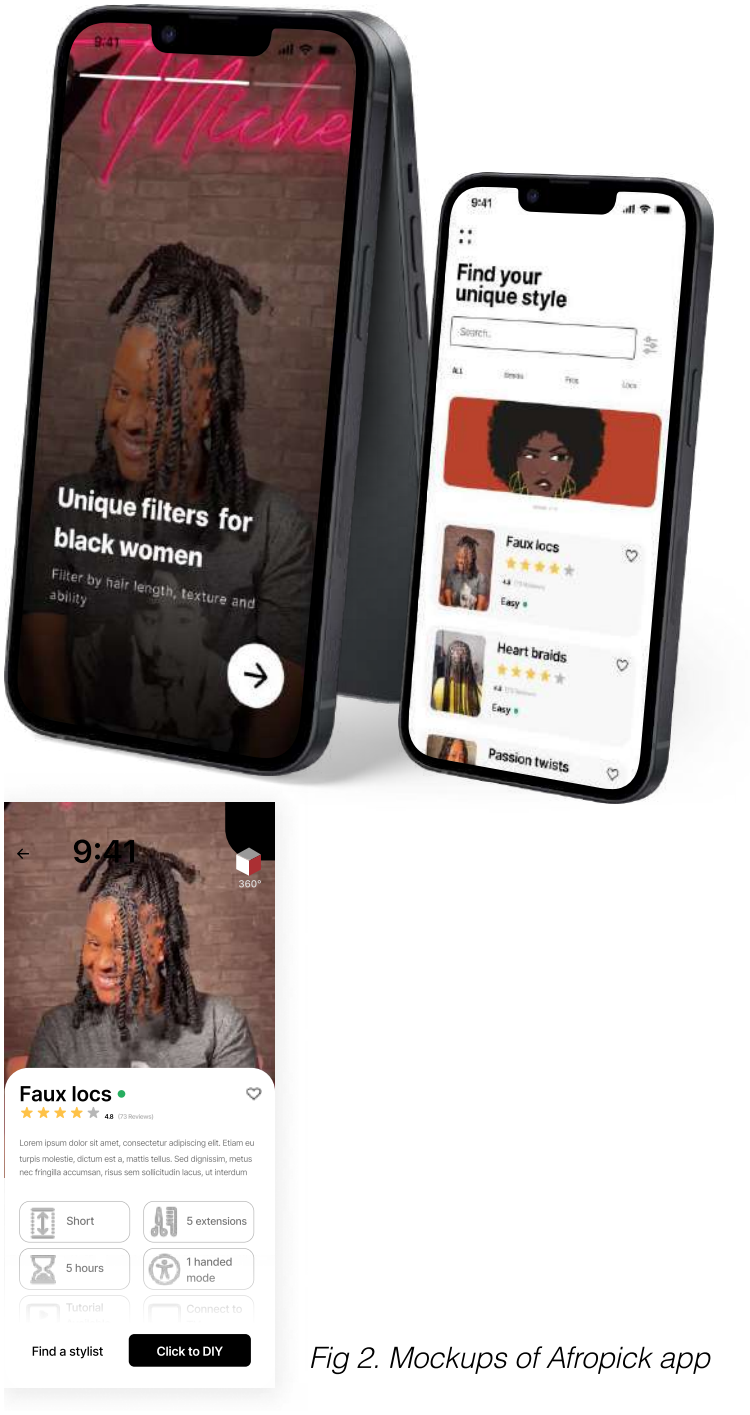

Fig 2. Mockups of Afropick app

Ọba o níyì ninù ilé ẹ

“A King has no Value in his own home”

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Ọba o níyì ninù ilé ẹ

An important and unexpected shift in perspective occurred during my studies when I encountered the book, "The Black Experience in Design." (Berry et al., 2022). In the book, there is an essay on Afrofuturism by Folayemi Wilson, entitled “Dark Matter’s Magic in Design” which features the Yoruba proverb:

“Ohun tóhún be l’éyìn òfà o ju Òòjé lo”

“What lies after 6 is more than 7”

The important shift for me wasn't the proverb's meaning itself, but its presence in such a renowned book within the design community. For much of my adult and professional life, I tried to minimize my “Yorubaness”, my “Africanness”, and even my own femininity. I recall the frustration I felt during the summer of my JSS2 class (equivalent to grade 8 in Canada) when my father insisted that I learn to speak Yoruba, even as I was preparing for my Junior WAEC exams, which were to happen the next few months. I was particularly upset because those were the exams that determined if you moved on to high school. He was adamant that I learned the tonal marks of Yoruba pronunciation, the *Àmì ohùn*, and even threatened to make me take Yoruba as a subject unless I learned it thoroughly. That summer, instead of resting or seeing friends, I had assignments in Yoruba, all because my father was determined to pass down our culture. He immersed me in tales of Yoruba folklore, communicated solely in Yoruba the whole summer, and even threatened to withhold my allowance if I replied in English.

At 9, when I had the chance to study in the UK, he refused on my behalf, saying he was not done with his parental duties, and he feared that Western culture might erode the values

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he was instilling in me. Despite his efforts, I still grew up recoiling from anything that seemed too local, or "razz" as it's termed in Nigeria. Yet, my father proudly embraced his heritage, always declaring himself a strong Yoruba man of the soil, unashamed of his culture, even as he engaged in "the white man's sport" of golf, only to return to his pounded yam and Okra soup.

This is why he was the one I excitedly called upon reading the proverb in Wilson's essay. That encounter with my culture, presented with such reverence, struck me very close to the heart. I'd been so intrigued by the differences in the world, yet I never accorded my own culture that same respect. A Yoruba saying, *Ọba o níyì ninù ilé ẹ*, which translates to “a king has no value in his own home”, echoed in my mind, I wondered if that is how my culture felt as I sidestepped it in search of other cultures to praise.

As an interaction designer, I have always detached my personal identity from my work, I believed my designs should mirror the user and not the designer. But Wilson's essay prompted a profound introspection. Could my identity as a Black Yoruba woman from Osun State influence my design thinking?, does this have a place in the way I approach design? This was a pivotal shift, one that redefined my relationship with design, prompted my exploration into Pluriversal design and, more crucially, with myself.

The Experts

“Instead of focussing on how much money we can make, we focus on how to make sure people are thriving” – Dr. Lesley Anne Noel (Personal communication)

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The Experts

Building off my insights and decision to extend beyond industry design guidelines, I reached out to a handful of experts who are working outside the bounds of and challenging conventional design narratives. The focus was on understanding the principles of inclusive design and the nuances of decentering design. The interviews were an exploration geared toward fostering a deeper comprehension of Pluriversal design principles, designing for specificity versus universality, and the concepts of recommoning and open-source design in fostering inclusivity.

Dr. Lesley Ann Noel, with her advocacy for Pluriversal design and community collaboration, was instrumental in reshaping my understanding of design as a communal act. Dr. Dimeji Onafuwa, whose expertise in interaction design and commitment to the commons and Pluriversal principles, highlighted the fluidity of these concepts against the rigidity of corporate structures. Dr. Sara Hendren, through her lens as an engineer and educator, grounded my perspective in the tangible realms of design, accessibility, and the empowerment of unconventional designers.

In my dialogue with Dr. Noel, I discovered that the term "inclusive design" did not fully capture my intent, whereas "Pluriversal Design" resonated more deeply with my aims. Her journey from adhering to Western design standards to advocating for community-led co-design mirrored mine as she offered methodologies to dismantle hierarchical dynamics and foster co-design (Noel, 2023). Dr. Noel's avoidance of the term "inclusion" highlighted its problematic nature, sentiments that were echoed by Dr. Onafuwa as he spoke on how the word inclusion was a problematic term that reinforces the existence of a dominant group at the core and others at the periphery.

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Dr. Onafuwa's expertise in interaction design and his perspective on Pluriversal principles underscored the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in design, as opposed to the static guidelines often found in corporate settings. He stressed the need for design to be adaptable and inclusive in its truest sense, supporting a vision where design principles evolve alongside society (Onafuwa, 2023).

Dr. Hendren's experiences as an engineer, and educator, brought a tangible dimension to the concepts I had been exploring. We spoke about her work in Inclusive design, finding design in unconventional places and facilitating design with individuals not traditionally seen as designers (Hendren, 2023). Hendren's approach as a design facilitator, rather than positioning herself as an expert and assuming an authoritative stance resonated with me.

Exploration Into Designing with The Black Community

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Designing with the Black community means actively listening and responding to its diverse voices and experiences. It's about co-creation and mutual respect.

- NELLY BEN HAYOUN

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Exploration Into Designing with The Black Community

Drawing on the lessons gleaned from my expert interviews and expanding on the observations made within the safe spaces created doing custom nail work for clients, I set out to design the "*Manicure Mixer*." Inspired by the rich tradition of beauty salons as spaces where Black women have historically gathered to talk about life issues, the *Manicure Mixer* is a research project that aims to create an impactful event integrating beauty salon practices that encourage dialogue on issues affecting the Black community in Vancouver.

History of the Salon

As a kid, I remember hating going into salons because it was filled with adults having conversations I could hardly understand and I would have much preferred being outside playing, but following my experiences with doing hair and meeting with other Black women I was longing for that same sense of connection to my community as an adult.

The history of Black beauty salons is one that intertwines with the social, economic, and political narratives of society. At its core, the Black beauty salon has been more than just a place for aesthetics or beauty; it has served as a communal space for women, a hub for activism, and a site for economic entrepreneurship.

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Black beauty salons have long been pillars of community and solidarity among women. They have provided more than beauty services; they have facilitated social exchanges, offering a space for sharing, support, and organizational efforts. In the Jim Crow era, African American beauticians used their economic independence and access to a public community space to become activists. The beauty industry became a crucial player in creating the modern Black female identity, wherein the seemingly unimportant space of a beauty salon stirred and motivated significant social, political, and economic change (Gillespie, 2021; Gill, 2010).

Beauty salons and schools have played a significant role in fostering a culture of activism and community building where discussions have led to organized action and demands for change. Through initiatives like the Citizenship Education Program (CEP), African American women used beauty salons as platforms to teach literacy, prepare for voter registration, and sow seeds for collective action during the civil rights movement (Gillespie, 2021).

Moving from Nigeria, a country where the beauty salon culture is so strong and a salon can be found on nearly every street, to Vancouver marked a very substantial shift in my personal experience. In Vancouver, I had the challenge of finding a salon that could provide the braiding services I was accustomed to and after approaching four salons without success, it became painfully clear that if I wished to maintain this aspect of my cultural identity, I would need to make private arrangements, potentially inviting someone into my personal space to braid my hair or learn to do it myself.

This scarcity emphasized the role of beauty salons back home as more than just centers for beauty services; they were spaces for intergenerational dialogue and sharing of cultural knowledge.

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The simple act of sitting on a wooden stool and getting my hair braided was an educational experience. It was a moment to soak in stories and wisdom from the diverse tapestry of the women's lives. It was through these conversations that knowledge was passed down, and a sense of belonging and cultural continuity was nurtured.

This disparity in access to culturally relevant beauty services in Vancouver only shed more light on the state of the Black community within the city. Conversations with other members of the Black diaspora in Vancouver revealed a shared sense of isolation, a collective desire for the communal connection that such salons facilitate.

Manicure Mixer

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The beauty salon was the one great thing we all had in common... It was a place where we could lay down our burdens, laugh at our mistakes, brag about our children, and where we could discover the strength to face our daily trials and tribulations.

- MAYA ANGELOU

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Manicure Mixer

Vancouver is a city with limited services and spaces for connection, let alone vital communal discussions within the Black community, the *Manicure Mixer* aimed to be a valuable opportunity to bring together and empower Black women in Vancouver. Further, it sought to foster a deeper understanding of how to respectfully and ethically ‘design with’ the Black community.

Project Objectives

This project had several interconnected objectives:

1. To create a safe space for Black women in Vancouver to engage in self-care.
2. To recognize and celebrate the historical significance of beauty salons as centers of cultural exchange, empowerment, and dialogue among Black women.
3. To understand the diverse challenges, aspirations, and needs of Black women in Vancouver through facilitated discussions.
4. To develop preliminary insights and principles for inclusive design practices informed by the conversations and experiences of Black women in situ.
5. To utilize events as a community building and learning opportunity to open up and center community-led dialogues around the needs, preferences, and cultural nuances of specific communities.

The *Manicure Mixer* project unfolded in two distinct stages, each an iteration that built upon the last. This incremental approach allowed for a depth of understanding and a progression of insights that informed the project's evolution.

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Version One began as a foundational experiment, a prototype designed to test the waters. It was a small-scale endeavour that aimed to create a comfortable space for Black women to gather, share, and discuss their experiences while engaging in the communal act of nail care.

Version Two expanded the scope, integrating the lessons learned from the first iteration. With a larger group, more diverse activities and beauty services like hair nails and lashes, and deeper conversations that were facilitated through the insights from the first version, this stage aimed to explore the implications of the project on a broader scale.

Manicure Mixer V1 (MM1)

The first version of the *Manicure Mixer* was sparked by a desire to see if the positive atmosphere I experienced with the two Black women could be expanded to a larger group. With no big plans or visions, this version was purely experimental and hastily organized over two days. I reached out through the BWCV Facebook group, offering an open invite to five Black women in Vancouver for an evening filled with discussion, connections, and complimentary manicures. Despite the short notice, the response from the community was incredibly supportive, receiving over 15 replies on my invitation form. Many shared their excitement about the idea, and though some could not attend due to scheduling conflicts, they offered to host or support future events.

Due to the unexpected high interest and my limited resources for providing manicures, I carefully reviewed the responses, making calls to confirm identities and ensure attendance of only Black women who could commit to the full four-hour event. This being my first attempt at organizing such an event or engaging with the community in this manner, I leaned on

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discussions with Dr. Noel for guidance. I made sure food was available—we had joked about how this was a must-have for any Black event—set up music to create ambiance and designed various nail art templates to use as conversation starters during any quiet moments.

Fig 3. Images from the first Manicure Mixer showcasing nail art, food and activities

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I had no specific expectations for the conversation's direction; I was simply curious to observe the organic interactions among five Black women from different backgrounds and age groups, which included a Nigerian, two South Africans, one Guyanese-Canadian, and one Eritrean. Hosted in the comfort of my basement apartment, our discussions ventured into personal vulnerabilities and strengths. Despite being strangers connected only by the internet, a sense of ease, familiarity, and community quickly emerged. We allowed our conversations to flow freely, flowing through personal and communal topics, with me taking the role of a participant rather than a facilitator.

As we discussed, several important themes came to light. Participants spoke about feeling like outsiders in spaces meant to be inclusive. They shared experiences of systemic barriers at work, including microaggressions that hindered their ability to be themselves. For example, one participant shared incidents where a colleague asked to see under her wig and even made inappropriate jokes about how working with them was better than working on cotton plantations. These instances, trivial as they might seem to some, highlight the microaggressions Black women face daily in professional settings. Housing discrimination was another significant issue discussed, with many expressing frustration over the challenges they faced in this area suggesting that they felt their race played a part in the challenges they faced. Although Vancouver's natural beauty provided plenty of opportunities for outdoor activities like hiking, but the women wished more events aligned with their interests like food and drink festivals or carnivals.

The discussion also touched on living arrangements and the challenges of interacting with roommates from different backgrounds and cultures. Vancouver is one of the most expensive cities in the world, so everyone in the room has either currently or previously lived with roommates.

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We shared strategies for navigating these new relationships. We also discussed the communal landscape and explored the complexities of intergenerational relationships within the Black community, the subtleties of distance and connection, and the desire for a stronger communal bond to counteract the isolating nature of the city.

Insights categorization from Manicure Mixer v1

With the rich conversations that went on for hours at the MM1, I set out to analyze and categorize the conversations into different major themes and points:

Social Integration and Sense of Belonging

- Feeling unwelcome in spaces around Vancouver: Many of the participants expressed a sense of isolation and exclusion in Vancouver's social spaces, emphasizing that even spaces that seem to be open to people of all races still felt unwelcoming, contributing to challenges in forming meaningful relationships.

Work and Professional Environment

- Challenges in finding gate-kept jobs: Three of the participants discussed the difficulties they face in accessing gate-kept job opportunities. They pointed out systemic challenges in certain industries that limit their chances of landing such jobs. During an interview, an individual was once asked to leave because the interviewers were not expecting to see a Black woman with a very Asian-sounding name.
- Microaggressions in the workplace: Microaggressions within the workplace, such as inappropriate inquiries about hair, were some of the things the participants identified

as sources of uneasiness and frustration which led to us having conversations about navigating professionalism in those diverse settings, such as asking to see under a wig.

Living in Vancouver

- Challenges with renting and accommodation: During our discussion, the participants expressed their difficulties in finding appropriate housing in Vancouver. Some participants felt that their race played a role in the challenges they faced while searching for housing. Moreover, some of them also shared their negative experiences with landlords. We also talked about the possibility that this issue was not specific to a particular race or culture, but rather a general problem in Vancouver.
- Limited cultural activities beyond hiking: Participants expressed a desire for more diverse cultural activities in Vancouver beyond hiking, highlighting a need for increased cultural representation.
- Dealing with roommates of different cultures: Three out of the five participants were immigrants from Africa and as such they expressed some sort of cultural shock with dealing with people from different races. One participant stated that caucasian women scared and intimidated her and she did her best to avoid them. As is prevalent in Vancouver, most people have roommates and cannot avoid living with people from different races and cultures necessitating us discussing strategies for fostering positive and inclusive living environments.

Community Dynamics

- Feeling jaded among older Black individuals in the city: The conversation revolved around a feeling of disappointment that the older Black population in Vancouver appeared to be more disenchanted and uninterested in forming connections or building a community. One reason suggested was that they had

already come to terms with the lack of a Black community in the city and therefore were hesitant to establish one or even acknowledge each other with a smile while crossing paths.

- Perception of Black people pulling away from each other: There were concerns about perceived distancing between Black people. Reasons that were offered ranged from the acceptance of the lack of community to intentional withdrawal from the community by immigrants due to the fear of "Black Tax." Black Tax refers to the financial and or emotional support that Black professionals are often expected to provide to their extended families and communities beyond their immediate household expenses. (Investec, n.d.).

Societal Challenges and Race Relations

- Experiencing both active and passive racism.
- Concerns about cultural appropriation of Black aesthetics.

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If you were a Black Woman you would be angry too.

MANICURE MIXER

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Manicure Mixer V2 (MM2)

After the first *Manicure Mixer* (MM1) took place, I was contacted by Nataizya Mukwavi, the Founding Executive Director of Black Women Connect Vancouver, who had seen the post and she reached out to me to offer the possibility to partner and host another event with her organization. I was excited about the possibility of taking on the project on a bigger scope wondering what could come out of it.

Caring for, maintaining and protecting of afro hair takes a significant amount of time, the process has often been a communal activity, a time for bonding between family members or friends, where stories, wisdom, and experiences are shared. Many culturally significant afro hairstyles involve intricate braiding, twisting, weaving, or loc maintenance. Achieving these styles with precision can be time-consuming with sessions ranging from 5-12 hours depending on the hairstyle and or the service being provided. In the spirit of fostering deeper community bonds and furthering the dialogue started in the MM1, the second iteration—MM2—aimed to revive the tradition of beauty salons as safe havens for Black women in Vancouver, which contribute significantly by providing a platform for dialogue on issues affecting Black individuals and communities.

The goal for the MM2 was not just to be a larger version of the MM1 but an iteration that was informed by the insights from the first version. The narratives that were shared within the first version of the *Manicure Mixer* would serve as the groundwork for this version. Each woman's account, rooted in their shared experiences as Black women in Vancouver, provided a clearer picture of the nuanced challenges and needs that often go unnoticed and these would be the discussions around which MM2 would be centred.

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Acknowledging that my basement could not replicate the authentic salon atmosphere experienced, I sought a real salon to transform into our Black Beauty Salon for a day.

The quest for a venue led me to Tunti Beauty Bar serendipitously recommended to me by a member of the BWCV group. Tunti Beauty is a Black-owned beauty establishment that specializes in lash services, and it was an ideal setting for the event. Up to that point, they only provided lash extension services, so I reached out to Cheyanne Tunti the owner proposed the idea of turning her salon into a fully blown Black beauty salon for a day, with nails and braiding and cornrow services being provided alongside lashes and she was just as excited about the idea as I was.

I got back in touch with Nataizya, sharing the evolved concept of MM2 and requested a partnership with her organization, which connects over 7,000 Black women across British Columbia. I informed her of the funding I had received from the Future Creative Catalysts Graduate Research Fellowship for the research event and the secured location.

Finding willing Black beauty service providers was challenging; many worked from home, lived far from Vancouver, and were understandably hesitant to travel.

Fig 4. Images from the MM2 showcasing service providers providing braids and cornrows

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However, Nataizya provided a directory from her organization that listed various Black beauty professionals, which was a crucial resource. After trying extensively to reach out to numerous stylists, I successfully connected with three professionals who generously offered to provide braiding services at a discounted rate to support the community.

Fig 5. Images from the MM2 showcasing service providers providing braids and cornrows.

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MM2 was also an opportunity to uplift Black-owned businesses in a city like Vancouver with a relatively small Black population. To encourage community development, I invited local Black entrepreneurs to display their business cards and sample products at the event free of charge, offering a platform for exposure and networking. Jamaican and Nigerian food vendors offered a taste of home, reminiscent of the first *Manicure Mixer*, where discussions over food fostered a feeling of togetherness. The inclusion of culturally relevant food and music was essential in creating a warm and welcoming atmosphere. The music, in particular, sparked lively conversations and laughter as guests engaged in friendly debates about the never-ending rivalry between Nigerian Jollof rice and Ghanaian Jollof rice.

Fig 6. Images from the MM2 showcasing food and participants eating.

The all-day MM2 affair which was 3 months in the making brought together 26 participants, including 9 service providers. Key to the event's ethos was the mantra 'by Black women, for Black women,' ensuring service providers were not only experts in Black beauty needs but also active participants in the experience. These professionals were not only to be compensated for providing the services but also were a crucial part of creating an authentic experience for the participants, who were receiving their services at no cost.

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In addition to the main event, I designed a zine to document the spirit of the Mixer and spotlight the contributions made. The zine included features on the service providers and vendors and was accompanied by goody bags with personal items like satin bonnets and hair jewelry, donated by another Black female business owner in Vancouver.

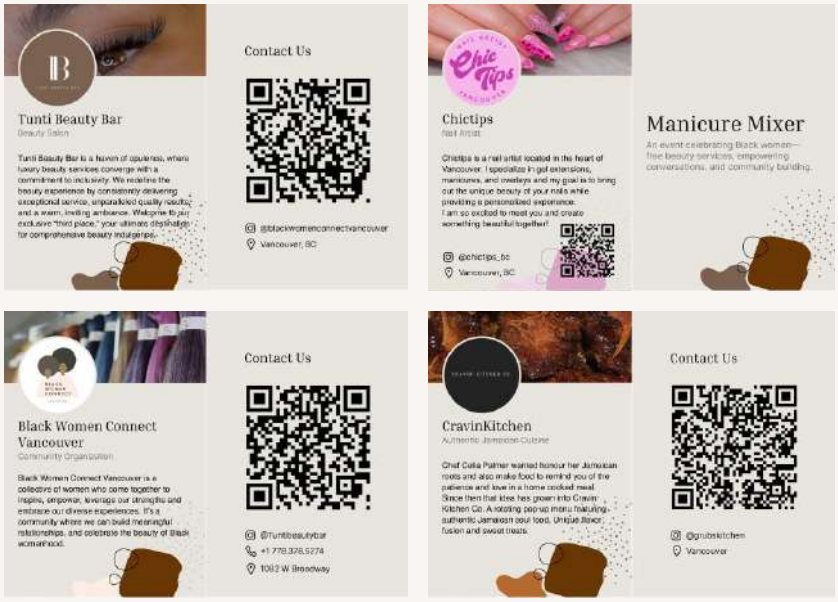

Fig 7. Images of Zines designed for the MM2

The Discussion Circle

Although MM2 was broader in scope, it was a more refined project that built upon the foundations of the first Mixer. While outcomes were not preconceived, I envisioned that having a more structured approach with specific facilitated questions would allow us to delve deeper into the previously unearthed challenges, probing further to understand if these experiences resonated universally across the Black women in our community. The discussions aimed to confirm commonalities in experiences, gain feedback and collectively brainstorm strategies for community-led solutions.

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Fig 8. Images of the discussion circle during the MM2

Facilitated discussion points.

The discussion circle at MM2 was steered by a series of questions, which were built on the insights from MM1. The participants were prompted to reflect and recount possible instances where they may have felt unwelcome in Vancouver, which led us to a broader discussion about fostering more inclusive social spaces for Black women in the city. Questions were posed about personal experiences with microaggressions, particularly in the workplace, and how the community could empower each other in the face of such situations.

The conversations also explored the community's fabric, asking

about connections with the older Black population and discussing the underlying reasons for the community's fragmentation. Strategies for addressing ignorance without feeling overburdened, finding collective community activities, and ideas for utilizing the *Manicure Mixer* as a platform for creating a support network were key topics addressed.

As for the *Manicure Mixer's* progression, we sought participant feedback on shaping future discussions that are both open and impactful and on determining the most pertinent topics to address in future gatherings.

These Discussion points were just to help with the direction of the conversation and to steer them in the direction that the MM2 aimed to build upon. Various conversations came about from these points that were both directly related to the conversation, and not at all but still contributed richly to the discussions.

I observed that having a structure in place at the MM2 event was helpful. The event had a wide range of participants, and some of them were shy and unsure about how to share their experiences. However, the discussion guidelines provided them with a good starting point for their input. This helped to jog their memories and made it easier for them to participate in the discussions. In comparison, the MM1 event was a more close-knit group and bonding between the participants was easier.

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Insights from MM2

Social Dynamics and Relationships

- Feeling Isolated in Vancouver:
  - The group discussed the concept of a "Vancouver culture" with one participant skeptically noting, ***“Culture is a very loose term to describe it.”*** The sense of widespread disconnection in the city was described as unique, unparalleled by her experiences elsewhere, despite having lived in East Vancouver for most of her life before relocating to San Francisco.
  - One participant remarked that expecting to commonly see Black individuals throughout Vancouver was unrealistic and perhaps inappropriate. Instead, they suggested that we would have to be proactive as a community for our self-preservation.
  - The discussions pointed out a shortage of "third spaces" in the city, a term by Ray Oldenburg that refers to inclusive areas outside of home and work where people can socialize, share ideas, and build relationships. It was noted that salons and churches often fulfill this role effectively.
  - Another participant added that the lack of third spaces sometimes leads to a choice of isolation, saying, ***"I sometimes settle into the feeling of isolation because I don’t have a third space, and knowing I have a third space would make me feel more confident to stand up for myself at work because I know that I can always go to my third space and feel energized.”***

- Dealing with Microaggressions:
  - The group openly talked about the prevalence of microaggressions and passive racism, with one person noting, ***"I have never met a Black woman who has not experienced microaggressions at work.”***

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- A suggestion by a participant was made to lighten the conversation with a unique approach: ***"A fun way to deal with this reality could be to play a bingo game with the sheets showing microaggressions and responses to them."***
- We also spoke on the topic of "code-switching" or "masking". These are ways that Black people have had to make themselves more acceptable to the company they are with. A participant spoke about how she was called toxic at work but without reason, simply because she refused to conform to them.
- As we discussed the stereotype of "The Angry Black Woman" A participant made a comment that stuck with me: "If you were a Black woman you would be angry too"

Community Dynamics

- Lack of connection with older Black people in Van: We had participants of a wide age range from 20-65 and this allowed us to discuss ways we could bridge generational gaps in Vancouver and why our community bond was so weak.
  - A participant spoke as an older woman meeting younger women at different events, suggesting, ***"We could do more age-inclusive events such as markets, film festivals and such."***
  - A participant suggested community game nights, playing dominos with the elders in the Black community to give them an opportunity to pass down their knowledge.
  - A proposition was made for a legacy award to honour long-standing (OG) businesses within the community. Yet, it was accompanied by a critical observation that ***"the OG's have a complaining attitude and it is more about taking initiative and doing something than complaining."***

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Future Directions for Manicure Mixer

- Asking for feedback:
  - The need for a feedback mechanism was recognized, with a request for "a form where they could put in possible topics before the next event" to foster a more thought-provoking and prepared discussion.
  - A participant encouraged other participants to help and support initiatives like this in any way they can or with any skills they have to ensure the continuity of events like the *Manicure Mixer*.
  - Lastly, a participant prompted the group to identify what specific attributes of Vancouver could be seen as advantageous over other cities and how these could be harnessed for the benefit of the Black community.

Is Building Community an End in Itself?

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Our sense of community is our strength. In designing spaces and experiences, we're not just shaping environments; we're nurturing the bonds that hold us together.

- DOREEN ADENGO

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Is Building Community an End in Itself?

The heart of this entire discourse is the *Manicure Mixer*, a microcosm of the thesis's larger ambition. This thesis speculates on a world where the principles of Pluriversal design are ingrained in the very fabric of our design processes, where the act of design is synonymous with the act of community building. It imagines a world where the lines between designer and user are blurred into a collaborative effort, where the design is not an endpoint but a conversation —a conversation that is as multifaceted as the communities it engages.

Carl DiSalvo's exploration of "design experiments in civics" provides a compelling framework for understanding the significance of the *Manicure Mixer* project. Carl DiSalvo's "Design Experiments in Civics" resonates deeply with the spirit of the *Manicure Mixer*, which can be seen as a civic experiment in its own right. It is a design process that probes and questions, engaging with the Black community to uncover and address their community needs. DiSalvo posits that design can and should play an experimental role in shaping civic life, a principle that the *Manicure Mixer* echoes. This project extends beyond the conventional boundaries of design, venturing into the realm of civic engagement where design acts not just as an artifact but as a participatory process. In DiSalvo's terms, it becomes an experiment in how design influences and is influenced by the dynamics of civic interaction, and community-led initiatives (DiSalvo, 2022).

This approach signifies a shift from designing for the many to designing for the particular, recognizing that within each specificity lies a universe of potential. Manuhuia Barcham's

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advocacy for maintaining the integrity of diverse worldviews without collapsing them into the singularity of neo-colonialism is in line with this approach (Barcham, 2021). This alignment reflects a shared commitment to creating spaces that amplify change and begin to transform the very systems within which they operate. The *Manicure Mixer* champions for Pluriversal design and recognizes that true inclusivity in design cannot be achieved through universal solutions but through a deep understanding and celebration of the diversity of each community.

The Black beauty salon was reimagined as a contemporary space where interaction design could facilitate not just dialogue but also collective empowerment. It became a physical and metaphorical space where community members could gather, not as passive recipients of design, but as active participants and co-creators of their communal narrative.

The *Manicure Mixer* transcends its role as a mere gathering space, evolving into an end product of the research with the possibility for tangible social impact. Although the project was initially intended to uncover the specific needs and challenges of Black women in Vancouver, it ended up addressing one of the community's most pressing concerns: isolation. The act of sharing stories, engaging in our cultural practices (like braiding along with other beauty and self-care practices) and coming together became a therapeutic exercise in building a sense of community. It became evident that the process of design—the crafting of this space and experience—was not just a means to an end but an end in itself. The *Manicure Mixer* then became both a design tool and a practical solution to some of the challenges of the Black diaspora, providing a space where the warmth of community, our collective presence and shared identity helped with our isolation, and provided a starting point to address other issues.

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This dual nature of the *Manicure Mixer*, as both a design tool and an outcome of the research, illustrates a holistic approach to design. It demonstrates how design can simultaneously be a reflective process and a proactive solution. As such, the project does not end with identifying pain points which is a core ideal of UX Design; rather, it has the potential to move forward, carrying with it the insights gained from community engagement to inform and shape subsequent design initiatives. Moving forward some of the ways to address the identified pain points could include social or political action, design solutions or just through the act of building and maintaining community through discussions.

This iterative process where the community gathering itself helps to untangle the issues it seeks to address, embodies the essence of interaction design as a means for social innovation and change. This goes to show the potential of design experiments to not only understand but to transform the civic landscape.

The *Manicure Mixer*, therefore, extends into the realms of interaction design and community activism and points to a future in which interaction design is leveraged not only as a force for creating products, apps, or interfaces but also as a strategic instrument for facilitating communal well-being.

The project has three potential pathways for future expansion. Firstly, it suggests the possibility of the community taking hold of the initiative started by the *Manicure Mixer* and building upon it to deepen community engagement. Secondly, it offers the possibility of utilizing the outcomes of the mixer for design Action, identifying areas where design can provide solutions to the challenges identified during the event. This could involve raising awareness of these issues through design activism or implementing solutions through social design. The third pathway emphasizes the *Manicure Mixer* itself as a

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critical medium for bringing the community together and addressing the observed disconnect within the Black diaspora in Vancouver.

There is already progress being made towards these future paths. The Black Women Connect Vancouver (BWCV) has expressed interest in incorporating the *Manicure Mixer* as a permanent part of their programs for Black women in the city. This indicates a commitment to maintaining and improving community engagement.

The *Manicure Mixer* project serves as an example of how interaction design can foster community engagement and empowerment while embodying the principles of Pluriversal design.

Reflections (Interaction Design)

"Design can be a powerful tool for liberation, but it must be wielded with intention and care." - Antionette Carroll

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Reflections (Interaction Design)

The journey of this research has significantly altered my perception and practice as an interaction designer. Throughout my thesis, I had to consciously steer myself away from my design instincts and the temptation to be solely solution-driven and challenge the innate inclination to default to designing an app or a digital interface as the ultimate deliverable. This process of unlearning was important to allow me to reframe some of what I had learned and been taught as an interaction designer. As Simon Sheikh warns that while knowledge can liberate, if we are not careful it can also restrict us by disciplining our behaviour, anchoring us in a tradition or practice, and thus limiting our understanding of what else might be possible (Sheikh, 2009). Challenging this tendency allowed me to embrace a broader vision of interaction design, one that values the rich and complex interactions between people as its foundational starting place and not simply its technical outputs.

This transformation in how I see what is important and possible, grounded in the principles of civic experiments and communal well-being, underscores a transformation from designing products to facilitating experiences that foster community resilience and empowerment. Reflecting on the evolution, I find that my approach to interaction design has been deeply enriched. It now incorporates an expanded skillset and knowledge, which include but are not limited to facilitation, active listening, co- design, and the art of creating spaces where genuine dialogue can flourish.

Onafuwa and Barcham both stand as designers who are actively working in the interaction design field with decolonial

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methodologies and advocacy for Pluriversal design approaches. As practitioners, they both champion the co-creation with communities, emphasizing design processes that are as diverse as the societies they serve. Together, Onafuwa and Barcham's work shows a commitment to a design ethos that is culturally sensitive, ethically grounded, and socially responsible guiding a path toward the practice of interaction design that centres these principles.

In reflecting on the essence of my role, I have come to understand that my identity as an interaction designer transcends the conventional task of crafting digital applications or proposing quick-fix solutions. It is fundamentally about weaving the social fabric through design —creating connections, constructing bridges, and nurturing environments that empower individuals to take ownership of their design narratives.

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