Editorial: Decolonization & Knowledge in Design

Ahmed Ansari
New York University
aa7703@nyu.edu
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5313-8383

Abstract

Decolonization has become a major theme in design practice and research, and the spate of scholarship produced under different terms—'decolonizing design(s)', 'decolonial design', 'respectful design', 'pluriversal design', to name a few—signal a significant turn in the field, that deals with addressing historical and entrenched various forms and relations of Anglo-European domination. This issue brings articles that take a critical look at the state of decolonial discourse and praxis in the field, highlighting its many challenges and tensions, as well as opening up new queries and questions for readers to consider: around research and pedagogical practice; around relations between the local and global; and around the status of professional design as part of the apparatus of present institutional power.

EDITORIAL NOTE

The idea for this special issue emerged out of a growing discontent and sense of dissonance over the past several years—one that shimmers, refracts, and reflects in the various articles that constitute this special issue of *Diseña*. I talk of the discourse of decolonial design, broadly speaking, on the one hand, and much of the nature of the academic scholarship that proselytizes it—with the predominant register being one of cautious optimism and hope—; and on the other, the sad and brutal nature of a world that has seen hard-won gains by the unremitting activisms of the 20th and early 21st century lost amidst overwhelming tides of resurgent hyper-nationalisms.

The near-centenary of fascist governance in Europe poses a considerable challenge to many of the master narratives that have governed Latin American decolonial theory, and, as a consequence, decolonial design and the current state of the discourse on politics and ethics. Take, for example, how decolonial theory finds its foregrounding nativity and land darkly mirrored in the far-right discourse of blood and soil (and indeed, the very vocabulary of indigeneity

and right to land has been employed by the right in contexts like India and Israel). Yet, even if we avert our gaze from the dismal ways in which the global far-right has appropriated the language (and, one might even argue, tactics and strategies) of the far-left, challenges to the decolonial narratives around history, modernity, identity, and action still remain, not least of which is the continuous challenge of, as we are finding out, the truth that there are truly no universals, even when it comes to grand narratives: that the coloniality of power cannot simply be demarcated within the neat binaries of 'the West versus the Rest'; that there are Souths within Souths and Norths within Norths, as much as there are no neat borders between the two in a global cosmopolis intricately woven through both material and intangible infrastructures; and that (especially in the face of the existential threat of ecological collapse) any futures we dream of require not just dreaming collectively, but also collective organizing at scales that require thinking and enacting solidarities that traverse the global.

Closer to the field and concerns of academic practice and knowledge production, the complexities of social realities render decolonization a far more challenging endeavor than the ease with which it has been often presented in decolonial design discourse suggests. The very fact that its interpellation into the existing institutional makeup of U.S., European, and Australian design academia—where less than a decade ago, discourses of the political in design were being outright dismissed—has been so smooth should be enough reason for pause. Yet, the decolonial turn in design *has* opened up questions that are fundamental enough to shake the field to its foundations: around the nuances of how research is done, especially with (cultural, racial, religious, etc.) Others; around the necessity of cultivating new forms of sensitization in the researcher, and new attention to the dynamics of the relationships between the latter and their informants; around the interplay between past and future, tradition and modernity, and the local and global; and to questioning design itself in a world where acts of the making and unmaking of worlds take place every day, all the time.

All of these—and more—are concerns raised in the following nine pieces, written by a very conscientious group of scholars and professional designers, including two guest contributors who were invited to write shorter bridge essays for the issue. In these articles and essays, you will find—rather than just answers (which, in the field, more often than not take the form of simple case studies)—questions, caveats, and tensions. Each of these articles and essays show us, in various ways, that the work of decolonization is not easy and far from smooth, and that it requires constant and vigilant attention, deep reflection and introspection, and an openness to questioning and learning. They also indicate that more might be required in terms of deeper, structural changes, particularly in design education and research, not least of which is—in my view—the impera-

tive to cultivate and put different traditions and schools of radical thought—decolonial, postcolonial, Marxist, among others—in dialogue with each other on the kinds of issues that have been opened up as territories to explore anew in the field.

We find, for example, in the first three articles—all of which pleasantly surprise by invoking a common theme of weaving as a metaphor—, questions around the ways in which the essential element of reflexivity shows itself and becomes a significant concern: the reflexivity of the field writ large, the reflexivity of the design researcher and teacher, and reflexivity regarding design histories. The relation between the global and the local is the focal matter of the next three pieces, all of which point to the complex milieus of topographies and heterogeneities which are often collapsed under broad terms like 'Global South', 'Global North', 'East', 'West', 'Center', 'Periphery', 'Third World', and so on. These pieces urge us to take seriously the challenges of developing transnational conversations, non-universalizing frameworks, and what different cultures can learn about each other (if not from each other). Finally, the last three pieces close out the issue urging readers to take seriously the imperative to, as contributor Jomy Joseph puts it, "walk the talk," pointing to the many contradictions in design, in its various incarnations as academic *and* professional practice in the world that challenge not just assumptions in academia around how smoothly decoloniality can be taken up as an imperative and actualized through practice, but also remind us about design's status as a form of activity inseparable from the politics of the institutions it belongs to, as well as its inscription within the dynamics and logics of the present capitalist world-system.

I hope that as you read these articles and essays, you too will allow their queries, their anxieties, and their appeals—many of which exhibit a dissatisfaction with staying still and being content with the present state of what passes for 'global' design discourse—to speak to you.

THE ARTICLES AND ESSAYS

Maya Tapiero, Albarrán González, and Campbell provide a survey of Latin American scholarship on decolonial ideals within industrial design education, especially scholarship produced in collaboration with Indigenous communities, and how this scholarship interacts with the landscapes of Western academia. Their survey illuminates the explicit concerns of this literature in not only taking up decolonization as a set of ideals, principles, and values, but also in navigating the very singular and concrete situations of working in institutions and classrooms, and the challenges in realizing those ideals through practice. Their article ends with a set of questions urging design researchers and scholars to take seriously the structural and systemic challenges posed in collaborating with, making space for, and translating the perspectives of, indigenous artisans.

Marysol Ortega Pallanez opens her article with an important excursus on the continuing tendencies in design discourse and practice that critically examine Anglo-European universalisms to sometimes unproblematically universalize categories, narratives, and frameworks in different kinds of procedures and operations, including when the latter are transposed from one context to another, or—even more apparent—when local practices are appropriated under the umbrella of the category of design itself. Ortega's article, in subtle and poignant ways, repeatedly attempts to challenge other pitfalls commonly encountered in the present state of design discourse, challenging cultural essentialisms. Her section reflecting on her experiences of embroidering with women in Hermosillo foregrounds her growing understanding of the ways in which different histories and cultures can come together to develop an explanation of *culture itself as heterogeneous becoming*. Through her account of an assignment encouraging students to delve into their personal histories, Ortega makes an important case for personal reflexivity a requisite to 'reflexivity-with'.

It is worth noting the concern that both articles so far have with the issue of how to properly represent the indigenous or subaltern subject, and are thus mainly concerned with issues of—in my view—translation, foregrounding the importance of critical reflexivity and the responsibilities it entails for the academic scholar. Clara Meliande's piece takes these concerns into a different register, drawing on how cultural anthropologists, particularly those writing from or adjacent to the ontological turn, have sought to bring attention to issues in how research is generally written, and to issues of register and genre in academic writing. Her argument for acknowledging the fabulatory dimension of academic writing makes for a much-needed intervention in opening up the space to read histories differently, and use speculation as a way to move beyond the limitations of the design archive. Drawing on Saidiya Hartman's work on critical fabulation as a way of addressing gaps in historical archives, and keeping the theme of the reflexive researcher consistent, Meliande's studies of failed design schools and pedagogical experiments in Brazil lead her to query the ethics of engaging in fabulation (*who* can, and who is allowed to, fabulate) while also allowing fabulation as a means of developing a new relation to history (what is implied more broadly is that genre—an understudied subject in design—opens up new ways for us to engage with the subjects of our research).

Esther Kang, our first guest contributor, marks an overall shift in the tenor of the articles in this issue, moving away from the researcher and their concerns, reflexivity, and choices, towards broader concerns of how knowledge is situated and produced in a global context and globalized world. Her short piece formulates an appeal to designers to move away from the strict binaries of center and periphery and their common conflation with 'Global North' and 'Global

South'—so prevalent in framing decolonial design discourse—, arguing that these frames obscure both the heterogeneities within 'the South', as well as the vital questions of the terms and impacts of producing knowledge about global Others in a highly interconnected and fluid world.

Britta Boyer's article on her work as part of an international team of collaborators from Brazil, Indonesia, Denmark, and the UK working with weavers from Myanmar reveals the challenges, frictions, and frustrations of such global endeavors while trying to stay true to a set of guiding principles. Boyer opens the article with a reflection on something that, in my view, has been underdetermined and underdeveloped in the present decolonial design literature, which is the situation of the global migrant subject, where she highlights the impact that a "lack of rootedness (...) unsettlement, and living as a nomadic subject" has on her outlook and practice as a researcher working across states and societies. A latent anxiety runs through the piece around the challenges to 'remote visiting', especially around issues of cultural appropriation.

Ehsan Baha and Abhigyan Singh follow on the theme of global exchanges in knowledge production by—again—problematizing the issues in essentializing a North-South dichotomy, stressing the often-transnational character of post-development work in the 21st century, especially in navigating the immense complexities of problems such as global climate transitions (where, as they attempt to argue, transnational alliances and solidarities are often necessary for successful change). Their article locates the potential pitfalls of oversimplifying the complexity of the world, the necessity (indeed, urgency) of global interchange, and the still inaccessible nature of much of decolonial discourse to the very subjects it tries to foreground. Their case study, which compares the ways in which locals in India and the Netherlands imagine and engage in the practices of energy economies, makes for an interesting look at not just the presence of the global in the material and imaginal dimensions of these economies, but also at the ways in which different material realities and technical infrastructures circumscribe the limits of what different communities can imagine as possibilities in practice.

The second guest contributor to this issue, Matthew Kiem, takes a sobering look at the vast fissure between the discourse of design as a force for change in the world and the field's capacities for enacting change (which, as he admits, are considerable and not to be undermined), and the forces that set the terms for designerly intervention within the world, i.e. political will and capital. In taking into account the limitations of one response to this dilemma in Carlos Christensen's idea of the 'design civil society', a model for thinking about centering design in popular civic discourse and thereby working to create political capital for it in the world, Kiem instead urges us to think about the possibilities of acting outside of design professionalism, pointing to the already 'infra-political' (qua

Angela Mitropoulos) creativity at work by everyday actors engaged in coping with the limits imposed on them, where the will of the political to improve life does not manifest.

The next article in this collection extends this observation on the disconnection between so much of design discourse and the dynamics of professional design practice. Bárbara Estreal and Marcelo Ramirez give various examples of the different ways in which Western corporations— particularly multinational companies—play on the desirability of forging relationships with partners in the Global South. As they attempt to highlight the ways in which corporations develop a rhetoric around *the power of design*, they illustrate how design becomes a crucial part of the operation of appropriating cultural difference into the smooth functioning of capital accumulation. Rather than presenting performative gestures and rhetorical moves, they reaffirm that to decolonize via design may entail a commitment to de-professionalization, and acts of refusal, sabotage, and undesigning.

Finally, Jomy Joseph leaves us with a sobering assessment of the gaps between three understandings of design roles and design work: as managerial work (the work of planning); as skilled technical work (the work of craft); and as care work (the work of imagining and materializing care in the world). Joseph turns to the political economy of design, making an analogy between design as care (work) and the way social reproduction theory frames care work—both as forms of work necessary to sustaining (and rendering normative) capitalism, despite being socially and economically undervalued. In his discussion of the Lucas Plan, Joseph attempts to illustrate a moment where, even if briefly and unsuccessfully, (unionized) designers were able to negotiate all three roles in an attempt to redirect the terms and outcomes of their labor. ◘