

Editors' Introduction

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After centuries of subaltern and decades of transdisciplinary gestation, decolonial thinking¹ has finally been incorporated into studies of materiality and – though belatedly – cohered as a question that can be posed directly both to and within the field of Design Studies. Some of the questions that come to mind in this formative moment for decolonial thinking in/and/ as design include:

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- What does the endeavor of decolonizing design mean?
 - What does it mean for design to be thought of in relation to decoloniality and for decoloniality to be thought of in relation to design?
 - How are ideas and practices of decolonizing design already emerging?
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- What are its implications within and beyond the field of Design Studies?

25 These questions have brought us – the members of the Decolonising Design (DD) project and research collective – together and have influenced our efforts to build an online platform that supports and promotes thinking by similarly interested design scholars. Each member of DD operates and deals with such

5 questions in distinct ways, and through engaging with issues such as politics of (im)mobility and migration, Indigenous Knowledge, class struggle, gender trouble, sexual diversity, dismantling structural racism, and the practice of relating respectfully with other human, non-human, and alter-human ways of being/becoming. Accordingly, this special issue of *Design and Culture* is intended as an experiment in addressing the questions above and to gain a sense of the diverse and complex forms of thinking that connect with the concept of “decolonizing design.” Our objective is not to answer these questions once and for all, but rather to approach decolonization in a manner that is adequate to both the complexity of the concept and the stakes of its imperatives.

10 One of the main imperatives of decolonial practice is to acknowledge and pay respect to paths by which ideas, projects, and designs arrive within and relate to particular contexts. This approach recognizes that knowledge production is a situated and relational activity. Ideas are embodiments of a designerly effort to make sense of experiential situations, and the transfer of ideas into and across different contexts informs how they affect thinking and action. DD emphasizes relations that ontologically design² rather than focusing on an “understanding” that seeks to pacify, control, erase, or occupy (colonize) the situation from which the “other” speaks. To this end, we resist “common denominators” and singular frames of reference. Instead, we advocate for performative mapping and storytelling that design relations which respect the disclosure of ontological differences between bodies, geographies, and histories.

15 One of DD’s major (but by no means exclusive) sources of insight has been the Latin American-based Modernity/Coloniality Project,³ which ran as a series of conferences and symposiums from the late 1990s to the late 2000s. Participants in this project included theorists from different Latin American and Caribbean contexts and diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including philosophy, pedagogy, semiotics, literary criticism, anthropology, sociology, and gender studies. Some of the figures connected to the Modernity/Coloniality Project who have been influential to DD include the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano (2007), particularly for his concepts of *coloniality* and the *colonial matrix of power*; Colombian philosopher Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007) for his concept of *zero point epistemology*; Argentine-Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel (2008) for his critical conception of the history of “Western” philosophy and the meaning of Latin American philosophy; Argentine semiologist Walter Mignolo (2011b) for the concepts of the *locus of enunciation*, *colonial difference*, and *border thinking*; Argentine philosopher María Lugones (2007) for her work on the *coloniality of gender and sexuality*; queer Chicana poet and critical theorist Gloria Anzaldúa’s (1987) writings on *mestizaje* and *borderlands*; Colombian-American anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2017) for his work on the concept of *pluriversality* and *autonomía*; Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel (2011) for his own work on the relations between questions of gender, race, and the coloniality of knowledge; and Puerto Rican philosopher Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007) for his work on the

5 *coloniality of being*. This list, along with the *Design in the Borderlands* (Kalantidou and Fry 2014) edited collection and recent *Design for the Global South* (2017) special issue of *Design Philosophy Papers*, provides some of the context to how DD conceptualizes decoloniality as it relates to design.

10 Decolonizing design involves more than just amplifying interests and concerns that have been marginalized within Design Studies' dominant discourses. While this is important, decolonizing design also involves challenging the dominant forms, conventions, grammars, and language through which knowledge about design is expressed and enacted in ongoing research and design work. In other words, it is a *radical* rather than reformist project, organized less around a struggle for the inclusion and representation of difference and marginality within colonial forms, than around the unsettlement and destabilization of forms – diffused, naturalized, and habitual – that instill colonial relations of power.

15 Each of the articles in this special issue reflects and emphasizes different dimensions of this basic idea. Dimeji Onafuwa opens this special issue with a review of a recent DD-organized symposium held in Malmö University, titled “Intersectional Perspectives on Design, Politics, and Power Symposium.” One of the symposium’s central questions was: Can design strategies re-articulate what design is in an intersectional context, and what tools exist to this end? Onafuwa focuses on discussions of allyship and, specifically, opportunities to de-link (decolonize) from our unsustainable present, and to re-link (recolonize) as allies and on behalf of “all” to other epistemologies.

20 In her article, a version of which was presented at the Malmö conference, Nadine Botha uses the design of the portable toilet to examine the politics of sanitation design in Cape Town, South Africa. While the portable toilet acts as a central object of the overall argument, Botha demonstrates that the question of sanitation design is ultimately a social rather than technical question, one that inevitably reflects the terms of colonial domination and its contestation. As Botha argues, infrastructure and utilities design encompasses more than just issues of brute materiality or “basic needs”; it also involves existential politics of human dignity. By considering design as an ontological agent in the context of decolonial struggle, Botha’s argument provides insight into how designed things configure meaning and possibility in relation to systemic processes and power structures.

30 Ali Musleh’s paper on the shifting nature of Israel’s oppression of Palestinians also recognizes design as an agent that conditions the processes and ontologies of colonial struggle. Musleh examines the way the Israeli state relates to the figure of the Palestinian as a design problem, namely, as a figure that is configured as an object or barrier to the completion of the Zionist project. To do this, he focuses on the specific effects of Israel testing new technologies on Palestinians. Like Botha, Musleh highlights the way design acts as an agent of domination and exploitation in a context in which the question of difference has been configured as an either/or equation.

Uzma Rizvi's article explores the material culture of the Cafeteria in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as a site of interaction for migrant workers. Rizvi examines the meaning and designs of these marginal spaces through concepts of "belonging" and "entanglement." In theorizing the Cafeteria as both a site and potential symbol of decolonial social designing, Rizvi points to the value of critical heritage studies to interrogate how narratives of origin and belonging may be negotiated and reconfigured through the designing agency of things and assemblages.

Norm Sheehan's paper on Australian Aboriginal conceptions of design serves as both an explanation of decolonizing design and a demonstration of it. Sheehan's prose is not conventionally academic. But the unusual form relates to the content he is communicating; the style is itself an embodiment of Indigenous Knowledge and serves as an example of Indigenous design. He uses this to present a complex reflection on the differences between Australian Indigenous conceptions of design and modern/colonial design traditions.

Finally, in the last paper, the DD members participate in a roundtable about what is at stake in the idea of decolonizing design. We conclude with reflections on the fact that it is impossible to be freed completely from the material and onto-epistemological subjugation of the Global North without constantly contesting our own positionalities and privileges within it.

While the diverse notions of design employed and articulated in these articles may vary, they all intersect in pushing for an understanding of the histories, locations, and relations of bodies within design and designing. Regardless of the geographies or the types of design and designing they address and discuss, these interventions in one way or another point to the necessity of acknowledging different bodies: those that design and shape the materiality of the world; those that are designed by such materialities; and those that are rendered as design problems or concerns. Thus, these interventions do not aim to give a novel definition of design, nor to expand the field as such. Instead they show how different designs exist, perform, persuade, extend, or remain within the colonial matrix of power due to specific historical, social, political, and economic reasons and rationalizations.

Going back to the four main questions posed at above, we hope that these sets of essays and writing put together in this special issue not only address but expand those questions further critically and reflectively. In relation to this, new sets of questions may arise that mark the possible paths that this initiative can take. For instance, what is involved in the premise that a relation between design and decoloniality is itself a coherent thing to think? In other words, what is involved in making the question of decolonizing design sensible, and for whose benefit? Further, how is the process of such questioning and reflection to be designed, and what does such a process of designing itself go on to design?

We would like to end this preface by thanking the editors of *Design and Culture* – particularly Maggie Taft and Elizabeth Guffey – for extending

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5 No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes

1. By decolonial thinking – or decoloniality – we refer to epistemic and ontic detachment from Western modernity and, by extension, from Anglo-Eurocentrism, imperialism, and global capitalism.
- 10 2. As per Anne-Marie Willis (2006, 70), ontological design is “a way of characterizing the relation between human beings and lifeworlds. . . we design, that is to say, we deliberate, plan and scheme in ways which prefigure our actions and makings – in turn we are designed by our designing and by that which we have designed (i.e., through our interactions with the structural and material specificities of our environments).”
- 15 3. Modernity/Coloniality Project refers to the articulation put by Walter Mignolo (2011a).

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