Diseña 25

Weaving Reflexivity *in* Decolonization Paths *and* Knowledge *in* Design

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This article explores the transformative potential of multiple, more complex decolonial paths in design practice. Through a recap of persistent tendencies in design discourse, such as universalization, rooted within coloniality and a European/Western dominant design paradigm, I advocate for a nuanced understanding of commonality and difference in our designing. Bringing the focus to praxis, I draw from examples in my design practice and pedagogy, highlighting the significance of personal reflexivity in challenging conventional design ideals and a mostly singular design history, while underscoring the importance of incorporating personal history, the history of the place, and its conditions to weave decolonial paths toward conviviality and the sustainment of life.

Keywords

conviviality

decolonization

knowledge production

design practice

relationality

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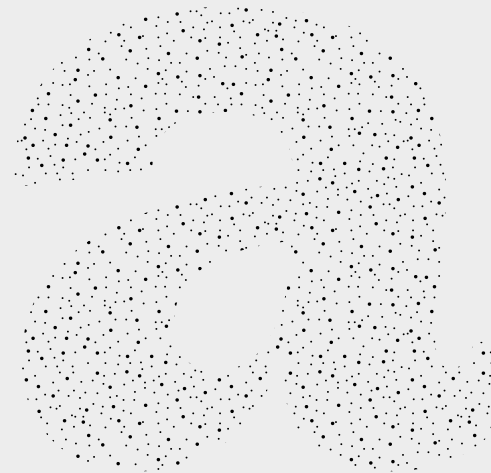
Weaving Reflexivity in Decolonization Paths and Knowledge in Design

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TRACING DESIGN LEGACIES TO REIMAGINE SITUATED RELATIONSHIPS WITH KNOWLEDGE IN DESIGN

I'm not Lance Wyman, though I once aspired to be like him—a design rockstar who created iconic visual identity systems like the Mexico City metro's symbol system or the 1968 Mexico Olympic Games logo. These designs became iconic because they harnessed simplicity and uniformity, contributing to the country's modernization—a gateway to the first world. In the early 2000s, similar models guided my graphic design education in northern Mexico, though in a different context. Modern European design ideals of simplicity, uniformity, and usefulness persisted, now within a globalized society. My training emphasized foundational form-making skills and aesthetic sensibilities from the Bauhaus and Ulm schools as universal principles of 'good design' to meet global market demands. However, this conception of design—valuing universality, productivity, radical rationality, and usefulness (Cardoso, 2005; Fernández, 2006; Montuori & Nicoletti, 2021; Ober, 2022; Souza Leite, 2008)—epitomized by the form and function motto, tethers design to capitalism and modernity (Escobar, 2018, 2020b). While usefulness or productivity are not inherently problematic, tethered to capitalism they serve the increase of profit, justifying the exploitation of nature and culture (Gudynas, 2009; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2017), and leading to extractive and unsustainable practices. This design paradigm perpetuates many socioecological damages and conditions of exclusion on the planet today. This essay explores how modern European/Western design, as a dominant paradigm, shapes designers' relationship with knowledge and ways of knowing and being in practice.

Under the dominant design paradigm that commodifies education as a service (Tlostanova, 2020), my design education prepared me for the global labor market. I moved into user experience design in the mid-2000s, working in digital products for the US while in Mexico, and later in service design in Scandinavia with designers from 30 different countries. In all cases, my formal

education was fairly similar to my colleagues, regardless of location. However, the increased complexity of my projects highlighted gaps in design education. I designed entire digital systems that increased the convenience of fast fashion or contributed to the regulation of refugees' lives through aid. Over time, I gained a greater awareness of how the predominant way of designing prioritized modernization and economic prosperity over the well-being or respect of those communities whom I was designing for, reinforcing systems of domination. Regrettably, my design education did not include questioning these power dynamics (Zidulka & Kajzer Mitchell, 2018).

I place part of my professional journey, which may connect at points with your own, next to the ongoing discourse in design theory involving both decolonial and ontological turns. These turns expand traditional conceptions of design as problem-solving, and emphasize its power in worldmaking and world-destroying dynamics (Fry, 2020). The decolonial turn challenges power, logics, and modes of knowledge production and worldmaking in design for being Eurocentric—i.e., one-world world-oriented [1]—, lacking the ability to be situated, and erasing incommensurabilities and particularities of other worlds (Abdulla et al., 2019; Escobar, 2018; Qazi, 2022; Schultz et al., 2018). The ontological turn in design urges a paradigm shift to reorient our designing towards futures that sustain life rather than defuture it (Escobar, 2020a; Fry, 2022; Willis, 2006). At the brink of multiple socio-ecological existential threats, laudable strides have been made in design for social innovation, transition design, pluriversal design, eco-feminist design, and more-than-human design. Still, the decolonial and ontological turns in design theory have yet to radically change practice. Often, aspirations in ontological and decolonizing practices become frameworks and tools that may be repurposed in any context, limiting their transformative potential and reinforcing dominant design tendencies (García et al., 2024). These well-intentioned outcomes can only support new design practices so far—let alone a new design paradigm—demonstrating the rife and insidious reach of dominant design legacies and tendencies (Akama, 2021).

Thus, responding and joining the call of scholars such as Yoko Akama (2021), I too welcome the exploration of other outcomes and approaches that may not only re-imagine practices of designing through resistance to the legacy of dominant design, but also the very essence of our way-of-being as designers. As part of this endeavor, I later share and unravel a way in which I am complicating how our being is entangled to ways of knowing design and our design way-of-being. For now, to provide context from where I am going about this process of complicating our way-of-being as designers with our ways of knowing, I ought to step back and introduce some background on decoloniality in design.

1 Science, Technology, and Society (STS) scholar John Law (2015) argues that the 'one-world world' is the Western assumption that there is a single reality, a single world. Under this assumption, difference is masked via the argument of various perspectives of this single world, which are in turn judged based on their adequacy to the dominant view, qualified as objective and rational.

CYCLES OF UNLEARNING TENDENCIES FROM COLONIALITY

To elucidate the challenges of decoloniality in design and the work to be done, particularly in design practice, we must situate ourselves within the decolonial turn in social sciences. Therefore, in the next few paragraphs, I briefly detail how the decolonial turn came to be, one of the main lessons learned, and why it is difficult to resist the tendencies from dominant design, such as the pull toward universalization.

The Modernity/Coloniality (M/C) group, a collective of Latin American scholars formed in the 1990s, delineated the decolonial turn in the region by offering an alternative to Eurocentric universalization of thought and highlighting non-European onto-epistemological erasure and marginalization (Ballestrin, 2013; Montuori & Nicoletti, 2021). In this decolonial turn, scholars argued that onto-epistemic practices of coloniality/modernity were instituted and consolidated through Americanity, the concept of a land waiting to be discovered and its peoples ready to be civilized (Quijano & Wallerstein, 1992). Americanity created an order, an "epistemology of the zero point" (Cushman et al., 2024, p. 10), in which the heterogeneous coexistence of ways of knowing and being is subdued through a temporal and spatial classification, using what Santiago Castro-Gómez calls an epistemological scale: "from the traditional to the modern, from barbarism to civilization, from the community to the individual, from the orient to the occident" (2007, p. 433). The decolonial turn argues that even though colonialism ended, coloniality prevails, since it maintains and reproduces onto-epistemological scales, where those at the bottom end of the universal scale need to be saved, civilized, and developed using Eurocentric/colonial tools, institutions, and paradigms.

Recognizing the influence of colonial tools, institutions, and paradigms, Aníbal Quijano (2007) and Madina Tlostanova with Walter Mignolo (2012) highlight one of the main lessons from the decolonial turn. This lesson entails the need to learn to unlearn. Quijano, Tlostanova, and Mignolo offer this path to free ourselves from colonial ways of thinking and being, and open up thresholds towards heterogeneous coexistence—of pluriversality rather than universality. However, unlearning colonial ways of thinking and being has proven to be a task that requires multiple iterations, as in the case of letting go of universalizing tendencies and practices in design, even when attempting to find paths toward decoloniality.

Unlearning universalizing tendencies reveals itself as a significant challenge in the evolution of decolonial discourse. To illustrate this, I expose a South Asian-Latin American exchange that has come full circle. Initially, the Latin American Subaltern Group, which preceded the M/C group, drew inspiration from the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group (SSG). Yet, during the 1980s and 1990s, a critical turning point emerged as Walter Mignolo, from the Latin Amer-

ican group, pointed out the problematic nature of directly transplanting South Asian approaches into Latin American contexts without considering the distinct colonial heritages and contexts of enunciation (Mignolo, 1994; see also Castro-Gómez & Mendieta, 1998). This critique, further echoed by the M/C group in the 1990s, emphasized the necessity of taking the decolonizing efforts stemming from Latin America as one direction out of many toward decoloniality (Cushman et al., 2024). These critiques underscored the importance of acknowledging particular histories and conditions in tracing authentic decolonial paths.

Three decades on, as the Latin American decolonial movement gained prominence, the dialogue took a reverse turn. Ahmed Ansari (2020) revisited these foundational arguments out of a pressing need to address new totalizing trends in decoloniality in design. By reassessing the contributions of the SSG and integrating new perspectives, Ansari redirects our gaze back to the Indian subcontinent, urging a reconsideration of decolonial designs with an acute awareness of local distinctiveness, opening questions of who speaks and can speak, particularly in the case of South academics in the North addressing these issues. This revisit of sorts, along with the critique made by Mignolo in the 1980s and 1990s, highlights a persistent challenge: the scholar and practical fields continue to grapple with universalizing tendencies, necessitating a continuous and reflexive unlearning of the one-world world narrative, to make space for local histories and situated practices in decolonizing designs.

The difficulty of resisting colonial tendencies of universalization can be seen in larger discourses discussing what design is. The categorization of all forms of world-making or creative practices resembling design under terms like *vernacular design* or *everyday design* clearly reveals the inclination towards dominancy, inadvertently reinforcing a universal framing where everything is subsumed under the umbrella of design (Gutiérrez Borrero, 2022; Lorusso, 2023; Martínez, 2016). This approach often overlooks or obscures the possibility of appreciating these practices on their own terms, raising the question of how design might adopt a more receptive stance—unlearning to absorb and learning to listen to diverse expressions, without necessarily claiming them as its own. Beyond questions of naming and categorization, recognizing the tendency to absorb all creative practices as design involves exploring the relationships between design and other similar practices, such as the culturally situated textile practice of embroidery in Hermosillo, Mexico, which I discuss in the next section.

In short, coloniality and decolonization are deeply tied to their time and place of enunciation. Yet, current design discourse often simplifies and reifies differences based on dominant ontological categories, missing the depth and particularities of such diversity of perspectives. My effort is to present a distinct Latin American perspective, which is far from uniform (Ortega Pallanez

2   For instance, Indigenous studies and decolonial scholar, Rachel C. Jackson (2024) covers how land dispossession in Oklahoma, US, in the early 20th century was experienced by both Indigenous and black people due to colonialism, but was done through different mechanisms of dehumanization through racialization. For the first, via the erasure of Indigenous land practices and corrupt practices such as land graft; for the second, through discriminatory laws and denial of rights.

et al., 2024), to highlight the intricacies of differences within difference[2] (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This aims to thicken (Geertz, 2008) essentialist categories of classification and othering from coloniality, displaying 'a complex whole' (Espina, 2024). From the northernmost part of Latin America in the Mexico-US borderlands, I provide more than a unique geopolitical stance. It involves a conscientization that a designer's way of being does not solely derive from factors such as ethnicity or geographical location, such as me being a brown mestiza woman dwelling in the Sonoran Desert, but rather from a complex interplay of personal histories and design experiences.

This nuanced outlook seeks to offer a more complex view of our positionality as designers—the self-identified one and how others perceive us in the places we practice. Such outlook inherently affects design practices, informed by self-imposed expectations and collaborative negotiations with those we design with. The incorporation of reflexive practices and sensibilities into our designing contributes to making palpable how designing can be—and often is—constituted by a combination of personal experiences, cultural and social interactions, relationships with place, and the ongoing synergies between various designs and situated practices.

LOCALIZED DESIGN HISTORIES AND EMBROIDERING-*WITH* IN HERMOSILLO

My current trajectory diverges from traditional design education—which emphasizes universal competencies—towards embracing unique relationships with place, self, and socioecological degradation. This shift informs my dual path in design practice and academia, aiming to redefine designing with desert and its inhabitants by addressing conditions of exclusion and domination, and exploring possibilities of transforming the field from within design education. Through this narrative, I hope to open up dialogues regarding various paths toward decoloniality in design, their intersections, and departures.

Embarking on research, I intertwined my personal history with my designing to challenge dominant paradigms and foster alternatives. In Hermosillo, Mexico, I focused on the exclusion of women and plants from public spaces, reflecting broader socioecological degradation. Returning to academia, I aimed to devise 'new ways of designing' (Irwin, 2015) that recognize how the 'things' we design inhabit and transform sociotechnical and ecological systems—often promoting or aggravating damage. Striving for systemic change, I embraced a collaborative approach and avoided imposing solutions, working with existing local efforts. However, COVID-19 and other challenges revealed my propensity to resort to dominant design practices and ways of being. During the peak of the pandemic, I prioritized tangible outcomes over cultivating meaningful relation-

ships with local groups. Designing 'something' became the focus because it would primarily lead to productive results for my research, rather than steering existing unsustainable paths in the city (Ortega Pallanez, 2023, 2024). My reliance on old habits was probably a way to cope with the vast uncertainty of a global pandemic. These reflections on these experiences underscored the imperative for new ways of being in our designing, which includes resisting design tendencies that reproduce conditions of domination and erasure, as well as a constant attentiveness on purpose.

Moreover, my approach continued evolving as I recognized the need to include my perspective and experiences from my work in Hermosillo, as a woman in a city where women face public space exclusion and have limited rights to the city. Although I was determined to leave behind the myth of the neutral and impartial designer, my efforts to align myself with local group expectations led me to set aside my motivations and purpose in favor of creating alliances with them (Ortega Pallanez, 2023). Acknowledging this, I turned to my personal history, incorporating embroidery into my work. This practice was rooted in my experiences and connections to Hermosillo and to when, where, and with whom I felt safe (at my nana's porch, with the mild breeze of Fall afternoons, among threads, needles, and coarse cloth and listening to my mom and nana chat about everyday life). In this situation, embroidery became a way to express and challenge my positionality. Embroidery allowed for a personal and convivial exploration of space, time, and possibilities, transcending traditional notions of domesticity of the practice. It challenged me to attend carefully to how I related to the group of women who embroidered together with me, as we reclaimed the public space through this collective practice.

Thus, one of my learnings from practice is to acknowledge European design histories and legacies, but advocate for more than mere acceptance or rejection. Rather, I seek to break the tendencies from such legacy that perpetuate relationships of domination, creating a heterogeneous mix—a *capirotada* of design histories. *Capirotada*, a traditional Mexican dish similar to bread pudding, originally a hybrid of Muslim and Roman cuisines from Spain/Europe, gives stale bread a second life combining it with savory leftovers. When adopted by various Indigenous groups in Mexico, they infused it with anise tea to soften the bread, adding *piloncillo* (whole cane sugar) and cinnamon, which sweetened it and led to a plethora of variations. This culinary metaphor encapsulates the essence of my design philosophy: one that is resonant and attends to various histories, forming a non-uniform composition that varies from one place to another. Histories also encompass those of the local community I am designing with and my personal history as a designer, and how the designed world shapes my becoming. This approach aims to cultivate personal reflexivity to foster relational reflexivity in

my practice. I have previously discussed the importance of relational reflexivity (Ortega Pallanez et al., 2024), the ways I have been engaging in a reflexivity-*with* in my relationships with *Hermosillense* embroiderers (Ortega Pallanez, 2023), and how relational reflexivity nurtures ways of designing that are convivial, rather than merely participatory. This emphasizes the significance of people's existence in relation to each other, to the place and its conditions, instead of solely aligning people around a project or a problem. To embrace relational reflexivity, we must first delve into a more complex view of the designers we are in the places we design (both self-perceived and perceived by others), to devise approaches uniquely suited to our designing, ensuring that the practices we incorporate are not only personally relevant but socioecologically—or natureculturally—appropriate.

CULTIVATING ALTERNATIVES TO THE DOMINANT DESIGNER WAY OF BEING IN DESIGN PEDAGOGY

From personal design practice, I now transition to design pedagogy, where I have been incorporating the unlearnings posed above and infusing an ethos of personal reflexivity into the classroom. Accounting for our own histories and reflexivity into design education not only seeks to enrich curriculum, but to fundamentally change how students perceive who they are as designers and what their role is. Highlighting the importance of personal histories and the socioecological context of the design endeavor, I ultimately aim for students to cultivate their own reflective practices. With this, I aspire to encourage students to explore beyond conventional ways of designing, through the development of a deep awareness of the impact, possibilities, privileges, and burdens of the designers they are in the places they design, to design under the logics of conviviality (Illich, 1980; Ortega Pallanez, 2023) and sustainment (Fry, 2020) rather than domination and extraction.

For this portion, I offer details of a semester-long assignment from a design studies course that focuses on students' reflections on how design shapes their personal histories, acknowledging these as an integral aspect of who they are as designers, thus influencing their ways of designing. This assignment was initially conceived for the 'Cultures' course: a class for all design undergraduates at Carnegie Mellon University, a U.S. classroom environment consisting of both national and international students, where there are myriad ways in which the students situate themselves in relation to both this U.S. context and their own, creating a cosmopolitan setting. The course, originally crafted by Ahmed Ansari, sought to provide a platform for critical examination of the multifaceted aspects of difference and the recursivity between their impact on design and design's impact on reinforcing difference. Upon assuming responsibility for the course alongside my colleague Hajira Qazi, we jointly redesigned the curriculum. As part of this redesign, I introduced an assignment called *cajita* (little box in Spanish) in

collaboration with Hajira Qazi, who provided essential input to refine and seamlessly integrate it into our curriculum. Inspired by Alberto López Pulido's work (2002) for commemorating the *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) to honor the students' ancestries, the *cajita* assignment invites design students to delve into their personal histories and present experiences involving meaning, purpose, struggles, and values that represent them personally and as designers through reflective analysis of personal artifacts.

Students choose these artifacts weekly, in relation with topics explored in a seminar format through themes such as labor, faith, disability status, race, gender, and sexuality, among others. By semester's end, students compile a collection of autobiographical artifacts that they package, hence the name *cajita* (little box). This packaging has taken the form of videos, tableaux, posters, or actual boxes, according to the designer's skillset and specialization. This collection of artifacts encapsulates their design influences, thereby engaging with the concept of ontological design—that is, contemplating how the design world contributes to shaping their personal histories, and how the perceptions and narratives of their past and present contribute to making certain futures possible, for instance by reinforcing or producing difference.

To illustrate the *cajita*-making process, consider the experiences of two students who embraced personal reflexivity.

One student used her makeup collection to engage in a discussion about the accessibility of beauty products. She critiqued the industry and designers' reliance on visual cues to communicate meaning, noting the non-descriptive, whimsical names of eye shadows such as 'spooky' or 'shook', or the smoothness of her lipsticks and hair products. This reflection led her to consider alternative sensory methods—such as touch and smell—for conveying color, extending her critique to other color-centric items like colored pencils. Her insights were drawn from class discussions on normativity and inclusivity in design.

Another student reflected on being an only child, a consequence of China's one-child policy, framing it as a design construct of an 'ideal' nation. She explored how this policy, through the regulation of women's bodies, discrimination, and penalization of those who had a second pregnancy, and her parents' conformity to the policy, sets her apart in other contexts. The latter, not only for being a single child, but for what it means to fit the expected mold in Chinese society. This reflection spurred thoughts on the compromises inherent in design when it aims at global appeal, covering aspects from ergonomics of various body proportions to balancing aesthetics against sustainability, added to her aspiration to contribute positively to the design field despite and in awareness of inherent biases.

The *cajita* is then a form of knowledge production about oneself allowing students to self-discover their stance within the design world and their

journey toward becoming designers. It promotes listening to how design has transformed their personal histories and acknowledges the array of design histories they bring forward. By embracing traditions, struggles, sorrows, joys, honoring family, and lived experiences, the *cajita* assignment challenges students not to shy away from narratives that exceed the conventional canon of design.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The existing dominant design paradigm has dramatically changed the world, not only through the artifacts we produce and their overconsumption, but also through the ways designers engage with knowledge and practice. Here, I highlight persistent challenges in changing unsustainable and exploitative design paths that harness capitalist conceptions of usefulness and productivity to serve globalized market demands. In contrast, the ontological and decolonial turns in design theory seek to reorient our designing toward sustaining life while questioning power, logics, ways of worldmaking, and modes of knowledge production. Yet, I underscore the recurring universalizing tendencies rooted in coloniality within contemporary decolonial discourse in design. Drawing on reflections from my practice as a design researcher and educator, I advocate for the importance of personal reflexivity to support multiple, more complex decolonial paths within and outside design academia. I argue that personal reflexivity is a critical initial step toward relational reflexivity in design—a reflexivity-*with*, a concept I explore in my research practice (Ortega Pallanez, 2023)—both of which are crucial forms of knowledge production in decoloniality in design.

As exemplified in the *cajita* project, this type of knowledge production—knowledge of one's becoming a designer and one's relations with place—is not focused on replicability, universality, or scalability. Nevertheless, it holds the potential to enact life-sustaining change by providing students with opportunities to develop critical and care-full (Williams, 2020) outlooks, not only about design and its worldmaking and world-destroying capacities, but also about design's relationship with coloniality and modernity, as well as with self-determination, community, and cosmologies. Thus, one of the purposes of this form of knowledge production is that students gain an understanding and awareness of the relationships design creates and reproduces of the universal and the particular. Therefore, I hope my students develop the sensibilities to recognize commonalities and differences with those they design with and the places in which the designing occurs.

For my fellow design practitioners and theorists, myself included, questions for further exploration and consideration arise that exceed the limits of this essay. What does it mean to teach in a cosmopolitan classroom? If replicability and the attainment of universal capacities are not the main goals, and instead nuance (the personal, place, relations) is the starting point, what new forms of rigor

could be achieved? How do we, as authors Zidulka and Kajzer Mitchell point out, keep in check the need to "question relationships of power and domination" (2018, p. 750) while maintaining the purpose of sustaining the web of life? What are the commonalities, excesses, dilemmas, and contradictions of emerging decolonial designs? These questions require awareness of the historical reproduction of relationships of domination and extraction by design, and the courage and mutual support to transform these tendencies. By intentionally reorienting our designing to change these tendencies and embracing the array of histories that shape our designing (including our personal histories), we can redirect our ways-of-being as designers toward conviviality and the sustainment of life.

I close with a brief reflection on my own design history. I still admire Lance Wyman's designs. I appreciate Wyman's ability to create symbols and position them in a particular design history. But I am also aware that those designs are the product of a specific era, a successful example of design under particular values and goals. While Wyman's designs offer valuable teachings, they—ultimately—do not represent the design ideal to aspire to. Thus, unlike many of my professors when I was a student, I do not encourage my design students to emulate figures like Wyman. Instead, I urge them to inquire into their personal histories, fostering a more nuanced understanding of themselves as designers. **D**

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