

Eſther Y. Kang

University of Wisconsin—Madison

School of Human Ecology

Design Studies Department

Madison, USA

eykang2@wisc.edu

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7294-484X>

essay

Legible for Whom?

Decentering the Dichotomy of Center and Periphery

Abstract

What does it mean to have and sustain a decolonial design practice in the aftermath of political rupture? With an emphasis on elevating the heterogeneity of scale, dynamics, and lived realities, this work focuses on the ways designers and technologists determine the orientation of their worldmaking practices. This work prompts designers and technologists to consider the diverse range of politics of a locale in their efforts toward decoloniality.

Keywords

decoloniality

postcolonial studies

design studies

critical practice

re-orientation

On the evening of July 19, 2024, Sandra musters the gumption to ask about the status of her flight at 9:30 pm local time, roughly three hours after its initial departure time. “Ma’am. I’m sorry, I do not know when your plane will take off. We are currently looking for available aircrew to staff your flight.” The gate agent’s response instills reassurance and apprehension as Sandra begrudgingly carries the empty update to her husband, Dimitri. “They don’t know, honey, but the agent gave me an 8oz bottle of water and a bag of crackers to snack on as we wait.” Dimitri sits expressionless as he glances at his wife before returning to his fixation on the airline’s smartphone app, hoping it provides an update on their flight from Houston, TX (U.S.) to their final destination. After an estimated four-hour delay, Sandra and Dimitri eventually make it out of the international airport around 11:30 PM and arrive at their final stop at 2:30 AM local time.

Compared to many travelers, Sandra and Dimitri’s arduous and exhausting journey nonetheless reflects their stroke of luck amid a global IT shutdown that began with a glitch in a software update that was initiated by the cybersecurity company, CrowdStrike, on July 19th. The faulty update affected users of Azure and Microsoft products. The *Blue Screen of Death* engulfed urgent and daily activity that extends beyond air travel, such as 9-1-1 operating systems, out-patient management, and cash retrieval from ATMs. Travelers were stranded in cities waiting for connecting flights for hours and, for some, days. Employees were locked out of their organization’s localized digitized systems. Medical staff resorted to alternative or postponed processes for urgent cases. Airlines used manual approaches to communicate with their customers. The global IT shutdown impacted multiple world regions, including Latin America, Asia, Europe, and the U.S. Mainstream U.S. media speculated that the recovery period could take several weeks due to more individualized requirements for a system reboot, amongst other needs. While the ramifications of a faulty software update were seen worldwide and in varying capacities, arguments that followed CrowdStrike’s malaise focused on object-based solutions, such as quality control or the sustainment of a globalized network. However, a glitch that embodied the earlier fears of what may come from the Y2K scare poses a broader question for design scholars committed to decoloniality: how will we respond differently when this happens again, and what is integral to fostering a decolonial design praxis in rapidly changing contexts?

In response to these provocations, I argue that designers who aim to incorporate the decolonial turn in their work need to account for two key considerations: first, de-center the false dichotomy of center/periphery; and second, elevate local heterogeneity as it relates to an international context. These considerations are vital because the dominant discourse in design scholarship remains concentrated in the U.S., Canada, and Western Europe. While these bodies of work

are important, it is critical to have a plural approach to practicing decolonial design, and thus, I outline the two considerations below.

DE-CENTER THE FALSE DICHOTOMY OF CENTER/PERIPHERY

The framework of the Global North and the Global South is a popularized method of analysis in design discourse when speaking specifically to the decolonial turn in design or broadly on power dynamics in an international setting. The delineation is made by scholars in design, critical computation, critical tech, and human-computer interaction (HCI) typically to illustrate an organization of labor, flow of materials, and concentration of power, amidst others. This dynamic, however, begins to establish a paradigm that materializes the assumption that the North is the center and the South, the periphery. The relativity to the Global North in one's relation and position in global structures and struggles is one that many scholars situated in the Global South contest. For instance, critical HCI scholar, Noopur Raval (2021), states that this false dichotomy privileges the normatives of the Global North by design, bringing to bear questions on the intentions of works that aim to elevate the experiences of communities in the Global South, particularly if the scholar is situated in the Global North. They include *for whom* is the invisible made visible, *for what reasons* is legibility significant, and *what type of impact* does this reveal have on the material conditions of workers in the Global South (Ansari, 2019; Raval, 2021). This false dichotomy of the North and South determines whose gaze is held and for whom the labor of legibility is provided (Raval, 2021). An active de-centering of this dichotomy makes room for a plural and situated sensibility in analyzing the norms, dynamics, and local definitions of freedom that lead to tangible, material change, rooted in place.

ELEVATE LOCAL HETEROGENEITY AS IT RELATES TO AN INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

Raval (2021) states that models that de-center the Global North and Global South dichotomy exist, such as the South-South Solidarity Network and Indian Ocean Studies. By drawing from current models for fracturing hegemonic practices, Raval (2021) states that design and technology scholars can approach their decolonial design praxis from the standpoint of the locale that they are focusing on. Redrawing the lines of what constitutes design and ways to approach contextual design can also be seen in the collaborative works of design scholars Joyce Yee and Yoko Akama (2023), through their Designing Entangled Social Innovation in the Asia-Pacific (DESIAP) network and the recent publication of the same name. DESIAP aims to resituate ways to design and approaches, to measure their success through a focus on the autonomy of regions across the Asia-Pacific, coupled with the elevation of the incredible heterogeneity that resides across locales. The inten-

tion of this work is not to heighten the problematic use of area studies, arguing for plurality in design or designing for plurality, nor is it to prompt the isolation that locales often adhere to when working in the field of locally-based design. Moreover, this argument does not further resound the notion of relativity under the guise of ‘many centers exist’: a false sense of autonomy due to the unevaluated power dynamics of the contemporary and the *longue durée*. The use of this guise overlooks the material impacts of multiple power dynamics, counter-acts of contestation, and subversions of a status quo. Beyond reductive statements that sustain hegemonic powers, the position of this work is to initiate a need to demystify the popularized use of the North and the South, whether positioned as a Center or a Periphery. Moving beyond this false dichotomy is further instigated by the elevation of a de-romanticized depiction of non-western regions, yet including the impacts of the *longue durée* of political ruptures. Coupling these two approaches foregrounds the possibilities of poly-justice: one that is historicized, situated, and community-based.

CONCLUSION

The events that Saundra and Demitri endured during the global IT crash will return to design and technology discourse. From the question of scale, agency, and cohabitation, design theories—such as the decolonial turn—will continue to confront the question of practice in these rapidly changing contexts. Encoded in these lines of inquiry is also a call to action for a method of analysis for thinking about design practice, theory, and pedagogy through a de-romanticized and demystified manner. As art historian, Sanjukta Sunderason, states:

We hear the word ‘decolonial’ everywhere, but the moral charge of the word often overrides concrete methods of analysis. Yet this is what we need in academia if we truly want to decolonize knowledge [and design]. The decolonial is not just an emotion—it has a history and a genealogy, and it should have a method of study. (Sunderason, 2023)

In this call to action, the design community is asked to consider the precision in their gestures towards decoloniality. With that, I conclude with a set of questions to guide the self-examination of one’s practice and the ways one situates and demystifies their work. *What colonial power... which form of imperialism are we aiming to dismantle, and towards what type of decolonization do we seek to reorient our worldmaking practices?* □

Note: The anecdote in this essay was pieced together through empirical observation of travelers within my personal network.

REFERENCES

- AKAMA, Y., & YEE, J. (2023). *Entanglements of Designing Social Innovation in the Asia-Pacific*. Routledge.
- ANSARI, A. (2019). Decolonizing Design through the Perspectives of Cosmological Others: Arguing for an Ontological Turn in Design Research and Practice. *XRDS: Crossroads, The ACM Magazine for Students*, 26(2), 16–19. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3368048>
- RAVAL, N. (2021). Interrupting Invisibility in a Global World. *ACM Interactions*, 28(5), 27–31. <https://doi.org/10.1145/346925>
- SUNDERASON, S. (2023, May 19). *Freedom by Other Means: Art as Archives of Decolonisation*. Third Text's Online Forum / Living Archives. <http://www.thirdtext.org/livingarchives-sunderason>