

## Essay

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# SLEEP FASTER, WE NEED THE PILLOWS

• Danah Abdulla

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‘Design can pivot from commercial pragmatism to a broader sphere of social influence, systemic critique and reconditioning of the present.’

• SulSolSal

Sleep Faster, We Need the Pillows

I would like to begin by defining what I mean by the term decolonisation. Decolonisation itself means different things to different people, including within the Decolonising Design (DD) research group, of which I am a founding member. Moreover, what is meant by decolonisation changes based on context.

Decoloniality is a subversion and transformation of Eurocentric thinking and knowledge; a knowledge produced *with* and *from* rather than about. Decoloniality shatters the familiar; it makes people question; and calls for creating something new rather than an additive inclusion into a certain field. Particularly, I see decoloniality here as coupled with intersectionality—whereas Patricia Collins<sup>1</sup> states, ‘race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate ... as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities’.

Most importantly, what decolonisation should not become is another descriptor following the same route as sustainability for example. When looking at decolonisation in design education, it is easy to see

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how academic institutions quickly cling on to them because they are in fashion, without providing support for genuine efforts from students and academics in introducing these ideas. The process itself becomes less thoughtful, and potentially, dangerous—stripping decoloniality of its criticality. We must be careful not to move into what Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang call the ‘too-easy adoption of decolonizing discourse (making decolonization a metaphor)’.<sup>2</sup> The danger of decolonisation becoming a metaphor is that it will be rendered obsolete. Worse, some will attempt to quantify it, but decolonisation is not ‘measured’ and a slow process that will take years or decades. Action now? Decolonisation is hard work and results cannot be ‘prototyped’ and packaged into an easily digestible toolkit overnight. Moreover, keeping in mind my definition of decolonisation, which does not consist of a one-size-fits-all universal definition, we should be careful with the idea of a global engagement and the limits to this. Decolonisation depends on context, and as many have argued, the ‘global’ is an uneven concept, skewed towards the Global North.

Amsterdam, July 2018

SulSolSal

Interview

Hannes Bernard and Guido Giglio make up SulSolSal—a design research practice based in Amsterdam, Cape Town and São Paulo. After graduating from the Sandberg Instituut in Amsterdam, the duo has been combining cultural, historic and economic research to create communal spaces, publications, video installations and performances. They are specifically interested in the complex relationship between design, economics and society, and reflecting on the spectacle of global development. For the 4th Istanbul Design Biennial—*A School of Schools*, they are curating the *Staying Alive* installation based on their research over the past two years.

→ SulSolSal (SSS) in conversation with Gabrielle Kennedy (GK).

GK/ You talk about neo-survivalism. What is it and is the term used in a literal sense for the design biennial?

SSS/ Neo-survivalism is a term we use to describe the growing number



RESPONSIBILITY—  
THE ONUS BELONGS TO?

Another aspect of discussing decolonising education is the question of responsibility. Specifically, how acutely do we feel a sense of responsibility to engage with these matters? As an academic—teaching at the undergraduate level—I feel it is my duty to engage the students with these ideas. This comes from my definition of curriculum and my teaching practice. As I defined decolonisation, I will clarify my definition of a curriculum, as it is too easy to equate a curriculum with a syllabus.

I view all education as political, even education that restricts critical thought and action and supports the status quo. Drawing on ideas from thinkers such as Catherine Cornbleth, Shirley Grundy, A.V. Kelly, Lawrence Stenhouse, Saadallah Wannous, bell hooks, Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux and Ira Shor, I see education as a socialising experience, one that deals with reality. Teaching is a way to educate people who have been depoliticised or are politically ignorant and helps make the people who make society, to train their critical thinking. Curriculum is a process, it

views students as active learners and concerns itself with how they learn, and their growth and development as human beings. The role of the educator is to encourage dialogue and 'conversations between, and with, people in the situation out of which may come thinking and action'<sup>3</sup> while constantly evaluating their process and its outcomes. Therefore, the educator is central to the teaching process. Taking it further and drawing on curriculum as praxis, this model is committed to emancipation where educators are meant to empower students and enable opportunities for transformation.

Now how well I accomplish this sense of responsibility is up for debate, but what is important is for me to be a reflexive educator and identify how students explicitly and implicitly experience the ideas I have introduced. I also feel a sense of responsibility being a member of DD, but as a group, we are careful not to be seen as another canon or as the only people entitled to speak on decolonisation within design. When it comes to discussing responsibility however, the onus for this work often falls on academics of colour. Colleagues and

management 'support' you in this endeavour, but are not willing to take up the process themselves. Nevertheless, the responsibility belongs to everyone, including those in management positions who have the power to influence decisions at higher levels within the university.

I have observed academic—whose task is to expand their learning and who possess the cultural capital to do so—approach the subject in two ways: either to claim ignorance on the subject, washing their hands of any responsibility, or, to quote my DD colleague Matt Kiem, 'make the token gesture of learning a new set of terms or adding a new different texts or examples to the curriculum' without invoking 'a sense of purpose [or] dedication that implies a far more radical and substantive redesigning of the dominant cultures of design practice, research, and education ...'<sup>4</sup>. To truly decolonise the institution, the onus should not fall on people of colour—those of us who are addressing these issues in our research and practices—but it should be a mission taken up by all.

Decolonising the curriculum is not without challenges. It may seem

as though it is supported without question, but there are those reluctant to discussing it, feeling removed from it as it does not affect them, those that equate it with 'inclusion' and 'diversity', and those that argue we have more important things to talk about (one only needs to search #decolonisingdesign to get a sense of the differing opinions amongst the design communities, or the PhD-design list for overt hostility towards the subject).

A main challenge of decolonising education is to understand decolonial politics. Too often, circles of people committed to progressive causes and decolonisation exclude Palestine from their agendas. This is referred to as Progressive Except for Palestine (PEP).<sup>5</sup> Can one be anti-racist, anti-imperialist and pro-Indigenous sovereignty and support Israel's occupation of Palestinian land, its discrimination of Palestinian citizens of Israel and the denial of Palestinian refugees right of return? Failing to 'recognise the plight of the Palestinians as a gross injustice and a violation of a people's human rights'<sup>6</sup> cannot be in solidarity with decolonial politics.

of leisure, professional and lifestyle activities and interests that are coalescing around a shared hobby of surviving the twenty-first century. Mapping these activities spans from hopeful nostalgia to total paranoia. It's used literally in the biennial installation, but is also framed as symptomatic of the wider typology of crises in social infrastructure, housing, health and changing labour conditions.

GK/ Survival as a hobby!?

SSS/ Neoliberal capitalism has quantified our entire existence as work, leaving only our leisure or hobby time to pursue the basic urge for self-preservation. For instance, within mainstream media, edutainment channels such as the Discovery Channel and National Geographic—once home to soft-spoken nature documentaries—now run extreme survival reality shows back to back.

GK/ Can you explain the link between crisis and learning?

SSS/ Historically, social crisis has been the domain of government. As trust in state institutions including schools has eroded, individuals are increasingly taking on the responsibility to learn about, prepare for and react to an uncertain future themselves.

GK/ You position yourselves as design researchers; what is your methodology?

SSS/ Although we have formal academic backgrounds, we prefer to operate outside the confines of academia. We work in an interdisciplinary way across theory, social research, film-making and performance, mapping pieces together without a predetermined output in mind. Incorporating aspects of artistic practice, we're constantly collecting, sketching, making narratives, scenarios, images and installations.

GK/ Tell me more about the installation you're presenting in Istanbul.



## PRAISING DISCOMFORT

Discussions on decoloniality are not meant to be comfortable. Perhaps this *discomfort with being uncomfortable* is the reason why they remain so 'safe' within design circles. The designer who continues to believe that design is neutral and divorces design from politics cannot have a meaningful engagement with decoloniality.

Engaging in decolonial work is both rewarding and exhausting. It can be detrimental to one's mental health, especially without care. The support of colleagues—and here I want to stress genuine support, a sense of how can I help and to mean these words—is crucial. As is the support of students, and their curiosity, narratives, ideas and criticisms that encourage us to keep learning, to produce work and carry on despite the hardships. When we launched DD in June 2016, with the premise that design theory, practice, and pedagogy as a whole are not geared towards delivering the kinds of knowledge and understanding that are adequate to addressing longstanding systemic issues of power, the positive reactions we have received outweigh the neg-

ative. Negative responses generally came from a club of predominantly male design academics who feel threatened by a group of young and critical researchers who think of design and designing differently. It appears that this defensive reaction also comes from a misunderstanding of decolonisation where they feel they have no part to play in the discussion and that it equates only to de-westernisation. One only needs to look at the media backlash faced by student initiatives such as Decolonising Our Minds at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) where the calls for expanding the Philosophy curriculum and challenge the political, intellectual and structural legacies of colonialism was interpreted as an attempt to remove all European thinkers from education.

Another side of the coin is within more progressive circles of academics, designers and artists attempting to engage with decolonial discourse but repeating the same theorists over and over. Talking about decolonising the curriculum and drawing on the same—albeit more progressive—European/North American authors does not address the issues of the politics

of citation. The effort to go beyond the canon creates another canon that remains Eurocentric in scope. It is vital to *dig deeper* into our references: who is writing specifically from the locations and experiences we are referring to? How do we challenge the dominant structures of knowledge and perspectives and acknowledge the importance of location?

## CHALLENGES OF THE POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE KIND

Engaging in decolonial work is a mix of positive and negative reactions. Drawing specifically on reactions to the DD platform, the supportive comments come from students and academics who feel that this platform is a necessity that called out design and design institutions when others would not. This is important as it provides a space to begin thinking about these ideas, and questioning the issues with contemporary design discourse. Moreover, the platform allows those working on the margins, who do not quite fit in, a place to share their ideas. The content that otherwise might not have found a home at conferences, in journals, in design magazines, etc., becomes accessi-

ble and available, and allows people searching for alternative discussions to engage with it.

The most disheartening challenges are from the direction of the institution itself. As academics, we require the support of our institutions and of our fellow faculty members. Particularly as—within a UK context where I work—our jobs become more precarious, and we are meant to see students as consumers and they view us as service providers. Degrees become about gaining specific skills and completing assignments rather than seeing every session as one that contributes to student learning, to engagement with the ideas presented, and to encourage them to question. Furthermore, educators wanting to engage with ideas of decolonisation must steer their teaching practice towards critical pedagogy. But this form is at odds with the neoliberalisation of universities.

While many universities pay lip service to decolonisation, their definition appears to be about the token inclusion of sprinkling a few names in the marketing friendly diversity and inclusivity discussion. As DD wrote in our editorial statement:

SSS/ *Staying Alive* is a curatorial framing of our research from the past two years, which ranges from DIY prepping hoarders and luxury bunkers to wartime recipe Pinterest groups, nootropic supplementation for efficiency and total food replacement therapies. Showing alongside this research, we've curated a selection of work by other designers that reflect a broader topology of crisis.

GK/ What does this intersection highlight?

SSS/ Our research shows real people and companies designing their life choices around the supposedly logical trajectory of the present, namely, a future of scarcity. In this scenario, the role of designers would be to manage that scarcity.

GK/ This is what characterises most design projects today.

SSS/ No, that's the traditional understanding of design, which is to create a product or a service with utility and commercial value.

GK/ So there is another paradigm?

SSS/ Yes. It rebukes scarcity as being inevitable, rather considering it an ecology designed by existing power structures. What the designers in our installation propose is that design can be about reclaiming agency, bolstering protest, and evoking alternatives.

GK/ It sounds idealistic.

SSS/ Yes, it demands a different world. With its links to mass media and popular culture on the one hand as well as science and technology on the other, design can pivot from commercial pragmatism to a broader sphere of social influence, systemic critique and reconditioning of the present.

GK/ You're involved in design education in the Netherlands; do you see this coming out in the design produced there?

SSS/ We see the potential for this and attempt to advocate to our



It is not sufficient for design institutions to simply include a greater diversity of actors or perspectives. This only goes to serve a delaying and off-setting demands for radical systemic change. While we support and defend measures to include marginalised subjects and our/their concerns in spaces from which we/they have been excluded or remain precarious, we also believe there is little point to diversifying institutions, practices, and processes that ultimately sustain colonial imperatives. Our aim is not to direct our efforts to prop up existing power structures, or to sustaining them through ameliorative measures. Rather, our aim should be nothing less than to seek the radical transfiguration of these structures through the critical eye of the programmatic imagination that dares to identify the possibilities and conditions that will give us alternatives to the now.<sup>7</sup>

In the UK, most universities claim that statistically what they term Black Asian and Minority Ethnic students underperform. Some argue for diversifying the content, while most attempt to address the issue through more one to one tutorials. However, the mere token inclusion addresses

symptoms, not the causes of issues. Why are these students not performing as well as others, and why do they fail to connect with the content being taught? It is not only a content issue, but also a matter of *who* is teaching and *how*. These are the effects of what is termed the hidden curriculum, which refers to the unwritten, unofficial, and often unintended lessons and values that students learn. This is why viewing the curriculum as a totality is crucial, because denying the effects of the hidden curriculum means we equate a curriculum with a syllabus and therefore plan it by considering only content and the body of knowledge. Universities should not only look at their content, but address their hiring practices by recruiting faculty that better represents the students, and faculty whose research is more attuned with contemporary concerns and relevant to the direction design education should take.

#### RÉVOLUTION JUSQU'À LA VICTOIRE

There is much more to this discussion that I have just stated in this essay. It has only touched briefly on an important discussion that should be taking

place not only within the confines of the academy but within industry. The work that remains is momentous, and to conclude, I would like to end with a quote from the late Palestinian intellectual Hisham Sharabi:

Waiting for the revolution to change the status quo is not a revolutionary stance. Truly radical action will undertake the difficult task of addressing feasible possibilities: possibilities to be found in the structures and institutions of the status quo, not in a utopian vision.<sup>8</sup>

This essay is an expanded version of a talk given at the event Decolonising the Institution hosted at the Royal College of Art in January 2018.

- 1 Collins, P., 'Intersectionality's Definitional Dilemmas', in *Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 2015, 2.
- 2 Tuck, E. and Yang, K.W., 'Decolonization is not a metaphor', in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 1, 2012, 3.
- 3 Smith, M.K., *Curriculum theory and practice, the encyclopaedia of informal education*, 1996. Available at [infed.org/mobi/curriculum-theory-and-practice/](http://infed.org/mobi/curriculum-theory-and-practice/) (Accessed 18 February 2015).
- 4 Schultz, T., Abdulla, D., Ansari, A., Canli, E., Keshavarz, M., Kiem, M., Prado de O. Martins, L. and Vieira de Oliveira, P., 'What is at stake with decolonizing design? A Roundtable', in *Design and Culture*, 10, 2018, 82.
- 5 Elia, N., 'Justice is indivisible: Palestine as a feminist issue', in *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 6, 2017 45–63.
- 6 Elia, 'Justice is indivisible', 47.
- 7 Decolonising Design, 'Editorial Statement' in *Decolonising Design*, 2016. Available at [decolonisingdesign.com/statements/2016/editorial/](http://decolonisingdesign.com/statements/2016/editorial/) (Accessed 1 Dec. 2017).
- 8 Sharabi, H., *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 151–152.

students that political design is not about politics but about the critical understanding of your personal position and agency. However, there's an uncomfortable tension between the power of so-called Dutch design and the state of permanent crisis that defines the Global South. In Brazil there is no market value for critical design, and in Europe there are fewer extreme crises to tackle.

GK/ What do you mean by 'the power of Dutch design'?

SSS/ The Netherlands doesn't really have any disasters, at least not on the scale of the rest of the world. Yet the sheer scale of the design infrastructure—the funding, schools, museums, institutions, markets and media exposure—cannot be contained within the borders of this small country.

GK/ Is this tension why you've centred your practice between Cape Town and São Paulo in Amsterdam?

SSS/ In Brazil or South Africa, this design has no inherent value other than it being recognised as coming from aspirational Europe. Yet ironically, these are places with many more problematics to be addressed, but the source of the infrastructure and problems are displaced. For us Amsterdam offers access to a cultural infrastructure that facilitates our deeper engagement with critical design.

GK/ Any solutions?

SSS/ Solutions are a European concept. Problems and solutions are constantly changing places based on market value.