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A Manifesto for Decolonising Design

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Much of the academic and professional discourse within the design disciplines over the last century has been bereft of a critical reflection on the politics of design practice, and on the politics of the artifacts, systems and practices that designerly activity produces. Our premise is that— notwithstanding important and valued exceptions—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.

These issues are products of modernity and its ideologies, regimes, and institutions reiterating, producing and exerting continued colonial power upon the lives of oppressed, marginalised, and subaltern peoples in both the ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ world. This planet, shared and co-inhabited by a plurality of peoples, each inhabiting different worlds, each orienting themselves within and towards their environments in different ways, and with different civilisational histories, is being undermined by a globalised system of power that threatens to flatten and eradicate ontological and epistemological difference, rewriting histories and advance visions of a future for a privileged few at the expense of their human and nonhuman others.

To date, mainstream design discourse has been dominated by a focus on Anglocentric/Eurocentric ways of seeing, knowing, and acting in the world, with little attention being paid to alternative and marginalised discourses from the non Anglo-European sphere, or the nature and consequences of design-as-politics today. This narrowness of horizons and deficiency in criticality is a reflection of the limitations of the institutions within which design is studied and practiced, as well as of the larger socio-political systems that design is institutionally integrated into.

We believe that a sharper lens needs to be brought to bear on non-western ways of thinking and being, and on the way that class, gender, race, etc. issues are designed today. We understand the highlighting of these issues through practices and acts of design, and the (re)design of institutions, design practices and design studies (efforts that always occur under conditions of contested political interests) to be a pivotal challenge in the process of decolonisation. We also want to move beyond academic discourse to critique and think around the ideas and practices that circulate through the work of professional designers embedded in the various sectors of production that stimulate and sustain the modern/colonial world economy.

Our goal is ontological rather than additive change. 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 offsetting demands for radical systemic change. While we support and defend measures to include marginalized 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.

Our objective—as design scholars and practitioners—is to transform the very terms of present-day design studies and research. Designers can put to task their skills, techniques, and mentalities to designing futures aimed at advancing ecological, social, and technological conditions where multiple worlds and knowledges, involving both humans and nonhumans, can flourish in mutually enhancing ways. For us, decolonisation is not simply one more option or approach among others within design discourse. Rather, it is a fundamental imperative to which all design endeavors must be oriented.

It is with the aim of providing an outlet for voices from the fringes, the voices of the marginal and the suppressed in design discourse, that we have opened this platform. We welcome all of those who work silently and surely on the edges and outskirts of the discipline to join and contribute to conversations that question and critique the politics of design practice today, where we can discuss strategies and tactics through which to engage with more mainstream discourse, and where we can collectively experiment with alternatives and reformulations of contemporary practice.

We encourage and seek decentralised dialogues, in which different voices can coexist in their difference rather than in an assimilated narrative. In this platform we welcome:

- Contributions from designers working at the intersections of materiality and culture, postcoloniality, decoloniality, gender studies, race studies, and other areas of human thought and action which seek to analyse, question and challenge the relations of power in the world today;
- New curatorial practices of designerly knowledge, that seek to challenge and disrupt colonial understandings in the field and develop knowledge and understanding of how designs for decolonisation might be presented, discussed, published, disseminated, and so on;
- Reviews, interviews, debates, podcasts and other forms of discussion and debate beyond the confines of academic language. We also invite formats that are generally devalued within academic contexts such as visual essays, audio papers, performance works, etc.
- Possibilities for the dissemination of critical thinking in design well beyond the canons of the discipline (e.g. design studies and/as epistemic disobedience);
- Critical pieces written originally in languages other than English; as well as potential translations into languages other than English;
- Critical pieces written by researchers, practitioners, independent scholars, and students in the process of completing their degrees and/or who feel they are marginalised or poorly supported by academic institutions. In other words, we welcome incomplete ideas, work-in-progress, and other forms of dealing with the questions above outlined, thus amplifying discourses outside the remit of institutes, which may or may not be projects enfolded in academic work.

Moreover, we seek to connect with already existing endeavors within and beyond the design field for a decolonisation of not only academia, but all professional practices and pedagogies, to connect and foster exchanges of knowledge that speak from, cross, and remain in the borderlands of design and coloniality. Through this platform, and in collaboration with like minded others, we hope that we can make a substantial commitment to contributing to the continued existence, vitality and diversity of human presence on this planet.

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Notes

Decolonising Design Collective is made up of Danah Abdulla, Ahmed Ansari, Ece Canlı, Mahmoud Keshavarz, Matthew Kiem, Pedro Oliveira, Luiza Prado, Tristan Schultz. This piece of writing initially appeared as an Editorial Statement at <http://www.decolonisingdesign.com/statements/2016/editorial/> and has since been updated and edited.

References

Decolonising Design Collective. (Revised 2017, June 27). *A Manifesto for Decolonising Design*. Retrieved from <https://www.decolonisingdesign.com/statements/2016/editorial/>

