

# Imagining Otherwise

## Danah Abdulla

86 This concept of 'otherwise' is a space where, as postcolonial scholar Cristina Rojas has written 'different narratives [are brought] into contact with each other, allow[ing] the marginalized to reveal their own interpretation, and opens space for accommodation, contradiction, and resistance.'<sup>1</sup>

Here today, I do not offer a solution; there are more questions than answers.

To speak of decolonizing design, we must understand the term decoloniality. But there are different definitions of what decoloniality means.<sup>2</sup>

1 C. Rojas, 'International Political Economy/Development Otherwise', *Globalizations*, 4: 4, 2007, pp.573–587, p. 585.

2 See T. Schultz, D. Abdulla, A. Ansari, E. Canlı, M. Keshavarz, M. Kiem, O de Prado. L. Martins, and P. Vieira de Oliveira, 2018. What is at stake with decolonizing design? A Roundtable, *Design and Culture*, 10(1), pp.81–101.

Decoloniality is based on context. What is defined as decolonizing in a place like the Arab region is different than speaking of decolonizing the institution here in Lithuania, or decolonizing in South Asia for example.

## Historical Grounding of Decoloniality

Decolonial theory emerged from the work of Anibal Quijano, María Lugones (who developed a concept of the coloniality of gender), Walter D. Mignolo, and Gloria Anzaldúa (who discusses the borderlands, about the hybrid spaces she inhabits as neither fully Mexican nor fully American) to name but a few. The ideas emerged first in Latin America in the 1920s, and by way of dependency theory and philosophy of liberation that spread all over Latin America in the 1970s.

Decoloniality has its historical grounding in the Bandung Conference of 1955, in which 29 countries from Asia and Africa gathered. The main goal of the conference:

was to find a common ground and vision for the future that was neither capitalism nor communism. That way was 'decolonization'. It was not 'a third way' à la Giddens, but a delinking from the two major Western macro-narratives (socialism and capitalism). The conference of the Non-Aligned countries followed suit in 1961 [... where] several Latin American countries joined forces with Asian and African countries (Mignolo, 2011, p.273).<sup>3</sup>

The legacy of the Conference is that participants chose to *delink* – this means not accepting the options

3 W.D. Mignolo, 'Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: on (de) coloniality, border thinking and epistemic disobedience', *Postcolonial Studies*, 14: 3, 2011, pp.273–283.

available to them. They said neither capitalism nor communism. The option was decolonization. The conference showed that another way is possible, however, such delinking remained within the domain of the political and the economic.

The term decoloniality should be understood as 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.

Decolonial theory however does not aim to be another hegemonic project, therefore, it is meant to be an option amongst a plurality of options.

I see decoloniality here as coupled with intersectionality – where ‘race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate... as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities.’ As Patricia Collins writes, Intersectionality’s purpose is to:

analyze social inequality, power, and politics. Because not only understanding but challenging social inequality have also been central to the mission of intersectionality, the interrelationships among social inequality, power, and politics have assumed distinctive forms within this knowledge project.<sup>4</sup>

It is therefore important to acknowledge, to quote my decolonizing design colleague Luiza Prado, that:

4 P. Collins, ‘Social Inequality, Power, and Politics: Intersectionality and American Pragmatism in Dialogue’, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 26: 2, 2012, pp.442–457, p. 449.

It is not enough to shift our focus from a Northern- and Western-centric perspective to one that is Southern-centric. We must also address the masculinist structures of power that govern knowledge production in design. The work of decolonization requires a profound consideration of how gender hierarchies established by coloniality affect our perception of what counts as valid knowledge, and who generates that knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

To think decolonially and to be an ally in decoloniality is also to acknowledge and understand that Israel is a settler colonial state through its ongoing land theft and repression of the Palestinian people. As Bhandar and Ziadah argue, The Zionist project ‘is rooted in dispossession, and maintained through a sophisticated matrix of apartheid policies against Palestinians everywhere, not just in the territories occupied in 1967’.<sup>6</sup> This is an important statement as often what happens with discussions on decoloniality is what the Diaspora Palestinian writer and political commentator Nada Elia calls ‘progressive except for Palestine.’<sup>7</sup>

## Objective Knowledge

René Descartes’ famous phrase ‘I think therefore I am’ (je pense, donc je suis) means the ‘I’ is non-situated as it distinguishes between mind and body. It claims to produce objective knowledge, and to do this, you

5 T. Schultz, D. Abdulla, A. Ansari, E. Canli, M. Keshavarz, M. Kiem, O de Prado, L. Martins, and P. Vieira de Oliveira, ‘What is at stake with decolonizing design? A Roundtable’. *Design and Culture*, 10: 1, 2018, pp.81–101, p. 79.

6 Bhandar, B. and Ziadah, R., 2016. *Acts and Omissions: Framing Settler Colonialism in Palestine Studies*. Jadaliyya. Available at: <<https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32857/Acts-and-Omissions-Framing-Settler-Colonialism-in-Palestine-Studies>> [Accessed 20 Jul. 2018].

7 N. Elia, ‘Justice is indivisible: Palestine as a feminist issue’, Justice is indivisible: Palestine as a feminist issue, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 6(1), 2018, pp.45–63.

are not situated – you are beyond a location, beyond a body, beyond power relations and you claim neutrality in knowledge. In his view, reality is composed of discrete ‘thinking things’ and ‘extended things’. Humans – but not all of them – were thinking things, and nature was full of extended things. The ruling classes saw women, people of colour, and Indigenous people as extended and not thinking beings. This begins the invention of our contemporary ideas of nature and of society. And nature is something to be controlled. This outlook shaped modern logics of power and thought.

This is a mythological narrative of Western sciences that pretends to be beyond any particularity. To claim that research is neutral or objective is to claim that knowledge is ‘unconditioned by its body or space location.’<sup>8</sup> Knowledge becomes hidden, because you’re not supposed to come to a space thinking as a gay person, a female, a black person, you are not supposed to situate yourself, because if you do, you are biased. Therefore, as Puerto Rican sociologist Ramón Grosfoguel argues, unlike other traditions of knowledge, the western is a point of view that does not assume itself as a point of view. In this way, it hides its epistemic location, paving the ground for its claims about universality, neutrality and objectivity. This is what Donna Haraway calls ‘the god-trick’ that is the conquering gaze from nowhere.

## Colonial Matrix of Power

For decolonial theorists, using the term decolonial emphasises that we are not past (post) colonial, and that only the active agency of the colonized will complete the process of eradicating the most harmful legacies of

8 R. Grosfoguel, ‘The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16<sup>th</sup> Century’, *Human Architecture: Journal of the Sociology of Self-Knowledge*, 11:1, 2013, pp.73–90, p. 76.

the colonial and neo-colonial eras. By the coloniality of power and colonial power matrix, decolonial theorists have come to mean the structures and institutions of power, control and hegemony that emerged with the modern world of colonialism starting in 1492 and are still at large. The colonial matrix of power contains four interrelated domains: control of subjectivity and knowledge, authority, gender and sexuality, and economy. It affects all dimensions of social existence such as sexuality, authority, subjectivity and labor.<sup>9</sup>

The term modernity/coloniality is used by decolonial theorists as it is argued that the modernity that Europe takes as the context for its own being is, in fact, so deeply imbricated in the structures of European colonial domination over the rest of the world that it is impossible to separate the two: hence, modernity/coloniality. So we could say that globalisation is merely a continuation of coloniality. Colonisation did not end in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

As Jason W. Moore and Raj Patel have written recently in their considerations of the Capitalocene, their way of characterising our new geological era that is not an ecological emergency resulting from humans doing what humans do (i.e. the Anthropocene) but rather a direct and active consequence of contemporary capitalism:

The rise of capitalism gave us the idea not only that society was relatively independent of the web of life but also that most women, Indigenous peoples, slaves, and colonized peoples everywhere were not fully human and thus not fully members of society. These were people who were not – or were only

9 See for instance Mignolo, W.D., ‘INTRODUCTION’, *Cultural Studies*, 21(2), 2007, pp.155–167; A. Quijano, ‘Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America’, *International Sociology*, 15(2), 2000, pp.215–232.

barely – human. They were part of Nature, treated as social outcasts – they were cheapened.<sup>10</sup>

## Thinking of History and Who Contributes to History

Edward Said's *Orientalism* opened up the question of the production of knowledge by interrogating the Orient/Occident divide.<sup>11</sup> Said unsettled the terrain of any argument concerned with the 'universal' by demonstrating how the idea of the universal was based both on an analytic division of the world and an omission of that division. This double displacement removed the 'other' from the production of an effective history of modernity. History became the product of the West in its actions upon others. At the same time, it displaced those actions in the idea that modernity grew and originated in the West and therefore removed the very question of the 'other' in History.

Decolonization is the subversion and transformation of that which exists. It is not about erasing every trace of colonial culture: people often inhabit the language of those that colonized them. So it is not to be thought of as *dewesternisation*.

Janet Abu-Lughod's book *Before European Hegemony* calls into question the Eurocentric view of the Dark Ages.<sup>12</sup> Her work reinterprets the beginnings of the global economic revolution. The roots of the modern trade system were not set in the 16<sup>th</sup> century but in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

10 Patel, R. and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*. London: Verso, 2018, p. 24.

11 E. Said, *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, 2003[1979].

12 J. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

For Abu-Lughod, the world already in the medieval period constituted a global system, but no one area was dominating, every country had equal footing. The system collapsed at the time of the Black Death in 1350, allowing Europe to become the key player 100 years later and pushing others into the periphery. This period marked the rise of the Spanish and Portuguese empires and their construction of massive New World production systems, worked by coerced Indigenous and African labour. These transformations were key elements of a planetary shift in the global centre of power and production from Asia to the North Atlantic.<sup>13</sup>

If we turn to the Edward Said quote – 'Modern Western Culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees' – it does a good job of demonstrating this movement referred to by Abu-Lughod. The first paper mill in the Abbasid Empire was built in Samarkand in present day Uzbekistan. This was on the Silk Route between China and the West. The Muslim army defeated the Chinese in 751 on the banks of the river Talas and expanded the Muslim empire further east. What is important is that some of the Chinese prisoners of war were knowledgeable in paper making, which the Chinese invented in the second century CE. These prisoners were taken to Samarkand and built the paper mill.<sup>14</sup>

This is similar to how the glass blowers of Murano in Venice were due to the conquest of Constantinople in 1204 by the Fourth Crusade. This opened Venice to the practices of the glass producers as many of the craftsmen were actually Byzantines displaced from Constantinople. Here exile plays a role in the development of an important industry for the West.

13 R. Patel and Jason W. Moore, *ibid*.

14 See J. Al-Khalili, *The House of Wisdom*. 2010, New York: Penguin.

I want to now draw on the example of chemistry to discuss the erasure of knowledge or what is considered knowledge. The following quote relates to the work of Geber the Alchemist (also known as Jabir ibn Hayyan), the father of chemistry:

[T]o those who will suggest that chemistry did not truly come of age until Renaissance Europeans such as Robert Boyle and Antoine Lavoisier, I would argue that their definition of chemistry as a proper experimental science is too rigid. Of course, the Islamic chemists were way off the beam with many of their theories. But science does not begin with the latest, most accurate, theories. For how then should we treat Newton's law of gravitation? We now know it to be based on the erroneous belief that the gravitational force acts instantaneously between bodies, however far apart they are. This magical 'action at a distance' was replaced by the more accurate description of gravity as a curvature of space-time in Einstein's General Theory of Relativity. But no one claims that Newton's work on gravity is not science. Indeed, it is rightly considered as one of the very greatest scientific discoveries in history.<sup>15</sup>

Jabir, according to Al-Khalili, combined in his work laboratory chemistry with mystical and 'bizarre' notions and obscure writing that is often difficult to follow. Despite this, he did turn chemistry away from its origins in superstition and into an experimental science. Some European scholars, such as J.M. Stallman in 1922, debated his credibility, claiming that his chemistry was too advanced and could not possibly have been attributed to him.

15 Al-Khalili, *ibid*, 2010, p.65.

## Eurocentrism

Returning to this question – thinking of history and who contributes to history – we can think of the countless contributions of the Islamic world to the European Enlightenment. For instance, the book *Qanun (Principle of Medicine)* by Ibn Sina (or Avicenna in Latin) from 1025, was translated into Latin and other languages and was the main textbook for European medicine until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Some consider that pharmacy as an institution is an Islamic invention, as the making of drugs from medical plants and the study of their effects on the human body was done extensively by Ibn al-Khatib who lived in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

But Western culture is Eurocentric, an ideology that developed after 1492 that refers to European exceptionalism, which is centred on Western civilisation. And so it constructed precedents that Europe was and is superior.

[Eurocentrism] is a culturalist phenomenon that... assumes the existence of irreducibly distinct cultural invariants that shape the historical paths of different peoples. Eurocentrism is therefore anti-universalist, since it is not interested in seeking possible general laws of human evolution. But it does present itself as universalist, for it claims that imitation of the Western model by all peoples is the only solutions to the challenges of our time.<sup>16</sup>

The eternal West within this phenomenon did however of course have a counterpart that was created on mythic foundations, the Orient.

16 S. Amin, *Eurocentrism*. 1st ed. 1989, London: Zed Books, vii.

This Eurocentric view has even skewed our perception of viewing the world by reinforcing colonialist superiority.

Most maps, revolutionary at the time of their creation, are an inaccurate display of landmasses. They pump up the sizes of Europe and North America. They're used everywhere from textbooks to Google Maps. So how is design Eurocentric?

## Design is Eurocentric

I will focus briefly on typographic hierarchy. Design champions itself as a universal problem-solving discipline, and in typography, universal is Latin and it renders everything else as non-Latin because it is not part of the canon.

96 As typographer Robert Bringhurst argues, typography is a practice that 'was once a fluently multilingual and [a] multicultural calling', but the last hundred years has seen an increase in 'typographic ethnocentricity and racism ... and much of that narrow-mindedness is institutionalized in the workings of machines'.<sup>17</sup> For Bringhurst there are alphabets that have histories longer and more intricate than Latin, and 'typography and typographers must honor the variety and complexity of human language, thought and identity, instead of homogenizing or hiding it.' Categorising Arabic as non-Latin implies a hierarchy, an outdated method that ignores the multilingual audience, and some designers have called for abolishing the term. Recent advances in technology and desktop publishing have rendered the creation of special characters easier, but the 'non-Latin' category remains in place, and machines embedded with this binary.

17 R. Bringhurst, *The Elements of Typographic Style*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., 2015, Seattle, WA; Vancouver, BC: Hartley and Marks, p. 90.

Another way to highlight that racism is embedded in machines is to refer to these devices like Amazon's Alexa. There have been countless articles documenting certain ways AI in general discriminates against specific populations. Think of the ways in which some accents are not recognised because it does not speak a particular type of English. Speaking English as an international language, as Stuart Hall reminds us, cannot speak the Queen's English. It speaks a variety of broken forms of English, for e.g. Anglo-Japanese, Anglo-French, etc.<sup>18</sup>

## Who is Modern, Who is Contemporary? To Become Western is to be Contemporary

So who is modern and who is contemporary? Who dictates these? Who dictates what good design is and what is crafts? When we think of good design, defined as the expression of taste manufactured by tastemakers, the certifiably acceptable objects that are material counterparts of the reading lists approved by the Great Book clubs, we think of Western design. The West makes good design while the rest do crafts. Indeed, many craft traditions were dismissed, even those with proud artisanal histories, on the grounds that they might impede modernization.<sup>19</sup> As Achille Mbembe (2015, no pagination)<sup>20</sup> writes in his article

- 18 Hall, S., 1997. *The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity*. In: *Culture, Globalization and the World System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. pp.19–39.
- 19 A. Rawsthorn, *Design as an Attitude*, Zurich: Documents by JRP Ringier, 2018.
- 20 A. Mbembe, 'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive', 2015 [Lecture] Available at: <<https://wiser.wits.ac.za/system/files/Achille%20Mbembe%20-%20Decolonizing%20Knowledge%20and%20the%20Question%20of%20the%20Archive.pdf>> [Accessed 1 Dec. 2018].



'Decolonizing Knowledge and the Question of the Archive', that appears in this book:

They [our institutions of higher learning] are indeed 'Westernized' if all that they aspire to is to become local instantiations of a dominant academic model based on a Eurocentric epistemic canon. But what is a Eurocentric canon? A Eurocentric canon is a canon that attributes truth only to the Western way of knowledge production. It is a canon that disregards other epistemic traditions.

The frame of reference for the majority of design histories and theories is Europe and North America, which often exclude the dynamic histories of colonialism, imperialism, migration, slavery, and wars, in spite of the fact that they have always been involved in these activities (although perhaps not explicitly being called designers).

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The discussion on 'good design' is a question of who controls, profits from, or is protected (or not) by the ways in which intellectual forms of production and consumption are organized and this applies to the division of labour in Western design history. The West makes good design while the rest do crafts:

Design historian Cheryl Buckley (1986, p.5) emphasizes that... Western design has historically been organized along the hegemonic gender binary, where women are presumed to have 'sex-specific skills' that make them especially suited for work in the decorative arts, and in fields associated with domesticity such as embroidery, weaving, knitting, pottery, or dressmaking. On the other hand, fields like architecture or graphic design have historically been male-dominated. At the famed Bauhaus school, it was feared that the presence of women practitioners in these fields could 'weaken' these disciplines (Ray

2001). This division of labor trickles down to the production of knowledge in design, too: male theorists still enjoy disproportionate visibility, opportunities, and respect in design academia.<sup>21</sup>

To speak of 'good' design is to speak of, and from, the conditions of our own time, and our response to these conditions.

Returning to this question – thinking of history and who contributes to history – we may think that the world is much more global now, but as curator Gerardo Mosquera argues, while 'globalisation has activated and pluralized cultural circulation, making it much more international [...] it has done so to a great extent by following the channels designed by the globalised economy, reproducing its power structures.'<sup>22</sup>

Returning to the title of this talk, how can we as designers begin to deal with this idea of imagining *otherwise*? Here is one line of thinking, from Mignolo:

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For example: one hegemonic political concern is to fight against poverty. Research is done to help decide how poverty can be reduced. But there is no research done to explain why we have poverty in the world. Decolonial knowledge aims to reveal the 'causes' of poverty rather than accept it as a matter of fact and to produce knowledge to reduce its extension.<sup>23</sup>

This is how we begin to open up possibilities, spaces of accommodation, contradiction, and resistance.

- 21 T. Schultz, D. Abdulla, A. Ansari, E. Canlı, M. Keshavarz, M. Kiem, O de Prado, L. Martins, and P. Vieira de Oliveira, 2018. 'What is at stake with decolonizing design? A Roundtable.' *Design and Culture*, 10(1), pp.81–101.
- 22 G. Mosquera, 'The Third Bienal de La Habana in Its Global and Local Contexts', in *Making Art Global (Part 1) The Third Havana Biennial 1989*, London: *Afterall*, 2011, pp. 70-79, xviii.
- 23 W.D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012, xviii.