

# Take it Personally: What May it Take to Become Designers for Pluriversality?

## Abstract

This paper argues that if we aim to Design for pluriversality, we cannot do so from a universalist notion of what it means to be a Designer. This paper briefly describes the efforts of decolonizing Design, then looks into two Design approaches in socially engaged Design methods that frame how Designers connect to place and people: Situated Design and Design Empathy. These discourses are then further nuanced by adding a decolonial lens, nuancing how Designers are situated and engage through the colonial matrix of power. This then serves as a map of aspects to be taken into consideration for nuancing a Designer's relation place, history, profession and people in the colonial matrix of power. This paper then suggest the notions of *awarenessing*, an action-oriented reflective awareness on one's position, flexibility in Design processes and the incorporation of personal aspects into Designing as possible ways to open up for pluriversal Design stances. The paper concludes by outlining potential implications of opening up for such stances in doing, writing and teaching Design.

Nicholas B. Torretta  
PhD in Industrial Design.  
Umeå Institute of Design - Umeå  
University.  
Umeå, Sweden.  
Email: Nicholas.btorretta@gmail.com  
[orcid.org/0000-0001-7806-8150](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7806-8150)  
**Google Scholar**

Received: December 17, 2021

Approved: December 14, 2022

Key words:  
Design, decolonization, power,  
pluriverse.



Revista KEPES Año 20 No. 27 enero-junio 2023, págs. 19-46 ISSN: 1794-7111(Impreso) ISSN: 2462-8115 (En línea)  
DOI: 10.17151/kepes.2023.20.27.2



# Tómatelo personal: ¿Qué se necesita para convertir-se en Diseñadoras(es) para la pluriversalidad?

## Resumen

Este artículo argumenta que si queremos llegar al Diseño para la pluriversalidad, no podemos hacerlo desde una noción universalista de lo que significa ser Diseñador. Este artículo describe brevemente los esfuerzos para descolonizar el Diseño, para luego examinar dos aproximaciones de Diseño en métodos de Diseño comprometidos socialmente, que enmarcan cómo los Diseñadores conectan a lugares y personas: Diseño Situado y Empatía en el Diseño. Estos discursos son luego matizados con un lente decolonial, detallando cómo los Diseñadores se sitúan y se comprometen a través de la matriz colonial del poder. Este análisis sirve como un mapa de aspectos a tener en cuenta para comprender la relación del Diseñador con lugar, historia, profesión y personas en la matriz colonial del poder. El artículo sugiere la normación de *awarenessing*, una toma de conciencia reflexiva orientada a la acción, sobre la propia posicionalidad, la flexibilidad en los procesos de Diseño y la incorporación de aspectos personales en el Diseño como posibles formas de abrir posturas pluriversales en el Diseño. El artículo concluye delineando las implicaciones potenciales de estas posturas para hacer, escribir y enseñar Diseño.

Palabras clave:  
Diseño, descolonización, poder, pluriverso.

## Background - Decolonizing Design

[D]esign is always a socio-material practice, one intimately linked to privilege and structures of inequality, white supremacy and heteronormativity, colonial power and epistemic violence, capitalist exploitation and environmental destruction. (Mareis and Paim, 2020, p. 12)

In order to explore a decolonial stance for Designing<sup>1</sup> for pluriversality, let's first look at the endeavors of decolonizing Design: Decolonizing Design has been a growing area in the past decades, which has been revealing and problematizing the intersections between Design, the hegemonic colonial power structure and colonizing behaviors. As many authors, such as Grosfoguel (2002, 2007), Mignolo (2012, 2018) and Vazquez (2017) have explained, our contemporary world is organized in a power structure created by European colonization and continued through EU-USA's capitalist-imperialism. As Grosfoguel (2002) states, after colonial administration has been ended, the oppressive behavior of colonization and the colonial power structure has continued in what he calls *coloniality*. For this reason, Mignolo (2012) has suggested we call *modern/colonial* our contemporary paradigm because the creation of modernity, as he argues, is a direct consequence of the discussions and flows of culture and materials evoked by colonization. The modern/colonial paradigm is characterized by a power structure that benefits Europe and the USA at the expense of the rest of the world in a relation of extractivism and exploitation, this power structure has been called the *colonial matrix of power* (Dei and Lordan, 2016; Fry et al., 2015; Mareis and Paim, 2020; Mignolo, 2012; Vazquez, 2017). Mignolo (2007) describes the colonial matrix of power as defined by four interrelated aspects: "control of economy (land appropriation, exploitation of labor, control of natural resources); control of authority (institution, army); control of gender and sexuality (family, education) and control of subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology, education and formation of subjectivity)" (Mignolo, 2007, p. 156).

---

<sup>1</sup> Here I use *Design* - with capital D - to refer to the trained profession with its educational institutions, to differentiate it from the idea of *design* - with lowercase d - as a natural human activity.

These authors argue that European domination and the subjugation of other parts as peripheral started with colonization and became established through the colonial matrix of power. In other words, as Moran, et al. puts it:

Colonial successes and the wealth gathered over centuries has benefited many, but it has also situated disregard, denial, and exploitation as primary to the epistemology of development. Thus, colonization is not a past doctrine; its violations and intrusions are embedded systematically in the assumptive framework of modern societies. (2018, p. 72)

These authors found Design to be situated in the modern/colonial paradigm and its colonial matrix of power, replicating its oppressive behaviors and structures. As Escobar (2015) argues, being situated in such paradigm, Design replicates unsustainable ways of being in the world as it is intertwined with a culture of exploitation and extractivism. Vazquez extends such argument saying:

Design, as the modern mode of relating to and producing the real, has functioned coextensively with modernity's epistemic expansion and domination. The geopolitics of knowledge reproduce the modern/colonial divide in terms of knowledge, imposing modernity as the only valid epistemic territory and erasing other worlds of meaning. Concurrently, the geopolitics of design refer to the control of form and of our ways of inhabiting the earth and worlding the world. (2017, p. 89)

22

Hence, Design as a field and practice was identified as sustaining colonial structures and replicate colonizing behaviors. As Moran, et al. (2018) state: "Colonizing design is silently enacted and is so prevalent among modern societies that it is often invisible" (p. 72). Colonizing Design has been largely defined as Design practices that impose cultures and worldviews - prescribe ways of living, especially Euro-USA-centric ways - onto others (Moran, et al., 2018; Mainsah and Morrison, 2014; Torretta and Reitsma, 2019; Trias Cornú, 2020; Tunstall, 2013; Tlostanova, 2017). Design was also revealed to be a colonized field by excluding and oppressing everything other to the white-male-cisgender-European norm. As Mareis and Paim state:

Historically, Western design has been a narrow and exclusive domain that often imagines itself as universal. Striving to define ideals and norms, the modernist lineage of design has proved largely

ignorant of its all-pervasive anthropocentrism and exclusionary assumptions, projecting a vision of the world largely defined by a small number of mostly white, male, cisgender designers in the Global North. Instead, the diversity of life-defining aspects - gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, religion, class, social background, physical or intellectual ability, and more - is routinely flattened or ignored in design's histories, pedagogies, practices, and objects. (2020, p. 11)

Following this, there has been an effort to imagine *Designs otherwise* (Mareis & Paim, 2020). Imagining other ways of Designing, as Mareis and Paim (2020) argue, does not mean to remove European Design legacy. Instead, it means to open up for the existence of various approaches to Design, thus posing the EU and the USA's notions of Design as only one among many possible (Mareis and Paim, 2020; Escobar, 2015, 2018). Such approach to Design is what Escobar (2015, 2018) has called *Designs for the Pluriverse*, where pluriverse is based on the Zapatista concept of *a world where many worlds fit* (Escobar, 2018). To summarize, we can say that the endeavor of Decolonizing Design and the related area of Design for pluriversity has come to the fore in contemporary Design discourse. These endeavors have revealed various facets of the relation between Design and the modern/colonial paradigm, the colonial matrix of power and colonizing behaviors. However, while this opened up for many directions to decolonize Design, little attention has been put on *who* is doing Design or doing the decolonial change in Design. Hence, it is possible to ask: what does it mean to be a Designer with a decolonial stance able to Design for pluriversity? This paper tries to contribute to this gap by exploring possible orientation points to reshape what it means to be a Designer in order to nurture decolonial stances for Designing for pluriversity.

### Design, people and the world(s): Local designs, global paradigms

To understand how the intertwining of our Design profession and the global colonial matrix of power gets represented in design practice and outcomes, the spectrum traced by Redström (2017) can be helpful. Between general and

specific, Redström's (2017) spectrum ranges from "what designing is", in the realm of paradigm, to what "a design is", in the realm of the object (figure 1). In this line we see a transition of scale, from an example of what a specific design is, to the project that was set up to create it, the program under which the project came about and the practice of Design that encompasses such a program. Lastly, we see the paradigm, the wider set of ideas that defines and orients Design as a field located in the world. As Redström puts it, these points in the spectrum are not fixed, they should not be seen as the "shift from design as a thing on one end to design as an activity on the other, but rather as the span between a distinct outcome and the overall orientation of the effort that produces such outcomes" (p. 39). As the efforts in Decolonizing Design have shown, Design can be seen as intertwined with the colonial matrix of power, situated in the Euro-USA-centric modern/colonial paradigm. Hence, in this spectrum, while this intertwinement is present at every stage, it is in the realm of the paradigm that we see the inevitable rootedness of Design in global paradigms.

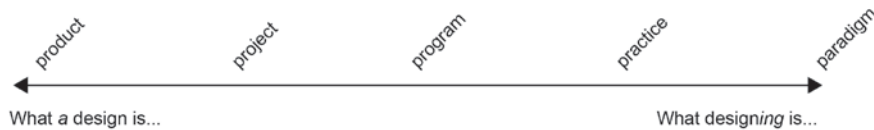


Figure 1. (Redström, 2017, p. 39).  
Note: Compiled by authors.

However, between Design being positioned in the Euro-USA-centric modern/colonial paradigm and what a Design outcome is, and whether that outcome is colonizing or not, there is a link: people. Design does not call itself into being and thus cannot transform itself into being decolonial. Humans, and our actions make Design come into being, we Design. Here we can cite the extensive decolonial work of Frantz Fanon (1961) and his reminder of the human source of human

problems. Fanon claims that the structures, beliefs and, thus, the problems we have in society, are all human creations and, therefore, human responsibility. This of course does not mean it is easy to change, as ideas can become institutionalized, but it means that it is possible to shift ideas and definitions over time. With this in mind we could say that Design is a set of ideas that exists in the wider part of the spectrum, which are held, formed and performed by people in Design practices, programs, projects and then made present in the world through specific Design outcomes. The person (or people) called Designer, is the one doing the moving between paradigm and product and nurturing whether *Designing* and a Design is colonizing or can be *otherwise*. Hence, the spectrum above can be populated by adding a person, a Designer, as the link between paradigmatic Design orientations and a distinct Design outcome.

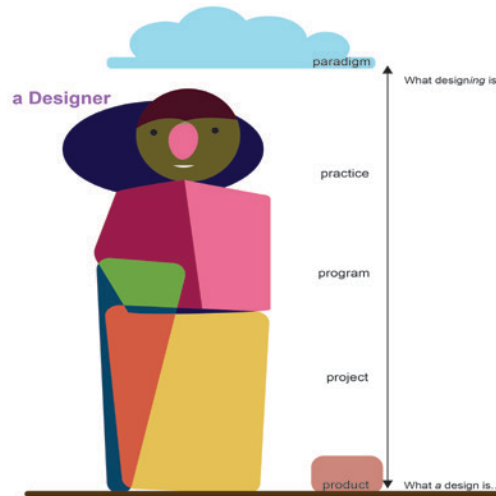


Figure 2. Populated spectrum.  
Note: Compiled by authors.

The Designer is the link that, influenced by the paradigm, brings beliefs and orientations of the profession into practice in a specific project and place. Positioned in a global modern/colonial paradigm, Designers draw from the Euro-USA-centric Design field to guide Design practice. This shift from Designing as an idea to an outcome happens through using courses of action - methods - that are accepted and judged as valuable by the wider community of Designers. As argued by, for example, Tunstall (2013), Tlostanova (2017) and Vazquez (2017), Design carries a Euro-USA-centric notion of what Designing is and what are acceptable ways of acting as a Designer. At the same time, Designers are also situated in the world and in the global Euro-USA-centric modern/colonial paradigm. Since we are all socially situated in the world, it is inevitable to stand in positions in the colonial matrix of power. *Positions* in the power structure grants degrees of *power*, and thus gives *privileges* and different degrees of *access*. Regarding organizations, Albarrán González (2020) uses the term “3P-A” to summarize organizational issues of *politics, power, privilege and access*. Here, when looking at individuals, I will use the term 3P-As similarly but to mean these above-mentioned aspects *position, power, privilege and access* that comes from being within the colonial matrix of power. 3P-As (position, power, privilege and access) are not static, they are dynamic, co-constituted in relation to the people, place and time we engage with.

26

What we see here then, in relation to the spectrum above, is Design as a field situated in the colonial matrix of power, a specific Design outcome that is situated in a specific place in the world and in between these, the Designer(s) which is a specific person also situated in the same structure. We could think of the image above then as the head connecting to the ideas of the paradigm, and the feet being the position of a specific person in the world, the movement of that person then are the acts of Designing, bridging the paradigm into being in a specific place and situation. The Design action happens then through methods taken from the Design paradigm into the place and situation of Designing.



It is relevant to consider how Designers relate to place and how this grounding of general ideas and orientations happens in place into a specific project and outcome. The next section looks at the concept of “Situated Design” to explore one central example of how the relationship between Designing and place is seen in socially engaged Design. The section relies on the book “Situated Design Methods” by Simonsen et al. (2014), which provides a comprehensive overview of how to situate Design into the place and time of its practice.

### **Design(ers) and place: Situated Design**

To say that design is situated is to highlight the interactions and interdependencies between designers, designs, design methods, and the use situation with its actors, activities, structures, particulars, and broader context. (Simonsen et al. 2014, p. 1)

As Simonsen et al. (2014) argue, Situated Design, as well as the concept of situatedness, is linked to a specific Design situation and context. Therefore, there is no singular definition to it, but instead a diverse set of situated methods and definitions. In their book, the authors present four approaches to the concept of situatedness in Design: *situated knowledges*, *situated action*, *situated learning* and *situating contexts*. These are based respectively on the works of Donna Haraway (1988), Lucy Suchman (1987, 2007), Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1996) as well as the book editor’s own perspectives. These four approaches serve as the basis for them to introduce a plethora of Situated Design methods. The book concludes with a chapter on how to take situated methods between different contexts.

The first approach they introduce is based on Haraway’s concept of *situated knowledges* (Haraway, 1988). Situated knowledges claims that knowledges always emerge *from* and are embedded *in* specific socio-political contexts. Knowledges are thus never neutral nor all encompassing, they are always contextually situated and partial. Bringing this approach to Situated Design,

28

Simonsen et al. (2014, p. 7) says that Situated Design “focus[es] on how designers interpret and construct the context for the Design process in order to make designs that fit into or stretch the context” (Simonsen et al. 2014, p. 7). In this case, attention is given to how Designers interpret the context in order to adapt and thus situate their methods. Haraway’s (1988) perspective stresses that any interpretation is partial and biased, which makes it impossible to have complete understanding of a situation. This in turn highlights that adapting and situating a universal method to a specific context depends on how the Designers relate to the situation. The second approach to Situated Design they introduce is based on Suchman’s notion of *situated action* (Suchman, 1993). In such an approach, Situated Design would see methods as plans for situated action rather than scripts to be followed. In this case, methods should not be seen as strict guidelines to be imposed into contexts but rather as orientation points to adapt and guide action in a way that fits the specific context. This approach, thus, leaves space for Designers to adapt the Design process in a way they see fit. The third approach introduced is based on Lave and Wenger’s notion of *situated learning* (Wenger, 1999). As they argue, situated learning stresses that learning happens through participation in communities of practice. They argue that knowledge about specific practices is not explained, but rather performed. According to Simonsen et al. (2014), bringing this to Situated Design highlights the importance of participation in the context in order to understand it. Finally, the authors introduce the approach of *situating contexts* which stresses the interdependence of a Design process with the relation between Designers, local actors and social structures. As they define it: “situating contexts emphasizes that any design process is embedded in a social context and that the context and the designer’s interpretation of it are crucial to the output and outcome of the design process.” (Simonsen et al., 2014, p. 6).

These four approaches are complementary as each point to a different part of bringing Design as a general orientation to action in a specific place. To sum up,

these approaches stress that Design happens embedded in communities and social structures. Participating in these communities and structures, Designers interpret the context from their partial perspectives and adapt Design methods in a way they see fit. Hence, situated Design shows a connection between Designing, society and personal perspectives. (Simonsen et al., 2014)

### **Adding a decolonial perspective to Situatedness in Design - Who is situating?**

Situated Design shows how Designers connect to place. Stressing that methods are to be adapted through interpretation to fit specific situations softens up the imposition of methods. As Design methods emerge mainly from the field's Euro-USA-centrism and are then applied all over the world, this opening to adaptation allows Designers to potentially remove parts of the methods that could render oppressive and impositional in the context they find themselves in. Departing from this and adding a decolonial perspective, we can take a step further in understanding the connection between Designers as situated people and a place. A decolonial lens to Situated Design methods allow us to add to the issue of connection between universal design methods and their adaptation to a place the notion of the situatedness of Design as a field and practice on the colonial matrix of power. Furthermore, it would also ask us to add the situatedness of people on the colonial matrix of power and the hegemonic Euro-USA culture that is replicated through it.

In relation to the situatedness of the field of Design, an issue explained in the introduction, we can see that the methods that Situated Design open up for contextual adaptation are still hegemonic. That is, they are rooted in the Euro-USA-centric modern/colonial paradigm. This allows us to ask: how can we, instead of adapting Euro-USA-centric methods to place, allow methods to emerge from the place where Design projects are situated?

When it comes to the situatedness of Designers, the picture is a bit more complex and worth unfolding for our goal of exploring what it means to nurture decolonial stances for being a Designer for pluriversality. A decolonial lens on Situated Design reveals that the way Designers are treated in the discourse needs further nuancing. Throughout the *Situated Design Methods* book, while they make a strong position against the universality of Design methods, Designers are still treated as a universal, single category. From a decolonial perspective we see that Designers are not neutral, they are people positioned in the colonial matrix of power, relationally defined through 3P-A (position, power, privilege and access) based on where and with whom engagements happen. When Simonsen et al. (2014) say, based on Haraway (1988), that Situated Design is “politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating” (Haraway 1988, 589 cited in Simonsen et al. 2014, 7), a decolonial lens could ask: Who is the designer? Who gets to situate Design? And what is this person’s/people’s relationship to the place, people and the context in relation to the colonial matrix of power?

30

Let’s exemplify this issue, Design is situated, but who situates it is important: Let’s say a participatory Design project takes place in a favela in Brazil. A Brazilian designer would situate the project with the partners and place differently than a European Designer would, as their socio-political and historical relation to the place and people would be different, granting them different 3P-A (position, power, privilege and access) in relation to the other people and the place in the unfolding of the Design process. Likewise, if the Brazilian Designer is a community member of the area, the Design process could be situated in the context in a different way than if the Designer is from an upper class and lives outside the favela, thus standing in a position of privilege and access to the people in the community. We could give any other example to illustrate this, such as if a female Designer would carry a design process about midwifery versus if a male Designer would. We could also give examples based on

3P-A differences in relation to race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Nevertheless, the point here is that, adding a decolonial lens on how to connect design to place - situated design - by nuancing *who* the Designer is in Situated Design opens up situatedness to be analyzed through matters of *oppression and imposition* in power disparities based on the 3P-A and its intersections of race, class, gender, religion and sexuality. Hence, nuancing 3P-A relations in Design projects wherever and however they are situated could help to us better understand and possibly steer away from colonizing tendencies. This in turn points towards another important aspect of Designing and the relation between Designers and place: the relation between a Designer and other people. Let's now turn our attention to another approach in socially engaged Design, which has been central in framing how Designers connect to other people in different contexts and situations: empathy. The next section outlines what Empathic Design says about social engagements in Design. The following section is based on Koskinen, et al., (2003) book "Empathic Design". After outlining such discourse, the section also adds a decolonial perspective to further advance us in our exploration of understanding what it could mean to have a decolonial stance to Design for pluriversity.

### **Designers and social engagements - Empathic Design**

The concept of empathy has been pervasive in the Design field in relation to how Designers engage with people. In the book "Empathic Design" Koskinen, et al. (2003) explain what empathy in Design is and how it can be used. Empathy, as they argue, is used to get closer to other people's realities: "In order to design effectively designers need to understand how people understand themselves" (p. 8). As they argue, it is not enough for Designers to just observe contexts, situations and people from the outside. What is needed is an understanding of people's situated experiences, feelings and emotions. According to them, through methods of Design Empathy, Designers can engage with people and

imagine how they experience the world, the Design process and any Design outcomes. In order to practice empathy in Design, the authors propose a plethora of methods that range from observations and interviews to doing things together and asking people how they feel while they engage with Design outcomes. Through hearing, observing, asking and trying things together with other people, Designers can empathically connect with people and connect deeper to the context and situation. Koskinen, et al. say that, through Empathic Design methods Designers can create resonance with users and thus “mak[e] sense of other people’s inner worlds”. (p. 53) Empathic Design methods are thus a set of ways Designers can create resonance and reach an understanding of users to use as inspiration for Design processes. It is important to notice that there is no claim for objectivity in this approach and the authors argue that a complete understanding of a user is not possible especially if cultures are different between Designers and users.

### **Adding a decolonial perspective to Design Empathy - who empathizes?**

The concept of empathy in Design is common whenever we hear about engagements between trained Designers and other people. The discourse on Design empathy shows us that it is not enough to watch from a distance, that instead, Designers have to experience *with* and *engage with* people in their practices. And that, even so, a complete understanding is never possible, especially when there are cultural differences. Now, adding a decolonial perspective to the concept of Design Empathy can move the argument further by nuancing how empathy can be beneficial or colonizing as engagements happens through the colonial matrix of power. Similar to what was seen in the discourse of Situated Design methods, a decolonial view into empathy could again ask for a better nuancing of who the Designer is as in this case Designers are also treated as a homogenous category that engages with another category called *people*.

One issue that this brings out is concerning resonance. Having in mind the colonial matrix of power, a decolonial lens could ask: in an unequal world, when people engage across cultures and power positions, can anyone empathize and resonate with anyone equally?

A decolonial perspective could critically see that access to and resonance with non-Designers may mean very different things based on who the people involved in a Design process are and what their relations in the colonial matrix of power are. For example, a white Portuguese Designer engaging - to find resonance - with Brazilians in a context in a favela in Brazil would inevitably carry with it the historical trauma of Portuguese slavery and colonization in Brazil. Other examples could be provided across different religions, classes, ethnicities, gender, sexual orientations, etc. This could be unfolded further from a Freirean (1970, 1996) decolonial perspective with his argument that says that people in higher positions of power and privilege in the colonial matrix of power often carry efforts to help people in lower position out of self interest and to “feel good”, which ends up validating their higher privilege and not changing power and privilege positions. Freire (1970, 1996) argues that such efforts do not necessarily lead to liberation from oppression. Besides, a decolonial lens can also further the discourse on empathy in another aspect: agency and personal stance. If we nuance who the Designer is, as a move away from a universalized view of Designers and people, we may ask: should we, as Designers, be able - and willing - to empathize, resonate and engage with everyone in every context? Such perspective could allow a Designer, as a specific person, to have preferences and political positions. Saying that you (or I) as a Designer should be able to empathize with anyone, removes our ability to choose which topics, groups and contexts we want to engage with and dismisses any personal traumas and discomforts that can emerge from engaging with specific topics and people in the unfolding of Design processes. A decolonial perspective, thus, highlights the importance of being aware of

how the contexts, people, organizations, topics we engage with as well as settings and the unfolding of processes may sustain and replicate colonizing structures and behaviors. Choices of which contexts and people to engage with can benefit from a constant reflection on our 3P-A (position, power, privilege and access) and our personal values and affinities based on what we want and feel we can resonate with. This would represent an opening up of Design for personal aspects, nuancing Designers as specific people, each with their specificities rather imposing a universal category of Designer.

### Where is the Designer?

Neutralizing the Designer and not nuancing who this person is, and how this person's situatedness affects the process of Designing, makes it easier to read processes and methods, but it is also an illusion. As seen above, by advancing the discourses on Situated Design Methods and Design Empathy with a decolonial lens, it matters *who situates Design* and *who engages with whom*. It thus becomes important to consider the different relations in the colonial matrix of power, the 3PA (position, power, privilege and access) the relations to the context that people involved in a design process may have.

34

We all inevitably stand somewhere in structures of power and our stances, as mentioned above, influence how we act. If we want to move towards pluriversal Designing, we may ask for a writing of who the Designer is to be present in our discourses. Therefore, we could be able to better understand how personal positions influence Designing, which could stimulate the release of the definition of being a Designer from its universal - thus inevitably Euro-USA-centric - frame and open up for diverse ways of being Designers. However, an important remark is that this claim for rewriting and nuancing of who is doing the Designing should not be mistaken with the heroic narratives



of “big-name” Designers that are common in Western design history. To illustrate this, Kaufmann-Buhler, et al. (2019) state the following concerning the tradition of writing and praising “big-name” designers instead of social relations and processes:

The canonical focus of these various design texts often betrays an underlying bias in favor of famous (overwhelmingly European or American, white, and male) designers, important objects, and so forth. They often neglect lesser known designers and objects, sideline users and intermediaries, and only superficially address social and environmental justice issues such as labor, globalization, sustainability, race, and disability. Exhibition catalogs as well as popular coffee-table books have similarly lionized “big-name” designers, often in concert with, or even sponsored by, the very brands that are their subject. More broadly, these kinds of biases against certain classes of objects and certain groups of designers and consumers have canonized notions of “good taste” and “good design,” and marginalized alternative narratives and perspectives. (Kaufmann-Buhler, et al., 2019, pp. 1–2)

This paper argues for a movement of nuancing who is the Designer as a movement in the opposite direction of praising individuals as geniuses. A movement towards humbleness. This is a claim to acknowledge how wider systems such as the colonial matrix of power, the histories, 3P-A of people and of the Design profession are constantly moving and influencing Designing. And that this, in turn, influences what are viable choices to steer away from sustaining colonial structures and behaviors in Designing. This is a claim to paint a more complicated, though more realistic, picture of what it means to be a Designer and what Designing is as a situated practice in the world. Hence, let us now complicate the diagram of Figure 2. After adding people as responsible for translating paradigm to product, with head (intellect) in the paradigm and feet situated in specific places, we can now add a second person to represent someone a Designer engages with in Designing (many people could be added, but for the sake of simplicity, only two are represented in Figure 3. Adding more people would mean a repetition of many relations, thus making the image more difficult to read).

In the image now, we can nuance the other issues related to how these people are situated and relating to the place and each other in a Design process. We can add: the 3P-A of each person; the relation between each in the colonial matrix of power; the relation of each person to the place; the possible power imbalance between each person according to their profession, place and 3P-A; the relation between each person and wider communities; history/herstory of each person before the engagement and of the communities they represent (racial, religious, gender, sexual orientation, political, etc.); the intention of each person with the Design project; the time span each dedicates to the process and how the process unfolds; and how the consequences of the project will be lived by each (Fig. 3).

36

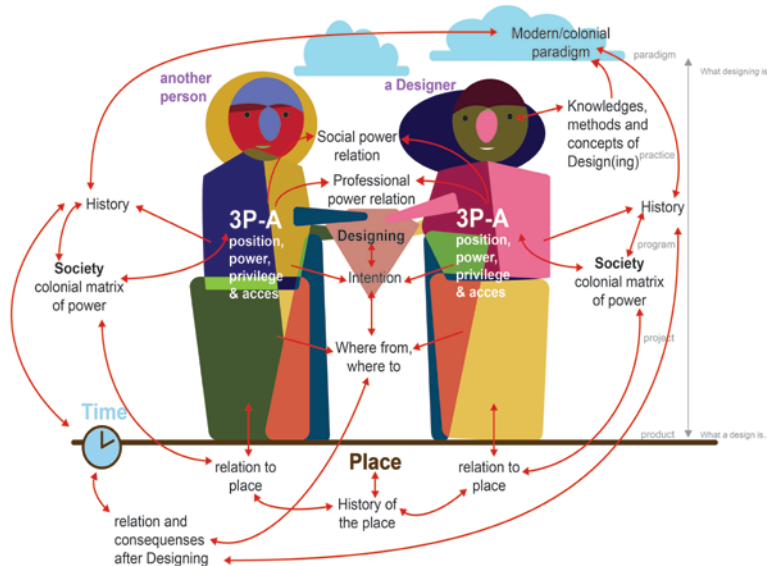


Figure 3. Spectrum of relations in Designing.  
Note: Compiled by authors.

As a consequence, I have to take a space here to situate myself, as a person and Designer in relation to this text, its goals and the directions presented in this paper. This can be seen in box 1 below.

**Box 1.** Situating myself

---

I am a Brazilian artist from Santos-SP, born in a lower middle-class family divided between arts and social work. I became a mix of musician, luthier, Capoeira teacher and Designer, where all these practices have somehow influenced each other. My upbringing in the unequal Brazilian society led me to try to use my practices to support social justice. At the age of 17 I got a scholarship to an upper-class Industrial Design University, where I experienced another part of Brazilian society. Studying and working with Design in São Paulo showed me Design as an elitist practice, devoted to the development of products for the richest population - a minority in Brazil. I saw myself using my profession to create things I would never have access to. Disappointed with Design, I managed to change environments and work for different Design-led social organizations. This gave me different 3P-As: from working for the rich, to having access to lower income contexts to design with. I was then usually working with people in vulnerable (targeted) situations, often illiterate craftspeople, trying to use Design to help them develop their crafts to improve their income. This also made me uncomfortable as we would come in from a higher class, as trained Designers that went through a Eurocentric Industrial Design educational (based on HfG Ulm) to guide people in “improving” their products in Brazil. The most uncomfortable aspect was that we came with a mindset dictated by our profession and the modern/colonial paradigm, that stated economic development as the only way out of poverty. Searching to know more and develop my profession, I chose to go for a master's degree in Design for Sustainability in Scandinavia, which then continued into different work possibilities and a PhD position in Sweden. Europe changed my 3P-A in different ways. Since I was racialized as a Latino immigrant, my access in the EU context was different than in Brazil. I realized presenting myself as Brazilian would create one type of connection to people, whereas saying that I was also a PhD student or junior researcher in Scandinavia gave my voice more power especially in Latin-American contexts.

Issues of how to connect with people and how our 3P-As may lead to imposition and oppression have been central concerns in my journey. I've been exploring issues of decolonization in Design in search for non-oppressive ways of Designing. My current focus has been to find ways to foster Pluriversal versions of Design. I've been exploring what would be my Pluriversal Design stance, for which I've been bringing in my perspectives as an improvising musician and Capoeira practitioner (an Afro-Brazilian martial art, see for example Rêgo, 1968 and Alves da Cunha, 2013). I've been inspired by the aspects of embodiment, attention to surrounding environments and circularity in conversation as aspects to bring into my Design stance - aspects which are also present in the way this text is written. This is just a glimpse of my ongoing exploration as I move and make sense of my actions.

---

Design happens in meetings of positions, power, privileges, access (3P-A), herstories and histories in the colonial matrix of power. After nuancing the diverse issues that are into play in bringing Design from ideas to action in specific places and carried by specific people, with our intention to steer away

from the Euro-USA-centrism and the potential sustenance and reproduction of colonial structures and behaviors in Designing, we may now ask: what is then a decolonial Designer for pluriversality?

### Is there a decolonial designer for pluriversality?

If we aim for a decolonial Design for pluriverses, the universalist and neutralizing Euro-USA-centric notion of what it means to be a Designers renders as not sufficient. Any universal definition would be opposite to the idea of being pluriversal. Hence, creating any new, singular definition of what it means to be a Designer would be contradictory, as doing so would recreate the same issue of one singular perspective ruling over all others. If we look this way, it is necessary to open up what it means to be a Designer; to create conditions for pluriversal ways of being Designers. Based on the decolonial work in Design and the issues we saw above we can then put together some aspects to attempt an outline for fomenting decolonial stances for being Designers for pluriversality. From what this paper has addressed so far, the first aspect for fomenting such stances is an active awareness on one's 3P-A as one moves, on how colonial oppression persists through the colonial matrix of power and on how these relates to our profession and 3P-As of other people. An active and reflective awareness, what could be compressed into the name of *awarenessing*, means to constantly reflect on relations between the issues mapped in Figure 3 to mitigate colonizing behaviors and structures. It is important that this be an active act as 3P-As and relations through the colonial matrix of power are co-constituted and are thus always changing in relation to the place, the people we engage with and on how Design processes unfold over time. This change may occur in longer stretches of time, such as between projects as well as in short term, such as while engaging with multiple people in a workshop, which may create a web of diverse and moving relations. Thus, it is important for this *awarenessing* to mean a constant reflective practice that is action-oriented towards changing

the Design process in a way to reduce colonizing relations and behaviors in the Design process, as mere awareness would not be enough since it does not change power imbalances. Similar to the relations mapped above, possible ways of dealing with colonial structures and behaviors will also be specific to the specific situation of Designing and how it unfolds, meaning that process that seem just from the beginning may become colonizing and vice-versa. In some situations, dealing with these issues could mean, for example, to take an ally role and let others lead the process, while at other times it could mean to encourage asymmetrical power relations that puts privileged groups in lower positions than their usual place in the colonial matrix of power. Likewise, it could demand the Design process to be stopped and rethought between all people involved. Finally, keeping in mind the problematization of hierarchies in decolonization, *awarenessing* would need to be shared between the people involved in Designing, thus asking for constant open conversations about how everyone is experiencing the relations and the process and then adapting it accordingly. This flexibility in relation to how we relate *to* and *in* Design processes would then be a second possible aspect of a decolonial pluriversal stance. A pluriversal Design process would thus allow pluriversal directions for a process, and the choice of direction and way of Designing would be a constant aspect to be checked and adjusted between all the people involved.

The third part then could be, from *awarenessing* and flexibility as a basis to invite personal position into creating versions of Designing. This would mean to allow each person, as situated individuals that move in the world, to create their own version of what it means to be a Designer in relation to their communities. This could allow one to engage with issues in Designing a way that corresponds to one's position, affinities and life path. As D'Amico-Samuels (1997) argues, personal issues and positions inevitably influence how we work, we might as well take full advantage of this and bring them fully into framing who we are as professionals. To exemplify what bringing personal issues into

our ways of being a Designer, we can think of the body in the illustrations above. With the head in the paradigm and the feet in the situation, arms representing the relations, and the movement of the body the Designing, the heart is still to be included. The heart in this case would mean personal preferences, embodied knowledges, feelings and emotions of being and moving in the world. To recall Empathic Design, this would mean an empathy towards ourselves: to look at our ways of experiencing the world and seeing them as valid stances, valid ways of being and thus sources for shaping what it means to be a Designer. However, this should not be read as a claim for an “everything goes” approach to Designing. Instead, as a decolonial stance, this could be seen as a way to take the hegemonic, Euro-USA-centric design tradition with criticality to decentralize it by creating other, situated, versions of Designing. This, of course, would mean different things depending on where one is situated. A person in a higher position in the Euro-USA-centric colonial matrix of power could see a design stance close to their position as natural. However, for a person in a lower position this could mean a possible way of freeing oneself from Euro-USA-centric definitions of Design. One example in this direction is the Anthropophagic Studio exploration by van Amstel and Gonzatto (2020). In their work, they use Anthropophagy as a way to rethink the concept of the Interaction Design Studio created in the Global North to a Brazilian context.

40

In summary, anthropophagy in Brazilian art, design, and education means reflective devouring of the Other, which implies much more engagement with the Other than copying or imitation. Devouring does not mean “yours, devoured, become mine”, but “mine, yours, devoured, become Other. (Azevedo, 2018, cited in van Amstel and Gonzatto, 2020, p. 10)

In this example, the authors use a local approach to transform Euro-USA-centric conceptions of Designing into new versions. These new versions in turn, while emergent from the place they are located, are able to talk back to the Euro-USA-centric tradition by standing *in relation to* it as an *otherwise*, devoured, form of Designing that had Euro-USA-centric Design as a point of departure.

However, while this is a relevant example and step in decentralizing Euro-USA-centric Design and creating pluriversal versions of Designing, it still does not go all the way in relation to the goal of this paper in finding pluriversal Design stances. In creating the Anthropophagic studio, they use perspectives from Latin-American thinkers and philosophers as anthropophagic alternatives to Euro-USA-centric concepts present in frame of the Interaction Design Studio, leaving the possibility of devouring and decentralizing Design to a - mainly male - intellectual elite. As seen above, decolonial stances would benefit from moving away from the Western historical glorification of the (male) intellect over (female) emotions and bodies, as Buckley (1986) outlines in her paper. To break away from elitism and hierarchy, pluriversal stances would allow everyone to decentralize Design, whether from traditional practices such as Capoeira or other cultural expressions, to experiences of being mothers, dancers, elders, clowns, gamers, etc. Hence, we could think of creating pluriversal versions of Design that emerge from embodied perspectives and practices that do not belong to any sort of elites or oppressive power systems like patriarchy, colonialism, etc.

To summarize, the orientation points this paper proposes for nurturing decolonial stances for Designing for pluriverses (which should not to be taken as a recipe, but as the opening of a space for exploration) consist of: *awarenessing*, flexibility and allowing personal versions of Designing rooted on one's - ever changing - position and experiences of the world. As we inhabit the world and are connected through structures of power and privilege, this openings would be taken *in relation*. That is, not to create stances as isolated individuals but to articulate them in relation to the communities, cultures and situations we are part of. In this case, situating Design would mean an encounter of adapting hegemonic Design methods on one hand with a situated Design perspective on the other hand. Empathy in this case would mean to engage with the topics, people and issues we are honestly interested in as well as to care for relations in the unfolding of Design processes. Designing in this case could be a process where the way

of moving, the directions and the relations between the people involved are constantly checked, discussed and changed as needed in order to steer away from oppressive structures, relations and behaviors. We could then ask: what could this mean to contemporary frames of Design and of being a Designer?

### Implications of having various ways of being decolonial Designers for pluriversality

Allowing various ways of being a decolonial Designer for pluriversality would have various implications. The first one we can outline would be related to *writing about* Design, a second one about *doing* Design, and a third one about *Design education*. Concerning how we write about Design, this would demand more attention to who is Designing and with whom. We would need to write the Designer, as a situated person, into how we write about Design. While this can complicate the view of methods, it may allow us to see existing methods differently by revealing how methods emerge from situated positions and are changed based on who, where and with whom Design processes are carried. Writing the person back into Designing could show us examples of how specific people have approached the aspect of decolonizing Design in diverse contexts and inspire people to adapt Design methods in new ways to new places without the fear of doing wrong by disrespecting the European canon of Design. Hopefully this could then open up for the creation and acceptance of pluriversal methods that emerge from different places, decentralizing the Euro-USA-centric methods of Design by not needing to comply with the latter but rather to stand side by side as a different version of Design that is genuine in its own right. In terms of *doing* Design, it would mean the need of sustaining *awarenessing* and flexibility. It would also mean to reflect and create Design approaches that fit our personal stances, the communities we are part of and the places we engage with. Designing would then not be seen as a neutral tool that is applied through a neutral person in a situated place and with situated



people. Design could then be seen as a specific practice with a specific perspective that happens in places and with people in a complex unfolding of 3P-A relations and perspectives.

In terms of Design education, this would mean to open for allowing Design students to relationally develop their own ways of Designing based on their cultures, 3P-A (position, power, privilege and access) and their personal interests. This could imply control loss by Design educators as it could make it difficult to judge Design practices that come from different cultural positions. This would be especially complex having in mind the multicultural and international nature of contemporary Design schools. The role of Design educators could then become more of a guide that provides reference points, showing how we relationally develop and adapt our situated decolonial Design stance for pluriverses and how it relates to our 3P-As and personal preferences as well as to other stances. Hence, educators could serve as examples for students to explore their own ways of framing what it means to be a Designer. Design education then, generally speaking, could become more of an exchange, a cross-fertilization between different perspectives than a matter of right and wrong in relation to an established paradigm of Design. In short, this shift would put Design in motion by destabilizing and decentralizing its definition, which in turns would give more importance to finding ways to connect, converse and exchange between pluriversal ways of Designing.

## Conclusion

This paper briefly described the decolonial effort in Design and what it has revealed and problematized about the field of Design. Looking at how the modern/colonial paradigm and the colonial matrix of power can be seen as permeating Designing, the paper looked at the role of people in Designing and how we, as people, are responsible for translating paradigms and ideas into

practice. The paper then looked at two central concepts in Design that look at the relation between Designers and place - Situated Design - and Designers and people - Empathic Design. A decolonial perspective was then added to these discourses to further them in the direction of decentralizing Design. From the argument that we cannot have a decolonial Design for pluriverses with a universal version of what it means to be a Designer, this paper proposed a frame for nurturing decolonial Design stances for pluriversality based the idea of *awarenessing*, flexibility and of inviting personal stances into shaping Design. This was then the base for outlining the implications of such shift in relation to writing, doing and teaching Design.

This text has explored possible orientation points to for articulating ways of being designers for pluriversality. As such, it is not a recipe nor a one-se fits all. Decolonial stances are situated, and it is on us to articulate how we can develop our decolonial stances for pluriversality in relation to the situations we find ourselves in. To conclude, the question that remains is: What is your decolonial Design stance for pluriversality?

## References

44

- Albarrán González, D., (2020). *Towards a Buen Vivir-Centric Design: Decolonising Artisanal Design with Mayan Weavers from the Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico*. Auckland University of Technology.
- Alves da Cunha, P. F. (2015). *Capoeiras e valentões na história de São Paulo (1830-1930)*. Alameda Casa Editorial.
- Buckley, C. (1986). Made in patriarchy: Toward a feminist analysis of women and design. *Design Issues*, 3(2), 3. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1511480>
- D'Amico-Samuels, D. (1997) Undoing Fieldwork: Personal, Political, Theoretical and Methodological Implications. In F.V. Harrison (ed). (1997). *Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further toward an Anthropology of Liberation*. 2nd ed. American Anthropological Association.

- Escobar, A. (2015). Transiciones: A Space for Research and Design for Transitions to the Pluriverse. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 13(1), 13-23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2015.1085690>
- Escobar, A. (2018). *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds*. Duke University Press.
- Fanon, F. (1961). *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Books.
- Freire, P. (1996). *Pedagogia da autonomia: Saberes necessários a prática educativa*. Paz e Terra.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New rev. ed). Penguin Books.
- Grosfoguel, R. (2007). The Epistemic Decolonial Turn: Beyond political-economy paradigms. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 211-223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162514>
- Grosfoguel, R. (2002). Colonial Difference, Geopolitics of Knowledge, and Global Coloniality in the Modern/Colonial Capitalist World-System. *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 203-24.
- Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>
- Kaufmann-Buhler, J., Pass, V. R. and Wilson, C. S. (eds). (2019). *Design History Beyond the Canon*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Koskinen, I., Battarbee, K., & Mattelmeaki, T. (2003). *Empathic design*. IT press.
- Mainsah, H., & Morrison, A. (2014). Participatory design through a cultural lens: Insights from postcolonial theory. *Proceedings of the 13th Participatory Design Conference: Short Papers, Industry Cases, Workshop Descriptions, Doctoral Consortium Papers, and Keynote Abstracts*, 0(2), 83-86. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2662155.2662195>
- Mareis, C., & Paim, N. (eds). (2020). *Design Struggles*. Valiz.
- Mignolo, W. (2007). Introduction: Coloniality of Power and de-Colonial Thinking. *Cultural Studies*, 21(2-3), 155-167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162498>
- Mignolo, W. (2012). *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking*. Princeton University Press.
- Mignolo, W. (2018). Pensamiento Decolonial. In G. D'Alisa, et al. (eds.)

*Decrecimiento: vocabulario para una nueva era - Edición ampliada para Latinoamérica* (pp. 343-347). Icaria.

Moran, U. C., Harrington, U. G., & Sheehan, N., (2018). On Country Learning. *Design and Culture*, 10 (1), 71–79. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17547075.2018.1430996>

Redström, J. (2017). *Making Design Theory*. Design Thinking, Design Theory. The MIT Press.

Rêgo, W. (1968). *Capoeira Angola: Ensaio Socioetnográfico*. Fundação Gregório de Mattos.

Simonsen, J., Svabo, C., Strandvad, S. M., Samson K., Hertzum, M. and Hansen, O. E., (2014). *Situated Methods in Design*. MIT Press.

Suchman, L. (1993). Working relations of technology production and use. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work*, 2(1-2), 21-39.

Tlostanova, . (2017). On Decolonizing Design. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 15(1) 51-61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2017.1301017>

Torretta, N. B., & Reitsma, L. (2019). Design, power and colonisation: Decolonial and anti-oppressive explorations on three approaches for Design for Sustainability. *Conference Proceedings of the Academy for Design Innovation Management*, 2(1). <https://doi.org/10.33114/adim.2019.04.314>

Trias Cornú, L. (2020). (De)Institution Design: Decolonizing Design Discourse in Uruguay. *Pivot 2020 Conference*. Tulane University.

Tunstall, E. (Dory). (2013). Decolonizing Design Innovation: Design Anthropology, Critical Anthropology, and Indigenous Knowledge. In W. Gunn, et al. *Design Anthropology : Theory and Practice* (pp. 232-250) Bloomsbury Academic. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474214698>

Van Amstel, F. M. C., & Gonzatto, R. F. (2020). The anthropophagic studio: Towards a critical pedagogy for interaction design. *Digital Creativity*, 31(4), 259-283. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14626268.2020.1802295>

Vazquez, R. (2017). Precedence, Earth and the Anthropocene: Decolonizing design. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 15 (1), 77-91. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14487136.2017.1303130>

Wenger, E. (1999). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. Cambridge University Press.

**How to cite:** Torretta, N. B. (2023). Take it personally: what may it take to become Designers for pluriversity? *Revista KEPES*, 20(27), 19-46. <https://doi.org/10.17151/kepes.2023.20.27.2>