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Journeys of displacement between South and North: decolonizing a designer imaginary

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Abstract

In a globalized world that promotes universal desires, southern epistemologies struggle to flourish against westernized notions of values, beauty and life goals. This manifestation of Coloniality (Grosfoguel, 2006) is strengthened by the mainstream systems of production and consumption of both goods and knowledge, where design is a driving force. Design, has been taught from generations in academy under the same Eurocentric canons that disseminate the values of capitalism and search for economic growth. Designers, have been worldwide trained to think, value and act according to the standards of aesthetics, progress and development set in the North. However, the current global unsustainability crises make more evident the global power dynamics, and the need to maintain diverse and contextualized forms of seeing and acting with the world.

Our own experience of being trained as designers in the south, and now relocated to the north is making us aware of our life desires imposed by contemporary coloniality. However, this relocation also builds on the advantages of coloniality, for instance, by being in contexts that have a stronger voice in international disciplinary communities. As others in our situation, we don’t want to be colonizers by being the “north in the south”. In this presentation we show journeys of deconstructing design, sustainability and their values and worldviews through transitioning between south and north. These journeys are motivated by the intention of creating mutual learning between south and north. We aim at supporting the transition of our discipline from Eurocentric worldview to more diverse worldviews and systems of values.
Keywords: design for sustainability, coloniality, global North, global South, Eurocentric design.

Here we reflect on design profession and education through the challenges we have faced working with and teaching design in Mexico, Brazil, Finland and Sweden. We question the purposes and means of design from our Latin American background, with special emphasis on the contradictions that emerge in using a Europe-centred profession into non-European contexts.

Our interest in using, teaching and learning design in these contexts has been to find collaborative systems that are more appropriate to this critical historical moment. We have learned, thought and used design as means for social participation in the search for sustainable futures. However, in this effort, we felt the incompatibility between design methods and diverse local contexts.

In the following sections we briefly explain our journeys with greater emphasis on the reflections that emerged and the consequent need for other ontologies of design for sustainability. We start with a introducing design for sustainability and the concept of coloniality in relation to design practice and education. We then reflect on our practice, teaching and learning journeys of design in the South (Latin America) and the North (Scandinavia). Reflecting on these journeys, we explain the need of articulating design in a way that embraces socio-political worldviews that have been oppressed in design. We conclude by posing the need of a new ontology for design for sustainability.

**Design for sustainability**

Taking part in the emerging global agenda for sustainable futures, design has set to tackle unsustainability through what is now known as Design for Sustainability (DfS). Emerging in the 1990’s, DfS has continuously embraced more complexity as knowledge of sustainability evolved (Ceschin and Gaziulusoy, 2016) and the interdependence between human and non-human factors became increasingly clear.

While DfS has been our area, as it represented a more meaningful use of design in our home countries, it is important to acknowledge that DfS emerged from a mainly
Eurocentric worldview, leaving out other ways of understanding, being and making a sustainable world. Therefore, transitioning DfS to our home countries has a considerable power of creating coloniality.

**Designers with good intentions and the edge of coloniality**

Ramón Grosfoguel, refers to coloniality as the "oppression/cultural, political, sexual, spiritual, epistemic and economic exploitation of ethnic/racial groups subordinated by dominant ethnic/racial groups with or without the existence of colonial administrations" (Grosfoguel, 2007). Coloniality is sustained through globalizing criteria that determine good academic (scientific, and design) work, in imposing culture, as well as other issues that lead global population to a common aspiration (Maldonado, 2007).

Design has greatly contributed to coloniality. For instance, Tony Fry describes how the history of design has been predominantly devoted to canonize everything created from the Western rules of the discipline, leaving out whatever was non-Western if it did not comply with the values or topologies of the established discipline. As a consequence, this has produced a denial in design of all other forms of human fabrication (Fry, Dilton & Stewart, 2015). As Escobar (2015) argues, this coloniality-supporting behaviour has continued into Design for Sustainability.

For these reasons we consider that DfS, even created with good intention of global sustainability, can not be seen as the only alternative and should not be used globally in a homogeneous way.

**Eurocentric Design Education**

Despite the small differences in the form of education, the underlying idea of design in Mexico and Brazil - and possibly many other countries labeled as developing countries - is similar. While both countries have diverse forms of production that could constitute design, the notion of design and its methods in design education are always from the old colonial countries of Europe - especially Germany, England and Italy. Through this perspective, design professionals are seen as experts responding to the needs of the industry and the market, most of the time neglecting societal
challenges. Design has been thought and spread around the world based on a capitalist and Eurocentric conception of progress.

Why do we teach industrial design in a country with mainly maquiladoras' industry (in the case of Mexico) or that is mostly based on exporting raw materials and importing designed good (as in Brazil)? In countries with enormous social inequalities, should we teach such industrial design that neglects social issues? Perhaps a better question would be, why do we teach this type of design in a context with different needs from those of Europe at the beginning of the 20th century, and even different of today's Europe? Why do we teach a displaced design?

To explain why there is a displaced design education, there is not a simple answer and we could even refer to the forces in the international geopolitics of knowledge that play a central role in the ideologies of contemporary societies (Brunner, 2014). Education in design is not the only case of international homogenization. For Ramón Grosfoguel, universities around the world are colonized by what he calls an "idolatric universalism". Grosfoguel points out that in universities around the world it is possible to find the same disciplinary divisions, themes, authors and canons of thought. For him, this is the model of a "Westernized University", a power structure that operates to promote Eurocentric knowledge educating the intermediaries who repeat the same model (Grosfoguel, 2013).

In design education, there is a hegemonic pattern which goes back to the traditional education models of modern design. Design has been taught as a discipline in a unique and totalizing manner, with monological design values which turn the profession into a servile agent of modern coloniality (Fry, Dilton & Stewart, 2015). Hence we need to look not only of design’s coloniality powers but also to the interrelation between design practice and education.

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1 "A maquiladora is term in Spanish that refers to factories located near the United States-Mexico border that operates under a favorable duty- or tariff-free basis. Maquiladoras are a product of the Twin Plant Agreement established between the two countries in the 1960s and have certain tax advantages that make them attractive to businesses. The word “maquiladora” is commonly used in English rather than its translation, “assembly plant.” Maquiladoras are also called “maquilas.” As of 2018, maquiladoras accounted for 65% of Mexico's exports and employed 30% of its workforce" (www.investopedia.com/terms/m/maquiladora.asp).
Following we present reflections on design practice, teaching and learning that revealed contradictions in displacing a profession from one global region and applying it in another region.

**Reflections on Teaching, learning and doing Design for Sustainability in Latin America and Scandinavia**

Our efforts in DfS have been majoritarily inspired by scandinavian participatory design (PD). Our work as designers in social organizations as well as our teaching and learning journeys in Mexico, Brazil, Finland and Sweden have had the underlying intention of transforming the conventional practices of human-centered design into more democratic ways to achieve sustainability. With this intention, our work has revolved around catalyzing processes of social innovation.

Working with social organizations, we used Participatory Design methods as ways of involving communities in decision making processes for local sustainable development and for the sustenance of local cultures. In teaching, we have focused on creating opportunities for students to do Participatory Design for DfS by engaging with topics and context that were close to their positioning in society. We focused on allowing communities and students to find a genuine interest in the design challenges in order to find a space of direct contact with the problem to be solved. In learning, our interest in DfS and Participatory Design has led us seek and have the privilege to undertake Masters and Doctoral education in Scandinavia. However, several conflicts emerged from these efforts and the displacement between Latin America and Scandinavia.

In teaching DfS in Latin America, we found the tension between willing to engage with local issues and the constraints of a Euro-centric academic design curriculum. For instance, curriculums were based on instrumentalist methods commonly used to meet the needs of the industrial economy, while engaging with social issues in PD for DfS asked for different methods. Furthermore, in Using PD for DfS in several courses, it became clear that the methods of PD and DfS were based on different socio-political contexts. Participatory design techniques originate from a context of greater horizontality in socio-political organization, whereas in the contexts we were
teaching, highly hierarchical structures had never allowed the vast majority of people to have a say in socio-political decision making processes.

This was also reflected in our work as designers with social organizations (mostly NGOs focused on local sustainable development). We faced difficulties in engaging with and supporting participation of publics, government agencies and other organizations due to hierarchies and a lack of participatory culture in decision making. The methods we had were not enough to support, include and engage all relevant actors in participatory processes. The types of social issues that we faced were extremely different from the ones that gave birth to the methodologies of Scandinavian participatory design or other methodologies for social innovation developed in Europe. Imposing PD and DfS methods to fit the context were not only difficult but also a support for coloniality as it inherited different socio-political relations and worldviews.

Through these feelings and reflection about the situatedness of Participatory Design and Design for sustainability, and then through learning and developing design in MA and PhD program, we have increasingly felt the need for a different form of design. The need is not only of new methods and practices, but rather of a new ground for participatory design and Design for Sustainability. We need a new ontology to ground PD and DfS that does not support coloniality and that embraces and deals with diversity in socio-political-cultural contexts.

**Conclusion, or why we need alternative ontologies for design**

“Nothing comes without its world”

Donna J. Haraway

If our true aspiration is sustainability, and we want to use the discipline of design in for it, we will have to reformulate design. The intentions in participatory design to democratize the processes that construct our world have contributed valuable and inspiring lessons to the development of a better DfS practice. It has been through the implementation of some of the methods developed in Europe - so called Global
North - that we have found a starting point to understand that the challenges of Latin America - so called Global South - are different.

In our experiences, by transferring PD and DfS practices to realities outside the realm where they were initially thought, a burden of coloniality became present not only in the ways of achieving a more sustainable life, but also in the fundamentals of what we understand as design.

A more sustainable world is being built through the current DfS, but this happens from a primarily Eurocentric vision. If everything we have designed designs us back, or in the words of Tony Fry (2012), 'design designs', in order to look for sustainability we would have to take a step back and rethink how we are trying to get there. A design practice that can truly engage with non-European context need to be rooted in other worldviews. This means, we need not only a new design practice and methods, but rather a new ontology of design.

As we find ourselves looking for other ways to become what we are becoming as designers, we conclude returning to Fry:

Becoming is always a becoming situated somewhere in cultural space. (...) to discover one is Eurocentrically placed in the world to “become what you are” means undergoing a process of epistemological decolonization enabling reflection upon “what you were made” (Fry, Dilton & Stewart, 2015).

Today, from our displacements and from displacing design between north and south we developed a reflective process of deconstructing our field. Through this process, we are looking for another ontology for design for sustainability, we are becoming.

Bibliography


