Decolonizing Design Research

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Abstract

Design research played and still plays a significant role in the coloniality of making. By transforming natural commodities imported from former colonies into manufactured Things that are later exported back to such places, design research contributes to keeping the geopolitical divide between designing and making, which is so typical of colonialism. Nevertheless, counter-hegemonic efforts, such as the decolonizing design movement, seek to open up design research to support autonomous development in former colonies and their diaspora. While adding a dialectical-existential perspective to this movement, this chapter scrutinizes the colonial legacy of design research and proposes subverting it through anthropophagy and similar alter/native universals.

Introduction

Design research, like most research activities, develops from cumulative knowledge building. Unlike most, it accumulates knowledge in artifacts or Things. In this field, Things are often spelt with capital "T" in design research to emphasize humans and non-humans' mutual constitution in the world and in acquiring knowledge of the world (Wakkary, 2021; Telier et al. 2011). This chapter does not aim to deconstruct knowledge accumulation in Things but to challenge the accumulation of knowledge in worlds that sustain colonial relations to other worlds by means of Things. Even if those relations are now less explicit than in historical colonialism, they persist through several forms of coloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2007). Coloniality prevents design research from developing further from the extractivist, racialized, patriarchal, capitalist, and ultimately colonial way of doing research (Smith 2012). This way thrives from the epistemological distinction between a generalized knower, the Self, and the generalized known, the Other (Santos 2018; Hall 1992; Smith 2012). In such coloniality of knowledge (Quijaño 2007), the Other is reduced to an object and converted to an instrument for changing the world, for example, like Africans who were firstly studied as exotic animals and then forcefully enslaved by Europeans (Fanon 1963).

Since the Other is not considered fully human by the Self, it is either treated as part of useful Things of their world or as part of undifferentiated Things of another world. The Self does not know and does not respect another world (Krenak 2020), thus keeping a detached position even when "discovering" what the Other already knew long before. Seeing mostly undifferentiated Things in another world, the Western Self steals, plunders, takes, and extracts what can enrich and humanize their known and respected world. In this social relation, the Other becomes a generalized mediation for the Self to exist in multiple worlds. The coloniality of knowledge lies, hence, on the coloniality of being (Maldonado-Torres 2007) that shifts humans and non-humans through fundamental ontological categories: Self, Other and Things.

Tensions that arise from this ontological dispute are typically ignored, ruled out, or carefully released by colonial research (Smith 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012) because they can potentially destabilize the coloniality of power (Quijaño 2000) and open up the possibilities of the Other to revolt against the Self, recognize their Things and fight for liberation (Fanon 1963). Design research frames these tensions as wicked problems, sustainable development goals, societal constraints,

organizational cultures, creative aesthetic challenges, and other watered-down concepts. There are exceptions though, as in counter-hegemonic investigations that seek its underlying contradictions.

Among these efforts, I respect and subscribe to decolonizing design (Paim and Gisel, 2021; Kiem and Ansari 2021; Abdulla et al. 2018), a radical movement that tries to cut the ties between design and the Western modernity project. The goal is to open up the possibility of designing from different epistemologies, theoretical standpoints and economic frameworks. Adding up to this movement, this chapter scrutinizes the colonial legacy of design research and explores its subversion for liberation. My position in this movement is of a White cis man born and raised in Pindorama. This territory was stolen from Indigenous people by European colonizers, who renamed it Brazil. I have ancestors in both groups, so I am recognized as a Latino immigrant in Europe and as a settler in Pindorama. Regarding design research, I work in an underdeveloped country that offers little support for doing scientific work (Vieira Pinto 2020).

Looking for better support, I pursued doctoral studies in the Netherlands, where some of my European ancestors came from. There I faced the coloniality of knowledge in the most explicit way: I had to give up the research program of exploring possible contributions of Latin American Cultural Studies to Participatory Design (Van Amstel 2008, 2009) because the authors I worked with — Jesus Martín-Barbero and Néstor García Canclini — did not publish in the high-impact journals that the Dutch and European academic system used to evaluate research quality.

Upset, I accepted that limitation and studied European Marxist canons (Lefebvre 1991; Engeström 2015), who led me to a thesis on designing with contradictions (Van Amstel 2015) that had mild relevance to the context I returned to in 2015. The coloniality of power paved the way for President Jair Bolsonaro's rise in 2018. Bolsonaro openly pursued scientists that questioned neoliberalism and U.S. imperialism, cutting research budgets for the humanities and the arts as part of his "cultural war" against degeneracy. Due to the catastrophic pandemic management of Bolsonaro (Pelanda and Van Amstel 2021), I had to work from home for two years, like most public servants. While moving my activities online, I met critical design researchers who faced a similar situation in different Brazilian universities. Together, we hosted a public online reading group on the possible contributions of Paulo Freire to design (Serpa et al., 2022). After reading some of his works, we studied the authors he relied upon, like Frantz Fanon and Álvaro Vieira Pinto, and authors that relied upon him, like Augusto Boal. These authors wrote about the possibilities of decolonizing their nations from a dialectical-existential perspective (Gonzatto and Van Amstel 2022). This chapter is my attempt to extend this perspective to decolonizing design research based on our recent studies on the contradiction of oppression.

The coloniality of making

In Marxism, contradictions can be defined as a tension between opposing forces that struggle to shape reality, provoking constant gains and losses (Van Amstel 2015; Engeström 2015). For instance, if design research would not have come to terms with the contradiction of designing for the Self versus designing for the Other, it would not have developed user-centered design, participatory design, and many other methods that generate Things by putting the Other in friendly cooperation or adversarial confrontation with the Self. Nevertheless, by increasing the tension within this contradiction, design research has lost control over Things, which became an abstract, elusive, runaway object of design. To make up for this loss, the Other's experience, behavior, or activity became the concrete anchor of Things, eventually mistaken for one another.

The Other is usually fine with Things designed in this way, even if treated as part of those Things because they are supposed to have superior quality to the Things that the Other could produce. Granted, the Other pays back in financial, informational, or affective matters, so much so that the Self gets enough resources for the next round of designing. It seems like a positive feedback loop with equivalent exchanges that tends towards a dynamic equilibrium of forces. However, since the

Self continuously accumulates more knowledge, power and money than the Other, the loop turns negative and leads toward the destruction of the Other (Vieira Pinto 2005b). This existential condition can be characterized by the imposition of a metropolitan world to a colonial world mediated by Things (Figure 1). People in the colonial world try to resist this imposition by designing their own Things and alter/native universals (explained later in this chapter), but they do not always succeed.
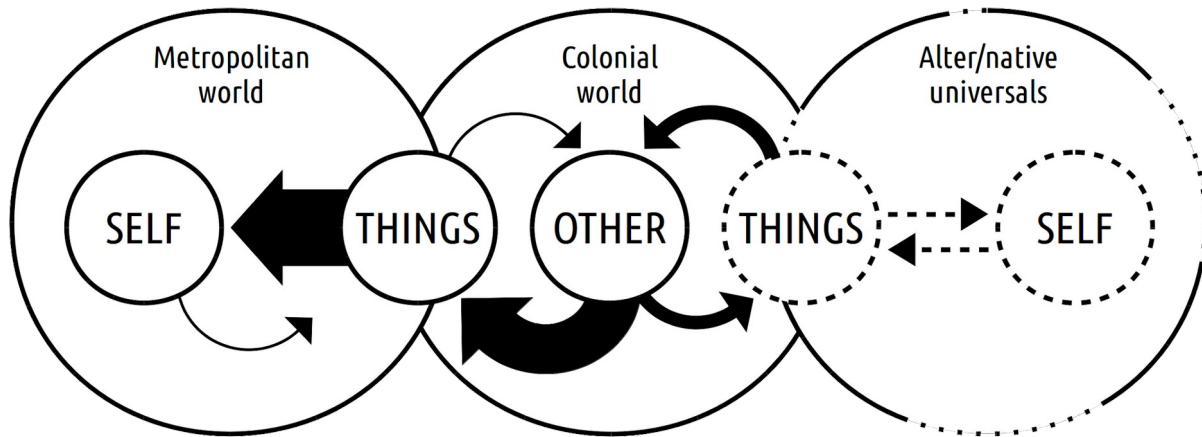

Figure 1: Unequal design exchanges in the colonizing feedback loop (left) and the attempt to overcome this inequality in the decolonizing feedback loop (right).

This nasty cybernetic loop extends to how reality is interpreted, theorized and transformed. The Other is persuaded or obliged to accept the superiority of the Self and to give up or even reject the knowledge coming from their traditions and crafts (Santos 2018; Quijaño 2007; Freire 1970). The erasure of local knowledge reaches the point of deliberately killing or isolating the local artisans so that they cannot pass their knowledge to the next generations. The so-called industrial revolution that replaced craft for design was and still is a violent process in both developed and underdeveloped countries (García Canclini 1995; Vieira Pinto 2005a).

Design schools and research programmes have been installed in underdeveloped countries precisely to replace traditional craftwork. These institutions take advantage of the coloniality of knowledge (Quijano 2007) to pursue another form of coloniality: the coloniality of making. Álvaro Vieira Pinto has thoroughly analysed this kind of coloniality under the label of underdevelopment and metropolitanism (Vieira Pinto 2005a; 1960). Here I reframe his work and connects it to the modernity/coloniality group's definition of coloniality forms (da Costa e Martins, 2019; Maldonado-Torres, 2007). The coloniality of making refers to the international production relations that overvalue the intellectual labour in developed countries and undervalue the manual labour in underdeveloped countries. By securing value through ideology, policy, and market strategies, developed nations design themselves out of the underdeveloped nation's making.

The coloniality of making thus manifests as a geopolitical divide between metropolitan (designing) world and colonial (making) world. This division is firmly grounded in the anti-dialogical gap between theory and practice (Mazzarotto and Serpa 2022; Freire 1970). Metropolitan design researchers feel compelled to develop universal theories and methods for the entire (metropolitan+colonial) world, whereas design researchers from former colonies feel compelled to merely apply and validate these theories and methods (Ansari 2016). As a result, design researchers working in underdeveloped conditions are diverted from their underdeveloped reality to become conscious of the developed reality (Vieira Pinto 1960). Since the definition of developed design research is always being updated, the underdeveloped design research remains as such: seeking unattainable Things of marvelous qualities that cannot be designed or used in their reality unless as

luxury products sold to their local elites. Nevertheless, the coloniality of making is just one of the aspects of the modernity existential project, which violently subsumes non-modern diverse cultures to colonized monocultures that cannot fully humanize and become autonomous (Escobar 2018).

Design as dehumanisation

It is already well established that design research can humanize Things and, in turn, humanize humans, but there is still a long path to admit that design research can also dehumanize people and nations. Design research humanities Things by making them work as expected by their users' minds or shaping them to fit users' bodies. For that, design research embeds representation of users in Things, such as target groups, ethnographic insights, personas, trained data sets, or task flows (Gonzatto and Van Amstel, 2022). Things are supposed to look and feel similar to humans to better interact with humans. Contrariwise, while making Things similar to humans, design research also makes some humans similar to Things or even less than that. What is considered human and worthy of designing for is just a tiny fraction of the possibilities of being human. The embedded model of being human is a specific one: the modern Western white cis average man, a.k.a. the Modulor (Corbusier 1955). The different ways of being human are framed as non-designer, non-user, non-human, or non-being. For example, a precarious worker who can filter information in a labour platform or an enslaved worker who can extract minerals are treated as Quasi-Thing, mostly ignored by design research. In contrast, the social robots or the artificial intelligence agents built with these materials are treated as a Quasi-Other for the Self, well worthy of design research (Wakkary 2021; Snelders, van de Garde-Perik, and Secomandi 2014).

Design research treats the Quasi-Other much better than the Quasi-Thing because it is an extension of the Self. Things that look like the Other do not reflect the values of the Other but of the Self who designed it, virtual assistants that look and talk like servant women attending to men being a case in point. The Self designed these Things to furnish a distinct world to live in, a world that can sustain the (sexist) values and the (patriarchal) position of the Self. But the metropolitan world is built at the expense of another world. Those who designed these Things did not live in the same world as those who produced or used these Things, and designers might not have considered their use conditions. Even further, those who made these Things did not live in the same world as those who extracted the raw materials to build, where most environmental and social damage currently occurs. The Self ignores and mistreats these distant worlds because they are populated by the underdeveloped less-than-humans, whose capacity to humanize is disregarded.

The contradiction between the humanization of Things and the dehumanization of the Other that now appears in design research stems from an older contradiction that emerged at the heart of the modernity project, the contradiction of oppression (Freire 1970; Fanon 1963; 1967; Vieira Pinto 2005a). This contradiction generates a divided ontology as if one social group (the oppressed) depended on another social group (the oppressors) to handle human reality. The first oppression relations rose when Europeans invaded the territory once called Pindorama, Abya Yala, Turtle Island, and other names. The colonial oppression positioned Europeans as the generalized, universal, all-powerful Self that had the best knowledge (and power) to tell what was real and what was unreal in the world, i.e., the only world they could recognize and respect, the metropolitan world. The rest (Hall 1992) became a generalized Other and inferior being in handling reality, either an aberration of the metropolitan world or a creature of another world. Indigenous people were the first to be generalized in that way, later joined by other social groups: Blacks, Muslims, and Asians. When Indigenous people reacted and resisted the destruction of their world, the oppressors reframed these actions as evidence of the oppressed inferiority in understanding modern reality (Fanon 1963). Slowly but always violently, this inferiority became internalized by the oppressed (Freire 1970; Boal 1980; Fanon 1967), to the point of accepting the coloniality of making and welcoming Things that comes from the metropolis as a kind of redemption.

Colonialist legacy of design research

Design research played and still plays a major role in the coloniality of making. By transforming the natural commodities imported from former colonies into manufactured Things that are exported back to former colonies, design research contributes to accumulating capital and knowledge at the metropolitan centers. Design research shapes Things according to the characteristics of the Other, aesthetically and morally legitimizing the unfair exploit. Even if tied to fair trade practices, design research prevents the Other from developing to the point of becoming a collective design body (Angelon and Van Amstel 2011), an autonomous designer (Escobar 2018), or a Self in relation to another Self.

The Self does not want to lend design power to the Other because that could risk stopping the exploit. When the colonized realize that they had already designed many valuable Things even before the colonizers arrived at their territory, they start to question their conditions, revolt against their oppressors and change the circumstances that sustain the exploit (Vieira Pinto 2005a; Fanon 1963). That is why the Self relies primarily on Things to keep in touch with the Other in a safe geopolitical manner. The Self is interested in taking undifferentiated Things (raw materials) from the colonial world and transforming them into differentiated Things (goods) in the metropolitan world.

Nevertheless, if the Self pays attention long enough to the colonial world, the undifferentiated Things may become differentiated through classification or fragmentation (Lefebvre 1991). After appreciating the difference between Things (and not necessarily between Self and Other), the Self may wish to settle and push for humanizing and respecting the colonial world. Then, the less-than-human part of the once ignored world may become useful Things to increase the workforce unless they resist this forced humanizing. In the past, colonial settlers imprisoned, evicted to other lands, and killed Indigenous people that could not be useful to them. Those who survived and integrated into the colony somehow became Quasi-Self, neither fully recognized nor rejected by the Self. In design research, these correspond to the so-called users, those less-than-human incapable of designing their Things (Gonzatto and Van Amstel 2022). Up to these days, design research continually segments users into populations, personas, or groups to prevent users from organizing and revolting.

By studying the particularities of underdeveloped markets and their users, design research helps pushing products to the bottom of the pyramid, branding multinational corporations that replace local businesses, and developing digital services that employ the local workforce in precarious conditions. Most of the research done on cross-cultural design, universal design methods, design for development, and design for social innovation cannot avoid colonizing the already colonized. These strands of research are sensitive to the social problems caused by colonialism, but they either assume colonization is over or think they are not responsible for that. Failing to scrutinize their position and recognize their *(des)ignorance* of other designs and design by other names (Gutiérrez Borrero 2022), they reproduce the coloniality of making in design interventions and the coloniality of knowledge in design publications.

But design research faces resistance from the colonized. As the contradiction of oppression builds up tension, stability begins to erode. The Other is always resisting the Self, using every breach in the colonial world to regain the denied humanity. When made into Things for the Self, despite not being recognized as fully human, the Other becomes conscious of a power that can be used against the Self, the power of working directly with nature (Vieira Pinto 2005a; Fanon 1963; 1967). A similar process of *conscientisation* (Freire, 1970) happens when the Other imports Things designed by the Self and scrutinizes their design (Vieira Pinto 2005a). By looking critically at those Things, the Other can redefine their purposes by making *gambiarras* (Boufler *2013)*, hybridizing the design (García Canclini 1995), producing Things locally and, in these ways, having an autonomous production of existence.

While localizing the production, the Other needs to understand how the Self produced those Things. That technical examination is like pulling a thread that reveals a network of domination built on centuries of colonizing, economic dependence, externally-supported *coup d'etat*, and political destabilization (Vieira Pinto 2005a; 1960). The Other realizes that most of the work involved in building the colonial world and the metropolitan world was not done by the colonizers but by the colonized (Vieira Pinto 1960). From that point on, the Other wants to become the Self of their own history. The decolonization struggle begins.

Decolonizing process

Decolonization can be described as the historical struggle through which the generalized Other becomes an independent, recognized, respected, particular, and conscious Self. The utopian horizon of decolonization is to overcome the contradiction of oppression and live in a society where biological and cultural differences are not framed as negative or demeaning (Fanon 1963; 1967). Ways to open that horizon are manifold (Tuck and Yang 2012), but a common decolonizing strategy is to reframe differences as positive and dignifying. In many cases, the assertion of the liberating Self requires othering the colonizers, particularly those who have settled in that world, to diminish their power and allow new relations between social groups to flourish (Fanon 1963). When liberation wars are necessary to gain independence, such as in many African countries, the colonizers become enemies that must be effaced from the territory.

After the liberation war is over, the othering might persist in safeguarding political independence and expanding it to cultural and economic domains. Becoming the Other is so unbearable to the colonisers that many of those who survive liberation wars return to the metropolis where they (or their ancestors) came from (Fanon 1963). In places where liberation wars did not occur, the colonisers may gradually became the Other to the Self in new forms of coloniality, like big stick diplomacy, underdevelopment, economic dependence, and digital colonialism. Despite inheriting settler privileges from my ancestors, I am treated as an Other by metropolitan design research, possibly because the design and research that my national peers do are not considered *designerly* or *researchy* enough by metropolitan standards.

Any design research that does not recognize, acknowledge, and cite the relevant research done in underdeveloped nations contributes to maintaining the coloniality of knowledge, especially those that run field studies and avoid literature review in these nations. Decolonizing design research starts with decentering and unsettling citations to revert the excessive accumulation of knowledge at metropolitan centers. Reading, citing, and collaborating with Indigenous authors is essential, as they are the ones who started this struggle (Smith 2012). Further than that, decolonizing design research involves standing against the oppressive regime of "one big science", "top universities", "world-leading researchers", "publish or perish" or "demo or die" which ignores the unequal conditions for publishing/designing original work. That means inviting underdeveloped researchers to edit and review scientific work, offering lower conference registration rates, charging accessible open access publication fees, etc.

Previous decolonization movements started by cutting the periphery's dependence on the centre through diplomacy (as in Brazil) or through revolution (as in Algeria). The second step was supposed to be redistributing power and dismantling centralization. Even if in many new nations the metropolis managed to keep the centralizing coloniality of power through new strategies, I still believe that once the focus changes from accumulating capital to crafting relations, the centre does not hold. Decolonizing design research may thus advance by taking the means of production to the peripheries, hacking intellectual property, commoning resources and information, generalizing local methods, reframing colonial legacies, and nurturing liberating utopias. Above all, decolonizing design research needs to recognize alter/native foundational concepts that can withstand the colonizing universals of design.

Designing alter/native universals

A good example of a growing alter/native universal is the concept of pluriverse (Escobar 2018) and its derived pluriversal design (Noel 2020; Leitão 2020). Despite being conceived by a U.S. pragmatist philosopher to convey democratic pluralism (James 1909), the pluriverse has become an alter/native to the sustainable development concept, raising the need to consider multiple paths of development and produce "*a world that can fit many worlds*", as the Zapatistas guerrilla fighters once demanded (Escobar 2018).

As inspired as I am by this concept, I am also worried that it is quickly taken out of its decolonising situation and used to support the apparently peaceful yet essentially violent strategy of multiculturalism (García Canclini 2001). The pluriverse may evoke the peaceful coexistence of the metropolis and the colonies, each in their world, without any reparations or change for the historical oppression, which is not truthful to its Zapatista "our word is our weapon" origins (Marcos, 2002).

The pluriverse can better be defined as *a universe that can afford many conflicting universes* to regain its revolutionary meaning. I prefer universe rather than world because, in that way, the pluriverse does not stand any longer as the opposite of universe, but as an unsettling synthesis of multiple universes. Then, the pluriverse does not deny the possibility of universalizing other concepts that are not worlds (Gutiérrez Borrero 2022), such as nation, culture, land, life, etc. According to Vieira Pinto (2020), universality is just one of the paths that connects consciousness to the totality of human experience. Without universals, though, human beings cannot develop existential projects that are complex enough to afford differences. Going hyperlocal and rejecting universals does not seem to favor the decolonization struggle. Instead, it tends to keep discrepancies as they are, incommensurable and therefore very consolable.

Universals (and other totalities) are not eternal, immutable, natural, ahistorical and a privilege of the metropolis. If we get rid of this association, we can recognize alter/native universals in the epistemologies of the South (Santos 2018). For example, universalizing animal, plant, and land rights. But to get there, we need to advance the struggle between modernity and alter/native existential projects. Pluriversal design research should not be practiced or disconnected from these struggles, running the risk of carefully releasing tension to keep these universals apart while preserving the unequal structure that divides them. If the pluriverse does not afford to deal with conflicts, it will not go much further than the melting pot of mingling cultures (Zangwill, 2017).

Beyond the pluriverse, there are other promising alter/native universals that can be further designed for the liberation of the colonized: *sumak kawsay, ubuntu, hind swaraj,* and many others. These concepts are furnishing a distinctly southern way of doing design research in the Global South and in its associated diaspora (Gutiérrez Borrero 2022). For instance, designers and artists in Pindorama often refers to anthropophagy to affirm their otherness.

Affirming otherness

Anthropophagy was a ritualized practice performed by some Indigenous peoples in Latin America when they captured a strong warrior in a battle or when a parent died (Castro 2012, 2014). The person was eaten so that the tribe could incorporate their memories and strengths in both metaphorical and literal ways. In the case of war captives, the ritual preparation could take months and require providing good food and shelter for the captive. In the case of the Yanomami, the human eaters had to observe the *õnokaemuu*, a seclusion rite that includes several food prohibitions (Kopenawa and Albert 2017). The ritual was not an act of savagery as described by the Europeans who escaped captivity or who heard about the ceremony. Framing anthropophagy as savagery was indeed helpful to justify the killing, enslaving, or catechizing of the original peoples of Pindorama — and of other lands (Fanon 1967).

Taking back that concept from the colonizers and reinstating its positive meaning was perhaps one

of the major Brazilian Modernism Movement (1922-1930) achievements. Oswald de Andrade, Tarsila do Amaral, Raul Bopp and other national bourgeoisie, primarily White, artists from this movement deployed a form of cultural anthropophagy that broke with European forms of doing art and conceptualizing culture (Garcia 2020). The rupture with colonial and canonical legacies was characterized by critical and creative assimilation of what is worthy of keeping and what is deemed to be expelled. Instead of excluding the Other from the filthy Self to become a pure Self like in the European Futurism movement, the Other is assimilated as part of the Self, in a radical form of alterity. This practice did not involve eating the flesh but the ideas of the Other with the same honor and appreciation paid by the past Indigenous people.

The concept of anthropophagy influenced several subsequent cultural movements in Pindorama, which resisted coloniality and the associated divide between a superior and inferior form of culture. Brazilian graphic design research was heavily influenced by anthropophagy in the 1960s, inspiring the combination of modern with non-modern forms of expression, going beyond or in a different direction than post-modern design (Duque and Inhan 2020). In the 2000s, anthropophagy was a significant source of inspiration for the Cultural Points program and the associated Digital Culture movement (Carvalho and Cabral 2011). As part of this movement, we founded the first Interaction Design Institute in Pindorama and pioneered a critical pedagogy in the field (Van Amstel, Vassão, and Ferraz 2011; Van Amstel and Gonzatto 2020).

Not all of the movements influenced by anthropophagy reproduced that practice as conceived. Since the 1950s, some artistic movements preferred to stop "eating the colonizers." (Boal 2014) They did not want to become anything like the Europeans. Instead of becoming a respected Self, they tried to stay as the Other to remind themselves of the historical struggle founded on this alterity relation. Inspired by Boal, my students once experimented with breaking all canonic fashion and graphic design rules that they knew while writing a collective manifesto on social design. The resulting monster aesthetics (Angelon and Van Amstel 2021) is a positive affirmation of otherness that enables collective design bodies to form even in conditions of fraught democracy.

My engagement with the decolonizing design movement did not aim at perfecting or correcting the metropolitan design research as this would not have been authentic decolonization. Authentic, in this context, means strengthening the design research that contributes to the liberation of former colonies and the colonized people that live in the diaspora. In the Design & Oppression network, I learned that to be successful in this effort, decolonizing design research must articulate other oppression struggles, running the risk of replacing colonialism with sexism, racism or other kinds of oppression (Serpa et al. 2022). We agree that decolonization is not a metaphor for fighting all kinds of oppression (Tuck and Yang 2012). Yet, we believe that decolonization cannot achieve its utopia of society with nuanced biological and cultural differences by countering colonialism alone. As Augusto Boal puts bluntly: "The fight against a single oppression is indissociable from the fight against all oppression, even if one of that seems secondary" (Boal 1980, 156). Colonization is at the historical roots of the contradiction of oppression, yet we should not hierarchize or isolate it from the derived and entangled relations. Decolonizing design research must run alongside and in coordination with other counter-hegemonic efforts that aim to depatriarchise, decapitalise, declassify and unsettle design. In this way, we might reach a historical situation in which all collective design bodies design for their authentic selves, in their alter/native respected universals, sharing a pluriversal democratic society that nurtures us all with what we need and desire.

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