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Introducing Relationality to Design Research

LIMA Jananda

OCAD University

lima@jananda.org

The Design Eurocentric legacy shaped its research practices based on separability and objectification. This paper seeks to reflect on the movement of experimenting and conceiving new methods as the beginning of major changes in the decolonizing design enterprise. The reflection stems from two main concepts: relationality and accountability. By going into the field, embodying other ontologies and epistemologies, I suggest that dismantling assumptions is an enriching and often painful process. It is by embracing uncomfortable positions and by unlearning that designers are able to reimagine design practices for decoloniality. This reflexive exercise is shaped as a conversation between my personal experiences – mainly in two distinct territories, Favela da Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro and the Janeraka Indigenous land, in the Mid Xingu River region – and academic theoretical learnings.

Design; Indigenous; decolonial; research; positionality.

1. Positionality

To acknowledge my positionality allows me to reflect upon and understand how race, gender, and class generate different ways of experiencing the world (Ribeiro, 2017, p. 40) and their impact on my relationship with others. It is also a reminder of the layers of complexity of individuals to avert the Modernity's homogenization trap.

An important reminder is that acknowledging one's **position** is not the same as granting **representativity**, but it allows reflections on the same themes from different viewpoints. As a Japanese–Brazilian ciswoman based in Toronto, I am constantly caught in two distinct realities of oppression and

privilege. In addition, I come from a family of politicians and activists from the peripheries of São Paulo. These facts allow me to question the power dynamics of current systems thoroughly. In the same regard, being a graphic designer helps me consider the different ways of sharing stories and how it weaves narratives. Storytelling is not neutral (Morales, 1998), so I am mindful of how marginalization results from the decisions made based on the media chosen, the vocabulary, and the symbols used. Equally important, as a percussionist, the music language, the body language, and the tempo are always present in my interactions. So, while you read this essay, I invite you to be mindful of my and your positionality to interpret the following words.

2. An Offering to the Decolonizing Design Enterprise

How are design tools and methodologies addressing different cultures, perspectives, and power dynamics for social change? Although it is preached as leverage to social equity, design methodologies are primarily being created and developed from the same Eurocentric and Anglocentric mindsets that have shaped the relations between the West and other cultures for centuries. Western tradition holds that settled truth is of the most significant value. But "It is impossible to see the whole of anything in a design from just one station point or perspective." (Nelson & Stolterman, 2014, p. 183). Moreover, in Epistemologies of the South (ES), Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) states that there are no longer sufficient modern solutions for the problems we are facing. ES framework also claims the world's diversity is infinite and that transformation emerges from combining different worlds.

Despite and yet because of the Eurocentric legacy of design, rethinking design's methodological and theoretical foundations towards a decolonial practice is much needed. For this movement to occur, it demands changes in the very institutional academic and professional structures that still sustain its colonial ethos. That includes disrupting academic standards when they do not seem to conform knowledge from other centers.

In this sense, people in the system affected by design should be involved in the design process (Bjögvinsson et al., 2012). A co-design approach aims to endeavour through less dichotomic concepts and connect different worlds. In acknowledging that fieldwork is a collaborative effort, I feel the need to consciously mention that these learnings do not come from a place of a designer making sense of the "native" wisdom (Sinha, 2003). Instead, they are formed in the relationships developed in the process.

Design creates new ways of living and thinking, and for that reason, the cultural and political agenda cannot be removed from the design, even when it claims neutrality. Looking into the power dynamics and oppressive system of conflict-affected spaces requires different ways of setting up a design process. This study narrates the experience of going in the field in two distinct territories: Favela da Rocinha in Rio de Janeiro, and the Janeraka Indigenous land, in the Mid Xingu River region.

I believe it is at experimenting and conceiving new practices that major changes will be made in the larger enterprise of decolonizing design. First by going into the field, embodying other ontologies and epistemologies, and dismantling assumptions. Second, by sharing these new learnings with accountability. Hence, this essay is a conversation between my personal experiences and academic theoretical learnings as a reflexive exercise.

3. The Enriching and Often Painful Process

While doing my master's in Toronto, I spent three months in the favelas in Rio. Arriving in these conflict-affected territories as a researcher from a Canadian institution was a real challenge as no favela resident seemed interested in speaking with me. I kept asking myself: "How could I gain this community's trust?" But, more importantly, "how could I connect and create meaningful relationships with favela residents?" Eventually, a few months later, I had the opportunity to visit the Marytykwawara family from the Awaete people in the heart of the Amazon Forest.

In both cases, I grasped those local inhabitants do not trust academic researchers. There is a sense that researchers are using the residents to appropriate the community's knowledge with no positive impacts on the community. Furthermore, in the Indigenous case, researchers are 'stealing' Indigenous knowledge to become experts in a culture that does not belong to them rather than contributing to the decolonization of research. (Smith, 2021) On these two occasions, I had one of the most challenging moments as a researcher. At the time, I didn't have as many mechanisms to deal with these conflicts as I have today. All along, I counted on my intuition to guide me through these experiences and to help me build trustful and meaningful relationships.

The assumptions we carry with us and the myths we believe are all defied when encountering other ways of being. In addition to the lack of trust from the communities, going into the field is a painful process because it puts us in an uncomfortable position to question our values and ego and reflect on where we come from. At the cutting edge, it challenges us to radically stop believing in underlying assumptions that shaped our worldview and our values our whole lives.

The *Social cartography of general responses to modernity's violence* (figure 1) guides the tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions in different reactions to the violence of modernity. It presents four discursive spaces.
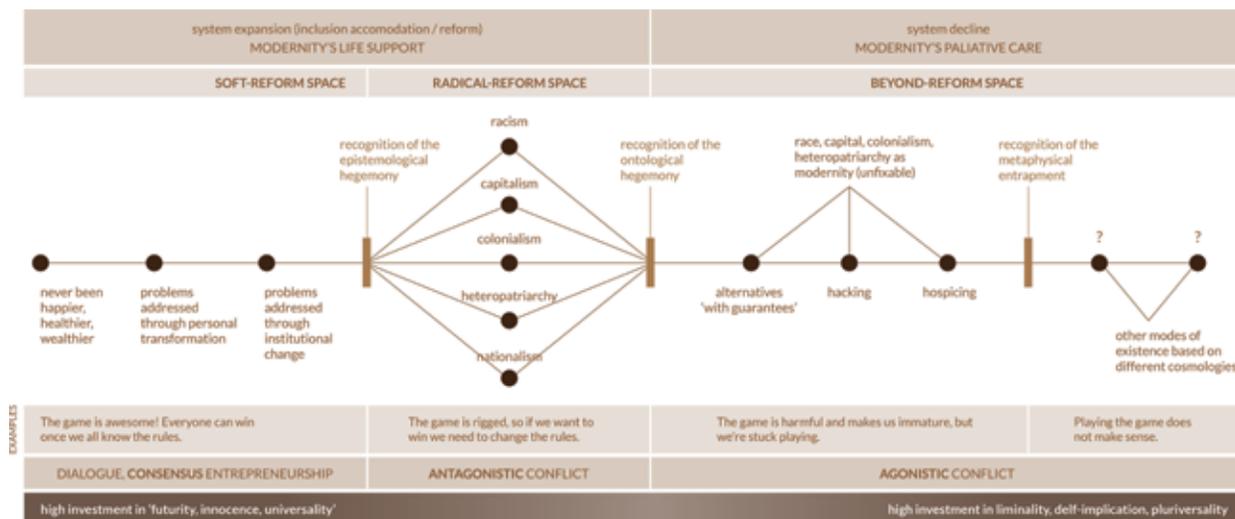

Figure 1 Social cartography of general responses to modernity's violence. Aadapted from Mapping interpretations of decolonization in the context of higher education. de Oliveira Andreotti et al. (2015)

In the **everything is awesome space**, Modernity is grounding humanity in the advancements in science and technology, achieved within a linear notion of time and a seamless notion of progress. Therefore, any problems are perceived as minor and can be addressed by expanding or improving the existing system.

The **soft reform space** offers critiques focusing on inclusion mobilized through institutional transformation. Still, it emphasizes the rights and responsibilities of individuals to determine their own success or failure, measured by the values of the existing system.

The **radical reform space** recognizes an epistemological dominance title systemic analysis. It focuses on how unequal relations of knowledge production result in the severely uneven distribution of resources, labour and symbolic values. Assessments from this space tend to prioritize one dimension of Modernity, this interconnected violences and have a solid normative position that seeks to fix the mechanisms that produce inequalities.

The **beyond reform space** recognizes an ontological dominance. It connects different dimensions of oppression and rejects the idea that the mere addition of other ways of knowing will change the system. Within this space, the monitored system is recognized as irrecoverable.

One of the ways of reading this map is acknowledging that our experience is not linear. That means that what the authors call *hospicing* entails inhabiting the four spaces at once. It is a challenging position to be facing all the frustrations, contradictions, and incoherencies that emerge when we traverse all the spaces.

> *"Hospicing demands a critique that is self-implicated rather than heroic, vanguardist or 'innocent'. It demands a kind of courage that is un-neurotic (not invested in self-affirmation): a kind of courage that helps us to look the bull in the eye, to recognize ourselves in the bull, and to see the bull as a teacher, precisely when it is trying to kill us."*
> *(de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015, p. 28)*

4. Relationality

When I came back from these two experiences, I had different understandings of what research is and what connecting with people entails. And I use that as a fuel to further investigate alternative ways of knowing as an action to try deconstructing and unpacking design practices. That investigation led me to two main concepts that are helping me understand my path while traversing different reformed spaces: **relationality and accountability**.

Time'i Assurini, a pajé (shaman) from the Marytykwawara family, taught me that for the Awaete people, knowledge has the character of presence and relationship. It is an exchange of knowledge that transcends oral tradition, and it is not carried out exclusively between humans. In the learning process, the entire forest contributes to connecting with knowledge. An animal that moves in the woods, a bird that sings, a strange noise, a tree, the wind; those forest beings are constantly altering the environment and imparting wisdom.

If knowledge cannot be possessed, rather can be shared, and be connected to, then this concept itself impacts a designer's entire approach to research. In his book Research is Ceremony (2008), Shawn Wilson explains that relationships do not simply shape reality. They are reality.

"Identity for Indigenous peoples is grounded in their relationships with the land, with their ancestors who have returned to the land and with future generations who will come into being on the land. Rather than viewing ourselves as being in relationship with other people or things, we are the relationships that we hold and are part of." (Wilson, 2008, p. 80)

Once, while giving a lecture to young intrapreneurs in a favela community, a person from the audience asked me how the result of my research helped her community. First, I presented her with all the numbers and facts of the direct impact of this project on the community. But most importantly, the research impact goes beyond the initial goals of that project. The relationships I create along the way are an essential – if not main – aspect of my design practice. Me being there, speaking to her, means that my relationship with knowledge extends to my relationship with that community.

5. Relational Accountability

One of the first activists I encountered when I arrived in Rio was Pedro Paiva. He is the founder of the collective *A Rocinha Resiste* and the collective *Sistema 2+1*. At the time, he grew tired of researchers approaching him to access the knowledge he built as a favela resident, then go back to their country, get a degree, and never offer anything in return to him or his community. For that reason, he created a list of commandments for researchers in favelas.

The ten commandments of the favela researcher (by Pedro Paiva)

1. The content produced must have as its motto the development of that favela.

2. At least 25% of the work must have the active participation of a member of the community.

3. The work produced must be kept in a favela library and in the library of a local educational institution.

4. If the work is developed in another language, it must be translated into Portuguese.

5. The researcher should give feedback to favela members each time the work is presented.

6. The researcher must commit to delivering the project to the government and institutions that can carry it out.

7. The researcher must carry out actions so that the knowledge and technologies developed in their study stay in the favela. They must also commit to acting so that these knowledge and technologies are used to benefit the favela.

8. The researcher must remain in the favela for a minimum of 24 hours.

9. The researcher must create a direct and permanent channel between himself and the favela.

10. The researcher must treat the image of the residents with the utmost respect, without value judgments. They will credit favelados (favela residents) in their projects and make an honourable mention to them every time the research project is mentioned or presented.

Pedro's Commandments make it evident that his community demands relational accountability from the researchers they interact with. Considering that research is grounded in the lives of individuals, rather

than in the world of ideas, on that ground, accountability is fundamental. This nature of responsibility is something I've been questioning from the start. What is my responsibility as a designer and as a human being? After building all these relationships, what happens next?

> *"The shared aspect of an Indigenous axiology and methodology is that research must maintain accountability to all relationships that it forms."* (Wilson, 2008, p. 137)

The infrastructures that sustain design continue to be marked by separability and objectification. Given knowledge being relationship, I have incorporated relational accountability as a prerogative practice, in an attempt to move away from Eurocentric and Anglocentric praxis.

6. The Beginning

All the connections with humans, non-humans, and knowledge made through my experiences are the collective origins of the knowledge and invaluable learnings expressed in this essay. As I hold myself accountable for expanding these connections, I share a list of initial thoughts to boost reimagining decolonial design practices.

1. I start by thinking that all I've learned so far might be wrong.

2. I am part of my research and inseparable from the subject of that research. (Wilson, 2000, as cited in Wilson, 2008)

3. Knowledge is part of the relationships between us and cannot be owned.

4. Research must account for all relationships that it forms.

5. Building honest and trustworthy relationships requires considering the community's values, culture and ontology in the ethics that define the research.

6. The benefits of the research go beyond the research itself.

7. Relationships do not end when I leave the community.

8. I must be aware of the power imbalances and discuss them with the community.

9. I need to be conscious of how research could be best delivered to the community.

The human and non-human dimensions of relationships are a priority when advancing towards decolonized design. And this responsibility lies in the designers' hands and everyone's hands. For this reason, it is inherently limited to assume that this thinking ends with this essay. In fact, I can assure you that by the time this is published, it will already be outdated, and the relationship with the knowledge shared here will have been transformed, expanded. But I propose that this can always be the beginning.

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Acknowledgement

About the Author

Jananda Lima has a master's degree in Strategic Foresight and Innovation from OCAD University. Her research in social design involves fieldwork in radically marginalized territories. As a futures designer, she focuses on reclaiming design for decolonial world-making. Jananda co-founded the Medio Xingu Observatory, which proposes a partnership between indigenous and academic knowledge, using cartography to generate counter-narratives. She is also part of E2GLATS, which aims to create exchange flows through mechanisms supporting shared value resources, goods, and knowledge. Currently, she is a design consultant for the Dobble Debate project at Sensorium Lab at York University.