Staying Diasporic: Centering migrant and diasporic ways of being in design

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Migration and diaspora are phenomena that are continuously shaping the world, and that are caused and informed by colonial structures. The communities in diaspora are held together by particular ways of imagining and relating with the homeland, the host culture, and themselves, touching back into the local. In the experience of migrating and becoming part of a diaspora, our identities shift, as we enter a state of tension between total assimilation and resistance, questioning our national hegemonic values and ways of being. As a designer with migrated roots, I would like to share some experiences and thoughts about working in codesign processes with migrant communities: How do we matter our worlds from a diasporic situatedness, and what does this mean in terms of encouraging decolonial processes in design? Which strategies might help us challenging our assumptions as designers? Ultimately, I want to continue conversations about the role of design into materialising dissent and contestation towards the hegemonic systems, centering migrant and diasporic ways of being. How might these reflections inspire us for future practices in design?

migration and diaspora; decolonial design; social design; codesign
Transcription of presentation

1.1. Introduction

My name is Yénika Castillo and I am a Mexican designer located currently in Malmö, Sweden, and under some seasons in Fredrikstad, Norway. Thank you to everyone that makes Pivot Conference possible, for opening this space for important conversations.

Before starting, I would like to acknowledge the persons that have co-created the work from which I share reflections about designing from a diasporic situatedness. They come from Afghanistan, Mexico, Peru, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica and Guatemala, who live in mostly in Sweden, but also in other geographies. To them, thank you, for sharing your *sentipensares* about your migrant experiences.

I would also like to recognise the places that hold me, both my current location and my home town:

Malmö, my current location, is Sweden's third biggest city and the city with the highest rate of immigration in the country: Out of almost 320,000 inhabitants, 35% are immigrants that represent 179 nationalities (SCB, 2021). Malmö itself was, for centuries, Denmark's second largest city, only being part of Sweden for the last 246 years. It went to be in the center of a country to be in the margins of another country.

My own home town is a city in central Mexico called Pachuca. The oldest vestiges of human settlements are from the Otomi, 9000 years ago, an indigenous people that still inhabit areas of Central Mexico. They were displaced from my home town region by the Mexica Empire, long before the Spanish conquest. Pachuca, during the colonial period, became one of the richest mining districts in the New Spain. My ancestors are most likely of Otomi, Nahua/Mexica, Spanish and British origin, amongst other origins that unfortunately I don't know. Maybe some of them were oppressed, enslaved, raped. Maybe some others oppressed, enslaved, raped.

We cannot ignore diasporic identities in an environment when almost 4 of us out of 10 persons are from another country. And from my own positionality, I cannot ignore the semi-nomadic roots of my origin and the colliding identitarian traces of cultures and heritages within myself. That, what the hegemonic systems have thought of as unrooted and unsettled, most likely implies a different relation with land, as a place with no borders that we all belong to.

This is a collection of reflections about designing from and with a diasporic situatedness. These thoughts have come from mainly two projects of interaction design regarding migration and diaspora, as well from a personal journey of migration. My wish is to share and bounce thoughts and impressions of identity and belonging, challenging structures from this position. What does it mean for our work as designers, and what can it inspire us for future practices?

1.2 Video collage + narration

I'm learning what makes this place home.
All the [new] feelings I can feel when I'm away from home.
Where is this path taking me?

I brought with me the best I could give.
Some things I try to recreate.
What new things become, out of which old things?
You recognise me
you ask me
I follow you
You show me the way
I change angles
I have many ways of landing.

We do together. We listen.
We enjoy each other's company.
Your perspective and mine are valid.
We feel at home.
What new and old ideas are shaping our thoughts?

Figure 1: Some stills from the video collage + narration presented at the Pivot Conference 2021. Source: Yénika Castillo Muñoz.

I think and feel in many languages.
I make. Observe. Re-make. We respond.
I am reminded of my privilege.
I want to share it.
Can my roots grow endlessly?
What is my own name now?
Are you a lagom latina?

Are you staying here? (for how long?)
A free choice can tie me up here forever.
Being far lets me be who I want.
This is also a generous land.

I'm naming things around me
What do your summers taste like?
What takes you back to your childhood?
Which sounds, smells and colors make it home for you?
Our mothers cooked the same meals.

How do I join these fragments?
With which threads do we weave together?
Stop the career of belonging.
All these small things anchor me.

I'm still searching for what brought me here.
I want a safe space where my past, present and future can be together.
Some things have become important after so long.
I still need to talk about this.
We share to all of our affects.
Your country and mine hurt the same.
We are bridges.

1.3 Insights

Migration and diaspora are phenomenons that are caused and informed by colonial structures (Ahmed et al, 2003).

While migration refers to a present and constant movement of persons, diaspora points out at the relationality towards a current location, a homeland, and a community over time. Anthropologist Paul Basu (2007) describes Diasporic situatedness as the shared imaginations of a group's culture and background, an intangible asset that holds the diasporas together. He adds that, in the era of cyberspace, the diasporic communities have more tools and resources to keep the memories of the homeland alive.

I argue further that this imagination is not homogeneous or static: It is dynamic, intersectional, highly subjective, plural and generational. We enter a state of tension between total assimilation and resistance, questioning our national hegemonic values and ways of being. Some cultural practices in diaspora might even come from a place of resistance. What does it mean to be a Latin American, Mexican-American, Afghan-Swedish, and so forth?
Memories, values, ideologies and acquired experiences are passing back and forth in this cycle of virtual to physical creation, touching back on the materiality around us, and shaping the relations we create, thus contributing to the local culture. In pandemic times, the digital tools are continuously inviting us to create and socialise in this virtual space. A decolonial analysis of this process is more necessary than ever. Here, there is a potential to co-create the tools we need for deepening into our identitarian threads, and reclaiming them in order to question the system that makes us migrate in the first place, and that reinforces otherness with xenophobic rhetorics and structures.

For working in this space, we need to embrace the complexity of our personal stories entangled in oppressive systems, that can evoke memories, emotions, conflicts and conditions beyond our power to solve, but that are as much part of the process and outcomes. This means that, as designers, we need to consider this an essential work of care, being aware of our own background and position, in relation to our participants, to equalize the interactions as much as possible, if the collective creation really intents to challenge normative narratives, for dissent and discussion (Lamadrid, 2013). Strategies like vulnerability, discomfort, reciprocity and listening, are essential into building co-design methods.

Centering diasporic ways of being in the world can be seen as a form of reparation, and I would add that staying diasporic can be considered a well-informed strategy for autonomy and radical interdependence: Keeping a critical position, informing ourselves and participating in cultural, solidarity and activist practices in diaspora, maintaining networks of support, keeping memory and identity alive.

As Mahmoud Kershavarz (2016) points out, Design has for long complied to power by materialising bordering structures. Here, a question is very pertinent: As designers, do we want to design identities, or do we want to design conditions for identities to coexist and thrive? What can we learn from the way communities in diaspora and migrants respond to oppressive systems?
Reflections out of Pivot Conference

The Pivot Conference 2021 was a very generous space in which these ideas could touch the ground and expand, with the contributions of the panelists and the questions from the attendants. In this section, I would like to elaborate further on some of the questions that I personally feel that enriched this presentation.

2.1 Working with positionality

A common thread in the panel was that we made an emphasis in the imminent work in one-self's positionality. This work is not easy because it implies a deep self reflection in two directions:

1. An external direction, that makes us look at Design as a discipline engrained and in compliance with an oppressive structure of power (Kershavarz, 2016)

2. An internal direction, in which we as individuals need to acknowledge and identify the ways that we personally have benefitted from that structure, because of our own background (racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, geopolitic), and exerted power from that position as designers.

This is, for many, including myself, a painful process that forces us to revise how those oppressions have crossed and left marks in our bodies, our family history, our communities, the inequalities of our countries. Personally, I believe this awareness comes from many other life experiences outside the academia, and that the challenge is to combine the knowledges in ways that keep these questions relevant. It is an ongoing process, and at least for me, there is still along way to go.

Regarding the migrant experiences, we should be aware of the right wing winds blowing in many territories, that blame migrants for the problems of a community, while at the same time, restricting the mobility and access of migrant persons and communities to diferent spaces and resources for development. Thus, we have to keep in mind that most of the times, the narratives of migration are not told by migrant themselves. Who holds the power over these narratives, and how can we counterweight this through our work?

2.2 Methods

As above mentioned in the transcription, during the presentation I mentioned strategies of care to work in codesign processes, which can be the base for actively seeking to create tools, based on mutual respect and solidarity, for decreasing our own influence and enhancing our participants' agency as co-creators and co-owners (Bauer and Wiberg, 2017). Researching from a position of vulnerability can be a strength into connecting with others' experiences of migration (Behar, 1996).

Some of the methods I developed and tested with the participants of both projects were aimed at prompting storytelling with different physical, visual and verbal cues, exploring ways to express the stories with metaphors, movements and drawings. An important learning has been to open unstructured spaces where conversations happen organically, for example, in the case of the project with the young Afghans, through cooking together (Castillo Muñoz, 2018, Appendix II).

The second project with virtual settings had other challenges, and the methods designed and tested aimed at reflection and conversation: Creating a collective archive of experiences, through answering to questions with images, clips and short texts; drawing history lines; and weaving the identity territories with history lines (Castillo Muñoz, 2020, Chapter 4 and p. 40)
Concretely for this presentation, an individual method of presenting collective thoughts was made through the video collage with fragmental narrations, inspired both in personal and collective experiences from both projects. The purpose was to share impressions and *sentipensares* from a diasporic perspective.

### 2.3 Staying diasporic

Revising the history of the places that hold me, I realise that a very relevant discussion regarding migration and diaspora, is to actually question the hegemonic notions of *property, belonging and mobility*: How do we relate to these questions? And how is design materialising the expression or the resistance and contestation to those notions? (Mata-Marín, 2020).

My proposal is that the diasporic experiences are like a spectrum: We all can relate to certain experiences of otherness. The important part is understanding that we don’t own all the experiences of the spectrum. Then, our work as designers is not to design the outcomes, but to come up with codesign strategies so the owners of those experiences have the spaces to voice them themselves.

As an answer to the last question of the panel: “What is the best insight you can share with students and designers today?”, I mentioned again to *stay diasporic*, to dare to put yourself in that in-betweenness, to embrace the otherness, the displacement. Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) coined the term “Nepantla”, which in náhuatl means literally “in between”, as that physical, conceptual or imaginary territories in the middle of everything, connecting worlds. It is not an easy task, but I believe we can all gain new perspectives from this space, and re-shift our work towards a restorative justice approach.

### Conclusions

Migration and diaspora are relevant topics to be discussed from a decolonial point of view in design. Thinking from this perspective challenges the hegemonic notion of objectivity and neutrality in western design: A very personal and deep work of reflection about positionality is needed, not only for the outcomes of the design process itself, but even as an entry point with participants with other experiences of migration and diaspora. I believe there is a long way to go into dismantling the hegemonic notions of *property, belonging and mobility* in order to materialise more solidary, just and equal worlds.

### References


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About the Author

Yénika Castillo Muñoz is an independent designer, scholar and activist. Her work explores the intersections of Design, decolonial theories and activism, finding inspiration on Mexican and Latin American knowledge, culture and ways of being. She is mostly interested in interaction design from a place of collective creation and relati-onality, encouraging horizontal collaborations in a frame of human rights and within planetary boundaries. She parts from her own migration experience to connect to others, to reflect upon the role of designers to kick off creative processes from below to shift paradigms. She is on a personal journey of decolonising her own upbringing in a catholic home, as a straight, middle-class mestiza in Central Mexico, assuming as well her diasporic identity as a person of color in Scandinavia.