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The Pluriversal Future of Design Education
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Abstract: In decolonial academic and popular work and discourse, there is a strong emphasis on decolonization. However, in “postcolonial” times of neocolonialism, decolonization is only the first step on the anticolonial road towards the worlds of our making. Where that anticolonial road leads is full of endless options and possibilities. Using an African Indigenous perspective, we explore the first step of decolonization in design education. Then we explore shifting the center of design education from Americo-Eurocentrism to plural centricities, not centrisms. Americo-Eurocentrism is a totalizing and dominating, colonial ideology while Americo-Eurocentricity is a particularist approach. Lastly, we apply George Dei’s idea of an Integrative Indigenous Framework to design education in order to imagine a pluriversal future of design education. (This is part of a paired submission, each “paper” reviewed and accepted independently. This paper is paired with the paper entitled The Decision. They can be read in any order.)

Keywords: ontological design, decolonizing design, pluriversal design, indigenous design, integrative indigenous framework

Introduction
I am a Nigerian and a US American, inhabiting multiple spaces of privilege and no privilege. I am a cisgender, heterosexual, Christian male. Simultaneously, I am a Black Nigerian in the US from an immigrant family. I am a member of the indigenous Ibibio people group and my name, Anietie, is a shortened version of the phrase “Who Is like God?” When I write from an indigenous perspective, I tend to write from a perspective of African indigeneity which is different from indigenous perspectives in the Americas or Australia. There are many other parts of my background and identity that place me in positions of privilege or disadvantage depending on the context—country of residence, education, income, etc. Many of those have changed throughout my life. One position of privilege I hold is a designer.

I practice design in the land of the Nacotchtank. Due to persecution they fled to Theodore Roosevelt Island in the Potomac River, later joining a neighboring people group, the Piscataway, in present day Maryland, and together fleeing to Pennsylvania. They were a people group before, when, and after colonists arrived. I honor them and this land on which I move, breathe, have my being, and practice.

Before sharing, I offer my introduction and land acknowledgement as a type of ritual. There are indigenous ways of being in which knowledge is never shared without some type of sacred holding ritual, first. This goes beyond positionality, though the practice does share my position and bias. The practice is more about relationship and knowing and can help the reader understand the ways of being and knowing that shape this research paper. This is a position paper and a research paper, but not in the usual, Western sense. It is a position paper sharing a position, but it is not an argument I seek to prove with enough evidence and citations. It is simply embodied knowledge that is shared for you to accept or leave, take with you, and use whenever you are ready or it is helpful. It is also a research paper, though it will not be classified as such in this collection because the paper represents searching and searching.
again (re-search) through different kinds of knowledge and knowing—embodied, community, spiritual, relational, lived experiential, cultural, etc. Even though this collection of papers has one focus on pluriversality, it does not use a pluriversal peer review process, or a peer review process that welcomes, understands, and celebrates different ways of knowing, which equitably recognizes different understandings of research, rigor, methodology, and methods. So if it feels like an argument to convince readers or if it feels like there are many citations, that is just to pass through the peer review process. The words that follow come from embodied, community, aural, relational, and experiential knowledge which is rarely written down, and sometimes, yes, written articles, as well. The work was synthesized through the various ways my communities use to synthesize knowledge, discarding practices that do not work for community health and traditionalizing the ones that do, through experimentation, storytelling, apprenticeships, learning-by-doing, song, learning circles, dance, etc.

Originally, I hesitated to enter the discussion on the future of design education, because there is growing awareness that design and design education have helped maintain the current power structures that have failed us and the planet. According to Foucault, power isn’t coercive or repressive, but rather productive (1990). Through communities of authority (like design schools, universities, academic publishing houses, and steering committees), power produces bodies of knowledge and epistemologies that maintain itself. This knowledge base is spread through discourse, as a means of transmitting, asserting, reinforcing, and legitimizing that power. In other words, discourse reproduces power–discursive power.

Discourse, itself, is also regenerative. Discourse “reflexively produces increased knowledge and the discourses needed to sustain the various discourses already in place” (Douglas, 2015, p. 75). Discourse can even standardize and, thus, enervate critique and dissent. I did not want to participate in such a powerless critique, or powerless power (Nigerian Culture, Generations). I am writing in the hope that, perhaps, we can practice a pluripotent, radically participatory discourse, giving up power while other voices assume power, opening up multiple, new, vulnerable possibilities of a fundamentally different future of design education than the one we can make through this academic project.

Escobar notes “the contemporary world can be considered a massive design failure” (2018). We are facing a global economic crisis in which a little under a quarter of the world lives on less than $3.20 a day, a crisis with housing, health, energy, education, and employment repercussions; a present ecological crisis in which each day we are more rapidly destroying our planet, habitats, species, and climate; a conflict crisis in which multiple regions of the world are caught in cycles of multiple types of conflict while tribalism and racism continue unabated; and a spiritual crisis in which our best faith-based, moral, ethical, and axiological systems have been powerless to stop the other three crises.

There are designers who try to address the economic crises through de-growth, post-capitalist, or anti-capitalist design (Wizinsky, 2022; Balamir, 2021; Alexander, 2020; Feltwell et al., 2018). Others address the climate crisis through ecological, sustainable, biophilic, or regenerative design (Kellert, 2018; Bergman, 2013; Van der Ryn & Cowan, 2013; Lyle, 1996). Others try to address patriarchy and conflict through design for women, feminist design, systems, and negofeminist practice (Place, 2023; Udenigwe et al., 2023; Gupta, 2021; Richardson, 2021; Klaas-Makolomakwe, 2019). Others take a systemic approach utilizing futures, transition, or systemic design (Kim et al., 2023; Jones & Van Ael, 2022; Sevaldson, 2022; Anghelou et al., 2017; Irwin 2015; Ilstedt & Wangel, 2013). There are communities of designers addressing inequities and trauma through equity-centered, liberatory, and emancipatory design; design justice; and trauma-informed and trauma-responsive design (Wise, 2022; Anaissie et al., 2021; Costanaza-Chock, 2018; Guzman, 2017; Hill, Molitor, & Ortiz, 2016; Noel, 2016; Harris & Fallot, 2001a, 2001b). Others have worked to expand Human-centered Design (HCD) to community-centered, society-centered, life-centered, and planet-centered design (Clasen, 2023; HmntyCntrd, 2023; Norman, 2023; Rizo, 2023; Life-centered Design School, 2022; Vignoli, 2021; Xu, 2021; Lee et al., 2020; Manzini & Meroni, 2017; Jawaharlal et al., 2016; Cantu et al., 2013; Ishida, 2004). There are even designers who take a postcolonial approach (Mainsah & Morrison, 2014; Irani et al., 2010). Others have started working in the growing area of ontological design, designing with an understanding and intention to affect the ways of being (Nold, 2018; Ramaprasad & Papagari, 2009; Willis, 2006.).

If any of these attempts are working, we have seen no effect on the polycrisis we face. The crises are worsening. Many of the various aforementioned attempts focus on one of the crises instead of taking a holistic, integrated approach. More importantly, those attempts do not work at the level of ontology, the level of our ways of being. Even postcolonial approaches critique colonialism using a colonialist lens, not doing enough to delink from colonial ways of being and knowing (Alfaisal, 2011; Grosfoguel, 2011). Ontological design has not yet seemed to fundamentally shift the ways of being that have produced our crises.
From an anthropology-through-design (AtD) perspective, our designs are not separate from the ways of thinking and being that created these crises, no (Singh et al., 2021; Gatt & Ingold, 2013; Kjærsgaard & Otto, 2016; Rainbow, 2008; Smith & Otto, 2020). Rather, our designs come out of the same onto-epistemic frameworks that sparked, fuel, and exacerbate these crises. Our design work and education say much more about who we are as humans than the little it says about how to resolve these crises. Heretofore, design has only served one master—the patriarchal, neo-liberalist, consumerist, modernist, extractive, (neo)colonial, hyper-capitalist, transnationalist world order (Escobar, 2018). Thus, whether designers have been aware or unaware, the dominating model of design has been one of design-as-imperialism or imperialism-through-design, towards a colonizing, monohumanist, one-world world (King, 2008; Law, 2015).

There is no way to fundamentally transform design and design education, which feeds design, without discussing, revealing, and transforming the dynamics of power (Pluriverse Working Group, 2022). To rupture the pervasive, all-encompassing, colonizing monohumanism of design, we must specifically decolonize design, education, and design education (Clement-Akomolafe, 2017; Ansari, 2018). The growing awareness of historical and present colonialism has led to a trend in which every field and human endeavor seeks to decolonize itself: Decolonize X. I applaud this work as important and highlight that decolonization is not the only work to do. The decolonizing work before us is only a step, one step, not the destination. In a post-colonial world of neocolonialism and open-door imperialism, decolonization is a first and necessary step in an anti-colonial direction toward a world of many worlds, the pluralistic multiverse, or the pluriverse (Clement-Akomolafe, 2017; Escobar, 2018).

If we are to remake and reeducate design education for a plausible life-giving, anticolonial future, a future that is pluriversally oriented, locally relevant, and deeply contextualized, design education must do 3 things which are being done in many fields (Asante, 2017). First, design must break away from the dualist, objectivist, realist, positivist, modernist, scientific rationalist domination of truth and global knowledge. In the pluriverse, that way of being can exist, but it does not dominate or control. Second, design must abandon the cis-heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, hypercapitalist, ecocidal, extractivist, neo-liberalist, Americo-Eurocentric power structure perfected during enslavement and colonization. Third, design must transform itself into an open, contextualized, translocal system of learning grounded in local and indigenous wisdom. The first and second are major steps along the way to realize the third.

Even though I am presenting them as three moves or steps with an implied order, in practice, the three steps are deeply connected and intertwined. For instance, it is possible that the third step can actually help to create the onto-epistemic openings for the first and second steps to grow. The process these moves embody is much more ecological and trisymbiotic, rather than linear or sequential (Shelef et al., 2013; Castillo et al., 2021).

There are designers conducting decolonial, indigenous and pluriversal approaches to design, etc. (Barcham, 2023; Leitão, 2022; Ray Murray et al., 2021; Smith, 2021; Smith et al., 2021; Garzon, 2017; López-Garay and Molano, 2017; Tlostanova, 2017; Wilson, 2008; Eglash, 1999). This paper is not critiquing any of these and other place-based, hyperlocal, and indigenous ways of designing or decolonizing design. In the last section, you will see that all these ways of designing are welcome in the Indigenous Integrative Framework. I simply point out that such a way of designing has not been widely adopted, or more importantly, spread or integrated into translocal, global design education which is still dominantly Western with a colonial perspective. Let us start with decolonization.

**Decolonization Is a First Step**

First, we must free design from the realist, rationalist, dualist framework metastasized from the West through imperialism, colonialism, and globalization (Subaltern and Indigenous peoples, Generation; Murea & Josan, 2014). This cancerous framework posits that we, as individualist humans, separate and outside of nature, through 3rd-person scientific investigation, can apprehend truths about the objective reality of the world. I use the terms metastasis and cancerous because it has been harmful to Africans and others around the world (Moyo, 2009; Nkrumah, 1965). The colonial understanding posits that only what is apprehended in this way is real; all other understandings are myth (Akomolafe, 2017). This totalizing truth is a type of global knowledge system built on assumptions creating a “monoculture of sight,” blinding us to the subjective colonial lens we use, and subjugating, dehumanizing, trivializing, vilifying, hiding, or rendering invisible the various competing visions of what is real, understandings of what is beautiful, ways of knowing, and pluralistic value practices (Akomolafe, 2017).
Akomolafe reminds us that we have forgotten that sight, history, and design itself are political events, that reality is co-constructed through subjective participation, and that the world is a performance, which means we can recreate it. If we are ever to resolve these crises, we must learn to see anew and relearn what is real. Design has played and still plays a primary role in the construction of this Cartesian, oppositional realism. Certain design education futures projects see the problem as a need to update the discipline of design to handle the crises we face; however, another understanding is that the fundamental problem is disciplinarity itself.

Disciplinarity is “a technology of modern power; it depends upon and deploys normalization, routines, convention, tradition, and regularity, and it produces experts” like Future of Design Education (FDE) participants “and administrative forms of governance” like steering committees (Foucault, 2012; Future of Design Education, 2019). Using protocols, regimens, methodologies, and techniques, it attacks the expertise embedded in communities all around us, by setting itself apart. Ask yourself this: how is it possible that design is its own department in many universities? Do biochemists not design? Do historians, choreographers, or statisticians not design?

Design is everywhere (Udoewa, 2022a; Manzini, 2015). Outside the constricting walls and halls of disciplinarity, across the world, design can be an applied and engineering science, an art, a social science, a humanity, a basic and natural science, and even more outside those disciplinary groupings. What design is and what form it takes comes from our ways of being which are our ways of knowing: our ontologies are our epistemologies. And our onto-epistemologies become our namologies - studies, perspectives, types, and ways of designing (Ibibio, Generations). This creates a cycle, the health of which depends on both the ontology and context. To say this another way, imagine a tree; the roots are our ontologies or ways of being; the trunk is our epistemologies or ways of knowing; the branches, our methodologies; the leaves, our methods (Jobin, 2023). Our realities and ways of being create the ways we design, and ontologically, our namologies reify, reinforce, or reimagine our realities and ways of being. This ontological nature is not specific to design; many fields are ontological or actually affect or structure our reality—education, literature, history, even media (Ekeanyanwu, 2017). However, design is peculiarly positioned to affect all the other fields because we design education, literature, media, and even history depending on who has the power. Is it not strange (or expected) that disciplinary design, known for its imaginative creativity, has had no ability to imagine other ways to see, other understandings of what is real, other experiences of what is beautiful, other pathways out of the looming, present crises we face?

Even with new educational guidelines, design and design education can never change unless we transform our ways of being and knowing. Our namologies come out from (and affect) our onto-epistemologies. The first step is for us to let go of the various modernist notions of the self, the economy, science, and the real (Escobar, 2017). We must see what we were taught not to see, “problematize the familiar,” sacralize the dismissed, embrace other ways of being and knowing, and seek out the pluralism and fragility of Sory over the hegemonic notion of objective Truth (Akomolafe, 2017). We must learn again, or we will be forced to learn again.

Thankfully, there are a multitude of autonomous, self-empowered, translocal voices and lives with diverse ways of knowing and being. In and through relationship with all creation we can be transformed and live, not just differently, but healthfully, abundantly, in ecogenerative ways. It is when we begin to practice various relational ontologies and epistemologies, what we call the first step, that the second step of delinking design from the heteropatriarchal, capitalist, racist, military order is easier.

**Shifting the center**

I want to applaud efforts that start with the second step. Matt Wizinsky has written a valiant work seeking to move us to a type of post-capitalist design (2022). Even though patriarchy, deeply intertwined with capitalism, is older than modernity by thousands of years (Jensen, 2017), modernism perfected, distilled, escalated, and fortified the patriarchy through various mechanisms like “democracy,” capitalism, academic scholarship attribution, legislation, etc. My honest fear is that if we have not departed from the scientific rationalism of modernity, as well as dominant notions of what is real, the stirring winds of anticapitalist and post-capitalist design movements afoot which so excite and animate us, may never fully break free from the glass box of Anglo-Eurocentrism. In other words, as indigenous scholar Jobim explains, we can try to shift the center (our methodologies) but if we haven’t affected our ways of knowing and being, we will still be reproducing the problem because our methodologies come from our ways of knowing and being (2023).
When dealing with systems, it is helpful to study the system dynamics and deal with root or systemic causes of negative dynamics (Meadows, 2008). When we do not, we may think we are offering a powerful critique, but the subtle work of disciplinarity can easily house both constructive and critical voices, while devitalizing, incapacitating, or simply paralyzing the same critical voices from any constructive work (Foucault, 2012).

A good example is the “disagreement” between fundamentalist Atheists who argue that Genesis is false and there is no God because Earth is 4.5 billion years old, and the fundamentalist Judeo-Christians arguing that Genesis is true, that the world was created in 7 days according to scripture. Secretly, or crypto-ontologically, they actually agree about the nature of truth. In their modernist monoculture of truth, they both believe that the truth of the scripture texts lies in verifiable or falsifiable statements about historical events that actually happened in time and space. If the event physically happened, the text is true. If the event did not happen historically, the text is false. What they both miss in their agreement is that truth, or rather Story, has many more understandings by other peoples. Story (including history and herstory) is a much more fragile, less intrusive, more plural and porous, more local and holistic, more sacred understanding and capturing and events that tell us more about the narrator than the narrated (Akomolafe, 2017). What if there are other understandings of truth for other people groups.

For instance, one truth of the Genesis texts can be understood not to be about the historical veracity of physical events in time and space, but to be about who it says God is. Many European creation stories featured Gods who created the world from war. In rebellion and contrast, the Genesis story talks about a God who creates the world based on desire and intention. Globally there were other creation stories that featured God or the gods creating out of good intention (Yoruba Culture, Generations). Still for that area of the world, it was relatively new. There is an American Indigenous tribe that starts every story with the phrase

“Now I don’t know if this story happened or not, but I can tell you it is true” (LivingtheQuestions.com, 2021).

Author Chinua Achebe wrote “There is no story that is not true” (2010).

These understandings and quotes speak of a world or ontology before story was wounded by modernity (Akomolafe, 2017). These are the very cracks, fragilities, and vulnerabilities that need to grow and propagate to fully break the crusted earthenware of modernism. Otherwise, our design work and education against capitalism, ecocide, patriarchy, militarism, and more simply maintains the same system, world, and ground of being. Marxism and liberalism may have different worldviews but the same world or ontology. Capitalism and socialism are simply two sides of the same coin or ontology, socialism being a “condensation of the . . . profit-generating activities . . . into a central authority” (Clement-Akomolafe, 2017). Men, women, and non-binary people all can reinforce patriarchal ways of being. In a white supremacist society, people of all races act in ways that buttress the social hierarchy. In capitalist societies, all types of organizations—nonprofits, universities and colleges, foundations, social enterprises—act in ways that fortify the capitalist world order.

Our namologies, or ways of designing, and design education are blinded by the co-created performance we call reality (our ontology); like fish, we have no concept of water. We live in a colonial world built on the myth of scarcity, the scarcity of food, money, knowledge, life systems, and more (Lappé et al., 1977; Brueggemann, 1999). We have designed educational systems and universities built on ignorance; our universities actually need ignorance, unemployment, and poverty to survive (Fuller, 2003). If you disagree, do a thought experiment. What would happen if everyone in the world earned PhDs or even masters degrees? Would we all have everything we need, or would the system readjust to maintain hierarchies and relevance, restratifying our existence? We have designed an economic system of scarcity in which the very creation of money creates and sustains the poverty it supposedly silences (Guzelian, 2019). If you don’t think so, run a thought experiment. What would happen if everyone in the world had the money they needed to conduct a comfortable life? How does an economic system based on scarcity react? Our namological tools and instincts are just as neocolonial as our ways of being and knowing.

While educational, political, economic, and social systems continually fail us, we still continually return to our single story (McGhee, 2021; Adichie, 2009). Thus, as much as design is supposed to be fueled by and with creativity, it is impossible for us to imagine, much less design, a non-dualist world of education without schooling, wealth without poverty, social organization without the nation-state and its controls, or well-being without pharmaceuticals, prisons, and therapy (Clement-Akomolafe, 2017). There are so many different understandings of what an economy could be—market, barter, moral, solidarity, post-scarcity, non-monetary economies (gift, traditional, or subsistence economies), and more we have not imagined. Why must we only have one possible economy based on scarcity? Similarly, there
are so many different understandings of what design is. Why must we only have one that builds a world on the mythology of scarcity?

One reason this happens is that our educational systems do not teach in the best way. In economics, we teach students how to analyze and use economic theories, but we do not teach students how to create and build their own new economic systems. In history, we often teach how to analyze, compare, evaluate, and synthesize other written histories, but we don’t teach the practical craft of documenting current history through first-person data. Similarly in design, we teach various design methodologies and frameworks, but we don’t teach the practice of building a design methodology or praxis, a namology based on local wisdom, needs, or visions. This makes sense as a colonial ontology can never produce a liberatory namology.

Design is a cultural enterprise. That means it has no definition because it is a contextual endeavor. Applying Wilson’s Indigenous Heisenburg principle to design, we know that “Indigenous epistemology is all about ideas [like design] forming through the formation of relationships. [Design] cannot be taken out of its relational context and still maintain its shape . . . it is not possible to both know the context and definition of [design] at the same time. The closer you get to defining [design] the more it loses its context. Conversely, the more [design] is put into context, the more it loses its specific definition” (2008).

How then can any FDE group create design curriculum or curricular guidelines for the world? We need to break the universalist, Euro-American hegemony on design and what design is. Design can only be understood in context with local ways of producing knowledge specifically because design has only ever arisen in a cultural and ontological context. There is nothing wrong with American-Eurocentricity; the problem is American-Eurocentrism. The former can be seen as a particularist approach which can have its contextual relevance in certain times and places. The latter can be seen as a totalizing Truth that measures the world by how it compares to Euro-American understandings and employs the term “objectivity” for Euro-American subjectivity.

The work before us is not to set the guidelines but to shift the center while local communities contextually choose their own relevant ways and practices. We need to discard design laws based on WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Developed), Anglocentric research or even cross-cultural research and focus on what is relevant to local needs. Name any design law or rule (like limiting the main colors to 3 on a digital product), and I can show you a situation where it does not apply (the Philippines, for example). We need to shift education for design research as well. There are designers who do qualitative research and a small minority who can do quantitative. Instead we must shift the center away from qualitative to mixed methods and allow the local context, tender needs, and vulnerable questions to lead the way. We need to shift the center from problem-based, damage-centered methods to asset-based methods, from colonial methods to decolonial methods (Leitão, 2022). Most design researchers focus on ethnography and grounded theory in their research and synthesis; however, the center must be shifted towards phenomenological research, narrative research, literature research, musicological research, aesthetic researcher, embodied research, research of parables, fables, sayings, and poems, and more that may be more suited for certain realities, worlds, cultures, contexts, and situations. The context must lead, not an ideology or contextless methodology.

A beautiful example is the Plurversal Design working group for the FDE initiative. Like other working groups, we were tasked with designing guidelines, topics, or course outlines for our category - designs for the pluriverse. Our group chose a “peculiar” route. We did not conduct interviews, study various curricula, do secondary research using reports of industry needs, conduct observations, do quantitative research about jobs that need pluriversal design skills (I do not even know what those are). No, instead, our group took turns sharing stories. Stories. The subversive power of stories. Each meeting a different person shared her stories from her work. At one point, someone realized that the deadline to send in our draft course outlines was looming and we needed to write something down. Instead of viewing our storytelling as something that delayed the design of new course guidelines, topics, and syllabi, we viewed it as exactly the research needed to produce those designs. Has the creativity of design been so silenced that we dare only name one way to research, one way to organize communities, one way to allocate resources, one way to design, one way to know, itself?

We need new local design values free from disciplinary experts; the values we find in many design methodologies, including HCD, reinforce white supremacy (Creative Reaction Labs Multiple dates, Mowris 2020). We need local design principles. We need anti-patriarchal, ecofeminist design, mujerista design, ecological design, relational economy design—we need design to grow up and be who it never intended to be. We must follow the rightful critique of Mansi Gupta who says that Design by Women is different than Design for Women due to the coloniality deep inside each of
us (2021). We call for nothing less than the breaking down of systems propped up by colonial system-purposes of our ontological making—a transformation.

**A World of Many Centers**

We know colonial onto-epistemologies can never produce liberationist namologies. Instead they produce colonial namologies. Through the ontological impact of design, colonial namologies, in return, reinforce colonial ways of being, continuing the cycle. If we are to shift this vicious loop to a virtuous one and co-construct a world that is resolving the economic crisis, the ecological crisis, the conflict crises, and the spiritual crises we face, we need emancipatory namologies.

But where can we find those? Even our seeming liberatory ways of designing, like participatory design, have colonialism built into them because our namologies are our onto-epistemologies (Udoewa, 2022a, 2022b). Our ways of designing are our ways of being and knowing. In order to communally build a world that has resolved these crises, we must look to the various groups and cultures that live a better story, a different, life-giving ontology. Their stories, worlds, or ontologies produce different namologies, the very ways of designing we need to address our crisis-bound world, the very ways of designing we cannot produce on our own due to our ontologies. One set of ontologies we need are liberationist, relational ontologies. Any pluriversal vision for the future of design education must have this relational bias.

Where do relational ontologies flourish? In Indigenous and certain local communities all around the world. As Nii Botchway, one of my Plurversal Design working group members said, in order to design from a relational ontology, “Indigenous people must lead the way,” (Botchway, 2022) leading towards an “Integrative Indigenous Framework” (Dei, 2017). Indigenous and translocal communities that live from a relational ontology must lead the bottom-up initiative for the future of design education, which is not happening with the Future of Design Education process. The top-down work required of “design leaders,” for a pluriversal future of design education, is not one of setting curricular guidelines leaving our (neo)colonial ontologies untouched, but of letting go. Let us take a look at a few of the current problems within design education following analyses of the social sciences in general (Clement-Akomolafe, 2017; Dei, 2017).

First, though design is supposed to be a discipline imbued with creativity, we teach design in rote-fashion according to modern schooling and universities. Second, our design education marginalizes, banishes, diminishes, and disrupts indigenous and other marginalized ontologies, epistemologies, and their namologies creating harm, trauma, and confusion especially for designers from indigenous and underutilized communities (Sin et al., 2022; Smith, 2021). Third, our design education assimilates designers to the capitalistic marketplace in every way, from design processes, purposes, frameworks, evaluation methods, materials, book publishing, and in the courses we teach (Wizinsky, 2022). Fourth, we perpetuate the colonial stratification when we brand some people as failures, “unable” to get into our design programs, schools, bootcamps, and universities or “unable” to pass and graduate. Fifth, the structure of our bootcamps, classes, and schools encourages conformity and standardization to, often, America-Eurocentric design research, theory, and praxis. Sixth, that theory colonizes and sometimes appropriates the knowledge of indigenous peoples in pseudo-participatory pseudo-engagement and extractive, transactional relationships that further the development of a monohumanist, one-world world (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015; Wynter, 2013; Law, 2015). Seventh, there is an assumed link between design education and solving social problems that is invalidated in practice as demonstrated by our worsening crises. Eighth, there is a tension between the push of design education at lower education levels (secondary and primary) which widens the educational experiential divide, while more alarming education inequity persists and is ignored (Heikkilä et al., 2017; Spaul, 2013; Nolttemeyer et al., 2012; Owen-Jackson, 2007). Ninth, the equity conversation in design education focuses mostly on gender, race, and ability access but does not focus on digital literacy bias, the educational relevance to lived and local realities, other types of non-Americo-Eurocentric differences, curricular and pedagogical inequity, educators themselves, and non-Americo-Eurocentric understandings of gender.

Ask yourself: will curricular guidelines deal with these issues of the kyriarchal, capitalist modernity? Or perhaps we need a more fundamental, ontological shift or, should we say, return? We can see glimpses of a pluriversal future of design education from African, pre-colonial education.

African pre-colonial education was holistically embedded in everyday life, treating the African learner as a holistic person, focused on survival, thriving, and solving practical issues (Dei, 2017). There was no one specific site, like a
The emphasis of pre-colonial African education was on history, local culture, tradition, and wisdom, treating the learner as a holistic person with relational responsibilities guided by an interdependence with the community. Though there were other modes of education like secret gender groups, intergenerational sharing of knowledge with a specific age group, and rituals, pre-colonial education focused on storytelling and mythologies. Such mythoforms were not for the purpose of self-discipline, rights, or individualism, but rather for moral character development, purpose-building, social responsibility, cultural preservation, and life meaning.

Colonial education destroyed this system, defining the boundaries of what, where, when, how, and why education takes place. Colonization alienated the learner from the community of which she was a part, and created an occupation of “teacher” which was previously shared throughout the community, further isolating learners. Instead of educating for moral character development, cultural perseverance, and meaning, colonial education provided regimented, certifiable skills through diplomas, certificates, and badges in order to train learners for the abusive, colonial workforce.

General colonial education presaged the colonial design education we have today. The rise of the profession of “designer” fooled us into thinking that design had a historical start, attempting to compartmentalize and alienate design away from its context and community (Udoewa, 2022a). The purpose of design education is to provide regimented certifiable skills through diplomas, degrees, badges, and certificates, training learners for the neocolonial, neoliberal, capitalist workforce. The result is an artificial, regimented hierarchy of elite designers and non-designers. This colonial system has resulted in the aforementioned problems in design today.

What happens if we apply social justice education scholar George Dei’s “Integrative Indigenous Framework” to design (Dei, 2017)? Dei’s Integrative Indigenous Framework is not a strict methodology or process, but a theoretical and experimental framework that seeks to integrate indigenous knowledge and ways of being into education and education systems and offers an alternative vision of education, education systems, and learning that are transformed by indigenous ways of knowing (Dei & Simmons, 2011). The Integrative Indigenous Framework focuses on a few values—students authentically bringing their whole selves, cultures, and ways of knowing to the educational experience; education embedded in the community life and activities, outside of a building or site; the importance and integration of indigenous language; the importance and integration of local community values; and education through indigenous ways of knowing (Dei, 2017; Dei & Simmons, 2011). It is infused in indigenous and local ways of being.

What might the future of design education look like if it were grounded in indigeneity and hyperlocalization? The future would be a bottom-up approach focused on the how, not the what of guidelines. In this future, design education is reconnected to family, elders, and community and recontextualized to local realities, preparing learners to address locally defined needs through cultural affirmation, autonomy, and communal interdependence (Dei, 2017; Escobar, 2018). This education is socio-ecologically beneficial, biased towards social justice, equity, and the rights and autonomy of local creation (people, animals, landscapes, rivers, mountains, plants, rocks, etc.). This education works with the assets, resources, talents, skills, abilities, and gifts of local communities (people, landscapes, animals, plants, environments) and focuses on local science and technology as well as local and locally indigenous ways of knowing. In this framework, design education participates in the advancement of indigenous knowledge through research, development, partnerships, capacity building, protection, and appropriate use. All learners are invited to evaluate the ways of knowing embedded in their own and local cultures, histories, and identities as a way to create not only alternative understandings of our world, its challenges, and design futures, but also alternative worlds, and thus, the pluriverse.

Imagine a world in which your design education, and even the very definition and nature of design, changes depending on where in the world your education is happening, through translocal, indigenous design knowledge and language resource centers and indigenous centers of excellence. Each center has a different understanding of what design is and educates learners in Z-ontological design. The ‘Z’ stands for the place and locality of the educational experience or the local or indigenous people group in the locality, such as Wolof-ontological design or Likeng Village-
ontological design. The Indigenous Centers are not just design knowledge centers but also language resource centers because so much of a culture and its ways of being and knowing are inextricably embedded, housed, and growing within the language, its songs, proverbs, poems, fables—all sources of namological material. Similar to international studies, relations, or development; literature; classics; and various regional and ethnic studies, design education should have a language learning component because language is not just communicative or even performative, but also formative and value-laden.

Each Indigenous design knowledge and language resource center and indigenous center of excellence shares and educates through local and indigenous ways of being, ways of knowing, and value systems (ontologies, epistemologies, and axiologies). In promoting local and indigenous design knowledge, each center furthers capacity building, continued research, applied knowledge, and appropriate use of indigenous science, technology, design, and culture. Part of the capacity building means all design educators must be trained in local and indigenous knowledge, sciences, and namologies. Each center works to decolonize research, teaching, pedagogical praxis, and curriculum.

Above all, each indigenous center engages in locally relevant design education by removing design from the colonially isolated classroom and recontextualizing design in its proper community. Students live in community and are grounded in community knowledge, implementing their design ideas and projects towards real community goals, futures, or needs. This allows local knowledge to address local needs. The indigenous or local design school or center is situated within the community and is a true partnership with the community. The community has full access to the indigenous design center or school and contributes equally to decisions about administration, teaching, and learning. Community members, local artists, artisans, and designers help write curricular content. Elders, family members, community members, artisans, craftspeople, and cultural custodians teach each day as experts in lived experiential, embodied, intuitive, spiritual, cultural, relational, community, and aesthetic knowledge alongside the trained design experts in mainstream, institutional knowledge. Ultimately, in the pluriverse, the definition and nature of design as well as the purpose of design education must be locally determined. All teachers must understand the purpose of education, its effect on learners, and the connection of the education and curriculum to the value commitments of the local community, so as to offer a truly Z-ontological design education.

Though we do not have an accepted, pluriversal design education system today, Clement-Akomolafe cites examples of general education that have constructed themselves based on pluralistic ontologies (Clement-Akomolafe, 2017). Mpambo Afrikan Multiversity focuses on lived, experiential knowledge, spiritual knowledge, cultural knowledge, indigenous knowledge and working in indigenous languages. Swaraj University in India does not use degrees or exams, connects students with local artisans, engages in real world work, and utilizes local and ancient wisdom from local communities as students live in diverse communities. Alternative Basic Education for Karamoja in Uganda uses locally relevant education situated in practical needs and goals like survival, utilizes the local language, hires elders to teach and facilitate indigenous knowledge and history education, and integrates education into the work and lifestyles of learners, siblings, and families. Ecoverstitves is a global collective focused on transforming higher education to include diverse ways of knowing and being.

This is a beautiful vision to which I ascribe. It is one that will help resolve the various crises we face, by not defining what design education should teach, but describing how it should let go and move forward (Yunkaporta, 2019). “Identity [of design education] is not just about what you do, it is about how you do it” (Abrahams, 2017, p.216). In this way, the vision presented is a call for the radical participatory (re)design of design education by translocal communities—the how, not the what. The challenge for us is whether or not we are willing to let go of steering, driving, controlling, disciplining, and disciplinariness, itself. There are successful examples of fields that were able to do this in part. For instance, there was a time that the field of Psychology was just Psychology. Today there is a contextualized field of African Psychology (Ebigbo, 2017; Nwoye, 2017). However, this contextualization is not predetermined. There are numerous examples of fields that never let go. We do not want design to go the way of (Black) Political Science which failed to properly, locally, and relevantly contextualize itself based on ideologies, values, and ways of being among Black people and thus was never born (Harris, 2017).

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