Transforming Design: Indigeneity and Mestizaje in Latin America

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This Conversation explored how the discipline and profession of design might be epistemologically decentred and, in effect, decolonized. Focusing on their
experiences working with Indigenous and mestizo communities in Latin America, the convenors discussed the need to reconceive design theory, research, practice, and education. Their goal was to begin a process of levelling the playing field on which Indigenous and non-Western perspectives encounter the discipline’s legacy epistemologies, which are rooted in Western modernity and its attendant coloniality. During the session, they fostered a Conversation that laid out the conceptual and practical difficulties that lie ahead but that must be addressed in order for the field to expand its historically narrow borders and adopt broader, deeper, and sustainable perspectives.

**Keywords:** Decoloniality; futures; cultural perspectives; global design; design discourse

1 **Organizing questions**

The following questions were laid out as starting Conversation points:

1. How may design be considered a colonialist enterprise?
2. What can we learn from past engagements with Indigenous and mestizo groups that will help us break out of the epistemologies that have informed design’s theory, research, practice and education?

1.1 **Sub Questions**

1. How do design’s inherited epistemologies influence our ability to co-design in teams that include Indigenous, mestizo, or non-Western participants?
2. How might we recognize the implicit biases and hierarchies in our design systems and replace them with egalitarian and “horizontal” modes?
3. How should we conduct cultural exchange in contexts of unequal power dynamics?
4. What is the difference between exchange and appropriation?
5. How might we teach design students and researchers to work outside of their own cultural contexts in non-appropriative ways?
6. How can we avoid the phenomenon of “parachuting?”

2 **The DRS2018 Conversation session**

2.1 **Background**

The convenors have worked with underrepresented, Indigenous, and mestizo communities in México, Costa Rica, and the United States. In addition, they have observed the absence of Indigenous, mestizo, Latin American, and decolonial knowledges, practices, and perspectives at international design and design research conferences.

The convenors acknowledge that throughout its professional history, communication design has been a thoroughly Western enterprise. Its approaches to theory, research, practice, and education have reflected modernist, Euro-American epistemologies presented as universal values. This has been the case even in the so-called “developing world” or global south, much of which is comprised of former colonies and other areas of ongoing Western economic, political, and cultural influence. In order to create a discipline that respects and incorporates local knowledges from specific locations, designers must reach beyond their traditionally liberal values of inclusivity, multivocality, and equal access. We must also dismantle and rebuild design’s epistemological foundations, identifying their Euro-American biases and establishing a multivocal perspective—or, better yet, multivocal
perspectives—in order to place all approaches to knowledge and practice—Indigenous, non-Western, and Western—on equal footing.

The convenors aimed to discuss how design’s inherited assumptions about phenomena such as power, knowledge, and time might be productively upended. Ultimately, they wanted to enrich design discourse by beginning to loosen Western modernity’s grip on the profession’s basic assumptions and ideologies. Along these lines, they wanted to identify differences between how design actually operates and how it might operate differently, not only in the Indigenous and mestizo contexts with which they were familiar, but in every context. For example, designers might address the cultural legacies, symbologies, and languages of form as a concept.

2.2 The Big Question: Why is #designsowhite?

The DRS2018 general sessions underscored the convenors’ concerns. One of the first and most consistently posed Slido questions, “Why is #designsowhite?” was repeatedly ignored until the third and final event (Figure 2). The question’s prevalence throughout the keynote sessions and on social media reflected many attendees’ desire to address diversity, equity, and indigeneity across the conference and the discipline. The question’s constant presence reaffirmed urgent need for this particular Conversation.

2.3 Starting the Conversation

The convenors briefly introduced themselves, the purpose of the panel, and the format. Conversation participants were seated in three groups gathered around three tables. The convenors asked each participant to introduce themselves and their reasons for attending. Altogether, and excluding the convenors, there were 18 participants. They came from diverse backgrounds and interests, many working interculturally and internationally. They represented Australia, Barbados, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Finland, Italy, México, Portugal, Sweden, Trinidad and Tobago, United Kingdom, and the United States as well as diverse interests in design research.
2.3.1 The Convenors’ Contributions

Each speaker began by establishing a framework. All reflected on the popularity and recurrence of the #designsowhite question, which by that point had been circulating through the conference for almost two days. The question—particularly its urgency—provided an unexpected but timely context for the Conversation.

Convenor 1: Theoretical Considerations
Raúl Sánchez defined coloniality and pointed to its contemporary manifestation in (or as) the discipline of design. He asserted that efforts to design with Indigenous communities necessarily take place in ongoing contexts of coloniality. Sánchez suggested that design is a Western discipline with a specific epistemology, ideology, and history. Therefore, when Westerners bring design to Indigenous people, they necessarily impose it, despite any intentions to the contrary. He also argued that because of ongoing coloniality, Indigenous communities are imposed upon from many directions, not just from designers. Across a range of activities, including design, Indigenous people and settlers meet in structurally uneven conditions.

But, Sánchez claimed, decoloniality cannot only mean disengagement between Indigenous people and settlers (including designers). As decolonial theorists such as Walter Mignolo and others have argued, there can be no return to “pre-contact” epistemologies for either side. However, decoloniality can mean fostering conditions in which the knowledges, practices, and desires of Indigenous communities take epistemological precedence. It can mean using a re-imagined and decentered notion of design through which Indigenous communities can interact on their own terms with settler forces.

Convenor 2: Issues in Research and Practice
María Rogal reviewed her decade-long research collaborations with Indigenous entrepreneurs and artisans in México. She explained that these collaborations originated within communities in which people had recognized design’s potential to improve their products’ marketability and to enhance their ability to tell their stories directly, with less interference from the dominant tropes and narratives of the tourist industry and other Western-dominated industries. Rogal identified features
that were critical to fostering productive interactions between these entrepreneurs and her designers; in particular, she identified the need for the designers to see the entrepreneurs not as clients but as collaborators. She described the value of horizontal design research methods and the need to be open to multivocality. She explained how working “in the field” rather than in the studio let her designers see the gaps between their formal knowledge and that of the Indigenous communities with whom they worked. Finally, Rogal advocated for rethinking the design canon, for re-evaluating the very concept of a canon, and for creating a multivocal approach to design (Figure 3).

**Convenor 3: Implications for Design Education**

Gaby Hernández offered an overview of her teaching practices with undergraduate and graduate design students. She explained that one can introduce new design perspectives in the classroom by reframing contents and facilitating new kinds of projects. She identified some pressing questions in contemporary design teaching.

- How should we talk about colonialist design practices and culture?
- Why do we teach design principles as we currently do?
- What are we leaving out?
- How do we reframe design education and practice for the youngest students?

Hernández proposed moving from the current, largely homogenous teaching model—which orients around European schools and approaches, such as the Bauhaus—to a heterogeneous one that considers cultures (rather than culture), that is inherently and consistently multivocal, and that always seeks to fully represent the underrepresented. She also argued that students’ voices and backgrounds must be allowed to fundamentally inform their design process, especially when these students come from underrepresented groups. Addressing the needs of students from dominant as well as underrepresented groups, Hernández asked how we might use image-making and visual practice to create spaces in which they can develop critical thinking habits related to questions of diversity, culture, colonization, and stereotyping. Finally, she encouraged attendees to reconsider course contents and projects in order to introduce diverse design perspectives, cultural criticism, colonial design tradition, and design practices that reflect students’ background and identity.
2.4 **Conversation**

After their opening remarks, the convenors introduced the following questions in the form of a Conversation prompt card deck, with eleven questions (Figure 4).

![Conversation Prompt Card Deck, designed by Gaby Hernández. Photograph: Denielle Emans](image)

1. How “western” is the discipline of design?
2. What are the inherited epistemologies of the design discipline?
3. How does design’s “western-ness” implicate it in colonialism?
4. How does appropriation masquerade as exchange in current design practice?
5. How can we reimagine design away from its western-ness and therefore away from colonialism?
6. What would a global discipline of design look like?
7. What would be the key concepts of a global and inclusive discipline of design?
8. What would be the foundational research and teaching practices of a global discipline of design?
9. What are current examples of global design research and teaching practices?
10. What other questions should we be asking about decolonial design and global practices in order to further this Conversation?
11. Are there any resources to further this Conversation?
Each individual received one or two cards to use as discussion prompts for their small group (Figure 5). These small groups were asked to focus, for approximately 30 minutes, on one or two of the questions. During these discussions, Hernández observed a palpable energy in the room. Participants actively engaged the issues raised mentioned in the cards and connected them to other equally important issues that the cards had not addressed. Reporting back to the larger group, each small group summarised key points of their conversation, including thoughts on the future of design. Hernández facilitated this “debrief” while Rogal took notes (Figure 6).
3.1 Outcomes
The following are key issues that emerged from the session.

2.4.1 Language is crucial
Attendees challenged terms such as global, universal, and decolonial, noting that these too can carry the often-silencing force of Western modernity. They argued for the importance of terms such as anti-racist and anti-capitalist to describe a design theory and practice that could work against the silencing, erasure, and violence in which the modern discipline of design has been implicated. They urged the recognition of neoliberalism as the name for a set of destructive economic, philosophical, and cultural practices in which design has played a role.

This focus on language and terminology reflected a larger understanding of the key role that discourse plays in reproducing ideology and, as a result, perpetuating inequality. In order to act upon this understanding, the discourses of design must become locally oriented, intensely contextual, and always attuned to issues of history and epistemology.

2.4.2 Design research, practice, and education must be rigorously contextual
Attendees noted that contemporary design education reinforces an epistemological hierarchy in which western knowledge dominates. They noted that this hierarchy exists not only in the institutions of the global north—in Europe and the U.S.—but also in those of former colonies in the global south.

In order to create a design education that recognizes, studies, and dismantles the modern discipline’s colonialist epistemologies and practices, we must create integrative design curricula that emerge from local traditions, histories, and processes. Doing so will require new practices, such as the validation of oral traditions and the acceptance of language differences.

3 Reflection and Further Steps
One attendee noted that, for her, our session felt like “the safest place in the conference.” This makes us feel nice, but it is also a sad and damning commentary on the discipline and its institutions. We must make the discipline a safe space for people to rigorously and productively discuss issues of coloniality and indigeneity. The attendees and the convenors feel acutely the urgency of these issues, and they are dismayed that their field is, at the moment, ill-equipped to address them. But they are eager to help it along, and to help transform it.

In the near term, DRS in particular can take some concrete steps. We encourage officials to choose conference locations in non-western countries. Doing so will expand participation, increase access, and promote equity. We urge officials to set a sliding scale of conference fees to account for different economies and incomes to encourage broader participation.

More broadly, and in the longer term, the discipline must abandon the notion that “design” can be meaningfully defined or understood outside of specific locations and their historical, epistemological, ideological, and economic contexts. When we retain this falsely universal notion, we take part in an ongoing process of silencing and erasure, a process in which a set of culturally and historically specific set of values is presumed to apply anywhere and everywhere.

In short, we must guard against any tendency to universalize any aspect of design theory, history, practice, and education. Instead, we should think of “design” as theories and practices that emerge in specific locations, rather than as generalized theory and practice that can be brought to bear on specific locations.
Within such a framework, the work of the design theorist should be to identify and articulate local design concepts, especially where they have been historically suppressed or erased under conditions of coloniality. The work of the design researcher should be to study local design practices, also under historical conditions of suppression or erasure, identify and validate horizontal methods where knowledge is produced with populations and not for them. And the work of the design educator should be to help students develop ways of making and thinking based on the understanding and validation of a multiplicity of design theories and practices.

4 References

The following references informed the convenors as they formulated their proposal and their framing of the Conversation, even if not cited in this document. We are including them here because we consider useful to this Conversation.

Decoloniality

Horizontal Methods

Design Concepts

Designing with people
About the Authors:

**Gabriela Hernández** is assistant professor of design at the University of Florida. Her expertise includes design for development, visual storytelling, and ethnographic research, and has significant international experience working with disadvantaged communities and indigenous groups in México and Costa Rica.

**Maria Rogal** is professor of design at the University of Florida. She explores the potential of design to positively shape the human experience. She founded Design for Development to work with indigenous entrepreneurs in Mexico on development projects. Her research has been disseminated internationally.

**Raúl Sánchez** is associate professor of English at the University of Florida. He specializes in decolonial theory, and cultural studies. Sánchez is author of Inside the Subject: A Theory of Identity for the Study of Writing and co-editor of Decolonizing Rhetoric and Composition Studies: New Latinx Keywords for Theory and Pedagogy.