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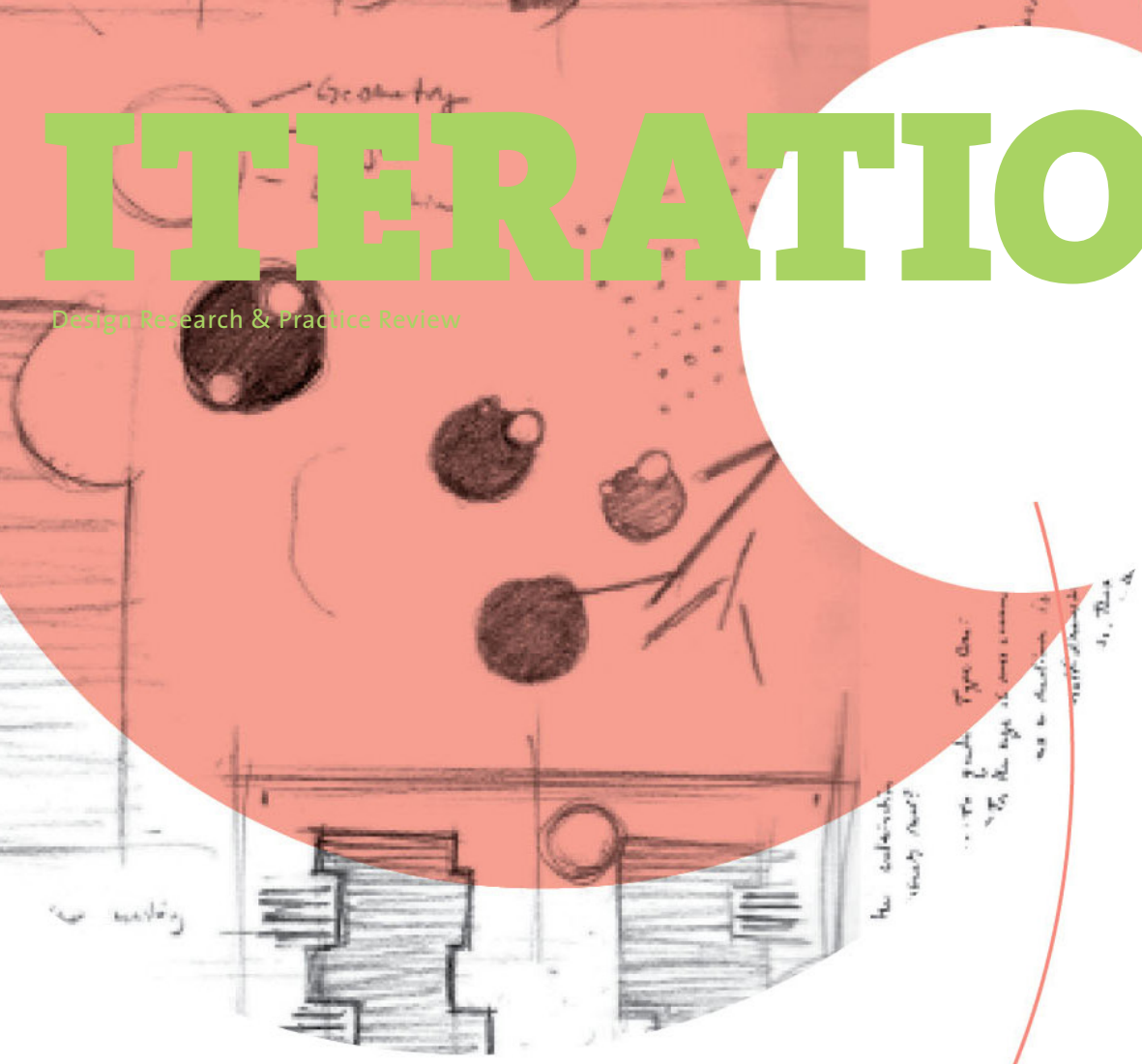

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Towards a decentered design education

DRS 2018 conversations on decolonial design

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As social design and design for development continue to gain relevance within design education and practice, the consideration and conscious integration of context-based methods that focus on locality and culture are critical in order to guarantee respectful and caring design outcomes. In the last decade, my University of Florida colleagues María Rogal, Raúl Sánchez and I have developed social design research in Latin America that keeps leading us to the revision and reconsideration of such issues. They not only pertain to design, but to language and rhetoric, corresponding directly with world views and local practices of populations from the borders and "peripheral spaces" (Medina, 2017), who have been invisible from traditional and Eurocentric/Westernised design theory and learning.

During the Design Research Society (DRS) 2018 Conference at the University of Limerick, Ireland, my colleagues and I led a conversation entitled *"Transforming Design: Indigeneity and Mestizaje in Latin America"*, whose premise was to explore how the design discipline might be epistemologically decentred and, in effect, decolonised. We used our design research experiences and work in Latin America with indigenous and mestizo populations as examples to analyse and reconsider how we teach and make design. In this conversation, we aimed to start 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 (Hernández, Rogal and Sánchez, 2018).

The problem in context: absent voices

One of the greatest motivations for our epistemological design intervention at DRS 2018 was my previous experiences participating in and attending international design research gatherings. At these events, I had perceived an absence of active and/or expanding conversations about horizontal design methods, decoloniality, and indigeneity, specifically from Latin America. After reviewing the proceedings from the Design Research Society 2016 Conference and the 2015 and 2017 conferences of the International Association of Design Research Societies, I discovered that only two papers had referenced projects from local and indigenous design-related practices in Latin America, as the vast majority of decolonial design and indigeneity research had taken place in Australia and Canada. They were authored by design researchers of European or Western origin, with no mention of collaboration with or authorship credit to indigenous design scholars. I do not want to imply that there are no indigenous design scholars, but rather I want to call attention to the lack of participation by indigenous design scholars in these conferences. The absence of design voices from indigenous or underrepresented groups, more specifically from Latin America, in design research conferences is not only a missed opportunity to inform diversity in design theory and practice. It is also a palpable example of underrepresentation and invisibility that continues to be perpetuated by prevalent concepts of modernity and universality in design learning and practice.

My own anecdote as a design practitioner and researcher from a colonised country (Costa Rica) working on decolonial design, heritage, and cultural identity may serve as an example to better explicate particular issues of Latin American underrepresentation in Eurocentric and Westernised design research gatherings. In 2016, I was a presenter at the Design Research Society Conference in Brighton, UK. My paper - a summary of my Masters in Fine Arts thesis project entitled, Swimming

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Figure 1: DRS 2018 conversation attendees, "Transforming Design: Indigeneity and Mestizaje in Latin America." Images by Denielle Emans and Gaby Hernández.

Against the Currents: Entrepreneur Women of Chira Island, Costa Rica, was the only case study about collaborative and context-based design practice with marginalised groups in Latin America (Hernandez, 2016). I was dumbfounded at the isolation of the topic and the apparent lack of interest in decolonial practices and Latin American design representation. The attendance of Latin American design researchers during this conference was clearly scarce, unveiling issues of access and the limited reach of the DRS to practitioners at or representing traditionally marginalised societies and nations. In general, the attendance of design researchers from the aforementioned geographies to DRS conferences and others of its kind is highly dependable on the approval of costly visas and a very limited ability to cover travel costs to Europe, Australia, or the United States. Barriers in language that prohibit their participation to present their research also affect diversity in attendance. Varying the location of these gatherings to countries belonging to the Global South was often a recommendation by attendants from diverse backgrounds during DRS 2018.

Thus, as expressed by our DRS 2018 conversation participants (Figure 1), our conversation space served as a solace for attendees from underrepresented groups—a safe space. We benefitted from the organic attention that the question *"Why is #designsowhite?"* received during the conference keynotes. Using Sli.do, a crowdsourcing tool to collect and integrate concerns and questions during the sessions, the inquiry was never acknowledged until the third day, when design scholars of Latin American and North American Lakota origin took the main stage. As a second-time DRS presenter and participant, witnessing the increased attention that DRS 2018 attendees voiced on matters of diversity, equity, indigeneity, and decoloniality helped me and my co-convenors gain greater confidence about the relevance of our conversation topic and how it helps break some of the strong influences of design practice, research and education from the Global North in place of a more diverse and equal design practice.

First steps towards a decentred design education

The interactive characteristics of our DRS 2018 conversation offered important conclusions, the main one revolving around the need to build a new design education precept—one that integrates multiple voices and ways of life of the marginalised and colonised, bringing attention to culture-specific methods from around the world. Such an approach would result in design theory that focuses on those whose creative practices have been ignored, diminished

or wrongly categorised as folk, artisanal, or survivalist, that rather offer diverse and context-based views of the world.

Decentering design knowledge and practice is key to reaching pluriversal notions of design (Escobar, 2018) as a practice not attached to consumerism or modernity (from its Westernised view) but to everyday sustained living based on the specificities of local cultures. In our DRS 2018 conversation report, we explain that the design discipline (education, practice, and theory) must abandon the notion that *"design"* can be meaningfully defined or understood outside of specific locations and their historical, epistemological, ideological, and economic contexts (Hernandez, Rogal and Sánchez, 2018). Our conversation participants agreed that in retaining this false universal notion, we take part in an ongoing process of silencing and erasure in which a set of culturally and historically specific set of values is presumed to apply anywhere and everywhere.

Since 2015 I have conducted research in the undergraduate and graduate design classroom/studio where I facilitate the exploration and discovery of *"oneself"* from a decentered perspective that includes students' exploration of their heritage and cultural identity in relation to their surroundings and historical roots. These activities enable them to understand themselves as active participants in building culture, while they discover that traditional (Western) design practices and *"globalisation"* are often culturally inadequate and rather unjust in multiple contexts and historic backgrounds. For example, design students who show interest in environmental issues study the consequences of their design decisions in the local and global scales. Findings about climate change, pollution, and cultural appropriation expose them to the mismanagement of resources in developing countries and their social, economic, and environmental consequences.

Such approaches in design curricula can have a great impact in building a culture of *"design care"* where students learn through practice that design decisions should be made with consciousness about material production, second-hand distribution, use of resources, and environmental impact, all of which have had direct negative repercussions in colonised countries that have historically been imposed careless views of modernity in multiple levels. As exposed by Fry (2017), *"care"*, when viewed as part of the "material, qualitative, ontological characteristic of something brought into being by design, becomes an object of engagement of *'design for/by the South'* accompanied by a fundamental question: *"What should be designed, and how?"* (Fry, 2017).

Supporting students to understand the impact of Westernised design practices is an important first step towards decolonial design education and horizontal social design practices. Many design programs in the Global North have invested efforts in the last years to bring students closer to marginalised and even indigenous populations without a real consideration of the vertical design systems that they end up imposing on what may potentially be successful co-design or participatory design practices. Short fieldwork visits, shallow cultural experiences, careless consideration of local economies, lack of local validation and an adequate cultural understanding tend to relegate actual design activities back to the studio, perpetuating emotional and psychological distance with cross-cultural stakeholders. As Kelly and Kennedy (2016) point out, *"Designers cannot, and should not, work in isolation when working with indigenous knowledge; there must be mutual benefits for all stakeholders especially the cultural custodians"*. They argue that design education should formulate and formalise new criteria and tools to ensure suitable, case-by case considerations for respectful and conscious stakeholder engagement, in order to assist designers ethically (Kelly and Kennedy, 2016). In doing this, design theorists, educators, practitioners, and researchers should prioritise local knowledge and cosmovision, supporting the formulation and introduction of new ways to tell design histories.

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