

# In Another Life Another Being: On Design and the Wages of Decoloniality

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Despite the struggles for design disciplines to confront their colonial legacies and practices, the question remains: who can truly afford a decolonizing practice worthy of the name? This paper will investigate why Industrial Design, as a discipline, has been glaringly absent from the decolonial conversation, and the critical institutional gaps between decolonial thought and action. I will investigate the pragmatic relations between labor, value, care work, and social reproduction within the political economy of design that dissuade and constrain the discipline from articulating its responsibility to transform its social and material realities. In setting this provocation, I argue that if decolonizing design is to be anything more than an epistemological curiosity, moving beyond the niche corners of design academia, it will need a diverse ecology of accomplices—to imagine other lives for itself and become other beings.

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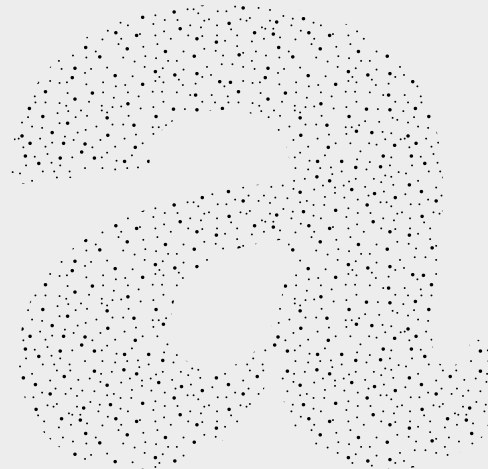
 decolonizing design
 

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 climate reparations
 

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# In Another Life Another Being: On Design and the Wages of Decoloniality

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## AN INQUIRY ON RESPONSIBILITY AND RELATIONS

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In recent years, the decolonial question has triggered a necessary and timely existential crisis for design disciplines that have historically been enthusiastic accomplices of colonial modernity and its particular conceptions of futurity, modernity, progress, and human development (Fry & Nocek, 2020). In response, there have been critical investigations into the collusion of design practices and efforts to articulate the necessary and strategic responsibility for decolonizing design. It is worth noting the collaborative work done by the Decolonizing Design Group (Schultz et al., 2018); as well as the calls for changing institutional frameworks to advance towards equity, inclusion, and diversity (Tunstall, 2023), and decentering the epistemic framework of colonial modernity in order to move towards a positive ontological decoloniality (Tlostanova, 2017). Moreover, anthropologists like Arturo Escobar have called for a ‘cultural studies of design’ to develop a deeper understanding of its ontological approach, driven by politics of radical interdependence, and imagine futures beyond the economic system of patriarchal capitalist modernity (2018, pp. 49-76).

As a practitioner, researcher, and Industrial Design educator, I am deeply concerned with this issue, and intend to explore why the discipline is often missing in academic conversation. With this contribution, I want to inquire into a crucial gap in how decolonial discourse in design academia translates into the everyday pragmatic realities of design practice. To structure this investigation, I will explore the political economy of design scrutinizing matters of labor, production, social reproduction, and care work as operative themes across at least three class functions. I delineate these social functions of designers as being a professional-managerial class; a precarious working class; and a creative, caring class that socially reproduces colonial relations in social and material everyday relations.

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## ON THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF DECOLONIZING DESIGN

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Over the past century, design disciplines and their many manifestations have increasingly tempered conceptions of futurity, modernity, progress, and human development. Historically, designers—along with technologically-minded scientists

and engineers—have benefited from their proximity to capital and social power in industrial societies. This social power, David Noble argues, affords these professionals “access to the social resources that make their achievements possible: capital, time, materials, and people” which is a “necessary prerequisite of scientific and technological development” (1984, pp. 43-44). While Noble observes this of American capitalism, design has also been instrumental in constructing nation-building processes for other colonial, decolonial, and postcolonial regimes (Fallan & Lees-Maffei, 2016, p. 3).

In its systemic role, Industrial Design has been materially responsible for centering and reproducing colonial modernity, imagining ever-new frontiers for a high-energy, mass-consumption way of life. However, industrial designers who intend to take the responsibility to decolonize design beyond conceptual gestures have often encountered confusion when attempting to translate these ideas into tangible material practices. In the following pages I want to explore the connections between this separation of decolonial thought and action as a reflection on how, perhaps, as the profession of designers has accrued more social power, their labor has tended to further separate from its craft traditions.

### **Separating Thought from Action**

Historically, design traditions have successfully responded, adapted, and anticipated new roles for themselves in response to the structural needs of a socio-economic system of capitalism in a perpetual, cyclical crisis. For instance, industrial designers helped imagine technological futures of everyday life, giving shape to amenities and appliances for the home and automobiles, which instituted new frontiers of consumption and marketization of surplus industrial overproduction (Raizman, 2020, pp. 260–266). Over the past century, design has addressed questions of industrial production, digital user experience, service and financial sectors, and complex systems design, granting its practitioners enough credibility to promote transition design in response to the climate crises it partly helped create (Edeholt & Joseph, 2022).

However, unsurprisingly, despite their craft traditions, designers today can practically be considered a professional-managerial class (PMC)<sup>1</sup>—a mediating class both in their “social location and social function,” which appropriates and reimagines the skills and culture that were once integral to the working class (Press, 2019).

To clarify, PMC is not a derogatory categorization, but it delineates a broader class of intermediaries between labor and capital in the complex relations of a social order that arguably requires such a separation. Among those participating in this social function of design are also academics, researchers, technocrats, design managers, and policy and service consultants in corporations, who

**1** Often in modern public and private organizations it is implicitly assumed that one is better paid in a leadership or managerial role than when designing and developing one's skills in the material sense—as facilitators of process and people rather than practitioners.

can afford certain privileges, resources, time and energy to engage with critical issues that concern the future of design. Sure enough, this class formation has contributed to the necessary intellectual labor in the academy and beyond—from working with marginalized communities, developing theoretical publications and study programs, and establishing research agendas, to participating in research production, policy consultations, student projects, and public exhibitions.

As Silvio Lorusso observes, there has been a shift in the social function of designers, from a “technical intellectual to the intellectual of technics”, in an attempt to frame the debate in the processes of cultural production (2024, pp. 277–278). There has been a tendency within such spheres of cultural production to place power and agency within the domain of concepts, visions, systems, and complexity, which often get reduced to abstractions, buzzwords, metaphors, and platitudes. Thus, like speculative and critical design, many decolonial design projects have found space in the niche corners of the academy, often as radical imaginaries of decolonization in waiting.

Yet, there remains a big difference between imagining a decolonial future and living in one where critical questions are raised. Beyond the few niche corners of design academy, to paraphrase Matos (2022)—who can truly afford to sustain a decolonizing practice worthy of the name? Who is hiring designers to genuinely engage in decolonizing work? What are the incentives of the private sector, NGOs, or the public sector to do this work at all, given all their contradictions and tensions? Moreover, even if one assumes designers are on board with the challenge, what exactly would decolonizing design *design*? How would its best practices differ from what came before? Does invoking the term ‘decolonial’ validate poor design? If the answer is neither to continue business as usual with red-green hope-washing, nor to abolish design disciplines altogether, what will be their craft expertise, rigor, and reason to exist in the world?

While Lorusso and Matos—referred here—articulate their position from their experience with graphic design traditions, which have a history of engaging with critical discourses, I believe they still offer relevant perspectives for industrial designers, given shared tangible craft traditions. Their disciplines have also witnessed their social power erode over time, with rapid technological change and precarious wage relations further marginalizing the skilled labor of its practitioners. While there is no lack of engagement with decolonial theory in design, the absence of an institutional program that addresses pragmatic concerns in practice leaves much to be desired.

As Rivera Cusicanqui reminds us, there can be no discourse, no theory of decolonization without a serious practice, without which it is left open to co-optation and mimesis (2012, pp. 100–104). Unfortunately, this co-optation can be portrayed in how practices of ‘academic colonialism’ have tainted the word

'research' in marginalized communities (Todd, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2014). Furthermore, there are generous material and social incentives available for those willing to co-opt the discourse and recenter themselves within movements as elite representatives, tendencies that need to be actively resisted (Táíwò, 2022).

In my view, these tensions are symptomatic of the depoliticization of decolonization. They indicate a separation between the thinking and the doing, the making and maker, the universal and the concrete particulars, and between what calls itself decolonizing and what is done in its name.

### **A Subsidy of the Creative Imagination**

Even if decolonial thought can be transformed into productive action by reclaiming design's labor relations, it would need new conceptions of generating value to substantiate its social function for a new social order. In this section, I want to go beyond the partial view of a strictly productivist (often Marxist) analysis of labor, wages, and value generation of design, and briefly engage with questions of social reproduction and care work.

Feminist scholars like Alessandra Mezzadri claim that "it is the reification and fetishisation of the wage as the value rather than the cost of labor that provides the premises for productivist understandings of value generation" (2019, p. 36). There remains the more invisible and reproductive labor that produces, maintains, and reproduces the worker (the designer-worker), and their productive labor (their design-work) depends on conceptions of human and non-human nature as foundations of a social system that derives surplus value (Bhattacharya, 2017). As Mezzadri argues, "reproductive realms and activities contribute to processes of value generation" in part "by absorbing the systematic externalization of reproductive costs by capital, working as a *de-facto* subsidy to capital" (2019, p. 33).

Noble also suggests that societal power structures and the designer's position within them shape technical possibilities and resource availability, ultimately guiding designers to adopt the ideologies of those in power who facilitate their work (1984, p. 43). Thus, when industrial designers were creating household appliances and automobiles, they were part of a political project designed to create a mass consumer culture and structure domestic relations to "absorb and defuse potentially revolutionary energies" in society at the time (Noble, 1977, p. xxiii).

However, even while the industrial production of human-centered household amenities and appliances eased household chores for the working poor and raised their standard of living, it ironically also created ever more household work that needed doing, for the simple reason that they were designed on the assumption that domestic work was performed by women and children (Cowan,

2008). Federici argues that this fundamental assumption about domestic relations emerged from the historical process of erasing women from participation in civic life and their violent institutionalization into domestic servitude, which she contends was a key factor in the formation of European mercantile capitalism and its eventual development: colonial expansion (2014). Yet, design rarely comprehends this invisible and unwaged dimension of caring and reproductive labor (White, 2021). These invisibilized systemic relations of modern life taken for granted are embedded and socially reproduced in the most intimate, particular relations of everyday life (Vink, 2023). Thus, taken to its logical conclusion, such relations must necessarily be invisibilized, for to fully acknowledge them would upend the whole social edifice that sustains global capitalist relations (Federici, 1975).

In this sense, design also serves as a demographic shaping tool that constantly cares for and maintains a particular social order. It helps imagine, anticipate, fabricate, and creatively open up the specter of opportunity, possibility, and predictability in the pursuit of that larger social project of, what Murphy (2017) has termed, the 'economization of life'. Therefore, I would argue that the caring labor of design also provides a 'de-facto subsidy to capital', insofar as it creatively imagines and socially reproduces certain normative assumptions of a 'good' life. This creative subsidy is operative in how industrial design practices economize social and caring relations, instrumentalized and fabricated through their labor and caring relations, perpetuating creative imaginaries of a good life through mass consumption.

Therefore, I would argue that designers are seemingly performing their social function at three levels: as a managerial class (privy to higher-order visions and planning for profit and growth); as a precarious working class trained in particular creative craft traditions that allows it to materialize good ideas into compelling products; and as a creative caring class that cares for society with its creative labor through the invisible interpretation, anticipation, negotiation, and translation labor it performs to socially reproduce everyday life. To be clear, this does not entail that all designers are operating equally at all these levels, but these roles are interspersed at varying levels depending on the amount of social power design disciplines have negotiated for themselves.

However, in the complex landscape of their roles, designers frequently encounter conflicts. For instance, a designer pertaining to the professional-managerial class (PMC) might champion user-centric and sustainable practices in a boardroom, only to be constrained by the profit-driven motives of corporate structures. The craft and working-class aspects of design, with their emphasis on material expertise and training, might be undervalued at the managerial levels compared to the more theoretical or visionary elements attributed to

the PMC. Moreover, the interpretive and caring labor that industrial design negotiates between these contradictions socially reproduces the values and expectations of modernity, progress, and development as tacitly embodied in desired artifacts. It is a core feature of industrial design education that has been honed for decades, reinforcing the social power of design and shaping its social formation.

Nonetheless, these relations are also ripe with contradictions, and occasionally political actions emerge to systematically transgress them to create just alternatives against an unjust social order. In the next section, I would like to explore a historical case where the professional managerial roles and the craft traditions of designers and technologists of a leading British weapons manufacturer came together to create alternatives to the social order: the Lucas Alternative Corporate Plan for Socially Useful Production.

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### **ON THE THREAT OF DANGEROUS IDEAS**

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During the 'Golden Years of Capitalism' in the 1960s and 1970s, workers in Western industrialized countries saw significant improvements in wages and welfare (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021, p. 90). This resulted in strong bargaining power for trade unions who advocated for better working conditions, greater participation, and ownership of the means of production, often led by multi-racial coalitions of the civil rights, anti-war, and labor movements (Windham, 2017, p. 7). However, while this same period also saw the free movement of capital between nations, it also meant deindustrialization and income deflation for working people in the Global South and North (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021, pp. 88–93).

In Britain, thousands of highly skilled industrial workers of Lucas Aerospace, a defense contractor, were facing corporate downsizing and the potential loss of their livelihoods. Faced with structural unemployment, the shop stewards, design engineers, and other technicians at Lucas Aerospace proposed an alternative corporate plan to management and formed an independent Lucas Combine Committee with the support of their trade union. They took it upon themselves to develop a companywide technological and economic feasibility study of workers' expertise, machinery, and equipment already stockpiled at the company. The design engineer and a key member of the committee, Mike Cooley, recalls the creative effort made to save their jobs by reimagining and retooling their manufacturing capabilities to propose what they called 'socially useful production' (Cooley, 1987). Instead of the weapons Lucas was producing at the time, the committee proposed 150 alternative products to address essential social needs—from hybrid engines and rail-car prototypes for public transport, to dialysis machines, combined heat and power systems, and renewable energy systems.

Wainwright and Elliot point out that the Lucas Plan was historically unique, not for demanding worker control over production, but because it laid



out an intricately detailed plan for worker control in a large-scale company, while at the same time campaigning both industrially and politically (1982, p. 247). It was a proactive and creative approach to trade unionism that went beyond merely saving jobs. This approach greatly benefited from having a highly skilled workforce, access to versatile technological practices unique to the aerospace sector, and building upon existing traditions of drawing up proposals for socially useful production that were already prevalent in the aircraft industry.

Moreover, Lucas Aerospace—being a military contractor—did not rely on market forces, but had a planned economic structure instead, since the British government was its biggest client. At the same time, their efforts also enjoyed political legitimacy from the Labor government in power. Structurally, the Committee was independent but elected, and bypassed rigid management-worker categories, remaining flexible, open, and adaptable, allowing for free flows of information, planning, and action, unprecedented at the time (Wainwright & Elliott, 1982, pp. 247–249). However, despite enjoying socio-political legitimacy and being economically and technologically viable, the alternative plan was eventually rejected, since it was politically unthinkable for management.<sup>2</sup>

Their apparent failure serves as a gentle reminder that the choice of socio-technological trajectories is not primarily based on technological or economic superiority. Instead, as Noble puts it, it constitutes a matter of mobilizing, legitimizing, and ratifying dominant social power and its dominant values, which determine whether to accept or reject alternatives (Noble, 1984, p. 146). In other words, the social, economic, and political structures designers operate within are replete with systemic mechanisms that depoliticize and filter out the threat of dangerous ideas, thereby legitimizing the social order that exists and should continue to exist (Piketty, 2020, pp. 1–9).

Thus, since the 1970s, the institutionalization of neoliberal economics established the global financialization of capital and effectively replicated colonial relations in the majority world, in an attempt to stabilize the structural crises of capitalism (Patnaik & Patnaik, 2021, pp. 264–266). In the same period, there has been a dramatic rise in household financial debts, making workers today far less likely to carry out industrial actions like strikes, let alone initiate creative political projects like the Lucas Plan (Gouzoulis, 2023). For this reason, David Graeber has argued that neoliberalism can be better understood not as an economic system of efficient markets, at which it is demonstrably terrible, but as a remarkably successful political project to decimate trade unions and depoliticize labor: in effect, it ensured that no alternative could be seen to succeed (Graeber, 2014, pp. 280–281).

<sup>2</sup> Although the Lucas Plan was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, Cooley was sacked by Lucas Aerospace for his activism by 1981 (see Cooley, 1987, p. 101).

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### **ON SHEDDING INNOCENCE AND BECOMING ACCOMPLICES**

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I want to end this essay by acknowledging that design academia still has the privilege of engaging in the discourse around decolonization: a luxury not available to other decolonial practices. For those frontline communities whose lives are on the line in resisting colonial violence and marginalization, decolonization is an ongoing, everyday struggle against the harsh social and material realities of the existing social order. Thus, to decolonize design is to recognize that colonialism is not some dark chapter in history, but rather a book that is constantly being written and rewritten, by design and designing, where most of the world is forced to live in someone else's idea of a good story. Today, it is a political project, reflected in a narrative of progress and development created by design for the world's most privileged few people and nations, for whom an ecocidal way of life has become non-negotiable (Funes, 2022; Scheidel et al., 2023; Sultana, 2022).

Designers today continue to benefit from the social power their disciplines have historically accrued. Even though the decolonial discourse in design academia has been timely and essential, designers still struggle to articulate a decolonial practice, despite their social power. There seem to be some critical institutional gaps that limit design to form new relations between decolonial thought and action (Fry, 2009; White, 2020, 2021). It is easy to forget that the explicit goal of decolonization is not to embrace a mythical time untainted by colonialism, but on the contrary, the abolition of the colonial order and its categorical structuring of the world, and "an extensive enactment of material reparations" for those still suffering the continuing legacies of the colonial order (Gopal, 2021, p. 894). It means acknowledging that the classes, castes, and communities entangled in and recreating these colonial relations were not merely victims, but also participants and collaborators of colonial and neo-colonial modernity (Gopal, 2021, pp. 891–893). Decolonization thus requires a transformation of relations, and shedding both settler and native innocence (Whyte, 2018, pp. 237–238).

I have presented the case of the Lucas Plan, a proactive form of trade unionism led by designers and technologists who challenged traditional divisions of labor and their social power, diffusing it across categories to reimagine social relations. The Lucas Plan explores what it means for industrial design to shed its innocence and take responsibility for decolonization, reclaiming the political agency of its material practices and concretely reimagining the material relations of production, distribution, and consumption. The designers and technologists of the Combine Committee suspended the social order of their time and exposed its irrationalities, if only briefly, to offer a glimpse of another social order. Even if it did not explicitly present itself as such, I would argue that it was a worthy accomplice to the decolonial project.

However, even under ideal conditions, the Lucas Combine Committee faced immense resistance, both internal and external, and it is unlikely that such industrial actions might ever recur in the same way (Wainwright & Elliott, 1982, p. 255). Even if designers were to take control of their labor, decolonize production, and redirect it for socially useful alternatives, the social formation/function of design might still be trapped in the categories, worldviews, and concrete particulars of a world that no longer exists. There remains an overreliance and valorization of a ‘capitalocentric’ analysis of the political economy that often obscures the mutable nature of capitalist relations in a global economy that is far more diverse and heterogeneous than previously thought (Gibson & Dombroski, 2020). Therefore, for Gopal, decolonization is not a metaphor but a metonymy—a range of intrinsically linked liberatory and rehumanizing projects that are “commensurable without flattening” (Gopal, 2021, p. 888). It also offers opportunities for exploring the *compossibility* of decolonial possible futures (Chattothyay, 2021).

Decolonization worthy of the name inevitably turns the world, its social categories of power, and its material relations on the head, and is ultimately a dangerous idea for the reasons I have explored here. These reasons are likely acknowledged by industrial design practitioners, even those absent from the decolonial conversation, as it is a daunting challenge for any discipline to independently comprehend, challenge, and transform the scale and scope of its social power. Therefore, if decolonizing design is to be anything more than an epistemological curiosity, it will need to undertake this difficult responsibility of transforming its professional realities along with its accomplices—where design can choose for itself other lives, and become other beings. **D**

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