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## THE DECOLONIAL DEBATE: TERRITORIES O DEBATE DECOLONIAL: TERRITÓRIOS

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## Abstract

The craft of formal and functional aesthetic qualities, overtly typical of dependent markets, characterizes Design Education in Brazil. In addition to reinforcing the cultural stereotypes conferred by colonizers on local people, such qualities contribute to maintaining the inequality that describes the historical colonial relationship. Critical Education in Design seeks to transform this reality through anticolonial praxis, even though little is known about its qualities. We conducted a prospective study on the relational qualities that emerged from the anticolonial praxis of the Design & Oppression network composed by university extension projects of associated laboratories in several Brazilian institutions. Weave this network several Brazilian educational initiatives dedicated to critical pedagogy, working with social movements. Following a practice of Latin American social movements, the choice for the term anticolonial indicates that explicit political action is associated with popular struggles in this praxis, from which six qualities emerge: freedom, criticality, solidarity, autonomy, dialogicity, and monstrosity.

**Keywords:** Design Education, Critical Pedagogy, Anticolonial Design, Paulo Freire, Relational Qualities

## 1 Introduction

Design has developed in Brazil as an avatar of the Anglo-European colonial discourse, primarily as a tool for maintaining production and consumption dependent on the former metropolises. Due to its historical origin, the field is directly linked to the maintenance of structures that undermine the possibilities of a sustainable and fair future for all (Escobar, 2018). The ecologically unsustainable, highly technocratic, economically unfair, racist, sexist, and violent reality in which we live in Brazil is also the result of design choices that built technologies that reinforce oppression while excluding possibilities for humanization (Cruz, 2021).

These choices also impact Design Education. As Lesley-Ann Noel (2020) points out, regardless of the country, Design Education is characterized by a colonial bias that prioritizes projects that serve the large capitalist industrial economies, which calls into question the validity of knowledge and practices outside this context. As a challenge to this imposed colonial paradigm, Noel reimagines and suggests curricula designed from other perspectives: curricula for vulnerable economies, pan-African, decolonial, pluriversal, among others. More than teaching projects ready to be replicated, Noel invites us to rethink Design Education from other structures of existence, seeking to distance ourselves from the colonial yoke.

This article is a response to that invitation. We start from the Freirean premise (2005) that education produces subjectivities through intersubjective dialogue, which takes place in short to long-term relationships. In addition to the quantitative approach to measuring results, it is also possible to measure the quality of education through empirical-theoretical constructs, such as autonomy and solidarity. These qualities serve to measure and guide the educational process if they are treated as pedagogical principles. Research on such qualities is incipient in Design Education, and there is no specific guidance on anticolonial pedagogies.

This research aims to prospect anticolonial qualities for Critical Education in Design based on the praxis of participants in the Design & Oppression network, formed by outreach projects and associated laboratories in several Brazilian institutions (Serpa et al., 2021). By adopting the concept of praxis (Freire, 2005), we seek to establish the cultivation of these relational qualities through theoretical reflection on the colonial condition and through concrete and continued social actions (Boal, 2009) of design outreach projects. The relational qualities we seek do not arise from the formal and functional properties of the objects created by design, such as effectiveness, usability, or aesthetic appeal, as these function primarily as market differentiators. Relational qualities shift our attention to the relationships between objects, worlds, and people (Cipolla & Manzini, 2009). These qualities shape the research object of Prospective Design (Van Amstel, Botter & Guimarães, 2022), the approach that guides this work in its objective of prospecting alternative presents based on past paths and future projects.

Following this approach, we recognize the path taken by critical pedagogy in Brazil, which, among others, denounced the complicity between formal education and colonial culture (Freire, 2005; Vieira Pinto, 2021a). We also recognize the potential to develop projects with the anticolonial bias that characterized this type of pedagogy. Unlike other research that uses the term decolonial to align itself

with the group of Latin American researchers Modernity/Coloniality (Escobar, 2018), we prefer to use the term anticolonial to characterize the paths and projects considered. This term expresses a more explicit character of struggle and political action than decolonial, the option made by popular social movements (Makaran & Gaussens, 2020). These movements prefer to align themselves with a tradition of militant research (Serpa, 2023), which dates back to the anticolonial praxis of Frantz Fanon (2005) and expands on the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire (2005) and Álvaro Vieira Pinto (2021a, 2021b).

## 2 Freirean critical pedagogy and Design praxis

Paulo Freire was a Brazilian educator and philosopher recognized for his contributions to the formation of critical pedagogy, defending an education engaged in the struggle for the liberation of oppressed groups, which cannot be done about or for these groups but only with them in a dialogical, supportive and relational way. With this defense, Freire (2005) wants to avoid the cultural invasion that occurs when ways considered inferior of being and knowing, such as those of Brazilian peripheral social groups and Latin America as a whole, are supplanted by external knowledge deemed superior. Inspired by the liberation movements in Africa described by Frantz Fanon (2005), Freirean pedagogy can also be considered an anticolonial pedagogy that aims at the autonomy and independence of colonized people. More than learning to read and write words, critical pedagogy encourages the oppressed to read the world critically and, in communion, write their history.

Critical pedagogy defends everyone's participation in reflecting on the world and building actions for its transformation (Freire, 2005). In this epistemological view, the leading role does not belong to the educator who conveys knowledge but to the student who produces new interpretations based on their reality. It is not from the oppressor, who returns the stolen freedom in a benevolent gesture, but from the oppressed, who fights for their liberation. In a related way, in Design, the leading role does not belong to designers trained by colonialism, even if they deny this origin; the protagonism belongs to all social groups that have had their agency in world projects denied.

Freire's participatory and dialogical proposal for Education had developments in several fields, including Design. His ideas influenced the more politicized branches of Participatory Design, which directly mention his work (Ehn, 1988). However, such references were systematically erased and co-opted by colonial logic, especially in the return of Participatory Design to Brazil as a method disconnected from its critical and peripheral origins (Amaral, Maynard & Mazzarotto, 2022). As an anticolonial response, the relationships between Freirean thought and the field of Design have been rescued in numerous works (Gonzatto, 2018; Noel, 2020; Van Amstel & Gonzatto, 2020; Cruz, 2021; Mazzarotto & Serpa, 2022; Silva, 2022, 2023; Serpa, 2022, 2023).

## 3 Prospective Design and relational qualities

Inspired by Freire's critical pedagogy, Prospective Design (Van Amstel, Botter, & Guimarães, 2022) is an approach that seeks to contribute both to the collective prospecting of alternative presents, and the transformation of current structures so that better futures are possible. Unlike other prospective approaches focused only on the long-term vision, the Latin American origin of Prospective Design requires recognizing the urgency of radical transformations in our oppressed and colonized reality that need to happen now. Instead of a time determined by the past, the present is seen as a space of possibilities in which different presents coexist, even if some are hidden by oppression. The Prospective Design turns to a relational aesthetic to perceive, identify, and express these alternative presents (Bourriaud, 1998).

Such aesthetics highlight the distinction between the intrinsic qualities of the artifacts that are part of the structures, and the relational qualities that emerge between the artifacts and the other actors involved. Realizing these relational qualities is perceived as fundamental to promoting structural transformations since altering the intrinsic qualities of isolated artifacts is not considered sufficient. Without this critical reflection, the cultivation of intrinsic qualities of artifacts contributes to the maintenance of colonialism, as it does not link artifacts to their geopolitical and cultural structures of production and consumption. Furthermore, relational aesthetics implies including the various actors who relate to and through these artifacts and the various artifacts linked in a network.

## 4 Research Context

The relational qualities defended in this work emerged inductively from the experiences, actions, and discussions shared among participants in the Design & Oppression network<sup>1</sup>. In this inductive process, they were identified, categorized, and contextualized by theoretical approaches from critical pedagogy and prospective Design. This network functions as a collaborative and multidisciplinary platform that seeks to discuss, analyze, and propose actions on issues related to oppression in Design (Serpa et al., 2021). It comprises designers, academics, activists, and other professionals interested in the social impact of Design and how we can give new meaning to its colonial origin and orient it in favor of the oppressed in liberation struggles. The activities of the Design & Oppression network cover a range of actions that include but are not limited to discussion forums, research and scientific publication, educational and critical training activities, organization of events, sharing of educational resources, and project actions in alliance with historically oppressed groups.

## 5 Relational qualities cultivated in the Design & Oppression network

### 5.1 Freedom

Freire (2005) states that freedom is essential to define our humanity. If freedom is a non-negotiable condition for humanization, its absence leads to dehumanization. Instead of being free for themselves, the oppressed-oppressor contradiction arises in which both are dehumanized: the former because their freedom is restricted, and the latter because they need to steal the freedom of others to establish their own. Freedom only gains its whole meaning in the active pursuit of liberation, because "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift." (Freire, 2005, p. 47). As a relational quality, freedom cannot be understood as an isolated characteristic of an individual but as a collective practice through which individuals develop their potential (Dalaqua, 2020). Therefore, no one is free by themselves. Freedom only gains meaning within the collectivity of being free.

If freedom is our ontological vocation, unfortunately, it is not a historical reality since oppressive relationships, many of a colonial nature, limit freedom in countless social dimensions: sexual, economic, ethnic-racial, religious, territorial, and epistemic. Oppressions that, intentionally or not, are reinforced by Design, both through its results and through its processes (Mazzarotto & Serpa, 2022). Freedom, therefore, needs to be collectively projected as a relational quality and not as an intrinsic characteristic of an object, as is done in the development of Free Software, for example. To cultivate freedom as a relational quality, the Design & Oppression network uses the *Design Livre* ideology (Faber-Ludens, 2012; Van Amstel & Gonzatto, 2016), an anthropophagic mix of Freirean critical pedagogy with Free Software and Open Design practices. This perspective reflects cultural resistance concerning foreign appropriation, a theme raised by Brazilian modernism and its anthropophagy.

An example of *Design Livre* is the collaborative cultural producers that emerged as an offshoot of the Brazilian Digital Culture movement. These producers used a platform based on Free Software, the Corais Platform, to design an open and participatory methodology for cultural production. While designing, the producers participated in the platform's metaproject and developed a social currency module together with other users. The result was the expansion of not only their freedom but also the freedom of all platform users (Gonzatto, Van Amstel & Jatobá, 2021).

Prospecting freedom as a central relational quality in anticolonial teaching in Design drastically changes the 'whys' and 'hows' of Design praxis. Instead of a neutral vision, there is a political perception of how it aligns with either the maintenance of oppression or the liberation struggle.

### 5.2 Criticality

According to Freire (2005), based on observation and critical discussion about the world, we need to uncover reality, become aware, and denounce oppressive relationships. By cultivating criticality, we seek to identify the origins of oppression, distinguishing the oppressed and oppressor social groups to which we belong. Thus, we recognize the shadow of the oppressor in all of us Latin Americans as we understand the indelible mark of colonialism. Vieira Pinto (2021a, 2021b) and Freire (2018) argue that there are two

<sup>1</sup> Audio, text and video materials are available on the network's website, as well as information about participation and actions: <https://www.designeopressao.org/>

antagonistic forms of perceiving reality: the naïve consciousness and the critical consciousness. The collective consciousness of a people moves between these two poles, and it is up to liberating education to promote ways of getting ever closer to critical consciousness, as it is closer to reality and enables the perception of oppressive relationships. Critical consciousness recognizes that reality conditions itself and, therefore, needs to investigate how such conditioning occurs and how it can be transformed. Conversely, naïve consciousness considers itself independent of reality and not conditioned by it, so there is no reason to investigate contextual reality. Criticality, therefore, recognizes that the future may be different. Naivety, meanwhile, tends either to the fatalism of accepting that everything has always been and will always be the same, or to reactionism, of not understanding or accepting changes.

In the educational practices of the Design & Oppression network, mainly with students or designers working in the market, the fatalism of naïve consciousness appears in some discourses. Many express a sense of discomfort with the role of Design in reproducing capitalism and colonialism. However, there is discouragement regarding any possibility of change, which seems impossible, something Freire (2005) refers to as limit situations. Our role in these moments has been to increasingly value criticality to seek to unveil how oppression operates and realize that other worlds are possible — understanding history as a possibility rather than a determination (Freire, 2000).

According to Serpa (2022), cultivating criticality involves first observing critically our educational background and actions, recognizing the potentialities and limitations of our approaches and tools to transform reality. In this critical approach, it is imperative to recognize, on the one hand, the ability of the oppressed to reflect and critically elaborate on their experiences and, on the other, the importance of exposing the oppressed to new themes and practices outside their daily lives, something that was denied to them by oppression. It is understood that from this supportive and dialogical encounter, new understandings and ways of acting on this reality are produced, no longer reflections of colonial imposition but an authentic creation that considers the subordinate reality and its struggles for emancipation.

Increasing our criticality is a process that takes time. It is a long, complex process that requires commitment. An example is the results of the Designs of the Oppressed course offered by the network in 2021 and 2022. Based on the reading and discussion of texts on critical pedagogy and counter-hegemonic forms of Design and the critical analysis of one's own design experiences, many participants expanded their understanding of when their actions reinforced or combatted oppression. In one case, for instance, an educator working in the Middle East managed to better identify the reproduction of colonialism in his practices by placing less value on local knowledge compared to hegemonic Design practices in educational actions with artisans (Mazzarotto & Serpa, 2022).

### 5.3 Autonomy

Freire (2000) denounces the incorporation of principles of the emancipatory struggle, such as autonomy, which in neoliberal practice stimulates individualism and competitiveness. For Souza (2021), the sense of autonomy corrupted by neoliberalism is found within Design education. Examples include the overvaluation of having a unique vision and authorial brand as a designer and being proactive in building one's knowledge. These meanings represent not autonomy but meritocratic individualism, where social relationships are springboards for one's benefit. When understood as a relational quality, autonomy is a collective elaboration of why the world works the way it does, including the recognition of structures as constructions that can be transformed. Autonomy is the constant search and exercise of freedom, and "it is only possible if it is intertwined with the collective because it is from the fluid dance between freedoms and responsibilities that the testimony of the here and now with others emerges" (Souza, 2021, our translation). Instead of autonomy as a reflection of the individualism imposed by the colonial condition, we defend autonomy permeated by the collective.

For example, Souza and Filho (2023) report the experience of Design students who autonomously and collectively plan and execute the *Préocupe* event at the Federal Institute of Pernambuco (IFPE). The event challenges the traditional logic of the teacher-student relationship by proposing an environment where people share experiences and learn together. Through the concepts of work and critical consciousness, the research reveals the proximity of the students' reality to that of the working classes, both working for others in their usual activities. In this context, autonomy emerges when students involved in the organization develop design skills and critical awareness. Thus, they challenge the proliferation of neoliberal education and contribute to cultivating their autonomous practices of critical pedagogy in Design Education.



#### 5.4 Solidarity

Solidarity, according to Freire (2005), is the principle of being with the people and never proposing solutions for them or about them but with them. Based on this, Serpa and Silva (2021) criticize the practice of empathy in design as restrictive and depoliticized, limiting users to the position of objects in creating goods. The authors defend solidarity as a guiding ethical principle and state that it is part of a dialogical design practice, where an alliance between subjects is possible in unveiling reality and confronting situations of oppression through collective projects. Unlike empathy, solidarity implies a shared agency between designers and users and enables an alliance in the fight against oppression.

In the solidarity relationship, power asymmetries are not ignored but made available to and for the benefit of oppressed groups. As Fanon (2005) argues, the role of the colonized bourgeoisie must be precisely to betray its vocation as oppressors and make available to the oppressed people all the knowledge and resources they obtained from their experience in the colonial system originating in the metropolis.

For example, Silva (2022) describes how the involvement of designers in popular struggles allows the emergence of solidarity as a central element, influencing significant transformations in participatory projects, in which, more than the result of the project, what matters is the growth and emancipation of those involved. Eleutério and Amstel (2023) report the designer's experience in solidarity with a network of women coffee producers, highlighting the importance of care as an aggregating element. Care that encompasses not just technical support but respectful consideration of each other's needs, challenges, and capabilities. Serpa (2022) presents a pedagogical experience in an intercultural context within international development, where the construction of solidarity is a critical factor for different subjects' appropriation of the design process. Solidarity, in this case, is driven by the extrapolation of relationships beyond the project space and by the recognition that communities have their forms of organization, participation, and particular methods to carry it out.

#### 5.4 Dialogicality

For Freire (2005), our actions as designers or educators can be dialogical or anti-dialogical. Dialogical praxis occurs when reflection on the world and action to transform it are participatory, horizontal, considering everyone's voices and knowledge, trusting in their abilities, and recognizing the right to create the world they want to live in. On the opposite side, hierarchies and asymmetrical power relations are reinforced in anti-dialogical action. A group now has the authority to decide what knowledge is valid and what model of the world we should build, and it is up to the others to accept these plans.

By valuing the relational quality of dialogicality, we recognize that, among educators and students, designers and other subjects interested in a project, or external allies and oppressed social groups, everyone has something to teach and learn. Dialogue between different voices and experiences can produce new knowledge and fundamental actions in the struggle to overcome colonialism and other oppressions. This includes assuming that we can even draw on knowledge from colonial metropolises as long as they are critically discussed, reformulated and adapted based on our context and interests as oppressed people and Latin American designers. Freire (2005) names as cultural synthesis such anthropophagic process, a dialogical reconfiguration guided by our interests and context, and an anticolonial response to cultural invasion that seeks to impose knowledge and practices without dialogue and critical reflection.

To help promote dialogical design practices and avoid oppressive anti-dialogue, Mazzarotto and Serpa (2022) developed educational material composed of 16 reflection cards based on Freirean critical pedagogy. Divided into dialogic concepts and their opposites, the material aims to assist in critical reflection on design praxis and planning design actions that increasingly come closer to dialogicality. These letters helped analyze actions by the Latin American NGO TETO in conjunction with popular housing movements. In an action intended to improve the community but applied in an anti-dialogical way, the NGO sought to solve the water scarcity issue in a favela by installing rainwater harvesting systems in homes. From the designers' point of view, it was a low-cost solution and aligned with sustainability principles. However, a few months later, it was found that the systems had been dismantled because residents preferred to use the water tanks provided for other purposes, either to sell them or to store their water diverted from the public system. Making

use of rainwater was an idea foreign to the majority's culture without resonance with the local context. The solution failed because it was developed from the perspective of external designers imposing models that work in their original contexts without dialogue with the local culture.

In another project, however, the population and the NGO worked together to pave the community's clay streets, which became impassable during rainy seasons. Instead of bringing external solutions, the dialogue focused on leveraging the knowledge and skills of the community itself. The result was paving using stones piled on the pavement by the residents, a cheap solution with low technological use, designed by them, and capable of maintenance by the community itself. In this dialogue, the NGO helped sharing knowledge on how to write projects and seek financing, which was a request from the community itself.

## 5.5 Monstrosity

Since colonization, native peoples and Latin Americans, in general, have been conceptualized as monsters when considered different and savage by colonizers. The quality of monstrosity consists precisely in accepting and giving new meaning to this difference. It means assuming that we are monsters and we have a culture of hybridism and miscegenation that makes us different from others.

Based on this, Angelon and Van Amstel (2021) identified that, amid colonized territories where the canon of modern Design has preponderance over other forms of expression, an anticolonial quality of radical alterity emerges which can positively affirm monstrosity. By comparing design works produced in a series of democratic design experiments at a Brazilian university with works of art from the Neoconcrete movement, the authors discovered an expression named monstrous aesthetics. This aesthetic represents a positive affirmation of alterity and collectivity that challenges colonial standards of beauty imposed on the colonized. It broke all Graphic Design rules known to students in the project to produce the monstrosity's quality. It also showed this same monstrosity in a remote forum theater play when the character changed virtual costumes several times during the same scene, just like a shape-shifting monster (Saito et al., 2022).

## 6 Concluding remarks

Lorde (2007) reminds us that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may, at most, allow us to beat him at his game temporarily, but they will never allow us to achieve genuine change. From this perspective, Design Education must overcome the emphasis on purely aesthetic and functional qualities of objects, a legacy of colonial education. Considered in isolation and uncritically, such emphasis directs us exclusively towards creating artifacts for capitalist consumerism. In search of a Critical Education in Design, we present reflections and examples of actions to value relational qualities. Such qualities emerge from the interaction between the different subjects and social groups engaged in a project, dialectically considering the different voices, cultures, interests, and desires involved.

Thus, this research sought to identify the markedly anticolonial relational qualities that a Critical Education can cultivate in Design, an alternative present that already exists in the praxis of the Design & Oppression network but which had not yet been unveiled and documented. The relational qualities we expect from Design Education are linked to the collective practice of Design: freedom, criticality, solidarity, autonomy, dialogicality, and monstrosity. Through these qualities, we recognize that everyone has the agency to design themselves and the world (freedom). Such practice is based on criticality to overcome the oppressions that hinder and constrain projective capacity. This type of project aims at liberation in its approaches and methods and, therefore, must value the qualities of autonomy, solidarity, and dialogicality among all participants. Finally, we understand that aesthetic results can overcome the canonical vision of Design, accepting our differences and monstrosity as a radical affirmation of our otherness.

The relational qualities described by the present study are not intended to exclude others, but they emerged prospectively from our studies in anticolonial literature (Freire, 2000, 2005, 2018; Fanon, 2005, Vieira Pinto, 2021a, 2021b) and our collective praxis as designers and educators at the Design & Oppression Network. They seek to prospect an alternative anticolonial present for Design Education that fosters other possibilities beyond the capitalist dependent orientation. These relational qualities drive the formation of critical designers who support the genuine interests of oppressed social groups and are committed to the struggles to overcome oppression that arise from colonialism and other oppressive structures.

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