Where are we?

where are we

Grasping Coloniality and Design

This glossary lays out the basics of what practitioners in and around design should know about coloniality when practicing design in global, networked contexts. It introduces concepts which help highlight legacies of colonialism, make visible decolonial struggles and some which may work as conceptual tools for creative practitioners. The glossary is made in Finland in 2020. It is compiled and written primarily by white Finnish people who have been educated in Finland. These positions are reflected in the given advice and examples, and also in the presented vantage points to both coloniality and design. This glossary also exists in Finnish.

to begin with

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COLONIALISM is the project of a nation expanding rule over or settling territories to gain economic, cultural, racial and religious dominance through extracting material and human resources from those areas. Colonisation was used by European nations starting from the 15th century to enforce imperialism, the ideology of expanding empires. Colonialism has many forms – its legacy and effects on wealth, autonomy, religion, identity and human rights are very much at play in today's world. See also COLONIALITY.

DECOLONISATION is the practical undoing of settling of land, colonial governance and power relations. As a term it encompasses both colonised nations' and indigenous peoples' independence and sovereignty struggles in their various forms. Decolonisation is not a synonym for other human rights or anti-racist social justice projects.

NEO-COLONIALISM is the contemporary practice of using capitalism, globalisation and cultural imperialism to extract resources from areas and peoples outside a nation state, or from indigenous peoples and lands. *Green colonialism* is one form of neocolonialism.

Recommendation: The edited book *Finnish Colonial Encounters*[1], estimated publishing in 2021.

TIP: *Read up on critical accounts of the colonial history of your country of origin.*

COLONIALITY is the living legacy of colonialism, a form of power that outlived historical colonialist project and became integrated in contemporary societies in the form of oppression and social discrimination (Aníbal Quijano[2]). Coloniality encompasses both material and psychological power relations that affect individuals' lives and whole communities. It manifests as displacement of people and knowledges, exploitation of labor, erasure of subjectivity, racism, religious convertion, hetero- and cis-sexism, etc. Capitalism, modernism and globalism – all of which underpin the design industry – are products of coloniality.

POSTCOLONIALISM is an intellectual movement and field of study that originates from the works of Middle Eastern, North African and South Asian scholars since the 1960s. It critically analyses the legacies of colonialism and imperialism, mainly from the 19th and 20th centuries onwards. Postcolonialism includes a multitude of critical, academic approaches.

DECOLONIALITY or decolonialism is a school of thought originating from Latin American scholars since the early 2000's. It dissects European colonial domination from the 15th century onwards, and is critical of modernity as a colonial world-system in the form of domination of Eurocentered knowledge. It springs from postcolonialism, and diverges from it in insisting that we are not "post" colonialism. Decolonial thinkers and activists also emphasise that not only people, but knowledge, was displaced by colonialism, and must be recovered and re-articulated (Global Social Theory[3]). <u>See also KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION.</u>

ADVICE: Consider coloniality as a fucked up, inherited circumstance. We were set up - what do we do?

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FIRST/THIRD WORLD; GLOBAL NORTH/SOUTH; WEST/REST; ONE-THIRD WORLD/TWO-THIRDS WORLD

There are many, often problematic definitions to describe the power imbalances between nations. The terms are coined from a national positions of power. They are loaded, limited and time-specific, and don't consider the positions of indigenous peoples. A helpful term to describe asymmetry of power and wealth is the concept of *one third of the world — two thirds of the world* (Chandra Talpade Mohanty[4]).

> **Recommendation:** Chandra Talpade Mohanty's essay "Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles[5]"

ADVICE: Defining countries by a western notion of development or underdevelopment obscures colonial power relations. Stop using the term "developing country".

See also DEVELOPMENT

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES; NATIVE PEOPLES

are nations and peoples who are the original or earliest known inhabitants of an area, before the establishing of national borders. Indigenous peoples have not organised as nation states, but have retained community, language and culture that are separate from surrounding dominant cultures. Many indigenous peoples have been colonised by national powers and have endured slavery, genocide and cultural erasure (meaning they have been denied land rights, been forbidden to speak native languages, practice religions and had cultural elements appropriated from them). Ethnicity and belonging to a people are central to indigenousness; it is an "identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism." (Alfred & Corntassel[6])

INDIGENISATION is the process of changing something to correspond to indigenous needs, values and worldviews. "Applying one's own cultural ways to today's needs manifests indigenous people's intentional efforts to get rid of externally imposed structures and ideals, and take charge." (Kuokkanen[7], transl. A.T.)

Example: Sámi[8] is the only officially acknowledged indigenous people of the European Union, and is a part of the arctic indigenous peoples. Sápmi (the Sámi land) is a large area split by Norwegian, Swedish, Finnish and Russian borders. These borders have been drawn to enforce national power and interests, and do not take into account Sámi areas or groups and their needs. Nation states have enforced various discriminatory assimilation and colonial practices on the Sámi people, who make active efforts to maintain or restore their land rights, languages and culture.

Recommendation: Read the fact sheet[9] by UNPFII and listen to "Decolonial Efforts and Sámi Politics with Petra Laiti[10]", an episode of Lymy podcast.

S

SITUATEDNESS describes the particularity and partiality that location and positioning bring to everybody's perspectives and knowledge about the world (Haraway[11]). In the frame of coloniality, we are all situated somewhere on a rough spectrum of colonised–by-stander–complicit–imperialist–coloniser. This changes in relation to time, place and other people. Our differing situatedness in the colonial dynamic affords us a differing understanding of coloniality. This determines which decolonial or deimperial efforts are ours to make.

Example: In Finland, a Sámi person, a person of colour (POC) with heritage and ancestry in a formerly colonised country and a white person with heritage and ancestry in Finland are all uniquely situated within coloniality, both through their histories and positioning here and now.

Recommendation: Situatedness within coloniality and the consequent perspectives on decolonisation are discussed in "Decolonization is not a metaphor[12]", an article by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang.

W

WHITE SUPREMACY refers to both an ideology in which a constructed idea of whiteness ("caucasian", European) is seen as superior and also the condition in which white people enjoy a structural advantage over all other people. White supremacy perpetuates and maintains the social, political, historical or institutional domination by white people and is at the root of white privilege. Values and attitudes of white supremacy are inherited and may be embodied, even unintentionally maintained, regardless of one's own cultural background and ethnicity. Its manifestations are context-dependent and varied, and it originated both as a tool and an outcome of the colonial project.

Example: In Finland, white supremacy may show as nationalism, and as pressure to assimilate to white culture in order to cope. In design work, white supremacy may manifest as a white saviour mentality of rescuing the "underdeveloped" with one's designs. See also WORLD-AS-PROBLEM.

ADVICE: *Try to be honest about your inherited, internalised attitudes and values of white supremacy. If you are white: talk about whiteness and racism with your white peers.*

See also UNLEARNING

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CULTURAL APPROPRIATION, also *cultural thievery*, means taking cultural elements without permission, usually elements from a marginalised culture that are appropriated (and capitalised on) by a dominant culture. Elements of marginalised cultures are often not respected in their original contexts by people representing a dominant culture; they may be rendered as signs of "primitiveness" and backwardness. It is only when the dominant culture "discovers", repackages and sells them that they become widely accepted. (Ruben Pater[13])

Recommendation: Ruben Pater's book *The Politics of Design: A (Not So) Global Design Manual for Visual Communication.*

ADVICE: *Carefully consider where you draw inspiration from, and your relation to the source of inspiration. The divide between celebrating and appropriating a culture can be fuzzy.*

See also CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

d

DECOLONISING DESIGN is the ongoing effort by designers and researchers to dismantle colonial constructs both within and through design practice, design outcomes and design research. It is crucial, because design and architecture are used to impose white, western concepts and aesthetics that further colonial power structures. These concepts can be systems, service or behavioural models, needs, infrastructure and lifestyles etc. inherent in the designs. Design for multinational corporations has parallels with how design works in colonial projects, because it helps expand normalised western lifestyles for economic gain. *Colonial style* is a term that codifies specific aesthetic choices in design. One entry point to the current design discourse is the Decolonising Design platform.[14]

Example: The Moratorium Office[15], a community-based self-determination project by Sámi artists.

Recommendation: Check out Modernity + Coloniality[16], a web-based course for designers by Ahmed Ansari.

ADVICE: *If your situation allows: consider not working for multinational corporations.*

EXTRACTIVISM in a material sense, is the process of extracting natural resources from the Earth to sell on the world market. Implicit in extractivism is that the location and/or community that is impoverished and the one which is enriched are separate. The context extracted from does not benefit from deployment of its natural resources. See also INTELLECTUAL EXTRACTIVISM.

ADVICE: *As a designer, consider your power to make material choices. What are the places and means of production used to source the materials in your designs, and are benefits and harms divided?*

1

OTHERING means activity that renders a nation/culture/person/practice as marginal or lesser due to differing from personal or locally predominant ideas of normalcy. Currently in Finland this means differing from white, western and/or "Finnish" idea(l)s. Otherness is not a trait or a fixed constant – who and what is othered varies depending on the time period and society in question.

Example: Well intended interest towards someone's country of origin or "local" culture as well as assumptions about another's powerlessness or victimhood can all be othering.

TIP: *Think about what you consider "normal." Do your designs enforce stereotypes or a white, western concept of what is normal?*

t

TOKENISM is using the symbolic inclusion of marginalised people or social politics to give the appearance of being inclusive.

Recommendation: The blog post "Is decolonizing the new black?"[17] by Left of Brown, Sisters of Resistance and Jenny Rodriguez.

TIP: *Ask yourself: why do you want to involve someone in your design work? What do they gain from participation and the work itself? How are they compensated? What is their power to influence your work?*

WORLD-AS-PROBLEM The dominant design ethos assumes a universal standard by which the complexity of the world can be addressed as a series of problems to be fixed with products, services, prototypes, workshops, instead of policy change, dismantling of capitalist structures, investment and divestment, and unsettling of land. Design is often explicitly taught as a task of "problem solving." This mentality overlooks what is considered a problem and for who, and that "solving" is subjective. "World as problem" is a concept introduced by Mahmoud Keshavarz and Pedro Oliveira.[18]

Example: Bringing "modern" designs such as water based sanitation systems to places that have drought or banning veils in the name of liberating women.

Recommendation: Read "Design Challenges: Full of crap? Notes on the Gates' foundation's reinvent the toilet challenge"[19] in Sasha Costanza-Chock's book *Design Justice*, chapter 3.
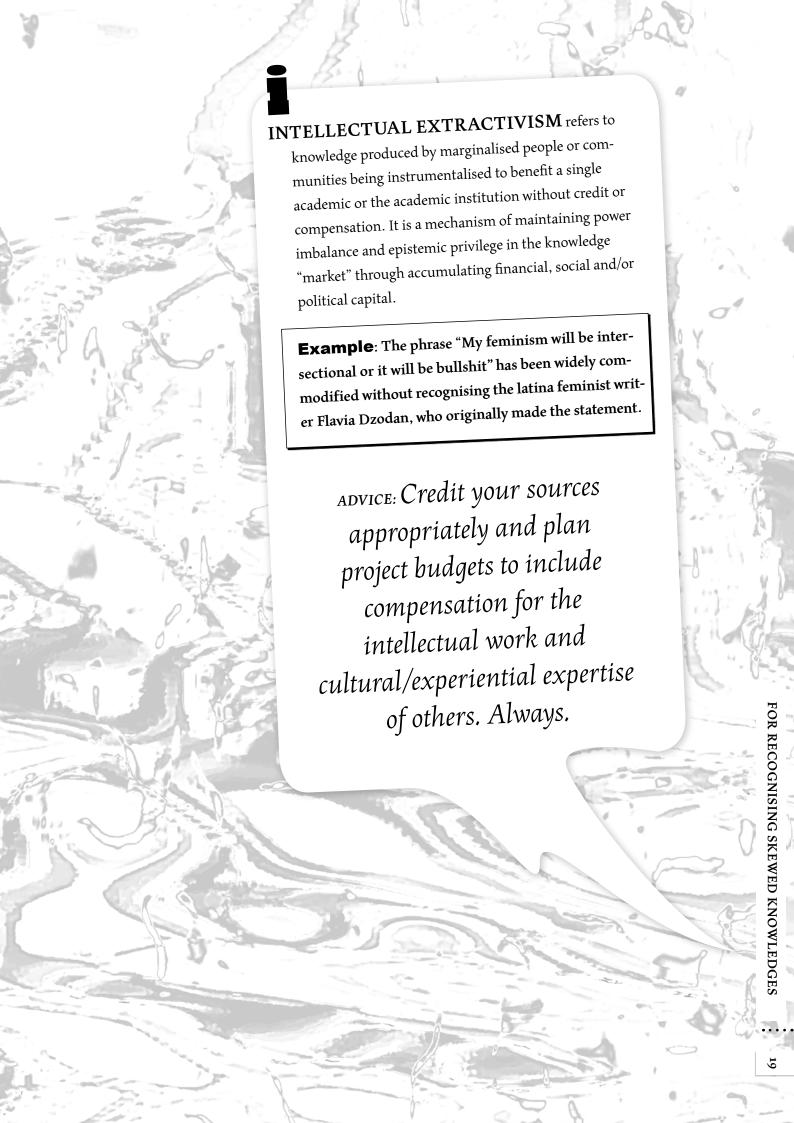
ADVICE: "*Designers must understand that the very notion of the "world-as-problem" is an assumption worth challenging.*" (Pedro Oliveira)

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DEVELOPMENT Specific Western/Global north definitions of development and progress are used as norms to enforce certain lifestyles, cultural configurations and visions of the future. This concept of development includes an assumption that development is always a change for the better. These ideas are then used to create demand for consumer products and boost free trade, strengthening unequal power relations between the one-third world and the two-thirds worlds.

TIP: *Ask yourself: what kind of progress your design work is creating. Who has defined it as a preferred future? Colonisation, too, has been justified with development.*

i

INTELLECTUAL EXTRACTIVISM refers to knowledge produced by marginalised people or communities being instrumentalised to benefit a single academic or the academic institution without credit or compensation. It is a mechanism of maintaining power imbalance and epistemic privilege in the knowledge "market" through accumulating financial, social and/or political capital.

Example: The phrase "My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit" has been widely commodified without recognising the latina feminist writer Flavia Dzodan, who originally made the statement.

ADVICE: *Credit your sources appropriately and plan project budgets to include compensation for the intellectual work and cultural/experiential expertise of others. Always.*

k

KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION consists of for example identifying, recording, formulating, selecting, disseminating and preserving information. These activities are used to validate which thoughts, observations, actions and processes are considered worth conserving in a specific context. Knowledge production includes many subjective and culturally customary choices that further impact interpretations of history and reality. Unevenly distributed power often results in dominant groups defining what is even considered as knowledge, science or understanding, who studies and what or whom is being studied. For example, academic knowledge and research is often heavily Euro and Anglocentric.

Example: In Finland, knowledge about colonialism has historically been produced in a way that does not recognise it as an element in Finnish history (Emma Hakala[20]), even when Finland continues to exert colonial rule over the Sámi people.

Recommendation: Rauna Kuokkanen's book *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift.*

ADVICE: *All design is a manifestation of knowledge, and designing a means of knowledge reproduction. Whose and what knowledge does your designing preserve?*

P

PLURALITY refers to simultaneous existence of multiple different perspectives at once. Recognising plurality includes detaching from a personal "default" and perceiving diversity of perspectives as many simultaneously existing realities that are tied to their social, cultural, geographical and historical context. Plurality may be seen as the opposite of universality. Rather than aiming for homogenous, one size fits all design, thinking through plurality allows for designing for "a world where many worlds fit" (a Zapatista notion).

Recommendation: Arturo Escobar's book *Designs for the Pluriverse.*

ADVICE: *Question universality — one size rarely fits all. Actively seek diverse perspectives in your work by listening to non-european, BIPOC (black, indigenous, people of colour) and otherwise marginalised voices.*

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ALLYSHIP means practical solidarity with those who need to struggle for whatever you can take for granted. It means taking on the responsibility of acknowledging oppressive structures and practices, refusing to take part in them, and actively searching for ways of acting otherwise. An ally does not expect credit or benefit for their contribution – on the contrary, allyship might mean giving up ease, accepting uncertainty, identifying personal privilege and transferring its benefits.

Recommendation: Check out guidetoallyship.com[21] for how to be an ally, and Say it in Saami[22], the first ever modern Saami phrasebook.

ADVICE: You cannot be an ally without recognising your position in the colonial dynamic. *See also SITUATEDNESS*

Sensitise to other positions in the dynamic: for example, listen and start learning in order to be able to amplify the voices of those who fight to be heard.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITY The meaning of cultural icons and customs cannot be fully understood by a person outside of that culture. Ease of appropriating signs from a foreign culture may signify lacking personally meaningful cultural heritage of one's own due to belonging to a dominant, legitimised culture, or having been assimilated to it.

Recommendation: Listen to "Are you a racist?? Being Black in a White World, Who Gets To Be Black & White Guilt[23]", an episode of Bobo & Flex podcast.

ADVICE: Find out about your own cultural heritage and analyse the cultural signifiers you are about to use. When working in culturally diverse groups, ask yourself: Is this framework safe for my collaborators? How are potential unsafe situations and ensuing burdensome, even traumatic experiences dealt with?

f

FUTURING is a tool for commenting on and possibly changing the present through envisioning and exploring potential futures by means of design. It includes engaging with indigenous, black, brown and intersectional feminist imaginations and envisioning desired futures through speculation, narration, visualisation etc. Futuring is also used in corporate settings and capitalist endeavours. It may be employed both to open up and close off potential futures and is thus always laden with the experiences and intentions of those who envision by furthering their specific values. *Prefigurative design* is a way of futuring that both imagines an alternative, less oppressive future and actively initiates it in the present through design artefacts, organisational processes, interactions and systems. It is rooted in the idea that future societies emerge from how we act in the present.[24]

Recommendation: Listen to "Whose Imagination Are you Living in?"[25] an episode of *Bitchface* podcast by Nicola Kelly and Phoebe Unter.

ADVICE: "*We have to imagine beyond fears*" (adrienne maree brown[26]). *Identify whose imagination you are designing.*

U **UNLEARNING** is the process of questioning one's normalised patterns of thinking and practicing, where they've come from, and trying to change them. It may mean identifying internalised stereotypes, presumptions and norms, detecting how and when they manifest in action, divesting from these customary ways of doing, and seeking information that could override existing presumptions.

Example: Recognising the white default, learning to ask rather than assume, refusing to compete against colleagues, all these require unlearning.

TIP: *Unlearning can be painful – do not succumb to despair. You don't have to question everything at once.*

UP

URGENT PATIENCE is a tool that brings together coexisting mental states that can help when making decolonial/deimperial efforts. It acknowledges an urgent need for change, but it might (have to) happen slowly, patiently. On one hand, becoming active requires recognising the sense of urgency that inequality and oppression evoke. On the other hand, in attending to that pain we need to be patient. Coloniality cannot be "solved", but we can unlearn it, dismantle it and nurture resistance. Finally, feeling pain for the world is a sign of the ability to care. By recognising our sense of urgency, we can patiently practice care, even love, as affective resistance. Urgent patience is a concept introduced by Tristan Schultz.[27]

Recommendation: Read "LOVE. A Blues Epistemology from the Undercommons[28]" by Mia Charlene White.

ADVICE: *"Identify your priorities. What would you want to change first? Then start struggling."*(Harun Kaygan[29])

W

WHITE FRAGILITY, WHITE SHAME, WHITE GUILT are concepts that describe the emotional reactions many white people have when confronted with their privilege and its origins. These concepts can help accept the difference between being to blame for global circumstances of inequality and profiting from them.

Recommendation: Check out _Milk and Fresh Snow_[30] – a digital archive of text and image interrogating whiteness by graphic designer Tiger Dingsun.

ADVICE: _Refuse fragility: Distinguish your intent and impact. Without intending to, your actions and design choices may be experienced as problematic. Apologise and make adjustments to have a better impact next time. Give up guilt, take on responsibility: If you have privilege, you are not responsible for having been born with it, but for what you do with it. Do you dismantle or uphold inequality?_

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