

# THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

## DECOLONIZING GRAPHIC DESIGN

11TH EUROPEAN ACADEMY OF  
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### ABSTRACT

*In order for graphic design to become more global, social, and inclusive, we can look to precepts of decolonization to inform our research and practice. In (de)colonial contexts, such as in the one in which my students and I work in Mexico, opportunities open up for designers and those who need and will benefit from design. In this paper, I draw on my work with US students in Mexico to design with Maya entrepreneurs who want to bring their products to cosmopolitan regional and international markets. To orient the audience, I provide a brief overview of participants—students and entrepreneurs—and context, with attention to the historical marginalization and contemporary context of our indigenous colleagues. I draw from the humanities and social sciences—particularly decolonization—as I outline concepts fundamental to our effective mutual engagement. Examples elucidate these concepts and support my argument that results from working in this complex intercultural and global context for over a decade. I propose that questioning and reconceptualizing the role of the designer in a subaltern context can create new opportunities for designers and colleagues, empowered and responsible through this process. Finally, I propose it is a way to work against dominant and oppressive structures and create new ways of knowing .*

*Keywords: decoloniality, indigenous peoples, co-design*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

As graphic designers turn their eyes toward social design, some will begin to work with indigenous people in contexts much different than those to which they are accustomed. Many may find their skillsets inadequate and themselves unable to fully explore opportunities to work with partners in development and social change. Many of the readily available concepts that inform graphic design practice can fail to inform collaborations with indigenous peoples or those who have been “othered” (Smith, 2012). Designers relying exclusively on these concepts may not realize that the transition from studio to field calls for significant methodological retooling. Furthermore, they may underestimate differences between their worldviews and those of their partners, particularly regarding questions of history, culture, economics, and the environment.

For over ten years, through my social design initiative, Design for Development (D4D), my design students and I have collaborated with indigenous entrepreneurs in Mexico to foster grassroots social and economic empowerment. Our mutual goal has been to co-create promotional materials to help these entrepreneurs enter markets in the Maya Riviera, Mexico City, the United States,

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or the European Union. In this paper, I will provide examples from D4D that show how concepts from outside the field of design can inform the process of co-designing with people in indigenous communities.

To frame this discussion, I draw on the writings of indigenous scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Shawn Wilson, and Bagele Chilisa. Each of these scholars emphasizes the need to de-center one's worldview in order to better comprehend different value systems and to become alert to questions of difference, objectification, and power relations—questions that do not normally arise, or arise very differently, in the typical design studio. Each scholar notes the history of colonialism and criticizes the current-day coloniality that continues to degrade, humiliate, and otherwise damage indigenous peoples and their cultures, knowledges, histories, and environments.

### **2 DECOLONIZING**

In *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith helps indigenous scholars develop "a more critical understanding of the underlying assumptions, motivations and values which inform [our] research practice" (21). Similarly, Shawn Wilson's *Research as Ceremony* addresses the need to "never remove tools from underlying beliefs" and to unearth the often implicit connections between the two (13). Both writers argue that the scholarly apparatus—theories, concepts, and methods—originating in dominant (western) culture always carries with it the ideologies of its origins. They do not suggest that we throw out the apparatus but that we acknowledge its problems and mitigate its effects. One strategy is to think ontologically—rather than instrumentally—about questions of method and knowledge.

In cultural terms, to decolonize is to disengage from the effects of historical colonialism and from the instruments of contemporary coloniality. Adopting a decolonial perspective allows us to view relations systemically, providing insight into how ideologies become naturalized and thereby affect the lived experiences of people identified as "other." In fact, coloniality powerfully shapes everyone's worldview. As I operate in the North American academic context, not only by writing this paper but in my everyday capacity as an educator and researcher, I realize that I am "inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism" even as I work against it (Smith, 2012, p.1). This position requires me to recognize how my worldview and my ways of working are built on and sustained by a vast cultural, historical, and economic matrix of power that had dominated the world for over 500 years. Yet the academy is where some the rules for that matrix of power are made—and changed. This is why I consider it a potential site of decolonization.

For Smith, from an indigenous perspective, decolonization can be thought of as the journey to self-determination (Smith, 2012, p.121). On this journey, three major concepts emerge: representation, sharing & reciprocity, and negotiating.

#### **2.1 REPRESENTING MAYA**

Smith tells us that "indigenous communities have struggled since colonization to be able to exercise what is viewed as a fundamental right, that is to represent ourselves" (Smith, 2012, p.151). The act of representing a person or a group of

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people, whether in writing, verbally, or visually—in one of any number of available mass mediums—serves as an act of inscribing identity onto them. Indigenous peoples have long been objectified in representations in various genres such as academic texts, travelogues, entertainment, and advertising, without having the right to review, approve, edit, or contest what others say about them. Representations, when repeated, create a narrative which becomes our understanding of the ways things are. Representations construct our reality. “Every issue has been approached by indigenous peoples with a view to rewriting and rerighting our position in history. Indigenous peoples want to tell our own stories, write our own versions, in our own ways, for our own purposes” (Smith, 2012, p.29).

The Maya Riviera of Mexico is a major tourism zone focused on the consumption of nature and culture. In this zone, contemporary Maya are caught up in the visual associations created by the meta-narratives of the tourist economy. Caricatures of ancient Maya culture abound. They are on the web, in advertisements, at the airport, highways, architecture, stores, signage, etc. The authors of this work are mostly non-Maya—Mexicans, foreigners, multinationals—who dominate (economically and therefore socially and culturally) the tourist economy and who have the means buy the public space. As a result, today’s Maya are seen as unchanged and primitive. Furthermore, this representation is recursive and hegemonic, often carried out with the help of contemporary Maya who learn, through example and experience, that caricature sells. These representations, and the concepts they perpetuate, are pervasive and seem to circulate seamlessly with the flow of information in and around the Maya Riviera. We seek to counter this.

## 2.2 SHARING AND RECIPROCITY

Knowledge is to be shared among the collective; it is not property nor is it secreted away. Smith sees sharing knowledge in a context of coloniality—in which knowledge is privatized and monetized—as “a form of resistance” (Smith, 2012, p.162). For Smith, sharing is “a process that is responsive to the marginalized context in which indigenous communities exist” (Smith, 2012, p. 162). Like networking, sharing is a way to exchange information, and it can be advantageous when other routes to knowledge are limited. Sharing across networks and using technology, for example, can aid in surmounting, even leapfrogging, local knowledge obstacles such as access.

Rachel Parr writes that “reciprocity means simply, a mutual action, a practice of give and take. To reciprocate is to give and receive mutually, and also to return, or requite” (Parr, 2002, p.17). It is the thing that “enables the research itself” (Parr, 2002, p.17). Reciprocity provides a foundation on which to create bonds and trust between peoples. For many indigenous peoples, reciprocity focuses on what is good for the collective and is evident in many types of encounters. Julie Cupples writes about the Aymara concept of *buen vivir*. Similar to the Maya concept of *convivencia*, it is a way of framing interactions “based on collective reciprocal relationships in solidarity.” According to Cupples, it is “distinct from the capitalist and individualistic notion of living better” because it “produces different and more inclusive ways of organizing economies and relating to nature and community (Cupples, 2013, p.244).

### 2.2.1 *Sharing Meals*

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There are many times where we, in groups ranging from 2 to 10 people, were invited into our partners' homes or to community gatherings for meals with their friends and families. We were hosted and waited on as one would treat important guests. The meals were always traditional to the region, with an explanation of their history, source, preparation, and instructions on how to eat, if not readily understood by all present. For example, one cooperative prepared pumpkin soup served in gourds accompanied by tortillas and habanero chiles—all grown locally. The meals reinforced our partners' respect and value of the environment and agriculture as well as culinary traditions. That these meals caused quite a bit of work in their preparation signified their understanding that we were working hard with them.

### 2.2.2 *Sharing Research*

With the long-term goal of exporting honey to the US and Europe, we had an immediate task of positioning the product in the marketplace in Yucatán, targeting US and European tourists along with Mexicans. Our research and competitor analysis indicated specific sizes and substrates were standard for the price per kilo we agreed would be feasible. Of course prices varied depending on the quality of the store, type of honey, organic certification, and other criteria. Fair Trade certification was particularly appealing as we considered market position and the narrative of the honey we had discussed—the importance of the environment to beekeepers and wanting to distinguish their quality honey from other brands. Sharing information in order to have a clearer perception of the competitive landscape they could not see, in order to make informed decisions, was crucial. We arranged with a local store in a high-end US chain to take photographs and video of the honey aisle, related products, and the store itself to provide context for what higher market honey looked like. It would cost more money and time than we had for one or more beekeepers to travel to the US to see this in person. Getting a sense of potential product placement, prices, and various options was a motivator and engendered consensus on direction and trust in the designers for reaching higher in the market to obtain a better return on their investment. Sharing this information was an indicator that the designers had listened and had their interests in mind. Later, information on fair trade and organic certification prompted a conversation within the cooperative and to government officials on how to improve, and then certify, quality.

### 2.2.3 *Sharing Data*

Photographs, videos, notes from interviews, sketches, diagrams—all of what was collected during the fieldwork process was accessible to all participants—partners and designers alike. Materials inspired designs, served as content for labels, brochures, and websites, and discovery and design documents taking the form of reports (in Spanish and English) served as supporting materials for presentations soliciting support from local government officials and as supplements to grant applications. These documents, where people can see their ideas made tangible, help everyone “get it” and push an idea closer to reality. Gualberto shared how the packaging prototypes and branding inspired them to work harder, noting it was real instead of just another unrealized dream. His cooperative used the design brief in their proposal to the municipal government soliciting funding to construct a processing factory.

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### **2.3 NEGOTIATING**

Smith writes that negotiating “is about thinking and acting strategically” and “about recognizing and working towards long-term goals” (Smith, 2012, p.160). It is related to sharing and reciprocity insofar as it involves working out agreements that support collective survival. Negotiating enables indigenous peoples to participate in dialogues that are always about the question of power. Implicit in negotiating is establishing priorities, interests, and attending to strategy, not always for immediate results but for long term benefit. Negotiation is not always about land or property but also about practices and positioning that lead to self-determination. Internal and external pressures prompt negotiating, leadership and gender struggles for instance, interaction with government institutions or a “focus on strategic relations and alliances with non-indigenous groups” (Smith, 2012, p.114).

#### **2.3.1 *Negotiating Partnership***

Manuel shared the news that his cooperative of beekeepers was just finishing construction of their new honey collection facility. He hoped that soon they would be able to sell their own honey direct to market and bypass low-paying intermediaries. His goal was for members to earn a living wage. In a later conversation, he spoke of how telling their story—of the people, bees, environment, and tradition—would be important for them to share as they marketed their high quality honey. Agreeing to collaborate required a negotiation as to what that interaction would entail. We discussed the process, of students in the US trying to design from afar with my oversight and agreed it would be challenging. Before we proceeded with any of this though, we presented the project in a formal meeting to the cooperative. This was an important step because the governance structure of the cooperative was democratic. Manuel led the meeting. Later, when I spoke, I shared my values beneficial to this collaboration. In order to get buy-in from members, in part to have enough honey to sell, providing the opportunity to explore terms of the collaboration was important. One terms I was insistent on was that we work as partners and would frame this an exchange. I did this because I had hoped it would become a learning experience for me and my students to learn how to design in context. There was little resistance but members were not as optimistic. At the meeting it became evident that there was a history of disappointment and lies, and a culture of mistrust as well. This is something that I was not aware of from my own experience. We worked together to counter this, to create transparency and not make promises without knowing we had the support necessary to deliver on them.

#### **2.3.2 *Negotiation Expectations***

Although not initially planned, students and faculty organized a visit, arriving two months into the project. The purpose was to present first draft designs, obtain feedback, gather research in the field, interview partners and potential users, and visit the apiaries. Essentially, to gain some measure of context for understanding what remained so difficult if they hadn't been there. Manuel arranged several meetings as well as a visit to the apiary. Two aspects among many stand out: negotiation about expectations would continue. In early presentations of designs, which designers viewed as drafts were seen by beekeepers as close to final products. They selected two and asked for some

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minor, not major, edits. Through an intermediary—a local government official—who garnered respect in the community, I explained that clear feedback was critical to designer growth. We expected iterations and we needed some feedback. It was clear that we did not negotiate or state the expectations for this initial interaction, nor did we provide the tools to use to comment. Some time later, our intermediary returned with further comments from the group and the explanation that we had already done so much work, they didn't feel comfortable asking for more, i.e., changes. Once this was established, it became clear there was much work to be done, but the research visit provided significant data to inform revisions and new directions. Despite all the design work, Manuel identified that it was entering the apiary as the moment the beekeepers began to trust the students—they interpreted that action as seriousness of purpose.

### 3 CONCLUSION

When I began D4D's initial collaborations with indigenous entrepreneurs in Mexico, I knew of other existing models for this kind of design work. But these focused on the end product rather than the process. In these models, designers "parachute in" to "do good work for people who deserve it" and then leave, never to be seen again. Perhaps a brief is sent to them in their faraway office. In contrast, and in the spirit of the decolonial principles I have outlined here, the model we developed engages people in long-term commitments to each other. Furthermore, it builds a knowledge base that emphasizes project and process. This approach reveals historical, conceptual, and pragmatic issues that designers can address when they undertake social design, in any location. Design is a complex cultural activity, and venues for design work are proliferating as the world becomes more interconnected. In this context, principled co-design will become more important than ever. As a western designer collaborating with indigenous partners, I strive to honor relationships as I continue to learn and teach. By bringing a decolonial ethic to graphic design process and practice, we establish mutually respectful foundations upon which to build relationship with others. Such an ethic requires us to understand our own histories in the context of the larger system in which we all live.

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