

Annalisa Pao  
Carnegie Mellon University  
March 2023

# On Decolonizing Design:

Complications and Opportunities in Disrupting Hegemonic  
Western Ways of Thinking, Knowing, and Creating

**“Fundamental change at every level of society is needed to address the issues confronting us in the 21st century.”**

-Carnegie Mellon University  
School of Design, 2023

**“...we cannot continue living within modernity because it robs us of the very basis for life, including our mere survival!”**

-Claudia von Werlhof

# **Design has ingrained hegemonic Western colonial epistemologies into our culture.**

According to Arturo Escobar, our deeply entrenched ways of being, knowing, and doing has led us to create and maintain the structures of unsustainability that uphold our “dominant ontology of devastation.”

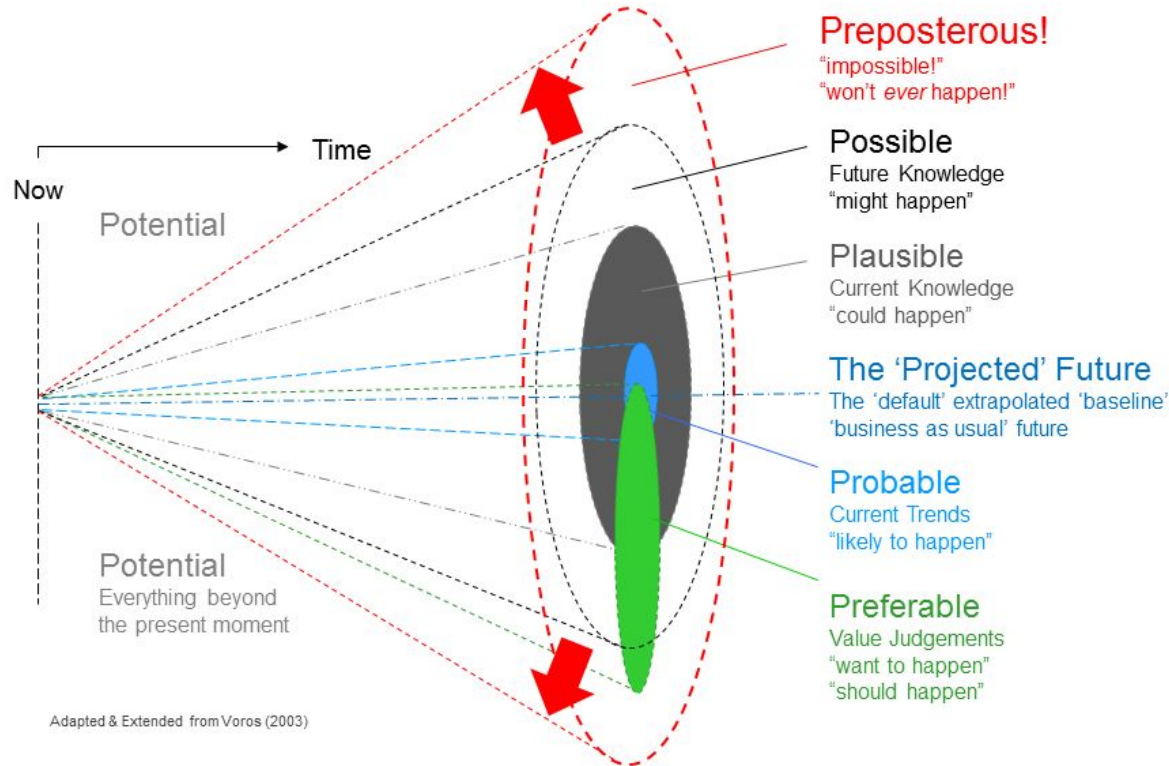
**In order to design our way out of wicked problems, we must untangle paradigms of modernity and colonialism from our design processes.**

To do so, we must re-evaluate these critical areas:

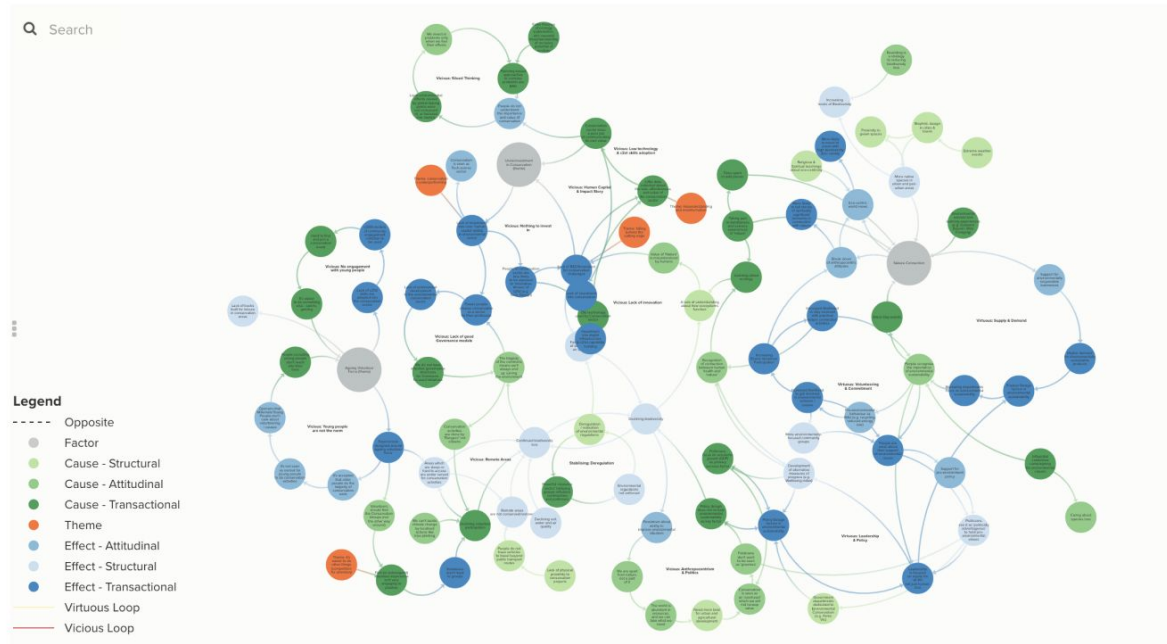
1. Theory
2. Research
3. Practice and Education

**How might we ontologically transform the ways in which we approach theoretical tools?**

# Futuring: From a “One-World World” to Pluriversality



# Systems: From Individualism to Interaction to Mutual Constitution



**How might we deprioritize hegemonic Western knowledge systems in our research methodologies?**



# **Incongruencies:** Dissimilar but Not Incompatible Forms of Knowledge and Knowledge Production

Models and toolkits taught in Western research training are not adequately able to capture alternate worlds.

- Essentialization of Peoples
- Inadequate Measures of Community, Knowledge, and Being

# **Positionality:** Shifting Power Away from the Researcher

Despite their methodologies set up to be neutral, there are ways that researchers perpetuate traditional power hierarchies in their research:.

- Predetermined Guidelines for Research
- Ownership of Knowledge

**How might we change the ways in which design is taught and practiced to begin to undo unsustainable systems?**

**Without the proper steps to critically reflect upon our goals, theories, and research methods, and contexts, designers will continue to replicate and reinforce colonial violence (in its many forms).**

Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Predictive Policing Technologies
- Philanthrocapitalist Projects
- Ways that Indigenous Art is Displayed in Museums

# **The academy is a colonial institution and hardwires colonial ways of thinking, knowing, and creating in designers-to-be.**

Design education as it exists in the Western academy, no matter how it postures itself, cannot properly challenge current systems of unsustainability for the following reasons:

1. It upholds hierarchies of exclusion.
2. Knowledge production is limited in terms of who is authorized to create new knowledge and what kind of knowledge is considered “valid”.
3. It is founded on and perpetuates Enlightenment principles that are key pillars to our unsustainable structures.

# Concluding Thoughts:

- This is not a complete rejection of hegemonic Western ontologies and epistemologies. Rather, how might we critically reflect upon them as we try to design for a post-modern world?

# Concluding Thoughts:

- This is not a complete rejection of hegemonic Western ontologies and epistemologies. Rather, how might we critically reflect upon them as we try to design for a post-modern world?
- In doing so, we must also try to critically reflect upon ourselves and work to decolonize the ways in which we think, know, and create. How might we try to reflect this in our practice, but also then take the steps to try to imbed new political ontologies into our work?

# Concluding Thoughts:

- This is not a complete rejection of hegemonic Western ontologies and epistemologies. Rather, how might we critically reflect upon them as we try to design for a post-modern world?
- In doing so, we must also try to critically reflect upon ourselves and work to decolonize the ways in which we think, know, and create. How might we try to reflect this in our practice, but also then take the steps to try to imbed new political ontologies into our work?
- The designs we create in turn design new ways for us to be. Are we able to be daring enough to challenge the sociocultural structures, processes, regimes, and institutions that we have grown attached to?



**“Design, if it is to be ecologically responsible and socially responsive, must be revolutionary and radical.”**

- Victor Papanek