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# Design, power and colonisation: decolonial and anti-oppressive explorations on three approaches for Design for Sustainability.

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Our contemporary world is organized in a modern/colonial structure. As people, professions and practices engage in cross-country Design for Sustainability (DfS), projects have the potential of sustaining or changing modern/colonial power structures. In such project relations, good intentions in working for sustainability do not directly result in liberation from modern/colonial power structures. In this paper we introduce three approaches in DfS that deal with power relations. Using a Freirean (1970) decolonial perspective, we analyse these approaches to see how they can inform DfS towards being decolonial and anti-oppressive. We conclude that steering DfS to become decolonial or colonizing is a relational issue based on the interplay between the designers' position in the modern/colonial structure, the design approach chosen, the place and the people involved in DfS. Hence, a continuous critical reflexive practice is needed in order to prevent DfS from becoming yet another colonial tool.

Keywords: Design for Sustainability, coloniality, decolonial, power structures, reflexivity

## Introduction

Our contemporary world is organized in a colonial structure (Mignolo 2012). As Dei and Lordan (2016) point out, colonialism, more than just an historical moment, is a global structure in place since the historical moment. This structure has benefited European regions and worldviews and oppressed non-western societies and worldviews for the benefit of Europe (Mignolo 2012). Similarly, Walter Mignolo (2012), defining the current society as "modern/colonial", demonstrates how modern society emerged from and is sustained by European colonization and dominance. Even though many former colonies are now independent countries, the systems of dependence still exists, especially through coloniality (Grosfoguel, 2002). Coloniality is the imposition of global desires, of Euro-USA Eurocentric (Quinteros, 2015) worldviews and value system in a way that benefits Europe and the USA while at the same time affecting these regions (Quinteros, 2015; Grosfoguel 2002).

The professional and academic field Design, as well as the fields from which we borrow - and steal - information and methods in Design for Sustainability (DfS), such as Sustainability Science and Anthropology emerged from the modern/colonial world. As Haraway (2016) points out "nothing comes without its worlds". That is, design and sustainability are situated in Western modern/colonial paradigm and thus inherit the modern/colonial structure and behaviours. Even though there are growing efforts to "open up" various field



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for diverse worldviews, we have to be aware of their roots in the colonial power structure and how such situatedness and inheritance play a role in sustaining or changing the modern/colonial structure when we, as designers and design researchers act in and through various locations. As many authors have argued (Ostrom 2009; Schumacher 1973; Lovelock, 1995; Grinspoon 2016), sustainability can only be achieved if we shift from oppressive hierarchical organizations to horizontal collaboration. Therefore, one of the needs for sustainability is the dismantling of oppressive hierarchical power relations such as the modern/colonial power structure.

In this paper we describe and analyse three approaches in Design for Sustainability: design activism, humble designing and radical listening. Using Paulo Freire's decolonial work on the ontologies of the oppressed as a lens (1970), we look at how each approach deals with power structures and what they mean in relation to colonization. It is important to notice, that, for this positionality that we do not claim to provide a global "solution" for decolonial and anti-oppressive DfS. The power relations and inheritances of colonized and colonizer people and places are as diverse as the cultures oppressed by colonization. Therefore, there is no single solution that can fit every place and situation. What we argue for is a constant critical reflection on positionality. The study we present here and the conclusions draw for decolonial and anti-oppressive DfS is thus situated in our experiences of being born in and working in Brazil, The Netherlands, Mozambique, Finland, Sápmi, Sweden, Borneo, Mexico, Namibia, The United Kingdom and South Africa. Hence, in this paper we look at how the positionality of people involved in the design process influences each approach towards being colonial or decolonial. Our aim is to elucidate how positionality of a designer or researcher is not fixed, but rather changes dialectically with the place and time and the design approach chosen. Our goal is to highlight the importance and encourage a constant critical reflective practice by designers in order to understand the possible colonizing results of each situation we find ourselves in.

## Contextual Framework

Parts of the world have continuously benefited from the modern/colonial power structure in place at the cost of others (Mignolo, 2012). Colonizing countries have benefited not only from the extraction of values - natural resources, cheap labour and cheap land - from the (former)colonies (former in parenthesis as bondage still remains in both economic but also ontological sense as shown by Mignolo, 2012) but also from using colonial power structures to become the "good doers". That is, from a higher position in power structures, western (mostly EU-USA) people have had the opportunity to access oppressed/(former)colonial countries and carry projects to - among a plethora of colonizing words - "save", "improve", "empower" and "dignify" the "underdeveloped world". Such efforts pose western perspectives as both oppressors in colonial histories but also as contemporary "saviours". This relation, far from being liberating, sustains the structure of dependence and bondage between colonizers and (former)colonial areas (Freire, 1970). It is important to notice, however, that many projects have actually engaged critically with colonial and local power relations in the search for emancipation and liberation, but they are a small amount in comparison to the plethora of cross-country collaborations that end up sustaining rather breaking modern/colonial structures. For DfS projects to be decolonial it is not only a matter of good intention, but rather a matter of the contextual interplay of *what*, *how* and *where* a project is done as well as *who* is doing it and *with/for whom* the project is being done.

In a globalized - colonized - world, it is inevitable that people, ideas, methods and practices travel around. This is the case with Industrial Design, Sustainability Science and all other academic fields. Born in Europe from the Industrial Revolution, Industrial Design schools are now widespread around the globe, echoing and sustaining the canons of German, English, Italian and Scandinavian design traditions. Not dismissing the achievements and relevance of European design movements, it is important to notice that, as Barad (1996) argues, knowledges are not innocent. Industrial Design emerged from a specific nature/culture and political situation; it is therefore a situated field that echoes the worldview of where it was created. The movement of ideas and practices to areas other than where it emerged is not harmful *per se*; however, it is important to be aware of how such displacements - of people, fields, methods and ideas - work through and affect colonial power structures of dependency. As design starts to engage more and more across political borders, it is important to see how design approaches can be colonizing by imposing worldviews and prescribing solutions and methods.

Design (research) work becoming neo-colonialism is not only a matter of the non-innocence and situatedness of the field of Design and its approaches. It is an interplay between the situated field, the situated design team (individual or group with their cultures and inheritances) and the situated place and community that design

work will affect and their positions in the modern/colonial structure. This dynamic becomes even more problematic when we deal with Design for Sustainability.

As Manzini and Vezzoli (2002) argue, sustainability is deeply local and tied to specific nature/culture contexts. Nevertheless, as Grinspoon (2016) reveals, sustainability is broadly defined as collective action for sustaining life on (of and as) the planet. Sustainability therefore has two sides in dialectic relation: being simultaneously local and global. The relation between this two-sided perspective can be seen clearly in the concept of Gaia (Lovelock, 1995; Latour, 2017). Gaia presents the world as one living organism made by various interrelated systems. Gaia shows how we, Homo Sapiens are, while living in diverse cultures, also interconnected to and part of bigger ecological systems. However, as Bruno Latour (2017) points out in his book "Facing Gaia", Gaia is an interconnection of communities in conflict rather than of peacefully connected entities. In light of a world formed by conflicting communities with different positions of power and privilege, Sustainability cannot be taken as an innocent agenda. Sustainability, with its specific type of knowledge (such as the emerging field of Sustainability Science) is also a situated field. Emerging from a Western academic environment, just as Design, it carries western worldviews and value systems. Imposing sustainability as a neutral global agenda thus renders as a form of coloniality.

In Design for Sustainability we adopt many concepts from Sustainability Science and its way of seeing the world to guide design work. One example, amongst various, is the adoption of the term "Anthropocene". This controversial, yet vastly adopted term, was chosen to define our current geological epoch. The Anthropocene, the epoch of the human, refers to the impact of humans on the planet being greater than the impact of all natural factors combined (Grinspoon, 2016). Through its terminology the Anthropocene suggests that to be human is to be in unbalance with Earth's natural systems - it is to make harmful impact on the planet. Framing our epoch in this way assumes that unsustainability is a natural and inevitable consequence of a "normal" way of being homo sapiens. That is, the Anthropocene generalizes and flattens humanity by implying that there is a normal way of being human. As any generalized view of the world inevitably assumes the image of the powerful, and as sustainability is a western concept, the Anthropocene homogenizes humanity through a Euro-USA-centric white hetero-patriarchal image.

Arguing against the homogenizing nature of the term Anthropocene, authors such as Donna Haraway (2016) have suggested other terms to name our epoch. For instance, Haraway (2016) has suggested terms such as Capitalocene or Chutclucene. Haraway proposes such nomenclature as to highlight that unsustainability is not a natural consequence of the Homo sapiens' specie, but rather a consequence of a specific way of organizing society, a consequence of a capitalist modern/colonial socio-political structure.

If Design is a Western- situated field, Design for Sustainability has both feet in the Western world. Here the potential for Design to become colonialist is even stronger. In working in Design for Sustainability, we have the afore mentioned interplay of situated perspectives (profession, people and communities), plus the situated field of sustainability, the imposition sustainability as a global agenda through global political movements and the two-sided perspective of local and global implications of sustainability.

## Methodology

In order to analyse how Design for Sustainability can be colonizing or liberating through this interplay, we use here the work of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire as lens. Freire's work is intrinsically decolonial (Chabalgoity, 2017) as it fights for the liberation (a word he uses to imply action for freedom) of the colonized self from the oppressive structures of the modern/colonial world (Chabalgoity, 2017). We use Freire's work for two main reasons: First, because his philosophical and theoretical articulations are deeply connected with action. As Freire points out, theory and practice are not dichotomies, but are in a dialectical relation to each other. As he argues, knowledge is not transferred but rather created by acting to change the world one lives in. This link towards action, we believe, is very fitting with design. Secondly, we use his work because his relevance as an author and teacher has served as inspiration for much of the latter work on decolonization, anti-oppressive work and on non-western (in this case Latin-American) ontologies.

As Chabalgoity (2017) shows, the Freirean oppressed is different to the European "subaltern". The European subaltern is the one from whom ownership was denied, while Freire's oppressed is the one that, through colonization, has been denied the possibility of being "fully human". The oppressed in Freire's notion, is the one into whom was internalized a feeling and behaviour of being "naturally less and worse" than the (colonizer) oppressor (Freire, 1970; Chabalgoity, 2017). It is important to notice, however, that the oppressor

and the oppressed in Freire's work are not separate people, but rather behaviours. In his book "Pedagogy of the oppressed" (1970) Freire defines oppression as a behaviour of prescription. According to Freire, the relationship of oppression is the prescription of the oppressor's worldview and values onto the oppressed, forcing the latter to not have the right to its own worldview and values (Freire, 1970). One central concept in Freire's work is that liberation from oppression starts from "conscientização". Conscientização (becoming conscious, from Portuguese) stands for a becoming aware that is inseparable from action - a getting to know about one's position and action in the world by acting (Freire 1970). Freire (1996) argues "it would be incomprehensible if the understanding of my presence in the world didn't already mean the impossibility of my absence in the construction the presence itself. As a conscious presence in the world, I cannot escape the ethical responsibility of the moving myself in the world" (1996, p 19 – authors' translation). For Freire, conscientização – the active becoming aware - and consequently liberation – becoming free from oppressive structures - can only happen through praxis of interconnected critical reflection and action (Freire, 1970).

In order to analyse Design for Sustainability from a Freirean perspective, we will focus on analysing three aspects of each DfS approach that we introduce below: (1) the relationship between people and the possible behaviours of prescription, (2) the position of people in the power structure of the modern/colonial world and (3) the possibilities for liberation or bondage in each based on whether spaces for conscientização (becoming aware about and through action) are opened or not.

In the next session we describe three different approaches to Design for Sustainability that focus on power relations. These approaches are not exemplary, but rather examples - three items in a broad and diverse spectrum. We chose these three snapshots of design action for two main reasons: First, because we believe they reveal three very different ways of dealing with power in design. Having these three diverse and rather opposing ways of doing design for sustainability can serve as points of navigation for a broader conversation about power issues in design. Secondly, we chose the approaches for our intimacy and experience in using and researching them in different nature/culture and political situations around the globe.

## **Study: Three approaches for Design for Sustainability**

In this section, we describe three different approaches for dealing with power issues in Design for Sustainability: Design activism, humble designing and radical listening. We first introduce each approach and give brief examples of each. We then look at the similarities between each and lastly, we analyse them from a decolonial and anti-oppressive perspective using the lens described above. The goal of this analysis is to elucidate the possibilities and dangers that each approach provides in informing non-oppressive and decolonial ways of doing Design for Sustainability.

As mentioned before, these are not isolated approaches, but rather images of the field of Design for Sustainability in a motion of understanding and tackling power issues in design for sustainability. As parts of a similar spectrum, these three approaches share various characteristics, such as: they are all centred in collaboration; they are aware of power relations between designer, community and political governance; they are sensitive to the imposition of worldviews and values; and are all based on mutual learning. However, it is the degree to which each approach takes these characteristics that sets them apart and makes them fitting to specific natural/cultural and political situation. We hope that revealing how each approach articulates these characteristics can contribute to nuancing power issues in design and help designers and design researchers to critically reflect on the situations we find ourselves in in order find non-oppressive ways of doing Design for Sustainability. Through this, we hope to help steering Design for Sustainability away from becoming a neo-colonial tool for the continuous domination of the world by a Western-modern/colonial capitalist agenda of sustainable development.

### *Design activism*

Design activism, as defined by Fuad Luke (2009, p.27) is "design thinking, imagination and practice applied knowingly or unknowingly to create a counter-narrative aimed at generating and balancing positive social, institutional, environmental and/or economic change". Design activism comes into being when a group of people (of which designers may or not be part of), discontent with the actions of mainstream political governance, take the initiative (co-articulated counter-narrative) to act on the issue themselves. (Fuad-Luke, 2009; Julier, 2013)

Design activism is when people who are not on the top of a power structure, empower themselves by coming together, forming a collective, co-articulating an issue to be addressed, and tackle the issue as an independent collective that takes front and defies governing powers (Julier, 2013). Design activism is an action of taking over power through action. Design activism is thus community driven and community led, it is an insider action within a community that identifies itself through a common issue. It is a motion from and by insiders to take over power and collectively act for creating change.

#### *Kääntöpöytä Urban Farming - Helsinki, Finland.*

One example of Design activism is the growing urban farming movement, in which the first author has been involved. While not all urban farming is necessarily design activism (as they may rely on governmental support in order to start) many of the urban farming, specially the guerrilla farming movements (see for example Reynolds, 2008) are examples of people taking over power to farm in urban areas. One example in this movement that started as a design activism action was the Kääntöpöytä (turntable in Finnish) area in Helsinki, Finland. Kääntöpöytä started with a group of people taking over an abandoned dumpster in an unused train maintenance area. The group started by turning the dumpster into an urban farming space. Nowadays, Kääntöpöytä has a bigger area comprising a greenhouse, a kitchen and an event space in the same area (Torretta, 2014). Kääntöpöytä, at present, defines itself as “a sustainable food production and urban planning laboratory located in Pasila’s yard, and a centre for peer learning and urban culture”(Kääntöpöytä, n.d.).

However, while design activism, for its interventionist approach, challenges mainstream politics (Julier, 2013) takes over and defies power structures, it does not necessarily survive as activist. For example, the Kääntöpöytä group, having started with a design activist approach, developed towards having governmental, industrial and non-governmental organizations support in upscaling urban farming practices throughout the city of Helsinki, becoming more of an urban design project (Torretta, 2014). As Julier (2013) argues Design activism “moves within the challenges of pre-existing circumstances, while also attempting to reorientate these. In this way, design activism also operates amongst its others. It exploits certain conditions of neoliberalism, to recycle and reprogram them” (Julier, 2013 p. 226). However, these changing relations between the design activist group and the ruling power, as can be seen with the Kääntöpöytä organization (Torretta, 2014) are not smooth and fixed, they are a constant negotiation and fight for power and space to sustain their action.

In summary, design activism is about taking power to make an envisioned change through collaboration. This change, is co-articulated (Julier, 2013) by a community that gathers around an issue and then lives in constant negotiation with the ruling powers. Design activism is dialectic action to take over power.

#### *Humble designing*

Humble designing (de Jong *et al.*, 2016; Reitsma *et al.*, 2017) is an approach that emerged out of a discomfort with Design for Sustainability (DfS). Humble designing is an approach to counter DfS becoming increasingly prescriptive, especially due to the widespread approach in DfS of nudging behaviour change. Uncomfortable with the otherness implicit in DfS - of designers demanding others to change – Humble designing is asking “who are we to design for others?” and “who are we to tell others what to do?” (Reitsma *et al.*, 2017). This design approach for sustainability seeks the acknowledgement of diverse worldviews and states that people are always in a coming together of partial perspectives, where one cannot have a full understanding of the complete situation. Humble design is a call for designers and design researchers to learn from others and to learn to be guided by the people we engage with in design processes (Reitsma *et al.*, 2017). The goal is to design in a way that is beneficial for all involved and that, instead of colonizing, opens space for horizontal collaboration (Reitsma *et al.*, 2017).

Due to this characteristics, humble designing can come into being when designers engage with a community that they are not part of. In this case, the designer may have a stronger power as an outsider, which then demands humbleness to engage in a way to level the power balance. The aim of humble designing is for designers to seek the creation of a dialogical space, balanced in power hierarchies that facilitates the opening of design processes to the perspectives of others. Humble designing is specifically focused on respecting diversity, as it is about creating a space for mutual learning and exchange between diverse worldviews, where a new way of being together can emerge that challenges pre-existing power positions.

### *On/off or in Between. Kungsbacka, Sweden*

One example in which a humble designing approach has been adopted is the *On/off or in between* project, in which the second author has been involved. This project focused on a micro grid area connecting different apartment buildings and public sector organisations. The electricity is produced and shared within this local system. Initially, the aim of the project was to make the apartment building dwellers shift their electricity use in order to make the energy use in the local system more efficient. The first envisioned solution by the design team was to stimulate people in the apartment buildings to do their laundry during day-time when the energy is produced by solar panels. However, the designers considered it unfair to ask for such a shift from people. Firstly, because it is difficult for people to change their routines, especially if they do not have a personal motivation for doing so; and secondly, because they are part of a system, connected through the grid. Therefore, it would make more sense to focus on a systemic perspective rather than on individuals. From realizing the potentially oppressive nature of the design process, the design team decided to shift towards a more participatory approach in order to involve the different actors in the grid and to accommodate and understand the different relations that each had to the system. The designers came up with a game to ask all actors to contribute with their perspective and ideas for optimising the system. By becoming aware of the power difference, and potential prescriptive nature of the initial process, the designers decided to manage and balance the power relation. The shift resulted in an attempt of humble designing and through that of opening up for mutual learning. This way, the stance that was taken by the designers was humbler than the initial entry point.

It is important to notice that humble designing is not only about creating participation (as design activism also is), but it is about managing power and humbleness between all participating actors in order to create a way of being and working together that is special and specific for that group of people (Reitsma *et al.*, 2017). Humble designing is about managing power relations in design (de Jong *et al.*, 2016; Reitsma *et al.*, 2017).

### *Radical Listening*

Radical listening is a design approach that has listening as its core. Radical listening emerged from the field of pedagogy and was first articulated by Kincheloe (2008 cited in Moore, 2018) based on Paulo Freire's (1970) idea of Radical Love. Radical listening is about having listening as the roots of the process. Moore (2018) explains that radical listening is when one is open "to understand another person's point of view without seeking to change them" while also being open to change through this listening (Moore, 2018 p. 481).

Radical Listening in Design for Sustainability can come into being when a person in a position of power engages with a person/community in a less powerful position with the willingness of contributing to the community. This approach, aware of cultural sensitivity issues, trusts "community members to be the best solvers of their problems. It means asking for individuals' ideas and implementing their solutions" (Health in Harmony, n.d.). Perceiving the big power gap, as outsider (designer) who has the power to bring about action – by political or financial privileges – lets the community (people who want change and will be affected by it) guide the process and is open to change the design way of working according to what the community wants. The design outsider assumes a position sharing the privilege and using it as a way to bring about the demanded change.

### *Preserving tropical forests through health care - Borneo*

An example of Radical listening is *Health in Harmony* organization's (see [www.healthinharmony.org](http://www.healthinharmony.org)) work with communities in Borneo for preserving rain forests. The communities they worked with logged the forests, which besides causing harmful impact to the forest, was also harmful for the local fish stock, fauna and weather. For these communities, logging was their main source of income for the communities. However, these communities voiced the willingness to stop the logging. Based on this willingness, the Health and Harmony organization decided to take action to help locals in stopping it. From a privileged position as a Western organization, Health in Harmony's founder Kinnari Webb engaged in 400 hours of listening to local communities by asking what they wanted in order to stop logging. After the 400 hours, the common answer was high quality and accessible health care. Since the organization was a specialist in healthcare, they organized a local health care system with all functional details defined and decided by the locals. Health and Harmony had to change, through the process, their perspective of what they believed creating a healthcare system and forest monitoring system should be like. The organization was open, through radical listening, to change their own views. The project has been successful in spite of various conflicts with local governments

and organizations that previously benefited from the logging. The benefits to the community are notorious and far from what the locals could expect from the local government (Health in Harmony, n.d.).

Radical listening is also about collaboration, but in a way that also opens up the design process to be led and changed by the community. In this case it is a collaboration across power structures for doing something that benefits the least powerful and not necessarily the ones in positions of power. The process of radical listening runs on local knowledge and acknowledges the community as the biggest specialist in the issue they want to tackle (Health in Harmony, n.d.). Radical listening is about sharing power and privilege through listening.

## Results & Analysis

### *Similarities and nuances*

As can be seen above, all three approaches share various characteristics, but their differences are positioned in the degree and format to which each characteristic takes shape within each of the approaches. One common characteristic is that they are all based on collaboration, as they all acknowledge that no individual can decide and design for a whole community. However, the types of collaboration vary greatly: design activism is a bottom-up co-articulated action that starts from a community created around an issue (Fuad-luke, 2009; Julier, 2013; Torretta, 2014). In this sense, it is collaboration between insiders in order to act and take – through that action – power to change their reality. On the other hand, humble designing is a collaboration between different communities with different power positions. Humble designing is therefore a collaboration through engagement of different communities in order to – through realizing and managing power relations – achieve a unique way of being and working together (Reitsma *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, while radical listening is also about engagement between different groups, it is between groups with a notorious power gap. It happens when there is a group asking for change, but powerless and the other group as powerful and willing to share the power to assist the other group in achieving their own goals. Radical listening is a collaboration by sharing power. The type of collaboration is intrinsically linked to the way each approach deals with power relations. Thus, another commonality is the awareness of power relations needed in all three approaches. These approaches are aware of the socio-political power structures embedded in the situations they are in. Nevertheless, it is how each approach deals with power relations that sets them apart. Design activism takes over power, humble design seeks to level and manage power while radical listening focuses on sharing power. It is this situational socio-political awareness that is very important in seeing the possibilities and dangers of each from a decolonial and anti-oppressive perspective. In the following section, we analyse and compare these approaches using the decolonial lens introduced before.

### *Applying a Freirean decolonial lens*

Here we use the three items from the before mentioned decolonial lens to analyse dialectically the three approaches: (1) the relationship between people and the possible behaviours of prescription, (2) the position of people in the power structure of the modern/colonial world and (3) the possibilities for liberation or bondage in each based on whether spaces for *conscientização* is opened or not. As these items are related in a way in which one can influence the other, and due to the shared commonalities between the three approaches for DfS described above, we do this analysis dialectically by focusing on each approach but simultaneously comparing and contrasting the different approaches which each decolonial lens' item.

### *Design activism*

The first aspect, and most prominent in Freire's definition of oppression, is the behaviour of prescription. In this case, a process that has the possibility of being prescriptive assumes colonialist oppressive behaviour (Freire, 1970 p. 29). While all three approaches try to get away from prescriptiveness, especially humble designing and radical listening, the position of the designer in relation to the group affected can shift these approaches towards being colonizing. Especially in design activism, since it is a bottom up action by a community gathered through an issue, oppression can come depending on whether designers are outsiders or insiders. As outsiders, designers cannot start a design activism for sustainability process in a place where they are not part of the community or where there is no community gathered around a specific issue. Starting a process in a place they are not part of, designers would be forcing people around an issue chosen, and thus imposed, by the design team. As design activism is led by a community that comes together around and co-articulates an issue (Julier, 2013), designers have to be part of this coming together of the community. This

aspect is problematic when we look at the second item of the decolonial lens: the position of people in the modern/colonial work. That is, a strong colonial behaviour can arise through design activism if people from colonizing countries, through structures of privilege get to carry projects in (former)colonial countries and chose design activism as the design approach. In this case, a more decolonial approach would be to support and facilitate existing design activist endeavours or open up for the possibility of it through processes of co-articulation of issues through, for example, humble designing and radical listening as we will see later. When it comes to the third aspect, design activism is an act of liberation as it is about directly taking over power. Design activism has to start from *concientização*, from an understanding of one's position in the world through action and thus becoming aware of being in a lower power position and acting to take over power. However, the internal dynamic of a design activism group, in order to encourage liberation has to hold space for the praxis of critical reflection and action – it has to support the collective *concientização* through its action so that the issue to be acted upon is indeed co-articulated. Otherwise, internal dependencies between the actors of the group can be created, thus, forming an internal power structure that does not allow collective liberation.

### *Humble designing*

As seen above, humble designing was created to counter the increasingly prescriptive behaviour of Design for Sustainability. However, we cannot take humble designing as innocent and naturally anti-oppressive and decolonial approach. Humble designing is an approach to be chosen by a design group with power to control a design process that involves more actors. The choice of humble designing can also be an imposition. Aimed at levelling power structures within a project team, humble designing can leave the greater modern/colonial global structure intact. A process that levels internal power relations but does not address greater modern/colonial structures, while it is not a colonizing approach, cannot be defined as decolonial as it does not contribute to changing the modern/colonial power structure. The strength of humble designing as a decolonial approach is when it happens with people from different positions in the modern/colonial structure. That is, humble design is fitting in situations in which the modern/colonial structure intrinsically puts the design team in a powerful position over the other project actors - such as western designers working in (former)colonial countries. In this case, managing the power structure by letting go of privilege and opening up for the creation of the dialogic space that is central to this approach, can allow processes of *concientização*. In this case, *concientização* can only happen if the dialogic space allows the praxis of critical reflection and action (Freire, 1970) throughout design process. That is, the design process has to be centred on a reflection and action of each person's positionality. Designers should not be in power to manage power relations, but rather, through the dialogic space allow the power management to be shared by all actors. This, in turn, relates to the third aspect of the decolonial lens. If designers choose humble design, but stay in power to manage power relations, there will still be a dependency on the designers. Hence, liberation through humble designing can only be achieved if the dialogic space allows *concientização* and if the power relation management becomes shared ownership.

### *Radical listening*

Radical listening in Design for Sustainability also stems from the willingness to find non-prescriptive approaches. As radical listening has listening as the very beginning of a project, the design process is defined by what comes from of listening to the actors involved. However, radical listening implies there is one person or group that listens and another group that talks. This is where the position of the people or groups in the modern/colonial structure is important. Radical listening is fitting to when people with more power, open up to listen to voices of oppressed that were not heard before - not heard not for a lack of voice, but for a lack of willingness from the powerful to listen. Similarly, to humble designing, radical listening finds fit when people from colonizing countries engage in design work in (former)colonial countries. However, the position of people and how the process is carried can define whether radical listening leads to *concientização* and liberation or not. Radical listening happens in situations where big power gaps are present - when a local group relies on the external person to achieve a wanted change and the external person shares power (such as economical and/or political) to make the change possible. This process, in order to support *concientização* has to highlight and present the power differences between the two groups as a problematic structure to be analysed and acted upon. If the power difference is neglected – seen as natural and irremediable - and not tackled through the listening and through the action that follows, the process does not open for *concientização*. Furthermore, if the community in lower power position continues to rely on the powerful to achieve their goals, radical listening does not decolonize or change power structures. It becomes therefore a momentary opening for

action that closes when the external design group leaves the situation, thus sustaining bondage in the long run.

## Conclusion & Discussion

In this paper, we introduced three approaches in Design for Sustainability that are concerned with power issues in design. The approaches introduced were: Design activism, humble designing and radical listening. We introduced the problematic relation between design, sustainability and the modern/colonial structure of our contemporary world. Using a decolonial lens based on Paulo Freire's (1970; 1996) work, we analysed these three approaches to see how each could sustain or change the modern/colonial power relations. From this analysis, we saw that none of these approaches are naturally decolonial but each has potential for being decolonial depending on the interplay between who, where and how each approach is carried. From the decolonial lenses described here, decolonial (that changes the modern/colonial global structure) and anti-oppressive Design for Sustainability (that does not prescribe) can only be achieved through reflecting on how the design approach affect the people involved in the design process. Thus, becoming decolonial is a relational issue. What is needed from us as designers is a critical reflexive *conscientização* about how our positionality and the design approach chosen relates to power relations and modern/colonial structures – how our position in the world is linked to the creation of the world and of our position in it, as Freire (1970) argues. In this case, it is important to allow the approach to adapt and change as the project develops and the power structures understood, analysed and tackled.

To illustrate this, designers engaging with an external community in a lower power position in the modern/colonial structure could start the process through radical listening. Radical listening would allow the community to define the process and aims of the project. Once the process is defined and started, in order not to keep the community dependent on the designers, a humble designing approach could be taken to manage power relations. Through humble designing the management of power relations in the group would be shared by all actors and a dialogic space (Reitsma *et al.*, 2017) for critical reflection and action would be created. The dialogic space provided by the balanced power relations in the humble design process can then encourage critical reflection and action to allow *conscientização*. This *conscientização* would then allow project participants to start co-articulating (Julier, 2013) issues for critical action to take over power through design activism. However, while this example may read like a recipe, the appropriateness of each approach and how they interplay depends on the situation we find ourselves in and the power relations implicit in it. The appropriateness of design approaches can only be found if design(ers) are conscious and continuously reflecting on its situatedness in relation to power structures.

To conclude, we consider the work presented in this paper as a contribution to a more critical attitude towards the imposed colonialising character that Design for Sustainability often inadvertently assumes. This colonialising character often remains hidden or un-reflected, which we consider as a danger to achieving true sustainable action both on a local and on a global level. In this paper, we applied Freire's decolonial lenses to uncover those often hidden attributes. We see this approach as valuable in order to stimulate a more critical and reflective discourse in Design for Sustainability. We hope this article allows the beginning of a process of *conscientização* of the reader and of design for sustainability.

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