Social design, whitening and epistemicide: a Mexican case

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to analyze the colonial viewpoint that underlies Design, Social Design and their methodology, Design Thinking. We study this theoretical scaffolding and its application in eight projects carried out by designers in the city of Puebla, Mexico, with Indigenous Peoples from different communities in the country. We explore the approach to Social Design and Design Thinking from their historical configuration in articulation with empirical information obtained through interviews with professors of Social Design, the designers of the 8 projects, and with a design studio. Design has been conceived as a neutral discipline although it presents its social dimension as the answer to various problems facing society. This article argues that design has a modern-colonial core that permeates its sub-disciplines, orienting them towards the cultural whitening of populations. The findings show that when implemented, Social Design becomes a practice of cordial racism and a form of epistemicide that give continuity to the attempts to make invisible, eradicate or appropriate the knowledge of Indigenous Peoples. The findings also show that the methodology used by Social Design, Design Thinking, has a fundamental role in contributing and possibly masking this epistemicide.

Desenho social, branqueamento e epistemicídio: um caso mexicano

RESUMO

O objectivo deste artigo é analisar o ponto de vista colonial que subjaz ao Design, Design Social e a metodologia por eles empregada, Design Thinking. Estuda este andaime teórico e a sua aplicação em oito projectos realizados por designers na cidade de Puebla, México, com Povos Indígenas de diferentes comunidades do país. Explora a abordagem ao Social Design e ao Design Thinking a partir da sua configuração histórica em articulação com informação empírica obtida através de entrevistas com professores de Social Design, com os designers dos 8 projectos, e com um estúdio de design. O design foi concebido como uma disciplina neutra, embora apresente a sua dimensão social como a resposta a vários problemas que a sociedade enfrenta. Este

KEYWORDS

Epistemicide; Social Design; whitening; Design Thinking; modern-colonial matrix

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Epistemicídio; Design Social; branqueamento; Design Thinking; matriz colonial moderna

PALABRAS CLAVE

Epistemicidio; Diseño Social; Blanqueamiento; Design Thinking; matriz moderno-colonial
Diseño Social, blanqueamiento y epistemicidio: un caso mexicano

RESUMEN
El objetivo de este artículo es analizar la mirada colonial que subyace al Diseño, al Diseño Social y a la metodología empleada por ellos, el Design Thinking. La investigación aquí presentada estudia ese andamiaje teórico y su aplicación en ocho proyectos realizados por diseñadores de la ciudad de Puebla con personas Indígenas de diferentes comunidades del país. Se indaga el planteamiento del Diseño Social y del Design Thinking desde su configuración histórica, y se articula con la información empírica obtenida mediante entrevistas tanto a profesores de Diseño Social como a los diseñadores que estuvieron en los 8 proyectos y al estudio de los productos de diseño que resultaron de ellos. El Diseño se ha planteado como una disciplina neutral y presenta a su vertiente social como la respuesta a diversos problemas que enfrenta la sociedad. En este documento se propone que el diseño tiene un núcleo moderno-colonial que permea a sus subdisciplinas orientándolas al blanqueamiento cultural de las poblaciones. Los hallazgos muestran que al implementarse, el Diseño Social deviene en prácticas racistas cordiales y en formas de epistemicidio que continúan los intentos de invisibilización, erradicación o apropiación de los conocimientos de los pueblos Indígenas, y que la metodología empleada, el Design Thinking, posee un papel fundamental para contribuir a este hecho y posiblemente, para enmascararlo.

1. Introduction
Design is an act of planning and creation as well as a professional practice with multiple specialties. Escobar (2016, 12) points out that the discipline of Design has an ontological dimension in which “each object, tool, service or even narrative in which it is involved creates particular ways of being, knowing and doing.”

This article analyses the way of being, knowing and doing that has constituted Design as a profession product of modernity. In the first section, we understand the way in which the appearance, configuration, and consolidation of Design around the world is linked to this civilizing project. Its nucleus was nourished by specific features of modernity from which the pillars that support it were erected: the technology of functionality, the epistemology of reason, and the aesthetics of whiteness.

Section two shows that these pillars are a structuring force for social design and design thinking, the leading design methodology in the West (Irani 2018). Despite their search for
a social, human-centered approach, design theorists and practitioners still rely heavily on methods that have proven unsustainable and unfeasible.

Section three describes the professional profile of a group of eight designers who have implemented social design and Design Thinking projects in several native communities in Mexico. The final part of the study analyzes their testimonies and practices to reveal the colonial practices underpinning the profession. When studied in conjunction with Mexico’s multicultural history, the study suggests that Design Thinking and social design, as currently developed, reinforce the racial imaginaries that have constituted the country’s national identity to this day (Gómez and Sánchez 2012).

2. Modern design: technology of functionality, epistemology of rationality and aesthetics of whiteness

2.1. Features of modernity: technology, epistemology, and ethos

According to Echeverría (2010), the revolution in technology that took place in the tenth century transformed the way in which people conceived themselves and the world. Although this revolution took place in both the East and the West, it was in the Roman Christian West, where there were particular conditions\(^1\) that made possible a type of modernity – which would later become the dominant project – centered on measuring the function of objects according to their efficiency in productive life. The value of what was created was linked to the pragmatic-economic results it could bring. The creation of new tools and techniques replaced efforts to improve or use inherited technology. Humans should constantly employ a supposed inherent capacity to create innovative technologies (Echeverría 2010).

Since the Renaissance, the project of modernity found its ferment with the European expansion and domination around the world. While in this period its opposite side, colonialism, was built. Coloniality refers not to colonialism, which describes control of material resources and labor in the political sphere over a given territory and population, but to a pattern of power (Maldonado, in Pachón Soto 2008) which is born of colonialism but is much more lasting and is rooted more deeply in the intersubjectivity of people (Quijano, in Pachón Soto 2008).

Coloniality was erected, above all, in two fields: economy and epistemology. Economy was based on processes of resource extraction from the colonies which sought economic growth with profits and unlimited resources, omitting the processes of violence and dispossession which it entailed (Mignolo 2015). In the second field, epistemology, astronomical knowledge broke down the idea of the divinity of the human being, so that the centrality of Homo Sapiens had to be thought of from reason (Juanes 2010).

European modernity codified the parameters of rationality, which in turn became the measurement for humanity. Rational meant human, thus everything outside it, especially in the colonies, would have to be measured against it to determine their degree of humanity (Fanon [1952] 2009). The production of knowledge was restricted to western methodologies and approaches, based, above all, on the hard sciences and the scientific method. Common populations in the colonies were deemed irrational and primitive, thus had their humanity stripped and their knowledge rendered invalid.

\(^1\)These conditions were the reduced geography, the dialectic of love-hate between north and south, and a capitalist behavior already present in mercantile life.
This “scale of humanity” was rationalized through an ethos: the ethos of whiteness (Echeverria 2010). Although strongly related to skin color and body, the ethos of whiteness is not the same as being white. Whiteness describes the behaviors necessary for subjects to become civilized, rational individuals. The first of these is the capacity to face the productive demands of the capitalist economic system. The second is to hold the banner of rationality and the methods of the West to generate knowledge. The last one is a dimension that appeals to virtuosity, that must be expressed through appearance: neatness, gestures, movements, composure, correct language. Corporality was taken from puritanical Europe to complete this form of identity.

2.2. The pillars of modern design

The configuration of Design is usually located in the first third of the twentieth century (Meggs 1983) with the foundation of the Bauhaus, the first design school created in 1919. Influenced by John Stuart Mill’s philosophy, which held that the moral quality of human acts depended solely on their utility (or possible harmfulness) to society, functionality became the foundation and result of rational design (Bürdek 2005).

With the expansion of design around the world, the political-ideological position of Bauhaus was relegated. Advertising and propaganda showed the potential of graphic design for persuasion, and industrial design played a part in improving the productivity of manufacturing processes. This potential was inserted into a dynamic where the value of the objects was linked to their capacity to circulate in the market and the economic return they offered.

The technology of functionality sustains that all design projects must be oriented to meet the demands of the market, satisfy and increase the aspirations and desires of people, and generate constant and increasing profits. The aim is to build brands that generate commercial identities while reinforcing social hierarchies and alleviating the civilizing malaise resulting from modernity.

The technology of functionality has found its way into the aesthetics of whiteness. Captured in different media and with different vehicles, this aesthetic responds to the hegemonic history that associates beauty with the canons inspired by Greek aesthetics. What had been present in sculpture and later in Renaissance painting, became almost a requirement in Design. Gradually, corporality was especially represented by the phenotype and ethos of the Anglo-Saxon man and woman. The desirable or beautiful was translated into palettes of color, compositions, and forms that allowed the “popular” to be discriminated against or to be re-functionalized by emptying it of its substance.

Beauty and harmony became rhetorical devices that constituted a hegemonic aesthetic that, in contrast, would determine ugliness (Cabianca 2008). Artistic and graphic creations had to prove their rationality and usefulness. The discourse of beauty and usefulness would be grounded in functionality. Expressions such as ugly, naïve, or cheap became permissive when it came to the assessment of the objects.²

Design’s proximity to the graphic arts, to craft processes, and to painting—disciplines that suffered from the stigma of inferiority in past times—triggered it to seek ways to

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²The aesthetics of whiteness are not static. They have been transformed over time. They have sought to impose themselves on other aesthetics and forms of graphic communication or to co-opt some of their elements emptying them of content. However, forms of resistance have also been generated that lead to tensions and disputes within this field.
assert itself as a real profession. The creation of a formal field knowledge around design and its professionalization through universities made it possible to speak of processes and methodologies unique to designers. Design became the owner of a rational thought that could create innovative objects that would foster humanity’s progress.

The epistemology of rationality is the belief of designers that makes them consider their discipline as the inventor of the legitimate artifacts of our era. The artifacts possess the functionality that is needed in a globalized capitalist market and the beauty that it demands. Therefore, designers are the valid constructors of how reality is visualized and made concrete at the level of Design. Design is de-futurazing (Fry 2011), that is, it eliminates all the possibilities of the future alien to it and builds a single desirable one in accordance with modern thought.

Design theories and methodologies created in Europe and in the United States are consistent with this epistemological approach. The result is a design practice that, as Costanza-Chock has pointed out (2020) excludes people that aren’t part of the western/modern worldview. Design usually reproduces systems of domination while allowing some challenges to it. In this paper the focus is to explore the reproduction of a modern/colonial core in a small-scale sample. However small, it is still important because it illustrates the pervasiveness of racism in modern Mexico.

3. Social design and design thinking: continuators of the modern core of design

Design’s expansion since its consolidation has been exponential. During the twentieth century the US consolidated as a design metropole as much as Europe. And, from the 2000’s onwards, Design Thinking emerged as the predilect design method in the United States, and soon became popular all over the world as the best way to implement design (Irani 2018).

The concept of Design Thinking emerged a little over four decades ago in the USA. To speak of Design Thinking implies three notions that, although they are strongly related, are worth distinguishing: first, the association of Design Thinking with a way of thinking characteristic of designers and/or people who use this methodology. This cognitive style allows them to solve complex problems with innovative proposals, differentiating them from others. Despite the effort to verify the social relevance of this perspective, there is no evidence to confirm it (Kimbell 2011).

Second, the consideration of Design Thinking as a general theory of Design. Although there are different authors that address this, Tim Brown (2009) best exposes the five most common phases of the Design Thinking process: empathizing, defining, devising, prototyping, validating and implementing. In addition to the superficiality and vagueness of these concepts (López-León 2017), there is a weak intention to place at the center the people for whom the process is developed. Design Thinking is conceived as the means to determine people’s needs through collaboration and recognition of the other, thus creating a functional solution with a desirable aesthetic. The weakness lies in the lack of training in ethnography, which can lead to simulated research (Martínez 2017), or to the invasive and extractivist practices the social sciences have tried to combat. With this approach to people, it is difficult to sustain the idea of an empathic process. Furthermore, the promised innovation is a synonym for the technology of functionality.
Therefore, research and its results are subordinated to understanding people as consumers and to seeking forms of differentiation that result in new markets (Tapia 2004).

The last of the perspectives is the understanding of Design Thinking as a valuable organizational resource (Kimbell 2011). This happens thanks to its dissemination in the world of business and technology, via companies such as Google, IDEO, MJV, AIGA, Apple, etc. and Ivy League universities. With Design Thinking companies manage to give the appearance of a human face while intensifying their intention to generate products that become brands that are easy and quick to acquire. The result was a vertiginous impulse of Design in spheres previously far from it establishing standards that define who is capable of generating value and vanguard. As Don Norman (2011) asserts, a designer complex is generated as the God creator of solutions who considers his solution the most intelligent and often the only one, without any evidence that he has, indeed, influenced the most critical parts of the problem.

The rise of Design Thinking was considered the panacea capable of solving even the deficiencies of the capitalist system (Brown 2009). For this reason, it is also used in one of the currents of Design that is relevant today: Social Design. Probably as a response to the crisis of capitalism that became visible at the end of the twentieth century, the concept of Social Design has been used more frequently by designers. This polysemic concept is framed, above all, in two intertwined meanings. The first one refers to carrying out actions for groups that are dispossessed or marginalized, or who oppose the system. The second one refers to actions that aim at the development and progress of society through the improvement of people’s quality of life (Ledesma 2018, 12).

Social design encompasses a wide variety of projects that make it a heterogeneous category. Ledesma (2018) has defined six areas of social design, each with different objectives: 1) propaganda for social awareness, 2) products to favor stigmatized groups, 3) interventions to make design accessible, 4) support of local entrepreneurship 5) construction of identities that favor collective knowledge, and 6) participation at different levels for economic and human development.

Social Design tends to fluctuate between a welfare-oriented character in which the designer is seen as the active subject who will cover the needs of passive subjects, lacking material and symbolic resources, and the search for a horizontal interaction between designers and users. Another fundamental variant for understanding the application of social design is its relationship with regular commercial design. While some scholars consider them as opposing spheres that should not be linked, Victor Margolin (2016) has proposed, with some acceptance, that social and commercial design are two interconnected spheres, where one can reinforce the other.

Although the modern/colonial core of design has already been criticized, design scholarship remains closed to non-western approaches to the discipline (Ansari, 2018). Thus, several implementations of social design projects tend to proceed without criticizing the methodological and theoretical frameworks of the discipline (Akama, 2019). In the end, all the results of social design projects are measured against western indicators that tend to confirm the discipline’s biases. And thus, stereotypes of subaltern actors – the ideal users of social design projects – are reified and entrenched.

Social design uses Design Thinking in its search for a methodology able to adapt to its heterogeneity. This makes social design complicit in the use and concealment of modern/colonial features. By sustaining that it has human beings and social transformation at its
core, social design conceals its modern/colonial dynamics. Social design operates pretending that it advances some harmless social goals that would eventually bring about social justice, and such an assertion often boosts designers’ morale. Designers do change the world in some ways but usually leave in place the multiple hierarchies of domination they encounter. Design has an impact on the world, but its achievements do not disturb and even reinforce the colonial matrix from which it emerged (Grosfogel, 2016).

4. Design theory into practice: subjects and methodological processes of research

4.1. Race in Mexico: a brief history

The modern-colonial features of design, which are present in both social design and Design Thinking, are part of the execution of any design project. These features intensify when a project is implemented to help groups that have been historically racialized.

During the last decade, many social design projects that relied on Design Thinking tools have been implemented to “help” Mexican native communities. Mexican designers have seen in this population a means to bring about social transformation, so they have created brands, companies, and NGOs that are aimed at improving these population’s living conditions. This article analyzes the conflation of the modern-colonial core of social design with Mexico’s racial history through the testimonies of three social design professors and nine Mexican designers who participated in eight projects in which Design Thinking was used as the main methodology.

As Akama et al., (2019, 1) have pointed out, doing design work with Indigenous peoples is tense and complex because non-Indigenous designers hold a professional approach that can “inadvertently displacing Indigenous practices, knowledges, and world views”. In Mexico, this is magnified by pervasive racism.

The Mexican national identity construction process reveals asymmetrical power relations and covered forms of racism at the core of Mexicanness. After the independence, and especially in post-revolutionary Mexico, the state advanced a racial ideology aimed at achieving national cohesion (Gómez y Sánchez 2012).

Through the myth of mestizaje the state and the ruling elite established a hegemonic and exclusionary identity with the mestizo (or mixed) at its core. To be Mexican meant that you had to self-identify as mestizo. At the same time, mestizaje is premised on the notion of whitening, for a white citizenry would entail national development. Thus, the national “we” excluded systematically all the non-mestizos. For this ideology, native populations were the “ancient roots” of the nation and the reason of its present backwardness. As a result, the state sought to eradicate native cultural practices by means of a forced de-humanization consisting of seducing and attracting them to the dominant culture (Díaz-Polanco 1992).

In Mexico, the distance between the colonizer and the colonized would be determined by their closeness to whiteness and the colonized efforts to whiten themselves. Race as well as racist imaginaries would then become legitimized and hidden elements of the discourse around Mexicanness. In turn, this discourse would determine Mexican identity as self-denigrating, racist, and sexist (Gómez y Sánchez 2012). Mexican design was no stranger to race. Mexican colleges began offering design as a college degree during the mid-
twentieth century, although branding and propaganda were important for the country’s political life since the nineteenth century (Vilchis 2010). And one of the main goals of state propaganda was to reinforce the mestizo ideology. The images and illustrations created in this period portray a colorful, mysterious, and exotic country.

Indigenous people were incorporated into this narrative as a homogeneous population, living in primitive communities. The Indigenous past of the nation was exalted while living Indigenous peoples were continuously treated as naïve, peaceful, and lazy. This exotization and folklorization of Indigenous people allowed non-Indigenous people to de-humanize them and treat their knowledge and art as inferior.

Although recently criticized, these stereotyped portrayals of native communities remain popular in design projects. As native arts, crafts, symbols, and textile gain popularity, global trends demand more and more native-made products. As a result, the interaction between designers and Indigenous artisans has increased. This interaction has in turn fostered unethical labor practices and exploitation (Albarran, 2020). Cases of plagiarism and cultural appropriation committed by fashion and graphic designers are an example of these unethical practices.

4.2. The social design projects: who and how

The nine young designers (seven women and two men) who were the main subjects of study, are heirs and continuers of this history, like all Mexicans. They have grown up with the myth of mestizaje, close to the aspiration/imposition of whiteness since they belong to the upper classes and are not part of racialized groups. They possess greater wealth than the majority of the population, which may or may not relate them to the political elite (Schröter and Büschges 1999), they are identifiable by their lifestyle, and attended the most prestigious and expensive private universities in the country. This elite training allows these designers to maintain a professional network that includes other designers from their same social class.

On a professional level, they belong to the semi-senior and senior categories\(^3\), that is, they have between two and eight years of professional experience. Four of them are specialists in the textile area, the rest are graphic designers, although two of them have focused on the area of Strategic Design\(^4\). Even though it could be thought that fashion, image, and Strategic Design are separated, several subjects of study have put into practice in their projects two or even all three areas by making crossovers between the specialties of Design.

These designers have been or are involved in Social Design projects with Indigenous Peoples, who are usually engaged in handicrafts or agricultural work. Three of them worked for a period of one year, while the other four have been involved in the project with Indigenous Peoples between five and eight years. The projects were or are being carried out with different rural Indigenous groups – Tzeltales, Nahuas, Mixtecos, Choles – in different states in Southern Mexico: Campeche, Chiapas, Guerrero and Puebla.

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\(^3\)Categories used in the Design discipline to distinguish the work experience that designers possess.

\(^4\)Strategic Design focuses on Design as a producer of useful, attractive, and generally profitable spaces, businesses, and experiences.
The three interviewed teachers have carried out projects and given classes on Social Design in private universities where the designers were trained.

To analyze the practices and imaginaries of all of them, qualitative procedures were used to understand the relationship they had with the Indigenous populations. These were digital ethnography, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, participant observation and a focus group. All information was recorded in a fieldwork diary. Descriptive data were collected and classified into categories continuously discussed with the theory. Qualitative methodology privileges the continuous interaction between theory and practice, one intervenes with the other and this is how both are transformed (Taylor and Bogdan 1987). In the following section, we show the findings regarding the application of the Design Thinking methodology within Social Design projects.  

5. Social design with Indigenous communities: instrument of modernity – coloniality

To interpret the findings, this paper will rely on Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ sociology of absences theory. The main tenet of this approach is the existence of an abysmal line that separates existence from inexistence. This line creates two different universes: one where things exist, are visible, intelligible, and sustain valid knowledge; the other where things disappear, knowledge is rendered inexistent, and populations are marginalized (Santos 2009). Epistemicide, then, refers to “the processes of oppression and exploitation, by excluding groups and social practices. It also excludes the knowledge used by those groups to carry out those practices.” (Santos 2009, 12). The design project this paper addresses relies on a western epistemology that belongs to the universe of existing knowledge. The knowledge they encounter and seek to whiten – that of native craftspeople – belongs to the universe of inexistent knowledge. Designers, as it will be shown, actively participate in the process of epistemicide. This section exemplifies, through social design and Design Thinking, the risk of perpetuating colonialism (Akama et al. 2019) is a reality.

5.1. Forms of epistemicide in social design

The eight Social Design projects analyzed used Design Thinking as a methodology to work with Indigenous Peoples. The way designers refer to this methodology shows an almost unshakable faith in it, due to the results it has brought in the market place. “All companies are served by these methodologies. They are selling millions, we should be implementing them” (Professor, Strategic Design class. Fieldwork Diary, February 16, 2018)

These words match with Escobar’s ontological studies of design. The content of design, and to some extent what design is, is determined by an unrestricted acceptance of Euro-American knowledge as a universal paradigm. Thus, only projects implemented using this

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5There are other findings of this research that discuss how Design Thinking was established in the country, the relationship Designer-Indigenous Peoples, as well as the analysis of the products from the projects. https://repositorio.iberopuebla.mx/handle/20.500.11777/4505.
paradigm can be productive and applicable everywhere in the world. Design projects only need to adapt their tools to any context, but the tools are universally available and applicable. However, when designers have applied Design Thinking tools to rural Indigenous populations, the supposed universality of the methodology has crumbled. The interviewees systematically mentioned that when working with native populations significant challenges and barriers arose (designer 3). They mention that these barriers are common when working on social design projects and become especially acute when working with native populations.

A first barrier is the lack of understanding by Indigenous Peoples of the processes of Design Thinking. When implementing Design Thinking activities designers experience frustration for not getting the answers and attitudes they expect from Indigenous Peoples.

Many of those women (craftswomen) sadly don’t know how to read, they don’t study anything, and they only do the same thing over and over, and that’s all. I truly think that all of us should live our lives the way we like, but that part (working with Indigenous craftswomen) is really complicated because we wanted to be close to them, like we said “hi” to them, but they didn’t want to interact with us (?)

The second barrier is that designers recognize they do not know the extent to which there is an understanding of the materials used in the activities. For example, in one of the most common activities, card sorting, people are asked to relate concepts (words) to images. When generated by the designer, the images correspond to the designer’s aesthetic. When talking about this phase, there is a recognition of uncertainty about whether this choice “connects with people” (designer 3).

The third barrier is “technical” language. Not only because it is recognized that there is a limitation because the designer-user’s mother tongue which is different (Spanish), but because there is a Design terminology of its own that is not commonly used in everyday life. The last barrier is found on the implementation-feedback phase (although not carried out by all designers) in which people are asked to give their opinion on the Design products. As in the first barrier, designers do not receive the answers they want: in many cases people remain silent or talk to each other to discuss it without commenting to the designer.

The response of designers to the reasons of these four methodological barriers often points to the ignorance of Indigenous Peoples. “They don’t know how to think in metaphors” (designer 3). “Sometimes you apply your methodology very beautifully and people don’t understand it” (designer 4). In other cases, it is resignation. The speed with which the methodology must be applied, and the difference in languages, does not allow for much participation as desired.

Sometimes we brought hair accessories with us (to the work sessions with Indigenous Peoples participating in a social design project), so when we talk to them (the Indigenous participants) we said “look, you can have my claw clip” and we tried to befriend them. That is something I don’t usually do in any other research meeting. I just interview the users and leave. It doesn’t require extra effort… like sometimes you even have to eat with them! (the Indigenous participants)

Despite the “extra efforts” (designer 3) that designers make to approach Indigenous Peoples, they qualify them as noble, but painful, silent, without long-term goals or dreams, with little openness or capacity of expression.
You can never measure now or in a hundred years what you left for them. [Because of] the language barrier. Another [reason] is because when we are there we are with people who have not had that opportunity to express themselves. So it's kind of frustrating for me. And you ask, how are you doing with this and this? And they say yes, fine. And that's very frustrating. There are people who don’t know how to express themselves. (Focus group)

As Memmi (1969) points out, Indigenous Peoples are racialized. The image and myth of the colonized is promoted by means of three global traits: laziness, weakness, and their lack of needs. Therefore, the blame lies within Indigenous Peoples, and not within the violence of the methodology of the modern-colonial matrix that does not favor a dialogue between different thought systems.

It is very problematic to work with [Indigenous] craftswomen. You try to explain to them and it's impossible. It takes so much time and you have to oversimplify all the things you tell them. (Conference 3)

The fact that these designers acknowledged the aforementioned barriers doesn't mean they tried to reflect on their causes. On the contrary, these designers did not attribute the barriers to any cultural or racial bias: “[Indigenous peoples] are Mexicans too. I want to face real cultural differences, like in Africa” (designer 4). We assume that the myth of mestizaje prevents these designers from engaging with the cultural and epistemological differences they encounter in the field. Processes of otherness and reflexive awareness on difference are impaired by this myth as well (Ansari 2019).

Designers constantly reinforce two sets of ideas: the first one is that native populations are unable to produce knowledge, the second one is that if they have some knowledge-like thought system, it is not as effective and valid as Design Thinking. Using Design Thinking then becomes a way to discredit native knowledge systematically. This process exemplifies the operation of modern design’s epistemology of rationality, imposed to native populations and leading to their knowledge and practices to invisibility and destruction.

This scale of knowledges mirrors a scale of humanity. If knowledge is a trait of civilization, then it is a trait of humanity. Subjects with no knowledge would be uncivilized and quasi-humans. This distinction has effects on every dimension of native life, including the sacred. Designers usually use pejorative terms to refer to Indigenous spirituality, and link their religiosity to their supposed status as primitive and superstitious.

When we were going to an Indigenous community and reviewed the interview questions, for example, there was one that we decided to change. Because with Method Cards you always have to ask at the end if you could ask three wishes what would you ask for. But we were worried that they would not understand. So we wanted to adapt it to the context. So we gave it like that twist and put it: if you could ask something to Diosito, (little God) what would you ask for? That's how we adapted it. (Designer 4)

The fact that the designers use the nickname “little God” being themselves religious shows that they’re not targeting religious beliefs in themselves, but the way in which Indigenous peoples establish a relationship with the divine. Designers constantly establish a link between Indigenous religiosity and backwardness. A horizontal and respectful relationship between designers and native populations would involve understanding their approach to the universe, worldview, and knowledge. As Sheenan (2001, 13) states, “Deeply listening to all participants also means that the voices of the land, the spirits and the people can be heard. These voices are not acknowledged within the
traditional Western research paradigm. Therefore, it is more crucial that they are listened to.” Designers should be careful not to romanticize the worldview of the Indigenous Peoples, but should also seek to build a horizontal dialogue that enables communication and problematization of design methodologies, therefore enriching the viewpoint of the designer, and that of Indigenous Peoples.

5.2. Teaching design thinking to Indigenous Peoples: methodological whitening

For designers, one of the central problems of Indigenous communities is the condition of poverty in which they live. Most designers think this poverty comes from a systemic root, but also from the naiveté of Indigenous Peoples to capitalize on their work. “These women had enormous power in their hands, which they could use to produce and earn … instead of just reaching out and hoping for welfare assistance” (Conference 1). So they seek to teach Indigenous Peoples ways to commodify their way of life by teaching them Design Thinking. Through classes, workshops, and talks, designers present ways in which Indigenous Peoples can apply the methodology to make innovative products that the market can constantly acquire. Unlike the crafts they make, these are products of inherited knowledge that must evolve. “Let’s say that experience and practice are no longer enough, more is needed, that skill of analysis and synthesis that designers are learning and that others … are simply learning in life” (Lecture 2).

The traditional classification that separates design from arts and crafts and establishes design at the top (Albarrán 2020), prevails in this case of study. Products that must be made tangible through a rapid manufacturing process, with the implementation of quality standards imposed by international companies. If these products make use of any native cultural element, they should be curated to make them look contemporary, sophisticated, clean, and modern “because the way they are conventionally produced make them look, to design professionals, ‘cheap,’ ‘folkloric,’ ‘naive,’ ‘parochial,’ ‘lacking design’” (Fieldwork diary, May–October 2018).

I remember helping a classmate to prepare her community immersion trip for a social design project. She told me: “I already bought new clothes for my trip.” “Why?” I asked. So she told me: “Because the school dean told me to get clothes like theirs (the Indigenous People), so we can blend with them.” I was shocked, and I asked, “What did you get?” my classmate replied: “I went to Zara and got a blouse with embroidery, you know … it looks Indigenous but less folkloric.” (Self-ethnography)

Demand also serves as justification for modifying products that contain native cultural elements. The market will not buy brands that do not produce continuous and attractive innovation. Arts and crafts need to be improved by designers so they can evolve and fit in Western standards (Albarrán 2020). It is omitted that many of the products created by Indigenous Peoples are intended as graphic communication and not as objects for consumption.

The problem they tell you about is always the same. People don’t look for you as much as before to buy things. Because of course they are very well made. But, to people it seems that it is already seen. So the craftsman-designer binomial arises to respond to this need. (Professor 3)
Although Design professors argue that the teaching of new processes is designed to diversify forms of production and not to displace previous ones, this is difficult when the processes of the Other are continually associated with negative attributes:

I can now mention you three, three people who are artisans by heritage, generation after generation, and who professionalized their tradition [...] because they can make a very good business out of their tradition. That is one extreme and I can see in the other extreme the artisan who is not going to change, or grow, he remains the same. (Designer 1)

The fact that designers seek to disseminate a Western methodology implies that Indigenous Peoples’ knowledge and meanings are useless. “Pathways to meaning are vital components of a people’s way of being in the world. The imposition of methodologies that do not consider Indigenous ontologies represents a ‘process racism’” (Sheenan, 2001). This “process racism” in design is what is coined in this paper as methodological whitening, because it seeks to teach Indigenous Peoples that their way of working is not aligned with the ethos of whiteness.

5.3. Co-creation, the mask that hides epistemicide and methodological whitening?

When describing their interaction with Indigenous Peoples designers often use words like co-creation or collaboration. They consider their projects developed under a horizontal scheme. However, when they delve into the forms of participation of Indigenous Peoples into the projects, this is minimal and asymmetrical.

During the first approach between designers and Indigenous Peoples, in the phase called empathy, the designers develop a process of simulated empathy that makes it difficult to recognize the Other, as it reduces him/her to a consumer or a source of information. The designer does not seek to generate a dialogue in which both share their lives, but rather a process of extracting valuable testimonies that will allow him/her to define a problem and a solution. The exercises he/she carries out within this methodology are aimed at understanding people from this perspective and not from a recognition of their human complexity. Events such as sleeping in the houses of Indigenous People, eating with them, and giving them objects are seen as “extra efforts” that must be made in order to obtain data.

In the ideation phase, when the designers plan the solution to be implemented, their subsequent products or services, the graphic line, and the messages to be transmitted, the participation of the Indigenous Peoples is reduced to the feasibility of implementation. “I come up with the idea and you have the technique, we talk about it to see if it can be done” (Designer 5).

The idea is not questioned, since this is where the designers’ knowledge comes in. Although they talk about Indigenous Peoples with a respectful discourse – “master
craftsmen,” “people with great experience” – they do not include them in forging the concept of the product. Although there are some cases where workshops are facilitated at this stage, the workshops are usually marked by the barriers mentioned above and by the very guidelines of Design Thinking.

Sometimes I liked to encourage them [Indigenous Peoples] to draw, because it is part of their everyday forms of expression. I let them choose both the color palettes and icons, but I would tell them to avoid certain colors for sure, because they loved to put lime green (the interviewee grimaces), so I would tell them which colors were allowed and which weren’t. (Designer 6)

Therefore, the maximum intervention of Indigenous Peoples falls into the prototyping phases, that is, when Indigenous Peoples make the product, as in the case of embroidery. Indigenous Peoples, in many cases, are treated as an executing hand, but not as a heart and mind that thinks, imagines, and creates. As Albarrán (2020) has pointed out, projects involving designers and Indigenous people, especially artisans, need to establish a dialogue that includes race as one of the main topics to be discussed. Without it, designers can end treating Indigenous people – specially artisans – as passive subjects of their own creation.

6. Conclusions

Design shows a high level of adaptability to current social change and social phenomena. The increasing awareness of problems such as racism, discrimination, or poverty has certainly influenced the methodological developments of the discipline. Nevertheless, the fact that such developments are brought about bona fide does not and should never insulate them from critique, for it is likely that they – entirely or partially – reproduce the social problems they’re supposed to target. For instance, even if designers mean well while deploying Social Design techniques, they sometimes reinforce racist stereotypes and assumptions about Indigenous Peoples. In addition, their methodological tools reinscribe discriminatory assumptions upon these populations.

However, so much remains to be debated. Clearly, methodologies such as Design Thinking, even when having a powerful grip on designers’ actions, can produce outcomes not easily classifiable as entirely racist or discriminatory, or purely colonial. Like every set of conceptual tools, it lacks the power of over-determination. This is, even if willing to, it will be unable to guarantee the production of the same result every single time. Therefore, exposing the ties of Design Thinking to colonial-modern assumptions about knowledge and ethnicity/race does not mean that every designer using it would be colonized, and every product, racist. Our goal in this article was more modest and less structural: to show that Design Thinking is not a neutral tool, that it is imbued in a specific ideology, and therefore is likely to lead to specific social results in the context of the Mexican racial landscape.

Human action is yet another factor to be considered here. Both designers and Indigenous users have a hitherto untheorized capacity to subvert the assumptions of methodological tools such as Design Thinking. Designers have the ability to adapt the tools to a point in which they can escape the modern-colonial grip, and Indigenous users can subvert them by refusing to partake in their application. Because we are discussing a phenomenon in which both Social Design and Design Thinking are deployed without a
coercive power dictating a particular way of acting, human action and decision become paramount. To what extent designers and Indigenous users in fact adapt and subvert Social Design and Design Thinking tenets, is a matter for another paper.

Social Design and Design Thinking are constantly evolving and adapting, but at the same time they are helping to produce the subjects they are working for. As their role in the fight against inequality becomes more relevant, the importance of understanding their impact on the production and transformation of racial identities increases. We should start thinking of both the discipline and the methodology as something more than the realm of a few technical experts. This is, we should think about them through their connections with the social.

We have tried to show that instead of a lie, the goals and inspiration of Social Design and Design Thinking regarding Indigenous Peoples belong to a particular ideology and line of thought. They make sense inside this worldview, but become disturbing when observed using the lenses of social theory. Our hope is that instead of abandoning them, designers critically engage in the discussion we propose here, so we find ways to dialogue with our own knowledge, hence becoming more responsible with both the effects we cause in the material world, and the people we work with.

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