

# **Design as Symbolic Violence: Reproducing the ‘isms’ + A Framework for Allies**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of symbolic violence describes how priorities, values and even sensibilities are reproduced through cultural practices, processes and institutions. Through symbolic violence, individuals learn to consider unjust conditions as natural and even come to value customs and ideas that are oppressive. Feminist, race and anti-colonisation scholars and activists have described how patriarchy, colonialism and imperialism exist within oppressive structures – and also within cultural practices and artifacts that embed domineering ideologies in everyday life. Design functions as symbolic violence when it is involved with the creation and reproduction of ideas, practices, products and tools that result in structural and other types of violence (including ecocide). In this paper, we describe the theory of design as symbolic violence and present sexist, racist, classist and ecoist examples. Acknowledging that the various ‘isms’ are reproduced through design, we then consider how to address these problems by constructing a Framework for Allies in design.

Design embeds ideas in communication, artifacts, services and spaces in subtle and psychologically powerful ways. Feminist, race, class and anti-colonisation scholars and activists have described how structural and symbolic violence functions in society through the oppressive 'isms' (sexism, racism, classism, colonialism, imperialism, etc.) which are reproduced by institutions and cultural practices and artifacts in everyday life. Design is a cultural and social practice involved with the production of things, services, spaces and communication that direct human activities. The concept of symbolic violence explains how ideas are reproduced by design. Design encourages people to do new things and think in new ways: it works in the domain of influencing behaviours and sensibilities. As such design often produces and reproduces social and power relations. Designers are implicated with replicating the 'isms' often without realising the extent of their own complicity with structural and symbolic violence. This paper lays out a theory of design as symbolic violence<sup>1</sup> and proposes that a Framework for Allies<sup>2</sup> can be a means of addressing structural and symbolic violence reproduced by design<sup>3</sup>.

## **DESIGN AS SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE: REPRODUCING THE 'ISMS'<sup>4</sup>**

The term 'symbolic violence' was coined by Bourdieu in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* in 1979<sup>5</sup> (translated to English in 1984) and later developed in greater depth in subsequent publications such as *Masculine Domination* (2001). The first book was based sociological research that examined social inequity and the reproduction of class power in French society. Bourdieu conducted a survey of 1217 individuals between 1963-68 and asked subjects to explain their personal tastes in music, art, design, home décor, to name a few. With this research Bourdieu describes the role of taste as a means of creating distinctions between groups of people. His findings demonstrate how these distinctions serve as a means of reproducing class power and the hierarchical division of people that ultimately enable and legitimise violence on various scales. Bourdieu describes symbolic violence as: "a gentle violence, imperceptible and invincible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of

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<sup>1</sup> Design as symbolic violence was first described by Jules Milestone (2007) and then by Joanna Boehnert in "The Visual Communication of Ecological Literacy: Designing, Learning and Emergent Ecological Perception", (PhD diss., Department of Design, University of Brighton, 2012) + *Design/Ecology/Politics: Towards the Ecocene*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017). Some content from this symposium paper is from the upcoming book.

<sup>2</sup> The Framework for Allies concept was developed by Dimeji Onafuwa, Jabe Bloom and Teju Cole in a workshop titled 'Privileged Participation: Allying with Decoloniality in a Difficult Climate' at the Carnegie Mellon University's School of Design (2016). Dimeji Onafuwa wrote the second part of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Some of the text in this paper has been previously published as a summary of a DRS2016 conversation. See: Joanna Boehnert, Dimeji Onafuwa and Bianca Elzenbaumer "Design as Symbolic Violence: Addressing the 'isms'" (conversation documentation from DRS2016: Design + Research + Society. Future-Focused Thinking. Brighton, UK, July 27-30 2017).

<sup>4</sup> This section was written primarily by Joanna Boehnert.

<sup>5</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, Translated by Nice, R., (London: Routledge, 2010).

communication and cognition (or more precisely, miscognition), recognition, or even feeling”<sup>6</sup>. The effects are embodied in “bodies and minds by (the) long collective labour of socialisation”<sup>7</sup>. It is through processes of symbolic violence that power imbalances are naturalised: “the most intolerable conditions of existence can often be perceived as acceptable and even natural”<sup>8</sup>. The concept describes how ideologies, values and even sensibilities flow through cultural artefacts, systems and practices.

Design reproduces existing social norms and often encourages new normative behavior. Anthropologist Juris Milestone described how design functions through the operation of symbolic violence where designers develop expertise in creating “order by manufacturing certain subjectivities”<sup>9</sup>. Design disciplines the public by encouraging social hierarchies where people distinguish themselves with their ‘good’ taste and commitment to quality<sup>10</sup>. With this work design not only drives consumer desire but “can works to depoliticise war, technology, architecture, consumerism and globalisation”<sup>11</sup> by virtue of its aesthetic appeal and sophisticated grasp of cultural ideas. Design performs cultural work in ways that booster particular priorities as influenced by the intentions and assumptions of designers as well as those who determine what will be designed (typically designers’ clients). While designers address the needs and desires of their audiences and users (as they interpreted them), designers can also perpetuate symbolic violence by embedding racist, sexist, classist and ecoist assumptions into design. We now examine some specific ways that symbolic violence works in design education and the design industry.

## **SEXISM**<sup>12</sup>

Where design privileges male perspectives and men’s priorities it reflects the concerns of the majority of the senior people in the design industry and education in ways that impact half the population. Looking at the statistics over the last 15 years at design schools across Europe through the (admittedly reductive) lens of female-male ratio, the number of female graduates has progressively risen (often significantly outnumbering males). In the United States, women are getting more higher degrees than men (women

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<sup>6</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*. Translated by Nice, R., (London: Polity, 2001), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 1.

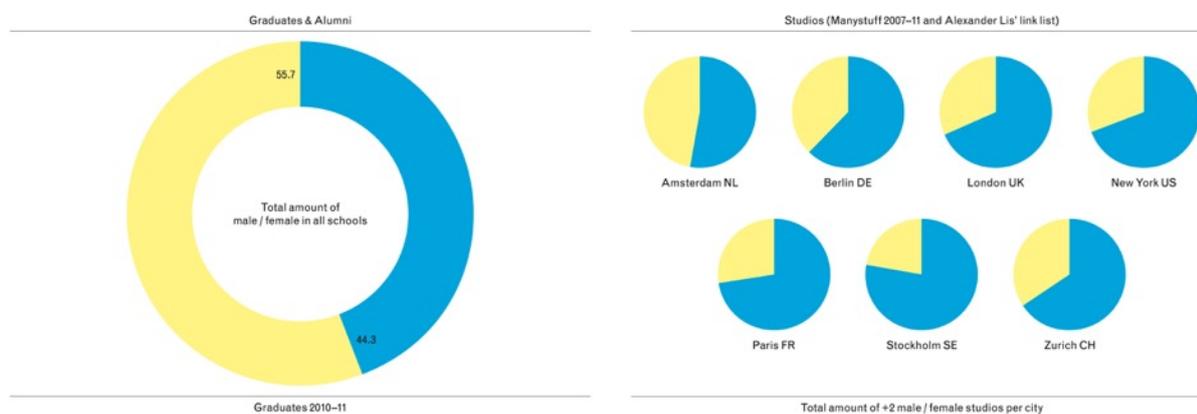
<sup>9</sup> Juris M. Milestone, “Design as Power: Paul Virilio and the Governmentality of Design Expertise,” *Culture, Theory and Critique*. 48:2, 175 – 198. (2007), 175.

<sup>10</sup> Milestone, “Design as Power,” 178.

<sup>11</sup> Juris M. Milestone, “Universities, Cities, Design and Development: An Anthropology of Aesthetic Expertise” (PhD diss., Department of Anthropology, Temple University, 2007), 96.

<sup>12</sup> This section was originally written with Bianca Elzenbaumer as part of our DRS2016 workshop.

earned 58.4% of the total number of master's degrees and 51.8% of the total number of doctoral degrees)<sup>15</sup>. However, these numbers do not reflect in the visibility of women within the design industry or design education<sup>14 15</sup>. Kat Ely conducted a survey of 27 design and engineering firms (with a total of 743 people) as part of the Blind by Design project and found 24.4% women staff but only 4.5% women with roles in design or engineering (2015)<sup>16</sup>. Sara De Bondt's research on women in European graphic design education (where women outnumber men) and graphic design studios, design conferences, design press, design exhibitions, design education, design award juries or design award winners (where men far outnumber women) also demonstrates that women are not getting similar amounts of jobs or recognition after completing their education as their male colleagues (see figures below).<sup>17</sup>



<sup>15</sup> Hironao Okahana, Keonna Feaster and Jeff Allum. *Graduate Enrollment and Degrees: 2005 to 2015*. (Washington, DC: Council of Graduate Schools), 5.

<sup>14</sup> European Commission. "She Figures 2012: Gender in Research and Innovation. Statistics and Indicators", (EU, 2012), Accessed 10 April 2017, [http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document\\_library/pdf\\_06/she-figures-2012\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document_library/pdf_06/she-figures-2012_en.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> Sara De Bondt, "A History of its own? Graphic Design and Feminism" (presentation at A History of its Own? Graphic Design and Feminism, Iaspis, Stockholm, 25 February 2012).

<sup>16</sup> Kat Ely, "The World is Designed for Men: how bias is built into our daily lives", (September 8, 2015), Accessed 10 April 2017, <https://medium.com/hh-design/the-world-is-designed-for-men-d06640654491>

<sup>17</sup> Sara De Bondt, "A History of its own?" 2012.



Figures 1- 6: Total women to male ratios where yellow is women and blue is male. 1. Total graduates, 2. Studios, 3. Books, 4. Press, 5. Exhibitions, 6. Conferences and Talks. By Sara De Bondt, “A History of its own? Graphic Design and Feminism” (presentation at A History of its Own? Graphic Design and Feminism, Iaspis, Stockholm, 25 February 2012).

The invisibility of female designers affects the life-path of individuals but also users and audiences of design. As feminist philosophers Donna Haraway<sup>18</sup> and Sandra Harding<sup>19</sup> have taught us for over 30 years, the bodies through which we produce knowledge matter. Each perspective is situated and partial. Male designers have different sets of interests than women designers. Their points of view and priorities are reflected in their work and then in designed artefacts, services and spaces. Ely describes the implications of the male-dominated design world where female drivers are 47% more likely to be severely injured in a car crash<sup>20</sup>. This statistic correlates to the standard use of a male crash test dummy in the automobile industry.<sup>21</sup> To address gender and other imbalances in the design industry and design education it is

<sup>18</sup> Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>19</sup> Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women’s Lives*. (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1991).

<sup>20</sup> Nicholas Bakalar, “Safety: Car Crashes Pose Greater Risk for Women”, *The New York Times*, October 31, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Kat Ely, “The World is Designed for Men”, 2015.

necessary to persistently ask what kinds of bodies and social backgrounds are missing so that we can pragmatically undo the exclusiveness of a profession that perpetuates symbolic violence<sup>22</sup>. As long as men continue to occupy the majority of positions in the design industry, design as a field will continue to reflect their assumptions and priorities. The theory of symbolic violence suggests women's invisibility within the design industry is not because women are not as good or dedicating the same energy to promote themselves as their male counterparts, but that there are structural, cultural and ideological reasons which undermine women's contributions. These reasons prevent women from achieving the same degree of career success in design as men.

### **RACISM<sup>23</sup>**

Where racist symbolic violence exists in design perpetrators typically deny any wrongdoing. The people at the brunt end of these discriminations are all too often forced to campaign vigorously against design that excludes or even insults them. A recent *The New York Times Sunday Review* article revealed how racist discrimination had been built into the machine-learning algorithms underlying the technology behind many "intelligent" systems that control the micro-targeting and segmentation of prospective users or customers<sup>24</sup>. For example, the software design of Nikon cameras has misrepresented images of Asians as 'blinking.' Hewlett-Packard's web camera software has been noted to struggle with identifying darker human skin tones. Users of Google's photo app have also in the past discovered within its digital photo albums the confusion of images of darker-skinned people for those of apes. Dimeji Onafuwa's son personally experienced multiple visits to his school office for a 'special photo sessions' after several failures to take his yearbook photo due to the improper calibration of the photographer's camera. This example exemplifies how symbolic violence may be a result of emotional carelessness brought about by inadequate understanding of the perspective of others, i.e. failing to acknowledge the racial exclusivity caused by the designer's cultural capital. What may at first glance seem neutral also reveals underlying assumptions and prejudices resulting from social distances between designers and the diverse audiences and users of design communication, artifacts and services. Bourdieu uses the term 'strategic condescension' to refer to the symbolic denial of such social distances between different social strata<sup>25</sup>. When white people say that they do not notice skin colour, a racialised critique argues that this is a claim that ignores social distances – and ultimately the privileges that are experienced by white people. A white designer might then exhibit strategic

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<sup>22</sup> Bianca Elzenbaume's phrasing, from our DRS2016 paper

<sup>23</sup> This section was written with Dimeji Onafuwa.

<sup>24</sup> Kate Crawford. "Artificial Intelligence's White Guy Problem". *The New York Times: Sunday Review*, June 25 2016.

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, "Social Space and Symbolic Power", *Sociological theory*, 7: 1, (1989), 16.

condescension by failing to design a Google application or a camera in ways work well with black skin causing offensive results on the Internet and in the Onafuwa's son's school.

## CLASSISM<sup>26</sup>

The term symbolic violence was coined by Bourdieu with his description of the ways that class distinctions are reproduced in society. Design is a primary means through which people distinguish themselves and display class allegiances. The design industry thrives on the fact that people regularly pay more for items that signify class pretensions. While these symbolic gestures take place, large shifts in the material circumstances of the lower classes are taking place as inequality rises dramatically around the globe<sup>27 28 29</sup>. Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson have demonstrated why raising inequality is bad for everyone (including the well-off) in their seminal book *The Spirit Level*.<sup>30</sup> The poverty that occurs today is not due to a lack of resources. This fact is hidden by neoliberal ideology and cultural narratives that obscure ideologically assumptions. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO] and the World Food Program [WFP] are both clear on the fact that there is enough food to provide everyone on the planet with the nutrients they need.<sup>31 32</sup> This does not happen because malnutrition and poverty in general today is a result of the disproportionate distributions of resources, the hoarding of wealth by elites and capitalist dynamics of concentrated wealth accumulation. The design industry is used by the establishment legitimise these processes with a wide spectrum of ideological work. For example, the D&AD New Blood Brief 'Rebrand the City' written by Venture Three Studio claims 'the City is vital to our economy' (2012). The brief asks students to 'Rebrand the City' because:

The World has changed, and the City of London has no decent PR. But we need the City to work – for our livelihoods, our savings and our student loans. Rebrand the City, and create a global campaign to showcase it to the world.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> This section was originally written with contributions from Noel Douglas (Boehnert, Onafuwa and Elzenbaumer, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> OECD. *In It Together: Why Less Inequality Benefits All*. (OECD Publishing, 2015).

<sup>29</sup> James Davies, Rodrigo Lluberas and Antonios Koutsoukis, *Global Wealth Report 2016*, (Zurich: Credit Suisse AG, 2016).

<sup>30</sup> Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, *The Spirit Level: Why Equality is Better for Everyone*, (London: Penguin, 2010).

<sup>31</sup> United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation [UN-FAO], FAO: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations, (New York: United Nations, 2017), Accessed April 10 2017, <http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2013/09/fao-food-and-agriculture-organization-of-the-united-nations>

<sup>32</sup> World Food Program [WFP], "Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)" (World Food Program, 2017) Accessed April 10 2017, <http://www.wfp.org/hunger/faqs>

<sup>33</sup> D&AD, "D&AD Student Awards 2012. A brief to rebrand the financial district of London", (no longer online).

This rosy narrative obscures the fact that the City of London brought the global financial system to a state of near collapse and then demanded public funds to recover. Following the deregulation of the financial industry and policies that encourage short-term profiteering and financialisation of different types of capital, the economic crisis of 2008-2009 required massive government banking bailouts. In the UK £1.1 trillion of public money was used to recapitalise private banks<sup>34</sup>. This unprecedented transfer of cash from the public sector to the financial sector caused a crisis of public finances and resulted in devastating austerity. Social programmes and the safety net are still being dismantled nearly a decade later as a consequence of this public subsidy to those who are already the wealthiest members of society.

Rather than addressing the specific policies and the deeper structural problems that created the financial and economic crisis, austerity policies force ordinary people to pay for the reckless actions of the financial class. Students were one of the first victims of the economic crisis as tuition fees tripled to bring UK tuitions fees to become one of highest in the world<sup>35</sup>. The D&AD brief challenged students to improve the public image of the very forces responsible for indebting them. The brief reinforces ideas about the financial class as wholesome and vital to the economy while obscuring the fact that they have managed to appropriate a huge portion of public wealth. The situation is similar in the United States:

From 2007-2010, median wealth – the wealth of those in the middle – fell by almost 40%, back to levels last seen in the early 1990s. All the wealth accumulation in this country has gone to the top. If the bottom shared equally in America’s increase in wealth, its wealth over the past two decades would have gone up 75 percent. Newly released data also show that those at the bottom suffered even worse than those in the middle. Before the crisis, the average wealth of the bottom fourth was a negative \$2,300. After the crisis, it had fallen six-fold, to a negative \$12,800...[meanwhile] Adjusted for inflation, median household income in 2011...was \$50,054, lower than it was in 1996 (\$50,661).<sup>36</sup>

The banking crisis has cost each person in the UK between £30,000 (94% of UK GDP). The bailout was less dramatic in the United States where the bailout totaled \$10,000 per person (25% of GDP)<sup>37</sup>. These enormous government handouts to the financial sector not been accompanied by adequate changes to the financial

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<sup>34</sup> National Audit Office (NAO) “Taxpayer support for UK banks: FAQs”, Accessed April 10 2017, <http://www.nao.org.uk/highlights/taxpayer-support-for-uk-banks-faqs/>

<sup>35</sup> Peter Walker, “England has highest university tuition fees in industrialised world, survey finds”, *The Guardian*, November 25, 2015, Accessed April 10 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2015/nov/24/uk-has-highest-undergraduate-tuition-fees-in-industrialised-world-survey-finds>

<sup>36</sup> Joseph Stiglitz, *The Price of Inequality*, (London: WW Norton & Company, 2013), xii.

<sup>37</sup> Steve Schifferes, “Crisis ‘cost us \$10, 000 each’”, (BBC News, 2009), Accessed April 10 2017, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/8248434.stm>

practices and policies that created the crisis. Nevertheless, young graphic designers are encouraged by A&AD to design a public relations campaign to deflect attention from these facts and whitewash the public image of the financial class. This D&AD brief is one of many examples of design reinforcing elitist class power.

## **ECOISM**

Symbolic violence is evident in representations of nature where truthful representations of the state of the environment compete with design characterising nature as infinitely exploitable. Design functions as symbolic violence where it is used to obscure human-caused harms to ecological systems and where it reproduces anti-environmental (ecoist) discourses that legitimise these problems. More specifically ecological harms are typically the result of the actions of industrial policies, corporate activities and the actions of individual people. Since environmental problems ultimately impact people by causing poor health, diseases and natural disasters – often far removed from where the decisions that lead to environmental harms take place: ecoism is also a form of violence. Anti-environmental discourses can be linked to other forms of oppression with the neologisms ‘ecoist’ and ‘ecoism.’ Ecoism is like racism, sexism, colonialism and imperialism because it is a way of thinking that enables violence toward nature and the people who depend on the natural world for survival.

An example of design as ecoist symbolic violence can be seen in the design created for the Hopenhagen campaign, an initiative by the International Advertising Association in support of the United Nations at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP-15) in Copenhagen December 2009. Hopenhagen used the skills of designers to create a spectacle of corporate concern with no agenda for change on an order that would feasibly address climate change. Meanwhile climate activists in Copenhagen for the COP-15 protested that the negotiations were subject to corporate capture that effectively prevented the adoption of a binding climate agreement. Several activist groups found the Hopenhagen campaign so offensive and damaging that they made the campaign itself the object of their protest. The Hopenhagen campaign obscured the debate on climate change at the UNFCCC Copenhagen Climate Conference 2009 with design and social marketing strategies that presented corporations as leading a people’s campaign against climate change.<sup>38</sup>

Natural resources and ecological spaces are used without concern for unintended consequences until environmental problems become so severe they can no longer be ignored. Responding to ecoist symbolic violence requires a major revision of human-ecological relationships as a foundation for the design of sustainable ways of living on this planet. The concept of symbolic violence in design is an analytical

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<sup>38</sup> Joanna Boehnert, “Hopenhagen: Design Activism as an Oxymoron”, (paper presented at the Design History Society conference DHS2011: Design Activism, Barcelona, September 7-10, 2011).

perspective for identifying and addressing design reproducing unsustainable conditions. Design reproduces ecoist assumptions that enable ecological ruin. Ecoism is an 'ism' where oppression first impacts the non-human natural world including all the various life forms and ecosystems that make it possible for the Earth to sustain us all.

## **RESISTING DEPOLITICISATION**

This list of 'isms' describes the many ways in which the concerns and needs of groups of people and the non-human natural world are dismissed with symbolic violence in design. Designers have a responsibility to resist the false narratives of design practice without politics. All design embodies assumptions and many of these of these are political (in terms of whose interests are served and whose interests are denied). The sooner designers acknowledge the implications of depoliticised design, the more deliberate we can be about reducing prejudices embedded in design practice. Towards this end, Dimeji Onafuwa, Jabe Bloom and Teju Cole organised a workshop titled 'Privileged Participation: Allying with Decoloniality in a Difficult Climate' at the Carnegie Mellon University's School of Design. This workshop aimed to provide a practical framework to help designers work with victims of structural, cultural and individual forms of violence.

## **A FRAMEWORK FOR ALLIES: ALLYSHIP, COLONIALITY, AND INTERSECTIONALITY<sup>39</sup>**

The Framework for Allies was developed as a response to issues of coloniality of power and knowledge in design and the need for intersectional approaches. In the 1980s Anibal Quijano conjugated coloniality of knowledge with coloniality of power in politics and the economic spheres. With colonisation comes historical erasure, cultural repression and a totalitarian notion of modernity. Walter Mignolo expanded on Quijano's ideas by indicating that problems with coloniality transcend knowledge, politics and economics alone to intersect with gender, sexuality and race.<sup>40</sup> Paraphrasing Quijano, Mignolo sees coloniality as "the invisible, constitutive side of modernity, and not merely derivative of modernity".<sup>41</sup> Mignolo's argument claims coloniality and modernity are interlinked and suggests that West-centric design – often considered to be an offspring of modernity – needs to be "to de-linked" from coloniality through a pluriversity of perspectives, or alternatives to a single reality concept. These alternatives present our world through different cultural lenses or subjective representations. For such de-linking to occur, scholars and

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<sup>39</sup> This section was written primarily by Dimeji Onafuwa.

<sup>40</sup> Anibal Quijano, "Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad" (1989) - translated in Mignolo's work.

<sup>41</sup> Mignolo, Walter D. "Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity, the logic of coloniality and the grammar of de-coloniality." *Cultural studies* 21, 2-3 2007: 449-514.

practitioners should serve as allies that lend voices to these “multiple reals”.<sup>42</sup> The intrinsic privilege that allies have puts them in a position to enable opportunities for more voices and different perspectives needed to address the symbolic violence of the ‘isms’ described in the first part of this paper.

## **THE FRAMEWORK**

The Framework for Allies Conversation and Framework was conducted in two parts: 1) CONVERSATION, and 2) SCENARIOS, NARRATIVES AND FRAMING. The framework was introduced through a participatory process. This introduction serves as a precursor to a series of follow-up workshops that will take place over the next few years. Participants had rich conversations moderated by Teju Cole, Jabe Bloom and Dimeji Onafuwa. These conversations have helped further refine the allyship framework.

## **PART 1: CONVERSATION**

We started with a discussion on the power implications of intersectional perspectives on decoloniality. Author and activist Teju Cole presented an exposition on the landscapes of literature, art, photography and design as conduits for expressing colonial difference. Postcolonial authors such as Ben Okri and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie serve as allies to each other. Other allies within “the colonial matrix of power”<sup>43</sup> may also be engaged to participate. The concept of erasure was introduced and participants looked at ways photography, art, and particularly design participate in making the experience of the colonialied/oppressed invisible either explicitly (conscious erasure) – for example, through neoliberal policies – or symbolically (unconscious erasure) – reinforcing hegemony through cultural capital and emotional carelessness (or symbolic violence). The conversation also touched on the challenges with and expectations of becoming an ally. An important insight is the relationship of allyship to power – since allies shed certain privileges and cede power to ensure that less visible forms of oppression are made more visible.

## **PART 2: SCENARIOS, NARRATIVES AND FRAMING**

The second section started with a presentation of unique scenarios representing intersectional issues relating to sexism, racism and xenophobia. These synopses were given to participants to allow them to work together to reframe these problems in groups. We used the Ally Skills Workshop Framework – created by Mary Gardiner and Valerie Aurora to support women facing discrimination in open technology culture (a heavily male-dominated field). Participants were given three framing categories to work within: Speech (or advocacy), Actions (or activism) and Practice (or allyship). They were then encouraged to map out some of

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<sup>42</sup> Arturo Escobar, "Transiciones: a Space for Research and Design for Transitions to the Pluriverse," *Design Philosophy Papers* 13, 1 (2015): 18.

<sup>43</sup> Walter D. Mignolo. "Delinking: The rhetoric of modernity": 449-514.

the challenges they identified in the narratives within at least one of these categories. The goal of this process is to continue to build on this framework. Ideas are mapped on a matrix in an effort to understand how conscious (explicit) and unconscious (symbolic) forms of oppression might translate over social scales and levels of intervention.

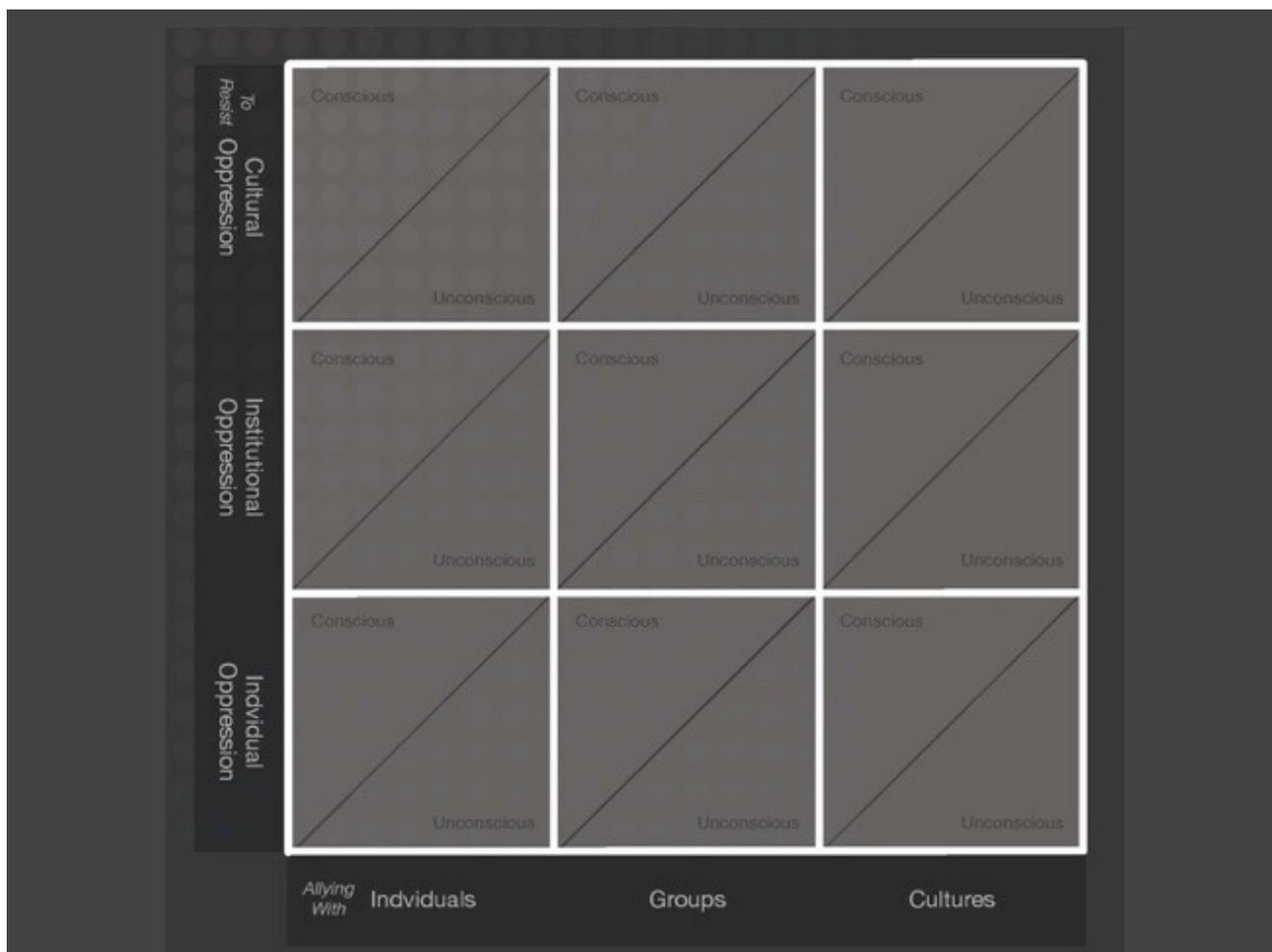


Figure 7: Mapping exercise showing scale and dynamic of oppression and potential for allyship. Inspired by the Winterhouse Symposium Social Pathways format.

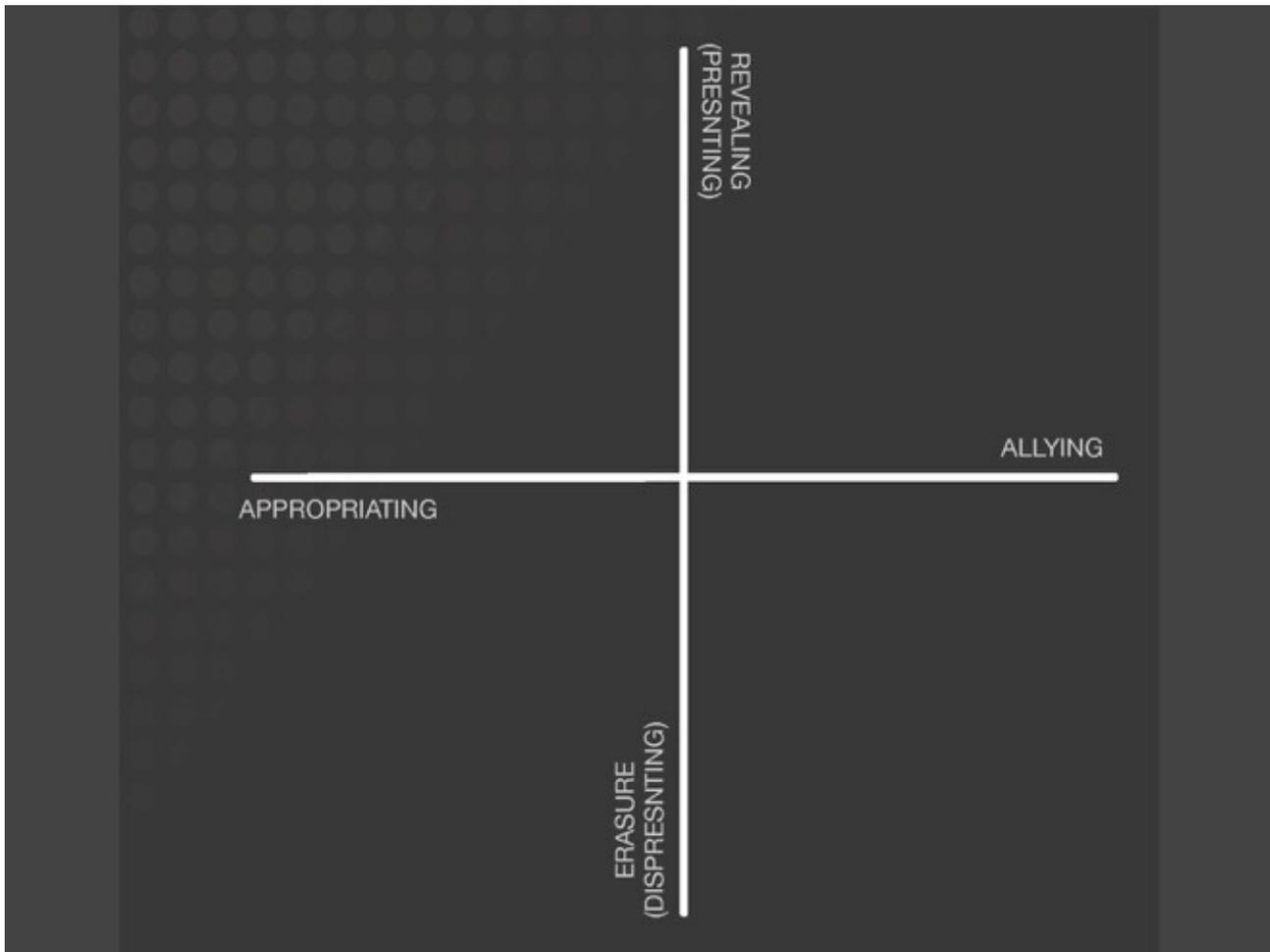


Figure 8: Two-by-two matrix showing representing the difference between allies and appropriators and how either strategy may affect platform building.

## CORE QUESTIONS AND FOLLOW UP WORK

Questions raised by this workshop related to the roles of allies in decolonising design. We considered the benefits as well as the negative ramifications of becoming allies. These ideas will be further explored to better understand the role of designers as platform builders in overcoming symbolic violence by working with the allyship model for movements relating to decoloniality and intersectionality.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of symbolic violence describes how design reproduces ideas that result in structural injustices that cause actual violence against people and the planet. Through symbolic violence, individuals learn to consider unjust conditions as natural and even come to value oppressive customs. Symbolic violence normalises structural violence. The Framework for Allies allows us to better understand the role of designers in minimising symbolic violence. It creates a platform for collective responsibility of privileged practitioners to continue to engage those outside of West-centric spheres to participate in work that challenges symbolic

violence in design. A series of workshops will be conducted using this framework across different design conferences with the intent to iterate the process, message and understanding of the role of allies in building platforms that might alleviate the effects of symbolic violence in design.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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