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#Decolonise!

Design educators reflecting on the call for the decolonisation of education

Design Education as Woke Work

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Abstract

Ashraf Jamal (2016b, p. 68) regards the work Us and them, the killer of the world by artist Simphiwe Ndzube (2015) as an important signifier of the sociopolitical turmoil in the national psyche which openly erupted in the Rhodes Must Fall campaign in March of that year. Jamal highlights the essential work of interrogating social realities such as inequality on a structural level (which he argues this artwork accomplishes). He also reminds us that the dynamic of 'us and them' does not passively play out in institutions such as universities, invested in sustaining neoliberal interests as they are, but is actively replicated in such institutions. The work of dismantling the 'us and them' dynamic that consequently endures in South African (and global) societies and higher education, thus entails critically assessing the complicity of such institutions in reproducing existing injustices. In her academic work, African-Canadian theorist Christina Sharpe **similarly highlights the importance of** scholarship as intellectual activism that advances social justice. Such engagements can be seen as attempts to decolonise social institutions, including universities. **In this spirit, the current paper assesses design praxis as a broader sociopolitical phenomenon reflective of current social biases, and questions whether design can escape the imperatives of neoliberalism (directly implicated in the perpetuation of inequality), not only in terms of individual good will to do so, but structurally. Are there examples of decolonised design suitable for inclusion and validation in a decolonised curriculum?** Such design would have to demonstrate more than an attempt to ameliorate the effects of social injustice, but rather seek to pro-actively dismantle the apparatuses of exclusion. It would have to position itself as 'design by the people for the people' in order to escape the us / them binary, and do its work on the sociopolitical fabric as socially engaged design: design as woke work. A brief overview of initiatives (such as Ecoart Uganda, a community based project which has used recycled junk to create public spaces the community are proud of, and the African Robots project by Ralph Borland, which combines affordable robotics with the wire art of South African and migrant Zimbabwean street artists), facilitates the exploration of design from an alternative perspective which foregrounds social justice and that potentially repositions design praxis, and design education, as woke work.

Keywords:

Christina Sharpe, decolonised design, higher education, socially engaged design, woke work.

Introduction

The DEFSA 2017 #Decolonise! call states: “As design educators, we need to interrogate our role in decolonising design education,” and the call frames such interrogation as a moral and intellectual act. The aim of such praxis (morally directed interrogation of an existing field or discipline, in this case design education), is furthermore forwarded as a means by which to effect actual change. The current paper is a response to this call as an invitation to honest reflection and to action – two terms (reflection and action) not interpreted here as indicating the tired and imaginary theory / praxis divide, but as two kinds of praxis: thinking is a verb. In order to imagine what decolonised design education might resemble (in order to bring it about), it is necessary to clarify what is understood when referring to ‘colonised design’ and design education, at least for the current author. This differentiation between colonised and decolonised design and design education is then applied to a brief critical analysis of examples of current design praxis with a view to demonstrating a possible critical framework for receiving and conceptualising design in higher education.

Critical analysis entails the evaluative appraisal of texts which constitute “the claims made by … theorists, ‘experts’, official bodies, … [and] journalists,” as well as by designers, educators, and peers. The outcome is a judgment or conclusion based on “a balanced reading and overview of what other people have written,” in tandem with “experience gained in the field … [and personal] knowledge and observations” (Gould 2011). Critical analysis is combined here with content analysis, in turn defined as an analysis of texts and examples of visual culture which is interpretive but also systematic and rigorous with a defensible internal logic (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, p. 1277). Lastly, the critical and content analysis applied here draws on (or reacts to) the theory of South African cultural analyst and lecturer Ashraf Jamal, and African-Canadian scholar Christina Sharpe, particularly her work on race and diaspora. The current exploration is written from a visual culture perspective broadly, but it is hoped that the observations made here might be useful in interrogating the status of decolonialism as it is currently unfolding in higher education in South Africa, in the creative industries centered on aspects of design praxis, and in design education.

Us and them

In a June 2016 review of the artwork *Us and them, the killer of the world* (a mixed media work created by artist Simphiwe Ndzube in 2015), Jamal seems to constructively engage with the Rhodes Must Fall campaign,[1] which he describes as “a long-overdue material and psychological struggle against the corrosive suppression of black agency” (Jamal 2016b, p. 68). He furthermore provides a useful framing of the context within which the Rhodes Must Fall campaign unfolded, namely the dehumanisation and instrumentalisation of designated sectors of society that neo-liberal capitalist ideology in tandem with western supremacy enables. In other words, Jamal clarifies the link between current post-colonial protest praxis, the higher education landscape in South Africa, and the meta-framework within which these exist, namely the late-modern manifestation of the Enlightenment project. Jamal highlights the point that Ndzube makes in his artwork, that neo-liberalism is predicated on a deadly othering. I adopt this us / them framing of the current struggle to decolonise higher

[1] The Rhodes Must Fall campaign was launched at the University of Cape Town in March 2015. Protesters agitated for the removal of a commemorative statue of Cecil John Rhodes, which served as affirmation of the lingering validation of western history and culture over African history and culture. This validation was furthermore seen to be perpetuated despite the lingering effects of colonialism in South Africa: Rhodes has been described as “an architect of apartheid” (Castle 2016). The statue was removed on the 9th of April 2015, but the campaign became a symbol and catalyst of the broader drive to decolonise higher education.

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education, and society, as a useful if potentially problematic way of conceptualising what a *de*colonised education and society might resemble, and how it might be achieved.[2]

To elaborate, Jamal (2016b, p. 70; emphasis added) cogently observes that "at the dark root of our liberalised economy there remains the acute sense that black lives *remain* marginalised, expendable, irrelevant." In his presentation *Africa will give the world a human face*, he reiterates the question as to what fifty years of decolonialism in Africa and twenty-three years of post-apartheid life in South Africa actually means in the face of such lingering black erasure (Jamal 2016a). Tangible aftereffects of the way in which Africa was carved up into territories parceled out to European sovereignties during the Berlin Conference, relegating these territories to Empire's "economic depots and … timeshares," endure (Jamal 2016a). For instance, existing kingdoms were summarily split apart, and vast territories, utterly unrelated in terms of population, custom, climate or history, were 'united' as national territories with regions that are still agitating for independence (Sèbe 2014).[3]

It thus comes as a shock when Jamal (2016a), in trying to clarify what he means by the term humanism, states "I'm not talking here about the moronic endeavour of decolonising our campuses because that is yet another nihilistic product, a black essentialist dangerous product which is actually destroying the fundament of education … the current black consciousness movement knows nothing about humanity." Jamal does not expand on this analysis, and his conflation of nihilism and activism remains mysterious. It ultimately transpires that, for Jamal, the particularity of a resistance position (along the vectors of race, gender, class, etc.) is at odds with 'true' humanity, to be understood as a singularity that has the power to unite us all, (as long as 'we' cooperate and don't insist on our 'identities'). The inconsistency of railing against identity politics for being mired in essentialism whilst advocating for the ultimate essentialism of a global humanism, also evades Jamal. It is here that Christina Sharpe's interrogation of systematised black exclusion becomes more helpful in thinking through lingering inequalities toward a deeper decolonisation. Engaging with Sharpe's work assists in probing levels of actual transformation in the 'post-colonies,' including South Africa.

On blackness

Sharpe's work on diasporic slavery is relevant to a consideration of decolonialism in South Africa, which cannot commence without a reflection on apartheid, an anti-black colonial project similarly dehumanising and enduring in its effects.[4] In her work *In the wake: on blackness and being* (2016), Sharpe uses the term 'wake' to refer to several aspects of living as a black person in diaspora, thus in the aftermath of slavery. The term takes on a compound meaning, each iteration a metaphor for aspects of historical and current black experience: the disturbance in water caused by the passing of a ship or the dragging of a body; a vigil for the dead; "air currents behind a body of flight"; an eddy in water or air that marks disturbed flow; but also a mode of consciousness, a state of wakefulness, of being 'woke' (Sharpe 2016,

[2] In adopting this framework, the us / them dynamic is not *endorsed*, but utilised as a means by which to make a point within a context where the stark inequalities that still imbue South African society remain largely normalised. The adoption of a neoliberal stance is complicit in this normalisation of exclusion. Using a racialised framework similarly does not endorse racism, but highlights the fact that it exists.

3 Azawad was declared an autonomous state by Tuareg rebels who conducted an armed struggle in 2011/2012 to secure its independence from Mali. This uprising amounted to the fourth Tuareg rebellion in post-colonial Mali, signalling irresolvable contention between Mali's Saharan and sub-Saharan populations.

4 Prof Anthony Bogues in And what about the human?: Freedom, human emancipation, and the radical imagination describes both slavery and apartheid as instances of 'historical catastrophe,' and elaborates as follows: "I am reaching for a way to both describe and name a human experience that cannot simply be understood as political domination or various forms of labor exploitation. Colonial power, racial slavery, and apartheid … were specific forms of domination in which power pressed flesh, in which the spectacle of violence was the everyday ordinary, making the living corpse existence always a 'state of emergency'. For the 'native' … Being-in-the-world was constituted by a series of repetitive traumas" (Bogues 2012, pp. 37-38).

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pp. 3-10; Sharpe, cited in Terrefe 2016, para. 71). The term's layered application, referring, as it does, to slave ships, to the bodies of slaves (alive and dead) tossed overboard, states of flight and agitation, the burden and care of mourning, and the conscious demeanor with which the sum total of these iterations of black life might be borne in order to survive and exceed them, furthermore foregrounds three significant considerations. In formulating the term, Sharpe means to emphasise, firstly, that blackness thus described is not limited to 'those in diaspora,' but is equally applicable to a global ecumene of the exploited: the contemporary collateral damage of neo-colonialism. She notes: "Living in the wake on a global level means living the disastrous time and effects of continued marked migrations, Mediterranean and Caribbean disasters, trans-American and -African migration, structural adjustment imposed by the International Monetary Fund that continues imperialisms / colonialisms, and more. … Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence" (Sharpe 2016, p. 15).

Sharpe's second point is related to the first (which clarifies the ubiquity of the wake – its reach), and highlights the all-enveloping, structural *reality* of the wake. She refers to this ontological, deep-structural ground of black existence as the Weather: that is, "antiblackness as total climate," the social engine that drives the ongoing production of "the conventions of antiblackness" presently and into the future (Sharpe, cited in Terrefe 2016, para. 146; Sharpe 2016, p. 21). It is this aspect of the wake (its continuous re-production into the present and future, and its current ontological inescapability), that I want to foreground in this call to decolonisation of higher education 'after' apartheid. Sharpe's writing seems to be an attempt to negate or bypass a specific kind of denial, or escape – a crucial endeavour that constitutes the only foundation from which we can start the work of decolonising our institutions and disciplines as educators, if we wish to do so with intent. She asks: "What happens when we proceed as if we *know* this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we … attempt to speak," when we truly "*inhabit* that Fanonian 'zone of non-Being'?" (Sharpe 2016, pp. 7, 20). What is activated by such an acknowledgement of the 'ground' – the ongoing social, structural reality of global and local exclusion of people of colour – is the possibility of proceeding towards its negation: the radical acceptance of the *status quo* as the first step toward its nullification. To live and work in, and against, the wake – to be woke – is "[t]o say I know where I stand, where I am placed, and therefore I can act from there" (Sharpe, cited in Terrefe 2016, para. 73).

The third concept encapsulated by the complex invocation of the term 'wake' of importance to the current discussion relates to my personal, embodied engagement with the task of decolonisation. Sharpe (cited in Terrefe 2016, para. 144) aptly observes that "[w]e can all be said to be in the wake but we are not all in the wake in the same way." It is essential for me to interrogate what it might mean for me, as a white, female educator, to grapple with the legacy of colonialism and apartheid in an education system that is becoming increasingly instrumentalising, professionalised and commodified – centred around issues of financial sustainability and the generation of third stream income in ways which fundamentally threaten critical thought and deflect time and energy away from attempts to clarify (much less live in the spirit of), such thought. These points of reflection demonstrate that, in order to effect decolonisation of any sort, the ground upon which the colonised institution – in the current case, the university – has been built, needs to be brought into focus: where is it that we stand?

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On work

Sharpe's work is highly personal, and her accounts of loss and adversity concretise the notion of living in the wake in a way that encourages an equal amount of honesty from her reader. In contrast to Jamal's curious call for a global humanity, Sharpe's is an ability to tell a story "'capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction'" (Sharpe 2016, p. 8). Such abstraction enables the easy dismissal of voices not speaking from the centre, but also facilitates a self-protective denial and amnesia, both 'ours,' and 'theirs,' albeit from contrasting perspectives, and with vastly differing stakes. Both abstraction and amnesia enable ongoing oppression and exclusion. The work of decolonisation hence includes observing specifics in the present, and the courage to remember, and contest.

The observations of fellow black African scholar Keguro Macharia, to whom Sharpe refers (see <https://twitter.com/hystericalblkns/status/895008146745421824>), throws some light on work and life in colonised academia. Macharia (2013) recalls "the surprise on some professors' faces when [she] understood what they said," and further lists her reasons for abandoning a career as an academic: "unsubtle comments from academic peers that I had received 'special' favors … banal and uncomprehending racism of white students who spoke of blacks as 'they' and 'them' and complained about 'their broken English' and 'bad dialect' … a system that served black students badly, promising an education that it failed to deliver, condemning them to repeat classes, to drop out, to believe they were stupid … conference panels where blackness was dismissed as 'simple,' 'reactive,' 'irrelevant,' 'done'".

Lest Sharpe's and Macharia's experiences be discounted as irrelevant to the current South African context, I reluctantly endeavour to add some observations of my own: the more or less palpable dismissal of female authority and of women in general; the valorization by peers of a mild (friendly, un-demanding) manner, frequent demonstrations of deference, and a self-censoring modulation of expression, when female-bodied; the dark anger of a critical mass of white colleagues manifesting as contemptuous cynicism, withdrawal, or claims of a generalised social and cultural victimisation; barefaced references to the primitive customs of Africans and Muslims, with a clear understanding of western (white), liberal, secular culture as the only civilised culture; casually shared comments such as "It's very nice in central-Europe, there aren't many blacks"; traumatised reactions to the call for the Africanisation of the curriculum with indignant proclamations such as "what about the Fabergé egg?!"; my own initial frustration with black scholars and philosophers for constantly problematising race when it was more comforting (and personally exonerating) to believe in a warm and fuzzy but fictional togetherness and equality; conspicuous deficits in empathy – alarming in the context of education; ongoing discrepancies in access to education, funding and basic amenities along the axis of race, conveniently regarded as indicative of a class division; the uncritical demonisation of dissent and of students; the tacit or overt acceptance of race as an unspeakable and unthinkable subject; and the less overt yet unmistakable lack of validation, in and outside the lecture hall, of ways of knowing, self-expression, and being not aligned with western norms.

I voice these experiences in some detail, encouraged by Sharpe's unflinching engagement with the current real, as I have come to the following conclusion: decolonising the curriculum, university, and our respective disciplines as practiced and taught cannot be based on superficial, meaningless, and dishonest lip-service, but begins with a sober assessment of where we are. True transformation entails a kind of principled intervention that can only commence once we acknowledge our respective roles (us / them; denial / amnesia) in endlessly replicating the structural dynamic of the university and the classroom in its current form.

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It is, subsequent to the basic recognition of the nature of the university and of its curricula, important to ask whether there are examples of decolonised design that we may hold up as representative of good (and socially relevant) praxis which furthers the aim of social justice.[5] Design 'by the people for the people' might be able to escape the us / them binary, as well as the machinations of western supremacy, and could be referred to as socially engaged design: design as woke work. The last section of this paper critically assesses examples of praxis in order to sound their decolonising potential.

Design as woke work

The conceptualisation of design as woke work emphasises praxis in a particular mode of consciousness, namely being woke to social inequality and its causes. It also valorises the *work* that goes into design as a form of social deliberation or mode of critique and exploration rather than as an economic enterprise. For this reason, the current discussion focuses on design projects rather than products, and a number of the projects subsequently also span a range of interrelated disciplines such as socially embedded visual art, community architecture, craft and design.

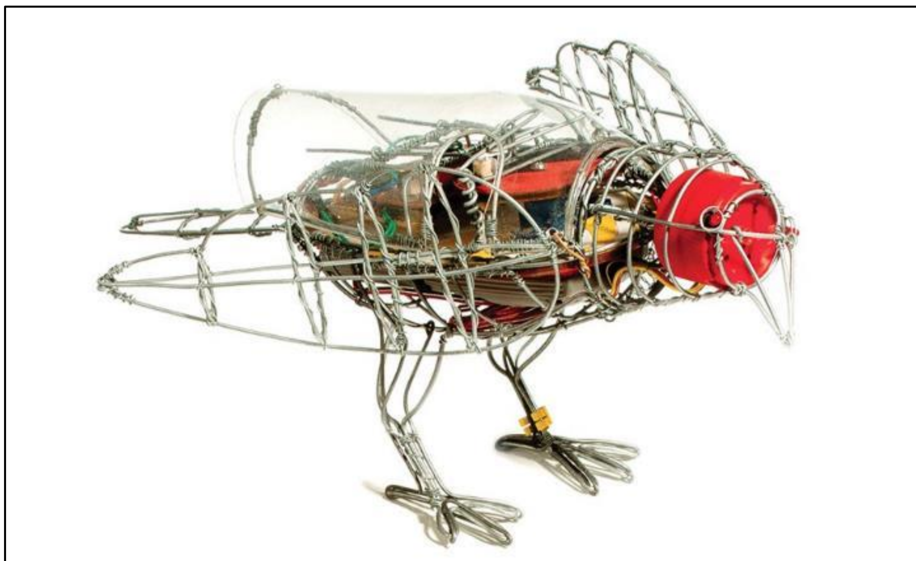

Figure 1: Ralph Borland in collaboration with Lewis Kaluzi, *Starling 1.2*, 2015, wire, found objects, servo motor, toy parts (Cromhout n.d.).

The *African Robots* project by Ralph Borland, in collaboration with South African and Zimbabwean wire artists, claims to address the disparities in access to education as well as the empowerment of street artists and migrants through skills enhancement: Shorkend (2016, p. 170) describes it as relevant for "ground-level social development." Borland studied Fine Art at undergraduate level and went on to obtain a multidisciplinary PhD from the School of Engineering at Trinity College, Dublin (Cromhout n.d.). Appealing wire figures, mostly of animals such as birds and frogs, are combined with found objects such as plastic bottles. These are audio-visually animated by means of discarded cellphone parts (batteries) and re-used Mp3 players (Borland, cited in Greenwood 2017). See Figure 1. Wire artists can access the electronic parts from informal cell-phone repair networks, making their

[5] The pursuit of social justice is interpreted here as congruent with the task of decolonisation whilst acknowledging that an actually achieved decolonisation does not necessarily signify the disappearance of inequality. Such injustices can, however, only be addressed once / if they materialise in a verifiably decolonised region, of which there are no current examples.

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production of the robots financially viable and sustainable, and obviating Borland's continued involvement or 'support.' This sustainability compares favourably to similar projects aimed at social engagement, such as the *Mapula* embroidery project situated in the impoverished Winterveld. Without its coordinators, who advise the makers in terms of themes, and who market the products on their behalf to galleries, corporations and craft shops, projects such as *Mapula* would in all probability cease to exist. (See Schmahmann 2002 for more information on the *Mapula* project). Borland's work demonstrates the necessity of making use of existing outlets (street art sales) and grass roots networks. However, the paternalistic aspect of the empowerment of unschooled black creative practitioners by white benefactors with formal education, remains. This observation is not meant to cast aspersions on the *Robots* project (clearly beneficial to the crafters and migrants involved),[6] but to bring into view the reasons for the necessity of a project such as this in the first place, namely the lingering disparity in access to education, finance, and career options along a racial axis.

Somewhat wider in scope, the Basural Foundation (previously known as Junkitechture), hosts a site on which they share environmentally friendly projects (not their own), that make use of recycled and upcycled 'junk.' The term *basural* means 'dump' or 'landfill' (Basural n.d.). Projects hosted on the site range in scale from fashion apparel to the built environment, and whilst some (such as earrings made from 'slices' of colourful wooden pencils), would only nominally contribute to environmental greening and embody the concept of greening rather more symbolically, others seem to earnestly grapple with environmental and socio-economic challenges.

The *PHZ2* project (Essen, Germany, 2008-2010) by Dratz & Dratz Architects, highlighted on the Basural site, consisted of a terraced temporary structure of just under 190m^2 built from bales of recycled paper. Comprising an experiment with paper as building material, the frame was able to weather the climate well over its two year existence (Figure 2). The architects plan to apply the technique to more permanent structures, and the prospects seem promising (Espinosa Cancino 2017). The built structure can itself be recycled back into other useable products (Figure 3). The costs are not made available on the project site, but one can presume that clients able to afford the work fall in a niche demographic, and the overall environmental and social impact is still negligible to non-existent.

[6] Borland has received grant funding from the National Arts Council with which he plans to open an 'academy' for street artists and migrants teaching them the skills he has shared with a handful of street artists, on a broader scale (Greenwood 2017).

Figure 2: Dratz & Dratz Architects, *PHZ2 Project*, 2008-2010, Essen, Germany, recycled paper, wood (Basural n.d.).

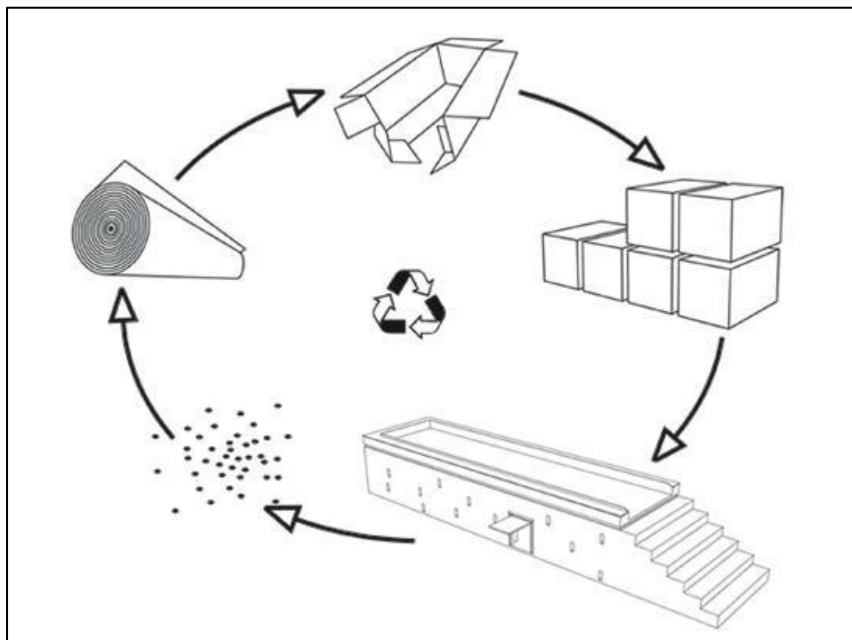

Figure 3: Dratz & Dratz Architects, *PHZ2 Project*, concept sketch (Basural n.d.).

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Figure 4: Gregory Kloehn, two houses from the *Homeless Homes Project*, ongoing, Oakland, California, found materials (Azzarello 2014).

On the opposite end of the scale in terms of affordability and social restitution are mobile shelters for homeless people, built by Gregory Kloehn as part of the Homeless Homes Project (Figure 4). Based in Oakland California, Kloehn's project started after an extended period of observing the ways in which homeless people would rebuild their makeshift settlements after waves of municipal clean-up operations (Seligman 2015). Inspired by their ingenuity and tenacity, he set out to build small scale mobile homes making use of the materials commonly utilised by them: the flotsam of urban life thrown out by more permanently settled city inhabitants. Kloehn has lived in his own hand built homes to see whether they are suitable, as one of his main concerns is the restoration of dignity and a sense of heightened safety for the residents (Azzarello 2014). He visits the owners regularly and takes note of any suggested improvements: one such innovation is the installation of a system which funnels rain water into a small tank fitted with a hose (see Figure 5). By 2015, Kloehn had built and given away twenty-five homes (Hooton 2015). As with the *Robots* project discussed above, the disparity in agency and levels of social inclusion and mobility between Kloehn and the residents of the homes he builds, remain. While the shelters provide increased safety and privacy, they have an unfortunate resemblance to kennels – a shocking observation that indicts not so much Kloehn's intentions and actions, but the stark dehumanisation of sectors of modern society. And, again, the deep-structural sociopolitical dynamic through which such exclusion and dehumanisation are effected, prevail unscathed.

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Figure 5: Gregory Kloehn, a home from the *Homeless Homes Project*, ongoing, Oakland, California (Alfaro 2015).

The last project mentioned here, facilitated by Ecoart Uganda, brings this brief appraisal of potentially socially relevant design praxis to a close. Ecoart Uganda was founded by artist Ruganzu Bruno Tusingwire in 2010 as an art collective that focuses on creating ecological awareness and community resilience (Gilmore 2015). The specific project highlighted here, namely the coordination of the building of a playground (or 'amusement park') from refuse by members of a shanty community in Kampala, was submitted as a curatorial project by Ugandan writer and curator Robinah Nansubuga to the Visible Projects Awards in 2015. She defines a socially engaged project in terms of its ability to impart skills and create "ownership for the community in which the project operates, whilst being able to survive without donor funding" (Nansubuga 2015, p. 198). The park was built in Kampala's Kireka neighborhood from discarded plastic bottles, cans, tyres, obsolete technological artefacts and other structural materials, and it became the first of several examples of similar community-built parks across Uganda and elsewhere in Africa (see Figure 7).

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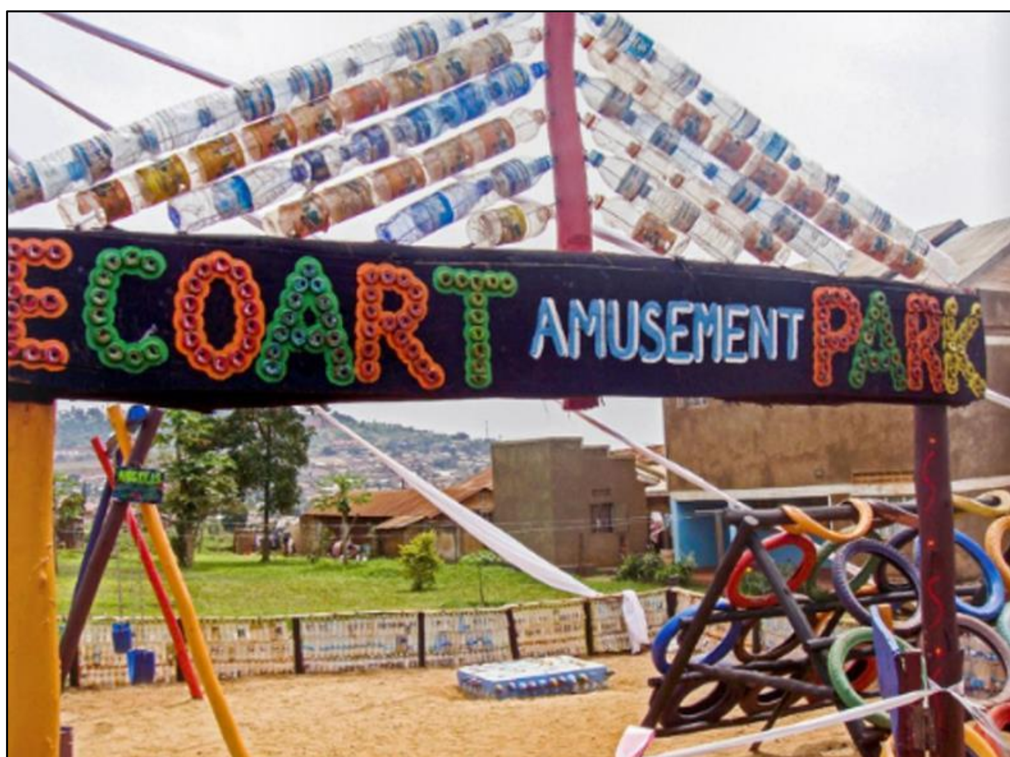

Figure 6: Ecoart Uganda in collaboration with the Kampala community, *Ecoart Amusement Park*, 2013, found materials, Kampala, Uganda (Ruganzo Bruno Gallery, 2015).

Tusingwire's aim is to mitigate the gap between the rich and poor, evidenced by the juxtaposed cities and slums of Uganda and elsewhere, to humanise the urban landscape and to create a sense of social cohesion (Ruganzu Bruno Tusingwire Ecoart Project 2015). This communally built park combines elements of community architecture, socially engaged design, artistic social commentary, and activism. As such, it evades design as the creation of an increasing flood of semi-necessary products which function to oil the cogs of capitalism.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to grapple with the theory and praxis of decolonising higher education and the discipline of design by critically appraising firstly the institutional landscape itself, and secondly, a number of examples of design, broadly defined as such. The examples were chosen as potentially representative of praxis that evades current exclusionary and elitist frameworks, and that, as part of a decolonised curriculum, might be validated from an alternative perspective: that is, from a point of departure where human ways of being revolve around activities other than ownership and ease of consuming as a meta-good. An attempt has been made to directly confront the prevailing and lingering biases in higher education regarding blackness itself, and the forms of cultural expression suitable for critical discussion and emulation. The notion of conscientised, principled effort, which can also be described as woke work, has formed the basis of the current analysis of what might be required for the effective renewal of design education in the neo-colonised sphere.

The examples discussed here, however, neither evade nor change the over-arching system in which they were created, and all were initiated by individuals who had access to further training. This leads to the disturbing possibility that the university might never be able to

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fulfil its envisaged role as a decolonised institution, as it merely serves to replicate existing social relations – us, and them. The design discipline, itself, would in all probability similarly cease to exist in its current form outside a capitalist system. The question arises: to what extent can the university, and the disciplines taught there, remain intact when, for instance, production and consumption are no longer needed to sustain capitalism, or when the elite no longer mobilises institutions of higher learning to replicate itself, or when woke work has succeeded in its conscientising and liberating task?

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