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Foundations of Information 24/FA-INFO-601-07

Book Review Final

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13 December 2024

Book Review on *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook*

In *Decolonizing Design: A Cultural Justice Guidebook*, Tunstall transforms her extensive experience, knowledge, and scholarly insights from her interactions with Indigenous communities and decolonial practices to guide the ongoing justice movements within the design field. The book is deeply personal, filled with passion, threaded by the author's professional trajectory, interweaving personal references with historical critiques to disclose the complexities of decolonizing design and offer a practical toolkit for its implementation. Thus, it is impossible to understand the book without knowing the author. Elizabeth (Dori) Tunstall is a design anthropologist of (at least) seventh-generation African American heritage (9). She has worked for institutions in the United States, Australia, and Canada, and was the Dean of the Faculty of Design at Ontario College Art and Design University (OCAD U) at the time she wrote the book. Tunstall's expertise in dissecting history gives the book a strong root-tracing style, deconstructing problems from their historical origins. This focus on historical analysis also leaves more current manifestations of modernist ideology underexplored, which may limit the book's applicability for readers seeking direct critiques of modern design practices or technologies. Tunstall's professional journey - mostly in leadership roles or as activist- also informs the book's orientation. Rather than addressing design merely as the making of objects, Tunstall approaches it as a field, making *Decolonizing Design* less of a design pedagogy, but more useful for design educators, administrators, and institutions seeking to drive systemic change within their environments.

For Tunstall, decolonizing design requires both introspection into one's stance and commitment and the dismantling of external imprints. Each chapter, then, either interrogates our own privileges or deconstructs the deep-seated colonial frameworks that have historically marginalized Indigenous and racialized perspectives. Starting with intimate personal reflections, Tunstall's narratives progress to broader systemic critiques and conclude with distilled takeaways in each chapter.

In Tunstall's mind, humility to reposition ourselves and prioritize Indigenous (people) is the first step toward decolonization (30). As Tunstall confronts her own positionality within the native-settler-slave triad in the first chapter, it reveals how colonial power dynamics underpin different identities. For example, in the context of the US, "The Black" refers to enslaved people excluded from assimilation, while "The Red" represents the natives resisting both extinction and forced assimilation (Tunstall 18). Despite the shared fight against settler colonialism, the goals and tactics of "The Red and The Black" differ (Tunstall 19). In contrast, Australia's settler colonial context produced a different understanding of Blackness - one differentiates from that of the first- and second-generation African immigrants, and of the Indigenous Black Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders due to the presence of American imperialism (Tunstall 25). This intricate identity exempted Tunstall from being erased in workplace conversations (Tunstall 23), as how it would impose on the Indigenous. The same kind of erasure was once implemented by policies of genocide, forced removal, and assimilation in settler nations like Australia and Canada (qtd. in Tunstall 25, 27-29). These unequal cultural encounters have inflicted intergenerational pain and created cultural gaps that persist today.

Reflecting on these frameworks, Tunstall interrogates her own perspective and learns to decenter her experiences to truly witness Indigenous needs. As a case of error, she critiques her past mistakes of instrumentalizing Indigenous colleagues by assigning them narrowly "Indigenous" tasks rather than including them as equal collaborators in shaping

larger decisions (Tunstall 30-32). In contrast, Tunstall advocates for a model of decolonization rooted in “first stories” - centering Indigenous voices as integral rather than peripheral - and building shared joy and liberation through communal participation (36). This approach, informed by Tunstall’s reflections from a course she had in Stanford, where students of various backgrounds brought first stories to their classroom, exemplifies how recentering marginalized voices can foster cultural justice (22-23).

Tunstall’s frequent references to her personal background and professional trajectory lend her work a sense of authenticity that resonates deeply with the genuine representation principles within decolonization. Yet her focus on settler nations, as she acknowledges in her prologue (Tunstall 10), also limits the applicability of her frameworks to other regions, where power dynamics, transculturation, and Indigeneity may hold different meanings. By anchoring her critique so firmly in her own experiences, Tunstall risks overlooking the broader, global complexities of decolonization. while simultaneously paving a methodological pathway to study colonial impacts on other terrains.

In the following two chapters, Tunstall dismantles two core myths of the modernist project: the promise of “better lives through technology” and the ideal of “universal humankind (40).” Decolonizing design, for Tunstall, requires delinking from the Eurocentric design praxis that emerged in Europe during the nineteenth century and resurfaced with the Bauhaus movement after World War II (40-41). That is to say, the blueprints of modern life showcased at the World’s Fairs have popularized a techno-centric, consumption-celebrating worldview that originated in Europe, expanded to America, and now dominates global design ideologies (Tunstall 41-44). It also conveyed an underlying message of European superiority, epitomized by the 1851 Great Exhibition's presumptuous belief that exposure to Western advancements would "civilize" non-European cultures (qtd. in Tunstall 59). Bauhaus, the paradigm that structures modern design, on the other hand, enshrined mass production as design’s ultimate pursuit and fixated the “white, cis-male, Anglo-Saxon, Christian,

heterosexual, affluent, and abled body and mind" figure as the totalized design standard (Tunstall 44, 59). Through explicit deconstruction of the historical foundations of the modernist project, Tunstall effectively inspires designers to reflect on their own design education and the default Eurocentric ethos built into their contemporary design upbringing. The analysis is particularly illustrative for those familiar with modern design frameworks. However, for readers without a background in modern design theory, her extensive delineation may feel less accessible and relatable, leaving readers wanting more contemporary examples of how modernist values are embodied in present-day designs. In addition, although Tunstall acknowledges "contemporary European design has evolved beyond modernism and the Bauhaus principles (40)." She doesn't address the ongoing impacts of Bauhaus, as it has shifted to function more as an aesthetic style than a guiding philosophy.

Tunstall argues instead, in Chapter 2, that technological advancements disproportionately benefited the privileged few while perpetuating and reinforcing historical master-slave relationships. Examples listed include the forced emigration of European white workers during the Industrial Revolution due to declined living standards and the accelerated theft of land and enslavement of the Indigenous, Black, and People of Color (IBPOC) communities following the invention of the cotton gin (qtd. in Tunstall 47-48, 49-50). The cotton gin stands as an early example of Ruha Bejamin's "The New Jim Code," continuing to reflect and reproduce existing inequities under the guise of progressive yet deceptive intentions (Benjamin 3).

To counter these dynamics, Tunstall envisions a decolonized approach by shifting away from the Eurocentric, techno-centric perspective and embracing alternative ways of understanding technology. Projects like Bina48, a humanoid robot infused with the lived experience of a real black woman, exemplify what it's like to embed abolitionist thinking in technology. Unlike artificial intelligence systems shaped by the consciousness of white,

cisgender, patriarchal men, Bina48 demonstrates huge concerns over liberation and equity, offering a glimpse into how technology can be repurposed (Tunstall 50-51). Tunstall challenges us to rethink the foundational assumptions driving technological design by asking questions like "What if our social media algorithms were optimized for interconnection, not engagement?" It reminds me of Samuel Woolley's critique in Manufacturing Consensus, where he reveals that "social media's susceptibility to computational propaganda is baked into its design (Woolley 107)." The underlying code of these platforms equates quantity with popularity and assumes that engagement metrics reflect user desires. The revenue model depends on advertisers and preys on addictive engagement. These fundamental visions and assumptions drove the social media's design. Tunstall's abolitionist perspective prompts us to consider alternatives: What would social media look like if it prioritized other values? What if digital communities were derived from other knowledge systems? What if technology is not aimed at productivity or efficiency?

Chapter 3 reveals how universal humankind is an exclusionary framework constructed from and to uphold white supremacy. Tunstall argues that this ideal erase diversity and denies non-white individuals' full personhood in the name of unity. She recounts experiencing racism while apartment hunting in Chicago (Tunstall 55). Chicago, as a city shaped by the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition and fabricated intensively with Bauhaus designs, is a standing embodiment of the modernist dream and continues to infatuate the young. Underneath its shining mask lies still severe segregation, poverty, and discrimination that ethnic and national markers can never be erased (Tunstall 56). Through Tunstall's tracings, it unfolds how universalism rhetoric was grounded in racism. Bauhaus, again, silenced diverse designers and their communities, demanding anyone who deviates from its white working modular man to either be assimilated or expelled (Tunstall 57). Similarly, the call for "universal harmony" at the 1851 Great Exhibition was intended only for the "eminent men

(qtd. in Tunstall 57-58).” Even within Europe, the endless conflicts before, during, and after World War II demonstrated the failure of this notion of unity (Tunstall 58-59).

These exclusionary practices, however, were realized globally through colonization, in which IBPOC practices of making were “deemed inferior, outright prohibited, or systemically erased to maintain the white supremacy culture” (Tunstall 60). According to Tunstall, white supremacy manifests in two ways: the first, through laws that protect the fragile white Christian bodies, and the second, through sets of normalized codes of conduct and attitudes, with which only the white supremacist ways of knowing and making were valued and institutionalized (Tunstall 61-63). For example, prevailing with better living through technology is the value of Progress Is More/Bigger (Tunstall 64). It praises the mass creation of more, more products, larger companies, more employees, more customers, and more profit. In contradiction is what the antidote might value - long-term impacts that go beyond mere financial ones (qtd. in Tunstall 63). These values, such as Individualism, Either/Or Thinking, and Power Hoarding, dominate global ideology and steer global focus and development. In response, Tunstall recognizes and explicitly names diverse peoples working on initiatives excluded by the modernist project, exhibiting powerful counteraction to reclaim the diverse origins of design beyond the Eurocentric narrative.

Tunstall shares her experience designing a course in Australia that transcended Bauhaus principles by putting them in dialogue with aboriginal values. For example, the basic Bauhaus elements of Point, Line, and Plane (basic geometric elements in visual composition) were used as media, making the quest of Respect (an Indigenous way of trusting the environment to be of self-healing potential) more tangible. Using different elements, students’ focus in their oral stories on their sketches would naturally shift, from light when using Point to larger structures when using Plane. Their connections and understanding of the place deepened along the way (Tunstall 66-68). The course embraced what’s redeemable in Bauhaus principles, undergirding it with Aboriginal values of

appreciating the land. It fostered reconciliation without erasing ethnic or national identities, offering an example of how design can reflect Indigenous values at its core. Tunstall's emphasis on recognizing diverse values, knowledge systems, and practices, shares similarities with Sasha Costanza-Chock's arguments in Design Justice, and both adopt community- and conversation-centered approaches to shift current power structures (qtd. in Tunstall 52; Costanza-Chock, "Design Justice"). This promising prospect encourages readers to continue exploring the field experiences Tunstall introduces in the subsequent chapters.

Tunstall proposes cluster hiring as a fundamental approach to redistributing power relations in Chapter 4. She identifies several pitfalls that can undermine such effort, one of which is "Supertoken". Supertokens are individuals who already excelled in "the systems that were meant to crush them" (Tunstall 77). Their success does not equate to systemic inclusion, nor does their presence necessarily dismantle structural exclusion, as they might not be empathetic to other's plight, or their privileges often align with maintaining the status quo. Another pitfall Tunstall highlights is forcing out-numbered diverse peoples to self-erase of diversity to fit in (77-78). To counter these issues, hiring initiatives need to expand their criteria, taking into consideration systemic exclusion, and be at scale to ensure that diverse hires do not feel isolated or tokenized (Tunstall 78-79). Tunstall breaks down the steps more vividly through her experiences at OCAD University, where she spearheaded a Black cluster hire initiative. She recounts the difficulties and countermeasures involved, such as the need to have a response prepared for every possible barrier or noting how easily her efforts can be denied in each and every step by any stakeholders involved.

For me, one of the most awakening aspects is its focus on redefining diversity beyond token representation. They made sure of deep-level diversity that goes beyond the surface-level differences in race, gender, age, and ethnicity by specifically asking for lived experience, community relations, and work relativeness (Tunstall 84-86). Looking back at my own design education, although received entirely in China, Bauhaus and its descendant

modern architectural principles had been made so central that while my undergraduate school prides itself in the field of Chinese Architectural Heritage Protection, Chinese architecture and Chinese ways of spatial experiences were never made structural but only explored haphazardly in electives. Even in a culturally and economically strong country like China, where physical colonization has only been partial and short in time, decolonization remains an unresolved challenge. Not to mention the regional and ethnic diversity within China itself. My education left me with a limited understanding of Chinese design traditions, making me hesitant to claim that my skills reflect my own cultural background. Tunstall's deep understanding and non-superficial approach of diverse hiring explains her rationale for prioritizing hiring initiatives over everything else and her decision to leave the industry and join academia in the 2000s. Because education is the foundation of systemic change and the area where the most significant impact can be made.

Chapter 5 serves as the final call to action, urging design firms, institutions, and organizations to reprioritize their resources, especially budgets, in service of decolonization (Tunstall 97). This time, Tunstall shifts her focus from cultural and societal harms to the economic debt of colonization, explicitly quantifying the material losses. Though these economic arguments may appear as the least important harm compared to the profound human costs discussed in previous chapters. Framing decolonization through a financial lens brings a pragmatic shift. As the author states in the previous chapter, “anyone’s action is performative allyship if they don’t give up something precious in order to advance decolonization or social justice (Tunstall 72).” Tunstall ends the last pages by saying that the true discipline of decolonizing design lies in ceding space and power (107).

Indeed, the ultimate goal of *Decolonizing Design* is asking for the powerful yet altruistic move - ceding power. This proposition, however, is a bold request that can only appeal to those who are already morally inclined to this goal. As Tunstall admits in her prologue, this book is an answer to those firms and organizations already seeking guidance

on how to decolonize their environments (10). To reach a broader and potentially more resistant audience, the book could make the harms of exclusion and colonial frameworks more immediate and tangible and emphasize benefits that extend beyond cultural justice, such as economic growth, innovation, and long-term sustainability. Despite this, *Decolonizing Design* successfully encourages readers to reflect on their cultural and educational backgrounds, offering actionable suggestions for diverse hiring that are grounded in reality rather than existing in a vacuum. The book is an inspiring read, particularly valuable for those looking to understand systemic cultural justice beyond DEI (Diversity, Equite and Inclusion) headcount.

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