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Reverberations at the Edges: Politics of designed im/materiality

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U.S. politics foster a conflicting mode of existence—one that centers heterogeneity and individual freedom. The contradictory nature of these two characteristics divorce the individual from networks and cause a collective state of disparate dissonance. This brings to the fore the line of inquiry on hegemonic influences on the concepts of objectivity, normativity, and standardization as systems are designed and developed in the US. The assumption of a system's inherent apolitical nature overlooks the foretelling promise of marginalized groups' intuit on what may be at stake and what may be a great potential due to points of tension in a system. This conjures the affective world of politics and the political in the designed im/material worlds.

Keywords: design politics, oppressive systems, affect

Political ruptures direct our attention to points of friction that have been reverberating through layers of complexity for long durations of time influencing the components that design the conditions of a place—economies, politics, cultures, relationships, and biomes. Each echo shapes the contours of seemingly discrete social contradictions that typically reveal themselves most prominently in the material and immaterial everyday lives of individuals in the margin. Similarly, the types of tensions a marginalized group faces and the extent to which they are affected varies according to one's place on a social stratification. In this light, it is critical to understand the power asymmetries that are at the crux of such tensions by conducting a deeper exploration of the affective qualities that signify these complex dynamics.

In the US, manmade systems are often portrayed as entities independent from consciousness, cultures, and histories. Upon their initial introduction to the public, common approaches to systems—material and immaterial aspects of life that range from services, policies, to digital architecture—are as though they are an apolitical means to an end fracturing critical reflection on the affordances carried through the decisions made to design such systems. A contrasting argument is one that foregrounds the theory that systems are an extension of multiple logics making it highly susceptible to enabling a particular type of cosmology to move forward as others fall by the wayside. This crystallization becomes fraught with politics as it meets a designed im/material hegemonic society that lauds its heterogeneity in representation yet lacks in substance seen in many Western contexts particularly the US.

The mismatch between systems with a hegemonic logic and societies rich with difference strikes any that deviate away from a standardization derived from a dominant culture subjugating a particular type of difference. This, in essence and materially, creates multiple forms of marginalization. Design's rapidly growing involvement in historically unconventional yet highly charged settings, such as policy-making, city planning, and service delivery, bring to light the complex relationship between designed products and the contexts in which they live. These insights bring to the fore the stark contrasts that exist as human variability meets designed material worlds and shapes lived experiences, differently. Despite aspects of design originating in a Scandinavian social movement (Greenbaum, 1991), its application to complex US-based issues translates differently. In the states, it becomes a one-dimensional approach made evident through fixed frameworks and ethnocentric logics seen through aesthetics familiar to a dominant culture and modalities attached to extractive and racial capitalism (Robinson 1983, 9-28; Kelley 2017). Such logics design a mainstream and fringe (Mata-Marín 2020, 130-164); delineate a *we* and *them* (Wynter 1976); set a social strata for man from "full human, not-quite-human, [to] nonhuman" (Weheliye 2014, 12). These manmade distinctions are absent from design's consciousness spurring misdiagnoses of these points of friction while deepening existing ones and inadvertently designing new ones. Design's blind

spot of what's at stake and for whom makes it integral to understand new dimensions of design to account for depth, complexity, and livelihoods.

Despite such high stakes, foundational to the designs of systems in the US has been the notion of democracy and the impression that achieving some form of it would yield dynamic harmony. However, the points of tension in the designed immaterial and material worlds reveal discrete and overt contradictions that expose the dimensions of life and privilege. In this light, it is important to further scope work done at the intersection of policy-making and the livelihoods of marginalized communities. Since, at this juncture, the term marginalized community is used broadly, I will provide a range of policies that have targeted disenfranchised communities to illustrate ways in which the U.S. has followed through with their beliefs in democratic values and ways in which they have faltered repeatedly underscoring the problematic nature of viewing systems as apolitical entities.

Immigration

President Obama authorized the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program in 2012. It is the first large-scale immigration policy to affect undocumented youth by providing temporary relief from deportation, renewable work permits, and temporary social security numbers. DACA also provided opportunities for more access to higher wages, driver's licenses, health care, and the ability to open a bank account (Hsin and Ortega 2018, 1487-1506). Some analysis has found that DACA best serves those with higher levels of education and access to more resources through their families. It also is unclear whether it improves social status in the longrun; however, it has alleviated stress, albeit shorterm, for undocumented youth who were brought to the U.S. at the behest of a legal guardian (Gonzales, Ruszczk, and Terriquez 2014, 1852-72).

Ethnic Enclaves

Asian ethnic enclaves such as chinatowns, japantowns, and little manilas formed as a result of widespread racism and anti-immigrant sentiment. With the California gold rush in the mid-1800's, many Chinese migrants moved to the coast to work as miners. Later, many took jobs as laborers and had a hand in building the transcontinental railroad. Within roughly two decades, the Chinese community grew 60x expanding their reach from California to Montana and made up a quarter of the workforce (Lee 2016; Kandil 2019; Wu 2015). With this rose an anti-Chinese movement, this resulted in massacres—such as 150 armed white miners in Rock Springs, Wyoming, murdering 28 Chinese people and burning their homes and businesses to drive Chinese immigrants out of their rural town—evictions, and legal restrictions (Lee 2016; Kandil 2019; Wu 2015). Chinatowns resurfaced with the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 instilled by the federal government; these ethnic areas acted as refuge for those that remained in the U.S. Building upon the history, present day ethnic enclaves, like chinatowns, aim to become historical landmarks to sustain the sense of refuge (Lee 2016; Kandil 2019; Wu 2015).

Justice System

Michelle Alexander argues that slavery was repurposed and presently takes the form of the criminal justice system (Alexander 2010). This theory typically takes the shape of service requirements that people in the justice system need to fulfill while serving time in prison. Some services are minimal, such as picking up trash along the side of the road, to life endangering tasks. In recent accounts, a Southeast Asian refugee from Laos, Kao Saelee, was arrested for armed robbery around 2008 (Levin 2020). After twenty years in prison, he was beginning to see the horizon as plans for his release were crystalizing. His final call to service was to fight the Northern California wildfires (summer 2020). However, upon ending his service, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detained him for deportation and sent him to a federal facility in Louisiana (Levin 2020).

Additionally, the ways in which policies were designed expose the fault lines in certain points of tension seen in an overlooked area: unintended consequences that result in exacerbating the initial problem. Here are a few examples of policy-making practices that deeply backfired on marginalized communities and those adjacent to them.

Implementation of policies in response to inequities

The Department of Immigration and Citizenship Enforcement finds itself in several precarious situations as it enacts immigration policies. Raids and other practices are often myopic in approach. For example, an ICE raid took place at an agricultural farm in 2008 where 400 arrests of undocumented workers took place (Harrison and Lloyd 2011, 365-85). This caused Agriprocessors, the company where the raid took place, declared bankruptcy. In

addition to this agency experiencing backlash, this example is also an example of policy drift—the transformation of a policy's outcome due to the failure to update its rules or structures to reflect changing circumstances (Galvin and Hacker 2020, 216-38). ICE was created in response to 9/11 to enact stricter immigration policies. Since its inception, the department has not adjusted their approach causing ripple effects as illustrated here; the stale nature of ICE is also reflective of "America's gridlock-prone polity" (Galvin and Hacker 2020, 216-38) where change to a policy confronts many institutional barriers.

Both of these examples illustrate the unintended consequences resulting from a policy that was meant to rectify and/or bring relief —though the initial policy may be seen as problematic, such as redlining. In either direction, whether the policy is seen as problematic or not, unintended consequences dramatically shift the ecosystem they reside in. This brings to light the need to reevaluate the ontological nature of systems and their relationship to enactment.

This brings to the fore the need to understand emotional dimensions of these designed im/material worlds to understand the affective qualities of politics and the political. This paints a robust picture of power asymmetries while providing a new dimension to understanding how one can approach an intractable social issue. This has often been referred to as the affective turn building upon the ontological turn as stated by Boaventura de Sousa Santos and through the Epistemologies of the South (ES) framework.

This framework includes three key pillars:

- *Sociology of absence:* underscoring that the absence of or omission of results in the erasure of "entire worlds" (Escobar 2020, 69) and a propelling of active erasure thereafter. This causes a world and surrounding worlds to be complicit in deeming it nonexistent with the inability to think of an alternative as it does not exist.

- *Sociology of emergence:* underscoring the possible responses to dominance—whether in the form of erasure, repattening, amongst others--is the emergence of several discrete to dramatic alternatives (Escobar 2020. 69-70)

- *Intercultural translation (across knowledges and struggles):* another way to think of this is "relational ontology" (Escobar 2020, 71); this is a new orientation deeply rooted in relationality understanding both "nothing preexists the relations that constitute it" and the tension that arrives when multiple worlds try to equally exist together (Escobar 2020, 72-73)

This framework begins to identify emergent spaces so that one may find a new orientation to their world, and multiple worlds. Similarly, and particular to the U.S. context, Audre Lorde states "certainly there are very real differences between us of race, age, and sex. But it is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human behavior and expectation" (Lorde 1980).

Returning to the affective turn, this provides a holistic understanding of a context as it pertains to the immaterial and how one can think through points of tension. Identifying the emotional thread that connects webs of designs, immaterial and material, one will be able to gain a type of depth that existing analysis would not warrant. To further provide context, here is a way feeling, emotion, and affect are distinguished. Feelings are personal and biographical. Emotions are social. Affects are [dimensions of intensity or] prepersonal (Schouse 2005). For instance, to understand a charged room or a collective sigh of relief or similar trigger points across a generation unveils multiple dimensions and scales of tension--publicly displayed, publicly felt, and understood beyond speech.

Seemingly discrete political contradictions shape to a given context, and points of tension are the gateway to identifying the underbelly of oppressive systems. Understanding the cosmologies of fringe communities reveal the acuity of such tensions; it concurrently exposes emancipatory and liberatory spaces through the ontologies and epistemologies of communities impacted by several issues. In this light, it is vital to have a critical understanding of the role of design*ing* and design*s* as design*ed* material and immaterial worlds meet variability across species differently and affectively.

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