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Critical Worldviews II

Final Paper

## **From Situated Design to Opacity: Designing Diversity in the Age of Global Diaspora**

### **Introduction**

In spring 2008, MoMA, New York curated a collection exhibiting various contemporary design projects around the theme “Design and the Elastic Mind”, aiming to explore “designers’ ability to grasp momentous changes in technology, science, and social mores, changes that will demand or reflect major adjustments in human behavior, and convert them into objects and systems that people understand and use” (MoMA). Among them was one of the projects by British designers Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, named *Technological Dreams Series: No.1, Robots* (Fig.1), where a variety of robots were presented, having differentiated forms and functions, in an imagined future where they could coexist with human beings closely as technological cohabitants. As the co-authors of *Speculative Everything*, Dunne and Raby aimed at using speculative objects specifically to imagine a probable future, where “new interdependencies and relationships might emerge in relation to different levels of robot intelligence and capability” (Dunne & Raby).

*Technological Dreams Series* successfully formed critiques on current usability-centered design orientations where robots should simply be in service for humans, and thus speculated a condition that robots can be seen as a separate entity. However, despite the successful attempt to imagine a future different from today, critical responses still formed around the topic regarding whose future the designers were speculating on. A common critique of Dunne & Raby’s work was

that they were still remaining in a Eurocentric narrative – From the minimalist aesthetics of the robot construction, the Bauhausian forms and color-lighting systems, to the obvious choices of modes of representation that involves a European model interacting in a space resembling a white box, the specific racial implications from the whole project setting is non-negligible. The design of those robots embedded whiteness, as something culturally human beings, onto objecthood and object-oriented designs, thus formed an overarching narrative that presumes whiteness to be the major and singular part of the future of human race, defining the terms and conditions within that future to be presumptuously white.



Fig.1: Dunne & Raby, Technological Dreams Series: No.1, Robots, 2007

The above project raised interesting questions regarding biases in design. We started to see cases where design biases were not caused by the intentionality of racism and racial stereotypes,

direct attacks, or hate crimes, but simply situated within a racialized background from where the designers came from. Owing to this phenomenon, if that background exists in a dominant place in the world, it is often seen as a biased design as it has the danger of suppressing minority voices that tend to be less heard through its representation. In other words, it was not Dunne and Raby's intention to bring stereotypical racial images towards their designs. The critiques of Dunne and Raby lied exactly in their ignorance of the contingent nature of representation – their failure to acknowledge which part of the future they were envisioning or to clarify what direction of worldview they were relying on, but simply tried to aim for the universal.

Discussions around biases in design became particularly important since design, as a subject, rises to the center of various disciplines, lying at the intersecting realms of modes of capital productions, innovation circles, curatorial spaces, as well as critical theories. Due to this nature, designers were given tremendous power from society more than ever to use various representational methods and shape the landscape of societal norms and human ideologies. Among them, as a critical design framework defined and codified specifically by Dunne and Raby, speculative design can be seen particularly as a form of design activism to give designers the capacity to reimagine the future, relying on themselves to decide on “what it should be” instead of depending on traditional decision-making public sectors (Dunne and Raby). The above project, *Technological Dreams Series: No.1, Robots*, is an example where the designers used their own framework of speculative design as a form of power envisioning a favored future. Therefore, this enormous power given to designers, if misused even simply as a form of misrepresentation, would carry the danger of circulating biases into other places of the world, bringing what was supposed to be a designer's situated perspective into other social functions that deemed to treat a singular

voice to be universal. A designer's unique perspective is indeed a manifestation of power being circulated in new entities within the realms of knowledge making and information exchanging.

Another reason why addressing design biases remains imminent is that we are now existing in the middle of a massive global diaspora characterized by the rapid rearrangement of racial and cultural realities. Identities are no longer fixated based on geographical locations but are fractured, fluid, and multiplied. Communities are formed based on different modes of social interactions and recognitions; thus, it becomes inevitable for a certain individual to embrace multiple identities and ideologies, with which oftentimes being contradictory with each other. This ends up in a sharp division and polarization in the whole world ideologically and politically, with people embodying ambiguous views that lead to failures of communication and understanding, or even hatred between one and another. As globalization forced the fusions of these conflicts, the questions of biases and design diversity were again pushed to the forefront on a timely scale. A sense of high cultural sensitivity thus becomes one of the key positive qualities of a designer due to the representative nature of design works that often embodies a distinct worldview. This is why it is particularly significant for us to address design biases, not simply from an artwork's original intention but more importantly on the scale of representations, by rigorously developing a new framework and design practice tailoring towards that.

Therefore, this essay aims at addressing the issues of design biases by using existing theories to develop a design framework that allows using representative methods to constitute a designer's own perspective. I will build on existing theory genealogies of knowledge as discourse, design ethnography, and situated design to examine the nature of its response and relation towards universalism, as well as using examples from critical race and gender studies in particular, to contextualize this argument. As designers reveal their own background, making, identity, and

worldview in the media representations of their works, situated design embodies both the danger of being perceived as universal and causing conflicting responses from opposite ideologies. How can we resolve situated design's danger of "revealing too much", reconcile the internal conflict of being both too specific and not specific enough, and in the end find a common consensus?

### **Situated Design: Theory Genealogies**

The term "situated design" has in its core premises a statement that "All design is situated – carried out from an embedded position." (Simonsen et al.) The term views design biases from the angle of recognizing the subjective nature of all kinds of design, acknowledging that everyone's unique situated background allows them to produce certain kinds of designs that only exist in the reality of their own making. There is inevitably uneven reception of knowledge and experiences among the diverse nature of designers, not to state the fact that design has become such an interdisciplinary field existing in a multiplicity of places in the world. Therefore, instead of blatantly aiming for objectivity and producing designs that are moderate, colorless, and unprovoking, the use of situated design aims at resolving biases by simply recognizing it as the first step.

The existence of situated design as a term has rich theory genealogies residing deeply in contemporary critical studies. In the following paragraphs, as disassembling the central idea of situated design, I will provide an attempt to trace back its theory genealogy as one possibility of its interpretations, as well as pointing out residing questions and problems coming from this attempt that are yet to be resolved. The origin and foundation of the idea had close relations that interweave with the critical concept of a "discourse" identified by Foucault as a way to formalize and constitute knowledge epistemologies. Foucault saw the process of knowledge production not

as normative but rather a form of contingency that traces back to history archaeologies – the social context and system that became eventually inseparable with it. In this sense, Foucault characterized the notion of discourse as “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them.” (Weedon) The idea of discourse contributing to situated design theories is so fundamental that it not only resides in academia but is entangled with identities themselves as well, relating back to the ontological construction of consciousness residing in designers themselves – “They are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the ‘nature’ of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern.” (Weedon)

Foucault’s notion of discourse immensely defined the landscape of contemporary critical studies as the idea also informed the developmental direction in its multiple sub-areas, including critical race and gender studies. Donna Haraway, building up discourse into feminist epistemology, first brought up the idea of “situated knowledge” that is the cornerstone of subsequent frameworks on situated design. The critical gender-studies lens Haraway offered freshly demonstrated how a feminist perspective can contribute to knowledge making by deconstructing existing stereotypes on male-dominant impartiality. It had significant meanings towards social progress and feminist activism as the unmaking of knowledge systems extracted notions of subjective reality from existing masculine power structures. In an attempt to make the interweaving situated knowledge systems a new reality, Haraway defined the central problem that situated design, as well as modern epistemology theory itself, aimed to work around – “So, I think my problem, and ‘our’ problem, is how to have simultaneously an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, and a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one

that can be partially shared and that is friendly to earthwide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.” (Haraway) This provocative lens of not only theoretical acknowledgement but also a strong aim for critical practices would turn out to be a core endeavor in situated design.

Adding on to the feminist perspective on knowledge discourse, the contingent nature of knowledge also affects recent developments of critical race studies. The deconstruction of the dominant knowledge system, on the other hand, revealed the embedded whiteness as a metaphysical implication to the foundations of these systems. Jackson, using critical race studies’ lens to view knowledge discourse, intentionally differentiated between the popular perception of reality and its underlying construction – “Given Man's historical horizon of possibility—slavery, conquest, colonialism – the Western metaphysical matrix has race at its center in the form of a chiasmus: the metaphysics of race (‘What is the 'reality' of race?’) and the racialization of the question of metaphysics (‘Under whose terms will the nature of time, knowledge, space, objecthood, being, cause and effect come to be defined?’)” (Jackson) Dissecting this chiasmus (Fig.2), it also offered critical race studies’ angle to design by successfully integrating the race of metaphysics into a possible design framework, forming critiques on projects like Dunne and Raby’s *Technological Dreams Series* by pointing out that their unique metaphysical existence includes whiteness as a form of being and objecthood.

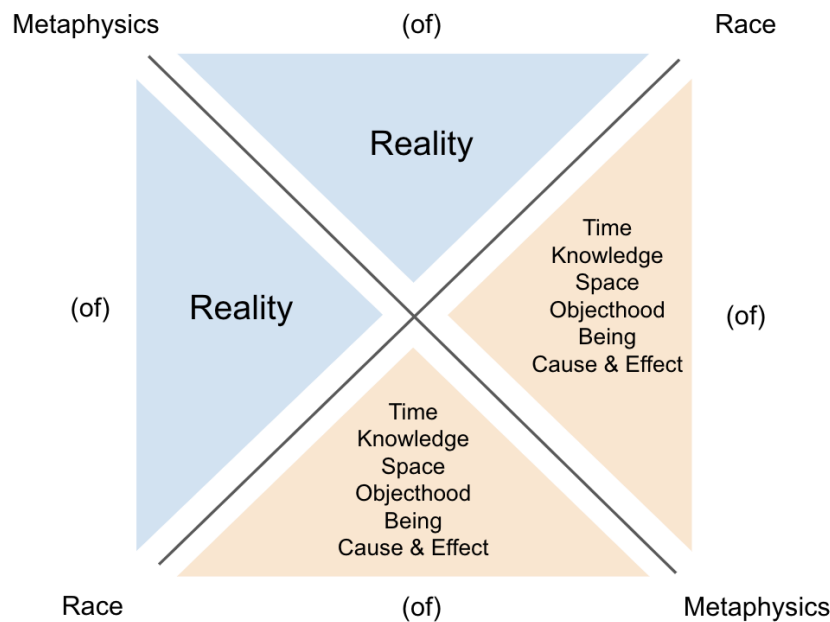


Fig.2: Metaphysics and Race – Relations, in Zakiyyah Jackson “Outer Worlds: The Persistence of Race in Movement ‘Beyond the Human’”

Adding on to that, the context of situated design also informed multiple other threads of design practices, such as design anthropology and design ethnography, positively pushing forth the movement of eliminating design biases in tangible circumstances. Public perceptions of how universalism ended up creating uneven power structures were introduced and circulated widely to aid decentralization, and this was predominantly seen in the critiques and vigilance in established design frameworks that possessed dominance. In her essay *Decolonizing Design Innovation*, Tunstall specifically used the term design anthropology, aided with the larger framework of situated design, to point out that the dominant “design thinking” methodology formally codified by the American design consulting firm IDEO was a kind of Imperialism that put “western design companies in a unique hierarchical position enabling them to guide non-Western institutions on how to solve problems”. (Tunstall) Responding to that, design practices that fully embodied



situated design ideologies started to emerge in ethnographic localities. In Elizabeth Chin's essay *Needlework*, she specifically introduced a detailed process of making Vodou flags as a form of ethnographic knowledge making, seeing "needlework as a rich material and metaphorical way to explore doing ethnography and producing ethnographic knowledge". (Chin) The embodiment of backgrounds, contexts, positions, and intentional subjectivities was manifested in the design works that produced more meaning than ever.

### **Situated Design: Problems**

As a conclusion, originated from the Foucauldian discourse, it is indeed a huge step forward applying the framework of situated design, as seen tracing from both critical race and gender studies into modern design practices, in aiding the contemporary progress of getting rid of biases and pursuing design diversity. However, as empowering as it seems, it is in my opinion that there are still remaining problems brought by this framework, especially being put into the context of a whole new reality with the current global diaspora, division, and disidentification we are experiencing.

(1) First and foremost, just as Haraway pointed out, there is a discrepancy between theories and "a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world" (Haraway). As global capitalism relies on the habitual class hierarchies in the whole process of value production, owing to capitalism's inherent reward system, the less-dominant is more used to a familiar narrative of conforming to dominant, "formalized", and authorized views other than practicing situated knowledge in context. Therefore, when this methodology is used by more dominant groups, such as Dunne and Raby, situated design still runs the danger of being interpreted as universal by the receptors of the public themselves even though whiteness can be accepted as part of their situated

background. Adding on to that, other knowledge sectors that are interweaving with situated design have to simultaneously keep up with the movement. An example of this would be the specificities of language used in design – If the descriptions of Dunne and Raby projects still embed a generalized narrative as “the future” that has implied racial superiorities, the public might still easily interpret their standpoints as universal.

(2) The second point involves how situated design has a tendency of “revealing too much” and thus causing conflicts from groups with opposite ideologies in this massive global diaspora. As situated design implies that no design is neutral, that every design has a certain worldview attached to it, the conflicting worldviews embedded in different designs are essentially speaking to the modern dilemma of diversity, which is this essential unbalance and incompatibility between individual difference and collective harmony. Facing this contemporary reality, how might we pursue diversity and unbiased designs but at the same time minimize conflicts?

### **Opacity: A Possible Response**

Responding to the above problems, this section aims at forming a way to work around the negotiation of these two problems together to establish a possible solution and a consensus. Here my simple version of the answer lies in Glissant’s theory on opacity, which is defined as the opposite of being transparent (Glissant). In my opinion, the theory of opacity is really powerful in not only resolving design biases but reconciling the essential diversity dilemma specifically existing in contemporary society.

First of all, as situated design’s revealed background information might bring out conflicting worldviews that are impossible to resolve, opacity puts one in a suitable and just-right position by suppressing the urge to judge and encouraging the right to difference. According to

Glissant, “To feel in solidarity with him or to build with him or to like what he does, it is not necessary for me to grasp him. It is not necessary to try to become the other (to become other) nor to ‘make’ him in my image.” (Glissant) As it was implied here, even though often interpreted as a highly possible construct from human beings’ long historical legacy of colonialism and social divisions, the dichotomy of “the one” and “the other” is still so fundamental towards modern human lives that sometimes the identity of “the one” cannot be formed and asserted through the constant negation of “the other”. Responding to this reality, the theories on opacity leave breathing room towards this inevitable antithesis, in that the lack of transparency makes it harder for preconceived notions of a dichotomy to exist. Opacity gives room for grey areas that are empowering and liberating.

Adding on to that, Glissant’s formation of opacity theories, on a second layer, embeds an implication that the mere right to difference is still not enough, as the word difference eventually cannot escape the danger of embodying existing hierarchies just by the understanding of it – By saying “we are different”, one is still implying a privileged position. Therefore, opacity gets rid of this disposition by retaining the right to not only being different but also being not transparent. The word “transparency” has behind its meaning an implication that everything can eventually be reduced to a singularized truth, which is exactly the danger of universalism since oftentimes the “truth” is produced none other than those who are in a privileged position. Responding to that, the use of opacity in situated design not only resolves conflicting views but also suppresses the tendency for any design work from moving towards the universal, or in other words, suppresses the viewers from moving towards a singular interpretation of an absolute truth.

As a conclusion, I found opacity a really powerful response towards the above problems in situated design due to its ability in both resolving the “one-other” dichotomy and suppressing the

tendency towards universalism. As situated design eventually envisions a dynamic new design cartography of diverse positions populated with interweaving social relations, “it is the opacity of the diverse animating the imagined transparency of Relation.” (Glissant)

### From Theory to Practice

As illustrated above, the tension, dynamic, and consensus established between the long genealogy of situated design resulting from a critical discourse can be mixed and married well with the concept of opacity illuminated by the poetics of relations, together forming a brand-new ecosystem for designing diversity that takes theory and turns into a framework of new design practice (Fig. 3). This new framework can therefore establish on existing frameworks of situated design and be used to evaluate not only the extent of design biases but also its potential problems, as well as the space it leaves for opacity to negotiate with those problems.

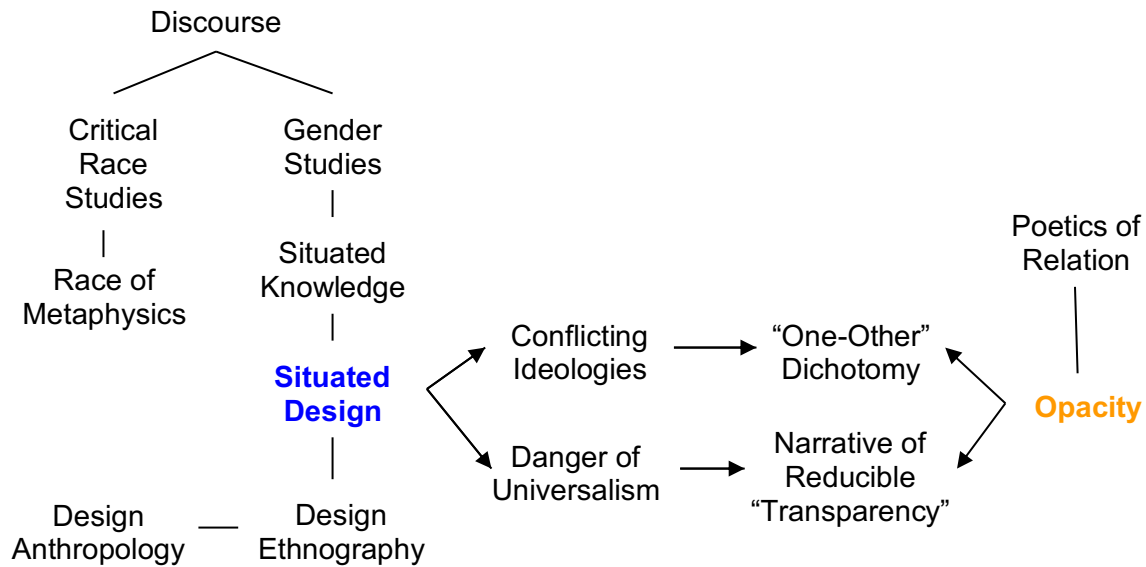


Fig.3: From Situated Design to Opacity – a new design practice

Looking back, I found myself actively trying to apply this practice that I framed into my own design work as a self-evaluation. Focusing on the context of situated design first and foremost, in my work “Situated Plastic” (Fig. 4), I intentionally used situated design’s perspective to experiment with the material quality of a plastic garbage bag and documented my designs from this perspective. In this project, I wished to form a personal response towards universal design by using plastic garbage bags creatively as a making tool for design ethnography. By revealing my own situated context layering environmental audio and another material choice within my making space on top of plastic prototypes, I wanted to update the image of a “normal plastic garbage bag user” as situational, contingent, and specific; instead of universal, replicated, and reproduced.

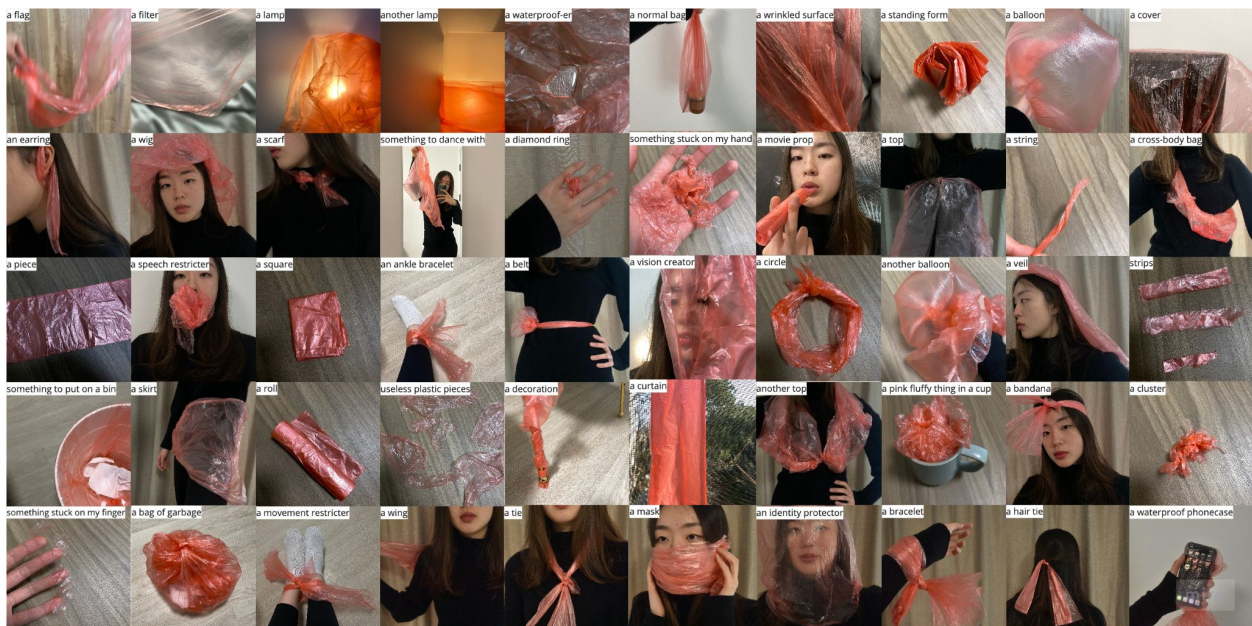


Fig.4: Situated Plastic – with layered material and environmental audio  
<https://vimeo.com/513763207>

Bringing it further to opacity, in my work I carefully chose to only show and reveal my environment instead of defining and generalizing. The work I made was intended to creatively reveal another fresh and personal way of using plastic, instead of claiming that it was the only way. Neither was it purposefully embodying the “one-other” dichotomy going against all the other ways

of using plastic bags by claiming that only my way was right. By avoiding the reduction towards an “easy” transparency defining clearly that “this is how I use it”, I reduced the possible narrative and potential danger claiming that my way of using was the only way, thus leaving some room for opacity by not claiming for the universal. Even though the added opacity parameter in this assessment gave it some kind of ambiguity in interpretation, it eventually avoided the danger of “revealing too much” brought by situated design.

## **Conclusion and Look Ahead**

Situated design discourse, combining with dynamics of social relations in a diverse world, is indeed an inevitable ongoing practice and endeavor that constantly needs to be updated and disrupted. Looking beyond this framework from situated design to opacity into the broader realm of design, there are still larger questions and opportunities yet to be brought up:

(1) First, the nature of the design biases I mentioned here still relies heavily on the idea of the representative nature of art and design, which is something our current modernity is constructed of. However, just like Guy Debord defined and criticized in “The Society of the Spectacle”, can we eventually escape this representative reality and construct a new design nature with more participation and engagement between designers and audiences by letting interaction itself take a more rigorous role, instead of remaining in the narrative of the representative dichotomy between the subject and the object? And if we follow that train of thought, what is the true meaning of participation and engagement?

(2) Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that situated design itself is a historical discourse that resulted from a specific and contingent social context as well. Eventually, I am not rooting for making situated design the only framework and ideology, constructing it to be another

narrative for “political correctness”. Ultimately, there has never been a ceasing need in the world we live now to develop diversifying design methodologies and frameworks – It is only in that never-ending insistence that we might truly decentralize design and bring diversity into place.

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