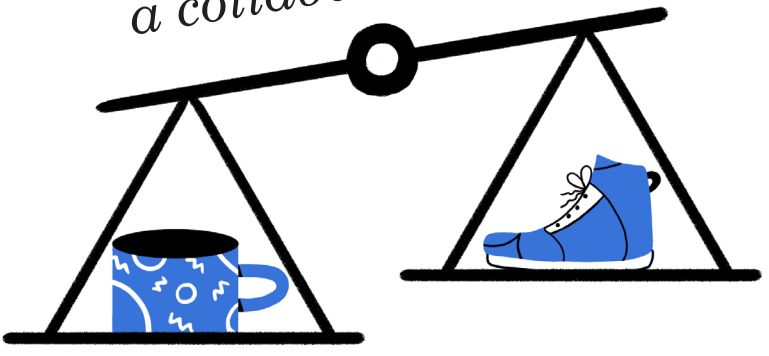
INTERSECTIONAL CRAFT

a collaborative essay



INTERSECTIONAL CRAFT

a collaborative essay
co-authored by

LISA JARRETT
ROBERTO LUGO
ARMANDO MINJAREZ
DIEGO MIER Y TERÁN
DORI TUNSTALL
and
NAMITA GUPTA WIGGERS

illustrated by
YAHIRA HERNÁNDEZ

concept and weaving by
BETSY REDELMAN

This essay is a part of the Intersectional Craft Conversations Project, which attempts to create a theoretical framework that counters dominant formats for academic discourse in Craft. This new method of producing Craft Theory is based in conversation and collage. It privileges personal narrative and storytelling over thesis statements and conclusions. It is an experiment in collaborative thought. Working through Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of "Intersectionality," this essay attempts to answer the question:

What is Intersectional Craft?

What's the game? Is your family woke? Is the way we talk, is it too academic? What's power? What's fame? What are your origins?

Some years ago I went to the beach here in Oaxaca, in Mexico, and I asked one guy, "Where are you from?" And he said, "Mi ombligo… my navel, is buried in this and this place." That lead me to think… ok where is my navel buried?

I'm an immigrant, undocumented at one point. I have papers now, but I have a mixed family, with papers and without papers, you know. I'm an artist. I'm also an activist. I'm also queer.

I'm also a man. I'm also an atheist. I have a degree in Craft, but I'm doing conceptual social practice… I am Mexican, born in Mexico, and essentially I am the product of colonization, right? I know I have indigenous blood in me. I couldn't tell you exactly which tribe. I mean I could maybe say… depending on the location that I was born, and grew up, and where my family comes from... we have an idea which two tribes we probably come from. But I don't feel that I can claim that I'm Native because I didn't grow up in that culture, or in that space.

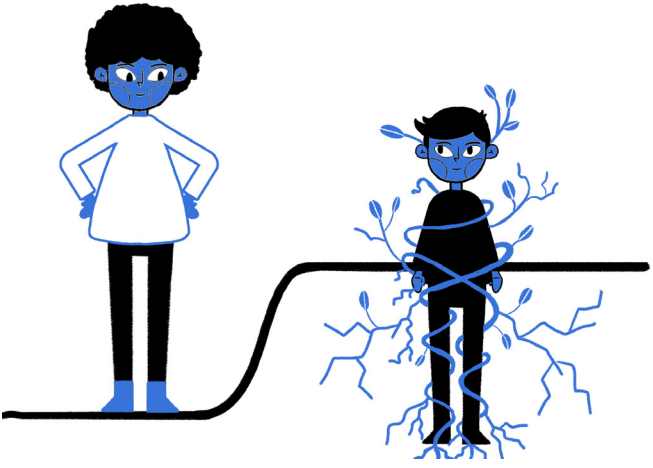
I also cannot claim to be European, because… I was not raised in Europe or in European traditions. So my identity as Mexican really is this mestizaje, you know, this combination. I mean everything that is considered Mexican from the mariachi band to the food… is that colonization coming together. That's kind of like my identity and my own identity crisis and trying to kind of understand who I am. But also, on top of that, knowing that I did grow up in a society that favors, you know, whiteness... with marketing, with advertisement that says, "the white is better," that the white is the ideal form. I mean, I grew up looking at myself in the mirror wanting to be lighter skinned, right? Wanting to have a finer nose, you know, a longer face, kind of rejecting the part of me that was connected to that land. So, I think I've reconciled all of those things already. I mean it's been a process, right? Of discovery and kind of unpacking all of that… and kind of reconciling what it is. You know, I am a product of violent acts. I am the aftermath of a really violent act. And I've just got to... come to terms with that.

I am from Philly. I started sort of as a graffiti artist a long time ago, not a very good one, but one nonetheless. And then I winded up at community college for a little bit and I didn't know what I wanted to go to school for. And so I found ceramics, and I've been sort of making pottery ever since. And I think somewhere in between there I really started to make this connection between where I grew up and how sort of rare it was that someone that grew up where I did winded up working with pottery. A lot of my work… doesn't hide away from that, but sort of represents a culture that doesn't have a voice within the visual arts, specifically the crafts: ceramics.

I am African-American which kind of places me in a certain… place in the heart of Babylon. Different strands have been in the United States for a really long time. My family, the Woods Family, has a homestead in Southern Indiana… There was a black town built in that city. We used to go to family reunions there. You could read the headstones going back into like the 1800s. When I say African American there is a sense in which I have a complicated claim on my Americanness.

I was born in Edinborough, England, just because my parents were studying there. And when I was nine months old, they went to India and spent three weeks or something like that. Then I came back to Mexico. Then, when I was eight, I lived three years in Spain… the side of my mother's family comes from Spain. And that's interesting for me because I find myself in Oaxaca and I feel totally unrooted. And Oaxaca, it's a place where it's very rooted. If you're not from Oaxaca, you are clearly not from Oaxaca. People ask me all the time, " Where are you from? Where are you from? Where are you from? " And because of how I look they always think I am from the U.S. or something else. I am actually collecting a list of nationalities.

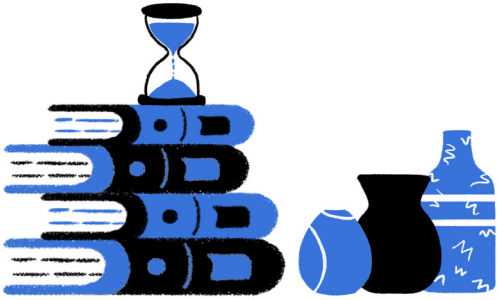
I've been Australian, Finnish, Italian --everything– Argentinian, Canadian. Everything but Mexican. So, I have no idea why I was born in England and then I find myself in this space in Oaxaca where things are so... yeah, their origin is so important.



My peoples are generally people of the African diaspora. I am not an academic. I like to think and read, but I don't have these structured tools of thought. I am a professor of community and context arts and also an artist... My work is loosely about the politics of difference, race, [and] identity.

I fall back on a piece of wisdom that kind of came out of our first conversations… Everyone's indigenous to somewhere. And through that, when you compare the values of people who live with the land, so to speak, who have that deep sense of obligation to the land and people around it, you find that there is more similarities in values, similarities in perspectives, than there are differences.

You know, I have a degree in Ceramics. Yeah, that's what my degree is in even though it's not my main practice at the moment. My experience in art school was one where… I realized that I was not seeing myself in art school, like in what I was learning, right? Particularly when it came to Art History. I mean, granted, it was Western Art History. But it just got me to think about... it really, it brought me to a space where I was really thinking about colonization and I was like, "Oh my god, this is it… this is what happens, right? Like, my experience is not reflected here."



And having grown in Mexico as opposed to Kansas, I mean, my god, you know, just my hometown is 400 years old and the richness of culture that is there is just not here. And so I was just really frustrated that here I am with all this kind of generational experience and cultural experience that I'm bringing with me and there's nowhere to share it. There's no one that has that with them and it's certainly not reflected in the text; it's not reflected in what I'm learning.

And I just, I'm like, is there a different aesthetic that I'm missing out on? Because of my history that has literally been burnt? Could there be a whole different way that I'm looking at the world if I had that with me? Or are we all just the same and just kind of remix things and arrive to the same place via different journeys?

The enemy is Modernism. And particularly the project of Modernism. And one of the key aspects of Modernism is this erasure of differences with the intent to get to the "universal man." So we'll probably break down the gendered aspect of that, right? But the intent to get to this notion of universal man, universal mankind, meant that we have to let go of our ethnic differences, we have to let go of our gender differences, we have to let go of all of these differences in how we express our sexuality. It was trying to, in many ways–in a utopian sense–bridge the differences of classes... Before, in Europe, only the aristocrats could have really nice things, right? So by this process of mechanization, we are going to provide a level of comfort and craft so that everyone (meaning mostly the middle class) has nice things as the aristocracy has nice things.

Simone Leigh and I had this amazing conversation about this once where she was sharing with me about how she wanted to study African ceramics. And she was at a school, at a college, that was very heavily rooted in the Mingei movement... So, Japanese ceramics, Japanese tools, Japanese ways of throwing. I mean, that was what you were there to do. And so, she got a Smithsonian fellow-

ship, went to D.C., spent some time there, worked with African potters, you know, did all this stuff and brought it back and it was just… there was no space for it. And this idea that somehow there's not ceramic traditions in the rest of the world is ridiculous. The idea that somehow if you're going to be International that you have to study just, you know, "Asian," and I say Asian in quotes because it's really about Japanese or Chinese porcelain, right? And you go to Jingdezhen and you study that. But even within that, what's really fascinating is how many times I have conversations with people where there's this perception that because those two cultural heritages, those traditions are somehow, somewhat represented--tangentially, you know, reduced to just signs and symbols, whatever it is that's happening in academia–that somehow there is diversity in the field.

[I listened] to an artist that has cerebral palsy give a speech… about what inclusiveness meant for her in art school. Really what it meant is that, so long as you're not disturbing the norm for everyone else, you'll be welcomed, right? But it wasn't enough. There wasn't a space… for her disability to be a vehicle to discover a different aesthetic.

It's all well and good until you ask people to give up their privilege. And then, all of a sudden, it all falls down.

The enemy is not Europe. The enemy is not Europeans. The enemy is actually this Modernist project. And our success in decolonization is then basically hinged on our ability to redefine a set of design practices, design outcomes, design standards, design–whatever that is not informed by or does not privilege this Modernist project that came out of a particular place and a particular time in Europe, and then spread like a weed everywhere else.

I think in Oaxaca this [Modernism] idea has never completely landed, or it has never taken a complete hold of culture. And I think that's what makes it a city or a state of resistance because even though people have been repeatedly told not to speak their language, to dress differently... And I mean it's funny because first the state designs traditional dresses 150 years ago; there was a state project of "Ok, let's design this Mexicanness." Then people, you know, take that, they're proudly dressing in the dress that represents their community. And then they're told not to dress like that because that's too traditional, too old. And then people start dressing as migrants, with the [baseball] cap or whatever, and then they're told "don't dress like that, you should dress in the traditional dress." Ok, so it's very messy. But the point is in Oaxaca there is so much richness in terms of biodiversity and cultural diversity that the state is not able to manage it; the state is not able to control it. So there's always an escape route. You know this homogenization is just not happening… In Oaxaca and many other parts of Mexico. But in Oaxaca it's very clear.

There's something about the term "intersectionality" that is still about fragmentation. Intersectionality seems to be sort of… an academic word. There's like two sides of the coin for me; there's this ugly competitiveness of those who have struggled in life and then there's this, like, this empathy. So, I feel like the folks that are probably exploitative run more into the constantly competing with other folks who have struggled. For example, I was once at a meeting, a board meeting, and talking about wanting to have more opportunities for people of color at this school. And then someone was, like "Well, women have been facing that for the last 100 years," and it was a white woman, you know. And then there's really no conversation to be had… because at that point, I'm a man and I have privileges. [What I'm talking about] is sort of separate from gender…

[I'm talking about] the lack of diversity we have in terms of race here… Because at this specific institution, I would say like more than three-quarters of the folks that attend the school are women. It's an arts/crafts school. And so it was sort of, like, what we're talking about, is what we don't have and what we aim to achieve, which is more people of color. But instead of using empathy to understand where I was coming from and saying, "Man, I've been fighting this fight for a long time. Right on!" she was deciding to compete and saying, "Well, that's not that important." It's tricky because on the one hand I'm not there to necessarily be a problem in the space. But I'm also required to advocate for particular perspectives because there's nobody else to do it, right? That's what happens when you're THE person in the room with that voice… Being the person that is able to represent something is a position of power.

We spend a lot of time under this umbrella "POC," right? In the community of people of color, we always have, in the arts especially, we tend to be the only ones in our general communities with expectations around what we're making. And does our work have to be about identity? I tried to make my work not about that because I was really excited about the places that I found myself in. And so I was painting birds... And I was painting, like, Japanese prints for a long time. But when I started to be able to do things about my past… It's sort of strange because in some ways people look at what I do as like being political or even exploitative, but it's strange because... I can't really make anything else. The question itself is a double bind—you know, like, does your work have to be about information or about this kind of experience? And, I mean, maybe not directly, I can appreciate that, but that's sort of asking me to separate myself from my experience.

Just this morning, the other call that I was on was with a group of curators from around the country who are of South Asian origin… The conversation kept circling around *South Asian, South Asian, South Asian* as opposed to–in opposition to--quote unquote "white spaces." And for me it's challenging because I grew up– those so-called "white spaces" are the museum spaces and gallery spaces that I grew up in. So, it's not in opposition for me… Within that South Asian identity, there are some really interesting things– there's colonialism that's at play there, post-colonialist situations. My mom went to a British boarding school, so there's a whole other separation that happened already by the time we were being raised... Yeah, I have to sort it through still. Like what silent messages are being communicated by this space called museum? Which is really a question about--what is a museum?

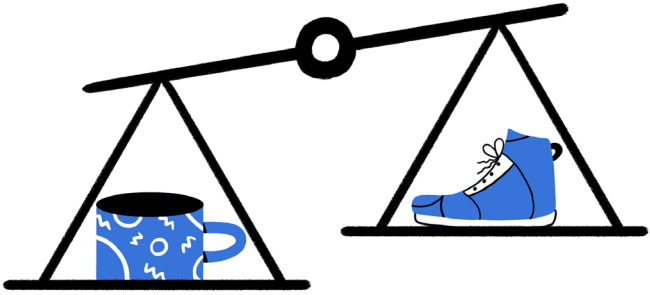
Really, I wanted to create spaces that were primarily for people of color. In my case, immigrants, and eventually queer people and other people of color in the city. I was personally really frustrated with constantly being in white spaces and conversations being shaped by factors outside my own experience and my own concerns and things that I wanted to pursue, so it was, like, "What would it look like to create our own space?" where we get to safely share our concerns, our ideas, our expectations, our vision, and then find a way to act on those.

In my opinion, design itself, it's a colonized and colonizing tool in Mexico. You see the development of where it came from and how it developed in Mexico. It's clearly a European tool that comes from this idea of the world around progress and machines and production and, of course, capitalism, blah blah blah. And then it's funny because we have this other field of symbolic construction and material culture that's been in this territory for thousands of years.

You know, it's the way people solve their material and symbolic needs. But it's, of course, never called design. It's called "artesanía." You know this word? Artesanía. Which is, we have a problem because it's not really "craft." There's not [a good] translation... And then playing with these words of folk art, arte popular, or artesanía -- and then we're like, I mean wait a minute! The real designers, the real masters of design have been here for thousands of years; this is what they do!

Clay has always been a poor [wo]man's craft. It's related to the indigenous peoples. I mean I think that I was naive in a way, starting, because I thought that I would be able to sell pottery to people where I come from and make, like, affordable pottery. And the history of that, you know, there was this Mingei Movement that they tried to do something like that, and then there was this Arts and Crafts Movement that tried to do that, and they often failed. And I think one of the reasons why is because… poor people have bigger problems than just, like, pottery, right? And so you have to figure out ways to get them included and that might not come in the form of them becoming the consumers of the objects… but it might [have to do with them being] represented in the objects. Because consuming, for me, doesn't just mean, like, physically using the cups or being the owner of the cups, but [it also means] going to a museum and then recognizing something that directly stems from your culture. I think that the biggest part for me is not in the creating consumers for my work, [it's in] creating more makers.

For example... I have a century vase at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and there's, like, Wu-Tang Clan imagery and lyrics [on it] and somebody from where I'm from wouldn't buy that pot, but if they find themselves in the museum then it starts to create this bridge where something that represents them is in that museum, you know? Or something that they find compelling in someway because they see themselves in it. And so I started to shift gears a little bit and stopped thinking about trying to sell them my pottery or even get them interested in my pottery or my functional work. But even today, I sell work for a lot of money, but I always have kept a line of cups that were sort of, like, accessible for people that were really interested in them... And I've always had the mind to keep my cups at the same price as, like, Jordans, 'cause I just felt like if my work ever got to the point where someone wanted to, like, stunt or, like, say that they have [one]… in the same way that where I come from people would, like, wear Jordans or, you know, a necklace or somethin' like that... I think my cups are sort of like in that.



I guess what I'm wondering is… maybe intersectionality is not the right word… I don't know what a good one is, but I'm wondering if the idea of what it is matches the word. Should it be intra[-sectionality], not inter[sectionality]? I keep thinking about that word…

designed and printed by
AMANDA BEEKHUIZEN
at
TANLINE PRINTING
2017

This book is part of research supported by a Craft Research Fund grant from The Center for Craft, Creativity & Design, Inc., and a Graduate Student Fellowship from the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts.

tanline printing
tucson, arizona