Design and Intersectionality
Material Production of Gender, Race, Class—and Beyond
Ece Canlı
University of Porto
Luiza Prado de O. Martins
Universität der Künste Berlin

As you must have been following, in the recent years, the world has been facing incredible and devastating incidents; some that we have been watching online, some that we have witnessed directly, some that we have been reacting through social media, protesting on the streets or so on. To remember some featured examples: public revolts and social movements that spread from Middle East to Latin America, nuclear disaster in Fukushima, war in Syria and refugee “crisis” blasted in Europe, rise of extreme right wing parties and dictator-like governments in various states, public massacres by radical groups in several countries, massacre of the latinx LGBTQI+ community in Orlando, lately Brexit, and the victory of Donald Trump, just a few days ago... Many people have been reacting to these incidents, every time with rage and despair, yet calling each moment as a “state of exception” or “emergency”, crying out for a miraculous change and collective action. However, such events represent just a very small visible portion of the overall picture of the ongoing effects of power, coloniality, modernity and capitalism; and misery, exclusion, subjugation, poverty and death, which are the everyday reality of many people in the world, rather than states of exception.

For decades, activists and scholars have discussed such forms of injustice and oppression from various viewpoints. Feminist movements in particular have been prominent in terms of bringing systematic inequality, violence and oppression towards women into view. Feminists like Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Angela Davis, Chandra Mohanty, Nira Yuval-Davis, amongst others argued that these three should not be regarded as mutually exclusive or separate identity categories, but intertwined axes of social power. In other words, oppressions based on one’s gender, race and class, cannot be tackled without understanding the greater matrix of power relations working on the bodies concertedly. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) later coined the term “intersectionality” to explain this phenomenon, in which different facets of oppression intersect and interact. The objective of taking these distinct forms of oppression into account is not to compare them, which would be a useless endeavour. Rather, acknowledging the complexity of oppression and the multiple shapes it might assume is a helpful strategy in understanding its mechanisms. Intersectionality is not a discipline by itself; rather, it is considered a meta-theory (Davis, 2008), a metaphor (Crenshaw, 1991), a theoretical stance or an approach that has already had a profound influence in a wide range of fields. Accordingly, we would like to permeate the potentiality of intersectionality into design, as we think that it could be a useful method for understanding design’s contribution to reproduction of such identity categories, hegemonic power and forms of oppression. And through this, we
would like to expand the question and discuss the politics and political agency of design.

Our claim as design researchers is that design, as a practice and discipline, is not exempt from these incidents and effects, but directly involved with or at the back of them. Most of the people/designers assume that such worldly issues such as social differentiation and unequal distribution of resources are of interests to legislative, institutional and financial practices, and mainly state politics. However, if we do a “detective work” in the words of political scientist Langdon Winner (1980), we can see how the system of inclusion/exclusion, privilege/oppression and social segregation is reproduced through and manifested in designed artefacts, spaces, sites and technologies. Design is a discipline deeply entangled in the dynamics of inequality. It enacts and enforces them; it is both a producer of these mechanisms, and is informed by them. Assuming that issues of inequality and oppression are a matter of institutional politics, and downplaying Design’s role in the maintenance of these systems is a dangerous path to follow, yet one that the design discipline seems too eager to walk. It is a path that tends to silence dissenting narratives, because it assumes that design (and, by extension, the designer) cannot be anything but fundamentally well intentioned. As such, any criticism is perceived with suspicion, if not downright hostility. Why question something that is inherently good? Why so much skepticism, even towards fields within design that are supposed to concern themselves with social issues? In such an environment, critical engagements with the insidious mechanisms that inform the process of designing are frequently stifled, if they manage to be discussed at all. This unwillingness to examine design’s role in the maintenance of oppression only reinforces the need for a profound critical engagement with intersectionality. As a discipline, Design is terribly late to a discussion that has been happening within other fields in the Humanities for decades now, and we have a great amount of work to do in order to overcome this. To paraphrase Ivan Illich: to hell with good intentions! It is urgent that we inquire Design’s role in sustaining heteronormativity, sexism, racism, xenophobia, and classism. It is essential, particularly given recent events, that we examine the ways in which Design contributes to the continuation of the project of coloniality and white supremacy. Borrowing the words of Argentine semiotician Walter Mignolo (2011), a radical epistemological shift is needed, one that will change not only the content, but the very terms of the conversation. This is no easy task, of course; it is a collective undertaking, one that requires that we challenge each other, that we reflect upon our own modes of operating in the field, and that we look beyond the surface of the obvious.

Let us look into the gentrified and privatised public spaces that push the lower-class to the outskirts of the cities; to the high security checkpoints at the borders and airports that legalise/illegalise bodies with “wrong”/“right” papers; the everyday gendered goods that underpin the representation of heteronormativity and performativity of feminine/masculine and female/male dichotomies; the gender-segregated public bathrooms that enforce binary perceptions of gender and silence queer and trans identities...Such examples, as we call “material co-
enactments of design and politics”, regulate and manipulate people’s bodies’ abilities, movements, inhabitations and life conditions in various ways, while segregating society through race, ethnicity, social and legal status, gender, sexuality, nationality and so on.

Apart from such evident examples of artefacts, spaces and technologies, talking about intersectionality in the context of design also requires to see the greater ecology of material power. For instance, we believe that it is not possible to talk about design and its relation to politics and power without thinking of its direct involvement in neoliberal capitalist economy, and being the backbone of the mechanisms of production and consumption. In parallel, the sustainment of neoliberal capitalist economy is one of the most central foci of intersectional critique, as the global labour market is the first hand regulator of the gendered, racialized and impoverished bodies (Mohanty, 2003, Salem, 2016). We can open this argument by stressing that today most of the technological gadgets we depend (say, our smart phones and laptops), garments we dress, cosmetics we use, toys, electronic appliances, plastic goods, textiles etc. are substantially manufactured in the Third World/Global South from Far East to Latin America by mostly under age women of color, the poorest and the most precarious bodies in all over the world. Chandra T. Mohanty (2003: 514) states that “women do two-thirds of the world’s work and earn less than one-tenth of its income’ under dehumanising working conditions; without insurance, security, sufficient sleeping and nutrition and future. In their article about global assembly lines, Barbara Ehrenreich and Annette Fuentes (1981: 94-95) stress that “eighty to 90 percent of the low-skilled assembly jobs that go to the Third World are performed by women” in the service of “foreign–dominated industrialization.” They call these young poor women of color as “the world’s new industrial proletariat” (ibid.) Considering that all these products and services that these bodies produce as the world’s new slaveries are “design”, one can say that the unremitting machine of design and production work at the center of gender-race-class persecution.