FCJ-224 Design Thinking, Design Activism, Design Study

Maria Hynes
Australian National University, Canberra

Abstract: In the history of altruistic efforts to correct the ills of the social body, Design Thinking is today enjoying its time in the limelight. While many designers have relegated it to a passing phase in the history of design, it continues to gain purchase in the broader public sphere, where it is increasingly celebrated as a natural evolution of design's diverse trajectories and the realisation of its moral potentials. This article offers a brief analysis of the contemporary status of the Design Thinking brand and, specifically, its popular deployment toward the solution of social problems. As a peculiar form of immaterial labour, Design Thinking is increasingly reliant on the elaboration of a debt to design, as a way of mitigating the problem of the potentially non-productive privatisation of the commons. Drawing on the work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, I consider the implications of this for its supposed beneficiaries. I argue that, to the extent that design is recruited toward Design Thinking, figured as a model of solving social problems, it risks reproducing the dominant debt/credit logic and denying histories of unpayable debt. What I call design study, by contrast, makes 'bad debt' a principle of elaboration, thus opening the way for different ways of experiencing our mutual indebtedness.

FCJ-224 Design Thinking, Design Activism, Design Study

Maria Hynes
Australian National University, Canberra

But we won't stand corrected. Moreover, incorrect as we are there's nothing wrong with us. (Harney and Moten, 2013: 20)

In their consideration of the contribution of academic labour to what they call the 'social reproduction of conquest denial', Stefano Harney and Fred Moten isolate a number of factors. They examine modes of intellectual practice that deny: the 'incessant and irreversible intellectuality' that was already there; political practices that, claiming to engage in just redistribution, wish to think away the division of private and public and, with it, the unpayable debts at the heart of the social; and forms of criticality that deny the underlabour that makes the social being of critical academics possible. To these characteristic forms of labour practiced in the university they oppose a somewhat idiosyncratic sense of 'study': 'study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative

practice' (2013: 110). In speaking of study in this sense, Harney and Moten are concerned with how to enable – in the face of the privatisation of intellectuality, its regulation and governance – the kind of 'common intellectual practice' represented by these mundane collective activities (2013: 110). Amidst the more sanguine openings to that 'something else' that incessantly goes on in the social, there is anger in their book, *The Undercommons*. This relates in part to Harney and Moten's refiguring of the question of the political; no longer a question of 'protecting nothing but an illusory right to what we do not have, which the settler takes for and as the commons' (2013: 18), the first right is now the right to 'refuse that which was first refused to us' (Halberstam, 2013: 12). Among other things, this means refuting the seeming innocence of those claims to speak as and for the common, which ultimately hide the 'rendering and hoarding of social wealth' that is their condition of possibility (Harney and Moten, 2013: 53). Vital here are the debt of the settler to blackness, the divvying up of the public and private on which History and State depend and the refusal of the common intellectual practice that is study through the ennoblement of whiteness. In short, the ongoing dispossession and governance of the undercommons.

Harney and Moten have much to say about the academic labour performed in universities and its relation to 'a whole, varied, alternative history of thought' to which their notion of study commits (2013: 110). Yet, much of what is called intellectual labour today actually goes on outside the university, as the disciplinary specialisation model of the liberal arts is announced as redundant in the wake of the complexity of contemporary problems. In the recent decades that this narrative of the demise of disciplinary expertise has been rehearsed, the idea that more 'integrative disciplines of understanding' are coming into their own has become familiar (Buchanan, 1992: 6). Of these more integrative and ostensibly more relevant modes of thinking, the model known as Design Thinking is paradigmatic. In its claims to public nowness, Design Thinking promises to make good the ambitions of earlier practices of social design that, until formulated as a teachable, transferable model of thinking, are considered well motivated but not yet effective. If the rather inflated claims of Design Thinking's champions are to be believed, Design Thinking is the answer to today's questions, the solution to today's problems. In any event, in the history of altruistic efforts to correct the ills of the social body, Design Thinking is certainly enjoying its time in the limelight. If Richard Buchanan's announcement of this mode of thinking as 'a new liberal art of technological culture' anticipated contemporary

rhetoric (1992: 5), it did not yet figure Design Thinking as the moral realisation of design's plural histories. In enthusiastic tones, contemporary advocates of Design Thinking's social potentials paint a picture of a world awaiting the social conscience of design: '...In an area outside Hyderabad, India, between the suburbs and the countryside, a young woman—we'll call her Shanti—fetches water daily from the always-open local borehole that is about 300 feet from her home....' (Brown and Wyatt, 2010).

This article offers a brief analysis of the contemporary status of the Design Thinking brand and, specifically, its increasingly popular deployment in new forms of design for social change. I consider the claim that Design Thinking offers 'one of the most powerful tools at our disposal to create a fairer, more productive society' (Rawsthorn, 2013), suggesting that to celebrate this mode of thinking, or indeed to merely unveil its neoliberal tendencies, is to miss much of what is essential about its widening appeal. I argue that Design Thinking is a peculiar form of immaterial labour that seems increasingly to involve an elaboration of a *debt to design*, as a way of mitigating the problem of the potentially non-productive privatisation of the commons. In making this argument, my aim is not to underscore the connection between Design Thinking's supposedly moral claims and economically motivated ones; other critics have effectively demonstrated, for instance, the way in which ambitious uses of design for contemporary problem solving have failed, in part because of the economic growth they have promoted (see Tonkinwise, 2015). Rather, my aim is to consider the creation of value involved in this specific mode of immaterial labour, and especially the role played by the supposed benefactors of Design Thinking in this process of value creation.

To be clear, my concern is not with design as such, nor with the kind of thinking that designers do. It is, rather, with the branding and marketing of a model of thinking that, denying the diverse histories and trajectories of design and designers, announces itself as the realisation of design's moral destiny, the most effective and ethical way to 'make a difference'. My concern is that the popular image of Design Thinking as a form of altruistic intellectual labour rests on a debt/credit logic that, claiming to remedy histories of social dispossession, inherits their logics and legacies.

The article is motivated, then, by a nagging, perhaps slightly melodramatic question, though I think it is not an unwarranted one in the light of Harney and Moten's provocation; namely, do

the hyperinflated claims made by the brand of Design Thinking represent 'the new way to steal from the stolen?' (2013: 53). In asking this question, I have some sympathy with design activists' efforts over the last decades to reappropriate Design Thinking toward a 'designerly way' (Markussen, 2013) of affecting social change, whilst working against some of its more economically instrumental and conservative tendencies. Yet the notion of design activism is itself being reappropriated within today's popularised models of design for social change (see Heller, 2015; Anderson, 2017; Rawsthorn, 2018). The idea that Design Thinking has found its moral destiny in endeavours to utilise 'design for good' is today standard fare for its TED-talk champions, where the image of designers as activists represents the ethical face of the Design Thinking brand. Given the appropriation of the sign of activism by an increasingly entrepreneurial model of Design Thinking, which seeks precisely to underscore the debt of the dispossessed to design, the final section of the article considers whether design might still have a role to play in experimenting differently with our indebtedness to one another.

What I am calling design study takes inspiration from Harney and Moten in refusing the seeming innocence of commonsense images of the common and the debt/credit logic on which they rest. In speaking of design study, my interest is not in the status of Design Studies – which is to say, the institutionalised study of design. My concern is to apprehend design as something other than a model of solving problems or even a form of activism, but rather as lending itself to study in the sense in which Harney and Moten use that term. Far from venturing to fix that which has been deemed broken, study is that which makes 'common cause with the brokenness of being' (Halberstam, 2013: 5). Far from the politics of redemption, study refuses those forms of intellectuality which ultimately place some lives 'under the sign and weight of a closed question' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 48).

In gesturing towards something that looks more like study, I indicate the importance of those practices that involve the performative refusal of the dominant logic of debt and credit, as a step toward a more open experimentation with our mutual indebtedness.

The Debt to Design

While many designers have relegated it to a passing phase in the history of Design Studies, Design Thinking continues to gain popular purchase in the broader public sphere, where it is

credited as a mode of problem solving more suited to contemporary reality than disciplinary expertise. Where earlier advocates of 'design for social change' pressed for the provision of design services to community groups, the notion of design for good extends today beyond service provision, to the innovation of responses to complex social problems such as poverty, health, and education. Since its earliest uses, the concept of Design Thinking has been surrounded by hyperbole and paradox. Celebrated for its cutting-edge approach to problem solving, it is a form of thinking whose mantra is 'Don't Overthink! Act!'. Hailed as a democratising force and a tool of the everyman, its method is nonetheless formalised and taught in specialised degrees at elite universities. And deploying a brand of critical thinking to disrupt dominant paradigms, Design Thinking has been fêted as a radical challenge to accepted wisdoms, whilst framed in the discourse of entrepreneurialism. To its champions, Design Thinking represents the realisation of a revolutionary transformation in society and culture early in the 21st century and the evolution of design's diverse trajectories into a socially responsible form.

A few essential features of Design Thinking are today celebrated. Consistent with the global rise of what Richard Florida (2002) has famously referred to as the 'creative class', the creativity of Design Thinking is established in opposition to analytical thinking; the former is said to build ideas up, the latter to break them down (Baeck and Gremmett, 2011). Relative to earlier versions of participatory design, Design Thinking's emphasis on collective creativity is said to involve a growing focus on 'the big picture of socially innovative design' and a 'hands-on' exploration of design possibilities' by 'diverse participating stakeholders and competences' (Bjögvinsson et al, 2012: 101; Dorst, 2011). Proponents of design thinking characteristically celebrate its democratising potentials, arguing that the hierarchy of expertise that once privileged designers has given way to the sense that, with respect to creative capacity, 'everyone is a designer' (Brown, 2014). As a form of research activity, Design Thinking is credited with the capacity to challenge the assumptions held within traditional forms of expertise. According to Don Norman (jnd.org), Design Thinking asks 'stupid questions', by which he means that it questions the obvious; this, he suggests, 'is where breakthroughs come from'. In the face of such radical questioning, what orients Design Thinking to genuinely meaningful solutions, its advocates suggest, is its 'human-centric' conception of use, from the

early stages of building empathy, through to the sharing of prototypes and innovative solutions (Brown, 2009). Finally, and despite its claim to actualise innate human capacities, it is increasingly regarded as a specialised form of thinking, as the veritable explosion of Design Thinking courses in the online space and at prestigious institutions demonstrates.

Of course, this branding of Design Thinking as a form of social altruism is reflective of broader economic and social conditions, including the decline of the welfare state, which has 'created markets for semi-public activities', as well as the growth of design education, which has 'pushed many young designers to seek new markets… in complex societal challenges' (Chen et al, 2016: 1). In any case, and 'whatever the reasons, design is not what it was in 1990', but 'faces a new type of late modernity in which social activities interwoven with things and services create value' (Chen et al, 2016: 1). It is interesting to note the challenges here for capitalist development within this economy of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996) and the biopolitical production of 'ideas, information, images, knowledges, code, languages, social relationships, affects and the like' (Hardt, 2011). As Michael Hardt (2011) has argued, in an era in which the reproducibility of property is so crucial to the reproduction of capital, the real struggle is 'between exclusive versus shared property', a struggle in which 'the immaterial trumps over the material, the reproducible over the unreproducible, and the shared over the exclusive'. As Hardt (2011) also suggests, the emerging dominance of this immaterial form of property is significant because of the curious manner through which the conflict between the common and property plays out, when the commons refers not simply to the earth and its material resources but also, and perhaps more importantly, to 'the results of human labour and creativity, such as ideas, languages, affects and so forth'. Hardt (2011) notes that there is a tension internal to this stage of immaterial capitalism, insofar as 'the more the common is subject to property relations… the less productive it is; and yet capitalist valorization processes require private accumulation'. The challenge is to appropriate the common and transform it into property, without losing its productivity in the privatisation process.

In the face of this appropriation of the common, *design activists* in recent decades have sought to reappropriate the surplus value of human creativity produced in design culture, a project that often involves 'a kinship with anti-establishment movements of various sorts (eg., anti-capitalism, anti-globalization, etc.)' (Markussen, 2012: 38). Such activism, growing as it has out

of instrumental design culture, recalls Hardt's (2011) claim that biopolitical production invariably 'exceeds the bounds of capitalist relations', granting labour increasing autonomy with respect to the commons. Indeed, and as Guy Julier (2013) suggests, design activists are 'no longer willing to lend their "ethical surplus" out', but aim to politicise the precarious conditions under which they labour and their origins in the political-economic conditions of wider society. Yet, while the more anti-establishment versions of design activism stress the limits of contemporary capitalism to address the challenges of the day, this orientation all but disappears in the new brand of activism. Today, it seems, one need look no further than Design Thinking's inherently activist capacity to 'build power' by 'providing compelling visions of a better society that people are then able to bargain for'. In calling on designers to use their talents to 'build a better world' and 'to create positive change in traditionally underserved communities', champions of Design Thinking do not shy from the moral challenge 'of seeking solutions to acute problems for vulnerable people with scant resources' (Rawsthorn, 2013). As such hyperbolic claims for Design Thinking proliferate, the destiny of design appears as a kind of lodestar for the future, as designers 'finally' face up to the ethical decision of 'whether we will simply do good design or we will do good with design' (Berman, 2012).

Yet while Design Thinking is thus announced as the solution to the present and the harbinger of the future, on the question of the past, popular articulations of Design Thinking are less attentive, and indeed the distinctly colonial overtones of many of its claims should not be overlooked. According to Ezio Manzini's popular formulation of 'design for social innovation', for instance, design represents a special modality of the 'essentially human' capacity for creativity. Yet, the 'design modality' differs sharply from a 'conventional modality', insofar as the former involves the sense of designing one's own biography and thus shaping one's future, while the latter involves the acceptance of a traditional way of life (Manzini, 2006). The assumption here, of course, is that the distinctly entrepreneurial notion of the life project can be considered a universal aspiration, to the extent that one is prepared to eschew 'traditionalism' and the kind of unrealisable or unprogressive ideas that Manzini refers to as dreaming. With an enthusiasm for geopolitical metaphors that a more cautious thinker would have left alone, Manzini announces the 'new role' for design at a point in history in which a 'new continent of sustainable civilization' is trying to come into being (2006: 2). Likening this

moment to 'the passage in Europe from feudal civilization to industrial urban society', Manzini suggests that we are today undergoing a 'great transition': a 'process of change in which humanity is beginning to come to terms with the limits of the planet, and which is also leading us to make better use of the connectivity that is available to us' (2006: 2). If the classical intellectual was crucial to the imaginary of a counter-industrial revolution, it is the Design Thinker who is here credited as the kind of post-materialist visionary who can help to bring this 'new civilization' into being, producing 'concrete, practical answers to difficult problems, such as those of an aging population, treatment for chronic diseases, the cultural integration of immigrants, and the requalification of cities and the informal settlements surrounding them' (Manzini, 2006: 4).

The naivety of this vision aside, there is in all this a cruelly misplaced sense of debt. Those whose fortunes have historically been deleteriously tied to capitalist development are now positioned as indebted to its latest form. More than this, they are recruited as immaterial labourers in the reproduction of the Design Thinking brand, as repeated images and narratives of local peoples in poor and developing contexts participating in the 'co-design' of solutions to 'their' problems seek to demonstrate. The elaboration of a debt to design thus serves as a way of mitigating the problem of the potentially non-productive privatisation of the commons, insofar as the realisation of the destiny of design involves the actualisation of 'everyone's' creative capacities in a happily inclusive form of labour. Design Thinking is thus engaged in a kind of prospecting of the common, undertaken with the sincerity of, and in the name of, socially responsible immaterial labour. In the production of value from this socially responsible labour, the work that the bearers of social problems do to support the immaterial labour arising from design's ethical destiny is far from insignificant. [1] No longer merely the weight on the back of European man in 19th century cartoons of the 'White Man's Burden', the non-European is now an active co-participant in glossy flesh-and-blood images and narratives of co-design!

Harney and Moten's idea of 'conquest denial' offers an apt term for the process by which histories of debt and credit become monstrously distorted in visions of the just society (2013: 40-1). To imagine a form of work – a kind of thinking or activism – that, in the name of justice, would solve the problems of social and economic dispossession is, for Harney and Moten, to claim an ethical dimension to such work that is strictly unjustifiable. Insofar as one accepts

uncritically 'the foundation of public administrationist thought', with its 'positivistic and normative' categories of 'state', 'economy' and 'civil society', one partakes in a kind of 'conquest denial' of 'the labor that goes on behind the backs of these categories' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 36). Conversely, in order to grasp the commons in anything other than the dominant terms defined by white history it is necessary to acknowledge that there are debts that cannot be repaid within the logic and institutions of capitalism: the debt that lies at the heart of its founding to the stolen labour of slavery, but also the ongoing labour of the undercommons that enables its reproduction.

It is not insignificant that one of the often-cited examples of the evolution of design trajectories into contemporary Design Thinking concerns anti-slavery politics. In her copious publications and public lectures on the activist potentials of Design Thinking, OBE recipient Alice Rawsthorn demonstrates the credentials of Design Thinking as 'an agent of change' by highlighting exemplary historical instances of design interventions, including the role played in the anti-slavery cause by an 1823 engraved design of a French slave ship:

> *The anti-slavery lobby used John Hawksworth's 1823 engraving of the layout of The Vigilante, a French slave ship captured by the British navy off the coast of Africa the previous year, to expose the heinous conditions in which African slaves were transported to North America. Nearly three hundred and fifty slaves were crammed into the hold of the ship in shackles, while the spacious captain's cabin occupied roughly the same amount of room as several dozen seated women. By depicting the ship in the dispassionate style of an architectural drawing, Hawksworth demonstrated the merciless brutality of the slave trade. (Rawsthorn, 2013)*

Lest our gratitude to Design Thinking not be sufficiently invoked by this example of how a designer 'brilliantly demonstrated the brutality of the slave trade', Rawsthorn characteristically goes on to cite another historical instance of design's achievements. Here she details the role played by the wealthy politician, Charles Booth, in raising awareness of the extent of poverty in London, through a series of maps he produced between 1886 and 1903. Without irony, Rawsthorn highlights the debt that history owes to Booth, who assembled 'a team of volunteers to visit every street in London to assess the income and social class of its residents' and then graphically demonstrated the data on maps, which distinguished seven categories of

inhabitants – ranging from 'the lowest class, vicious and semi-criminal', to the 'very poor' who suffered 'chronic want', through various gradations up to the wealthy or, as Rawsthorn puts it, 'the luckiest Londoners, like Booth himself who lived in plush and leafy Kensington'. Rawsthorn is keen to emphasise the 'rigour of the research', which, combined with 'the design decision to colour code each street', meant that 'the information relayed by the maps was readily understood by a far wider audience than the few people who'd have plowed through an academic tome on the subject'. As a result, this prototype of Design Thinking was rendered as design activism, as the problem of poverty was translated into the solution of government intervention into poverty (Rawsthorn, 2013).

Aside from the problematic attribution of wealth to mere good fortune or the celebration of the resultant governance of the deprived of the city, again it is the sense of history's indebtedness to the progressive foresight of early practitioners of Design Thinking that is remarkable here. How fortunate for slaves that an early form of Design Thinking brought to light the deprivations of their conditions of transportation! The public appeal and value of contemporary Design Thinking is deemed crucial in this, not atypical though very motivated, account of the history of design. Yet the very notion of the public is of course itself the result of a divvying up of the commons into the public and the private, which enables both the private accumulation of wealth and the public administration of poverty. As Harney and Moten put it, 'public administration is the competence to confront the socialisation thrown up continuously by capitalism and to take as much of that socialisation as possible and reduce it either to something called the public or something called the private…' (2013: 37).

Rawsthorn's uncritical account of the perceived link between deprivation and depravity (exemplified by Booth's identification of poverty with criminality in the black-coded area of his maps) is spot on in one sense. Social dispossession does, as Moten (2016) suggests, mark some lives as insurgent from the start. To walk down the street as a black man in the US today is, he notes, the act of an insurgent body, which leaves it vulnerable to harm. Against such insurgency, the professionalisation represented in contemporary Design Thinking appears as nothing short of a form of counterinsurgency, the goal of which is, like 'the ultimate goal of counterinsurgency everywhere: to turn the insurgents into state agents' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 38). Insofar as celebrated forms of Design Thinking engage in the collective reproduction

of intellectuality in the pursuit of problem solution, they frequently also become engaged in correctional institutions of the common, including diverse forms of governance and the deployment of policy towards those deemed in need of fixing. The point is certainly not that design is bereft of value, but that this characterisation of contemporary Design Thinking as the natural evolution and moral destiny of design's diverse trajectories reduces the forms of thought and practice of design to a naïve, even ugly, form of debt reparation. But this notion that the debts of the past can be made good is, as Harney and Moten insist, the call of victorious whiteness. The question, then, concerns what it would mean to engage in the practice of *bad debt*, 'which is to say real debt, the debt that cannot be repaid… debt broken from credit, debt as its own principle' (2013: 61).

Design Study, Bad Debt

The popular version of Design Thinking, I have been arguing, establishes its social, even activist, credentials in large part through the elaboration of the debt of the broken to design: the debt of 'those vulnerable people' with 'acute problems' and 'scarce resources' to the projects that many of the 'gutsiest, most dynamic designers of our time are working on' (Rawsthorn, frieze.com). But the innocence of this image of social change rests on a denial of the fact that the common wealth has never in fact been held in common. Far from effecting a just redistribution of the commons, to seek to fix that which has been deemed broken may be 'to fix another way of imagining the world, to literally fix it, to destroy it, to regulate it, to exclude it, to incarcerate it, but also at the same time to incorporate it, to capitalise upon it, to exploit it, to accumulate it' (Moten, 2014). It is not that design interventions are without value, but that they must be seen to be social, rather than interventions upon the social. Such an acknowledgment is crucial if they are to avoid the fundamentally asocial logic of debt and credit to which dominant social reality is oriented, which deems some lives broken and in need of fixing and which hopes, through social repair, to remain in credit into the future.

The question I want to briefly consider in closing is what it would mean to appropriate the idea of design toward collective practices of being differently indebted. Given that the very sign of activism has been contorted through its recruitment as the ethical face of Design Thinking, what forms of collective practice might intervene in the present, without claiming to fix it? Or,

to put it in Harney and Moten's terms, what would it mean to enable the practice, the study, of bad debt? Harney and Moten write:

> *They promise to match credit and debt again, debt and credit. But our debts stay bad. We keep buying another song, another round. It is not credit that we seek, nor even debt, but bad debt — which is to say real debt, the debt that cannot be repaid, the debt at a distance, the debt without creditor, the black debt, the queer debt, the criminal debt. Excessive debt, incalculable debt, debt for no reason, debt broken from credit, debt as its own principle. (2013: 61)*

Eschewing Design Thinking's efforts to redeem debt as credit, then, what I am calling design study works toward debt as a 'principal of elaboration', through which the word 'owe' becomes 'a more generative word' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 150). As Harney and Moten (2013) insist, what is truly injust is the forgetting, through prescriptions for repair, of the undercommons. Because of course the commons is not a substance laid out underneath a general humanity, but is an undercommons: a 'general and generative antagonism', which, though it certainly involves dispossession, is a 'space and time that is always here', rather than a problem demanding repair. Promises of reparation refuse the reality of this fundamentally unpayable and uncreditable debt. In their cruel positing of the commons as the fertile space of human creativity or the source of a common wealth that could be equitably shared, prescriptions for repair deny the 'brokenness of being' that the notion of the undercommons seeks to affirm, with an eye to inhabiting it differently (Halberstam, 2013: 5).

'We cannot represent ourselves. We can't be represented' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 20); if the undercommons had a voice, this is what it would say. Though of course the very image of voice is already too tied to representation and its peculiar distribution of debt and credit. Better, perhaps, to speak of the noise of the undercommons. The noise of refusal; for if there was a right that could be said to be 'proper' to the undercommons, it is the right to refuse, the 'refusal of what has been refused' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 96). Denied the innocence of the social from the moment of its dispossession and appropriation as labour, the undercommons refuses the very promise of making bad debts good, engaging instead in a 'game-changing kind of refusal', which 'signals the refusal of the choices as offered' (Halberstam, 2013: 8). If that which

is dispossessed cannot be brought into credit and does not want to be fixed, what does the undercommons 'want'? Jack Halberstam writes:

> *If you want to know what the undercommons wants... it is this – we cannot be satisfied*
> *with the recognition and acknowledgment generated by the very system that denies a)*
> *that anything was ever broken and b) that we deserved to be the broken part; so we refuse*
> *to ask for recognition and instead we want to take apart, dismantle, tear down the*
> *structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access*
> *the places that we know lie outside its walls. (2013: 6)*

I have suggested that celebrated versions of Design Thinking represent a guise in which the deployment of governance and policy against the socially dispossessed appears in the name of socially responsible labour. Sure, Design Thinking's champions stress that design thought and practice should always be a talking to, rather than a talking for, the other. But this too is to impose on the undercommons the requirement of a 'reasoned or meaningful self-generated utterance' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 50). The point is not that all forms of doing with and for another are corrupt from the outset, but that if one opposes the existing forms and structures of life, it must be via the acknowledgement that 'they are not only bad for some of us, they are bad for all of us' (Halberstam, 2013: 10). The indebtedness that champions of Design Thinking seek to impose upon the dispossessed 'presumes a kind of individualized relation to a naturalized economy', which is, in fact, 'predicated upon exploitation' (Halberstam, 2013: 5). The credit that such forms of thought and 'activism' then seek to generate through their altruism is a fundamentally asocial relation, in which the appearance of mutuality disguises the very real mutuality of bad debt: debt that cannot be redeemed by credit, 'excessive debt, incalculable debt, debt for no reason, debt broken from credit, debt as its own principle' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 61).

It is the elaboration of debt as its own principle that I suggest 'design study' makes its own. Far from insisting upon our debt to design, design study is a speculative practice that engages in a performative refusal of the idea of creditable debt. In this, the contemporary status of the idea of design may serve as a resource of sorts, much as the university's resources (financial, literary and social), may enable 'study' where study seems increasingly improbable (Harney and Moten, 2013). Unlike the kind of research upon which celebrated Design Thinking embarks, study is

'both a concept and a practice of determining what needs to be learned together, without objective or endpoint and without escaping the feeling that we are in a mutual debt to each other' (Harney, 2018). Study disengages itself from the individual discreditation that identifies those who are falling behind and surrenders the instrumentalism of completion and solution, engaging, rather, in ongoing experimentation with the performative refusal of the dominant debt/credit logic.

Harney and Moten stress that study is a gathering of intensities and that its enablement will likely also involve a gathering of resources. Given that the thought and practice of design today attracts such a gathering of resources, in part due to the popular appeal of Design Thinking, the language of design might be useful to the extent that it can be deployed towards study and the 'development of ways of being together that cannot be shared as a model but as an instance' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 105). In this respect, the work of the Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI) in Boston provides an interesting instance of experimentation with ways of doing debt differently. Representing itself as an 'artistic research and development outfit for the improvement of civil society and everyday life', the Design Studio exploits the idea of the studio as a place of invention in which the pragmatics of reconsidering problems and solutions play out:

> *Situated at the intersections of design thinking and practice, social justice and activism, public art and social practice and civic / popular engagement, we design and test social interventions with and on behalf of marginalized populations, controversies and ways of life. (https://www.ds4si.org)*

Self-representations aside, it is the practical aspects of the Design Studio that interest me here, insofar as they provide a sense in which design might orient a more open experimentation with bad debt and with the intellectuality of study prior to its ennoblement as a model of thinking.

It is no accident that the practices of DS4SI are deeply implicated in the US politics of race. If the undercommons is inextricably linked to notions of blackness, it is because there is an unpayable debt to slavery at the heart of the structures we inhabit, though Harney and Moten insist on distinguishing the idea of blackness from the 'psycho-politico-pathology of populations'. As they say, 'blackness...must be understood in its ontological difference from

black people who are, nevertheless, (under)privileged insofar as they are given (to) an understanding of it' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 47). In any event, it strikes me that many of the collective practices of DS4SI go some way in productively engaging the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of study.

To cite an early, but much cited and important intervention, the 2012 installation, 'Public Kitchen', set up in one of the largest and most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods of Boston, was a 10 day experiment in reimagining public infrastructure. In the face of the increasing privatisation of formerly public services and functions, this pop-up kitchen and its associated events used the medium of food to reimagine the public space, at a time when café society individualises our relationship to food and privatises space. More precisely and importantly, the experiment elaborates a new relation to debt that, without disavowing our indebtedness to one another, nonetheless answers the question '"how much do I owe you?" with the answer '"nothin"' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 156), in this way deepening, rather than refusing, that bad debt that is both 'unpaid and unpayable' (Harney, 2018). The point is not to hold this experiment up as exemplary, and there is no doubt that the Design Studio engages in a treacherous game in which thought, speech and practice must constantly be directed away from their capitalist appropriation and toward their more improprietous use. In fact, no empirical instance will get it right, since there is no right. But, in their experiments of living otherwise, these practices might approximate study in their style or manner of elaboration, not simply through a new form of sharing but by actively and performatively refusing the logic of credit amongst others, through the deep sociality of bad debt.

Immaterial labour is loquacious (Hardt and Negri, 2001), and certainly the labour that is today associated with the notion of Design Thinking is of the noisy, talkative type. While the discourse of Design Thinking announces its arrival on the scene, iterating the debt that will be owed to this mode of solving the problems of the day, it stakes its claims to activism on the image of itself as a motivated intervention into contemporary social experience. In any case, the dominant paradigm of social reality – we could, following Harney and Moten (2013), call it whiteness – announces itself as the means of addressing and correcting. Amidst the din of these triumphant voices, however, the undercommons has its own cry: 'But we won't stand corrected. Moreover, incorrect as we are there's nothing wrong with us. We don't want to be

correct and we won't be corrected. Politics proposes to make us better, but we were already good in the mutual debt that can never be made good' (Harney and Moten, 2013: 20).

Biographical Note

Maria Hynes is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Sociology, Australian National University. Her research pursues an ethico-aesthetic conception of the social sciences, in areas relating to affective and biopolitical forms of power, practices of creative resistance and anti-racism. She has published in a variety of journals, including *Angelaki, Environment and Planning A & D, British Journal of Sociology, Sociological Review, Performance Review, Parallax, Culture Machine, Borderlands, Fibreculture* and *Continuum*.

Notes

[1] The highly celebrated global design and innovation firm IDEO's partnership with the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the Stanford d.school for the 'School Retool' project is exemplary in this respect. Recognising the need to provide school students with 'skills like critical thinking, collaboration, and communication, to prepare them for a global, innovation-driven economy' in the face of the redundancy of existing models of learning, School Retool 'empowers' school students 'to bring this much-needed change to their schools', through a four-month professional development fellowship, which 'trains principals to take a do-it-yourself approach to school change by conducting small, scrappy experiments called "hacks"' (ideo.com). School Retool is celebrated as an especially significant social innovation in schools with a high proportion of low-income students; 'the best part' of this initiative, its proponents argue, is that 'they use the resources they already have available to address their schools' needs now, without waiting for external funding or assistance' (ideo.com). Read: without any extra funding, students in poor schools can provide their immaterial labour to design DIY solutions to the problem of their impoverished schooling opportunities, whilst reshaping school culture in the direction of design culture and the innovation economy.

References

Anderson, R. 'Are Designers Becoming the New Activists?'
(2017), https://medium.com/@Riander/are-designers-becoming-the-new-activists-9bbc46ffe576
Baeck, Aline and Gremett, Peter. 'Design Thinking', in Helmut Degen and Xiaowei Yuan (eds.) *UX Best Practices – How to Achieve More Impact with User Experience* (McGraw-Hill Osborne Media, 2011), 229-250.
Berman, David, in Scalin, Noah and Taute, Michelle. *The Design Activists Handbook: How to Change the World (Or at Least Your Part of It) with Socially Conscious Design* (Ohio: HOW Books, 2012).

Bjögvinsson, Erling, Ehn, Pelle and Hillgren, Per-Anders. 'Design Things and Design Thinking: Contemporary Participatory Design Challenges', *Design Issues* 28.5 (2012), 101-116.

Brown, Tim. *Change By Design: How Design Thinking Transforms Organizations and Inspires Innovation* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009).

Brown, Tim and Wyatt, Jocelyn. 'Design Thinking for Social Innovation' (2010), https://ssir.org/articles/entry/design_thinking_for_social_innovation

Brown, Tim, 'Huffpost Live From Davos' (2014), https://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/tim-brown-davos_n_4635681

Buchanan, Richard. 'Wicked Problems in Design Thinking', *Design Issues* 8.2 (1992), 5-21.

Chen, Dung-Sheng, Cheng, Lu-Lin, Hummels, Caroline and Koskinen, Ilpo. 'Social Design: An Introduction', *International Journal of Design* 10.1 (2016), 1-5.

Design Studio for Social Intervention (DS4SI)(Undated), https://www.ds4si.org

Dorst, Kees. 'The Core of Design Thinking and its Application' (2011), http://sheltonography.com/resources/Articles/Design%20Thinking.pdf

Florida, Richard. *The Rise of the Creative Class (and how it's transforming work, Leisure and everyday life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

Halberstam, Jack. 'The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons' in Harney, Stefano and Moten, Fred, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013).

Hardt, Michael, and Negri, Antonio. *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

Hardt, Michael. 'Reclaim the Common in Communism', *The Guardian*, Feb. 3, (2011), https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/feb/03/communism-capitalism-socialism-property#top

Harney, Stefano. 'Stefano Harney on Study' (2018), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJzMi68Cfwo

Harney, Stefano and Moten, Fred. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2013).

Heller, Cheryl, 'Interview: What is Design for Social Innovation?' (2015), https://unreasonable.is/interview-design-social-innovation/

Hroch, Petra. 'Sustainable Design Activism: Affirmative politics and fruitful futures', in Betti Marenko and Jamie Brassett (eds.) *Deleuze and Design* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 219-245.

Julier, Guy. 'From Design Culture to Design Activism', *Design and Culture* 5.2, (2013), 215-236.

Kimbell, Lucy. 'Rethinking Design: Part 1', *Design and Culture* 3.3 (2011), 285-306.

Lazzarato, Maurizio. 'Immaterial Labour', in Paulo Virno and Michael Hardt (eds.) *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 142–157.

Markussen, Thomas. 'The Disruptive Aesthetics of Design Activism: Enacting Design Between Art and Politics', *Design Issues* 29.1 (2013), 38-50.

Manzini, Ezio. 'Design in a Changing, Connected World', *Strategic Design Research Journal* 7.2 (2014), 95-99.

Manzini, Ezio. *Design, When Everybody Designs: An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015).

Moten, Fred. 'Do Black Lives Matter? Robin D.G. Kelley and Fred Moten in Conversation', (2014), https://vimeo.com/116111740

Norman, Don. 'Rethinking Design Thinking', (n.d.), https://www.jnd.org/dn.mss/rethinking_design_th.html

Rawsthorn, Alice. *Design as an Attitude* (Zurich, JRP-Ringier 2018).

Rawsthorn, Alice. 'Design and Society', Inaugural RSA Tindale Lecture, (2013), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=euIwLydYJpI

Thorpe, Ann. 'Design As Activism: To Resist or to Generate?', http://current.ecuad.ca/design-as-activism-to-resist-or-to-generate

Tonkinwise, Cameron. 'Design For Transitions – From and To What?', (2015). *Articles*. 5, https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/critical_futures_symposium_articles/5