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Reimagining and Decolonizing the Language of Design

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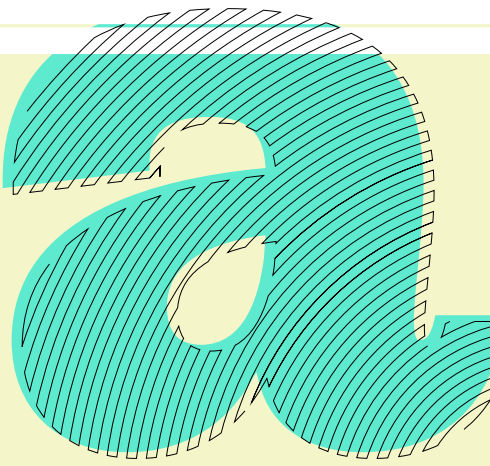

ABSTRACT

This article examines how traditional design methodologies predominantly serve Western and colonial interests, urging designers to rethink their foundations through decolonial theories and methods. By grounding the research in the context of migration between Mexico and the United States, it dives into a case study, proposes textiles and cultural artifacts as design tools, and offers a methodology rooted in oral histories, traditions, and localized design approaches. Using untailored *faldas* (skirts) as a narrative canvas, it demonstrates an alternative approach to design research that emphasizes learning from collaborative storytelling. The methodology centers on three critical principles: a deep immersion in the research context; conceptualizing stories and experiences as research artifacts; and identifying inherent tensions between researchers and their methodological tools. This approach challenges extractive research methods, celebrating research participants' lived experiences. By prioritizing narrative, cultural context, and participant agency, the research reframes design as a decolonial practice that values pluralistic ways of knowing and understanding.

Keywords

design methodology
design tools
design research
design studies
storytelling

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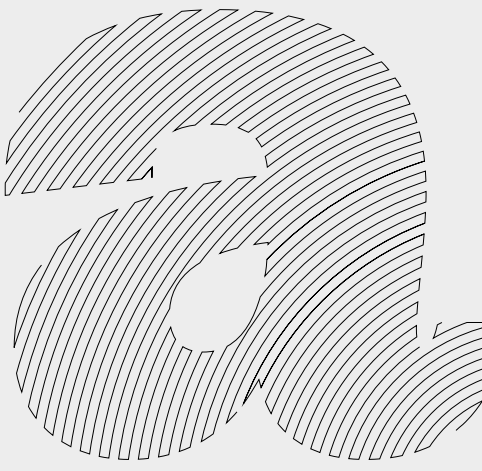

Reimagining and Decolonizing the Language of Design

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DECOLONIZING DESIGN RESEARCH TOOLS

Design is a language. Those who communicate using this language—designers—are inherently biased (Fathallah & Lewis, 2021). Design, like any other language, is a system of communication that discusses and relies on culture and emotion. In any design research process and engagement, practitioners use design as a generative tool for creating and exploring narratives.

When it comes to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research, design promises to serve the unique purpose of connecting researchers and participants. Two opposing mindsets are evident in design research practice: one believes in being the experts and focuses on designing for people, and the other sees themselves as co-creators (Sanders & Stappers, 2008). So, while many design practitioners find storytelling a part of the design process, they are highly artifact-driven, even in a co-design or participatory process (Sanders & Stappers, 2014). In this context, 'artifact' refers to the tangible or intangible outcomes of the design method, serving as evidence of the research and process.

This article provides a unique opportunity to reflect on the colonial influence on design tools, and proposes an approach to define the relationship between coloniality and design research. This section serves as the foundational argument before diving into a comprehensive research case study on how a culturally informed artifact can become an outcome, encouraging researchers to go beyond the need to know.

Kiran Asher (2017) highlights that María Lugones, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, and Márgara Millán Moncayo contribute to decolonial thinking and feminism by emphasizing that there is no singular view of gender and the way it interacts with power, race, place, class, and sex. Furthermore, Mendoza (2016) states that anticolonial feminist theory emerges in a rich intellectual context but

still exists in the margins of critiques of colonialism and feminist theories. Hence, by exploring the multidimensional lens that serves as the foundation of decolonial feminism, this article delves into the themes of cultural probes, womanhood, and research prototyping to understand how the design research process involves negotiating self and identity. It demonstrates how design practitioners decenter themselves to create agency for those closest to the stories and challenges, and disrupt conventional methods and tools. More specifically, the research delves into learning about and sharing stories of women by grounding in theories and practices developed by women.

Kuenen and Redström (2013) argue that design practice within research is distinct from the practice that occurs in professional environments. However, research in any context gives greater legitimacy to written sources, regardless of their authorship. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argues that research can reproduce colonizing ideologies and perspectives, especially when interpretation and inquiry are conducted by those who are not the subjects of the study. The relationship between a design practitioner and design is essential (both in this article and otherwise) because many of the research tools currently available favor generalization, simplicity, and linearity. However, the potential of design practice to disrupt these conventional methods and tools is immense, inspiring a new approach to design research, open to learning from pluricultural landscapes—that is, from environments where different cultural knowledge, practices, and experiences intersect and transform each other.

Ultimately, design is not just a language but a colonized language. Design practitioners must reflect on how they can learn from pluricultural landscapes, surroundings, and communities to remain authentic to the stories they seek to hear and tell. By questioning the researchers' positionality, this article documents the process of learning and creating with women in Mexico, sharing their stories as artifacts of the design process rather than imposing solutions upon them. It also attempts to highlight the cultural significance of women telling their stories and how design practitioners may rely on these narratives to engage with and learn through design methods.

Focusing on the impact of migration and displacement on women in Mexico, the case study examines how traditional design practices can be challenged by centering women's stories and experiences, learning about the community, and understanding their life experiences to explore how migrant journeys impact the lives of women. Finally, since the decolonizing design movement struggles to extend its influence from academia to practice (Baha & Singh, 2024), this article also explores how dismantling and questioning existing design methodologies can create ways to explore decolonial practices and their intersections with gender, race, sex, and class.

METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH CONTEXT AND TOOLS

Before we dive into the research methodology, I will clarify how I define some of the key terms in this article. When describing design as a *language*, I define it as a communication tool between two individuals. In this article, I propose that design as a language comprises not just terminology but also how we use the tools, engage in activities, and build partnerships and relationships through design. Decoloniality, intersecting with design and feminism, is employed as a critical lens to explore and challenge design as a language. Lastly, since storytelling is the central tenet of this approach and case study, workshop and interview participants are referred to as storytellers—which also implies an effort to move away from colonial terms in research praxis. Throughout this article, design tools are interpreted as a means to ground research in the cultural and historical context, using them to engage in and initiate a conversation.

Positionality of the Researcher

Señora Benita's poignant statement during our interview—"It hurts to talk about it, but we need to talk about our stories"—has become the grounding force of this research. As a non-Mexican woman studying migration in a Mexican community and its impact on Latinas, I am acutely aware of the complex ethical terrain I need to navigate. Drawing on Smith's critical work on Indigenous research methodologies, I confront the fundamental question: Can a researcher from outside a community authentically represent its narratives?

This dilemma is central to my approach, where I am reflecting on interiority as a means of examining one's positionality, its impact on the design discipline, and how attempts to decolonize the discipline are a result of intentional interiority. Through intentional interiority, I seek to challenge the complacency and oversimplification often found in decolonizing design practices (Baha & Singh, 2024; Ortega Pallanez, 2024). I reflect on interiority as a means to highlight that design is imperatively biased and colonized—as a set of tools that limit the discipline and its way of engagement. Ultimately, this reflection aims to reimagine and redefine the discipline by centering non-Western tools and techniques.

Furthermore, this article seeks to present a distinct relationship between two countries connected under the signifier of the Global South: India, my country of birth and ethnicity, and Mexico, the country and region of research. Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) argues that fostering a South-South connection will allow us to dismantle the hierarchical structures of politics and academia imposed by the North, and I take the liberty of writing this article to hold space for dialogue among ourselves.

Initially focused on young women migrating to the United States from and through Mexico, my research trajectory shifted upon encountering women in San Francisco Tetlanohcan, a town in Tlaxcala, Mexico. Their tradition of using *faldas* (skirts) as narrative vessels offered a profound methodological insight. While acknowledging the complexities of textile design origins highlighted by Cordry and Cordry (1968), I chose to center the oral histories of local women, adapting their storytelling practice through painting on skirts. This approach is not merely a research method but a deliberate act of creating space to reflect on our existing design toolkit(s), building on oral histories and storytelling, and recognizing the limitations and possibilities of our positionality as researchers. I also want to reflect on the fact that *faldas*, also referred to as *enredos* or *huipiles*, can be Indigenous garments, whereas in this research we rely on their oral history and significance—not to co-opt an Indigenous tool, but to honor the traditions and historical significance of *faldas* as an artifact.

Theoretical Engagement

The field research was conducted between Mexico City, San Francisco Tetlanohcan, and La Preciosita, a town in Puebla, Mexico. I used my time in Los Angeles to reflect on the material collected and tools developed during the research period. Although this research started as a student project during my Master's, it is best suited for this publication and theme, as much of the learning and articulation of the research emerged from reflecting on my practice as a design researcher and practitioner. The investigation overall can be divided into three parts, based on how I experienced and executed the project:

- *The Acclimation Phase:* This phase focused on the initial field research in Mexico City and San Francisco Tetlanohcan. It was a period of adjustment and learning, during which I familiarized myself with local culture, customs, and perspectives on migration. These insights significantly influenced the direction of the research.
- *The Prototyping Phase*: This phase centered on using *faldas* as canvases, exploring various sizes, materials, and questions to assess their impact on the comfort of research participants' body language and willingness to engage. Lasting five weeks, this phase was conducted mainly in Mexico City and Los Angeles. It facilitated the development of the tools I used for community engagement in La Preciosita.
- *The Learning Phase*: This phase specifically focused on learning about the context. It was more closely associated with how I used immersive research methods, engaged in lite-

rature review, and reflected on why this research contributes to how we explore design methods. During this phase, I worked with a group of five women in La Preciosita, who call themselves *Cinco Señoras* (Five Ladies) and work together to offer rural tourism services in order to create opportunities within La Preciosita.

BACKGROUND: A COMMUNITY AND NATION IN TRANSITION

Learning is an organic process; research is claimed to be linear. Through this project, I recognized that research as learning needs to be more adaptable to its context and the people involved. By focusing on the creation of research tools informed by stories and traditions, I critically assess design tools and their limitations, and emphasize that culture needs to be a vital part of the research process. This section examines the impact of immigration and how tools centered on learning from oral histories and traditions—commonly referred to as primary research—were used to deepen contextual understanding and explore immersive approaches.

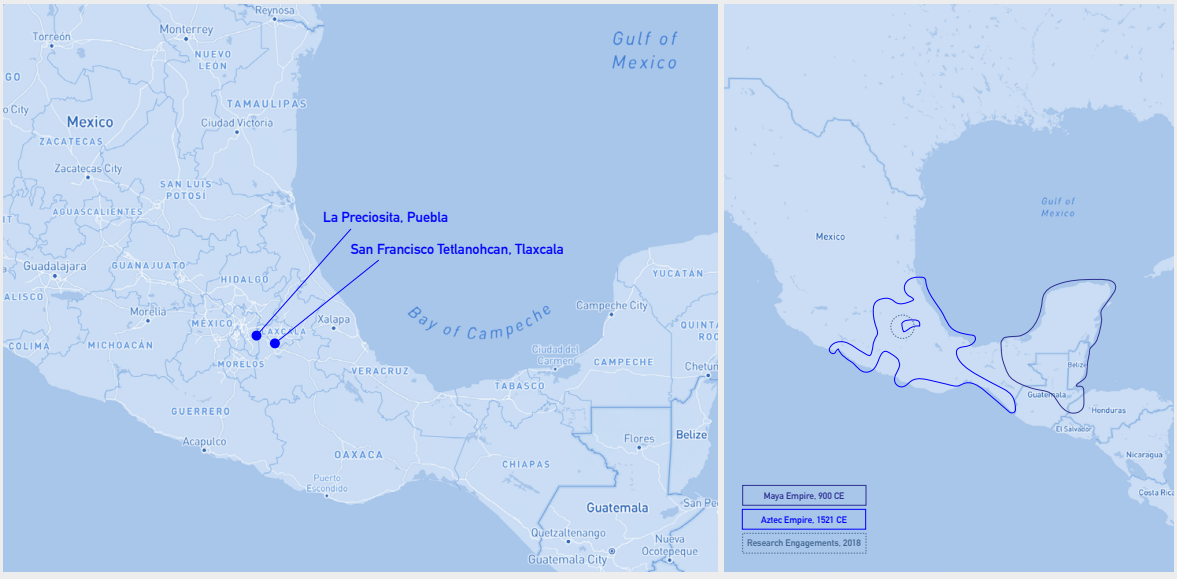
Figure 1: Community members in La Preciosita. Photograph by the author.

The Impact of Immigration

The field of Mexican migration studies has long been fragmented, with no resolution to the debate on the issues. The United States and Mexico offer differing estimates of the size of the migrant population, their remittances, and the impact on communities due to variations in data sources and study methods (Durand & Massey, 1992). The migration relationship between the two countries is one of the most complex, wherein the circular and agrarian nature of the migration pattern governs movement between the two countries (Gladwell, 2018; Sánchez-Montijano & Zedillo Ortega, 2022). So, while the United States focuses on tracking incoming migrants, it rarely looks at those who leave; whereas Mexico is interested in the dynamics of individuals moving both in and out of the country. Furthermore, immigration is one of the most debated topics in the United States and has been a key election issue for politicians.

At the crux, the decision for a Mexican person to emigrate comes down to community-level factors, where national, state, and regional conditions are significant; the effect and impact are much more local and challenging to study through data alone (Durand & Massey, 1992). After assessing migration in Mexico for sixty years, Durand and Massey identified that sending communities are often isolated rural villages removed from natural markets and employment opportunities. After studying thirty-two different communities, they identified four key drivers of migration in Mexico, including quality and access to agricultural land. These findings validate and inform the evidence collected through conversations and field research in La Preciosita, where agriculture faces significant challenges due to the terrain, a declining rural population, and economic hardships.

Figure 2: The two main places where the research took place. Source: Author's own.
Figure 3: Mayan and Aztec Empires in relation to research context. Source: Author's own.



Learning from Women and Their Experiences

When the men of the family move out, the elders decide who should take a seat at the village council meetings to represent them. This did help us get a visual representation of the women of the family, but we're not allowed to talk.

CINCO SEÑORAS

Long before Mexico and Central America were colonized, Mayan and Aztec communities shaped the region, with women playing different roles, which were defined by their class, gender, ethnicity, and attributes of their lives (Brumfiel, 2006; Chase et al., 2008; Macleod, 2004). During the acclimation phase of the research in San Francisco Tetlanohcan, women described how they continue to illustrate their identities and experiences on their skirts, keeping traditions alive. Traditionally, women wove their skirts and adorned them with elements part of their everyday lives. They would often use flora and fauna as inspiration, but the most integral part of these skirts was their depiction of themselves. While in La Preciosita, I observed that women lead the communities and actively contribute to economic and communal growth, yet they continue to fight for recognition and an equal voice. In fact, there too, "Indigenous knowledge, cultures, and languages, and the remnants of Indigenous territories remain as sites of struggle" (Smith, 2012, p. 99). Struggling against *machismo* (sexism), women have gradually been labeled as what Paz (1985) describes as *mala mujer* (bad woman).

Benita shared a story of Lidia's resistance to *machismo*: "Her father kept Lidia locked because she married the man she loved. The whole village wanted them to be together, but her father wouldn't approve of him. They've been together ever since."

Writing from Bolivia, Rivera Cusicanqui (2012) states that the notion of identity as territory is unique to men, and that many forms of organization are still marked by the colonial seal of the exclusion of women. So, while women represent the majority of La Preciosita—a town with less than 850 inhabitants due to the men migrating to the United States—they still struggle for access to power and participation in communal decision-making. Although this project aimed to better understand the influence and impact of migration on women's lives in rural Mexico, it has been imperative to engage with feminist and decolonial theories, as well as the political dimensions of migration, dissecting its economic, cultural, and communal impacts. One man I spoke to had returned from the United States to be with his family. Later in the article, we will appreciate the different experiences of the wives and mothers of those who migrated: "[In the US] I could live the life I desired and still be able to send money home (...) I could buy a pair of shoes if I wanted to and a car if I could. But back here, in La Preciosita, I have to travel to another town to look at shoes."

He is not the only person in La Preciosita who thinks like this. Most men see emigration as a practical choice, echoing each other and expressing the lack of opportunities in rural Mexico. The women, on the other hand, have been trying to reshape La Preciosita by creating opportunities for themselves and their children. While migration encourages individuals to move away from their hometowns and families, the women of La Preciosita see this growth differently.

FÁBULAS DE LAS FALDAS: SKIRTS AS NARRATIVE CANVASES

As Europeans began to colonize different parts of the world, they utilized research and rationality as tools of convenience. They dismissed the complex ways of living of Indigenous and native communities (Smith, 2012). As a result, design researchers and practitioners wield power through gatekeeping methodology and tools (Fathallah & Lewis, 2021). Design tools such as journey mapping, service blueprints, and relationship mapping utilize the context but fail to tailor approaches to diverse experiences and communities due to their linear format. These tools are widely used in medicine, business, and public service, often for decision-making and finding intervention opportunities (Tueanrat et al., 2021). While journey maps illustrate human experiences, they are structured to follow a step-by-step process. A fundamental critique of these tools is the confirmation bias they perpetuate and the presumptuous engagement of design practitioners, which may not fully capture the depth and complexity of user's emotions throughout their experience (Stickdorn et al., 2018). This project, therefore, explored how design tools could be reimagined to decolonize design techniques in order to learn from experiences and stories rather than actions.

As highlighted earlier, the decoloniality of this approach came through intentional reflection and reliance on oral histories and experiences shared by women—to learn and create artifacts and cultural probes centering their experiences. Since the ritual of storytelling and showcasing one's identity is still present in how women in Mexico and Central America engage and tell their stories, the approach heavily relies on them to reimagine design tools. For instance, testimonio (testimony) is a radical and urgent literary genre that uses narration to bring attention to oppression and resist the conditions contributing to it (Forcinito, 2016). *Testimonio* is used and interpreted in many ways, with no single definition of its characteristics. Most importantly, *testimonio* has been a significant tool for Latinas, including Guatemalan human rights activist Rigoberta Menchú. Taking inspiration from these varying storytelling methods and opportunities, this project relied on the intersection of *testimonios*, textiles, and visuals as storytelling devices.

The proposal of untailored skirts as a canvas challenges the traditional and contemporary paper-based, quadrilateral, and inflexible nature

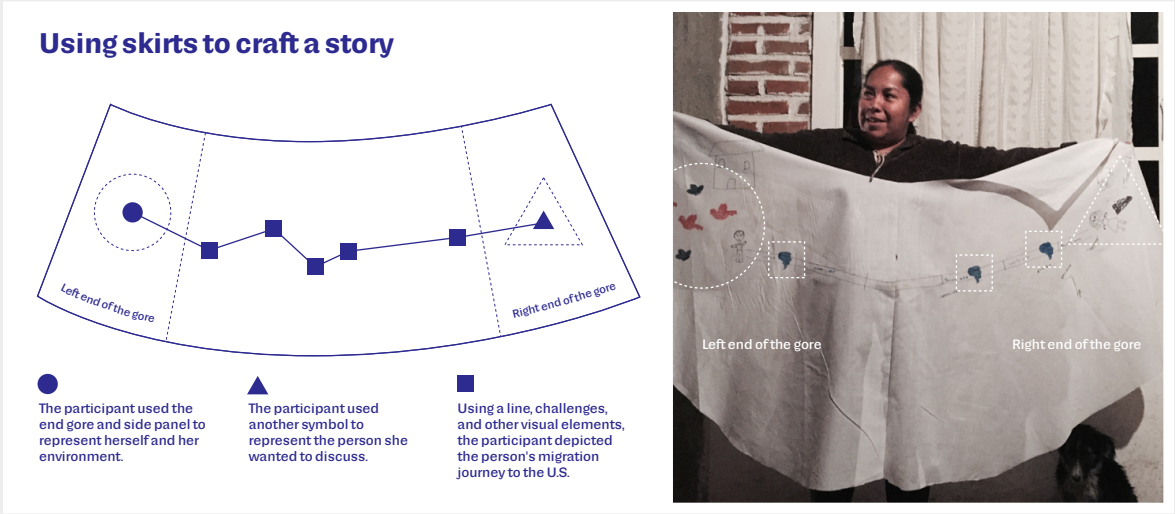


Figure 4: The narrative structure of the *faldas* in relation to how Elisabeth used it for her skirt. Diagram and photograph by the author, redrawn.

of design tools. Below are three key comparisons between contemporary tools such as journey mapping and skirts, highlighting the way in which the latter seeks to decolonize design research practice. Alternatively, while *faldas* ground us in Mexican communities and women's stories, different cultural probes and textiles can inform the redefinition of the project based on the context of other regions. Hence, the proposal is not to use *faldas* for all journey mapping and storytelling exercises; instead, it is about exploring how we might rely on the experiences and stories women want to share, using artifacts that reflect their identity.

Table 1: Key differences between journey mapping as a traditional design tool and artifact-based design tools, such as *faldas*

Categories	Artifact-based Storytelling	Journey Mapping
Linearity vs. Expression	*Faldas* and cultural artifacts provide narrative flexibility and agency to the participant. This method seeks to reflect on traditional ways of understanding experiences by focusing on the nonlinear aspects of storytelling to devise a more relational approach.	Journey maps often impose a linear structure on the participant, focusing on a resolution towards the end of the journey.
Text vs. Tactile	Iconography and tools (such as rubber stamps) can help develop and engage in conversation through creative expression, challenging the linguistic barrier in research. Using untailored fabric for an A-line skirt, the process focuses on creative expression through tactile and visual interactions.	A key hurdle of contemporary design tools is the requirement for participants to comprehend, speak, and respond in the same language as the researcher. Co-designing a journey map can place significant pressure on participants to communicate *effectively*.

Categories	Artifact-based Storytelling	Journey Mapping
Researcher vs. Participant Autonomy	The *faldas* methodology engages in a deeper learning opportunity by encouraging participants to take ownership of 'their *faldas*'. *Faldas* were imagined as a garment that storytellers could wear to share their stories.	Contemporary tools, such as journey maps, often focus on improving services and/or capturing lessons. As a result, they frequently belong to the researcher rather than the participant. These tools serve well when the researcher aims to lead the discussion and wants the participants to validate their assumptions, but they often lack emotional engagement from participants.

ENGAGING WITH *CINCO SEÑORAS*: A CASE STUDY

By transferring stories onto the untailored *faldas*, this project examines the anatomy of *faldas* and how they can be viewed as a canvas for one's story—not just a garment. The foundational elements of this project have already been outlined in the methodology section, but within the learning phase, the project was divided into different engagements with the storytellers. In this section, we dive into how the storytellers, *Cinco Señoras*, became involved in different interactions and approaches to share their stories and challenges, while deeply engaging with design tools.

Group Workshop

The confirmation bias and presumptuous engagement steps easily permeate a workshop format, where design practitioners may want to utilize the same tool within a limited period to arrive at a shared conclusion. Reflecting on the prototyping phase and the cultural context, I designed the group workshop as a space where storytellers could come together to learn about each other. More importantly, it was designed to help them become familiar with each other as women. Taking turns introducing themselves, the *Cinco Señoras* explored their identities through words, colors, and imagery. This exercise provided unexpected insights, with storytellers self-identifying as 'fighters' and 'active participants'.

Individual Interactions

For the individual spaces, I created an environment with the understanding that each storyteller has a different story, and their challenges vary accordingly. These unique challenges were reflected in their techniques. Using the *falda*, I prompted the storytellers to take on the role of narrators and walk through their experience—one-on-one sessions allowed for a deeper exploration of personal narratives. The anatomy guided our interaction, focusing on self and

Figures 5 and 6: Women exploring the foam stamps in La Preciosita. Photographs by the author.

family representation (using animal stamps), migration journeys and challenges, current situations, and future aspirations. Using an iterative and adaptive approach, each storyteller led their session. Whereas one participant, Elisabeth, meticulously divided the space of the skirt through text, her mother-in-law, Benita, knew what she wanted to represent and used the prompts as mere suggestions. While constantly iterating questions, the *faldas* created a space—physical and metaphorical—for the *Cinco Señoras* to take ownership of their stories.

Figure 7: Individual storytelling session with one of the Cinco Señoras. Photograph: Filo Gómez.

Engaging at a Pace of Trust

The relationship between each narrator, the translator, and the researcher grew stronger as we spent time together. During my multiple visits, I participated in events, shared meals and lodging, and engaged in community celebrations to immerse myself in the everyday experiences of La Preciosita. This immersive approach allowed me to build trust with the storytellers, understand the contextual information while doing primary research, and establish a bond that helped me understand the nuances of the subject through dialogue. Repetition and extended interaction during the prototyping and learning phases significantly influenced my position as a researcher and how I approached my interests—while seeing them evolve through immersive learning. The workshops and individual interactions lasted hours, and the storytellers were motivated to share their stories. The materials kept them engaged in the exercises and interviews during the sessions. Unsurprisingly, the *Cinco Señoras* did not want to part with their skirts, as it was an homage to their relatives thousands of miles away.

ARTIFACTS AS OUTCOMES

A New Research Outlook

This article and case study propose a fundamentally different approach, informed by the critical perspectives of decoloniality in feminist theories and design. Departing from traditional methodologies that prioritize linear and output-driven processes, this research methodology centers on cultural intimacy, participant autonomy, and narrative flexibility. As a research tool, the untailored *falda* reimagines an existing and traditional design tool, grounding it in culture and personalization. This approach reimagines and decolonizes the language of design in a new way by:

- Decentering the narrative and agency, away from the researcher and closer to the stories of those developing artifacts. It challenges existing power dynamics by positioning individuals participating in research as co-creators and primary interpreters of their own experiences rather than subjects for analysis.
- Utilizing the personal and cultural nature of clothing as a research canvas, introducing an embodied approach. It recognizes that stories are more than verbal and written accounts: they can and should be reimagined differently for different contexts, reflecting on personal, contextual, and cultural significance.
- Adapting rigid research frameworks into contextual methodologies. This case study and article highlight how research

tools should be continuously modified to provide comfort and give space to cultural nuance and emergent theories, redefining research as a responsive process.

Ultimately, this article proposes that design methods can be shaped and developed as living artifacts that dynamically represent their experiences, rather than producing predetermined, structured outputs. As this case study demonstrates, the practical application of these principles reveals the profound potential of a decolonial design research approach.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through iterative prototyping, the approach evolved into a dynamic artifact that facilitated deep engagement. This approach leveraged the *falda's* local resonance to cultivate familiarity and encourage open dialogue, demonstrating its potential as a versatile conversational tool adaptable to diverse cultural contexts. Challenges encountered during initial prototyping led to the development of supplementary tools designed to support participant expression. By incorporating playful elements and reducing the emphasis on artistic skill through foam stamps, I created a space for intimate and authentic storytelling. The resulting artifact—a combination of the skirt and supplementary tools—allowed participants to visually narrate their experiences, focusing on identity, relationships, and migration.

Design practitioners often rely on methods that privilege non-pluriversal and non-pluricultural experiences. This research revealed a critical need for design practitioners to reflect on the intersectionality of socio-politics and design methodologies—to decolonize design as a language. My observations of changing family dynamics, community, and tradition during field research directly influenced my methodological approach, highlighting the importance of adaptability in cross-cultural contexts.

By exploring the convergence of themes such as the migration debate, women's roles in rural Mexico, and inadequate design tools, I used the prototyping phase to explore how I could create a psychologically safe and comfortable environment to learn from the women impacted by migration, rather than focus on the pain-points or challenges in their lives—not all problems can be solved by design. In this approach, the *faldas* served as a connector for us to reimagine the conversations and stories, positioning me as an observer and listener. Ultimately, the *faldas* became visualized stories—the authentic narratives of the *Cinco Señoras*.

This research raises a crucial question: How might design practitioners engage with pluricultural landscapes to challenge and decolonize design tools, fostering more expressive and profound learning? While design as a discipline acknowledges colonial oppression, it must more radically push back against tools and mindsets that perpetuate Western and colonial perspectives.

Reflecting on my position as a woman of color from the Global South, I recognize that this research experience and its learnings have differed. While the differences could be attributed to many factors—such as the tools; length and depth of engagement; and an intentional focus on participant autonomy—this work underscores the importance of diverse voices in design research and the need for continuous critical reflection on our methods and assumptions. In conclusion, this article invites readers to reimagine their experiences through a decolonial lens, challenging them to develop and create *artifacts as outcomes*, celebrating pluricultural perspectives and ways of knowing. **D**

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