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Embodying an Anti-Racist Architecture

Editorial

Emma Cheatle, Luis Hernan, Carolyn Butterworth, Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye, Catalina Mejia Moreno

‘Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is, obviously, a program of complete disorder. But it cannot come as a result of magical practices, nor of a natural shock, nor of a friendly understanding. Decolonization, as we know, is a historical process: that is to say it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content.’ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963, p. 36¹

field: Issue 8 Embodying an Anti-Racist Architecture responds to two appeals. The first is a demand. In September 2020 our students at the Sheffield School of Architecture, University of Sheffield published the ‘Anti-Racism at SSoA: A Call to Action’, a document condemning the ways in which the school and university institution are complicit in systemic racism in architecture, and demanding ‘immediate action and concrete change’. The second appeal is less explicit. In 2007 Renata Tyszczyk and Doina Petrescu launched the inaugural issue of *field*: a new journal intended to create an open forum for the practice and research of architecture. The first issue was appropriately dedicated to exploring indeterminacy, recognising the difficulty of defining the contours of architectural practice and research. As the name of the publication suggests, the journal emerges from the conviction that research into spatial practices involves, by necessity, ‘interlocking yet distributed fields of knowledge’.²

As an editorial board, we gathered together to plan *field*: issue 8 as a special issue that responded to both appeals, reflecting on the way that the spirit of the journal could establish a dialogue with the ‘Call to Action’. By reflecting on racism, we choose to address some of the most important and urgent needs that have historically shaped our discipline and to respond

1 Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963, p. 36, as quoted in E. Tuck & K.W. Yang, ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 1, No. 1, 2012, pp. 1-40; 2.

2 Renata Tyszczyk and Doina Petrescu, ‘Editorial’, *field: Architecture and Indeterminacy* 1/1 (2007): p. 1.

to the increasingly anxious and parochial discourse the discipline has developed.

The original ethos of the journal is particularly relevant to this new issue. In architectural education the idea of a field is often conceptualised as something that is outside of us; as a situation that requires examining from an external, neutral perspective; as a set of conditions to be recorded and made sense of. By using field as its name, the journal set out to challenge these preconceptions. As the first editorial explores, architecture needs to respond to the richness and diversity of interpretations when going into fieldwork. Recognising the nuanced, ethical nature of research, and that our positions are always immersed in the thick networks of social interactions, we need to learn not merely to observe, but to situate ourselves in relation to the action therein.

Fifteen years on from the first issue, and after a five year hiatus since issue 7, we were interested in reflecting on the ways in which the theory and practice of architecture has developed. To challenge self-referential discourses, we decided we needed to listen to what has been invariably pushed to the margins of the theory and practice of the discipline. We also asked ourselves what has changed since the first number was created and realised that the practice and theory of architecture had changed little, but the discipline was increasingly expected to participate in debates of wider societal and political issues. As an editorial team we come together in the conviction that all forms of racial and gendered injustice — spatial, environmental, material — spring from legacies of colonialism and the logics of exploitation, extraction and classification that have been imposed on populations. As an editorial board, our hope is that this issue will generate a self-reflective understanding of ourselves, as individuals and as members of an institution, and hence as contributory tools of oppression as well as obliteration of difference. We also seek to identify the spaces and contexts where we and others have been subjects of, or have evidenced racist behaviours and structures. As an editorial board we also hope that this issue, a first dialogue, will prompt important conversations and begin to generate urgent changes. Change is a difficult task and this issue of the journal has been composed in order that we can learn to sit together in the discomfort of initiating that change.

But who are we? The new ongoing chief editors of field: are Emma Cheatle, Senior Lecturer in Architectural Humanities, and Luis Hernan, Lecturer in Architecture and Digital Cultures, who took over the editorship of field: because we fundamentally believe in the role of architectural humanities not as a benign form for explaining or discussing architecture, but as a powerful and necessary tool for actively addressing the pressing issues that the discipline of architecture should face up to. The practice of humanities is always unsettled, dynamic, relational, and communicative and therein lies its agency. Emma and Luis also wanted to challenge

the idea that only established academics can be editors, and that the journal should instead seek to map different fields of possibilities and situated knowledges. We approached Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye, then a University of Sheffield PhD student, and our colleagues Carolyn Butterworth and Catalina Mejía Moreno to make up this special issue board. The unique set of editors, each with specific positionalities and interests, has been working generously and in collaborative dialogue to create the journal. Carolyn, a Senior University Teacher, is director of Live Works which seeks to create new spaces for equitable urban production. She was extremely interested in extending the idea of an academic journal and opening it to practice-based staff, and to students, who would not normally contribute. Victoria, who aided the students' original 'Call to Action', moved out of Sheffield School of Architecture to Urban Studies and Planning, and from being a student to completing a doctorate during the editorial process, now lectures at Sheffield Hallam. She arrives in the team having experienced in the school the very extractive knowledge processes some of the articles criticise first hand. Catalina, now a Senior Lecturer in Climate Studies at Central Saint Martins, UAL, was Lecturer in Humanities at Sheffield. Her work is motivated by her embodied knowledge and studies of inequalities and injustices across the global south. Carolyn, Emma and Luis also work together (with Doina Petrescu and Cith Skelcher) on the school's Feminist Library, a digital project and resource which brings together the legacy of feminist student and staff work and initiatives in the school from the last 20 years. The spirit of that feminist archival project informs this one. We are also joined here by Indigo Gray whose incisive and generous copy editing input went far beyond the original brief we tasked her with, and brought another intellectual layer to the project. We extend special thanks to her.

The original call for papers came directly from and through the 'Call to Action'. The call's narrow focus has opened up to the breadth of issues of oppression across race and gender, including trans rights. The original 'Call to Action' caused a good deal of controversy, disquiet, and debate in the staff body in Sheffield School of Architecture, with some (anecdotally) feeling, if not personally attacked, then disappointed that they are being "criticised" by the students. The contributions we have received, and there are a wealth of them, are affirming, critical, angry and contrite – they collect together positions many of us feel. "We are sitting in the discomfort together", as Victoria has repeatedly said.

The issue has been eighteen months in the making with our original call for papers made in winter 2020. We have two kinds of contributions. The call was initially made "internally" as a direct provocation to the school's students and staff. This has resulted in a rich collection of positions, particularly from students. In promoting student work not normally published in a journal, we made an editorial decision to prioritise powerful, developing subjectivities and lived experiences over established academic

knowledge. We have embraced the unfinished, the complaint, and the experimental.³ We were pleased to receive contributions from School of Architecture academics and teachers, some of which are included here. These contributions shed light on some of the ways in which individuals are striving to embed anti-racism in their teaching and research. We hope, through field: and other means, their vital contribution to this subject can build in confidence and scope. The second kind of contribution emerges from our relationships as editors to a wider field – of mainly pedagogical academic and student groups responding to anti-racism at other schools of architecture, particularly Westminster and Brighton, and some student and academic connections in Johannesburg. This has resulted in what we see as a dense web of interrelated yet nascent starting points and networks. It reflects that we as a school, as an institution and as a discipline have barely/only just begun to respond to racism and inequality. In this vein we acknowledge the value and complexity of the many citational practices our contributors use, from C.L.R. James to bell hooks, from Sara Ahmed to Djamila Ribeiro. The bibliographies that our contributors have produced constitute a rich set of collective reading resources in the journal for us to learn from.

Issue 8 of field: is also the journal's relaunch. Does the name still suit us? With this number we would like to start a critique of the idea of a field as a bounded space – which suggests some are outside, and that entry is restricted. Since the seventeenth century the common land once available to local commoners for various shared uses has been parcelled and enclosed by successive landowners and land acts, resulting in and perpetuating the inequalities around access and ownership we see today. We also continue to critique the idea of fieldwork and the way that its implicitly extractive logic raises ethical questions. Invariably, fieldwork is understood as a completist practice where a researcher collects (extracts) “data” to contribute to “outputs”, rather than as a series of relational, ongoing practices. We position that the field, rather than a place, is instead “us”; “us” as a responsible, thoughtful collective of students, educators, and researchers. Then we can build something open, collaborative, and interactive through the discomforting but necessary self-reflective work of, as Audre Lorde says, touching that deep, dark place within each of us that fears and loathes the differences amongst ourselves and of others.⁴ We retain the difficult nature of the word then as a challenge and a reminder. The ongoing issues of field: will remain free and open access. They will welcome editors and contributions from all fields of the spatial disciplines, and at all levels in their careers. As in the past, contributors and editors of the journal will continue to overlap.

3 Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Duke University Press, 2021).

4 Audre Lorde, ‘The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House’, *The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House* (Milton Keynes: Penguin Random House, 2017), p. 21.

field: Issue 8 Embodying an Anti-Racist Architecture comprises essays, articles, podcasts, drawings, designs, the cover image and a film. In bringing them together we do not so much try to answer the original ‘Call to Action’ but to map out both the state and trajectories of anti/racism at

the school as it is (or was) in 2021. We try to bring nuance and complexity from all of our contributors' situated positions, within both the institution and all of the places and spaces we inhabit or find ourselves within. We recognise and acknowledge the anger behind the 'Call to Action', and behind some of the contributions. We have asked ourselves how we both operate in solidarity and 'stay with the trouble'.⁵ In the most critical pieces in the journal there is a resistance to problem solving, a critique of the knee jerk reactions to 'decolonisation' as a tick box representational exercise. We've also resisted themes as a way of tying contributions together, resisting boxes to place them in, and prioritising the potential conversations between them. We are reminded of a metaphor sometimes given for the nature of recovery after illness. You find yourself in a field that has been stripped bare of its crops and seemingly all its fecundity. There are, though, new green sprouts here and there; green shoots to be tended to, nurtured with the hope they will grow a new garden. Perhaps that is the kind of field we envision here, one located in a place decimated by racism, misogyny and inequity, yet one that contains the hopeful new germinations, through our young students, our engaged staff, our interlocutors and collaborators.

We have 22 contributions – an unsettled treasure of written, spoken and visual voices and positions. The front cover was commissioned specially from Alem Derege – her powerful and beautiful image of hair braiding as an architectural motif sets up and weaves a thread throughout the journal. It speaks to many of the image based contributions: Ruth Tay's provocative collage 'Shining a Spotlight on the Audience', which explores white saviour complex, and how this shapes the role we play as designers; Amy Crellin and Melissa Fitzpatrick's designs for 'Contextualising Colston', a critique of the potential futures of Bristol's Edward Colston statue is given, considering community participatory evaluation in light of real events surrounding Colston's statue and the Black Lives Matter Protests; the Unsettled Subjects' creative responses by Catalina Mejía Moreno, Hafsa Adan, Kavitha Ravikumar, and Shahed Saleem; Samuel Kapasa's photographic essay on the relationship between his practice and his identity; Aayushi Bajwala's visual poetry in the margins; and even Emre Akbil and Leo Care's call for an 'image equality archive'.

'The Call to Action' is a document borne from dialogue, and as such derives its power from the activism that collaboration and cooperation engender. Conversation and collaboration are inherent within many of the contributions as well as across them: Victoria Ogoegbunam Okoye, Juliet Sakyi-Ansah, Michael Badu, Alisha Morenike Fisher, and Nana Biamah-Oforu create two recorded conversations discussing their experiences as Black students-researchers-educators in predominantly white architectural institutions, reflecting on their shared as well as particular lived experiences; Studio Juggernaut, an open research group led by Jane Tankard at the University of Westminster School of Architecture and

5 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016).

Cities, explores mechanisms for reciprocity in architectural education and practice; the Unsettled Subjects group operates both collectively and individually through readings and responses to C.L.R. James' *The Black Jacobins*; Tilo Amhoff, Vanessa Malao Nkumbula, Vivian Wall compile the findings of the Independent Thought reading group, a student and staff forum at the School of Architecture and Design (SoAD) at the University of Brighton. Both this and the Unsettled Subjects reading group were established as spaces for engaging critically and collectively with the "political present" (Beech 2021), as well as charting power, race and coloniality in architecture and the city, through reading, research and creative practice; Asma Mehan, Carolina Lima, Faith Ng'eno and Krzysztof Nawratek discuss white hegemony across different geopolitical and academic spaces, mindful of the nuances of using English as their shared yet borrowed language; and Eva Sopéoglou and Catalina Mejía Moreno, in their then respective roles as module leaders in environment and technology and humanities, share an interdisciplinary, reflective dialogue.

Individual contributions cluster around and through these collaborations, like pebbles filling the gaps and changing the overall shape: Zahraa Essa's work analyses the dollhouse to understand six rooms in the heteropatriarchal South African Indian Muslim home, deconstructing the constituents in the rooms to reveal the 'hauntings' (Gordon 2008) of colonial empire and economy; Michael Ford, in conversation with Rebecca Acheampong, takes us to Birmingham to highlight the displacement of BAME owned businesses by commercial gentrification; an anonymous contributor takes us to Malaysia to explore the racial constructions of Indians on the plantation frontier of British Malaya; Aisha Sillah evaluates post-apartheid design, arguing that its legacy remains a divisive force in the spatial environment; Sophie Mayer, examining attitudes towards ethnic and gender diversity in architecture, evaluates what can be learnt from mitigating practices in the legal profession; Juliet Sakyi-Ansah initiates a dialogue on how we might begin to collectively conceptualise anti-racist approaches in architecture; Aayushi Bajwala picks apart race and gender in the city and countryside through the practice of walking; Anureena D'costa revisits the 'Call to Action' one year on; Zoe Lord evaluates inequity in housing and its effects on quality of life; and finally ideas of white silence and embracing the feelings of discomfort are revisited in Ben Purvis' critical self-reflection.

We hope you embrace these positionalities as we have, stay with the discomfort, and find both solace and potentialities in their complexities.

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