Northumbria Research Link

Dialogues on Decolonial Participatory Design Praxis During a Revolution

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On the 17th of October 2019, people from across Lebanon participated in nation-wide protests which ignited a revolution condemning the political elite and the dire socioeconomic conditions they have engendered. Such events through which people are (re)imagining their lifeworlds prompt us as Lebanese design researchers to (re)imagine Participatory Design within a decolonial and decolonizing narrative. In an effort to (re)imagine PD so that we think/do with and from the revolution, we present dialogues held amongst: ourselves, with Lebanese public health practitioners/activists and with decolonial/decolonizing literature. Through these dialogues we unsettle our entanglements and raise the contradictions and questions within PD that we are contending with. In doing so we contribute to the growing efforts to decolonize PD so that we create worlds otherwise.

1 Introduction

> He sets them off one against the other. They engage in wars against each other and against their people in the name of international legitimacy or democracy. He pays them to topple one another, and implicates them in his plans under the illusion of aid.
> –Arab Rulers Once Again by Nawal El Saadawi

In 2019, peoples in Lebanon took to the streets to protest against systemic corruption and their dire living conditions. The protests, which are ongoing, crossed religious sectarian divides—divides that were entrenched during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and are maintained by the current political elite. Protestors stood in solidarity with one another, igniting a revolution calling for radical social and political change.

We understand the revolution as a decolonizing one, since it demands the creation of new social, economic and political structures that break away from Lebanon's colonized history [13]. Indeed, the revolution's slogan of كلن يعني كلن (All of them means all of them) calls for the removal of the political elites who have occupied governmental roles since the end of the civil war with the support of both Western and Eastern powers. Activists have criticized how the multiple diplomatic and economic conferences (e.g. Cedre) held to support Lebanon in fact endorsed and strengthened the power of the current political elite, indicating neocolonial complicity. The civic disobedience of the revolution, such as storming public institutions and disrupting politician's extravagant social outings, demand an end to neocolonial complicity and the prioritization of the well-being of the people. As such, the revolution is characterized by disruption and social, economic, and political shifts that are associated with decolonizing movements [13].

We also view the revolution as being that of decoloniality. The current governance system shaping the ontologies (i.e. worlds) of peoples living in Lebanon has been highly influenced by international development actors and foreign states that have propagated a Eurocentric vision of what is modern [9], and as such it is a product of coloniality/modernity [22]. Some collectives from the margins of society as well as the previously silent middle class have emerged from the revolution while other existing collectives were re-ignited. Through their emergence and re-ignition, these movements and collectives are formulating new political imaginaries [20] that counter the coloniality/modernity of Lebanon's current social, political and economic system. Such imaginaries are challenging the

urban and rural divide, the capitalist and clientelist economic model, the inter-sectarian and multi-ethnic divisions, and Lebanon's geopolitical position. Therefore, we view the revolution as a channel through which some collectives are engaging with the plurality of worlds held and envisioned by the multiple worldviews in Lebanon. In doing so, they are proposing worlds otherwise [12, 22] that break away from the social inequalities, sectarianism, corruption, geopolitics and religious/political clientelism that have been instituted and upheld by the political elite.

As the lifeworlds [17] tied to Lebanon are unfolding through and with the revolution, so are our lifeworlds as Design researchers who call Lebanon home. The unfolding of our lifeworlds urges us to to (re)imagine PD and our praxis, as others have done [7, 8], within the imagination of the revolution so that we may think/do with the revolution. More specifically, through dialogues held, we engage in not only re-defining the content of designs but also the terms in which design is done– as called for within decolonizing design by Danah Abdulla [30] building on Border-thinking as a decolonial concept. We reflect on our entanglements with our colonized histories/presents and decolonial aspirations in order to unfold/refold our Participatory Design (PD) praxis. We refer to unfolding/refolding our PD praxis as the act of unsettling our praxis [30, 41, 42] (unfolding) and raising questions that will guide our decolonial PD praxis (refolding) and in doing so we highlight the contradictions within PD that we are grappling with. Our process of unfolding/refolding our praxis happened as follows: (1) Reem and Sarah had conversations with 9 Lebanese public health activists and practitioners (i.e. our interlocuters)–which we refer to using psuedonyms–on issues of social justice, design and innovation that are shifting within a simultaneously decolonizing and decolonial revolution. (2) As the conversations with our interlocuters were taking place, Reem was having conversations with Jowel (a friend and colleague of Reem's and currently an anthropology PhD student) on her entanglements with Lebanon and the revolution as well as the work of decolonial/decolonizing scholars they were reading. These conversations were, and still are, part of Reem and Jowel's aspirations to grow together as well as a form of care they practice with one another as colleagues and friends. The conversations Reem and Jowel held also touched on those that Reem and Sarah had with interlocuters; this in turn informed Reem's analysis that led to the questions raised in this paper. As such, we placed our praxis in dialogue with the decolonial/decolonizing knowledge we were reading at that time and with the conversations that were being held.

This paper presents some of these dialogues in hopes that by sharing them we would be opening our dialogic space for (re)imagination with the PD community. The paper does not aim to prescribe a tool-kitted approach for questioning how to decolonize PD during times of revolution, for that would be maintaining the universalist approach of coloniality [41]. Rather, through this paper, we delve into the Lebanese local landscapes and histories in an effort to decolonize and reimagine our praxis [5].

2 Lebanon (لبنان)

لبنان is a country in what has been constructed as the Middle East [29] that was formed by and through European colonial power. In 1941, Lebanon was designated as a state yet remained under French mandate [9]. Elections were held in 1943 after which the Lebanese government denounced the French mandate [9]. Subsequently, Lebanon was recognized as an independent state by the newly formed United Nations. Since then, Lebanon and all those that call it home have witnessed turbulent times including the break out of the Lebanese Civil War in 1975. The war materialized along religious sectarian lines with political parties and their militias claiming to represent their sects while also having opposing views on the country's stance on geopolitical issues such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, neoliberal economic policies, and the integration of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon [18]. The war was not only fought by Lebanese people. Palestinians, who had been displaced to Lebanon due to Israeli settler colonialism, and Syrian armed forces invited in to the country by the Lebanese president and the Arab League, actively participated in the fighting [18, 23].

The war ended in 1989 with the signing of the Al Taif agreement by the fighting factions [23]. The agreement was supported by both Western and Eastern powers that had a vested interest in the country and the wider Middle East region [23]. The agreement was a power sharing agreement between the leaders of the political sectarian militias which, on the surface, aimed to maintain the co-existence of the religious sects in Lebanon. However, by allocating governmental roles to different sects, the agreement further entrenched sectarian divides as the political leaders used the government and its public services as means of serving their respective sects and to preserve their popularity (i.e. political and secterian clientelism) [23]. As such, those same political leaders became the political elites that have occupied the government for over 30 years. The entrenchment of political sectarianism in government, and social and economic life, impacts not only Lebanese citizens but also others residing in the country, including Palestinian, Iraqi and Syrian refugees, and migrant workers from Asia and Africa.

On the 17th of October 2019, the peoples in Lebanon took to the streets to protest the high rates of unemployment, shortage in foreign currencies, depreciation of the Lebanese pound and new taxes that were announced by the government. While these were the instigators of the initial protests, for months after people occupied public squares

that had been previously privatized as well as major highway intersections across the country. Protestors demanded the resignation of all the political elite. As previously mentioned, the protests crossed sectarian lines, as people from different religious sects came together under a common call for change. Furthermore, protests were held advocating for the rights of women, refugees, LGBTQ+ communities, and domestic migrant workers, under the slogan of الثورة نسوية (The revolution is feminist) [19]. The protests also worked in solidarity across urban and rural divides. In contrast to previous protests (e.g. the 2015 protests against the mismanagement of waste in the country) which were centralized in the capital Beirut [16], the 2019 protests were being held in rural towns and villages. Over time, the revolution transformed into a social movement that is infused by the political imaginaries of peoples living on the margins of society. Futuring [15] debates took place in public squares and online forums on the potentials of social, political and economic changes that would contribute to worlds otherwise.

3   Decolonial/Decolonizing Participatory Design

The unfolding/refolding of our PD praxis extends on efforts of de-linking PD from its modern/colonial epistemologies. Sosa [33] draws on Mesoamerican worldviews in an effort to decolonize our views on creation and posits that such indigenous knowledge provides an epistemological understanding in which design is an act of re-creation rather than that of creation. Similarly, we are not attempting to create our PD praxis anew but rather trying to (re)imagine PD through unfolding/refolding our praxis. Furthermore, PD research has explored the decolonial cracks, spheres of decolonial action that could exist within the system of coloniality/modernity [22], and in which we may situate our praxis. Paterman Brasil [24] recounts how inhabiting decolonial cracks along with Afro-Brazilian communities transformed their practice as a designer in a manner that negotiated the multiple worlds in which they as a designer are entangled in. In doing so, the research highlights how PD decolonial praxis may be shaped by indigenous actions and ways of being and knowledge, thus de-linking PD from colonial/modern epistemologies [24]. It is with this understanding that we approach our unfolding/refolding of our PD praxis in dialogue with Lebanese public health activists and practitioners that are creating decolonial cracks in line with the revolution. We place our conversations in dialogue with decolonial/decolonizing literature and critically reflect on PD praxis given the realities in which we are working in [31]. In doing so we unfold/refold our PD praxis hoping that it may trigger further decolonial PD dialogue [31] and shape our thinking/doing and doing/thinking in this space.

The unfolding/refolding of our PD praxis within the decolonial cracks created by the revolution also entails reflecting and thinking on the tensions that arise as decolonization and decoloniality unsettle and disrupt current ways of being. Through their work, Arruda et al [6] explore how participatory media projects may not solve things but rather problematize the colonized socio-political narrative of those on the fringes of citizenship, such as refugees. The Lebanese revolution and the new political imaginaries emerging are intertwined with the worlds of refugees living in Lebanon. Therefore, our conversations not only problematize the narratives of those on the fringes of citizenship under the current Lebanese government but also the tensions that are arising regarding citizenship within the decolonial narratives of the revolution. We do not aim to solve these tensions, but rather bring the questions that arose to the fore within the refolding of our PD praxis. In their work Smith et al [32] aimed to decolonize PD by facilitating and reflecting on workshops with Namibian youth. The research pointed to the continued and diverse postcolonial and neocolonial entanglements of participants that hindered the generation of on-the-ground advice that may inform PD practice. The authors [32] questioned the possibility of disentangling knowledge and epistemologies with participants, given that participants' and their inter-generational narratives are a result of and propagators of colonial entanglements. The dialogues presented in this paper further extend on this research by questioning how we may decolonize our PD when we ourselves are not only entangled with the current Lebanese system, which is shaped by a colonized history and coloniality/modernity, but are also entangled in a decolonizing and decolonial revolution.

4   Our Entanglements

In this section, we present the conversations we had and place them in dialogue with our entanglements with(in) the current Lebanese socio-political system, the ongoing Lebanese revolution, and the coloniality/decoloniality that are shaping them. Through dialogue, we highlight the contradictions we are contending with (i.e. unfolding PD praxis) and refold the questions that have come about as the revolution shifts and disrupts our lifeworlds and introduces new political imaginaries.

4.1   Our entanglements with(in) the system

Through her work, Reem has built relationships with local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that are running primary healthcare clinics (PHCs) working on health-related innovation [36, 38, 39]. However, the revolution

has initiated open conversations on the ties that local NGOs have with the political elite and their role in maintaining the status quo through political and sectarian clientelism. Conversations with interviewees revealed:

"So the fact is that the more than 70% of the primary health care network of the ministry of public health is run by NGOs and most of these are politically based or faith based or both" - *Sherine*

"Some of them [NGOs supported by political parties] are getting money in a political way and not even providing services." - *Mohammad*

Interviewees highlighted that working within and/or accessing services by such a system would make us complicit in accepting the corrupt systems the political elite have put in place and that finding non-complicit partners is difficult:

"you sort of have to accept the structure of that [primary healthcare] network and the fact that it is based on political considerations and/or religious ones." - *Farah*

"So if you're someone who doesn't believe in that [sectarian] system and don't want to benefit from it then you have to maybe walk sometimes for several kilometers to maybe find a PHC that is neither politically nor religiously affiliated. And even that is not very easy to find!" - *Sherine*

Freire [14] has emphasised that the oppressors (i.e. the political elite), transform structures into tools for domination and as our conversations with participants have highlighted, that is the case of the healthcare system in Lebanon in which we have been working. El Saadawi [26], a prominent Arab feminist, posited that religious clientelism maintains the oppression of the marginalized as a continuity of colonialism. Therefore, the question that we found ourselves asking is *how do we navigate the Lebanese system we are entangled in as researchers who support a decolonizing/decolonial revolution?* Ansari [4], in his exploration of decolonial design in India, highlighted the role of the political and economic elites as interlocutors of the colonial agenda which to this day sustains the oppression of marginalized communities and their political imaginaries. Ansari [4] called on designers to not define their decolonial praxis "narrowly and exclusively in response to Anglo-European settler histories and narratives" (pg. 139) and to account for the role of interlocuters in maintaining hegemonic narratives of oppression.

Nonetheless, this brings us to another issue that made us pause. In our efforts to design with the revolution, *are we potentially excluding or disregarding those resisting from within the system to create decolonial cracks?* Walsh [22] posited that rather than viewing decolonial efforts as existing outside the matrix of modern/colonial power [25] we should acknowledge and work within decolonial cracks. Through our dialogue, we acknowledge that practitioners and public health workers within the Lebanese healthcare system are themselves positioned to be the upholders of political sectarianism and its corruption by the design of the system and their own experiences of oppression. However, this does not necessitate that they do not practise resistance by creating and working within decolonial cracks. Therefore, rather than viewing them as accomplices, *should we not explore the less visible decolonial cracks that they may be working within and consider how we may think/do* [22] *with them*? *Is it possible that those that work within such cracks are forming a communal that resists sectarian divides maintained by the political elite?*

In his articulation of Autonomous Design, Escobar [11] positioned the realisation of the communal as the most fundamental goal that can be worked towards through inter-epistemic dialogues characterised by debate, generous listening and mutual care which our PD praxis may facilitate. However, taking on such a role requires a break away from our design disciplines and the acknowledgement of the need of a politicized and critical post-disciplinary approach [42]. Through such an approach our design praxis would not solely be applied in our specific specialisations (e.g. participatory health product design) but would also be open to the ways that others are trying to create decolonial cracks and are working to enable change from within [11].

4.2   Our entanglements with(in) the Revolution

Conversations on the programmes being launched by collectives that formed during the revolution also prompted us to question *how our PD praxis may account for and counter instances of horizontal violence within the revolution*. In this case, horizontal violence refers to the violence that the oppressed enact on other oppressed people. [14]. Due to the international aid system predominantly funding healthcare for refugees, our conversations discussed how Lebanese citizens have started viewing PHCs solely for refugees even though they too may benefit from them:

"When you tell people about the PHC in a certain area, they directly say it's for the Syrian refugees. Yes in the past few years, Syrian refugees were seeking healthcare in the PHCs but that doesn't mean that these centers were created solely for them!" -*Ahmad*

"[Lebanese] people didn't know that they had the right to get services from PHCs." -*Rami*

Pracitioners we conversed with highlighted that the imposition placed by the aid system on the provision of services through siloed funding streams *"have contributed to some social tensions between the Lebanese host community and the Syrian refugees"* (Sherine) when coupled with the xenophobic rhetoric propagated by Lebanese politicians against refugees [1]. As Lebanese designers and researchers, we have worked on projects specific to refugees [3, 10, 21, 35, 37,

40]. This was partly motivated by our solidarity with refugees that are marginalized in Lebanon but also by the international funding streams that emphasized a focus on refugee issues.

As previously mentioned, the Lebanese revolution shows the potential of being an intersectional and a decolonial feminist [43] revolution that advocates for the legal, social, economic and political rights of refugees and the most marginalized living in the country. However, our conversations highlighted instances where the above detailed tensions between Lebanese and refugees have manifested in the exclusion of non-Lebanese within the revolution and its political imaginaries by some. An activist highlighted that:

"I think that the refugees always had more rights than the Lebanese in terms of the healthcare system since the beginning of the Syrian crisis." -*Rami*

Another stated that they are currently primarily focusing on supporting Lebanese communities by developing social protection programmes exclusive to Lebanese despite being aware of the needs of refugees:

"Within this work [of the collective], so far it is not focused on refugees at all. It is mainly Lebanese and we are trying to discuss with them [refugees] the fact that we are discussing Lebanese now." -*Ahmad*

El Saadawi [27] articulates that by focusing interventions to counteract the oppression of one marginalized community, in the case of her work on Arab women, initiatives often lose sight of the wider socio-political and global economic systems that oppress all. Vergès [43] employs a decolonial lens to criticize the exclusion of migrants within White Feminist movemennts. Furthermore, Freire [14] emphasizes how as oppressed communities strive for liberation, they often risk becoming oppressors themselves (i.e. Horizontal Violence). As we reflect on these conversations and the insights of El Saadawi, Vergès, and Freire, we acknowledge that the exclusion of refugees by some Lebanese activists propagates the racial and ethnic oppression engendered by coloniality/modernity. Research on decolonizing PD have highlighted how engaging with decoloniality allows us to problematize systemic epistemological and ontological oppression [31, 32] that are of the debris of colonial legacies [34] and our dialogue equally leads us to problematize the potential complicity of our PD praxis in exacting horizontal violence within a decolonial/decolonising revolution. As part of unfolding/refolding our praxis we ask: *how does our PD praxis, when working with/for one marginalized community, contribute to the exclusion and further marginalization of other communities who are also subject to the colonial matrix of power? How might our PD praxis work towards restoring humanity for and with all of whom are oppressed?* These are not questions that we may answer ourselves, but rather should be in dialogue with the actors within the revolution who are formulating new political imaginaries. We need to ally with activists who are working towards building solidarity through dialogue with all of whom are oppressed [14], which El Saadawi views as the first step in working glocally (globally and locally) for freedom [28]. Furthermore, we need to ask: *how is our PD praxis that of inter-culturality?*. Inter-culturality is a "permanent and active process of negotiation and interrelation in which difference [between varying oppressed groups] does not disappear" [22] (pg.58). Embracing inter-culturality means respecting and valuing the diverse knowledge, values, histories and struggles of all races, ethnicities and cultures tied to Lebanon. We carry this respect with an eye towards *(re)imagining inter-culturality that is intertwined with the epistemologies of Lebanon and the region*.

5 Conclusion

Design scholars have called for a decolonial epistemic shift in our design practices and pedagogies as we contend with Design's complicity with coloniality/modernity [5]. However, just as decolonization is a rupture of disorder [13], so will be the state of our (re)imagination of PD praxis as we engage with actors who are themselves formulating their own decolonizing and decolonial movement. In this paper we have placed our conversations in dialogue with epistimologies and decolonial design from Latin America, India and the Arab region. As we continue thinking/doing in Lebanon we will continue our deeper engagement with the epistemologies of Lebanon and the region by placing ourselves in dialogue with the words of ibn Sina, Rumi, Gibran Khalil Gibran, to name a few, and design scholars such as Samer Akkach [2] and Danah Abdulla [30].

Our dialogues highlight that as the Lebanese revolution continuously shifts narratives and unfolds our lifeworlds so does our (re)imagination of PD. In this paper we raise the contraditions and questions we are contending with when engaging in PD within our entanglements as Lebanese design researchers. The conversations held prompt us to consider how our PD Praxis engages with interlocuters and decolonial cracks within the existing Lebanese system as well as instances of horizontal violence within the revolution. These questions are not static, for indeed they will keep changing as the Lebanese revolution and the political imaginaries of the revolution unfold.

conversations, while not directly speaking to the work in this paper, complemented the space in which Reem was thinking/doing. We also thank Angelika for her feedback on drafts of this paper. Lastly, we would like to thank our interlocuters and acknowledge the people in Lebanon that are still protesting and demanding change.

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