WHY DOES "PARTICIPATORY" MAKE ME SHIVER? PROPOSING A DECOLONIAL PRACTICE FOR PARTICIPATORY WORK

ENGAGEMENTS, NEGOTIATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Colonial practices often come unnoticed with participatory projects that involve people, places and economics. There are complex power structures involved, and nuances of ethics at play. But how to address this complexity in a constructive manner? By explicitly drawing on a convergence between the challenges addressed by participatory art and participatory design, I propose a postcolonial perspective as a valuable critical practice for understanding the dynamic power structures in participatory projects. In order to decolonise a participatory project I suggest a set of concrete questions that can be asked regularly. To be the killjoy that points to the less flattering aspects of a project is never an easy position to take. But it may be necessary if the field of art and design is to raise its awareness and contribute to an ethical change.

INTRODUCTION

"Marika, so how do you work with participation in your project?"

Per Linde, who posed the question at the end of his seminar, looks at me.

I freeze. My stomach crunches and I shiver. Millions thoughts and memories are rushing through my mind. I realize I'm angry and want to yell "What the fuck are you imposing? Don't mention that word to me, don't attach it to me!"

But we are in a seminar. And we all behave.

So I reply calmly: "I don't."

(Hedemyr, 2017a)

But is this really true that I don't? And why this fury? I do work with a lot of people in all my projects. I work site-specific and involve and talk to a lot of people at the location. I'm running cooperatives and I always create opportunities to involve and work together with people. So why does "participatory work" make me shiver and react so strongly every time? And why do I avoid labelling my work as such? It relates to power.

So let's try to unfold what it is all about. A participatory project makes me uneasy when the language used for people and places demonstrates a hidden and unspoken power-balance, or an unawareness of the power positions at play. Especially when the persons involved gets de-individualised and where someone else has decided what a certain group "need", not the group or persons themselves. There is often a strange flipping between: participation as empowerment; a good intention at contributing and helping others; an exploitation of people's perspectives and knowledge; a real potential of co-creation, curiosity and change; and a naïve colonial attitude. There is a complex power structure involved, and nuances of ethics at play.

On the following pages I will present why I find a postcolonial perspective a valuable critical practice for understanding the dynamic power structures in participatory projects. I will explicitly draw on a convergence between the challenges addressed by participatory art and participatory design.

Postcolonial and decolonial approaches will be used to support my argument regarding power, and as an approach and practice for how to deal with power in a constructive and ethical way. A postcolonial perspective enables one to challenge the fundamental worldviews and assumptions on which a participatory project and its practices are based. In the scope of this paper I will focus on the agendas and power structures inside participatory projects, and I will suggest a set of concrete questions that can be asked as a daily decolonial practice.

My argument is to be placed in the context of recent debate and critique of participatory art and design, and as a complement to the discussion on postcolonial perspectives on design by for example Dourish & Mainwaring (2012), Irani et al (2010), Mainsah & Morrison (2014), and Merritt & Barddzell (2011), and as a complement to the discussion on participation and art by Bishop (2012), Jackson (2011), Kester (2011).

PARTICIPATION, EMPOWERMENT AND VALUE

The word participatory is explained as "providing the opportunity for people to be involved in deciding how something is done" (Merriam-Webster 2017). Participatory design is an approach to design attempting to actively involve all stakeholders (e.g. employees, partners, customers, citizens, end users) in the design process to help ensure the result meets their needs and is usable. In art, participatory art has been a description of a wide range of projects that are created through a participatory process, and at times (mis)used as a label also for community-based art, interactive art, or socially-engaged art.

In both design and art, there is on one hand the political dimension of user/participant empowerment, allowing different or marginalised voices to be heard and have a real impact on the development, and on the other hand an instrumental dimension where the artist/designer and the participants are used in order to create a certain value for the initiator or stakeholder. A project's power structures are influenced by *how* these two perspectives 'empowerment' and 'value' are talked about, since art and design are part of both cultural and capitalist practices (Balsamo 2011; Karlsson 2016; Eagleton 1995). While cultural theory provides valuable models for understanding the ways in which culture exerts influence on social structure and life, they have to be combined with economic theory if we are to fully understand the power structures operating in contemporary participatory art and design. This combination is done in postcolonial theories.

A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE

The postcolonial perspective is valuable because it describes a practice of power hierarchies and power politics that defines the relation between people, places and profit. In short: A practice of subject hood defining who is subject, who is object, who is allowed to speak and who is silenced. A practice of space politics creating "here" and "there", a centre and periphery, and the idea of the existence of "empty spaces". A practice of exploitation by appropriating valuable assets, instrumentalising people, and generating profit for only certain actors. Furthermore, it takes into account that all these practices are entangled, and provides an intersectional analysis of this entanglement (Ashcroft et al, 2009). The postcolonial perspective on culture aim to deconstruct material and discursive legacies of colonialism, offering an approach to think about how local practice operates in contemporary transnational contexts affected by histories, relations and logics of colonialism. Its cultural-linguistic and political economy theory approaches draw on influences from poststructuralism and Marxism. As a discipline of theory and criticism, it "seeks to understand how location, social dimensions of identity, and the global political economy differentiate between groups and the opportunities they have for development" (Mainsah & Morrison 2014: 84).

In relation to participatory projects I'm interested in postcolonial theory beyond racism. This is evidently impossible. Racism is at the very core of colonialism and the underpinning ideology that has made European colonialism possible (Lindqvist 2011). The horrific crimes committed cannot be compared with anything else. Also, in our present times racism is not only a restaging of a colonial past but also as a traumatic contemporary reality, as for example Grada Kilomba clearly outlines in her book *Plantation Memories* (2010) by giving accounts of everyday racism and linking it to postcolonial theory.

The reason I search for ways to discuss participatory projects through a postcolonial perspective beyond racism, is that I experience colonial acts and practices in projects that are happening for example in a Swedish city by Swedish partners. Projects that are not racist, but stage a colonial relationship between stakeholders, different neighbourhoods and partners. There are no neutral or objective positions in a participatory project and colonial practices often come unnoticed with it. When a project is presented as neutral, unaware of the power practices it embodies, and wants to stage me, as white woman and artist, in the role of the coloniser, a token, or a complicit – this is when I start to shiver. I shiver of frustration over the un-equal power positions, and the masking of the daunting play of power. I shiver when there seem to be no space for ethical and socio-political aware negotiations or critical questions. I shiver because I will be entangled in it all. To be the "killjoy" or "nasty bastard" that points to the less flattering aspects of a project is never an easy position

to take. But it is necessary if the field of art and design is to raise its awareness and contribute to an ethical change.

Am I afraid of committing or being complicit in a colonial act? Yes, I am. But I do not want that to refrain me from being involved in a project. As practitioner, my way out of the shivering is to make conscious choices on how to do politics and ethics in practice. A first step is to talk about the sticky issues and difficult questions that may come with a participatory project, to bring them out in the light, and find a way to work with them as part of the project.

As artist or designer, one has to find a way for how to work *in* and *with* these power practices. In a participatory project, the initiator, or the artist/designer who has been engaged to go "out there" to create something "from zero", could be very close to commit a colonial act. As Thiong'o express it in his book *Something Torn and New* (2009: 4): "A colonial act – indeed, any act in the context of conquest and domination – is both a practice of power, intended to pacify a populace, and a symbolic act, a performance of power intended to produce docile minds". This is especially important to have in mind if the initiator is a local government who has set aside funding for participatory projects in precarious areas. The artist/designer could also be close to commit a colonial act by "helping" a certain group of people whose "needs" someone else has defined, thereby restaging the power hierarchies of the coloniser and the colonised.

THE NUANCES OF LANGUAGE

When applying a postcolonial perspective there is also a call for "increased attention to the language of the texts of participatory design research [and practice] – the metaphors, images, allusion, fantasy and rhetoric and what types they produce about peoples and places" (Mainsah & Morrison 2014: 84). An example of the delicate nuances of language is found in a booklet on Community Dance, produced Kultur i Väst, the cultural administration of the government of Region Västra Götaland in Sweden. The purpose is to inspire the creation of more community projects. With concrete examples from realised projects they explain that the working methods are based on a democratic and artistic exploration. But they also explain that the "dance artist starts from a place and the people *there*, and *highlights* the *resident's* stories ... In community dance the amateur gets *help* to depict and convey a story or issue that is important or urgent, together with professional artists." (Kultur i Väst 2013:7, translation and emphasis by the author).

The booklet does not mention any financial aspects of the projects, how they have been funded or who got paid or not in the process. Thereby leaving out an important aspect of the socio-political reality of the projects.

OPPORTUNITY AND EXPLOITATION

Since every participatory project, to a greater or lesser extent, is part of the global neo-capitalist society in which it takes place, it is important to pay attention to how value and profit are talked about, and how it is linked to money or not. There can be a fine line between "being given an opportunity" and "being exploited". The artist/designer could be complicit in a colonial act of exploitation when extracting valuable ideas from the "participants" in order to create value elsewhere. Or it could be the artist/designer's creative abilities that are exploited.

In 2008 I was one of eight artists selected for the AIRIS - Artists in Residence Project, initiated by TILLT in Gothenburg. During one year I worked at an "ordinary workplace" as an opportunity to broaden my skills and try new ways of working. One day a week I worked at Paroc, a stone wool insulation factory in south Sweden with 90 employees. My fee was 500 Euro/month, a bit lower than normal because this was an "opportunity" for me as an artist. Starting from a very experimental and open process with no requirements of a certain outcome, the factory management, however, announced in the press that the goal of the project was to

> clarify the leadership, develop the staff, increase collaboration among employees and strengthen the corporate identity. We also want to strengthen the innovative thinking within the company and get the staff to feel proud to work at the company.
> (TT 2008, translation by the author).

I used my experience as choreographer to do workshops with the employees with the aim to create a work together as film or performance, and to unfold the creative and collaborative spirit among the workers as co-creators. As the project developed, I got limited possibilities to realise any artistic expressions, apart from initiating social events outside working hours. I felt trapped by the situation, but the factory management was very pleased with the results. The general atmosphere and collaborative spirit was better and they proudly presented how the press coverage corresponded to a market campaign worth minimum 150 000 Euro. As a comparison, my fee was 5 500 Euro for the whole year. Instead of the project being an "opportunity" for me to create work together with people I normally don't work with, I felt instrumentalised and exploited as cheap labour that could create a lot of value for money for the factory. I also felt that I betrayed the workers since we never realised any co-creation. When trying to raise these issues with the initiating organisation TILLT they had - at that time - very little understanding of my concerns, holding on to their perspective that they had given me a great "opportunity". In these situations, it is important to clearly see the power structures at play, and not read the situation as a "personal issue".

Should we avoid participatory projects because of their complexity? Of course not. Participatory projects can have a great potential for change and democratic development. But they always include worldviews and power dynamics that have to be considered and dealt with. Irani et. al (2010) in their article *Postcolonial computing: a lens on design and development*, as well as Mainsah and Morrison (2014) in their article *Participatory design through a cultural lens: insights from postcolonial theory,* outlines how postcolonial theories provide useful approaches to participatory design. However, both papers refer primarily to projects where a designers or stakeholders from the so-called Western world work in projects in the so-called developing world. By only referring to projects in Africa or trans-national collaborations, there is again a colonial perspective that risk shadowing the nuanced and effective analysis of power relations on micro and macro level that postcolonial theory can provide for participatory projects in themselves.

A DECOLONIAL PRACTICE

So, how to deal with the entangled power dynamics and nuances of ethics at play? I propose a set of questions to use and reflect upon in each situation, as a daily practice of decolonisation of participatory projects:

- Who is funding this project and what do they want to get out of this project?

- Who has initiated this project and why is it to be done?

- Who are the subjects?

- Who in this room is paid while participating, who is not?

- What does participation actually mean in this project?

- Can a participant decline to continue?

- Are there options to re-negotiate how the project is set up?

- What am I doing here?

- Who is profiting from the knowledge production created?

- What kind of language is used for the people and places involved?

- Are my ethics and moral compatible with the project? If not, do I stay and work for a change or do I leave?

- What is "here", what is "there", and which spaces are talked about as "empty"?

- Are the words empowerment or creativity used to mask a form of exploitation?

- Is this project creating a real change, or just a temporary relief and fun?

- What/who is exploited during the project?

- What does it mean to be a token in this project?

- Where do I/we get from here?

- When can I rest?

The above questions builds on a set of questions presented by Temi Odumosu at her seminar *What could a decolonised approach to new media (and its public expressions) look like?* (Hedemyr, 2017b), but here developed and expanded for the context of a participatory project.

Coming back to the very first question of how I work with participation in my projects, and my response that I don't, made me reflect on which position I actually do take. In my long term public art project *The Event Series* (Hedemyr 2017), I work "from the belly of the beast", to borrow an expression from Stuart Hall (cited in Kilomba 2010:36). Hall uses this expression to describe the specific time and place from which he writes, as a Black intellectual in England. "Being inside the beast announces somehow the place of danger from which he writes and theorizes - , the danger of being from the margin and speaking at the centre." (Kilomba, 2010:36). In *The Event Series*, this is the position I take as a local artist who do critical performative works at Gothenburg's Event District, the very heart and belly of Gothenburg - The Event City. My interaction with people is more resembling a documentary film maker, or a undercover journalism, although I'm always open with who I am and that I'm there to create a site-specific work. I use a form of "walk and talk" practice to get to know a location and its people. Therefore, I would still say that *The Event Series* is not a participatory project. But I do find the set of questions relevant also here because the project involves people, places, power relations and economics - just as the majority of art and design projects do.

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