# Performing Citizenship through Design?

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## ABSTRACT

In the face of global protests and conflicts over spatial rights, this paper proposes another framework for participatory design. As participation necessitates the question of participation in, what and for whom, we wish to bring in perspectives from citizens studies in which citizenship is something to be claimed, enacted and performed, as a potential for decolonizing the universal claim of participation in "participatory design" and reflecting on role of the designer in current social struggles. Instead of creating neutral participatory spaces for democratic dialogue, we argue that the designer may recognize the productivity of affective relations. With examples from a deportation camp in Denmark and a seminar in marginalized spaces of São Paulo, we address to how designers and activists turn the gaze from making minority groups participate *in design* and instead work with embodied and mediatized perspectives and the ethics of affect *in the design process.*

## KEYWORDS

Citizenship, Participation, Decolonialism, Design, embodiment

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## 1 INTRODUCTION: DECOLONIZING DESIGN?

A premise for much participatory design emerging in the context of the Global North seems to be a desire for a 'greater good' or at least that design processes can help consensual approaches visions of future practices and products by involving affected groups of people directly in design processes, enabling them to represent their own intentions, ambitions and activities to others hence, ground *"discussions in desired outcomes* (...) *and the contexts in which they will be used"* [17], p 3. While this formulation may seem overly simplistic and rationalistic, other contributions from within this tradition has called for leaving utopian ideas of consensus and instead engaging with *"staging sociomaterial conditions for controversial issues in ways that facilitate contradictions, oppositions, and disagreement through direct engagement"* [5], p 153. Responding to this, and that participatory design may play other roles in social processes by deliberately confronting and exhibiting "glitches" as potentials for speculations in alternative futures [6, 11] or by creatively disturbance animating the existing world, hence reopening dialogues about desirable futures [2, 3] or even proposing "design as dissent" [22Traganou,], we seek to discuss the critical role of the participatory designer and ask to what extent the normative center of participatory design can be decolonized.

Within a global context in which controversies emerge from the systemic and interdependent workings of climate crisis, urbanization crisis, and the migration crisis – producing a condition of "intersectional (im)mobilities" [20], pp 3-9, the struggle over space and the right to movement is central. As participatory design often engages with marginalized, or immobilized citizens, we need to reflect on the position of designer.

This entails designerly engagement with people's ability to generate "structures of possibility" [8] through active interventions. Working from ideas of "cosmopolitan localism" [16], we can approach everyday acts of citizenship [14] as expressions of ontological designs opening up future prospects for coexistence. Understanding design as "ontological" entails that we conceive of design as a practice not directed towards the shaping objects, processes and material landscapes defining the future, but also shaping and defining the *inhabitants* of that future.

We will return to the implications of this for rethinking citizenship and coexistence later [10]. First, however, we want briefly to focus on the implicit challenge of 'decolonizing design'.

While Escobar [8] contends that this may open up potentials for "building bridges" between transition designs from e. g. the (global) North and South by bringing particular experiences into dialogue, a more radical challenge comes from calls to "provincialize" and distance itself from Western/Northern design approaches, acknowledging that "decolonizing design", also, requires problematizing the affective and conceptual operations that form the basis of our relations with the world [21]. If we are to avoid 'decolonization' to be hollowed out to a mere gesture [19], we have to recognize how the *"paths by which designs relate to particular contexts".* Here *"ideas are embodiments of a designerly effort to make sense of experiential situations, and the transfer of ideas into and across different contexts informs how they affect thinking and action"* [18]. As the Decolonizing Design roundtable from *Design and Cultures* points to, this also means engaging with issues and politics of (im)mobility, knowledge, class, gender, sexual diversity, and structural racism as an embedded part of design.

In this framework, we explore two examples from different design activist collectives, *A Cidade Precisa de Você* (The City Needs You) from São Paulo, and the media activists *Other Story* from Denmark. We propose that both examples showcase how participatory


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**Figure 1: Jay, immobilised in his bed at Deportation Camp Sjælsmark. Photo from other-story.org**

**Figure 2: Jongo in the garden of Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque.**

design may be related to acts of citizenship from marginalized communities, but also how design and citizen's acts negotiate power relations through spatial, embodied and affective forms of participation. While we might easily contend to the Escobar's notion of the pluriverse, we ask: what are the frictions, affective ethics in bringing such embodied experiences of citizenship into dialogue? Here we understand affective ethics as what emerge from embodied situations; for instance, as invisible power structures are made visible.

## 2 OTHER STORIES: GIVING VOICE TO ERADICATED BODIES

*Everybody can sing* [9] is a film about Jay, an elderly man, born in Iran and currently held in the deportation camp for expelled refugees in Sjælsmark, Denmark. Focusing not on his story as migrant and refugee, but rather on his experience as a singer, and showing him as hospitalized in a bed without being able to move on his own, the video presents the singing voice of Jay. Singing enables him to be heard and to connect with other bodies, other voices, despite of his fragile situation in detention.

The production of the film was accompanied by a physical blockade of the Deportation camp during the time of Jay's deportation from there to a facility in Sweden. During the deportation, an assemblage of activists loosely related to the groups and collectives such as No Deportations DK in cooperation with media-activist collective Other-Story, organized a blockade of the Deportation camp and a live-update on social media of what was known about his forced migration to Sweden.

Other Story presents testimonies of *"people living the change"* as a performative gesture. "Living the change" here refers to all sorts of global transformations and movements related to, war, migration, climate change etc. Through media activism, Other-Story makes visible experiences with citizens in precarious or life-threatening situations, making the lack of citizens' rights visible by sharing stories and gathering voices and in doing it presenting another story: the story of an opera singer immobilized in a deportation camp. Rather than confronting and dichotomizing, Other-Story chooses to visualize or give voice to the human perspective by presenting people not as victims, but rather as fully human citizens with dreams and hopes. In the video Jay explains how singing is source for power and joy within his everyday life, claiming a more general role for singing and music in human life. By focusing not on his explicit immobilized appearance in the video, the film points to Jays fully human capacities giving voice to a communion with others, not based on his status as illegal migrant, but as a hearted and compassionate opera singer.

## 3 OTHER EMBODIMENTS: CHOREOGRAPHING POWER

*Autonumous Architecture: activating learning territories* [4] was an interdisciplinary seminar held in São Paulo in March 2019 with the aim to cultivate new learning territories through empowering urban minorities to access and partake in the rights to the city. The seminar gathered activists, academics, social movements and active citizens into three days of being-in-common. The places activated were four different spaces: Quilombaque Perus, which hosted the opening in the periphery; Teatro de Container, where the workshops and most of the conversations took place; Casa do Povo; and finally, Luz Train Station for the closing performance and ceremony.

The seminar had the intention to open space for discussion and sharing practices between peripheral territories and its citizens, who build common infrastructures to foster life and claim their own territory and rights. Invited as presenters were active citizens from cultural occupations, housing squads, urban gardens, indigenous villages, slums, Movimento Sem Terra (MST) settlements. The conversations were articulated in seminars, round tables and embodied gatherings moving together.

The first choreographic gathering was staged in the garden of Comunidade Cultural Quilombaque. It engaged the participants and was guided by young black artists from Perus. Through the popular dance genre Jongo, the primarily white participants in the seminar learned from the cultural history of Afro-Brazilians. This invitation to appropriate and perform Afro-Brazilian culture promoted an exchange between bodies, movements, cultures and history, but also affective negotiations of colonial pasts.

This affective situation was even clearer in the closure ceremony in Luz Station As this choreography consisted in a milder and less revolutionary embodiment, it related to the urban context exterior to the seminar. In both choreographies, designers and

activists unfolded expressions across socio-cultural differences in a participatory but frictional space.

## 4 PERFORMING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH DESIGN

Returning to the discussion of design and citizenship, we may ask, in what sense the two cases embody and express citizenship understood as localized responses to global processes *and* to what extent they opened up futures for common coexistence.

One might claim that the expressions of citizenship performed here are of little significance as of compared to the representational power structures the concerned people are up against. Do citizens in the periphery of São Paulo for instance come close to the rights (spatial and territorial) by performing embodiments of minority culture across privileged cultures? Does detained illegal immigrants in the hands of the Danish prison authorities have any power by expressing cultural competencies and reaching out for empathy among a white majority? What we want to argue is that minor movements and interventions have the potential to open up the field by embodying the frictions and inherent asymmetries that majorities are not aware of. This does not transform social and economic geographies, but it might change the mental and embodied geographies of citizens - both in margins and centers. If collective action is called for, those are the geographies that need to be mapped and experienced; to let the pluriverse and multiple embodiments co-exist.

That is what we found in the gathering and embodied capacities to do things together or sing across differences. What we point to is an awareness of the asymmetries in participation across territorial, cultural and social borders, what leads us to reflect: how do we as designers perform participatory design and work with communities *without* reducing people? In both cases, designers and activists seek to open a space for other voices to be heard and recognized. The starting point could be by giving and understanding of the political, spatial and social complexities within the territory - whether in the Danish deportation camp, the derelict areas around Luz station or in the peripheries of São Paulo. Participatory design is here rather curating whom you want to listen to and how. How do you as designer create space for encounters to further intersections between identities, contexts and rights?

Those are questions particularly present in our current joint project on *"Performing Citizenship*", in which we seek to bridge participatory design and citizenship studies with performative interventions and performance designs. In the project, we propose a change of perspective by focusing on the acts of citizenship through mediatized, embodied and expressive forms [12, 1Andersen,]. Following political theorist, Engin Isin's recent call for a reorientation of research perspectives on citizenship looking into how citizens constitute and perform themselves as political subjects, *"not in bounded territories but through transversal figurations"* [15], p 121, our project will contribute to such a re-orientation. In particular, we see a potential in developing a performative and embodied conception of citizenship that do not only analyze performative rights claim [13, 14] but argues that citizenship is not (only) a right you acquire, but a process of becoming, involving cultural, social and spatial expressions with often affective negotiations of rights as consequence.

## 5 OPENING SPACES FOR AFFECTIVE FRICTIONS

The above cases share similarities: In particular the practice of an aesthetic and embodied way of engaging with communities, hence a performative understanding of rights claims. Those mediatized and embodied forms are, however not without frictions.

In the first example, the visual documentation and distribution of the story of Jay did not change the actual process of deportation or solve the actual problem of the lack of citizens' rights in Danish deportation camps. However, by presenting the complexity and human side of it being imprisoned, it moved the problematization and awareness of it further and called attention to as well the potentialities and the fallacies of performing and mediatizing citizens situations. *Everybody can sign* offers existential and expressive autonomy, whereas it does not prevent the citizen from deportation. However, we believe that exactly by manifesting those contradicting forms of citizenship, a more plural and antagonistic understanding of citizenship can be brought forth.

In the second example, embodied forms of encounter opened up the social space but also made visible privileged positions within the participatory circle. Hence, we can say that the choreographic movements did not *solve* the asymmetric relations between designers, activist and citizens, rather it furthered the movement of problematization bringing awareness of the colonizing aspects to the fore. However, we believe that by bringing the affective power relations into play, and by embodying the socio-cultural difference in relation to territories, citizen rights, both design and activism can learn from the territory.

As participatory design takes the democratic ideals of doing good as its point of departure, it risks overlooking the affective relations between participating bodies. Therefore, we suggest participatory design to start considering the affective and asymmetrical relations in design and activism. This must be done not exclusively by inviting for the discussion theoretical notions that allow for difference and multiplicity (such as Escobar's "pluriverse"), but also by moving from a critical approach (design researchers) and impact seeking acts (designers and activists) to dealing with the affective and embodied forms of citizenship with its territorial and socio-cultural boundaries. While we know that participation is never neutral, neither is it a rationalized process of making direct impact in society. Rather design processes and activism are constituted as ecologies between territories, peoples and their multiple rights claims. Intersections and encounters do occur, but those are not without friction, once they live from affective ecologies of asymmetry, inequality and (im)mobility. How can we deal with those asymmetrical and affective relations? One approach is by acknowledging that decolonization presumes taking the situated and contextual frameworks into account. Accepting that we can never universalize claims for decolonizing design. Instead, we may work from an understanding of ethics as relational and situated properties emerging from any body's capacity to affect and to be affected. We may then start working with the situated qualities emerging from affecting and affected bodies. For instance, through embodied forms of gathering. Ethics

is not about judging each other right or wrong, but to acknowledge what an action is, what it brings out in the situation, how it breaks sociality and its asymmetries open. Ethics, then, is about how we inhabit uncertainty, together.

For participatory design to acknowledge affective ethics, it must care for what frictions emerging from the situation. For instance, the Danish political and cultural context of Other Story is a media environment, that do not give voice to the deported and imprisoned in the camps. If it does, it is in a superficial form of making them into victims, threats or social parasites, not showing their human face. The Brazilian context for the autonomous architecture festival is yet different but share similar asymmetric power structures.

Rather than claiming decolonization from a presumed universal reason of doing common good, we have to start interrogating what is the common, for whom and from where? The particular paths different acts of citizenship may follow are very different, and if we are to take the challenge of decolonizing design seriously, we must bring our own situatedness into consideration.

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