

PD *otherwise* will be pluriversal (or it won't be)

Pablo Calderón Salazar

Product Design School, Jorge Tadeo Lozano University,
Bogotá, Colombia
pablo.calderon@utadeo.edu.co

Liesbeth Huybrechts

ArcK, University Hasselt, Diepenbeek, Belgium
liesbeth.huybrechts@uhasselt.be

ABSTRACT

The following text proposes a narrative and argumentative path starting in the wetlands of the Caribbean coastal region of Colombia, where Orlando Fals Borda, more than 50 years ago, found himself in the search for appropriate tools and methods for studying the complex social situation of the communities living there. His development of PAR -a transformative and explicitly political research approach *with* communities [15]- represented a radical critique and novel proposal for research in the social sciences. Such proposal opens a path for us to explore some examples of knowledge and research (building knowledge) *otherwise* such as 'systematisation of experiences' 'epistemologies of the south' [8] and 'situated knowledges' [20], as well as some design initiatives, networks and platforms *otherwise* that have emerged in recent years, such as 'designs from the souths' [19], 'decolonising design' [36], 'depatriarchise design', and 'autonomous design' [12]. We then build on these proposals of knowledge and design *otherwise*, to explain how they have influenced and informed our intervention in a specific case study of northern-European PD, which we will present as a practical example of such ideas. Our journey will end with a plea for contemporary PD to incorporate the political nature of the origins of PAR and the more contemporary concept of 'pluriverse' [13], so as to better articulate -not only its investigative- but also its transformative qualities.

CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → Interaction design; Interaction design process and methods; Participatory design.

KEYWORDS

Participatory action research (PAR), situated knowledges, design otherwise, decolonial option, pluriversal designs

ACM Reference Format:

Pablo Calderón Salazar and Liesbeth Huybrechts. 2020. PD *otherwise* will be pluriversal (or it won't be). In *Proceedings of the 16th Participatory Design Conference 2020 - Participation(s) Otherwise - Vol 1 (PDC '20: Vol. 1)*, June 15–20, 2020, Manizales, Colombia. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 9 pages. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3385010.3385027>

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. Copyrights for components of this work owned by others than the author(s) must be honored. Abstracting with credit is permitted. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee. Request permissions from permissions@acm.org.

PDC '20: Vol. 1, June 15–20, 2020, Manizales, Colombia

© 2020 Copyright held by the owner/author(s). Publication rights licensed to ACM.

ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-7700-3/20/06...\$15.00

<https://doi.org/10.1145/3385010.3385027>

1 INTRODUCTION

In 2013, de Dutch king Willem-Alexander declared "the end of the welfare state, and the beginning of the participation society" [10]. This statement resonated with 2010 policy plan of David Cameron in the UK, dubbed *The Big Society*, which attempted to reduce the interference of the state in civil society. The declaration of the Dutch king and the former British PM could be interpreted as noble attempts to give power to civil society, yet it is important to also consider the political -or rather politicised- instrumentalisation of *participation* in order to push forward policies aimed at undermining the welfare state.

Previous to this particular approach to participation in 'politics'¹, within the field of design practice and research, other approaches to 'the political' [30] in participatory processes were developed. The origins of Participatory Design (PD) can be traced to the democratisation of the workplace in 1970's Scandinavia, wherein designers collaborated with workers to re-design their workplaces [11]. Later, as types of labour and workplaces radically changed, PD began to engage with other settings that involved different constituents and publics [23].

However, this text won't focus on Dutch or British politics, nor specifically on Scandinavian or European PD. Instead, it proposes an archaeological exercise for tracing the (potential) influence of Latin American participatory action research (PAR) in contemporary design (and) research practices. It also explains how this trajectory has informed and influenced the authors of this text in positioning themselves as designers-researchers intervening in diverse contexts. We will begin by describing the historical context in which Latin American PAR emerged [15] and how it established itself as a valid epistemological standpoint for social research throughout the continent. We will continue by exploring some references of knowledge *otherwise*, such as 'systematisation of experiences' [6, 27], closely linked to PAR practitioners; 'epistemologies of the south' [8], by which other ways of knowing -and building knowledge about- the world are accepted as legitimate; and 'situated knowledges' [20], a feminist critique to the universalisation of knowledge fostered by many (Western-ized) scientists.

This trajectory will follow with a brief inventory of design practice and research otherwise, such as 'designs from the souths' or 'design with other names' [3, 19], which call for understanding the practices corresponding to design -but not recognised as such from the European design tradition- in different cultures and geographical contexts; 'decolonising design' [36], by which a group

¹Here it is important to cite the difference between 'the political' and 'politics' made by Chantal Mouffe: "by 'the political' I mean the dimension of antagonism which I take to be constitutive of human societies, while by 'politics' I mean the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created" [30]. In this case, we question the use of participation in 'politics', simultaneously reinvindicating its 'political' nature.

of researchers and practitioners call for revising the role of design in the global colonial matrix of power; 'depatriarchise design', critically questioning the marginal role of women -and other disenfranchised groups- in the hegemonic world of design; and Escobar's [12] proposal of 'autonomous design', which offers a basis for a design praxis *with communities*, contributing to their realisation. This narrative and argumentative path will support the positioning of the author-researchers of this paper, in their participatory research and design interventions in different contexts.

Moreover, through the theoretical review and presentation of the case, we would like to contribute to a question we consider crucial, taking into account that the PDC is being hosted for the first time in Colombia and Latin America: *What can PD, with its Scandinavian roots and further 'Northern' expressions, learn from the history and experiences in participation in Latin America?* In that same line, the use of the 'otherwise' in the present text represents a *ruse* for dislocating the knowledge structures or, as Danah Abdulla puts it, "thinking *otherwise* is another way of thinking that runs counter to the great modernist narratives—it locates its own inquiry in the very borders of systems of thought and reaches towards the possibility of non-Eurocentric models of thinking" [1].

2 ROOTS OF PAR IN COLOMBIA

Orlando Fals Borda was a Colombian sociologist who, at the end of the 60's, began to lay the groundwork for what is now known as Participatory Action Research (PAR). As he travelled throughout Colombia -more specifically in the most remote territories of the Caribbean coastal region- and began to research the social reality of the workers, peasants and indigenous communities, he found that "the terms of reference and the categories operating within sociological paradigms imported from Europe and the US, where unsatisfactory" for the Colombian reality [15]. His seminal work, *Historia doble de la Costa* -Double history of 'the coast'- [16] is a profound narrative of the social struggles that had been fought in the region in the course of the 20th century. Besides the content itself of the book and the historical situations it informed by, we would also like to highlight the tone and structure of the book: its four volumes recount four different sites and moments of resistance, and in each volume, there are two parallel narratives running simultaneously. The two narratives (or 'double history') are represented on the two pages of each spread of the book: on the left page, there is the academic voice that, even with an evident 'sarcasm' towards European social sciences research, represents his role as one of the leading academics in the country; on the right page, there is a more informal and narrative voice, representing his engagement as a citizen in investigating reality as a 'common man'. Those four volumes -with their two respective 'tones'- represent a sort of *epistemological anarchism*, by which Fals Borda, in refusing to study the social reality of communities through frameworks from the social sciences not fitting to understand them, developed novel methods for research and documentation.

In positioning himself, Fals Borda compared his role with a figure adopted in the riverside areas of the San Jorge river, in the Caribbean coast region of Colombia: the *hombre hicotea* -or turtle man [16]. The *hicotea* is a type of turtle that inhabits the wetlands in northern

Colombia and Venezuela; he uses such "anthropomorphic representation to illustrate, not only cultural forms of resistance, but also ecological relations" [26]. By identifying himself as an *hombre hicotea*, he is recognizing his dual role as an academic from the interior (the man) as well as discovering the territory through its river basins (the turtle); but this identification also attempts to break the modern dichotomy between human beings and nature. Such dichotomy, based on an anthropocentric worldview, would suggest that only humans would be able to research and make sense of the world; instead, acknowledging that a turtle -or any other animal- can better make sense of the territory, becomes a revolutionary and profoundly political statement.

But his use of figures and metaphors to illustrate his stance on investigating reality went beyond the anthropomorphic figure of the turtle-man: he insisted on introducing himself as a *sentipensante* being, "who combines reason and love, body and heart, to un-do (himself) from the (de) formations that affect harmony and the possibility of speaking the truth" [28]. *Sentipensante* is a neologism combining the words *sentimiento* (feeling) and *pensamiento* (thought) and it presents itself in the form of an adjective. By positioning himself as such, he was not (just) *being a romantic*, he was transgressing the European standards of social sciences and research, in which (scientific) reason and objectivity are the only valid ways of constructing knowledge. But assuming the role of the *sentipensante* being -and all of his practice in general- was not oriented 'against' certain form of research in the sciences: instead, he was acknowledging that scientific reasoning was *not enough*, in order to understand -and transform- the social reality he was intervening in, but it also required his emotions and affects. From a similar perspective in PD research, yet from a different cultural standpoint Yoko Akama reminds us of the Japanese term *kokoro*, which (greatly simplified) "collapses any separation between mind-spirit-heart to infuse one's being and the world as interrelatedness" [2].

It is important to understand PAR in its historical and geographical context, as it did not emerge in vacuum; it did so as part of a 'wave' of liberatory practices throughout Latin America. Such was the case of Faletto's dependency theory, Freire's popular education, Gutiérrez's theology of liberation, Boal's theatre of the oppressed, Quijano's coloniality of knowledge and Max-Neef's human scale development, amongst many others [27]. But more than explaining in depth each of such movements and practices, we consider important to speak about what they have in common: they all share a critique to the hegemony of the positivist / scientific method on the construction on knowledge and suggest different ways in which we can approach knowledge production; but, most importantly for the present text, all such practices inquired how research can become not only investigative, but transformative. Such was the case of popular pedagogue Paulo Freire, who explored the approach of PAR in the education of the masses, which case will serve as an introduction to explore some ideas of what we have (unoriginally) dubbed knowledge and research *otherwise*.

3 KNOWLEDGE *OTHERWISE*

In the development of what he called ‘popular education’ (PE), Paulo Freire strongly advocated for pedagogues to directly intervene in diverse social contexts to trigger processes of learning that would be explicitly transformative. In so doing, Freire insisted on the inseparable relation between teaching and research; yet he does not refer to the latter from a positivist, scientific, perspective, but considering it a ‘search’ that follows the constant questioning of things he noticed from the social reality [18]. This manifests what PE and PAR have in common, insofar knowledge can only emerge from particular social realities. Furthermore, Freire claimed that he did “research so as to know what [he] does not yet know and to communicate and proclaim what [he] discovers” [18], making it a constant -and never ending- process of searching for what he yet does not know. Such stance on the construction of knowledge (teaching and research), was accompanied and complemented with a position on knowledge itself in relation to practice: “without practice there’s no knowledge; at least it’s difficult to know without practice” [21]. Freire’s statement -and overall practice- represents an application of PAR in PE, as it suggests having to embody and incorporate a set of practices in order to be able to reflect and produce knowledge about it. Building on this insight by Freire we will now make a journey through some core particularities of approaches to knowledge -and research- “otherwise”, as are systematisation of experiences, epistemologies otherwise and situated knowledges from a feminist standpoint.

3.1 Systematisation of experiences.

Within the research approaches contained in the liberatory praxis of PAR, we can highlight the systematizing of experiences (SE) as one that radically transgresses the ways in which scientific knowledge is constructed, documented and communicated. The SE is a *sentipensante* research practice *par excellence*, as it seeks “to probe the integrality of the *doing*, the *feeling* and the *knowing*” [27]. “The SE declares itself openly against the trends that dichotomize the *knowing* subject from the object of *knowledge* (. . .), aiming to share it (systematization) with other interested parties and fundamentally to intervene in the transformation of its social spaces” [6]. SE proposes a different research paradigm in social sciences, as it suggests that, instead of having to define the theoretical and conceptual frameworks before conducting any *field work* (aka. the *experience*), the latter would precede the first. This strongly resonates with Schön’s critique to ‘technical rationality’ and its “belief that the teaching of scientific principles should precede the development of skills in their application” [35]. The proposed shift implies giving special attention to the systematising (or documenting and sharing) of the experience, having previously defined a framework for doing so.

But what is most important for the present text is the following: “SE is a process of social appropriation of learnings and knowledges built through a critical reading of experiences, which is mainly produced by the active and central participation of those who take part in the experience” [5]. This suggests that, aside from challenging the order of the steps in the method, SE also implies a change in the terms of the research, in which the central goal is not the search for an objective scientific truth, but the validation of the

diverse personal voices that have been actively involved in a given social research process. However, it is important to clarify that SE is not the mere description of a series of facts and actions, nor the organizing of data, of a given experience; SE is a “critical reflection with transformative purposes” [5] that aims to empower the participants by allowing them to critically reflect on their experiences. SE, therefore, presents itself as a practical example and application of PAR, insofar as it gives researchers and practitioners tools and insights into how to follow social research processes inspired by its principles. But SE also serves as a link and vehicle to explain how PAR represents a fundamental -yet constructive- critique to Western/Northern science’s monopoly on knowledge and research.

3.2 Epistemologies *otherwise*.

In his article *La sistematización como proceso investigativo; o la búsqueda de la episteme de las prácticas* (Systematizing as a research process; or the search for the episteme of practices), Marco Raul Mejía [27] argues for the importance of legitimising research practices such as *systematizing experiences*. For doing so, he does a succinct recount of the philosophy of science, and the critiques emerged from many thinkers regarding the stance of seeing science as the only valid source of knowledge. Among many others, Mejía acknowledges the work of Feyerabend and his epistemological anarchism in questioning the validity of the scientific method [17]. This call resonates with Boaventura de Sousa Santos’ revising of the limitations of (exclusively) relying on western epistemology when attempting to understand and interpret the world; instead, he advocates for what he calls *southern epistemologies*, not (only) referring to ‘the south’ as a geographical reference, but as an epistemological location [8]. We can connect such stance to Papastergiadis, who defines “the concept of the South as a loose hemispheric term that refers to a series of places that share similar patterns of colonisation, migration and cultural combinations” [31]. This certainly implies acknowledging the hemispheric location where most of these practices emerge, yet understanding that nowadays it can be considered a *third space* that can emerge anywhere and define new epistemic locations; locations where other ways of knowing -and building knowledge about- the world, are considered valid and legitimate. Without having made a direct reference to Fals Borda, we could interpret his approach to PAR as a remarkable example of de Sousa Santos’s epistemologies of the south in a dual sense: on one side, as a practice to interpret -and build knowledge about- the world emerging in the global south; and also, most importantly, as a practice proposing new epistemic locations from where to approach the world and its knowing.

In referring back to Fals Borda’s approach to research and knowledge building, we consider relevant to mention his collaboration with a local popular artist from the Caribbean coastal region called Uliánov Chalarka, which, in turn, allows us to expand the spectrum of possibilities for documenting and communicating research in the social sciences. Fals Borda and Chalarka worked together to produce a series of 5 comics, which aimed to make more accessible the history of struggles for the land of different provinces in the region. Chalarka’s work, entitled *Graphic history of the struggle for land in the Atlantic coast* (1985), added visibility to the already narrative-full recounts of PAR [34], at the same time as it reinforced

the belief that PAR processes were oriented to the popular classes and their participation –and understanding of the processes– was considered fundamental. But the use of visual language, beyond its instrumental and practical function, also resonates with what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui has dubbed ‘sociology of the image’ [7], a nascent field of social practice and research which both includes visual expressions of communities in its analyses and utilizes graphic language in its products (she does extensive use of ‘visual essays’). Cusicanqui’s take can also be interpreted as a way of situating knowledge and research, as she calls to consider the different codes and languages present in a given context and moment.

3.3 Situated knowledges

From a similar standpoint, we would like to consider how the approach to knowledges otherwise, can also be articulated through the work of feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway, who has strongly questioned the hegemony of science on knowledge from a feminist standpoint. Haraway calls for a situatedness of knowledge: “I would like a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges” [20]. Haraway’s claims resonate with de Sousa Santos call for southern epistemologies, insofar as they don’t attempt to propose *better* epistemological or methodological approaches for the construction of knowledge, but to consider that universality claims in scientific knowledge had to be revised. In doing so, she advocates for situating knowledge, which inevitably passes by positioning oneself in the process: “positioning implies responsibility for our enabling practices. It follows that politics and ethics ground struggles for and contests over what may count as rational knowledge” [20]. The situatedness of knowledge and its construction is also one of the main calls made by decolonial thinkers, for whom the dictum ‘I am where I think’ becomes a guiding principle [24]. Such dictum “presses the imperative to consider the how and what of knowing as ‘located’ in a way that is inherently political” [25]. Situating knowledge connects us back to SE, which radically questions who can ‘own’ knowledge and under which circumstances can it be constructed. In echoing Santiago Castro-Gómez, Madina Tlostlanova consolidates such a critique, connecting it to decolonial thinking

“the sensing and thinking subject, which is Western/Northern by default, occupies a delocalized and disembodied vantage point that eliminates *other possible ways to produce, transmit and represent knowledge*, allowing for a worldview to be built on a rigid essentialist modern/colonial model that hides its locality and represents itself as universal and natural” [37]

However de Sousa Santos, Feyerabend, Haraway, Tlostlanova and many others have posed fundamental critiques to the scientific monopoly on knowledge, it is important to clarify that neither of them intend to propose a better stance or epistemology of knowledge. Instead, in words of de Sousa Santos, what they all do is contribute to an *ecology of knowledge*, an ecology which “does not refute scientific rationalism but challenges its dominance by portraying it as one of many possible ways of knowing” [24]. Having covered some manifestations of knowledges otherwise, we would like to argue how these have permeated and influenced –either directly

or indirectly– several initiatives of design practice and research otherwise.

4 DESIGNS OTHERWISE

Continuing our journey, in the passage between knowledges and designs otherwise, we refer back to Tlostlanova, who calls for understanding “modernity/coloniality as a total design” [37]. When approaching this from Willis’ [38] perspective of ontological design (in a reductionist way, summarized by the dictum ‘the designed designs’), we understand that the totalising and universalising power structures of modernity (scrutinized, amongst many others, by the authors we have brought to the fore in the previous section) are designed. But Tlostlanova also stresses how design as a field of practice becomes a site of contestation, hence her call for decolonizing design. As an initial contribution for such endeavour, she suggests to consider practices and philosophies such as the *Sumak Kawsay*, from indigenous populations of the Andes, as an idea “grounded in equity, participative democracy and defense of biodiversity as the necessary conditions of individual and social welfare” [37]. Tlostlanova’s scrutiny, by inviting us to critically inquire how conventional design has contributed to establish the total design of modernity, becomes a base for us to explore different manifestations of design practices and research *otherwise*.

4.1 Pluriversal designs

The different manifestations searching for other paradigms of research in the sciences and the way knowledge is constructed and transferred have influenced many academic spheres, as well as different institutional spaces. However with a considerable delay, they have also influenced design practice and research in recent years. The prevailing (Eurocentric) design paradigm is built upon the very idea of universalisation; take IKEA, a European reference on democratising design in people’s everyday life: “IKEA promotes the agenda that one design fits all, regardless of the context” [24]. Such approach might be compared to scientific claims of the objectivity of knowledge which we have made reference to before, evidencing how the struggle for opening space for practices otherwise overflows disciplinary frontiers.

To begin unpacking some of the different approaches, initiatives and networks that have contributed in building alternative readings of design practice and research, we bring to the fore the decolonial notion of ‘pluriverse’ (which will become even more relevant in the conclusion). This notion, frequently coined by Escobar and other decolonial thinkers, finds the closest attempt to a definition in the *Zapatista* dictum of ‘a world of many worlds’, and can be understood in opposition to “modernity’s One-World ontology” [14]. This evidences how such a notion builds upon the different perspectives of knowledge otherwise we previously discussed. We argue then for the consideration of pluriversal designs, in which different manifestations will coexist in deep correlation, resisting totalisation and universalism. We will continue by giving an overview of some examples of what we understand as part of such a constellation of pluriversal designs.

4.1.1 Designs of the souths. It is precisely in problematizing the universalising tendencies of the One-World design of modernity, that Gutiérrez [19] suggests the need to consider practices of ‘design

with other names, or 'designs from the souths' (plural used intentionally): "from an intercultural perspective, we could postulate the designs of the souths as ways of prefiguring artefacts that are left out of the margins of what is considered 'design'" [3]. This implies questioning the universality of design represented in brands and companies such as IKEA and the likes, but also taking into consideration other practices that rarely enter within the 'design radar', for being made under different logics than the prevailing ones within the field. Such might be the case of the Bolivian Cholets, the colourful buildings of El Alto commissioned by the new wealthy urban Aymara peoples, which are not recognised as legitimate works of design or architecture by the Bolivian architectural establishment (partly because they are made by a self-taught architect and partly because they represent a new wealthy class, which is no longer at its service).

4.1.2 Decolonising Design. Similarly to how decolonial thinkers have sought to pose a challenge to the universality of knowledge legitimised by the colonial matrix of power, in design practice and research there have been recent initiatives attempting to go a similar way in challenging European design standards. Perhaps one of the most visible and representative examples is that of 'decolonising design', a network of art and design researchers and practitioners who articulated themselves as a response to the modern/colonial mark of the traditional design research field. However they acknowledge that "designers have very little to go on in the way of thinking about design's relation to the problem of modernity" [36] -a statement that does not keep them from intervening in the world (of design)- they go in great lengths to critically position themselves in relation to the European design tradition. But they also make sure to clarify that "decolonizing design is not a "new" nor an additional form of design. but a political project that takes design as such - including its theorization- as both an object and medium of action" [36], which suggests that, instead of proposing a *better* form of design, they use design as a way to problematize our social reality (including design itself).

Their critical stance resonates with a critique that designer Ruben Pater posed to the 'Refugee Challenge', a design competition proposed by 'What design can do' and Dezeen in 2016. In his article, published digitally on Dezeen the 21st of April 2016, Pater questioned the relevance -or even coherence- of designers participating in a crisis that they have taken part in creating [32]. The act of critically positioning oneself -and recognizing the historical role that such position has played in creating the conditions of power present in the world- is one of the central characteristics of decolonial thinking, which decolonising design has rightfully appropriated.

4.1.3 Depatriarchise Design. In a similar vein, the platform 'depatriarchise design' was created in 2017 to critically examine "contemporary design through an intersectional feminist perspective" (<https://depatriarchisedesign.com/about/>). Yet, similar to Haraway's critiques to scientific knowledge, the stance of depatriarchise design stems from feminist standpoints, but aims to a wider critical reflection on different forms of oppression and discrimination in the design *milieu* in particular, and in society -through design- in general:

"Design participates in amplifying the overall experience of oppressed groups (gender-based, sexuality-based, race/ethnicity-based, wealth-based, etc.) and plays an active role in their subordination as users, practitioners, theoreticians, and objects of representation. Structural and symbolic violence work interchangeably within the field in order to perpetuate what we call design patriarchy." (<https://depatriarchisedesign.com/about/>)

In representing a 'universal' and 'scientific' truth, hegemonic design becomes a vehicle for sustaining and reinforcing a patriarchal system. Their call for depatriarchising design is then a call for diversifying (through situating) the voices present in the design world, as well as those who define what is -or can be- considered design.

4.1.4 Autonomous design. Heading back to Latin America, it is imperative to talk about Arturo Escobar, one of the most prominent Latin American decolonial thinkers who has explicitly crossed disciplinary borders to the field of design theory and critique. He has done so, in acknowledging that design is not only part, but a protagonist in the "patriarchal capitalist modern/colonial world system" [12] and, in doing so, recognising it as a battlefield in the quest for other possible worlds (resonating, in turn, with Tlostanova [37]). Escobar proposes a practice of what he dubs 'autonomous design', "a design praxis with communities contributing to their realisation" [12]. As Calderón, Zuljevic and Huybrechts have argued [4], autonomous design has to be seen through a southern lens, wherein autonomy requires to be approached from a communal perspective (that is, not autonomy as individuality, but as based in commonality). Moreover, Escobar insists that designers willing to engage in such practices ought to "deeply understand the political project of the movement, and submit design interventions and co-design processes to the same principles to those to which the movement submits his actions", deeply echoing what Fals Borda defended through PAR and reminiscing the figure of the *hombrehicotea*, whose knowledge of the territory is based on a corporeal rootedness to it, rather than on rational or scientific reflections.

4.2 Ecology of designs

Perhaps it may be suggested to read these diverse manifestations of 'design practice and research otherwise' as contemporary manifestations of the different avant-garde movements of 20th century Europe; however, such reading might be limited by the contestatory logic of such movements and initiatives. As Schultz et al. argue, we should not see these as new forms of design [36]; instead, we suggest these practices should be seen as structural critiques to the knowledge structures that sustain the hegemonic design practices. Precisely, as Abdulla argues (citing Mignolo), the *otherwise* as decolonial category asks for re-defining not only the content of 'the conversation', but also the terms under which it is undertaken [1]. Furthermore, similarly as de Sousa Santos argues for an *ecology of knowledges*, we might follow that these initiatives, practices and stances on design, rather than representing a new field of practice, attempt to expand the spectrum of what can legitimately be considered as design and the different ways of building knowledge about -and through- it. We might argue that these examples of

designs *otherwise* illustrate the beginning of an *ecology of designs*, or, as de Sousa Santos himself puts it: ‘an ecology of practices’ [9].

5 DESIGN INTERVENTIONS OTHERWISE: POSITIONING AS DESIGNERS-RESEARCHERS

These different approaches of knowledge, research and design otherwise have served to inform and inspire the authors of this article to intervene as designer-researchers in diverse contexts. And we have done so, through what Donald Schön calls “reflection-in-action” [35], meaning that instead of having to previously define the theoretical concepts and analytical categories, we have established certain practices through which we have been able to build critical reflections. As we have argued before, this deeply resonates with SE, insofar as the practice or experience precedes (or takes place simultaneously to) the theory. In this section we will present a case we have been working on the last years –specifically focusing on two ‘actions’ we undertook-, in order to explain how different manifestations of knowledge and design otherwise can take shape in practice in a specific location and moment. Our presentation of the case takes place in two parts: first reflecting on how we positioned ourselves and the implications that had and, second, we explain how we have made use of SE as an alternative framework for academic reflection.

5.1 Positioning as a political act

We could address many aspects of De Andere Markt (DAM), the particular case we discuss here, being a long-term PD process that has been developing over the past five years. However, for this particular text, we would like to refer to the experiences that relate to what has been discussed by Fals Borda in relation to PAR in Colombia. Furthermore, we will explain how some of the references of knowledge and research otherwise we have discussed, have helped us in positioning as designer-researchers in a specific case study. The mentioned case partly emerged from the PhD research of one of the authors of this article, which has been exploring the participatory potential of interventions. That being said, we understand *interventions* as the ways designers enter the public realm (usually in a context not their own), and acknowledge the importance of “widening the field of [artistic] intervention by intervening directly in a multiplicity of social spaces in order to oppose the program of total social mobilization of capitalism” [29]. At first sight, intervening in a given context might seem at odds with the principles of PAR yet, as Freire argues, “though we know that things can get worse, we also know that we are able to intervene to improve them” [18]. Intervening becomes, then, an ethico-political imperative, and the question becomes then “*how do you position yourself within such an intervention?*”.

In trying to answer this question, we first have to acknowledge that as designer-researchers we were informed and inspired by PAR. When we intervened in different contexts we have done so not with the lens of a scientist looking at an object of study, but assuming the role of an active participant who, in researching the context, simultaneously transforms it [15]. Such was the case when

we began to work in Genk², where we immersed in the daily life of the city, starting from a concern with the ways in which many actors were dealing with a major work crisis –the recent closure of one the greatest employers in the region- and the effects this might have on its population and the (further) development of the workspaces, services and tools, as well as the larger urban landscape. The main concern was that there was little public debate taking place, regarding how to deal with this crisis of work in the city and how –and with whom- a meaningful and sustainable transformation of the work landscape could take form. We didn’t have any prefigured ideas of what was to be done about this concern, allowing for the design interventions that have emerged from this concern, to have done so from the interactions with the community in context. This approach was influenced by the references of research and knowledge otherwise, insofar as we have avoided defining any prior theoretical concepts that, in turn, have emerged through reflection-in-action.

Governments, organisations and inhabitants were confronted with a lack of clear answers in developing a strategy for the future of work in their city. Therefore, our first action for intervening in the city consisted of mapping the capabilities of the inhabitants, but also of local organisations, companies and policy makers. For doing so, we made use of a DIY-printing press as a way of starting a first conversation with them about work in the city based on their perspectives and strengths (for a more thorough discussion on the role of capabilities in this project, read Huybrechts, Dreessen & Hagenaaars [22]). This intervention addressed the re-localising of production and deskilling of labour that had heavily impacted Genk in the past years. By visualising specific, situated, knowledges and capabilities, we were countering the ruling narrative that a series of ‘experts’ in power (being them researchers or policy makers) have the capability to find a solution on their own [Figure 1]. Instead, we contributed to construct a narrative that suggested that if there were solutions (plural used intentionally) to the crisis, they would emerge from the articulation of the many capabilities of the people and organisations already living and working in –and governing- the city. Such approach is explicitly a political one, as we decide to bring to the fore voices of people who have not been taken into account before and set up the conditions of possibility for them to articulate diverse (design) projects and initiatives. This was built upon our understanding of Rancière’s notion of politics as “rendering visible what had not been, and making heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals” [33]. At the same time, this was implicitly responding to the calls of ‘decolonising design’ and ‘depatriarchise design’, insofar as we tried to articulate the positions of people and organisations who have historically been –consciously or not - marginalized and oppressed by the colonial matrix of power (migrants, unemployed, youngsters, women, etc.) in the city’s design processes and spaces.

The following intervention consisted in setting up a living lab in Winterslag, one of the city’s neighbourhoods, in order to give continuity to the process of mapping and visualising these diverse capabilities in a physical, more permanent, space. Although the living lab methodology has an important history and trajectory in Scandinavian PD, we would like instead to bring to the fore how

²Genk is a city located in the province of Limburg, in the Flemish region of Belgium.



Figure 1: ‘Finding differences’: a sample of one of the portraits made of the citizens of Genk with the poster that visualises her skill.

such approach was also influenced by the different manifestations of design otherwise we have cited. Setting up the living lab required us to immerse in the everyday life of the community, which, in turn, allowed us to better grasp what were their concerns but also their dreams and capabilities to act upon these. Such is a central quality of Escobar’s notion of autonomous design –in turn deeply inspired by Fals Borda’s PAR approach–, by which the only way of understanding and being able to actively intervene in a community, you have to share the spaces of their everyday life [12]; in other words, you have to *sentipensar* with them. But both interventions also contributed to give shape to the ‘otherwise’, as it helped to change the terms of the conversation. By understanding the loss of workplaces as the central concern among most actors, we suggested, instead of speaking about jobs and access to them (as most were doing and was perhaps expected), to openly and critically discuss the nature of work and its changing character in the transition the city was going through.

Even if setting up a living lab implies –and supports– building strong relations over time, we considered it insufficient as a platform for articulating the many voices we encountered during our research process and to give them a prominent place in the future development of the city and its community. For that reason, we developed a tool to visualise the voices and their multiple relations in the city, and which we had identified throughout our different interventions. The tool –which we called ‘the relational network tool’ (RNT)– is a website (<https://deanderemarkt.be>) that maps five different categories of nodes –actors, spaces, tools, events and initiatives– and the relations between them [Figure 2]. The development of the RNT has several goals: on one hand, visualising the actors we worked with –and their capabilities situated and related to specific sites– in the city, as a documentation that was publicly accessible. On the other hand, the RNT has aimed to foster autonomous processes, by means of giving backoffice access to different actors, groups and community leaders we collaborate with, through which they can map their own interventions and the networks of actors that relate to them. From an outward perspective, the RNT has helped



Figure 2: Snapshots of the relational network tool.

to represent Genk to the rest of the world, based on the strength of its relations and its potential for building new work environments and relations in the city, rather than for its problems. The RNT as a tool for representation also encourages and inspires other places to appropriate such pluriversal (urban) design practices. It is also important to note that this network tool is in continuous change, on the level of positioning, structures, content or actors that maintain it, and based on the new interventions that take place. In that sense, the RNT does not represent a modernist “total design” but aspires to be a pluriversal representation of an “ecology of designs”.

Furthermore, we see this as an example of how ‘northern’ PD practices –such as the case we present– can be informed and inspired by other ways of thinking and doing. In this case, the development of the RNT was heavily influenced by Escobar’s notion of ‘radical interdependence’ [12], by which all actors –both living and non-living– are deeply interconnected between them. It would be quite a stretch to label the process we have made as a Latin American PAR process, or from any other approach we have presented. However, we see this as an example of countering hegemonic PD endeavours, which have become widespread since participation has become a key neoliberal strategy for many governments, as we have illustrated in the beginning of this article. Pluriversality became then a counter-hegemonic strategy in our interventions, taking shape in our positioning as designer-researchers when framing our different actions, but also in the ways of documenting and sharing the process and reflections of our research.

This careful disclosing of radical interdependence was sometimes particularly challenging as local inhabitants, policy makers and companies were often sceptical of the time it took to gather different perspectives and bring them together in new pluriversal constellations. Each intervention took several months (or in short projects several weeks) before the insights from this exploration surfaced, both on the level of content, visuals and social networks. This requires conscious and careful positioning of researchers, supported by a sensible systematisation of experiences.

5.2 SE as an alternative framework for academic reflection

Reflecting back on how PAR has served as a central influence on the ways in which we –as design researchers– have entered an unfamiliar public realm in close relation to the inhabitants of the city, we see SE has had an essential role in exploring ways of making critical reflections relevant for academic (and non-academic) contexts. We have written several texts about DAM, which –even if some may be written in academic and scientific language (such as the present

text)- have been constructed based on critically reflecting and problematizing our own experiences. In some cases, by using formats as field-diaries or chronicles, we have been able to valorise our experiences and those of other participants of the project by reflecting on the process and producing valuable ideas for the design practice and research field. Moreover, as Rappaport argues, visual (graphic) and oral narratives are central to PAR practices, which see themselves enriched by the tones and formats of disseminating knowledge that privilege reaching the masses [34]. The challenge to find alternative ways of socialising and disseminating knowledge, becomes particularly relevant in institutionalised academic spaces -such as conferences- where contributions as the present text will have the obligation to give example in its exploration; that is, even being an academic article to be presented in an institutionalised space, its presentation will explore other ways of sharing knowledge, such as visuality and other narrative paths.

It now also seems important to disclose our positions as authors of this text, in relation to the topic and overall argument we have made: one of the authors is a Colombian designer, researcher and educator who co-founded DAM as part of his PhD trajectory on interventionist practices; moreover, he had a 7-year trajectory in Europe, wherein he always asked himself how his position as a Latin American and Colombian influenced the way in which he intervened and operated in diverse European contexts. The other author is a Belgian researcher and practitioner, with extensive experience in participatory design processes who co-founded DAM in order to engage in a long-term project with a city with which she had worked in numerous short-term projects. Such combination of profiles and positions makes manifest our interest in fostering articulations and links between southern approaches to participation in the social sciences and northern manifestations of participatory design, at the same time that presents DAM as a site where such connections could be made.

6 CONCLUSION *OTHERWISE*: A CRITICAL REFLECTION AND AN UNANSWERED QUESTION

In her paper *On decolonizing design*, after laying bare the stakes and stressing the urgency of decolonizing design practice, and suggesting some alternative readings from different epistemologies and ontologies, Tlostlanova [37] argues that participation (in design) is not enough. However, in that conclusion is also made clear that the notion of participation she alludes to is grounded in an exclusively Northern understanding of the term. That being said, it is only fair to acknowledge that participation has been a central topic in the agendas of contemporary design (see Huybrechts, 2014), art (see Bishop, 2012) and architecture (see Miessen, 2010) practices and research in the last decade. Moreover, as we briefly described in the introduction, initiatives of infusing the design process with participatory dynamics as political endeavours were given form to in 1970's Scandinavian countries, later expanding throughout Europe and the global north.

Yet the statements by Tlostlanova and the whole discussion we had on pluriversal designs, challenges us to further unravel and debate the political nature of such participatory endeavours. For instance, it is important to note that PD did not always succeed

to pose a fundamental challenge to the field of design and how it was being practiced. This, due to the fact that the role of design and designers in supporting a given and established social order was not always fully questioned beyond including workers' -and later other disenfranchised groups'- voices in the design process. PD practitioners could have perhaps gone much further in inquiring their interconnections with the world they work in through asking the following questions: How do the products of the work of factory-workers -or other actors PD works with- create situations of inequality, racism or coloniality? How do they affect the natural world and non-human actors? How has PD work served as a token for designers to whitewash the image of their clients and projects by adding a 'social' tone? Such questions bring to the fore the lengths that PD can still explore in challenging itself and design practice in general.

However, in the same text where she declares the insufficiency of participation, Tlostlanova (echoing other discussed authors in this article) also give us some hints of an alternative 'reading', which can in fact give form to these pluriversal approaches to participatory design. She suggests that the decolonial notion of pluriverse -which we have roughly outlined before- can be used as a "positive ontology" for design [37] with which she opens the space for considering other forms of participation, or participation *otherwise*. Citing Ingold (2011), in one of his constructions of the notion of pluriverse, Escobar argues that we cannot marginalise ourselves as sole observers of the world. Instead, we need to understand that we are active participants in the world's construction [13]; says Ingold: "participation is not opposed to observation but is a condition for it, just as light is a condition for seeing things, sound for hearing them, and feeling for touching them" (Ingold, 2011). Participation is to immersion, what observation is to research; our conscious -and critical- intervention and participation in the building of worlds is an example of 'pluriversal politics' [13].

Escobar goes on to argue that "we cannot exit the crises with the categories of the world that created the crises (development, growth, markets, competitiveness, individual, etc.)" [13]. Reflecting on what we discussed before, we can even consider 'participation' as other of such categories that are easily being tokenized by the powers of the one-world ontology. Instead of ruling that we should abandon altogether any pretensions of participation, we believe that we should challenge ourselves as designers-researchers to understand the political nature of participation, and that this comes about by seeing it through a lens of pluriversal politics -aimed at "creating the conditions of possibility for the emergence of the pluriverse, other ways of making worlds" [13]. It is precisely in these pluriversal politics that we believe there is a seed of participation and PD *otherwise* that can be able to take part in engaging with the challenges of our times. Following Abdulla's proposal of seeing the 'otherwise' as a decolonial category for 'changing the terms of the conversation', the call is not -only- to ask what kind of participation should we practice or foster. It also challenges us as PD researchers to assess if -and how- our work is engaging with other ways of world-making, by taking into account unheard voices and contributing to the articulation of those voices (human and not-human) in their own right, in relation to each other and to us as designers.

With the PDC conference being hosted for the first time in Colombia and Latin America, we refer back the question we posed in the

introduction: *what can PD, with its Scandinavian roots and further 'Northern' expressions, learn from the history and experiences in participation in the region?* Even though we have not –and cannot– give an absolute answer to that question, we consider the present text contributes to the debate (1) by presenting an overview on knowledges and designs “otherwise”, through which we gained insights in pluriversal ways of approaching research and design; and (2) by critically reflecting on our learnings of a northern European design project (that is always framed through particular notions, understandings and expectations of PD) via DAM. This process of carefully disclosing and giving form to radical interdependence through a case study on work in the city, that slowly took shape in an ecology of designs, challenged us as researchers to provide people insight and confidence in this process. And for doing so, we found that by explicitly positioning ourselves as designer-researchers and exploring the potential of SE in design practice (including the RNT in such process), we could better support the transformative intentions of the local community.

In more general terms, we hope that the present text might contribute to advance in the (necessary!) process of inspiring PD -in particular- and the field of design -in general- with the political and emancipatory spirit of Colombian PAR and Latin American decolonial approaches. We believe that this spirit benefits the particular ways in which human and non-human actors are involved in our processes and articulates and reasserts our commitment to their transformations.

REFERENCES

- [1] Abdulla, D. (2018). *Design otherwise: towards a locally-centric design education in Jordan* (Doctoral dissertation, Goldsmiths, University of London).
- [2] Akama, Y. (2017). Kokoro of Design: Embracing Heterogeneity in Design Research. *Design and Culture*, 9 (1), 79-85.
- [3] Calderón, P., & Gutiérrez, A. (2017). Letters South of (Nordic) Design. *7th NORDES Proceedings*, Oslo, Norway, June, 15-17.
- [4] Calderón, P., Zuljevic, M., & Huybrechts, L. (2018). Southern manners in northern lands: Design interventions for autonomía. *Strategic Design Research Journal*, 11(2), 103-114.
- [5] Capó, W., Arteaga, B., Capó, M., Capó, S., García, E., Montenegro, E., & Alcalá, P. (2010). *La Sistematización de Experiencias: un método para impulsar procesos emancipadores*. Venezuela. Sistema Nacional de Imprentas, Caracas.
- [6] Clacier, L. (2014). Sistematización de experiencias. Una práctica sentí-pensante para la transformación social.
- [7] Rivera Cusicanqui, S. (2010). Sociología de la imagen. *Miradas chixi desde la historia andina*. Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón.
- [8] de Sousa Santos, B. (2011). Epistemologías del sur. *Utopía y praxis latinoamericana*, 16(54), 17-39.
- [9] de Sousa Santos, B. (2007). Another knowledge is possible: Beyond northern epistemologies.
- [10] Dutch King Willem-Alexander declares the end of the welfare state. (2013, September 17). *Independent*. Retrieved from: <https://www.independent.co.uk>
- [11] Ehn, P. (1988). *Work-oriented design of computer artifacts*. Stockholm, Arbetslivscentrum, 496 p.
- [12] Escobar, A. (2017a). *Autonomía y diseño: la realización de lo comunal*. Buenos Aires, Tinta Limón, 395 p.
- [13] Escobar, A. (2018). Otro posible es posible: Caminando hacia las transiciones desde Abya Yala/Afro/Latino-América. Bogotá: Ediciones Desde Abajo.
- [14] Escobar, A. (2017b). Response: Design for/by [and from] the 'global South'. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 15(1), 39-49.
- [15] Fals Borda, O. (1979a). Investigating reality in order to transform it: The Colombian experience. *Dialectical Anthropology*, 4(1), 33-55.
- [16] Fals Borda, O. (1979b). *Historia doble de la Costa* (Vol. 3). Universidad Nacional de Colombia. Banco de la República. El Ancora.
- [17] Feyerabend, P. (1993). *Against method*. Verso.
- [18] Freire, P. (2000). Pedagogy of freedom: Ethics, democracy, and civic courage. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- [19] Gutiérrez Borrero, A. (2015). Resurgimientos: sures como diseños y diseños otros. *Nómadas*, 43, 113-129.
- [20] Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- [21] Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change. Temple University Press.
- [22] Huybrechts, L., Dreessen, K., & Hagenaars, B. (2018). Building Capabilities Through Democratic Dialogues. *Design Issues*, 34 (4), 80-95.
- [23] Huybrechts, L., Dreessen, K., Schepers, S., & Calderón, P. (2016). Democratic dialogues that make cities 'work'. *Strategic Design Research Journal*, 9(2), 100-111.
- [24] Kaethler, M. & Calderón, P. (coming out in summer 2020). Bourgeois. In *Designing in Dark Times: an Arendtian Lexicon*. Edited by Staszowski, E., & Tassinari, V. London: Bloomsbury.
- [25] Kiem, M. N. (2017). *The Coloniality of Design*. Doctoral dissertation, Western Sydney University (Australia).
- [26] McRae, D. (2015). El hombre hikota y la ecología de los paisajes acuáticos. *En Resistencia en el San Jorge*. Tabula Rasa, (23), 79-103.
- [27] Mejía, M. (2007). La sistematización como proceso investigativo o la búsqueda de la episteme de las prácticas. *Revista Internacional Magisterio*, 33, 1-17.
- [28] Moncayo, V. M. (2009). Fals Borda: hombre hikota y sentipensante. *Orlando Fals Borda. Una sociología sentipensante para América Latina*, 9-19.
- [29] Mouffe, C. (2010). Artistic Activism and Agonistic Politics. Baladrán, Z., & Havránek, V. (Eds.). *Atlas of Transformation*. Transit.
- [30] Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*. Psychology Press
- [31] Papastergiadis, N. (2010). What is the South?. *Thesis Eleven*, 100 (1), 141-156.
- [32] Pater, R. (2016) Treating the refugee crisis as a design problem is problematic. *Dezeen*, 21st of April 2016. [Retrieved from: <https://www.dezeen.com/2016/04/21/ruben-pater-opinion-what-design-can-do-refugee-crisis-problematic-design/>].
- [33] Rancière, J. (2009). *Aesthetics and its Discontents*. Polity.
- [34] Rappaport, J. (2018). Visuality and writing as action: Participatory Action Research on the Colombian Caribbean Coast. *Revista Colombiana de Sociología*, 41(1), 133-156.
- [35] Schon, D. A. (1984). The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action (Vol. 5126). Basic books.
- [36] Schultz, T., Abdulla, D., Ansari, A., Canli, E., Keshavarz, M., Kiem, M. & JS Vieira de Oliveira, P. (2018). What is at stake with decolonizing design? A roundtable. *Design and Culture*, 10(1), 81-101.
- [37] Tlostanova, M. (2017). On decolonizing design. *Design Philosophy Papers*, 15 (1), 51-61.
- [38] Willis, A. M. (2006). Ontological designing. *Design philosophy papers*, 4 (2), 69-92.