

Pluriversal Spaces *for* Decolonizing Design: Exploring Decolonial Directions *for* Participatory Design

How to cite this article: Torretta, N. B., Reitsma, L., Hillgren, P.-A., van Ryneveld, T. N., Hansen, A.-M., Castillo Muñoz, Y. (2023). Pluriversal Spaces for Decolonizing Design: Exploring Decolonial Directions for Participatory Design. *Diseña*, (22), Article.8. <https://doi.org/10.7764/disena.22.Article.8>

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DISEÑA | 22

January 2023

ISSN 0718-8447 (print)

2452-4298 (electronic)

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Original Research Article

Reception

March 03 2022

Acceptance

January 06 2023

 Traducción al español aquí

Decolonization is a situated effort as it relates to the relations of privilege, power, politics, and access (3P-A, in Albarrán González's terms) between the people involved in design in relation to wider societies. This complexity creates certain challenges for how we can understand, learn about, and nurture decolonization in design towards pluriversality, since such decolonizing effort is based on the relationship between specific individuals and the collective. In this paper, we present and discuss the 'River project', a participatory space for decolonizing design, created for designers and practitioners to reflect on their own 3P-A as a way to create awareness of their own oppressive potential in design work. These joint reflections challenged ideas of participation and shaped learning processes between the participants, bringing to the foreground the importance of seeing and allowing for a plurality of life and work worlds to be brought together. We build on the learnings from this project to propose the notions of *pluriversal participation*, *pluriversal presence*, and *pluriversal directionality*, which can help nurture decolonizing designs towards pluriversality. We conclude by arguing that, for nurturing pluriversality through Participatory Design, participation, presence, and direction must be equally pluriversal.

Keywords

Decolonization

Pluriverse

Participatory Design

Participation

Presence

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INTRODUCTION: DECOLONIZATION AND PLURIVERSALITY

Eurocentric modernity has imposed, through colonial domination, a colonial power structure in the world (Grosfoguel, 2002; Mignolo, 2007) that brought a view of universalism where the world, and thus design, has a single history, a single way of being performed; a one-world world, as Law (2015) puts it, an argument that is also echoed by other scholars such as Grosfoguel (2002), Leitao (2018) and Vazquez (2017). As a response, the idea of designs for pluriversality, based on the Zapatista's idea of allowing a 'world where many worlds fit' has come to the fore in contemporary design critique as a way to decentralize hegemonic culture and remove colonizing oppression from design (Escobar, 2018; Mareis & Paim, 2021;

Tlostanova, 2017). To allow this, we need to become aware of our *position* in society and the *power, privileges, politics, and access* (3P-A) that comes with it (Albarrán González, 2020). 3P-A are constantly co-constituted in relation to the people we interact with in specific settings. Bringing this to design demands personal and collective reflection and action for managing power relations within a design project (Albarrán González, 2020). By having these two sides in relation—personal and collective—, we believe decolonial design journeys can benefit from being done together. As Leitão argues: “we can only become aware of the features and flaws of our worldview in contrast with other storylines” (2018, p. 8).

In this paper, we depart from the notion that decolonization is a complex effort with various levels of understanding and engagement according to one’s 3P-A. For example, from a British-American context, Tuck and Yang (2012) argue that decolonization is an Indigenous effort for getting land back. While from a Latin-American perspective, Dussel (1977) argues that after political independence, the decolonial effort in the former colonies is to achieve intellectual independence from European/USA domination. Acknowledging this complexity, we take the position that, when fighting for decolonization in design, we gain more by finding ways to connect and cooperate across different relations to decolonization and colonial experiences and 3P-A than by tracing stiff boundaries around who and where one can fight for decolonization. In this paper, we introduce a case, the River, as an example, among many possible, of how design can create decolonial spaces to collaboratively change itself towards pluriversity.

Bringing back Tuck and Yang’s (2012) beforementioned argument about decolonization and Indigeneity, it should be noted that although none of the participants in the River project had indigenous identities, many of them, including the European participants, are involved in design collaborations with indigenous communities. Hence, the River also constituted a space to explore how to respectfully engage with collaborations that may have a harder relation to colonial histories than ours. As such, the River is aligned with the intentions of the Decolonising Design Collective (see decolonisingdesign.com), which aims at challenging mainstream design and universal ideas about design and participation. We build on the learnings from this process, to propose the notions of *pluriversal participation*, *pluriversal presence*, and *pluriversal directionality*, which we believe can help nurture decolonizing designs towards pluriversity.

RIVER PROJECT BACKGROUND: A PARTICIPATORY DESIGN SPACE

Created through the metaphor of the course of a river, the River project was intended to be the water between the riverbanks of personal and work lives, challenging Eurocentric modernity’s assumptions of objective knowledge and neutral professional positions as distinctly separated from our personhood. The project

intended to be a space to connect these riverbanks and explore how to transform our actions towards decolonization in both lives.

The River was a space of reflection among designers and practitioners. Through conversations, seminars, and creative exercises, we explored ways to engage with decolonizing design across our varied experiences and degrees of being colonized and/or being colonizing subjects. The River intended to offer a space to better understand our own 3P-A, and find ways to challenge existing colonial power structures in design. In the River case, we constituted a heterogeneous group located in Sweden, England, and Guatemala, with most of us having mixed heritage and coming from the Global South, all stepping into the same boat to navigate the river of decolonization between work and everyday life. This implied a coming together of diverse relations to colonial power structures, with some of us having experienced both the relative privileges of the hegemonic majority within our own countries, as well as oppressions within them and in the diaspora. Figure 1 shows a map of how diverse the meaning of decolonization was among the participants. This diversity of relations also created turbulences inside the boat, as positions and experiences sometimes shifted and collided. Thus, the River project was a process of navigating decolonization while also trying to balance a boat of multiple changing positions. For example, the diasporic experience itself constitutes a movement that forces us to take other perspectives by changing positions in power structures.

Figure 4: Map of meanings of decolonization for River participants. Credits: Nicholas B. Torretta, 2022.



The River was a two-month-long process with two weekly meetings that, due to the pandemic, ran online through a conference-call software (Zoom) and a digital platform (Basecamp).

Figure 2: Learning Goals of the River. Credits: Lizette Reitsma, 2021. Recomposed.

GOALS OF THE RIVER

- ▷ Develop personal reflective practices on one's position.
- ▷ Create awareness of oppressive structures and when projects, ideas, and behaviors are oppressive.
- ▷ Ability to hold space for conversations to unpack relations and collaboratively choose courses of action in (design) projects.
- ▷ Explore an active approach to decolonization.
- ▷ Develop an understanding of both opportunities and difficulties regarding learning across cultures and worlds.

In total, nine persons participated. The majority of the people in the group were designers, while three were social scientists. Participants were of various ages and ethnic groups and were in different stages of their careers, ranging from professional practitioners to students and academics.

Leaning on the tradition of Participatory Design (PD) (Ehn, 1988; Simonsen & Robertson, 2013) that permeates the institutions we, the organizers (first three authors) are part of, the boat to navigate the River was framed as a PD space. We drew from mutual learning, a core aspect of PD which is often described as the processes where designers and diverse stakeholders respectfully learn about each other's domains through joint explorations and shared practice (Eriksen et al., 2020). Mutual learning can also occur by sharing knowledge across projects and contexts, and when processes of deep self-reflection are incorporated to challenge worldviews and taken-for-granted assumptions (Eriksen et al., 2020, p. 10). This can be seen also in what Dindler and Iversen (2014) frame as relational expertise. This approach explicitly pays attention to the establishment and transformation of personal and professional relationships in collaborative processes. Bringing these up front doesn't mean fully controlling or managing relations. Rather, it allows collaborative constellations to "emerge among heterogeneous participants, with multiple perspectives and agendas and where, rather than a stable center of control, agency is dispersed" (Eriksen et al., 2020, p. 44).

A similar argument is echoed by Light et al. (2013), saying that a project is only truly participatory when participants are involved in shaping the process. This in turn takes us to another important aspect of PD, which is the goal of equalizing power relations (Eriksen et al., 2020). By creating the River as a space for mutual learning and mutual transformation, we tried to equalize power relations in two ways: first, to level power between participants and organizers, by

being 'participating organizers' who would also be involved in the activities. And secondly, by framing the River as a space that could be steered by everyone, thus leaving the second half of the River purposefully unplanned.

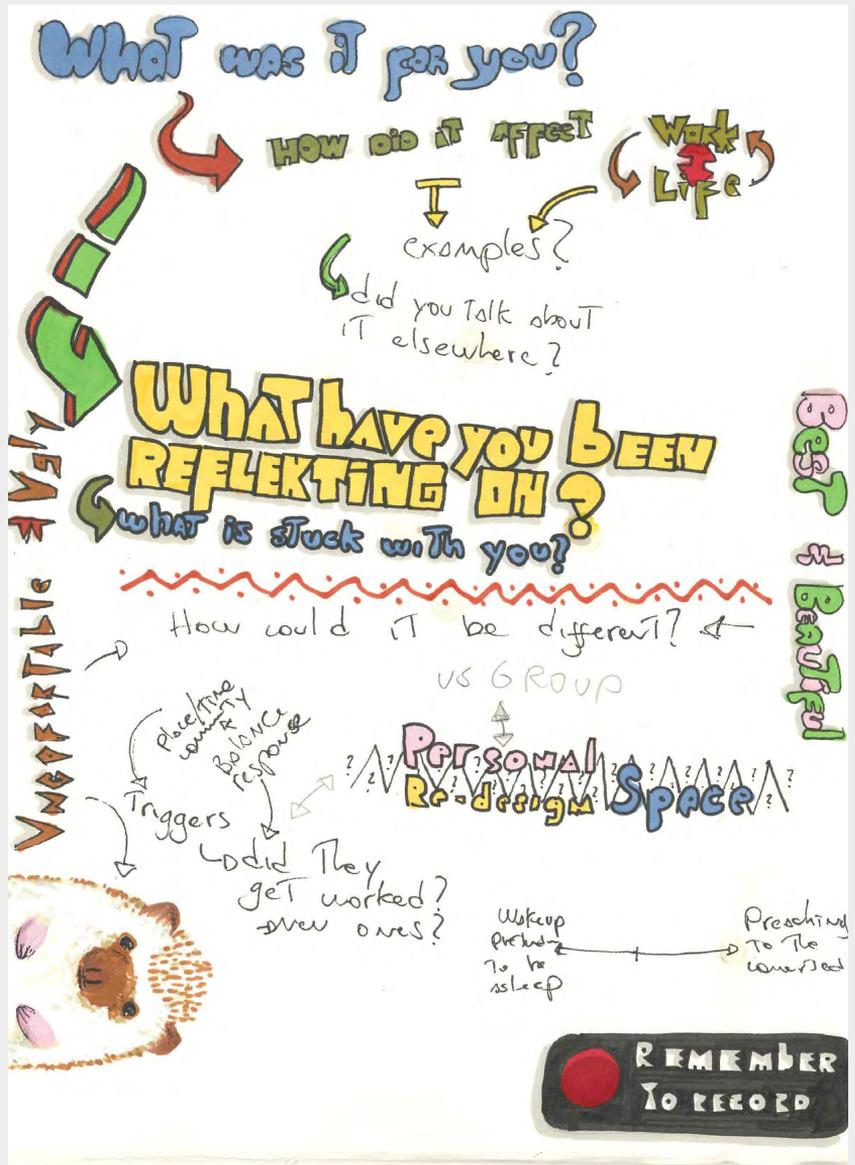
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The capture and analysis of empirical material were made through autoethnography (Ellis et al., 2011), interviews (Broom et al., 2009), and collaborative analysis. As co-organizers, we held constant reflections in the form of autoethnographic diaries (Figure 3) based on our experience through the River, and from watching recorded sessions after completing the process. Additionally, we held semi-structured individual interviews with all participants after the project. These followed a general map (Figure 4) that was co-constructed as the interviews progressed. In these interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the overall process and specific moments of discomfort, and asked about which aspects they had carried with them after the River. These materials were analyzed by the co-organizers. Through this, we found overarching topics relevant to the design community, which became a draft text that was shared with all participants, who were invited to join the writing process, resulting in this article.

Figure 3: Example of Autoethnographic Diary. Credits: Nicholas B. Torretta, 2021.



Figure 4: Map Used for Interviews. Credits: Nicholas B. Torretta, 2021.



RIVER PROJECT IN PRACTICE

The process consisted of two meetings per week: one two-hour session on a specific topic held by an organizer, a guest, or a participant; and one informal coffee break session. Each two-hour session asked for preparation by reflecting on specific questions and by choosing an object that represented an answer or reflection on the questions. The first four sessions were planned by the organizers. The remaining four were left open to be shaped by the participants. At the end of each week, we asked everyone to share a reflection in whichever format they preferred.



Figure 5: Overview of River structure, topics, and questions. Credits: Lizette Reitsma, 2022.

Each week

The first week focused on getting to know each other. To frame the process, we introduced Capoeira, an afro-Brazilian decolonial martial art (see Cunha, 2011; Rêgo, 1968) as a proposal on how to approach turn-taking in dialogues. From Capoeira, we highlighted the idea of conversations as dynamics of short questions and answers for mutual improvement, with care for each other's level of experience. We also brought in the Capoeira aspect of paying attention to and respecting the rhythm and flow of conversations. Following this inspiration, we took turns presenting ourselves and then moved into a joint reflection about this first experience.

The second week focused on reflecting on the 3P-A of ourselves and our projects. The third week focused on colonization from Indigenous perspectives, where we had two guests presenting and discussing the oppression and colonization of Indigenous Sámi people in Scandinavia. Week four was centered on listening and, instead of questions, the assignment asked everyone to record a soundscape of everyday life that involved or represented listening. In week five the topic was the possibilities of learning across cultures and their potential risks, such as cultural appropriation. The sixth became an open session where we looked back at the process of the River so far. The seventh session, organized by a participant, asked us to explore our surroundings in unusual ways. The eighth and last session was a wrap-up exercise to reflect on the whole process by creating self-por-

traits. Following a compendium of all the questions from the River (Figure 6), these self-portraits were supposed to represent how we were working through (or not working through) the questions that appeared during the course of the River (Figure 7). We closed the session with a round of presentations of ourselves and our journeys using our self-portraits.

Figure 6: Questions used for self-portrait exercise. Credits: Lizette Reitsma & Nicholas B. Torretta, 2024.

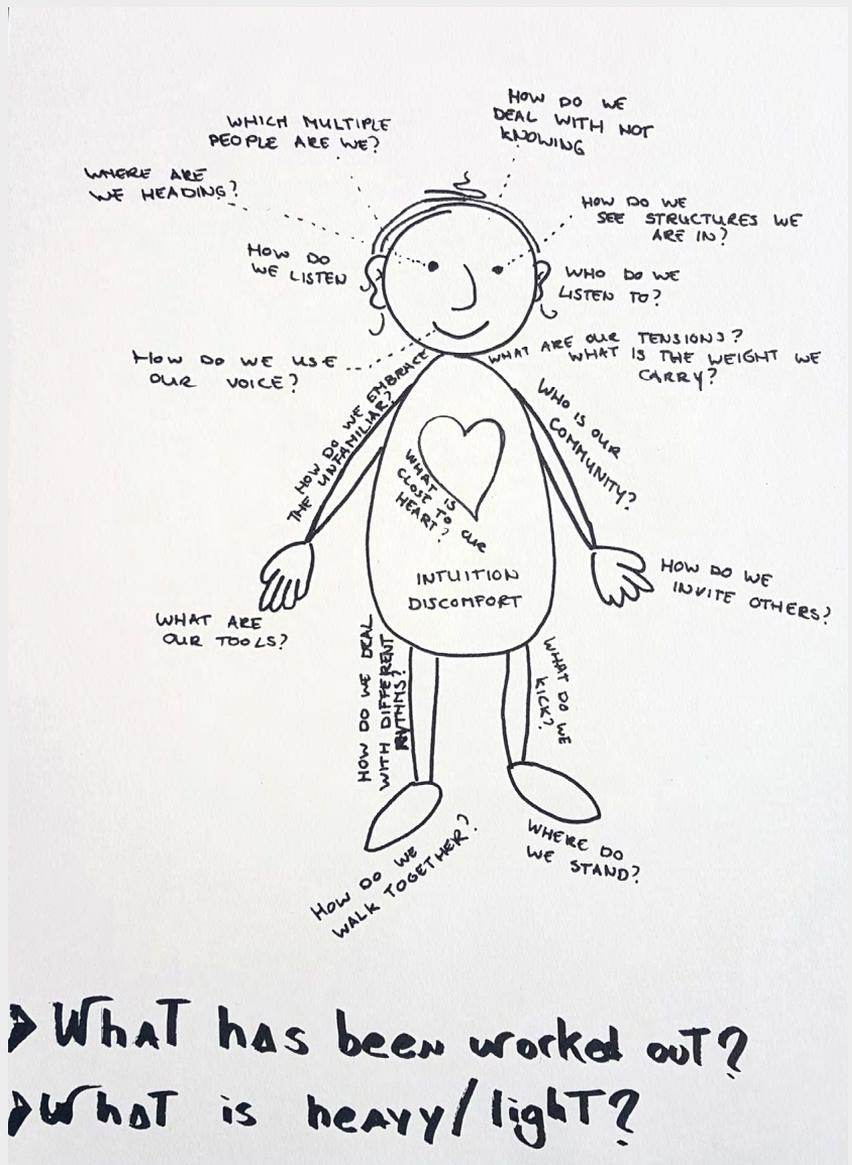




Figure 7: Examples of self-portraits from the final exercise.
Credits: Lizette Reitsma & Nicholas B. Torretta, 2021.

FINDINGS

Here we summarize the findings reached through collaborative analysis, by dividing them into three interconnected, mutually dependent concepts: *pluriversal participation*, *pluriversal presence*, and *pluriversal directionality*. In presenting the results, we bring in quotes with the consent of the participants, to illustrate how they perceived these aspects.

The River was a collective of very different people, maybe not that different, but where everyone was ready to meet some unsettling situations. But because we agreed to, it was possible (Participant).

Pluriversal Participation

Coming from the PD perspective, we started with a push towards equal participation, where each person should contribute similarly and have their voices leveled. While we demanded every person to post weekly reflections and prepare for each session, we saw a need to move away from such a strict protocol. The issues we were dealing with not only needed more time for reflection and digestion, but also demanded different time spans for different people to properly address them. Respecting this, and with the intention to co-shape the River, we gave up this demand and allowed reflections to come at the pace and format that suited each participant.

It didn't have the same hierarchies and rules as an academic environment, but you learned anyway, in your own rhythm, to understand your own process (Adriana).

This diversity in rhythms of reflection was also seen in the forms of participation that, sometimes, resembled vivid small streams, while also often deep calm waters. At first, we pushed toward not having silent gaps in conversations, a demand that was quickly countered by some participants stating that they needed time to think, and that silence should also be welcomed. After this, we adapted the process to allow people to engage as they wanted, to speak or remain silent and just listen as they saw fit.

Were more listening and reflections sessions for me (Evelina).

It is ok to be silent, it is ok to be uncomfortable. Good to be legitimate in participating in different ways (Kimberly).

Discussing about our personal power and position triggered several participants to reflect on how much space one should take in different situations, and the balance between contributing to the collective versus overshadowing others' presence.

Who am I to ask these questions? Who am I to provide a solution? I am supposed to be the gatekeeper on this platform. Who am I to be that? (Participant).

This brought an awareness of the lengths of turns we were taking. Each of us had to be aware of our own rhythms and the flow of the River and responsible for our own journeys when engaging with each other; and thus respect that each one has different ways of engaging. As a consequence, the dynamics were heterogeneous, with more active participants speaking and posing questions, while those more comfortable with being silent observed and listened. We had a constant reflection on the process and the dynamics within the River, so these different ways of engaging were always in discussion. This overall shift from an imposed form of universal participation towards allowing people to participate according to their own life-worlds, stances, needs, and personal journeys, marked what we see as an opening toward *pluriversal participation*. That is, to create PD spaces where people are allowed to participate in the ways they feel comfortable, while acknowledging that comfort and participation change over time, therefore the space has to shift accordingly.

We had something in common, that is why we came together. We are individuals on our own, but hearing all these different perspectives in life gave us something to react and put ourselves out there, and to learn: that is what made it special (Mina).

Pluriversal Presence

Considering their own power, privilege, politics, and access (3P-A), the participants reflected on the multiple worlds they found themselves in, often based on different ontologies. These different worlds came from the roles, contexts, places, and displacements each participant went through, due to migration or professional demands, for example. The complexity of the relational and situated character of the 3P-A became evident where especially participants from the Global South both reported having privileges (e.g., in relation to relatives in their home countries) and lack of access compared to colleagues in their work in the Global North. Both situations created profound discomfort. These complexities also brought with them tensions: on the one hand, they felt privileged to have a well-paid job; but, at the same time, they realized that this work maintained the status quo of power relations.

Maybe I am not being enough of a rebel in my work, I feel. I am going too much with the status quo. And I feel I live this double life (Participant).

I have to negotiate that feeling of having double standards (Participant).

Living within and coping with these different worlds also revealed that everyone carried complex identities, which increased the heterogeneity of the group. This provided a fertile ground to learn from each other's experiences. As participants stated, if a group is homogenous, or claims homogeneity, there is a bigger pressure to follow a standard expected behavior.

I realize I cannot see it from that point of view, as I never had that life experience. I can only try to understand (Participant).

We were decolonizing in relation (about the individual vs the collective, we needed the others in order to do self-reflection) (Kimberly).

From the first session, we invited the heterogeneity of our identities and the diversities of our personal and professional worlds to emerge and participate in the process. We welcomed our pasts, presents, future aspirations, doubts, fears, and insecurities, acknowledging each one's multiple roles as mothers, fathers, friends, teachers, lovers, students, daughters, sons, and so on. This allowed us to introduce ourselves differently than in usual professional settings, and a feeling of 'wholeness' was reported, where we could engage through complex intersections of roles and identities, or, as a participant said, we could be personal and "learn from the heart."

River was a space to join the personal, professional, and political (Yénika).

Even though it is good to keep a separation between work and life to stay healthy, it is good to bring them together to be more a whole (Participant).

By sharing our personal aspects as an entrance point to engage with the decolonization of our professional practice, we saw that these different worlds are always influencing each other. Bringing these together, the participants stated that we were “decolonizing in practice”, incorporating the effort into our everyday life worlds. Even though our professions might be similar, our perspectives and approaches may differ due to our 3P-A. This heterogeneous perspective in the group was mentioned by the majority of participants as being the central aspect that allowed us to connect and feel comfortable to engage. We see this as an opening towards what we could call *pluriversal presence*: to bring our complexity and always changing life-worlds into PD, allowing these to guide our ways of *being in* PD processes.

We were personal in a very professional way. It is good that we talked about personal things because they underpin who we are as professionals (Participant).

Pluriversal Directionality

Building on the two previous concepts, *pluriversal directionality* means using them to allow the reshaping and change of directions of design processes over time. This flexibility means adapting design in conversation with those involved, and to the specific circumstances of designing. In the River, by adapting the process with the group, we saw that, as designers and design researchers, we can benefit from keeping spaces for reflection and conversation with the other people involved in designing, to know when and how to change roles and design approaches. To allow for *pluriversal directionality* thus entails allowing a design process to move into unpredicted directions, based on the circumstances of designing and how it unfolds. We saw that dealing with power relations and colonizing tendencies could mean that a designer would need to shift from a coordination or facilitation role to that of an ally, letting others lead the design process. At other times, this could mean encouraging asymmetrical power relations that put privileged groups in less privileged positions than usual. This change might even demand that design processes be stopped and rethought.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Escobar (2018) emphasizes the importance of nourishing and creating a sensitivity to difference, whether cultural, epistemological, or ontological, and argues that the pluriversal concept brings this to the foreground powerfully. The River tried

to embrace plurality, and participants found it both challenging and rewarding to live in multiple worlds, especially since the taken-for-granted ontology within their work or professional roles (Eurocentric modernity) collided with their personal worlds. However, being able to bring this complexity forward was also seen as a resource and a way to learn to live in a pluriverse.

Here we can also learn from scholars such as Donna Haraway, who long ago brought forward these complexities of our identities and how we constantly, through our multiplicity, co-become and co-constitute each other in relation (2006, 2013). This also makes sense when thinking about relations of power, politics, access, and privilege (3P-A) (Albarrán González, 2020). These 3P-A have a bearing not only on our 'professional' roles, but within the full complexity of our multiple identities, and they exist in relation to the others we engage with. Pluriversal presence and participation became crucial in the River, where we tried to acknowledge each person as simultaneously specific, multiple, and complex, with their own relational changes according to the worlds they inhabit and the people they engage with. Although the participants' specific professions were somewhat diverse, the heterogeneity increased considerably when everyone brought in other aspects of their personhood such as their cultural background, experiences of oppression and colonization, and their 3P-A.

My participation in the River transformed me. It was a quite unique experience because it was a collective process where I happened to actually feel safe amongst colleagues—in spite of the hierarchies of careers, our differences in terms of cultural backgrounds, and our different points of view that were posed as questions instead of arguments. (...) A mixed group made it feel more comfortable. People were at different levels in their career and leveling that out made it safe (Participant).

The River was a collective process for learning and reflecting about 3P-A among a group of designers and practitioners, by fostering dialogues between various life and work worlds. As such, it not only helped us explore our own decolonial possibilities but also, as the River was in itself a PD project, it provided some insights for seeing decolonial possibilities in PD. With pluriversal presence and intending to keep the process adaptable to the group through what we saw as pluriversal directionality, we ended up with pluriversal forms of participation.

In taking the learning from the process back to a broader PD public, we wish to highlight the following considerations—as an example, not as a recipe—for decolonizing PD towards nurturing pluriversality: that the claim in PD for equal participation and equalizing power relations may need to be rethought and cannot be standardized nor universalized. Instead, we could think of pluriversal forms of participation and of pluriversal forms of being present. Equally, it

became important to allow plural ways of participating and relating to the process, with each person contributing with a different understanding of the worlds we live and work in. These pluriversal approaches conflict with the universalizing norms within Eurocentric modernity.

Also, in addition, we have to acknowledge that we are all on different journeys and thus we are all in constant change, which would entail a need for PD processes to be adapted accordingly. From the River experience, adapting a PD process with the intention of pluriversality does not mean doing one check and one adaptation, but rather keeping the process flexible and changing through constant reflection on its pace, rhythm, dynamics, and relations between the people involved. Seen through the metaphor of the river, it would mean being sensitized towards the flows and currents of water meandering through a complex biodiverse terrain with both troubled- and calm-waters. Hence, pluriversal forms of participation are only possible if the dynamics of the process are in constant check between all participants, allowing also a pluriversal directionality.

To embrace these levels of pluriversality—presence, participation, and directionality—we need to move beyond a locus of control, a center that sets the rules. Thinking of this in terms of relational expertise in Participatory Design, Dindler and Iversen (2014) build on Yrjö Engeström (2007) to suggest quite radical distributed models for understanding the emergence of collaborative constellations. We believe in this and tried to provide opportunities for the River to find its flow and route. However, as Dindler and Iversen argue, we cannot escape the fact that, in setting up a PD space, the organizers have a distinct agency (2014, p. 48). We planned the initial route through the River and invited the other participants into the journey. We steered the boat although everyone was invited to suggest which beaches we should stop at, or how to navigate when the River unfolded into a delta.

To conclude, having in mind our initial goal of exploring decolonization for pluriversality, through the River we realized that decolonizing towards pluriversality demands participation, presence, and directionality to be equally pluriversal. While the discourses on pluriverses usually entail a view of the relationship between societies and governance from a wider level, here we tried to bring it down to the (inter)personal level. However, it might also be that pluriversal presence, participation, and directionality are still at the beginning of a long journey; something that we so far only can aim at and constantly push for. In describing the River project and what we learned from it, we wish to inspire journeys of decolonizing design through PD in the intersections of work and life in other contexts, and among other constellations of people. **D**

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank all the people involved in creating, running, and participating in the River project: Adriana Palencia, Anne-Marie Hansen, Ellacarin Blind, Evelina Danielsson Valladares, Fanny Lundkvist, Juliana Restrepo Giraldo, Kimberly Spirito, Kristina Sehlin MacNeil, Lizette Reitsma, Mina Rostami, Naomi Terry, Nicholas B. Torretta, Per-Anders Hillgren, Tara Nair van Ryneveld, and Yénika Castillo Muñoz.

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