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Undoing Coloniality?

Polycentric Governing and Refugee Spaces

Tamirace Fakhoury and Rosalba Icaza

In ‘Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza’, Gloria Anzaldúa writes that ‘the act of writing is itself a sensuous act, an act that heals trauma and an act that is embodied through which we re-write ourselves into our bodies and the world’ (1987/2007, 88–89). Anzaldúa’s understanding of writing is our first step in the task of undoing the coloniality of polycentric governance.

This intervention is situated in the enquiry and praxis of decolonial thinking that gravitates around the notion of modernity as coloniality or modernity/coloniality/decoloniality. The first slash indicates that there are no modern epistemologies, institutions, norms, and subjectivities without coloniality, and that coloniality is not merely derivative but co-constitutive of modernity (Mignolo 2002). The second slash indicates there is something beyond modernity ‘because there are ways of relating to the world, ways of feeling, acting and thinking, ways of living and inhabiting the world that come from other geo-genealogies, non-Western and non-modern’ (Vázquez 2014, 173). Here, non-modern denotes that these are not pre-modern, but rather reduced as such by ‘the modern apparatus’ and in this way ‘are logically constituted to be at odds with a dichotomous, hierarchical, “categorical” logic’ of Western modern thinking and critique (Lugones 2010, 1).

While the various contributors to this volume offer comprehensive analyses of what polycentric governance can and cannot interpret and analyse, we foreground what this notion erases and silences. In other words, we account for its coloniality. Nonetheless, this is not an easy task. How can one account for what is no more (Vázquez 2020)?

Our entry point is to unsettle modern epistemologies that inform the ‘we’ in the opening question of this volume: *how are we being governed today?* (Gadinger and Scholte, Chapter 1). We are conscious that in the discipline of international relations, there have been recent attempts to unsettle or decentre dominant forms of knowledge and knowing about (dis)order

(Tickner and Smith 2020). These efforts are welcome, but insufficient if the inclusivity of more voices and perspectives from beyond the Anglo/North-European sphere leave intact the terms of the conversation to where non dominant perspectives are invited to.

Our take on that ‘we’ is more than opening the door while holding on to the lock. It is not about seeking to decentre or unsettle an ongoing conversation on polycentric governance. Our take is a different one, informed by decolonial calls for onto-epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2011; Motta 2018). From our point of view, the ‘we’ that is mobilized reinforces imperial difference and actively produces as non-existent and unintelligible those who dwell on its borders, the less than human and the more than human, and those positioned in between across the colonial difference (Mignolo 2002; Lugones 2020). This is presented as a central technique of power characteristic of universalisms by decolonial feminist Rosalba Icaza.

Dwelling on the borders of an unproblematic assumed ‘we’ aims to bring us closer as contributors in this intervention. It is also a pathway towards the second part of this response. In this section, Tamirace Fakhoury introduces her work on refugee spaces, establishing an empirical base by drawing on illustrative cases from her scholarship on the politics of displacement in Lebanon. The section offers concrete ways through which (mis)representations of refugee spaces as sites of vulnerability are unsettled by reflecting on how power and norms are questioned by refugees’ voices and bottom-up activities.

As a final step, we reflect on refugee spaces, asking what lies beyond the interpretive analytic of polycentric governance. In other words, we question the apparently unproblematically critical contribution of this notion by marking its limits from the vantage point of its coloniality.

From this perspective, what is presented as a highly relevant focus on (structural, normative, institutional, networked entanglements of) power, legitimacy, and techniques of (self) governing to understand planetary complexity and draw policy lessons that contribute to global social justice is not only that. The key lesson we draw from this is that the planetary complexity of contemporary governing cannot be solely analysed and interpreted through a focus on polycentric governance.

There is a teaching from one of our grandmothers that one of us feels is relevant here: *so much does the clay jug go into the water that it ends up breaking*. In other words, so much does one concentrate on understanding and learning how to transform what (dis)orders and regulates life that one ends up being, thinking, sensing, embodying, and articulating that order and that regulation. This is the limit of polycentric governance, and, in general, of conceptual proposals rooted in Western modern genealogies. The

result is that the coloniality that such concepts carry with them renders as non-existent the plurality of ways of living life and inhabiting Earth that are not about governing. This is the violence of the coloniality of polycentric governance.

Coloniality and Colonial Difference

Early writings on coloniality defined it as a structure of management that emerged at the onset of the early modern world in the sixteenth century with the conquest of the Americas and the control of the Atlantic commercial circuit. This structure worked through control of the economy, authority (government and politics), knowledge and subjectivities, gender, and sexuality (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2002).

For some, the definition of coloniality as a historical structure of management would seem as a synonym or close to what the editors in this volume classified as structural approaches or historically situated perspectives to polycentric governance (Overbeek (Chapter 13); Schneider (Chapter 2), in this volume). However, this is far off the mark. This is especially significant when one considers that coloniality unmutes a distinctive positionality across the colonial difference, as we explain next.

As an analytic, coloniality contributed to delineate a non-Eurocentric critique to capitalism and theory of domination that considered a world system analysis of historical capitalism important and necessary. However, these were also insufficient once the experience of earlier Spanish and Portuguese colonialisms were considered precisely in relation to the notion of colonial difference (Mignolo 2002).¹

Colonial difference has been described as ‘the changing faces of colonial differences throughout the history of the modern/colonial world-system’ (Mignolo 2002, 61) and brings to the foreground the planetary dimension of human history silenced by discourses centring on modernity, postmodernity, and Western civilization (Mignolo 2002).

Colonial difference has been conceptualized in relation to imperial difference. Colonial and imperial difference should not be understood as a fixed binary, but as terms that name a binary but that are not thought of as such but as historically situated movements that co-constitute positionalities. To consider where our frameworks of understanding stand across the colonial and imperial difference grounds the possibility of a critical awareness of our locus of enunciation, from where one speaks, thinks, does, and imagines.

Polycentric Governance as a Concept

Our engagement with polycentric governance starts by acknowledging that the ‘critical commentaries in the book draw attention to ahistorical and Euro-centric tendencies in much existing research on polycentric governing’ (Gadinger and Scholte, Chapter 1, this volume). Nonetheless, our intervention redirects this critical observation to the very concept of polycentric governance.

Inspired by Maria Lugones’ (2003, 2020) theory of resistance and the decolonial method developed in her engagement with the universality of the concept of ‘gender’, our commentary on polycentric governance emerges from the vantage point of its coloniality to name what this notion erases (Lugones 2003, 2020).

Coloniality of power, originally coined by Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano (2000) introduced a non-Eurocentric understanding of domination. Quijano’s perspective de-silences the role that ‘the basic and universal social classification of the population in terms of the idea of “race” [as] introduced for the first time’ with the conquest of the Americas (Lugones 2010a, 371) plays in the constitution of so-called Western civilization and the so-called modern world.

Once coloniality of power is named, for us it becomes possible to engage with polycentric governance by foregrounding the historical experience of being dehumanized. In other words, coloniality of power allows us to make room and legitimize our interest in what modern/colonial frameworks of academic and expert knowledge actively produces as inexistent, unintelligible, backward, and traditional.

In this volume, we learn that polycentric governance in its different iterations, informed by a variety of theoretical perspectives, is mobilized to interpret and analyse multi-scalar planetary operations of power, legitimacy, and techniques of control and domination. More recently and according to new-materialist perspectives on polycentric governance, the focus lies on complex entanglements to human and more-than-human forms of resistance, resilience, and adaptation (see various authors in this volume).

Nonetheless, polycentric governance as a concept and an analytic in its liberal, structural, post-structural, and critical variants belongs to what Vázquez (2011) conceptualizes as the epistemic territory of modernity. Modern disciplines, epistemologies, and methodologies, including critical and post-positivist ones, belong to this specifically provincial geo-genealogy (Dussel 1993; Mignolo 2002; Motta 2018). As these are re-signified, renegotiated, creolized, and hybridized by the inclusion of the ‘othered’ and their worlds

of meaning, they become useful in the diagnosis, representation, and classification of modernity's own maladies, genocidal violence, disciplinary and productive power, unfinished projects, liquidity, and so on. Deconstruction, self-reflexivity, hybridization, provincialization, and pluralization have been prescribed as a way forward. However, from a decolonial perspective these are critiques from within the epistemic territory of modernity.²

Coloniality does not belong to this modern epistemic territory and is not a critique in that sense, but something else (Motta 2016; Lugones 2020; Vázquez 2020). Coloniality does not name an absence of hierarchies of validity among different forms of knowledge either. It names what modern ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies silence and produce as non-existent. In other words, coloniality names what is non-intelligible under the analysis and interpretation of governmentality, or the structural, institutional, normative, operations of power, legitimacy, and techniques of hierarchical, circular, fluid, bottom-up, or entangled forms of power that govern 'us' today.

For example, critical discourse analysis has well equipped scholars to interpret and analyse the modern operation of textual representations and classifications of power and governing. In so doing, this critical approach diagnoses how modern discourses produce realities such as polycentric institutions, norms, and structures of governance (see Beckman, Chapter 14, this volume). However, this approach cannot account for what is erased by its own diagnosis. That erasure is the coloniality of discourse and co-constitutive of its critical diagnosis and subsequent prescriptions (Icaza and Vazquez, forthcoming).

The historical movement of erasure, coloniality, as co-constitutive of modern ontologies, epistemologies, methodologies, has been denied under assumptions of totality via macro-narratives of civilization, humanity, development, and democracy (Mignolo 2002, 2011). This results in a double denial: the contribution of the 'othered' to the co-constitution of modernity and of their worlds of meaning, living, and sensing.

In the early 1990s, Enrique Dussel argued that modernity, in particular modern rationality, was founded on two principles: the domination of others outside the European core, and the denial of the violence of that domination. For Dussel, this violence and the denial of such violence was an epistemic operation (a way of knowing and being) with deep socio-political, economic, ecological, and aesthetic implications that to this day organize many of our interactions in the production of academic knowledge.

Nonetheless, the historical movements of modernity/coloniality are not the totality of the reality, as explained at the outset of this response. The third movement, decoloniality, articulates a liberation from the denial of

being denied. And in this sense, the task of decoloniality is not to interpret or analyse polycentric governance enacted by the ‘othered’ ‘outside there’, but to de-silence, de-mythologize, and decolonize (Rutazibwa 2018) worlds of meaning, being, and sense that lie underneath disembodied modern rationality and dwell on its borders (Motta 2018; Lugones 2020).

Self/Other: Constituting a ‘We’

In the epistemic territory of modernity, a self who is not seen, but nonetheless can see, study, classify, and appropriate worlds of meaning, inhabits, constitutes, and is constituted by reality, or in this case, polycentric governance. This positionality is what Castro-Gomez defines as the ‘hubris of the zero point’ (Castro-Gomez 2005). This self’s interpretations produce the ‘world out there’ which means that there is no object of analysis (polycentric governance) a priori or independent to the interpretative struggles in which he is committed/involved. To display the colonial and monocultural foundations of polycentric governance as a concept, though it is important to expose this outsider’s positionality, his disembodied modern rationality, and the construction of realities outside himself, it is not enough. We need to de-silence colonial difference in the understanding of that self. This is what we do next.

It has been argued that the historical movement towards classification and representation of the ‘real out there’ was a necessary condition for the construction of non-European white males as ‘the other’ and of Earth as ‘nature’ as pre-requisites for the appropriation of lands, bodies, and territories at the onset of the modern world (Dussel 1993; Lugones 2007; Maldonado Torres 2007).

This drive to represent, classify, and appropriate as particular of Western modern ‘civilization’ is what underpins a Cartesian subjectivity (I think, hence I am) and was established alongside domination around race and global markets (Maldonado Torres 2007). This Cartesian subjectivity or modern ego was nonetheless ‘born in its self-constitution over against regions it dominated’ (Dussel 1995, 35). In short, the modern subjectivity is marked by his will to power. For decolonial feminists, this individual self is characteristically modern in his incapacity to acknowledge the feminized racialized ‘othered’ as plural selves (Lugones 2007).

In her engagement with the coloniality of power, Maria Lugones coined the term coloniality of gender to analyse racialized capitalist gender oppression (2007, 77), while researching why people were so indifferent to violence against black women and women of colour. She examined the ways in

which colonization and the dehumanization of indigenous and black bodies were part of the explanation of this contemporary phenomenon and further extends a non-Eurocentric understanding of domination.

In so doing, Lugones not only identifies the problematic heterosexual readings of coloniality by Quijano but introduces the notion of coloniality of gender to explain how racialized people were reduced to bodies for labour and subsumed under a gender structure that guards the access to socialization and to ‘humanity’. Coloniality of gender helped Lugones to theorize class and race, but also gender as social categories imposed in the colonial encounter through different technologies of dehumanization and genocide, such as the systematic rape of colonized woman. From a feminist decolonial perspective, these categories act as universalism and as such erase and silence the feminized racialized *othered* (Motta 2018).

It is precisely that sense of loss and disregard that grants the possibility of observing the universalism of the modern/colonial notions we deploy in the interpretation and analysis of reality (Lugones 2020), of seeing ourselves as products of those universalisms (Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi 2018, 16) but also as active resisters to them (Lugones 2003). So, who are ‘we’?

How Are ‘We’ Governed?

One of the opening questions formulated by the editors of this volume is ‘how are *we* governed?’ We have already questioned the unproblematic characterization of polycentricity as an angle, an abstract disembodied vantage point, or gaze from where a self observes, classifies, and grapples with the phenomena of *how we are governed today* (Gadinger and Scholte, Chapter 1, this volume). We would now like to pose the following questions: what is there to be governed and by whom? And in so doing, what is produced as inexistent by that ‘we’?

Recent decolonial analyses on social resistance to global and regional governance (Icaza and Vázquez 2013; Icaza 2018) have undertaken the task of unveiling their universalisms expressed as monocultural and Euro-centred gestures. One of these gestures has been the promotion in academia and policy circles of the notion of governance as a way out of methodological nationalism within the disciplines responsible for examining the global and the regional and their numerous interplays.

Nonetheless, this movement to overcome methodological nationalism leaves governing, power, and hierarchy intact in terms of the academic and expert conversation of the disciplines driving it (Mignolo 2002; Carastathis

and Tsilimpounidi 2018; Icaza 2018). In other words, polycentric governance, far from breaking away from analyses of governing as a top-down process, emerges from and in relation to an already unequal political economy of academic and expert knowledge production. This is, of course, not new, but by situating the concept in this way, we aim to establish its limits and its incompleteness vis-à-vis the vast range of ways of knowing about governing today.

From this clear demarcation of the limits of polycentric governance, it is possible to articulate the following: despite the critical scholarly interest in interpreting and analysing every day, bottom-up forms of governance and resistance to multi-scalar forms for governance, it is precisely that focus on governing that narrows down the possibilities of accounting for what is not. In other words, to open up space for bottom-up forms, norms, and institutions of governance is not only not necessarily conducive to a greater plural understanding, but also renders as inexistent what is not just governing but that concretely delinks and disobeys from its confines.

Equally relevant for our task of unveiling the coloniality of polycentric governance is to ask: who is the 'we'? This sort of question aims to name the epistemic totalization underneath that 'we' by unveiling its provinciality within the confines of the Anglo/North-Euro-centred geographies of reason that uphold it as a global design (Icaza 2018; Mignolo 2002). This drives our interest in the geopolitics of knowledge, that is to say, an eagerness to problematize the question of who produces knowledge. Like any other concept, polycentric governance is geo-historically and body-politically situated, or in other words, it has been generated in concrete places and ecologies and by concrete bodies (Icaza 2018).

Related to this last point, our questioning of polycentric governance is directed towards the claim that polycentricity can materialize in spaces of vulnerability such as refugee camps. To be more precise, polycentric governance as an angle-gaze from which the case of forced displacement might be studied in the search for bottom-up governing by refugees, their negotiated agency, open possibilities for unsettling of power relations, and for crafting a politics of claims-making foregrounds access, representation, and reform of already given norms and institutions. In other words, it might account for patterns of complexity and plurality that nonetheless leave intact the phenomena of governing.

Polycentric governance as a prism that engenders coloniality produces as inexistent ongoing resistance efforts for the abolition of national sovereignties, borders, and hence refugee (en)campments (Carasthathis 2018) due to their 'non-intelligibility' in the eyes-gaze of that unproblematic 'we'.

The deployment of polycentric governance to analyse governing in refugee spaces as a pathway to counter their over (mis)representation as sites of vulnerabilities engenders coloniality. In other words, to privilege analysis and interpretations of the phenomena of governing does not contribute to dismantling it, which one can praise as an example of freedom to know and research in academia. However, that privileging comes with its underside: it produces as inexistent refugee camps as places of resilience and creativity, and of refugees as enacting their active agency expressed as disobedience to norms and policy legacies (Lugones 2003; Carasthathis 2018; Icaza 2018). This incapacity to acknowledge difference is the coloniality of polycentric governance.

Recent calls for the integration and visibility of spaces and lived experiences of refugees that were previously ignored or produced as inexistent have proliferated in polycentric governing research. These calls are driven by assumptions of the analytical purchase that refugees' voices, representations, and narratives might carry key challenges to frameworks and conceptualizations. But as we have previously indicated, the focus on governing not only fails to dismantle governing but produces as inexistent disobedience, creativity, and what cannot be assimilated by the analysis and interpretations of governing. And what cannot be assimilated becomes unspeakable (Motta 2018; Lugones 2020).

From a decolonial perspective concerned with epistemic justice, calls for the inclusion of previously excluded voices are welcome but insufficient, as these become assimilated into pre-established inter/intra disciplinary conversations and frameworks of understanding. And as we engage with a decolonial perspective, our interest is to highlight the (im)possibilities of epistemic justice in calls for the integration of refugee voices into the broader literature on polycentric governance.

Border Thinking

This volume presents an array of relevant interventions that situate polycentric governance in (North-Euro/Anglo-centred) history, identify layers of complexity in its formulation, raise the importance of this notion's development with multiple stakeholders' views, and take into consideration plural scales of power. All of these are important but insufficient interventions if our aim is to de-silence what polycentric governance renders mute. And what precisely is it that polycentric governance universalism mutes? Our answer is: that which exceeds the logics of domination expressed in epistemic

totalities and universalisms, that which is non-assimilable by interpretations and analysis of governing.

Calling for the self-ascribed onto-epistemic privileges of the West to lay bare and refuse Euro-centred geo and body ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies, and for unmuting the coloniality of polycentric governing is a first step. To be able to know through non-assimilable means is a decolonial move. This is the case of border thinking as a re-orientation towards unlearning as a de-familiarization of ourselves from the imperial North in order to learn from the South (Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Motta 2018; Icaza 2021).

Border thinking was originally introduced by Chicana lesbian feminist Gloria Anzaldúa to unmute ‘the borderlands experience as epistemological and political choice [that] offers a way of imagining, being and inhabiting our bodies and relationships that is beyond fixed categories that separate, simplify and silence’ (Motta 2018, 107). As an onto-epistemic and methodological approach, border thinking has been a useful tool for decolonial feminists to (re)think ‘the global’ from an epistemology of vulnerability (Icaza 2018). By epistemology of vulnerability, we mean forms of knowing/being/sensing power from the historical experience of being dehumanized. From this epistemology of vulnerability, we ask: what happens when polycentric governance is challenged through the epistemic visibility of knowledges that have been produced as backward, subaltern, etc.? This is what the second section of this response aims to answer. We look at Lebanon as a polycentric battlefield of policies that refugees question, disrupt, and renegotiate on an everyday basis.

How Refugees Reshape Polycentric Governing

‘Only refugees can forever write the archive’

(Qasmiyeh, 2017)

Refugee spaces in Lebanon have historically emerged as complex and incoherent sites of polycentric governing (Sirhan 1975; Fakhoury 2021a, 2022). Amid successive refugee-producing conflicts that have played out in the neighbourhood and seeped into its borders, Lebanon has shied away from developing an asylum system that would formalize the stay of displaced individuals. In this context, refugee policy has arisen as a collage of fragmented sites of authority ranging from the local to the global. On the one hand, local actors including landlords, political parties, municipalities, and recruitment firms have performed refugee-related functions that are not necessarily

within their mandate (Sanyal 2017; Moawad 2021). On the other, governments have delegated refugee assistance to external actors such as United Nations (UN) agencies and the European Union (EU) to cater for refugee livelihoods and needs (Fakhoury 2019). In this regard, the legacy of colonial authority has deeply shaped humanitarian governance in Lebanon.

Beneath this surface, however, what happens when refugees seek to decentre and reconfigure this landscape of polycentric governing? What happens when they strike back from subaltern spheres to renegotiate everyday forms of humanitarianism and livelihoods? And lastly, what happens when we rewrite the history of polycentric governing through the lens of refugee agency?

We chronicle below some forms of everyday practices in which refugees have delinked the act of governing from dominant rationalities of institutionalized polycentric orders. We show how they have disrupted narratives and scripts of governing, and reimagined polycentric governing in Lebanon as a site of resistance (Fakhoury 2022) and bottom-up *refugee-led humanitarianism* (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016).

Since 2011, Lebanon has welcomed more than 1,500,000 displaced Syrians. What first started as an open-border policy soon changed into a policy of strict control over refugees' lives and trajectories. In 2015, the Lebanese government ordered the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to stop registering Syrian refugees. Since then, the UNHCR has been monitoring data on the registered population whilst advocating for resuming registration activities. Against this backdrop, supranational organizations including the UN, the EU, and the World Bank have allocated substantial aid to boosting refugee livelihoods. This politics of aid is yet to be contextualized in a broader rationality of governance (Fine and Thiollet 2020). This rationality seeks not only to cater for refugees' needs within the neighbourhood of Syria, but also to provide a legitimating narrative for such multilevel interventions. Indeed, at the heart of this rationality lies the narrative of resilience-building, which seeks to boost refugees' and hosts' capacity to respond to challenges (Badarin and Schumacher 2020; Fakhoury 2021b). In coordination with a plethora of local, national, and global actors, the UNHCR has, for instance, developed the so-called Refugee Resilience Plan with the aim of coupling the stabilization of Lebanon with protection and humanitarian assistance needs for refugees. Similarly, the EU has developed various policy instruments that aim to consolidate refugees' resilience or their capacity to withstand challenges while boosting Lebanon's capacity to deal with displacement. A case in point is the adoption of the 2016 Lebanon–EU Compact, which aims to improve refugee access to livelihoods and jobs in exchange for financial and developmental

aid. Such initiatives including the UNHCR's resilience plan and the Compact call on various sites of authority from the international to the local to cooperate together.

From a critical perspective, however, resilience-building has reified polycentric governing as a 'push-pull dynamic' or a set of colliding logics (Fakhoury 2019, 2021b). First, donors including Western and Gulf actors as well as international non-governmental organizations (INGOS) and UN agencies have held turf wars when it comes to delineating their mandates (Deardorff Miller 2017; Facon 2021, 2022). In this way, the coloniality of polycentric governance has been enacted and reified. Second, supranational actors have negotiated resilience-building practices in terms of facilitating refugee access to education, labour, and livelihoods, albeit in conditions lacking an underlying protection environment. Indeed, as early as 2015, and as soon as the Syrian regime gained the upper hand in Syria's internationalized war, the Lebanese government started boldly advocating for refugee return, implementing return initiatives in coordination with the Syrian government. In the context of the country's cumulative crises ranging from its economic deterioration to the 2020 Beirut blasts, displaced Syrians and Lebanese citizens alike have been pushed into extreme poverty. This has provided a pretext for governing authorities to further restrict displaced Syrians' rights, banning them access to labour and housing. Within this context, refugees have been locked into spirals of protracted precarity. They have further embarked on dangerous returns to Syria or onward journeys into the unknown (Sewell 2020). Pushbacks, deaths in the Mediterranean, stalled lives and re-returns to Lebanon are some of the scenarios that the displacement continuum has had in store for them (Refugee Protection Watch 2021).

In this context, it is safe to say that the polycentric response to Syrian displacement in Lebanon has not met its objectives. Indeed, as multi-level actors ranging from international organizations to informal networks have sought to manage refugees' lives, it has become increasingly difficult to locate who governs who and what the rationale of such governmentalities may be (Fakhoury 2019). Do these multi-level 'bonding forces' (Koinova et al. 2021, 1988) converge to resolve displacement, coordinate aid responses, and stabilize Lebanon as a key regional refugee-hosting country, or rather enable supranational entities such as the EU to engage in governing at a distance (Anholt and Sinatti 2020; Fakhoury 2022a), re-enacting 'imperial governance' (Gravier 2015)?

In this context, most work on Syrian refugees has portrayed their stay and survival in Lebanon through the lens of suffering and securitization (Kikano and Lizarralde 2020). Predominant strands of thought have focused on how

polycentric governing articulated through the lens of INGOS, UN agencies, and national bureaucracies shape the lives of ‘helpless’ and ‘aid-dependent’ displaced individuals. Within these strands of thought, an increasing number of publications have explored how uncoordinated responses have pushed refugees into liminality (Carpi 2019; Fakhoury 2021; Facon 2022). Such lines of inquiry have become ‘archetypal’ (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020) in the ways polycentric refugee governing is assessed in terms of its impact on refugees’ lives.

What happens, however, when we go beyond the act of reading and analysing ‘governing’ through the lens of institutions and bureaucracies? And what happens when we flip the narrative and instead look at the various ways that refugees destabilize this tapestry of polycentric governing, and go beyond rationalities of institutionalist orders?

In the below, we provide some examples that account for how refugees in Lebanon have renegotiated humanitarianism as led by INGOS and supranational organizations. We also account for how they transgress, as political catalysts and actors, the polycentric tapestry that orders their livelihoods, aspirations, and journeys. The objective is not merely to account for refugee voices but to challenge ‘governing’ through knowledges that have been produced as subaltern and insufficiently visible to gain traction as authoritative governing orders.

Refugees as Humanitarian Actors, Aid Providers, and Hosts

Rather than mitigating tensions and ‘managing complexity’ between different refugee groups on the one hand and refugees and hosts on the other, polycentric humanitarian responses have often stirred new conflicts and entrenched structural asymmetries of power. Characterized by a ‘presentist bias’,³ such responses have also glossed over prior plights and histories of displacement. In the context of refugee flight from Syria, international actors such as the UN agencies and the EU have rushed to provide aid to Syrian refugees in Lebanon, relegating the concerns of other refugee groups such as Palestinians, Kurds, and Iraqi populations. As the Refugee Hosts Project documents, such tensions come fully to the fore in refugee settlements and camps. The Baddawi camp in northern Lebanon, which has historically hosted displaced individuals from Palestine, has recently welcomed displaced Syrians, Iraqis, and newer ‘Palestinian’ refugees fleeing the war in Syria. Against this backdrop, aid actors have created parallel systems of humanitarianism, which often undercut each other (Refugee Hosts Project 2021).

The UNHCR, which was in charge of registering displaced Syrians until 2015, has largely focused on Syrian refugee groups. In contrast, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, which has seen its funding power diminish in recent years, has continued to cater solely for Palestinian livelihoods. The World Food Programme has dispensed food vouchers to displaced Syrians, arguably sidelining other refugee groups' needs in the Baddawi Camp (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2020).

However, camps are not the only sites where tensions come to the fore. In the wake of Lebanon's colossal financial crisis that has pushed more than 50 per cent of Lebanese citizens into poverty, displaced Syrians have been queuing to retrieve money from the banks' automated teller machines in some of Lebanon's overcrowded urban districts, fuelling tensions with local residents. Against this backdrop, international organizations have engaged in heated debates over whether they should dispense money to Syrians in Lebanese Lira, a currency that has lost more than 90 per cent of its worth, or in US dollars, a currency that Lebanese citizens are hardly able to access.⁴

Such accounts of how humanitarian responses to displacement entrench rather than mitigate inequalities are not new. What is often unaccounted for, however, is how refugees themselves may rewrite humanitarian scripts and evolve into aid providers and 'hosts', seeking to implement new ordering arrangements. Examples abound; in 2006, Syrian refugees hosted Lebanese citizens fleeing the Israeli–Hezbollah conflict of that year. Also, within the Baddawi camp where multiple refugee groups coexist, Palestinian refugees themselves have chosen to provide aid to 'older' or 'newer' refugees including the recently displaced Syrians (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016, 2020). More recently, in the wake of the 2020 Beirut blasts, Syrian refugees opened their homes to Lebanese who found themselves without shelter, playing the role of providers rather than dispossessed individuals (Da Silva 2020; Fakhoury 2022b).

Such practices rewrite the humanitarian economy of the refugee spaces on a daily basis, and turn the table on the dichotomy of aid recipients and donors (Refugee Hosts Project 2021).⁵ They also lay the ground for what Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2020) frames as *refugee-led humanitarianism* and *refugee-refugee relationality*, shifting the focus away from institutionalist ordering structures and rationalities, and hence their coloniality.

In yet another perspective, while organizations reify a binary logic opposing refugees and hosts through their aid programmes, research has documented how refugees' and hosts' identities and actions merge within Lebanon's urban spaces, leading to shared entanglements and overlaps. Rather than constituting non-city enclaves, refugee spaces in Beirut have

stretched within the city, generating a dense web of commercial, economic, and social networks with surrounding areas. In such spaces, refugees and hosts have tangled economies and livelihoods. In Nab'ah, a poorer neighbourhood in Beirut, Lebanese citizens have for decades shared the space with various migrant and refugee groups such as Egyptian workers, the recently displaced Syrians, or the Kurdish-Syrian refugees who fled Syria way before the 2011 war (Fawaz 2016). It is within this continuum of entangled fates and everyday interactions that refugees and hosts create their own polycentric networks in which governing as a totalizing rationality, but not the totality of the story, can be unveiled.

Refugees as Political Catalysts and Protagonists

Looking at refugees as negotiators of humanitarian scripts, aid providers, and hosts helps to destabilize the institutionalist lens of polycentric governing. At the same time, this endeavour remains incomplete if we do not account for the various ways in which they contest and reshape policy and politics through acts of collective organizing and transgression.⁶

In the context of deteriorating living conditions and Lebanon's restrictive policies, Syrian refugees have not remained idle. Researchers have documented a series of contentious performances such as sit-ins, protests, or roadblocks that the displaced Syrians have initiated either to voice cross-border grievances in the light of the war in their country, or to denounce their deteriorating conditions in Lebanon (Abiyaghi and Younes 2018; Clarke 2018). Contentious action spanned both remote areas such as Aarsal in northern Lebanon (Clarke 2018) and more central urban centres such as Beirut (Abiyaghi and Younes 2018). It also extended beyond episodic mobilization, crystallizing into forms of collective organizing. Displaced Syrians have thus been actively engaged in setting up refugee-centric organizations that focus on manifold claims. Some of these organizations have focused on improving refugee livelihoods and protection needs (Al-Saadi 2015), sharply criticizing the politics of short-term humanitarian aid.⁷ Others have engaged in higher-level activism, denouncing deportations from Lebanon or human rights violations in Syria, as well as engaging in conflict regulation efforts in their home country (Al-Saadi 2015; Werlander 2015; Clarke 2018).

Lebanon's 2019 nationwide revolutionary episode, commonly framed as the 'October uprising', provides insightful terrain for understanding how Syrian refugees have acted both as political catalysts and protagonists. The

nationwide protests that erupted in the wake of a WhatsApp tax aimed at overthrowing Lebanon's political leaders and changing a political model that promotes corruption and impunity. As most Syrian refugees lack legal residency papers, few of them participated in Lebanon's iconic protest marches. Still, they acted as political catalysts whose struggles helped to uncover, identify, and further expose the failures of Lebanon's political system. Though refugees were at the margins, some protesters adopted their cause as one of the key references in their graffiti and protest performances (Nagle and Fakhoury 2021). Protesters further capitalized on crosscutting struggles from workers' to refugees' rights, debunking the narrative of the refugee as a liability and shifting instead the focus to Lebanon's political regime and its failings. It is within this perspective that Baylouny attracts our attention in highlighting that refugees' struggles help to unmask deeper citizens' grievances and structural inequalities within domestic and international settings (Baylouny 2020).

Though refugees were physically at the margins in Lebanon's protest marches, they still orchestrated major sit-ins at the UNHCR headquarters in Tripoli and Beirut throughout 2019 and 2020. During those sit-ins, they criticized underfunded aid programmes, lack of housing options, limited international responsibility sharing and shrinking resettlement plans (Matar 2019; Enab Baladi 2020). Slogans displayed during those protests centred on their rights, dignity, and future aspirations.

Such mobilizations have not left the UNHCR indifferent (UNHCR 2020). Indeed, the UNHCR has since then carefully rethought how its cash assistance programmes to Syrians and non-Syrian refugees as well as Lebanese citizens could be reconfigured to align with the 'leaving no one behind approach' (UNHCR 2022).⁸

Contentious refugee action has not only centred around mobilizations and organizing. It has also articulated itself through everyday politics. Thus, refugees have wrestled daily with administrative hurdles either with Lebanese bureaucracies or UN agencies (Ozkul and Jarrous 2021). On the bustling streets of the Hamra neighbourhood in Beirut or the popular souks in Tripoli, they have engaged in daily political debates on their entitlement to rights, space, housing, and water.

Everyday contentious action has further articulated itself through refugees' decisions to disrupt borders and restrictions, realizing what Achiume (2019) frames as an act of decolonization. In the wake of Lebanon's economic collapse, many have chosen to take the boat to Cyprus, or to reach the EU through via sea or land. Against this backdrop, their daily acts of despair, the continuous wrestling with administrative hurdles such as waiting in line

to receive cash assistance, as well as the decision to seek options beyond Lebanon, have constituted bottom-up sites of refugee resistance.

Such examples reflect powerful means through which refugees exercise the right to shape their fate, notwithstanding restrictive policy practices and limited resettlement options. At the same time, these examples are yet to receive recognition in mainstream policy studies and strands of literature that focus on institutionalist analyses of polycentrism. However, it is by retracing such subaltern scripts that we can explore how refugees rewrite ontologies of polycentric governing, and how they strike back, positioning themselves as central actors who can negotiate alternative forms of humanitarianism and systems of ordering.

Preliminary Conclusions/Lessons?

Can a decolonial reading of polycentric governance in dialogue with the field of refugee studies, and more specifically, the politics of refugee voices, representations, and narratives, contribute to undoing coloniality in polycentric governing research? And can it delink polycentrism from institutionalist governance research, delving rather into relational comparative histories and geographies (Hart 2018)?

By engaging with empirical illustrations from refugee spaces in Lebanon, we do not intend either to glorify bottom-up refugee governance or present an idealized or idyllic account of it. Rather, we have sought through these examples to *decentre* then *recentre* the lens through which we conceive and perceive polycentric governance. We have shown that while accounting for structures and regimes of governance is crucial, it is still possible to ask questions differently. Some of the questions that our analysis could inspire are: how do refugees renegotiate polycentric aid systems and aid dependencies as laid out by institutions and governments? Under what circumstances do they play the role of political and social catalysts, identifying cumulative failures in colonial authority, political systems, and humanitarian aid? What strategies do they resort to break away from their 'stalled lives' and spirals of waiting; temporal orders that top-down institutions reproduce to maintain their *raison d'être*?

These questions open a myriad of ontologies that remain hitherto unexplored: how do refugee-led forms of governing stand in counterpoint to the totalizing movement of top-down polycentricity led by governments and international organizations? How do they 'account for what is no more'? And how do they explain 'the planetary complexity of contemporary governing

beyond elements borrowed from power, structures, legitimacy, and hierarchies'? And what do refugees' ways of *unsettling* and *re-governing* governance tell us about the spaces and temporalities that the notion of polycentric governance erases? In a yet more critical perspective, does accounting merely for bottom-up refugee strategies enable us to break away from an analysis of governing as a top-down process? And to what extent does including their 'previously excluded voices' allow us to 'desilence' what polycentric governance mutes? Finally, how do we escape the trap of glorifying refugee sites as sites of resilience and creativity, a logic that colonial authority and top-down polycentrism have used to legitimize their importance (Edkins 2000; Harrell-Bond 2002; Turner 2012)?

Given the parameters of possibility granted to us by a volume like this one, we see that our task in this response is naming an outside of the epistemic totalizing movement of polycentric governance. As a concept and analytic, we invite a positioned understanding of its explanatory possibilities. A positioned understanding means that it is localized within the epistemic territory of modernity, modern selfhood, and subjectivity, and when it is articulated as a response to planetary operations of power, domination, control, and so on, it reveals its own geo- and body political location from its coloniality.

So, to be clear, this response is not about representing a decolonial proposal on polycentric governance, nor does it claim the possibility of decolonizing polycentric governance. We embrace a productive tension that emerges from the task of undoing the coloniality of polycentric governance and delinking it from institutionalist governance research, and that is what we explain through our take on the notion of coloniality of power and gender, and our illustration of how refugees decouple polycentrist from institutionalist and colonial pathways.

To undertake coloniality as an onto-epistemological point of departure while accepting the task of undoing its manifestations in polycentric governance as two women of colour working in European academia is nonetheless a highly problematic task. It requires us to undo silencing and dehumanization with conceptual tools and means of academic validation such as expert use of theories in colonial languages and writing styles that are complicit precisely with our own silencing and dehumanization (Sheik 2020).

So far, there seems to be no way out without pain, without reactivation of trauma, and without sensing the colonial wound. This carries a huge ethical responsibility for us as researchers, teachers, and mentors within academic institutions that deny our full humanity and wholeness (Motta 2018). If our aim is to illustrate how to conduct a feminist decolonial critique of

polycentric governance to radicalize knowledge praxis, we can only hope to find solace in *learning each other* as women of colour (Alexander 2005, 2, 300) and invite others to encounter each other as we have done here through our co-authored piece aiming at naming the logics and disembodied rationalities that try to enclose our imaginations (Motta 2016).

Notes

1. For the analysis of commonalities and differences between world system analysis, Immanuel Wallerstein's historical capitalism analysis, and coloniality as an analytic, see Mignolo 2002.
2. The argument of an exteriority of modernity is informed by Enrique Dussel's dialogue with Gianni Vattimo's work (see Dussel 1999). For a genealogy of the emergence of this critique see Mignolo 2002.
3. Aydan Geatrick, interview with the author, London, February 2022.
4. Informal conversations and interviews with Lebanese residents, Beirut, December 2021 and January 2022.
5. Refugee Hosts Project—Recommendations for Research and Practice #3 Refugee-Host Relationality October 2021.
6. For an account on how to capture migrant and refugee agency, see Paret and Gleeson, 2016.
7. One of the authors' informal conversations and interviews with refugee-centric organizations in Lebanon (2014–20).
8. Informal conversations with UNHCR officials, Beirut, 2020.

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