

## Disembodied Territories

**Dr Sara Salem**

Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, LSE  
s.salem3@lse.ac.uk

### Keywords

*web design, co-creation, anti-colonial knowledge, disembodied place-making*

Disembodied Territories is a web-based creative project that was co-curated by Dr Menna Agha and, Dr Sara Salem, visual designer Engy Mohsen and web developer Frederick Kannemeyer, along with 45 other artistic contributors. It was supported through institutional KE funding at LSE and the Flemish Architecture Institute in Belgium.

After meeting virtually at many different online events, Menna and Sara began discussing questions of space, power and politics. Both hailing from Egypt originally, they were especially interested in how Egypt as a space is often imagined as part of the Middle East rather than Africa. Throughout their conversations, broader questions began to emerge around how we think about maps and how we think about imaginings of space that exist on the continent of Africa and in the African diaspora.

Disembodied Territories is a mapping project that is critical of the colonial history of maps, which were used to enable exploitation and colonialism. Many countries across the Global South only came to exist on paper through mapping, in order to enable the marking out of colonial territories. As such, Sara and Menna were acutely interested in whether maps could be used in anti-colonial or post-colonial theorising or knowledge production. The collaborative project maps the ways in which the African continent keeps reinventing, resummoning, or unbounding itself from dominant frames of place-making, as well as how diasporic and displaced Africans deploy critical ideas of space as a way of imagining an otherwise and an elsewhere. It is a visual project that interrogates the pictorial dimension of mapping, by speaking to the power of the visual and how we imagine the world. The co-curators initiated conversations with artists and filmmakers, with people who produce knowledge in spaces outside of academia. The founding premise of the project was to examine both the colonial history of mapping and its critical potential, and to situate that inquiry as a visual conversation with people across different sectors and different spaces.



*Image 1 © Engy Mohsen & Frederick Kannemeyer*

## **Process and outputs**

To build the website, Sara and Menna worked with visual designer Engy Mohsen who created the visual language of the platform and a design for each contribution piece, and web developer Frederick Kannemeyer. To build their project team the co-curators reached out to their networks and asked for recommendations, before holding some informal interviews. This was done right at the beginning of the project and completely transformed how it developed, as it became a highly collaborative co-production between the four team members. It was also important for all team members to be from the continent of Africa, to support an understanding of the different kinds of visual language that are more common in African contexts. Every decision about the final project was taken collaboratively, although Sara and Menna did the bulk of the administrative labour through their respective institutions.

In addition to the four core team members, there were 45 other artistic practitioners and academics involved in the project who contributed a piece for inclusion in the final website. These collaborators were found via a combination of direct invites and a call for contributions. Targeted invitations ensured there was equal representation from all parts of the African continent and diaspora, whereas the open call enabled submissions from

artists not known to the curators. Collaborators were invited to share a creative piece for inclusion on the website, with very few restrictions around what that could be. The final project includes articles, prose, illustrations, sound pieces, films, recipes and poems.

Disembodied Territories was supported through LSE Knowledge Exchange project funding drawn from an institutional HEIF allowance, and match-funding from the Flemish Architecture Institute in Belgium. More funding from LSE followed half-way through the project timeline, drawn from unused HEIF funding. The LSE funds had to be spent by a certain date, so contributors were paid upfront before they completed their submissions. The project benefited enormously from the support offered by a committed finance officer at LSE, working at departmental level. Without that support, it may not have been possible to process all the honorariums, some of which were incredibly complex due to tax implications and international banking complications.

The project ran for just under a year from start to finish. Early on in the process there was a storytelling workshop for all the contributors to present their submission ideas. Abstracts were used to organise the workshop into six different sessions, with a respondent who had expertise in the specific areas under discussion. The workshop provided an important space for all of the collaborators to get a sense of where the project was going and how the different submission pieces were speaking to each other. It also provided an opportunity for feedback at an early stage in the project, which was both instructive and supportive for the entire team. The project team experienced some delays in receiving all the submissions, but because the funding had already been spent there was a degree of flexibility built into the deadline which prevented the process from being overly stressful. Sara notes that for any future KE projects, building flexibility into the timeline will be a priority as it enables a more caring way of working with all collaborators.

## **Evaluation and impacts**

The Disembodied Territories website was launched in April 2022 and the impacts of the project have been manifold. Apart from being a dissemination platform for anti-colonial research and artistic practice, it has also been praised as a useful teaching tool. It provides a decolonial atlas or index

of artistic projects that are exploring academic questions in critical ways through multiple formats.

The website is fully open access, and designed to be equally accessible on



Image 2 © Engy Mohsen & Frederick Kannemeyer

mobiles with low data connectivity. This was a priority for the web developer, as it ensures it can be viewed in the same way by users across the Global South. Positive feedback on the website has highlighted its accessibility and also its design, which includes four cross-referential indexes through which to explore the content. This was an intentional design, which rejects the conventional notion of mapping and instead presents knowledge as an interconnected journey to be explored.

Sara Salem describes the website as;

*‘an atlas or a collection, containing all of these different voices, different opinions, different ways of representing space or maps. You feel like you’re in a room full of different people speaking in different voices and we wanted to capture a movement. Maps are often very still, very static, and that’s not how we experience space at all.’*

Disembodied Territories will continue to develop as new submissions are received. It is currently being used in anti-colonial teaching and research, and the project team plan to hold an exhibition in a physical space to further disseminate the work included in the collection.

<https://disembodiedterritories.com>