Learning Ownership Through the Use of Photovoice in the Production of an Academic Reader

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This paper illustrates how a group of photojournalism students co-created meaning and constructed a communal image through the photographs they took for an academic reader compiled by the Communication Skills Program at the American University of Beirut (AUB). Through photovoice, these students were empowered to find their "voice" in the creation process of the reader, which mitigated their marginalization. They became active partners in their individual and communal education process and challenged their marginalization on campus. In Freirian terms, these students have challenged the oppressed role by participating in the co-creation of a reader used to teach academic writing.

In August of 2018, the American University of Beirut (AUB) released its fifth locally-compiled and published academic reader, *Pages Apart*, for English 203, a core academic reading, writing, and composition class. The process of creating this reader involved engaging students taking a photojournalism class to address the needs of the publication and find suitable photos from around Beirut and Lebanon to include in the book. The students took photographs that would speak back to the articles from a Lebanese lens. Through these photographs, these students became participants and agents in the shaping of the reader by using photovoice, a photographic technique that helps the photographer represent their community (Wang & Burris, 1997).

This paper shows how student participants co-created meaning and constructed a communal image through their photography, thus becoming active partners in their individual and communal education process. Throughout the paper, I weave in my experience as an instructor of English at AUB, the lead editor of the reader, and the faculty adviser of four student clubs to better explain pertinent academic, cultural, and social contexts as well as witnessed cases of marginalization. First, the paper offers a brief history of the American University of Beirut to provide background information and contextualize the argument. I then present a definition of marginalization drawn from Jose Causadias and Adriana Umaña-Taylor's (2018) reframing of marginalization to explain why AUB students, despite their elite academic status in

Lebanon, are marginalized in their academic community. After explaining what photovoice is and how it came about, the paper gives a brief description how the students utilized photovoice in challenging marginalization. I argue that, through photovoice, these student participants assumed ownership of the reader and enhanced their voices in the visual production, co-creation of meaning, and shaping of the curriculum.

A Brief History of the American University of Beirut

Established in 1862, the American University of Beirut became the educational hub of the region. In the Department of English, the Communication Skills Program (CSP) offers composition and writing classes to over 7,000 students who come from different parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Europe, Asia, and North and South America. However, the Lebanese and Lebanese expats constitute the largest percentage of the student body.

AUB is considered the most expensive university in Lebanon. In a country where the minimum monthly wage is 304 USD, AUB's one credit hour costs 689 USD for undergraduates enrolled in the social sciences. Therefore, many students find themselves unable to afford AUB tuition fees. More than 60% of students apply for financial aid, receiving assistance exceeding 30 million USD in need-based grants, scholarships, need-based student loans, graduate assistantships, and work-study programs (Facts and Figures, n.d.). Since financial aid is given to students in need, numbers show that a large percentage of students come from economically underprivileged families. This economic disparity places the economically underprivileged students on the periphery in a country where great emphasis is placed on outward display of money.

Following the establishment of the French Mandate in 1923, the official languages of Lebanon became Arabic and French; however, bilingual education at both public and private schools continued even after the independence of Lebanon in 1946. Lebanon also has a large population of naturalized Armenians who settled in Lebanon following the Armenian genocide of 1905. They established Armenian schools that teach Armenian and Arabic as primary languages and French or English as second and third languages. AUB as an English-speaking institution can often marginalize student populations whose first language is not English. Below, marginalization is defined generally and in the context of this study.

Marginalization Defined

Marginalization is traditionally defined as the treatment of an individual as peripheral or insignificant based on their race, religion, culture, or general

beliefs. Causadias and Umaña-Taylor (2018) redefined marginalization as "multidimensional, dynamic, context-dependent, and diverse web of processes, rooted in power imbalance and systematically directed toward specific groups and individuals" (p. 707). The authors recognized the fluidity of the term and redefined marginalization as a dynamic concept that is context-dependent and not necessarily entangled with clear-cut discrimination. According to Causadias and Umaña-Taylor, youth experiencing marginalization can alter their situation, so the label is not unchangeable. The authors clarified how marginalization has many different definitions and meanings depending on the context, for it can be related to discrimination against social groups or academic marginalization related to educational policy. This context-dependency, they argued, "can be defined and redefined in immediate settings of families, schools, and neighborhoods" (p. 710) or "social positioning" (p. 709). In one of its many facets, marginalization, they argued, is "the enforcement of a social order purposefully guided and enforced by those who hold power" (p. 710). Therefore, marginalization is recognized as context-dependent and not necessarily against one particular ethnic group.

One of the aims of this paper is to argue for the presence of a spatial case of marginalization at AUB. "As a spatial analogy of social positioning," Causadias and Umaña-Taylor (2018) stated, "the term *marginalization* … is consistent with other terms rooted in spatial symbolism, including *subordination* (to keep down), *oppression* (to weigh down), and *exclusion* (to keep out)" (p. 709). For the sake of this paper, the term is used in line with Causadias and Umaña-Taylor's definition to include any form of alienation or sidelining "enforced by those who hold power" (p. 710). In this sense, many groups of students at AUB experience marginalization for various reasons, as presented in the following section.

How AUB Students Experience Marginalization

Nonnative Speakers

Students at AUB struggle to find their academic voice (personality, style, or tonality) for several reasons, be they educational, economic, or political. Most students studying at AUB are speakers of English as a second or third language, and many have studied in schools following the French system and find the American liberal arts program at AUB to be unfamiliar; they are also not prepared to do all their learning in English.

Save for those who study at the American Community School or at American or English schools in the Arabian Gulf (Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, etc.) where the primary language of instruction is English,

many students find themselves in the first few years at AUB struggling with a language of instruction they had learned as a third or fourth language. Some French educated students ask friends to translate entire lectures, and many copy or purchase class notes from other classmates, as I have discovered through my teaching and mentoring experience. The educational system differs from what these students were accustomed to at school, and this puts them at the periphery and may make them feel as outcasts. As someone who works closely with students through student clubs, I hear students complaining that they feel like "phonies" in their academic environment. This covert form of alienation solicits little attention from the university, and I have heard many instructors claim that pressuring students to perform by enforcing strict timelines, overwhelming the students with material, and giving difficult exams is part of the academic culture of AUB. This causes a myriad of challenges for students and encourages unhealthy competition. For example, pre-med students tell stories of how some try to compromise other students' success by stealing and hiding study notes and materials causing some students to drop their majors altogether. Unfortunately, this negative result is downplayed by the overall political turned social discrimination in the country.

Political Pressures

National politics and political parties have been the cause of the religious-based civil war which lasted for two decades; the war's aftermath has infiltrated the walls of the University. Annual elections for the Student Representative Committees become political parties' power struggle on campus where students affiliated with different political parties outside the university try to garner the largest number of votes for their group. National TV stations and newspapers cover the event, which shows the nature of pressure these students experience during election times. In recent years, the situation has been controlled and guided by the dean of students, and students are no longer allowed to rally under a political banner or use their affiliated political party's name in their campaigns. As a result, campaigning students started targeting students from their religious communities to vote for their preferred candidate. Students are sometimes verbally harassed if they refuse to comply, but little has been done at the administrative level to try and remedy the situation. Instead, AUB uses extreme measures to try and contain the situation instead of solving it. For example, in recent years, student elections were cancelled, and students were expelled because the elections turned violent. For this reason, students sometimes find themselves between a rock and a hard place where they want to join the representative student body but are weary of the exhausting underground political fight on campus.

Social and Environmental Crises

The unstable political situation in Lebanon and the power struggle between political parties left the country with a corrupt political elite and an environmental crisis that ignited a revolution on October 17, 2019. Lebanon in recent years has become one of the most polluted countries in the world (Salameh et al., 2018) that still suffers from power and water outages. For the youth in Lebanon, hope for change seems out of reach, and students at AUB seek to find their voice by participating in highly regulated student activities (clubs and student elections) but have slim opportunities to participate in the curricular conversation at AUB.

Still, clubs are not always the answer. In the fall semester of 2018, the Gender and Sexuality Club at AUB was pushed by various religious groups to cancel a Halloween party mixer for the LGBTQ+ community after members of both the club and the community received numerous death threats from outside the university. When the club's faculty adviser expressed his concern about student liberties in an email to the AUB faculty, he was met with a myriad of emails stating that such liberties are not tolerated in the Lebanese community and that there is no need for a Gender and Sexuality club at AUB in the first place. Therefore, students sometimes find themselves voiceless and marginalized for their academic, political, or even sexual orientation. To better engage students and give them a sense of empowerment, the editorial committee of English 203's reader decided to involve students in the compilation process of the book by giving them a chance to find their voices through photography.

Photovoice and Empowerment

Caroline Wang and Mary Ann Burris (1997) defined photovoice as "a method by which people can identify, represent, and enhance their community through a specific photographic technique" (p. 369). Photovoice uses photographic images taken by the less powerful and fortunate to empower participants and induce change within and outside the community (Wang & Burris, 1997). Wang and Burris developed photovoice based on Freire's notion of critical consciousness and feminist theory, and their work has been instrumental in studying marginalized groups in different populations. Photovoice's foundation is documentary photography (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988), and it engages the youth in smaller parts of bigger projects (Wang et al., 2000). Additionally, photovoice projects help youth shape their social identities and "can be instrumental in building social competency" (Strack, et al., 2004, p. 49). Samantha Warren (2005) argued that, as more attention is paid to the

visual dimension of social life, "the visual world becomes another 'text' to be read giving clues about the cultures that produce it" (p. 1). Warren also argued that image is data, and Carey Noland (2006) asserted that, through photography, participants choose images that represent them and their views, for the visual organizes the experience of external reality (Wright, 1992). In this sense, the academic reader at AUB, *Pages Apart*, became the project through which students at AUB participated in the academic conversation and the shaping of their social and political identities in spite of pervasive marginalization.

The Reader

The American University of Beirut (AUB) released the first edition of its custom published Reader for Academic English in 2007 to adapt the teaching of the course to our students' needs and interests. The faculty, realizing that international editions of readers published in the United States cannot speak to the particular audience of AUB, decided to compile and publish a homegrown reader that includes international texts of various genres that are relevant to the AUB community. The committee selected to work on the reader collects, edits, and writes author biographies, questions, and activities for each text. Now, eleven years and five editions later, the committee continues to custom publish a reader springing from the knowledge and experience of the Communication Skills Program. The fifth edition of the Reader, *Pages Apart*, was released in August of 2018.

This edition began with the "Art of Composition" where a multitude of articles cover strategies for reading, reflective and academic writing, using sources, and voice. Like the rest of the reader, these articles came from a variety of sources and were previously published in academic and peer reviewed journals, while some were book chapters. The remaining chapters included op-eds, textbook chapters, personal narratives, exposés, essays, poems, and short stories written by renowned writers from around the world and selected for their relevance to Lebanese students.

Learning Ownership

Freirian Theory and Voice in Relation to AUB

In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Paolo Freire (1970) explained that the oppressed are not marginals but rather have succumbed to the structure that marginalized them. He added that "the solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that that they can

become 'beings for themselves'" (p. 74). To achieve this, the teacher must become the student's partner and engage them in critical thinking. This should involve a trust in the student's creative abilities. As an educational hub that prides itself in graduating world leaders, AUB is concerned with maintaining a high ranking in the region through faculty research and the employability of students. Consequently, AUB hires leaders in their fields and assumes that, by being exposed to such great minds, the students are bound to learn. This view may unintentionally support the banking model of education Freire warns against, and it may also contribute to the marginalization of students by considering them fresh minds in need of guidance.

To empower students, Freire (1973) suggested that "People should be active participants in understanding their community's issues, facilitated through the sharing of mutual experiences, and become agents of community change" (p. 73). Ira Shor (1993) built on Freire's work to emphasize education's capacity to promote democracy and equality among students and teachers in order to advance literacy and knowledge. In involving students in the production and selection of photographs for the reader, the editors have invited students into a dialogic rhetoric where they negotiate meaning through their lens. Shor insisted that students need to be taught how to question answers and not how to answer questions so that education becomes what students do instead of what is done to them. In the case of the reader, students engaged in producing a visual composition in the shape of an academic book for their peers to use. This authorial responsibility made students an integral part of the reader's production rather than reinforcing their marginalization on the periphery of AUB.

The photojournalism students who participated in the project had completed English 203 for which the reader was compiled, and they were reminded of what the class objectives and learning outcomes were. They worked with these objectives in mind and towards instigating the change they wished to see in the curriculum. Though their contribution was in interpreting the texts through their photos, they dictated the visual representation of the book and thus contributed to centering AUB in the reader. Their work had more influence than predicted. When informally asked what they thought of the photographs that were taken by previous English 203 students, current students agreed that it made them more interested in leafing through the reader to see how their fellow students read and interpreted the articles.

Further, to use terms from the New London Group (1996), students engaged in designing their (and their peers') social futures by representing Lebanon, Beirut, and AUB in the manner they saw fit rather than in the way the editors considered suitable for the reader. The student photographers related the texts, whether they spoke about Beirut, Lebanon, or the Arab world or not, to their experience and their immediate surroundings. They recreated meaning

that they presumed future English 203 students could relate to. However, the New London Group warned that putting knowledge into action might not be as feasible as presumed, for students might be incapable of transferring their knowledge to practice. This is where the teachers step in to guide the learners in their attempt to develop a critical and cultural understanding of these practices, for immersion in the practice does not guarantee mastery of practice. Here, the student photographers studied, in a prior semester, the foundations of photojournalism; however, it was in applying these skills to the reader that they learned how to perfect their skills. At the same time, they contributed to the conversation taking place about the reader for they have contextualized the articles and placed them in a local frame better accessible to students with a shared cultural background. With such participation, student photographers have repositioned themselves closer to the center than at the periphery of AUB, and they have succeeded in challenging their marginalized status.

Co-creation of Meaning: Voice, Authority, and Empowerment

Photovoice may empower student photographers in constructing their voice. Paul Matsuda and Christine Tardy (2007) argued that readers of academic texts create a persona of the author or what they refer to as voice. They stated that "Shifting the discussion of voice from the sole province of the writer to the jointly constructed reader-writer interaction can provide rich insight into the readers' role in the process of constructing voice" (p. 247). Through their photos, AUB students vocalized their understanding of the texts and articulated a contextualized message, for voice does not emerge necessarily in writing alone. The multimodality of this project lends itself to the construction of voice through photographs without the need for a foreign language to mediate this construction. Students interpreted, borrowed, and even appropriated the author's voice in the recreation of meaning suitable for their world, culture, and circumstances even when the editors sometimes challenged the students' choices of photos.

Many of the photographs that were taken by the students were contested by the editorial team, and it was my decision as the lead editor to insist on giving these photos, and by extension the students, a representative platform or voice. In one instance, one of the editors insisted on including a photograph of a "happy" dog being pampered instead of the caged dog that the students had chosen to be included with the article "Should we stop keeping pets? Why more and more ethicists say yes" (See Figure 1). The students explained that in Lebanon and especially in Beirut, keeping dogs in small apartments is seen as caging them; also, pets are obtained from pet stores that cage pets in display windows until they are sold. Students, therefore, depicted a reality as they

have seen and understood it. In this sense, the students have joined the rhetorical conversation if only through their choice of included photos.

The students chose, in some cases, photos that are completely rooted in a Lebanese context even when the article generally addressed American or international audiences. In "Eating, growing, thinking: The food chapter," the students chose to include photos of Lebanese vegetarian "fatayer" or pastries with "The economic case for worldwide vegetarianism" (see Figure 2). Such an example illustrates how voice is created through the choice of a Lebanese food article since the Lebanese cuisine has been generally associated with vegetarianism with popular dishes like hummus, tabbouleh, and veggie fatayer.

Students partaking in this project chose to represent their realities through their trained photographic lens and to articulate, through a photograph, their reality. Whether the article speaks in particular about Lebanon or not, it was represented with a photograph from Beirut or Lebanon in general. Warren (2005) stated that it is through the act of viewing that we experience the world we live in and bring cultural, social, and psychological knowledge to our understanding of this experience. In this manner, the photograph ceases to be a mere presentation of a topic and becomes a representation of the reality of this student and her understanding not only of what the article discusses but also the reality that represents it. The photograph here has become a composition of comprehension and expression.

Figure 1: Student-selected photo of caged dog

Oxford Martin Programme on the Future of Food. "We wanted to illustrate the scale of those benefits."

04 Springmann and his team imagined several potential dietary scenarios in 2050, comparing health-care and climate-related costs if the world keeps up its current meat-heavy diet, versus shifting to a diet that meets standard global dietary guidelines. For many regions of the world, this shift would mean drastically cutting meat consumption and eating more fruits and vegetables. Springmann also calculated the hypothetical costs of a world of vegetarians (a diet with no meat), and vegans (no eggs, dairy, or animal products whatsoever).

How Much Would the U.S. Save If People Ate Less Meat?
Projected annual savings in 2050, in billions of U.S. dollars

	Direct health-care savings	Indirect health-care savings	Environmental savings	Total savings
If everyone followed diet recommendations	150.9	28.1	18.1	197.1
If everyone went vegetarian	187.2	36.4	35.0	258.6
If everyone went vegan	208.2	40.5	40.5	289.1

05 The researchers calculated the direct health-care costs of a meat-heavy diet (associated with the treatment of diseases such as diabetes or heart disease) and indirect costs resulting from unpaid care from family or friends, and lost work days. To quantify the savings of reducing meat-related greenhouse-gas emissions, they drew on a measurement called "social cost of carbon," which estimates the value of future damages caused by each additional ton of carbon emissions.

06 Out of all the world's countries, the U.S. would save the most by curbing its taste for meat. Due to its very high per-capita health-care costs, the country could save $180 billion if the population ate according to recommended guidelines, and $250 billion if it eschewed animal food products altogether—more than China, or all of the EU countries combined. And this is to say nothing of the number of obesity- and chronic-disease-related deaths that could be averted (at least 320,000 per year), and the accompanying benefits of reducing the level of greenhouse-gas emissions. (Springmann and his team made another estimate, using a somewhat less intuitive measure called "value of a statistical life," that put the savings from not eating meat

Veggie Fatayer at Souk El Tayeb. Photo © Hanaa Ayyad

in the neighborhood of $2 trillion to $3 trillion in the U.S., and $20 trillion to $30 trillion worldwide.)

07 Overall, the researchers pointed out that the economic value of health benefits associated with more plant-based diets is comparable with, or exceeds, the value of the environmental benefits.

08 The authors admit, of course, that the valuation techniques they used are "subject to significant uncertainties." And achieving the kind of savings they identify would require a massive overhaul of dietary patterns across the globe—the world's population would need to reduce red-meat consumption by 56 percent, increase fruit and vegetable consumption by 25 percent, and simply consume 15 percent fewer calories overall.

09 But putting a dollar value on these already well-established impacts is significant: For one, these figures can guide policy. Countries could compare

How Much Would the World Save If People Ate Less Meat?
Projected annual savings in 2050, in billions of U.S. dollars

	Direct health-care savings	Indirect health-care savings	Environmental savings	Total savings
If everyone followed diet recommendations	482.4	252.3	234.1	968.8
If everyone went vegetarian	622.8	350.5	510.6	1483.8
If everyone went vegan	684.4	382.6	569.5	1636.5

Figure 2: Student-selected photo of Lebanese cuisine

A lone fisherman at sunset along the Beirut seafront. Photo © Ata Allah Elbizanti

This is My Love... This is My City
Nizar Qabbani

Nizar Qabbani (1923-1998): Born and raised in Damascus, Syria, Qabbani attained international renown for his Arab nationalist, feminist, erotic, religious, and love poetry. After obtaining a Bachelor's degree in Law, Qabbani served as Consul for the Syrian Foreign Ministry in several cities including Istanbul, Madrid, and London, and his thirty-five books of poetry written over the span of half a century were translated to numerous languages including English, Italian, and Hindi. His lyrics were sung by numerous Arab singers making his poetry popular with the younger generations.

1.
I search for a city that resembles us
Its winter resembles us
Its autumn resembles us
Its serenity resembles us
Its lightning
Its thunder
Its waves resemble us
I look for a city similar to the color of your eyes
And my sorrows

2.
I search for a city
In the far end of the world where we know no one
And no one knows us
Its rains drown us... its snow burns us
An inn we enter at the end of the night
Which does not ask our names

Figure 3: Student-selected photo of Ain el Mreisseh bay in Beirut

Similarly, a poem by renowned Syrian poet Nizar Qabbani about an abstract city was accompanied by a scenic view of Ain el Mreisseh bay in Beirut (Figure 3). The choice of photo to represent not the content of the text but the reality of the photographer emerges as research in how one adjusts her lens to speak back to the text. In this way, the students had a say in how the reader is visually shaped and how they are seen and represented as Lebanese working on a book for a generally Lebanese audience. They took charge of shaping the context and challenging the content. As Warren (2005) argued, here "voice" is used in a political sense "as a medium or agency of expression" or "the right or opportunity to express a choice or opinion" (p. 870). "Voice" communicates a message to a wider audience; a message that would have otherwise remained unheard if former methods of photograph collection in the reader compilation process were followed, or if photographs were either obtained from professional or "foreign" sources.

In participating in the assemblage of the academic reader, the students have become more involved in the creation of notions of self and place in a larger social context and in fighting the marginalization they are facing at AUB. Thomas Gullotta, Gerald Adams, and Carol Markstrom (1999) argued that a sense of belonging emerges from being a valued member of the society, and this arises from contributing to the society. In Lebanon, the history of a war-torn, sectarian country can be altered through such communal activities as well as a restructured identity and voice. By choosing photographs from AUB, Beirut, and Lebanon, the students have become involved in the emergent voice of the reader.

Research Implications and Conclusion

In studying photovoice in the creation of a home-grown academic reader, several questions arise that invite a deeper reflection on the subject. More studies should be done on the production of locally compiled and edited readers on other marginalized groups of students in other Lebanese universities as well as in other countries, and on how the involvement of students in such productions promote engagement and agency. A larger-scale study surveying English 203 students and their reactions to the reader and its photographs should be conducted to examine the effect of photovoice on the audience of this reader. Results from such studies will aid practitioners at AUB and other universities in the Arab World in understanding the importance of voice and agency through the production of locally compiled readers that speak directly to ESL learners. Marginalization can occur not only because of unstable political situations in the region or the discrimination that Arabs face nowadays post September 11 but also because we are using a colonial language not only

in communicating with the world but in communicating among ourselves. A question remains: Should AUB share its reader with other English programs at other universities, or would that undermine the authorial presence of these programs by expecting them to use a reader compiled with the AUB student in mind without a consideration of the more general Lebanese audience? Finally, further studies on the topic can contribute to mitigating the marginalization of not only AUB students but all Lebanese students at their respective schools and universities.

Unlike readers compiled at the American University of Beirut in previous years, *Pages Apart* enabled student photographers taking photojournalism classes to co-create meaning and contextualize the articles for a predominantly Lebanese audience. Students became participants in the shaping of the reader and contributors to the communal learning process. These students were invited to transcend the boundaries of Freire's definition of the oppressed and become active and engaged partners in the shaping of their and their peers' education at AUB. They helped construct a communal image that shifted their status from a marginalized group to active participants in the shaping of their curriculum. Through their photographs, they not only offered a different viewpoint of the articles but also took charge of the construction of meaning. Thus, the experience of students at AUB suggests that student-shaped readers may be useful tools to give voice to populations that are marginalized in some academic contexts.

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