Refugees re-making community: on the performativity of participatory video

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Abstract This paper illustrates the performative nature of participatory video (PV), drawing on JL Austin’s well-known work on speech acts, utterances, and performative sentences, as well as Butler’s reworking and application of the notion of performativity. During recent research I used PV as a method. Sub-Saharan African refugee research participants who had not known each other before the PV project negotiated issues to be filmed and made a short film together, creating a small community where none existed before, who are taking steps to organize collective action. The emergence of this new community in and through the making of the film during the fieldwork illustrates the performativity of PV, what is accomplished in and through its making. This performativity works not only through people who take part in creating a video, distributing the video, and watching the video, but also may have effects on people who have never seen the given video, as they are in a landscape and embedded in social relations affected by people who took part in it or saw it. PV is thus both a way of gathering data to learn about the world, and it also is involved in changing it, bringing forth new relationships and new ways of being.

Keywords Film geography · Participatory video · Participatory research · Performativity · Refugees

Introduction

Refugees’ integration into American daily life and society requires a profound transformation in their lifestyle and how they make a living. Documenting the experience of well-being among vulnerable refugee populations is important if we aim to see successful integration of Sub-Saharan refugees in the US. During recent research I used participatory video (PV) as a method. Sub-Saharan African refugee research participants, from Rwanda, Congo, and Burundi, who had not known each other before the PV project made a short film together and negotiated issues to be filmed. PV helped create a community where none existed before, a community taking steps to organize collective action. The emergence of this community in and through the making of a film during the fieldwork illustrates the performativity of PV. Performativity works through creating, distributing, and watching the video. PV is a way of gathering data to learn about the world and is involved in changing it, bringing forth new relationships and new ways of being. In this paper I explore this performative nature of PV, drawing on JL Austin’s work on speech acts, utterances, and performative sentences, as well as Butler’s reworking and application of the notion of performativity. The paper argues that PV can be an
alternative methodology that disrupts common power relations of the filmmaking process, by positioning those filmed as central to the decision-making process, making PV an ongoing iterative practice. The paper has four sections. In the first section I give a brief overview of theories of performativity, PV and film geography. In the second section, I explain the PV process and how I went about it during the Covid-19 pandemic. In the third section I talk about the outcome of the PV project, and the expectations of the refugee community who participated in it. And in the conclusion section, I tie the performativity discussion with my PV project and explain why and how PV is performative.

Performativity, PV and film geography

According to the American film critic and theorician Bill Nichols there are six different modes of documentary film: poetic, expository, reflexive, observational, performative, and participatory (Nichols, 2017). Currently there is a trend of making participatory documentary films together with a community and some social scientists, often scientists who focus on development projects, use PV projects to get to know the community they work with. PV accentuates filmmaking and visual research exposing new “possibilities that using film offers geographers as a research method and a research output” (Jacobs, 2016, p. 454). The concept of performativity emerges from JL Austin’s well-known work on speech acts, utterances, and performative sentences. Austin pointed out certain uses of language where the primary purpose of the utterance was not to describe the world, but rather to do something in it. The classic examples include saying “I do” when getting married. The point of saying “I do” is not to describe the world or a state of affairs separate from what happens in the saying of it. It is in and through the saying of “I do” that, in fact, one gets married (Austin, 1965). This is the performative nature of language. Note that this performativity is not achieved through linguistic utterance alone. Butler builds on this work of JL Austin on performative uses of language (2010). For Butler (2010), gender is similarly performative. She does not mean that passing as a member of a particular gender identity is similar to an actor’s “performance” for an audience. Rather, the point is that in talking about ourselves in certain ways, in acting in certain ways, we are bringing something into being; we are in fact being a particular kind of gendered subject. This is somewhere between constructionist and realist approaches to the world, or a hybrid of them. Other scholars have noted the performativity dynamics at play in academic disciplines like economics and its relation to “the economy” (Callon, 2007) but performativity is a pervasive feature of social and cultural life and involves feedback loops between practices that represent the world and the ways in which the world is changing. When we talk about or represent the world we are also intervening in or altering the world—this is the essence of performativity (Butler, 1990, 2010, 2015; Derrida, 1988). As Hacking (1983) puts it, representing is intervening.

Use of visual methods in social sciences, including geography, has grown in recent years (Clark & Morriss, 2017). However, as Jacobs (2013, 2016) explains, the production of a film as a research output is positioned diminutively in comparison to the written text in geography and the social sciences. This is rather odd given that while “geography and visuality are indivisible” geography has never developed a visual sub-discipline like that of anthropology (Jacobs, 2016, p. 452). Lukinbeal (2019) groups current research on film in geography in two broad approaches: cultural studies and cultural economy. Most cultural studies research on film uses hermeneutics and treats film as a text, analyzing it with an Author-Text-Reader model (Holland, 2020, 2021). Some film geographers use a cultural economy lens to grasp film as a practice that constitutes the spaces of production and consumption within which economic action is framed. While working with vulnerable groups, auto photography, film ethnography, and video diaries can provide a ‘bottom up’ approach that requires adaptive, inclusive, and sometimes individualistic (case-by-case) qualitative methods (Lukinbeal et al., 2015, 2007; Garrett, 2010; Capstick & Ludwin, 2015; Ernwein, 2020). Geographers have used an analogue process which “places film either as a text that should be analyzed or a visual research method” (Jacobs, 2016, p. 452). This restricts geographers from further understanding the role of film in knowledge production (Jacobs, 2016). PV as a research method goes beyond hermeneutics to engage with the performativity of representation. We can make participatory documentary films collaboratively with
our research participants and engage with the performative dimensions of production. Here, film is a practice-based, experiential form of inquiry and a research output. A focus on the performative of collaborative film making begins to answer Doel and Clarke’s (2007) call for research on film qua film.

PV is a dialogic and interactive process, an effective tool for community mobilization and development, and is used in participatory action research (PAR) (Snyder et al., 2019). As a visual method, PV offers the potential to look “alongside” rather than “at” research subjects” and to “destabilize hierarchical power relations” (Kindon, 2003, p. 142) that are typically embedded in knowledge production. PV refers to a set of techniques to create a video about issues chosen by the community the video is ostensibly "about". It is generally facilitated by a PV “practitioner,” who knows the technical aspects of filmmaking. PV is an iterative process of collaborative film making. Key directorial decisions such as what will be shot, what will not be shot, who will shoot, who will talk in front of the camera, what will be included and excluded in the film, are made by the participants. Such negotiations inherently involve power dynamics, both pre-existing and newly emergent. For instance, when an “elder” in a community in which such people are generally respected is involved in a PV with several younger people, negotiating community hierarchies while also trying to ensure that everyone has a “voice” about what may or may not be included in a film can prove difficult. One the one hand, PV filmmaking can be a mechanism for democratic transparency and overturning established hierarchies and powers within a community. On the other hand, the process may be seen as undermining traditional lifeways. There is inherent power in PV and that power can be multi-valent. While PV is often used by communities to voice their concerns about challenging issues, there are debates about PV’s relationship to empowerment and its limitations regarding social change (Kindon, 2016; Milne, 2016; Shaw, 2016, 2017; Walsh, 2016). Although PV provides an opportunity for marginalized, underserved communities to participate and self-represent, empowerment might not take place due to the structural power dynamics, inefficient use of the PV method or inadequate distribution of wealth and resources in the community (Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Leal, 2011).

Alongside debates about how participating in a collaborative video project is shaped by inherent group power dynamics are discussions of how PV can lead to exclusive or inclusive community relationships (Shaw, 2015). Others point out the messy realities and technical difficulties of making PVs, which can easily prolong the completion of the projects and increase the cost (Shaw, 2016). There are challenges in using, PV including the importance of doing careful analyses of cost/benefit, time, effectiveness, and limitations. But, despite all of these real concerns and qualifications, PV can be a community empowerment tool for social change. (Kindon, 2016; Mistry et al., 2016; Wheeler, 2011; Wheeler et al., 2020).

The process: PV in the time of Covid-19

Pre-Covid research

While producing a documentary film, “Taste Bud Memories,” on refugee communities in Tucson in 2018, I met many sub-Saharan African refugee women. I then began research aiming to understand refugee women’s social and family lives, livelihoods, and how community gardening affects these. Scholars discuss well-being as a construction that is both connected to forms of practices and shaped by places (White & Blackmore, 2016; Atkinson, 2010). Constructs of socio economic and spatial well-being are also connected to the methods of data collection, analysis and by whom these are being done. As White puts it, “Different methodologies do not simply highlight different aspects of well-being; they play an active role in generating different kinds of data and analysis, and so ultimately in constituting quite distinct accounts” (White & Blackmore, 2016, p. xi).

During the semi-structured interview process, I asked open-ended questions to have free flowing conversations. Some of my research participants kept asking me, “Did I answer the question correctly?” or, “What will happen to me if I answer these questions wrong?” Although, I was under the impression that I had prepared semi-structured interview questions that did not have right or wrong answers, refugee participants were rather formal in the way they were answering the questions. I explained that there were no wrong answers. But then I realized that refugees, who had gone through many interviews during the vetting
process in refugee camps to be eligible to start a new life in a host country like the US, had assumed that interviews can have serious consequences. I needed to find a way to break through the wall of interrogation my refugee research participants seemed to feel they were going through.

My hope was that PV was going to create a safe space for them. My plan was to buy camcorders, conduct workshops to teach them basic technical aspects of video making. They would vote on a topic and make a video by interviewing one another. We were going to discuss the video clips and edit the video together. The community would watch the rough cuts and the final cut, selecting the video clips they saw fit for the story. Then we would organize film screenings and invite all the families to the public screenings and have a discussion. Such was my plan. Then Covid-19 hit…

PV in the time of Covid-19

On March 15, 2020, my university asked all research that requires in person contact to stop. My data collection came to a halt. I needed a new game plan to continue my remaining fieldwork virtually, including the PV. Interviews with refugees switched from in person interactions to WhatsApp calls, sometimes with video, sometimes audio only because low-income participants did not have high speed internet.1 During WhatsApp group calls, I was able to include a translator. The WhatsApp interview process took 12 months and included 50 two hour-long interviews with refugee men and women from Rwanda, Congo and Burundi. Participants in those interviews were asked if they would be interested in joining a PV project. Some of them asked to join the group with their husbands. I explained the PV process to the group and added that they might leave if they do not like the topic chosen by the PV group, or they could suggest a new topic. They would be the directors of the film, and the edits would be done according to the way they see fit. They will own the film and decide how and where it would be distributed. Instead of cameras, I bought ten cellphones with sufficient lens and storage capacity for easy filming during Covid. I added that if they participate in the PV project, I would give them cellphones to use and to keep after the project.

Positionality reflexivity, and PV in the time of Covid-19

Positionality, reflexivity, assumptions, and cultural biases of the researcher can affect the data collection and its analysis (White & Blackmore, 2016). Pratt’s description of positionality is:

a researcher’s social, cultural and subject positions (and other psychological processes) affect: the questions they ask; how they frame them; the theories they are drawn to; how they read—(Bondi (1999) draws a distinction between intertextual and experiential reading; their relations with those they research in the field or through interviews; interpretations they place on empirical evidence; access to data, institutions and outlets for research dissemination; and the likelihood they will be listened to and heard. (Pratt, 2009, p. 556)

I do not share the rural, educational, social, cultural, and religious background of my research participants. I am a secular, Turkish, cis-gender woman, hetero-identifying (then) PhD student originally from Istanbul, Turkey. My research participants are from Rwanda, Congo, and Burundi, so I am an outsider to their community (Gilbert 1994; Mullings 1999). When I met with my research participants for the first time, at a community garden where I used to volunteer before Covid, somehow, I felt a spatial and temporal connection through our shared otherness:

Your name is Ozlem Ayse? It is not an American name? What language do you speak at home? Turkish? So, it is not English? You came here from a different country? So, you were not born here? We were not born here either. So, you are more like us. We left our country too. You don’t have any children? You are young, God will give you some, don’t you worry. You go to university to be a teacher? That is nice. Most of us did not have a chance to go high school, but we are all mothers with many chil-

1 On WhatsApp and its use in academic research see: Kaufmann, K. and Peil, C., 2020. The mobile instant messaging interview (MIMI): Using WhatsApp to enhance self-reporting and explore media usage in situ. Mobile Media & Communication, 8(2), pp. 229–246.
dren. Nice to meet you. Welcome to our community garden.

(Refugees from Congo, Rwanda and Burundi).

They situated and analyzed my positionality (Sultana, 2007) in the first ten minutes of my fieldwork, making me face my privileged position, my class difference, my educational difference, and my positionality during my first encounter with them. After this encounter my identity and their engagement with my research were clearly defined for a while within the refugee community.

Later, during the pandemic while I was waiting for the phones to arrive, my research participants were seeing anti-vaccination videos on YouTube. Such videos went “viral” among the refugee community in Tucson, as they did in many other communities in the US and around the world. Somehow research participants connected my project with those videos. After years of colonialism and distrust toward white Anglo-Americans and Europeans and in the context of racist and xenophobic attitudes towards African refugees, they had the following reaction to vaccine (Hochschild, 1998):

Through the vaccines, the white men will inject chips in our bodies and change our DNA and control our brains to make us like devils. (Refugee from Rwanda, age 47).

Although my research and attitudes towards the research participants had not changed, how they perceived my positionality had. In their eyes my positionality was no longer what it had been. During a WhatsApp interview I was told:

Don’t tell me you are coming from Turkey, Arabia or India, you are one of them, you are white like them. You are white like Trump. (Refugee from Rwanda, age 45).

This woman, who is white like Trump, is asking us many questions about our lives, happiness, finances. Now she asks us to take videos of us. Why? Why does she want to give us phones? Why does she want us to keep the phones? What if those phones are detecting information about our families in some way for the government? What if she controls our brains with those phones? (Four refugee research participants).

My positionality was openly discussed during the interviews, and for the first time my “Whiteness” was an explicit feature of it. On the one hand, this shows how fieldwork unfolds according to political and temporal context (Ward & Jones, 1999). On the other hand, this shows both my research participants and I contain multiple, unstable, contextualized, and politicized positionalities. To maintain ethical relations and a continuous environment of respect while looking and thinking alongside the research participants (Kindon, 2003), a researcher needs to go thorough continuous negotiations of positionalities. For my research participants, the vaccines were not only part of a plot by white people to control them, but my research and the cell phones I was going to give them were too. Even worse, participants were to keep the phone, ensuring their own surveillance and control. My research was not supposed to bring any stress or inconvenience in their lives. These conspiracy theories about vaccines and the cellphones rekindled the understandable mistrust the Sub-Saharan African refugee community has had for white people and brought the PV project to a halt.

PV is a continuous conversation that the researcher engages in as a project unfolds. PV participants decide the content and the tools. Continuous negotiations of positionality among the group is essential. These ongoing negotiations distinguish the PV method from other visual methods. This remotely administered PV project was a constant back and forth negotiation about identity, politics, positionality, gender, age, family, child raising, household economics, loneliness, belonging, despair, faith, food, health concerns, food insecurity and hope for a better life. After a month, in the context of Trump’s America and longstanding distrust of Africans (and people of African descent) toward whites, the PV project participants decided not to use the cellphones. All points of view were listened to and respected in the group, and some of them decided differences of opinion were irreconcilable and left the PV group, including one person who said: I talked with my God and he told me to get out of this project completely (Rwandan, age 53). My goal was to stay open-minded and be non-judgmental and follow an ethical, responsible, and respectful path of action as new relationships and experiences unfolded. I respected their actions guided by their cultural and religious upbringing, and we...
respectfully parted ways with some of the research participants.

After negotiations among themselves, another group of twenty refugees decided to continue participating in the PV project. Most refugees in the PV group were illiterate (including in their own languages), so they choose one refugee from Rwanda who is conversant in many African languages to be the camera trainer for the whole group. He also became my video and research assistant. I trained him via zoom meetings about how to use a video camera (a prosumer handheld fixed-lens camcorder) and a sound recording device. He dropped off the camera at refugees’ front doors and over WhatsApp explained how they should use the camera. Instead of coming together physically to have roundtable discussions, each refugee video recorded themselves with the help of their family members at their home and explained how they felt about the PV project. We arranged WhatsApp group calls to discuss the most pressing issues worthy of making a video. Other refugees watched the video clips online and formed their opinions.

During the PV process, some participants decided they were interested in creating an agri-business together. The PV participants, who had not known each other before this project, now were thinking about getting together to write a grant to support their future agri-business plans. After each participant completed their video clips, the group watched them and decided to make three separate videos about pressing issues. In the first video the refugees explained their ideas about agri-business: Organic food is expensive, we cannot afford to buy it... If you grow your own food in the garden, you know what is in it. It is cheaper than buying it from the grocery-store. You can use the money you don’t spend on food for paying bills. This can also be an agri-bussiness: you can grow vegetables to sell (Refugee from Rwanda, age 44). They also mentioned the problems they encounter as they participate in community gardens in Tucson: I believe the Community Garden is well-organized, I like the way those small plots of lands are. It would be better if they could maybe add more water for the plants, and if they could find us a specific place to make compost, but not in the garden because it is too small (Refugee from Rwanda, age, 45). The aim of this group is to show their film to authorities in Tucson to explain their problems with the community gardens and ask for improvement and seed grants to start their agri-business.
Video on child-raising

During the production of their first video some of the research participants got together and asked me if it is OK to make another video about disciplining children in the US:

*Children are spoiled here. We were told children are free to do what they want [here]. Our parents raised us by telling us what not to do, what to do. We are trying to raise our children the same way [we were raised], but it’s a problem. Then the children call the police. When the police come, they do not want to know what is going on at home. They just take our kids away* (Refugee from Burundi, age 38) (Fig. 2). The refugee participants had not shared this problem with me during the semi-structured interviews or focus groups. PV provided them a safe space to talk about their troubles as they resettle in the US. *Now I am afraid to tell my children what not to do. I look at my kids like an opposition political party. I am shocked* (Refugee from Congo, age 42).

The aim of this group is to show the video to Tucson Police Department (TPD) as well as the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD).

Video on IOM loans

While the videos on agri-business and child raising were being shot, some refugees started to get together to discuss another challenge they face as they resettled in the US: the loans they take out with the International Organization for Migration (IOM) to cover their travel expenses to the US (Fig. 3). Being processed as a legitimate refugee by the US government is one thing; however, their travel to the US is something else, and the US does not pay for that. They formed a new group and focused on what the IOM loan is, what they think about it and how it affects their lives in the US. *Paying back the IOM is showing that you are giving back the love they (the US) showed to you by saving you from the refugee camps. That is why I needed to do everything in my power to find a job, or two jobs or three jobs to pay the IOM loan, to show that I am worthy of their love* (Refugee from Congo, age 58). The refugees are hoping to raise awareness about the IOM loan and its negative effects on their lives as they resettle in the US: *We have a $13,000 IOM loan. My husband is a dishwasher, and he also works as a caregiver. I sent my first-born to work instead of to school to help pay the loan. I don’t know if we will ever pay it off* (Refugee from Rwanda, age 52). They hope to create a campaign to replace the IOM loan system with a travel grant system and use this video during their campaign.

**Conclusion**

While PV can be a research method to collect data, or to help communities tell stories and raise awareness about the problems they live through, it also can be an activity that ignites a transformation in a community. PV is not only a way of knowing the world, gathering data to learn about the world, it also is involved in changing it, bringing forth new relationships and new ways of being, “producing ontological effects” (Butler, 2010, p. 147). For
instance, in the emergence of new ways of being a parent in the US or seeking to create a new agribusiness, people are “working to bring into being certain kinds of realities” (Butler, 2010, p. 147). As Derrida (1988, p. 13) notes, “the performative does not have its referent outside of itself or in any event before and in front of itself …[I]t produces, or transforms a situation…” PV filmmaking is a performative act. Just by the sheer act of negotiating the issues to be filmed and making a film together about themselves, the research participants created a new community where none existed before, and that community is taking steps to organize collective action. The emergence of this new community in and through the making of the films illustrates the performativity of PV and its ability to restructure the complex sociality of communities. The performativity of PV can be understood through attention to individual lives, social groups, and communities. If performativity is understood through attention to what is accomplished in the doing of something, what is accomplished (what “happens as a result”) has an infinite range of effects. Thus, the performativity of PV works through people who take part in creating, distributing, and watching the video. The performativity of the PV also affect people who have never seen the video, as they are in the same landscape and embedded in social relations affected by people who either took part in its production or saw the video.

During a PV project, facilitators go through the work of observing, negotiating, experimenting, and mutually adjusting sociotechnical assemblages to advance a project and produce a collaborative video. The collaborative video production, which includes research group member’s training, the group discussions, the feedback loops, the revised editing process, is all a long sequence of trial and error. The PV project eventually goes through reconfigurations and reformulations to find out what works for a given group. But what makes PV so valuable is its performative dimension. The success of a PV process depends on the mutual adjustments made according to the conditions of felicity in a group, those conditions necessary for things to “work” (Austin, 1965). These adjustments are never given in advance and always require attention to a group’s characteristics and dynamics. Similarly, adjustments, negotiations, feedback loops, and revision and editing are parts of a process of video production that produced new groups and transform strangers into acquaintances, friends, or business partners. The refugee participants started to see themselves as community members who can work together to find solutions to food and economic insecurity, and intergenerational gaps between refugee parents and teenagers. This also suggests the ways in which PV is likely to have effects on the refugee community at large. The ability to reconfigure existing relationships, and to produce new socialities and subjectivities illustrate the performative nature of PV.

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