Article

Exile, Return, Record

Exploring Historical Narratives and Community Resistance through Participatory Filmmaking in 'Post-conflict' Guatemala

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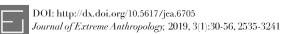*Ghent University*

Abstract Following previous experiences of violence and forced displacement, 'the returnees' from the Guatemalan *campesino* community 'Copal AA la Esperanza' are now defending their territory against the construction of a hydroelectric dam. The returnees unexpectedly mobilized me as a Belgian historian to 'make' their 'shared history' and produce a documentary about their past and present struggle. The aim of this article is to reflect on *how* and *why* I developed a participatory, filmmaking-based methodology to tackle this challenge. I focus on *filmmaking*, *participation* and *knowledge production* to demonstrate the epistemological and ethical benefits of a dialogue between disciplines and methodologies as much as between academic and community practices and concepts. As such, I exemplify my visual participatory approach through its engagement with post-colonial histories and the co-creation of shared knowledge at the intersection of community and research interests. Moreover, I demonstrate how filmmaking can be developed as a grounded, visual, and narrative approach connecting media activism with 'performative ethnography'. Combining insights from participatory action research (PAR) with Johannes Fabian's notion of 'performance', I argue for 'nonextractivist methodologies'; 'knowing with' instead of 'knowing-about'. From being a side project and a matter of research ethics, participatory filmmaking turned for me into an investigative tool to explore the collective production and mobilization of historical narratives. I argue that participatory research should not be limited to communities participating in research projects; researchers can equally participate in community projects without this obstructing scientific research. In sum, participatory visual methods challenge us to reconsider the role of academics in (post-conflict) settings.

Keywords participatory filmmaking, co-creation, shared history, displacement, collective narratives, community resistance, media activism, performative ethnography

I visited the community of 'Copal AA La Esperanza' for the first time in May 2015, after a three and half hour sweltering mini-bus ride and a 45-minute walk. From the city of Cobán in the Central Highlands of Guatemala, two buses per day head in the direction of Copal AA. After one hour of paved road until the crossing of the market village Cubilhuitz, you can count another 2,5 hours of dirt road straight into the jungle and into indigenous Q'eqchi' territory.[9] After passing Cubilhuitz, the unpaved road

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[9] Guatemala's indigenous groups, which amount to 60 to 70 per cent of the population, consist of the Maya, Xinka and Garifuna. The Maya are by far the largest indigenous population comprising 22 different ethnic groups, all speaking a different Maya language, for example Q'eqchi' (Viaene 2010, 13).

'Copal AA La Esperanza'
is one of these return communities.

Screenshot from trailer 'Los Retornados', a 2019 production in collaboration with filmmaker Pieter De Vos, originating from my first two fieldwork periods in 2015 and 2016. To watch this video, go to www.vimeo.com/342252852

deteriorated as we drove. 'This is as far as the *Coaster[10]* goes', the man next to me said, as the driver slowly maneuvered the minibus in the opposite direction. A young *Copalero[11]* waited for me at El Rancho, a Q'eqchi' community from where the dirt road turned into a rocky path only motorcycles and pickup trucks could access. My companion complained about the bad road conditions, telling me that municipal authorities kept on promising construction works that never happened. Together we walked to Copal AA La Esperanza, the very last community on this route. Entering Copal AA, we passed a huge wooden sign:

<div align="center">

ALTO: ADVERTENCIA
BIENVENIDOS
COPAL AA LA ESPERANZA
RECHAZAMOS LA CONSTRUCCIÓN DE LA REPRESA XALALÁ
SI A LA VIDA[12]

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Copal AA is a *campesino[13]* community located in the Alta Verapaz Department. People in neighboring Q'eqchi' communities had already told me about Copal AA; that they were 'different' because they were 'returnees'. In 1981-1982, at the height of Guatemala's

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[10] Coaster is a type of Toyota minibus.

[11] Spanish for 'someone who lives in the community of Copal AA La Esperanza'.

[12] 'Stop: Warning. Welcome. Copal AA La Esperanza. We reject the construction of the Xalalá Dam'

[13] Campesinos are mostly indigenous peasants living in rural communities.

More than 900 victims
lay to rest in different places in this region.

internal armed conflict, they fled to Mexico for more than 10 years (Stepputat 1999, 73). During peace negotiations in 1993, four different ethnic groups collectively returned and
Screenshot from trailer 'Los Retornados', www.vimeo.com/342252852.

founded a new 'return community' at the shores of the Chixoy River. As we speak, their common future is endangered by the possible construction of the Xalalá hydroelectric dam (Viaene 2015a). Fearing new violence and displacement, the *Copaleros* resist the imposition of any 'megaproject'[14] in the region.

In Copal AA, histories of exile and return did not only 'take place' but have been continuously mobilized to 'make place', to claim and defend lands and territory.[15] The returnees unexpectedly mobilized me as a Belgian historian to 'make' the history of their community by producing a documentary about Copal AA's past and present struggle. When I first arrived, Héctor Fernández,[16] head of the local authorities, clarified the reason of my presence through the microphone in front of the community council, and in front of me (field recordings, 26/05/2015, my emphasis):

> So, I believe that this work [trabajo] is going to take a lot of patience, a lot of time – above all, a lot of dedication. Although, as we said, we already started this some time ago, but that work is not *organized* [arreglado] yet – everything is *scattered* [disperso]. So, that is our objective now. Our companion [compañera] will come and help us to

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[14] Large-scale investment projects related to natural resource extraction like mining, hydroelectric or palm oil industries.

[15] For more information on (historical) narratives and 'place-making' see Katie Vasey's ethnography of Iraqi Shi'i refugees who resettled in a country town in Australia (Vasey 2011) or the work of Talja Blokland on collective histories and 'spatial stratification' in the gentrified neighborhood formerly known as Little Italy in New Haven, Connecticut, US (Blokland 2009).

[16] Pseudonym.

Now our lands and communities are threatened again.

systematize [sistematizar] – how to *make the history* [hacer la historia] of
our community. (...) That is why we are having this conversation so that

we won't have doubts: Well, who is that woman, where does she come
from? Or: What is she doing in our community? So that we can all give
testimony, information – without a problem let's say. So that we don't
have to doubt why this is *useful* for us [para qué va a servir].

As a historian, the idea to 'make' community history first made me feel uncomfortable.[17]
As an activist, however, the opportunity to generate community-based research with
social impact appealed to me. To tackle this challenge, I developed a participatory,
filmmaking-based methodology, combining insights from participatory action research
(PAR) (Fals-Borda and Rahman 1991; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014), visual
ethnography (Pink 2013; Gubrium and Harper 2016), indigenous media activism
(Schiwy 2019) and Johannes Fabian's notion of 'performative ethnography' (Fabian
1990).

While 'co-creation' and 'co-learning' are central features in the majority of participatory
visual research, disciplinary and academic boundaries make cross-fertilization difficult
and often prevent practitioners from speaking to one another. Although this has changed
since the 1990's, disciplinary and academic 'sequestering' still applies to participatory
and/or action research, participatory video as well as to communications, (indigenous)
media, art and film studies. The 2018 foundation of the international *Participatory Video
Festival* (PVF) aimed at transcending these boundaries (PVF#1 2018). At PVF#1, I
found inspiration in the work of Nicola Mai exploring experiences and representations

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[17] Historians collaborating in the making of 'official histories' – especially 'state-sponsored'
ones – are often criticized that they 'merely execute political agendas' and therefore lose their
academic freedom (Bevernage and Wouters 2018, 2–3).

Our struggle continues,
no matter what,

of migrants working in the sex industry through participative ethnographic filmmaking (Mai 2016). Next, Maarten Hendriks demonstrated how the making of a fiction movie

with gangs in Goma (DRCongo) turned into an ethnography of political performance (Hendriks 2019). And van Dienderen, in turn, stressed the collective nature of applied visual arts projects (van Dienderen 2009).

The aim of this article is to reflect on *how* and *why* I gradually engaged with participatory filmmaking. I focus on three interrelated levels: *filmmaking*, *participation* and *knowledge production*. Through the article, I will define my approach as the co-production of 'shared knowledge' at the intersection of community and research interests. My focus on 'filmmaking' rather than 'video' emphasizes process as the subject of analysis through the 'mediated interactions' between different participants, including the ethnographer (van Dienderen 2009, 249). Moreover, I will define 'participation' as a coordinated act of consensus on various levels and during various stages of the filmmaking process. From being a side-project and a matter of research ethics, participatory filmmaking gradually turned for me into an investigative tool; a way of exploring the returnees' capacity to collectively produce and mobilize historical narratives. To ensure the project's action-compound, participatory ethnographic filmmaking eventually turned into the collaborative production of the short documentary 'Los Retornados' together with Pieter De Vos, a Belgian filmmaker.

The article has five parts. Before diving into participatory filmmaking, I first reflect on the historical connection between indigenous people, land and conflict in Guatemala. The next two parts unravel how my participatory visual approach emerged from the community's historical and political trajectories. In the second part, I explain how the returnees negotiated filmmaking to match the research project with community media activism. In the third part, I explore participation and the production of 'shared history' in relation to Copal AA's governance practices. In the two final parts of the article, I

focus on the epistemological significance of my approach; why I consider participatory filmmaking a shift from '*informative* to *performative* ethnography' (Fabian 1990, 18), and how performative ethnography became a route to knowledge about collective narrative capacity and community resistance.

Indigenous People, Land and Conflict

I start by highlighting the historical connection between indigenous people, land and conflict in Guatemala. Between 1960 and 1996, Guatemala was shattered by one of the longest and deadliest armed confrontations on the Latin American continent. The internal armed conflict was characterized by state repression against citizens in response to the armed resistance of leftist social movements and guerrilla groups. UN-facilitated peace negotiations between the government and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) took 11 years but eventually ended 36 years of violence. In its 1999 final report, the UN-sponsored Historical Clarification Commission (CEH) counted over 200,000 people killed; 83 per cent of the victims being indigenous Maya and 93 per cent of the documented violations committed by military state forces and related paramilitary groups. The conflict had an outspoken ethnic compound and the CEH concluded that agents of the state committed acts of genocide against groups of Mayan people. The Commission named land distribution, racism, structural injustice and political exclusion as the underlying causes of the conflict (CEH 1999).

Two decades after the signing of peace, a new wave of violence is sweeping the country. Guatemala's transition into a formal democracy translated into neoliberal reforms opening the door for extractive industries (Illmer 2018, 4; Wayland and Kuniholm 2016, 395). Unequal land distribution and institutionalized racism are at the root of the escalating incidence of forced evictions and extrajudicial killings of indigenous people defending their lands, livelihoods and the environment against megaprojects (Tauli-Corpuz 2018).[18] Communities have been publicly denouncing government pressure and formulated threats towards their leaders, unannounced military presence in their territory and bribing attempts to accept megaprojects in return for electrification and road construction works (Viaene 2015b, 23). Recently, threats have turned into the actual killing of *campesino* leaders. In 2017, the Human Rights Defenders Unit of Guatemala (UDEFEGUA) documented 483 attacks against people defending their lands. During the first half of 2018, more than 300 evictions were already registered and 18 activists killed (Tauli-Corpuz 2018; Vidal 2018).

Copal AA La Esperanza is one of the indigenous communities taking the lead in a regional opposition movement against the construction of the Xalalá hydroelectric dam on the Chixoy River. The second biggest dam ever planned by the National Electrification Institute (INDE) would affect 220-230 communities by major changes to water flow and biodiversity, flood the lands of 58 *campesino* communities and displace thousands of Q'eqchi' living on the border of the Alta Verapaz and El Quiché departments (Viaene 2015, 22-24). For now, communities threatened by the Xalalá Dam

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[18] The majority of Q'eqchi' *campesinos* in the Alta Verapaz department has no property title because the Q'eqchi' were repeatedly displaced and dispossessed from their lands through history; during the colonial period, the liberal period and the internal armed conflict and most recently during neoliberal times (Viaene 2015a, 76).

succeeded in putting the project on hold after a decade of regional resistance[19] through ACODET; the Association of Communities for Development and in Defense of Territory and Natural Resources (NISGUA 2018, 1). Regional communities, however, continue to express their opposition to the Xalalá project and are currently in a state of high alert due to the rise of rural violence.

Compared to neighboring Q'eqchi' communities – most of whom were internally displaced during the conflict – Copal AA has an unusual historical trajectory. The community consists of a mix of four ethnic groups; Mam, Q'eqchi, Q'anjobal and Acoteca. *Copaleros* originally come from different places in the rural highlands, mainly from the departments of Huehuetenango and San Marcos (Egan 1999, 97–98). During the military's counterinsurgency offensive in 1981, the indigenous highland population was left with only two options: surrendering to the control of the army or seeking refuge in the jungle, inhabited by presumed guerrilla supporters (Stepputat 1999, 66). Together with more than 45,000 others, people living in Copal AA today took a third option and fled to Mexico into more than 100 settlements under registration and protection of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Stepputat 1999, 73).

Past experiences of state terror and ten years of exile in internationally assisted refugee camps resulted in the emergence of new forms of political organization and collective identity among the refugees in Mexico (ibid.). In 1993, 2,500 refugees from different Mexican camps organized themselves and collectively returned to Guatemala. Crossing the border with dozens of buses, 'the returnees' [los retornados] carried the slogan 'Return is struggle, not resignation' (Bradley 2013, 104-106). After negotiating land from the Guatemalan government, different groups of returnees went their separate ways. From community policy documents we learn that on 12 January 1996, 90 families celebrated the foundation of the 'return community' of Copal AA La Esperanza. In 2016, the community consisted of 124 families, a total of 570 'pluricultural' and 'multilingual' inhabitants.

Since the foundation of their community, people from Copal AA have been very concerned with history; who are we, where do we come from and where are we going as a community, as *returnees*? The possible construction of the Xalalá Dam opened a discursive space where historical narratives are being renegotiated and rearticulated. Facing new displacement and destruction of their livelihoods, Copal AA adapted its community development and defense strategies. The returnees started updating their collective return identity and community history to make sense of on-going injustice and violence but also to strategically counter the state's divide-and-conquer-strategy and mobilize international solidarity. With my research I could tap into this community process, unexpectedly resulting in a participatory filmmaking project. Moving away from externally led interventions and responding to community challenges has been coined as one of the core principles of action research (Colom 2013; Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014, 2).

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[19] Communities engage in collective action by mobilizing their right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent; organizing 'popular consultations'; mobilizing (inter)national networks; organizing road-blocks and controlling access to their territory; using online and visual media (cfr. infra); and through judicial activism, street protest and artistic interventions.

Filmmaking and Community Media Activism

I visited Copal AA La Esperanza for the first time in May 2015 because community authorities invited me. This happened after I presented my on-going research at a general assembly of indigenous authorities from the Nimlajacoc micro region. I introduced myself as a historian, looking for victim-survivor communities to participate in my fieldwork on local historical memory processes (field notes, 09/05/2015). Present authorities from Copal AA, better known as the Community Development Council (COCODE), immediately expressed their interest in collaborating and invited me to their community. At that time, I did not know how exactly their historical trajectory deviated from other regional Q'eqchi' communities. Also, I had no idea why they were so eager to invite a historian.

Upon my arrival in Copal AA, the COCODE asked me to present my research project for the approval of the community. Days in advance, local authorities had informed people about the arrival of 'the historian' [la historiadora]. During my first community council, in his opening speech (cfr. supra) Héctor Fernández clarified that they 'already started this work some time ago' and that I would come and help 'to make the history' of their community. From Héctor's speech I learned that the *Copaleros* expected several things from me as a historian. First of all, I was invited to join and continue an on-going community initiative. I was also asked to systematize and organize 'scattered' pieces into some sort of whole. Finally, this 'work' – referred to as 'making history' – had to be 'useful'.

After I presented my research, the community council started negotiating with me about working methods and research output. It was the time of the year when people had to weed out their cornfields, so they proposed that the women would testify in the morning and the men in the afternoon returning from their fields, 'so that we all have the opportunity to speak and enough time to express ourselves'. Next, they discussed that different generations should testify, everyone who 'lived and experienced it'. They seemed to agree that the periodization of their community history should take off when 'the exploitation and oppression' first started, referring to Guatemala's late 19th century liberal land reforms and semi-feudal *finca* system (Huet 2008, 20; R. Wilson 1999, 42–43). About its ending, Héctor initiated the discussion: 'I believe this history doesn't end but – let's go see where we are going to stop'. The community council reached consensus to focus on both Copal AA's past and present 'struggle' [lucha] including their contemporary resistance against the Xalalá dam. Or as Héctor put it:

> We returned from refuge (…), arrived in our community and saw that there is a need to continue fighting [seguir luchando]. (…) From the 80's onwards they fought us with bullets – the army was massacring our families, our people. (…) Now that we're back, although they're not going to kill us in that way anymore, they're going to end us in another way. (…) So that is also part of our history.

During later fieldwork, the returnees would often voice this continuity between past and present through the common expression 'la lucha sigue', the struggle continues. Finally, someone proposed that each 'testimony' [testimonio] should be 'recorded in the form of

Video clip 'If it is for love' [Si Es Por Amor] by Grupo Alfa y Omega. To watch this video: scan the QR code with your smartphone, or go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ZPLlpZc25g

video' [grabado en forma de video]; a project that soon became known as 'the documentary' [el documental] (field recordings, 26/05/2015).

The suggestion to record everything did not come out of the blue but made a lot of sense considering the community's particular engagement with a national trend of audio-visual and web-based activism that is, in turn, rooted in a broader history of collaborative and community media in Latin America. First of all, Copal AA has a partnership with Red Tz'ikin, a national network of independent (indigenous) community video makers. According to their website, their aim is to 'decentralize, democratize and decolonize audio-visual means of production' in Guatemala. Years before my arrival, several *Copaleros* formed a 'video group' and received community filmmaking training as members of the network. In 2014 and with the support of Red Tz'ikin, the Copal AA community band produced a video clip that turned their song 'If it is for love' [Si es por amor] – about resisting the Xalalá Dam – into a regional hit.

Apart from Copal AA's alliance with Red Tz'ikin, the returnees also engage in media activism to express their community identity, denounce megaprojects and advocate for environmental protection. The returnees not only seem to share most of what happens to them online, they also *make* things happen to be able to post about it on social media through individual as well as community accounts. During my fieldwork in 2015, teachers and students organized a march during the community's yearly Environment Festival. Everybody dressed up in self-made costumes and carried slogans calling for environmental protection. At first, I found it bizarre; this loud and colorful mass of people marching in and for the proper community. Until I realized that part of the march was actually held online where people shared and liked photographs and videos

Copal AA march in commemoration of the 1944 October Revolution. Picture shared publicly on Facebook on 21 October 2018 by Festivales Solidarios, a national solidarity collective focusing on the defense of territory and historical memory.

of the event, not only community members themselves but also their regional network of friends and (inter)national solidarity organizations, including myself. Other examples of community media activism are the 2015 women's march or the 2018 commemoration of the 1944 October Revolution and agrarian reform movement. Even though the returnees find themselves in the most remote part of the Alta Verapaz jungle, they connect with various resistance and solidarity movements across the Latin-American continent and across the globe. It is important, though, to emphasize that media activism *per se* does not distinguish the returnees from neighboring Q'eqchi' communities. The existence of Red Tz'ikin since 2015 but also the 2012 foundation of *Prensa Comunitaria* – a fast-growing community media platform – indicates a national, (rural) indigenous trend. Yet, the returnees do have a particular history of recording and documenting organized struggle, as I will demonstrate further in the article.

Next to this national trend, Copal AA's use of media tactics is also rooted in a continental history of militant cinema and anticolonial struggle. Freya Schiwy explains how 'New Latin American Cinema' and the more global and militant 'third cinema' of the 1960's and 70's denounced 'internal colonialism – the extension of a neo-imperial

logic of racism, exploitation, and dispossession – and was informed by a Marxist and anticolonial analysis of global capital.' Latin American militant cinema ended in the late 1980's because many filmmakers went into exile or were 'disappeared' (Schiwy 2019).

The subsequent rise of indigenous media activism then, has been explained in terms of increasing global citizenship (Rodríguez and Kidd 2009), cultural activism (Salazar and Córdova 2008) or linked to developments in the field of visual anthropology 'reversing the colonial gaze' as an 'antidote to the crisis of representation' since the 1960's (P. Wilson and Stewart 2008, 3–4). Schiwy, however, stresses the continuity between contemporary indigenous media and the 60's and 70's vanguard revolutionary cinema, even though 21st century media activism has been ideologically broader and different in style. She argues that instead of understanding indigenous media as 'citizen's media' (Rodriguez 2011), critical scholarship should move beyond a liberal democratic focus and engage with post-colonial debates. Schiwy ascertains that 'critical work on digital media has rarely engaged with post- and settler colonial histories' or addressed the convergence between Marxism and indigenous struggle, with media activism from the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, being the most conspicuous example (Schiwy 2019). I come back to this knowledge gap in the next part of the article.

In sum, not only could I tap into an on-going community history project, engaging with audiovisual media equally matched the research context. Additionally, the returnees' request to record their history of exile and return also fitted into my personal trajectory as a researcher. I had no filmmaking experience but initially thought of making this documentary as an opportunity to get access to the community. Also, I considered filmmaking in terms of reciprocity; to be able to 'give something back'. I had been struggling with this during previous fieldwork in other regional communities. When people asked me what I wanted to do with their recorded interview, I frankly answered that I was writing an academic book in English with the information they gave me. Usually, the answer felt like a confession and was unsatisfying for both the interviewee and for myself. Apart from 'giving back', the filmmaking process also seemed an opportunity to simultaneously gather empirical data for my research on local post-conflict memory processes. I imagined that a video 'side project' would allow me to equally ask the questions I wanted to ask to empirically test some meta-historical concepts I had in mind back then. Filming individual interviews, I reasoned, could lead to a database of transcriptions for further analysis and interpretation.

However, from being a side project and a matter of research ethics, filmmaking unexpectedly turned for me into an investigative tool to explore collective narrative capacity and community resistance. To understand the epistemological significance of my approach however, it is necessary to first consider its participatory nature. Instead of doing research *on* or *for* people, my approach transformed into doing research *with* people, or as Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it: 'knowing-with' rather than 'knowing-about' (Santos 2018, 14). In varying degrees, this principle characterizes most participatory research, privileging 'subject-subject' rather than 'subject-object' relations (Santos 2018, 261–62; Gubrium and Harper 2016, 12). Unlike many participatory video (PV) projects, however, participation in this case did not entail handing over 'cameras to the people' to reclaim local histories in a framework of technical capacity building (I.

Rodriguez and Inturias 2016, 44; Shaw and Robertson 1997). Instead, the returnees handed over the camera to me in order to increase their narrative capacity by mobilizing my academic legitimacy, network and resources.

Participation and the Making of Shared History

Besides filmmaking, my participatory approach was equally grounded in an existing community reality. Copal AA's community organization and governance practices are inspired by a mix of *indigenous consensus governance*, *cooperativism*, *participatory democracy* and *democratic centralism*. This is the outcome of various *Copaleros'* historical and political trajectories that I will briefly touch upon and then relate to the meaning of participation during the filmmaking project.

First of all, Copal AA community governance is partly rooted in indigenous consensus governance where 'consensus' entails both at the same time 'a given arrangement' and 'a process of dissent'. Schiwy points out that integrating opposites is characteristic for Maya languages where 'consensus and dissensus appear as two sides of the same coin' (Schiwy 2012, 86). As such, indigenous consensus differs from unanimity but equally from a plurality vote system. Rather than counting community member's votes, decisions are made through deliberation and continuous interaction between rotating authorities, delegates and the community assembly. While liberal democracy is based on individual rights, consensus governance is subjected to community interests (Schiwy 2012, 88).

Secondly, a strong cooperative organizational form equally characterizes Copal AA; members count with 7,8 hectares of land each, next to community land for collective work and reforestation purposes (Strategic Community Plan, 2016). Thirdly, the *Copaleros* have appropriated some of the language and practices of participatory democracy during life in exile between 1981-1993. Mexican refugee camps were a space for participation where the refugees were trained by international aid workers and learned new techniques of democratic governance (Stolen 2004, 5 and 20). To stimulate more direct participation in the preparation of the collective return, the refugees organized themselves in so-called 'sectors' [sectores] in the different camps; committees per constituency such as the women, the youth, health promoters, the elders, the educators, etc. (ibid, 8). Today, Copal AA continues this rotating delegate system with 14 sectors. Copal AA's highest authority is the COCODE, the Community Development Council [Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo], an elected team of about 6 *Copaleros* executing daily community governance and acting as community delegates on a regional level, towards municipal and national state authorities and towards other external organizations. Unlike the sector or cooperative system, most regional Q'eqchi' communities also have a COCODE, an entity that was implemented in rural areas after the peace process (Abbott 2017). The returnees, however, have a particular centralist interpretation of the COCODE's operation and function; another historical legacy.

During the conflict there were strong cross-border links between the Mexican refugee camps and the Marxist-Leninist Guerrilla Army of the Poor (EGP) in the Guatemalan jungle. EGP-bases were organized according to an appropriated version of the decision-making practice and disciplinary policy of *democratic centralism*; initially defined by

Some of the documentary participants, participatory ethnographic filmmaking during my first fieldwork period in 2015, Copal AA La Esperanza.

Vladimir Lenin in 1902 as 'unity of action, freedom of discussion and criticism' (Lenin 1972, 320).[20] The EGP combined democratic base discussion with central and strong leadership to accomplish coordinated, effective and swift action under a permanent military threat (Fieldnotes 01/07/2018; Harnecker 2003, 10). Various *Copaleros* resided with the EGP at some point during the conflict and later assumed leading roles in the foundation of the return community. Today, the returnees departed from authoritarian and bureaucratic soviet centralism as well as from the revolutionary EGP context and translated democratic centralism into a framework of community resistance and regional territory defense.

Resulting from the aforementioned historical and political trajectories of its founding members, the return community did not only develop participatory governance and organizational practices but also a high capacity for coordinated and collective action. Copal AA governance is defined by a fusion of indigenous consensus governance, cooperativism, participatory democracy and central leadership by the COCODE *in service of* the community. Consensus and participatory processes are efficiently 'coordinated' and 'organized' so that *participation* would not obstruct collective *action*. This pitfall can actually also be articulated in the context of PAR projects, where participation can equally become a 'new tyranny' and lead to group inertia and a dysfunctional action-compound (Cooke and Kothari 2001). It is important to keep the aforementioned historical and political trajectories of the *Copaleros* in mind to understand the emergence of specific participatory practices during the filmmaking process.

Some of the documentary participants, participatory ethnographic filmmaking during my first fieldwork period in 2015, Copal AA La Esperanza.

The returnees gradually revealed their capacity for coordinated and collective action the moment they heard that I, a Belgian historian, was roaming around the region and invited me to their community. From the very start of the filmmaking project, the returnees adopted a coordinated yet participatory approach and effectively distributed narrative labor on a community scale among different participants, including myself. Once I agreed to participate in the making of a documentary, the authorities took charge of the project. During this first phase of fieldwork[21] in Copal AA between May-June 2015, the COCODE together with two respected teachers and community leaders 'organized' and 'coordinated' everything. I call them the *co-directors*. Together, we continued considering the periodization and central themes of Copal AA's history on which consensus was reached during the first community council. Mandated by the community council, the co-directors nominated a group of 21 community members to become *documentary participants*, the main characters of the film to be interviewed. Some of the participants already volunteered during the community council but the co-directors also pointed out additional characters themselves. They proposed participants according to different age categories or their assumed knowledge about the themes and events emerging from the community council. After some initial meetings, we concluded with a rough timeline – a *storyboard* if you will – including themes and events that the co-directors assigned to specific age groups and then to specific characters.

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[21] During my PhD trajectory, I conducted 9 months of fieldwork in regional victim-survivor communities between 2014-2018 of which I spent 2 months in Copal AA. Fieldwork in Copal AA was split up in three different periods in 2015, 2016 and 2018. Because of the community's high organizational capacity, the nature of this kind of fieldwork was different from my other regional experiences; it was very intense and an above average density of ethnographic data were co-created in a relative short period of time.

Some of the documentary participants, participatory ethnographic filmmaking during my first fieldwork period in 2015, Copal AA La Esperanza.

The kind of knowledge the co-directors desired from the documentary participants was *lived experience* that was at the same time publicly recognized as being *shared* on a community level; not necessarily because the entire community experienced something together as a group (the collective return, the foundation of the community, resisting the Xalalá Dam, etc.) but also because different community members had gone through similar experiences or at least could identify with this experience as part of their family's intergenerational trajectory (discrimination, resettlement, displacement, life in exile, etc.). Moreover, the co-directors did not only consider knowledge to be shared retrospectively, but also in a practical and anticipating sense – with hindsight as it were (Carr 1986, 126). The making of shared history did not only aspire to be a collective sense-making effort but also an action-oriented and *collectivizing* community process captured in the returnees' rearticulated slogan 'Return is struggle, not resignation'. Next to the 21 individual documentary participants, the co-directors also gradually introduced 6 *collective characters*: the COCODE, the sectors, the future generation, the ancestral council, the community branch of ACODET and the community music band.

Before every interview, the co-directors and I refined the key themes to be addressed with specific characters and loosely prepared some basic interview questions. The community considered me as 'la historiadora', the historian facilitating the filmmaking process. I visited documentary participants and conducted the semi-structured interviews while filming them. Notwithstanding the co-directors' coordinating function and interview preparation, documentary participants had agency in the making of the community history. Without going into detail here, I want to mention the mastering of techniques and strategies to fit their individual life-stories into the community narrative while at the same time co-authoring it.

The recording of the interviews can be compared with a standard semi-structural interview situation between the ethnographer and the interviewee. Only this time, I – the ethnographer – was 'coordinated' by the co-directors instead of following my own research agenda and questionnaires. Moreover, during the interviews and according to a rotating system, one member of the COCODE always accompanied me to show the way and for technical assistance but also to daily report to the COCODE and keep an eye on the filmmaking process. Next, I was not only asked to facilitate the recording of the interviews, the community also entrusted me with the final montage and editing of the documentary. As Héctor mentioned in his opening speech, my job was to 'systematize' all the separate interviews and string them together 'to make the history' of Copal AA. Finally, the sectors participated through repeated feedback sessions (cfr. infra)

and the co-directors and myself consulted the community assembly at the beginning and end of every of my three fieldwork periods between 2015-2018.

In sum, filmmaking revealed an interesting dynamic between 'coordination' and 'participation' among the COCODE, the sectors, the community assembly and 'the historian'. I consider Copal AA's community history to be 'shared' because it was *told collectively* by distributing narrative labor, not necessarily because every community member was capable of telling the entire story from her own lived experience. I also categorize it as 'shared' because it was *publicly recognized* as such over the course of the filmmaking process, which does not exclude the mutual existence of individual and family narratives. In this specific research and community setting, participation thus came to signify a *coordinated act of consensus* and did not only entail the community's participation in a research project but equally the researcher's participation in a community project. Participatory filmmaking practices emerged from the returnees' political and historical trajectories as well as from the pragmatics of their everyday community resistance. Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon argue that only participatory research is able to create 'the conditions for practitioners to understand and develop the ways in which practices are conducted "from within" the practice traditions that inform and orient them' (Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon 2014, 5). I interpret this understanding 'from within' as a critical engagement with a community's political and historical trajectories. In a Latin-American context, this is in line with Schiwy's call for considering post-colonial histories and the convergence between indigenous struggle and Marxism (cfr. supra).

I am well aware that participatory methods risk reinforcing internal power imbalances and dysfunctional group consensus (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 112). At the same time, however, I argue that participatory methods should first and foremost depart from community realities instead of being overwritten by academic, Western or liberal-democratic practices or falling into an overemphasis on pre-fixed formulas and techniques (Cooke and Kothari 2001, 38). Only then, 'hybrid' understandings or 'cultural and conceptual mestizajes' can emerge at the intersection of community and research interests (Santos 2018, 11). As such, participatory research might also contribute to the 'decolonization' of research methodologies (Smith 2012).

From Informative to Performative Ethnography

Filmmaking and participation, the two first pillars of my community-based approach, gradually came to define the production of shared knowledge; a final element I will discuss in the two remaining parts of this article. I initially thought of making a film as a way of getting access to the field, a way of 'giving back' and a side project enabling me to collect empirical data. Gradually, however, participatory filmmaking turned into a full-fledged research method with the returnees and with social impact. A specific kind of knowledge or information came to the surface as the filmmaking project turned into a community venture that I did not only facilitate but also actively took part in. First of all, I came to know how and why this community was constructing a 'shared history'. Participatory filmmaking revealed the community's capacity to collectively produce and mobilize historical narratives in a context of on-going violence and resistance. Secondly, participating in the filmmaking process myself, I started gaining insight into my own role

as a researcher in co-producing the narrative that, at the same, I was also studying. What was my part in the division of narrative labor and why? How did the returnees mobilize their narrative capacity to get me on board but also to mediate my role in the making of *their* history? And finally, what did *participating* in the making of shared history learn me about *researching* collective narrative capacity?

Once participatory filmmaking turned out to be a way of knowing, I decided to do an ethnography of the filmmaking process itself (van. Dienderen 2009). Inspired by political ethnographer Maarten Hendriks (Hendriks 2019), I consider this an example of what Johannes Fabian calls a shift from 'informative' to 'performative' ethnography. An informative ethnography, he argues, is the kind where the ethnographer asks questions and hopes to obtain knowledge from his 'informants' (Fabian 1990, 11). According to Fabian however:

> Performance seemed to be a more adequate description both of the ways people realize their culture and of the method by which an ethnographer produces knowledge about that culture (Fabian 1990, 18).

Fabian claims that there is a kind of knowledge that cannot be found out by asking:

> This sort of knowledge can be represented – made present – only through action, enactment or performance. (…) The ethnographer's role, then, is no longer that of a questioner; he or she is but a provider of occasions, a catalyst in the weakest sense, and a producer (…) in the strongest (Fabian 1990, 18).

Fabian emphasizes that performance 'is not what they do and we observe; we are both engaged in it'. Moreover, a performative ethnography is 'the kind where the ethnographer does not call the tune but plays along' (Fabian 1990, 18). In essence, Fabian understands the notion of performance as the act of 'giving form' to human reality. Performance then, is no mere synonym for 'enacting' a pre-existing social or cultural script but involves a specific kind of social, coordinated action in which something new is created, fashioned or made as 'the result of a multitude of actors working together to give form to experiences, ideas, feelings, projects' (Fabian 1990, 11-13) – or in the case of my research; shared history.

Fabian's performance concept relates to PAR in considering the co-production of shared knowledge through action as opposed to ethnographic data 'collection' by researchers, or information 'transfer' and even 'extraction' from research 'objects'. Both epistemological perspectives are in line with Santos arguing for 'nonextractivist methodologies' and for 'knowing-with' instead of 'knowing-about' (Santos 2018, 14). Moreover, both Fabian and PAR focus on process rather than product and push the researcher to get 'involved' at the research site. For Fabian, however, getting involved is first and foremost an epistemological concern whereas PAR emphasizes ethical arguments. Fabian primarily wants to *understand* human reality through collaborative action, whereas PAR prioritizes the *transformation* of human reality through collaborative knowledge production. Santos, in turn, bridges epistemology and ethics by stating that there is no 'social justice' without 'epistemic justice' (Santos 2018, 6). He also adds a

decolonizing perspective: the kind of 'shared' or 'lived' knowledge realized through performance is not only characteristic of most indigenous epistemologies but equally of social and political struggle 'which often does not have an individualized subject' (Santos 2018, 3).

A reorientation from informative to performative ethnography applies very well to how and why I turned to participatory filmmaking for intertwined epistemological and ethical reasons. Considering the visual nature of my research, it is important to emphasize that I do not use the concept of performance referring to 'the documentary' as an artistic genre or an audio-visual product but to the entire *filmmaking and history-making process*. Performance also connects to my understanding of participatory methods which, as I already argued, should not be limited to communities participating in research projects; researchers can equally participate in on-going community projects without this compromising scientific knowledge production.

Moreover, a performative ethnography can produce 'hybrid forms and complementary ways of knowing' that are capable of entering broader political agendas (Santos 2018, 11). Part of my role as a Belgian historian, for example, was to make sure that the returnees' story of struggle and resistance would resonate with international solidarity movements. The returnees strategically mobilized my academic legitimacy, visibility and resources. Minimizing power imbalances in the field is generally invoked by ethnographers as an ethical thing to do. However, this does not necessarily entail abandoning the *role difference* between the ethnographer and research participants, as maintained by Fabian. During the filmmaking process I found myself in different roles at the same time or during different moments; I have been a researcher, an activist, an outsider, an insider, a participant-observer, an observing participant and an observed participant. Instead of abandoning role differences in the field, I therefore relate more to Santos' notion of 'diatopical identities'; 'accepting [the interpenetration of] the dichotomies but not the hierarchies' (Santos 2018, 251). Unlike some action researchers (Kemmis, Mc Taggart, and Nixon n.d., 9), I do not hold an a priori critique against the notion of the external or facilitating researcher; depending on the research context, role difference might be encapsulated in participation and strategic mobilization.

In the final part of this article I further exemplify performative ethnography as an investigative tool. An extensive analysis of collective narrative strategies and techniques is beyond the scope of this article, so I limit myself to an impression of *how* participatory filmmaking revealed aspects of collective narrative capacity and the study of it; through a self-reflexive and co-creative process of 'repetition and rehearsal'.

Collective Narrative Capacity: Repetition and Rehearsal

From previous fieldwork, I was used to carefully ask questions about the kind of violence to which informants had been exposed and how this affected their everyday lives. Also, during and after interviews I always tried to shy away from too much emotional involvement. In Copal AA however, talking about the past happened spontaneously and overwhelmingly. Once we started filming it dawned on me what a great tragic-romantic tale this shared history really was; the story of an eternal search for land, the struggle of a people who were displaced several times, went into exile, returned, founded a new

Mexican refugee camp with international accompaniment by Witness for Peace. Image: community archive Copal AA La Esperanza.

community together, and were now threatened by a hydroelectric dam.

The story of exile and return appealed to my imagination, its plot resonated with similar David and Goliath stories and made me instantly sympathize with the returnees. As I afterwards understood, this was part of what researchers have called *ethnographic seduction* 'to denote ways in which interviewees influence the understanding and research results of their interviewers' (Robben 1996, 72). I specify this phenomenon as *narrative seduction* because it was precisely as a result of Copal AA's capacity to deploy various narrative strategies and techniques that I developed an empathic response and got engaged with the returnees' cause. At first, me being 'seduced' was a possible obstruction to ethnographic understanding. Nicola Mai, however, has demonstrated the analytical value of a systematic exploration of the researcher's personal experience through his 'autoethnographic' approach (Mai 2016, 2018). Likewise, being self-reflexive about my own role in the filmmaking process and the making of shared history, I have learned to transform a seeming obstruction into a deeper understanding of both the returnees' collective narrative capacity and participatory visual methods.

The *Copaleros* did not only seduce me with a great story; collectively told it was also surprisingly coherent and therefore convincing. Nobody seemed to contradict each other and most life-stories nicely fitted into or departed from the documentary storyboard. I looked for public counter narratives but they were almost impossible to find. Despite internal community diversity – different indigenous groups, generations, gender perspectives, experiences, etc. – the returnees were capable of *collectively* telling and retelling their community history. What made the story even more engaging was that various documentary participants showed up with photographs, personal diaries and even video images to support their testimony. I discovered that a historical legacy of international accompaniment in the Mexican refugee camps had not only affected the community's capacity for coordinated and collective action but had also resulted in an exceptional community archive. Unlike conflict experiences of internal displacement in other regional communities, life in exile and the collective return were particularly well documented. NGO's accompanied the returnees until the foundation of their community and left copies of these photographs and videos with them. During the filmmaking process, Copal AA's historical archive that was scattered through the

The collective return from Mexico to Guatemala with dozens of buses. Image: community archive Copal AA La Esperanza.

community gradually found its way to me and revealed itself as another aspect of collective narrative capacity. I ascertained how 'shared' Copal AA's history really was after my first fieldwork period, when I became aware of what Liisa Malkki calls 'the sense of a collective voice'. Malkki has been working on violence and memory with Hutu refugees in Tanzania. She describes how a refugee camp in Mishamo unexpectedly 'turned out to be a site that was enabling and nurturing an elaborate an self-conscious historicity among its refugee inhabitants' (Malkki 1995, 52–53). Just like the returnees from Copal AA, Hutu camp refugees were engaged in the constant construction and reconstruction of a collective past:

In virtually all aspects of contemporary social life in the Mishamo camp, the Hutu refugees made reference to a shared body of knowledge about their past in Burundi. Everyday events, processes, and relationships in the camp were spontaneously and consistently interpreted and acted upon by evoking this collective past as a charter and blueprint. (…) it was unmistakable that history had seized center stage in everyday thought and social action in the camp (Malkki 1995, 52–53).

History had also seized center stage in Copal AA, where people were constantly referring to 'a shared body of knowledge' about historical violence and resistance. The past proved to be present at the heart of community education, development, organization and resistance practices. Apart from compelling, complementary and coherent stories, talking about the past often took the form of standardized, 'almost formulaic historical accounts' that were told and retold with a strong feel for 'repetition and thematic unity' (Malkki 1995, 56) and with similar emplotment. Participatory filmmaking thus did not only reveal Copal AA's capacity to collectively distribute narrative labor or mobilize an audio-visual community archive. The returnees were also capable of speaking with *a collective voice* by drawing from a shared repertoire of historical accounts, standardized formulations and narrative plot techniques.

Participatory filmmaking gradually exposed the making of shared history as a continuous process that started with the very foundation of the community. The possible construction of the Xalalá dam opened a discursive space where historical narratives are being renegotiated and rearticulated. In their everyday resistance, the returnees are caught up in telling and retelling their shared history to foster internal cohesion, regional legitimacy and international solidarity. This insight connects very well with Fabian's idea

Constructing the first houses of Copal AA La Esperanza in the jungle of Alta Verapaz. Image: community archive Copal AA La Esperanza.

of performance, which he says is a process of giving form to human reality through continuous *repetition and rehearsal*. To describe this process, Fabian uses the metaphor of an iceberg where performance is but the visible tip and repetition/rehearsal the 'submerged body': 'The tip of the iceberg does not represent its submerged part', rehearsal carries the performance that is but a moment of a larger process (Fabian 1990, 12). Part of this 'submerged body' became tangible when local authorities shared with me videotapes from community storytelling sessions that they themselves had organized half a year before my arrival. The recordings show some of the co-directors coordinating the sessions and many of the documentary participants sharing their life stories. The recordings remind of Héctor's opening speech saying that they 'already started this some time ago, but that work is not organized yet – everything is scattered'.

In sum, participatory filmmaking became an investigative tool to explore the production and mobilization of collective historical narratives. Fabian's notion of performance, however, not only explains how people fashion their everyday realities but also the ways in which ethnographers try to understand this process by 'playing along'. My job was to 'make' the returnees' history and bring together 'scattered' pieces into a documentary about the community's past and present struggle. Experimenting with ways to 'make' this history, my strategy came to reflect and co-produce this community process of repetition and rehearsal. After my first fieldwork period in 2015, I did a first coding round of my data to identify recurring themes, events, places, standardized accounts, expressions and overall narrative structure. I turned my analysis into an advanced storyboard and then into a rough montage of six chronological chapters that I call the *rough cuts*:

And then we will use that to create the history of Copal AA.

Impression from community storytelling videotapes. Images: Copal AA La Esperanza. Montage made in the context of this article by Tessa Boeykens. To watch this video: scan the QR code with your smartphone, or go to https://youtu.be/1W-l8LMTbl0

1) The Fincas [Las Fincas] (7:45 min)
2) People Organize Themselves [El Pueblo se Organiza] (6:02 min)
3) The Internal Armed Conflict [El Conflicto Armado Interno] (7:14 min)
4) The Refuge [El Refugio] (7:35 min)
5) The Return [El Retorno] (10:37 min)
6) Struggle Continues [La Lucha Sigue] (13:05 min)

In 2016, I returned to Copal AA for a second fieldwork period and organized two screenings of the rough cuts, one with the co-directors and one with the sectors and the documentary participants. I also discussed the rough cuts individually with a few community leaders. My preliminary interpretations of the shared narrative then were picked-up by the community and collectively discussed for further adaptation. I therefore consider the rough cuts *repetition and rehearsal* material. As a performative tool, these feedback sessions contributed to the co-creation of shared knowledge about Copal AA's past and present struggle. At the same time, as an investigative device the feedback sessions enhanced my understanding of the community's narrative capacity and the making of shared history (van. Dienderen 2009, 254). Moreover, producing and discussing the rough cuts increased my understanding of visual participatory methodologies and my own role as an ethnographer and historian.

However, apart from being a collective sense-making effort, a *collectivizing* community process and a form of participatory filmmaking-based research, the project was also meant to be action-oriented in forging (inter)national solidarity and visibility. At that

Impression from the 2016 rough cuts, summary montage made in the context of this article. Co-produced by the community of Copal AA La Esperanza and Tessa Boeykens. To watch this video: scan the QR code with your smartphone, or go to https://vimeo.com/347704095

point, I hit some of the restrains of participatory ethnographic filmmaking. Due to my limited filmmaking skills, the returnees and I agreed that the rough cuts – chronological storytelling portrait shots – were slightly boring to watch. Moreover, due to the project's participatory approach, the montages had an overload of characters. Together, we therefore decided to involve Pieter de Vos, a Belgian filmmaker. To ensure the project's action compound, participatory ethnographic filmmaking moved towards the making of the short movie 'Los Retornados', to be released in September 2019. The challenges and insights of this collaboration and alliance between a community, a historian and a professional filmmaker, however, is a different story to tell. I nevertheless wanted to share the trailer of our forthcoming movie at the beginning of this article (cfr. Mov 1). The making of 'Los Retornados' was part of the same participatory process that started in 2015 when Héctor Fernández reminded the return community why history was 'useful' for them.

Conclusion

After previous experiences of violence and forced displacement, the 'returnees' from Copal AA La Esperanza are now defending their community and territory against the construction of the Xalalá hydroelectric dam. In this context of everyday resistance, the *Copaleros* mobilized me as a Belgian historian to 'make' their community history by producing a documentary about their past and present struggle. The aim of this article was to reflect on *how* and *why* I gradually developed a participatory filmmaking-based methodology to tackle this challenge. I demonstrated how filmmaking rooted in local media activism and into a broader history of anticolonial struggle in Latin America. Next, I analyzed how participatory practices emerged from the returnees' political and

historical trajectories. From being a side-project and a matter of research ethics, participatory filmmaking turned into an investigative tool to further explore Copal AA's collective narrative capacity. Combining insights from participatory action research and Johannes Fabian's notion of 'performance', this article fused ethical and epistemological arguments for 'knowing-with' instead of 'knowing-about'. Participatory filmmaking revealed the returnees' capacity to distribute narrative labor, to mobilize a historical archive and to speak with 'a collective voice'. As such, the making of 'shared history' emerged as a performative process of repetition and rehearsal. The same happened to my research strategy through the making of ethnographic 'rough-cuts' that eventually turned into the production of the short documentary 'Los Retornados'. Through my analysis, I have hinted several times at the consequences of disciplining research and methodologies. At the same time, I hope to have demonstrated both the epistemological and ethical benefits of a dialogue between disciplines and methodologies as much as between academic and community practices and concepts. I have defined my participatory approach through its engagement with post-colonial histories and the co-creation of shared knowledge at the intersection of community and research interests. In relation to that, filmmaking developed as a grounded, visual and narrative approach connecting media activism with performative ethnography. I conclude that visual and participatory methods are highly suitable to explore process, performance and the kind of shared knowledge that is being co-produced as such. As a precondition for the co-production of shared knowledge, I emphasize that participatory methods should be grounded in community realities and practices. Moreover, I have demonstrated that participation should not be limited to communities participating in research projects; researchers can equally participate in community projects without this obstructing scientific research. Participatory, visual and performative methods challenge us to reimagine community-based research in terms of social justice and to reconsider the role of academics in (post-) conflict settings.

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