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**Original Article**

# Counter-documentation tactics: participatory, visual, and walking research with undocumented migrants

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## Abstract

The mediation of migration has inspired ample scholarship in the past decades for understanding global power dynamics and the role of communication processes in maintaining, questioning, and reverting those very dynamics. This article sheds light on the experiences of migrants and their tactics for creating more humane, inclusive, and authentic media representations. It reports on one year of participatory action research (PAR) with six undocumented migrants living in Brussels, Belgium, which included participatory video-making and a combination of walking interviews and visual artefact production. The findings revolve around three counter-documentation tactics developed during the study to oppose hegemonic ways of representing (undocumented) migrants. The article aims to make a methodological contribution by reflecting on ethics and the pragmatic combination of different participatory methods while offering a conceptual vocabulary for approaching mediation, migration, and alterity from the perspective of progressive social change.

**Keywords:** documentation, media representation, participatory methodology, participatory video-making, undocumented migration.

## Introduction

> *"It's not easy to put yourself out there in front of the media and tell your whole life story. It's not easy because it's sad – sometimes very, very sad. One needs a lot of courage to even accept to address this with you…"*

These words were uttered by Lucinne during a walking interview in central Brussels in the summer of 2021. Born and raised in Cameroon, Lucinne migrated to Belgium in 2008. Even after years of asylum applications and procedures, she is currently without legal residence. Lucinne is one of over 100,000 people in this situation; without legal residence, they live under precarious circumstances and the threat of incarceration or forced repatriation on the one hand and hostility and exploitation in Belgian society on the other. Though socially and culturally heterogenous, this group of people is generally known in Belgium by the label *sans-papiers* in French or *mensen zonder papieren* in Dutch ("people without papers") in reference to their lack of sustainable legal residence in the country. These labels have negative connotations and are part of a dominant discourse that problematizes the group as unwanted and undeserving migrants (Vollmer, 2011).

Undocumented migrants have few political advocates. Indeed, calls for more punitive policies vis-à-vis undocumented migrants—including incarceration and forced repatriation, even of minors—have entered mainstream discourse across virtually the whole political spectrum and mediasphere. However, a handful of alternative and grassroots media initiatives mostly active on social media have nuanced this picture and included the voices and perspectives of undocumented migrants. Two notable examples are ZIN TV, a collective and participatory news platform with an emphasis on diversity, and Sans-Papiers TV, a media platform by and for undocumented migrants in Belgium. Still, both are small in reach and mostly cover French-speaking Belgium.

Besides the struggle of her life trajectory, Lucinne's words reveal the specific difficulty of *sharing* that story with journalists, which she has done on a few occasions for stories on the precarious housing or employment situations of undocumented migrants. In a context where undocumented migrants are societally marginalized and considered non-citizens, speaking out implies genuine risks. In most cases, undocumented migrants avoid public attention, and many have developed strategies to avoid interactions with authorities and institutions that could lead to arrest or even repatriation. In this sense, silence is often not only less antagonizing but simply safer. In Lucinne's quote, "the media" is shorthand for mainstream media, which refers to the crucial brokers of powerful discourses that determine the societal position of undocumented migrants. Beyond the mere *sharing* of stories and experiences, we conceptualize these reflections as forms of *counter-documentation* that strategically challenge the political hegemony.

This article reports on a research project that explored how undocumented migrants experience the role of mediation and representations of migrants in particular. With this study, we make three contributions. Empirically, we enrich the growing literature on media representations of migration by highlighting the experiences of undocumented migrants as well as their recommendations for more humane and fair reporting on migration. Methodologically, we describe an original participatory visual approach that combines the production of visual artefacts with walking interviews. Conceptually, we develop a three-fold framework of counter-documentation tactics that can enable undocumented migrants to become part of the frame rather than being positioned outside of it. We argue that this framework allows for thinking about media

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representation as a proxy for societal power relations, thereby affirming the relevance of qualitative research on media experiences with marginalized groups.

Given the small-scale qualitive study design, we do not intend to generalize the findings to all undocumented migrants. While the findings are clearly rooted in the context of Belgium—and, more precisely, that of Brussels—we expect them to resonate with the situations of undocumented migrants elsewhere. The increase in undocumented migrants worldwide has sparked scholarly debates about hospitality, citizenship, and belonging more generally, and the perspectives of undocumented migrants in the "capital of Europe" can add to these ongoing debates.

## Mediated (self-)representations and alterity

Studying processes of migration and mediation in a combined framework can illuminate key power relations defining the current age. Representations of migration and (im)mobility in media connect not only to "controversies about the presence of the Other in the national imaginary" (Hegde, 2016, p. 2) but also to asymmetrical and contingent regimes of solidarity and pity (Nikunen, 2018; Sajir & Aouragh, 2019). The media–migration nexus has become a distinct interdisciplinary research field in the past years (Smets et al., 2020) largely due to peaks in migration movements to the US and Europe between 2015 and 2020 and the prominence of migration and border surveillance discourse in public debate. Our interest here is mostly in the field of media representation, which concerns the ways in which certain groups and topics are imagined in texts and images. Such media representations are ubiquitous in daily life and shape individual and collective imaginations of "Others"—both those who are far away and those within our own societies (Orgad, 2012). In this regard, myriad studies have revealed and criticized the often stereotypical, unbalanced, or outright xenophobic media representations of migration and migrants.

Two fundamental concepts in the intellectualization of these observations are visibility and voice (and the absence thereof, i.e., invisibility and silence or voicelessness). With regard to regimes of visual representation, scholars have argued that migrants become either *hypervisible* or fully invisible, with both sides working "in conjunction, especially as they both visually affirm unquestioned and assumed authority and power of the national subject over de noncitizen Others" (Zaborowski & Georgiou, 2019, p. 99). According to Georgiou (2022), even when migrants are granted a voice or visibility, they are "often contained within a narrative and visual grammar of Otherness, where migrants speak as actors that are either exceptional or generic, and who belong to cultures, geographies, and histories that are fundamentally different than those of their audiences" (p. 3). Sigona (2014, p. 378) has contended that we should look beyond such binaries to study the specific power configurations in which a voice or silence is produced and received. Thus, visibility and voice frameworks only capture part of the complexity.

Besides visibility and voice, we rely on two notions from critical communication and documentation research. The first concerns perceptions of media representations and the capacity for self-representations to offer a response. While many studies have focused on migration-related *content*, fewer have devoted attention to its production or reception or how the people in the texts or images experience "their" representations. Those who are supposedly represented in media texts may not recognize themselves in those representations or might even find them harmful (Smets et al., 2019). Our project directly addresses this issue, as one objective was to formulate recommendations for media makers and professional communicators from the point of view of a specific marginalized group. Self-representations (i.e., the various textual or visual ways to express oneself, usually to a certain audience) have been studied more thoroughly, particularly because they constitute a significant part of contemporary social media culture (Rettberg, 2018). Self-representations are a fruitful domain for reflecting on power relations in digital culture (Thumim, 2017). In the case of migrants' self-representations, scholars have probed the practices and politics of "selfie-taking" and its potential to counter-balance hegemonic media representations (Risam, 2018). (Digital) self-representation has also been mobilized by scholars to "authorize" migrants as their own subjects and storytellers (Georgiou & Leurs, 2022; Sarria-Sanz et al., 2023). These inquiries and approaches were instrumental in our study, as it aimed to invite participants to express themselves and share stories that were important to them through forms of mediated representation.

The second crucial notion is the relation of documentation to forms of alterity as informed by philosophy and documentation theory. Concepts linked to alterity and otherness have long informed critical scholarship on the situation of undocumented migrants (e.g., Sayad, 1991). As the ultimate "other" of the nation state, undocumented migrants are regarded as non-citizens who threaten both the state and society and who, from a polity perspective, do not deserve inclusion (Chauvin & Garcés-Mascareñas, 2014). Since they are on the disadvantaged side of this power matrix, undocumented migrants can come to "experience the state as a pervasive and frightening power that shapes their lives and regulates their every move—and never asks for their opinion" (Walzer, 1983, p. 59). We argue that mainstream media is often an extension of this pervasive and frightening power for undocumented migrants.

## Counter-documentation

There is an undeniably important link between media and communication practices. Scholars, artists, and activists have mobilized the concept of *documentation* in response to conditions of alterity or non-citizenship. Rather than presuming the value or political impact of voice and visibility, Schreiber (2018) has argued that a framework of documentation can increase awareness of the contexts in which migrants are challenging neoliberal (migration) policies. In her writing on such documentation work in the cultural practices of Mexican immigrants in the US and across the U.S.–Mexican borderland, Schmidt Camacho (2008) has claimed that as they "narrate a condition of alterity to, or exclusion from, the nation, they also enunciate a collective desire for a different order of space and belonging across the boundary" (p. 5). While both Schreiber and Schmidt Camacho have addressed (Latin-)American contexts, their insights are valuable for our current study not only because they pose alternatives to the visibility/invisibility dichotomy but also because they emphasize processes of self-representation and realist aesthetics.

To fully stress the political potential of documentation work, several authors have promoted *counter-documentation*, which is the notion we adopt here as well. In her work on the

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ways in which undocumented migrants use film, video, and other documentary media, Schreiber (2018) has noted that producing so-called *counter-documents* allows artists and activists to "draw upon modes of documentary practice to challenge the state's ability to determine the parameters of political inclusion and to mobilize other undocumented migrants" (p. 235). Such counter-documentation is in deliberate opposition to "dominant politics of mobility" (p. 18, p. 38). Counter-documentation as a framework is useful for thinking about ontology, epistemology, and power relations. According to Frohmann (2008), "documentary politics," which include both documentary and counter-documentary practices, play a role in "building ethical and political technologies of moral reasoning and subject formation in which ways of being human are at stake" (p. 179). Counter-documentation has also been used as a lens to describe a politics of visibility among indigenous people in Canada in response to colonialism (Taschereau Mamers, 2021, p. 137) or within grassroots activism challenging state monopolies on information media (Adami, 2016).

However varied in its expressions, counter-documentation is typically antithetical to hegemonic perspectives that protect the societal status quo. Still, this analytical many-sidedness requires us to concretize and operationalize the meaning of counter-documentation in a given context. In our study, we perceive counter-documentation not as a finished achievement or product (i.e., an observable accomplishment) but rather as a process (i.e., a series of activities that may never be truly finished) that, in this case, entails the gradual erosion of hegemonic ways of seeing and representing migration. To understand *how* this counter-documentation process occurs specifically, we engage with the notion of tactics, which has been employed extensively to target small, concrete actions aligned with a larger strategy (Dutta, 2011; Specht, 1969). Visual culture scholars have demonstrated how visual media, such as paintings, photography, and documentary film, can be used "tactically" to achieve a particular social or political goal (Cherry, 2000; Kishore, 2018; Mirzoeff, 2006). In this article, we discuss three counter-documentation tactics of undocumented migrants that align with their goals of being recognized legally and socially, being valued economically and morally, and seeing progressive change in society. However, before discussing each tactic in detail, we present a thorough description of our methodology, as it is integral to the counter-documentation put into practice.

## Participation, action, and implementation

This study is founded on the approach of participatory action research (PAR), which is characterized by the active co-construction of knowledge as well as critical reflection on collective social change through collaborative research (McIntyre, 2008, p. 5). Experts in PAR have emphasized that the application of this approach varies considerably depending on the research setting and particular social issue. In our case, it is important to reflect on the specificities of the three dimensions of *participation*, *action*, and the *implementation* of the research.

For *participation*, the involvement of a small group of undocumented migrants in the study developed from a platform initially set up after receiving philanthropic funding to work on "humanizing and de-polarizing the public debate on migration."[1] This work included representatives from NGOs that address issues such as anti-racism and education, poverty, and asylum as well as media makers and academics. After defining the overarching goals of the program, we obtained funding for research focusing on including the voices and perspectives of migrants and understanding how they prefer to be portrayed or represented. This research focus was motivated not just by the realization that such perspectives have often been absent from the public debate in Belgium but also by the promise of approaches to participatory visual research that we found in the literature. We subsequently partnered with *Samenlevingsopbouw Brussel*, an organization in Brussels that has provided various types of social support to undocumented migrants for several years and previously carried out a short project on digital storytelling.

Once a group of participants was formed, we defined the goals for common *action* through a recursive process of questioning, reflecting, investigating, implementing, and refining, as described by McIntyre (2008, p. 7). The group's common goal was to develop a project that can sensitize the broader public to the conditions and experiences of undocumented migrants and eventually raise awareness about the policies (or lack thereof) concerning this specific group. Involving a mediated aspect was crucial for this objective, and we deemed it essential to sketch the shift from the initial broader goals of the funding and institutional partners toward a specific goal defined together with participants, as it demonstrates the co-creative and action-oriented character of the study.

With this goal in mind, the *implementation* of the research encompassed several activities. For instance, to raise awareness among the general public, a video and an accompanying article were circulated through the local press and by various social media accounts. Furthermore, recommendations for journalists and media makers regarding media representations of undocumented migrants were formulated in a report that was circulated by the program partners. Throughout this process, we collected data that facilitated a social-scientific analysis of the project. The key findings of that analysis and of the current article were then discussed with the participants during feedback sessions. Through the dimensions of participation, action, and implementation, we sought to respond to key ethical imperatives in research on and with migrant populations, especially when forms of human suffering are involved and "objective" or "neutral" observations are inadequate, as convincingly explained by Halilovich (2013).

## The local context

In this article, we consistently use the term *undocumented migrants* and explicitly avoid more popular terms that imply criminalization. In addition, we often employ the term *irregular* to refer to a person's lack of legal basis to stay in or transit through a country. In the local languages and during most of the research process, we frequently used the terms *mensen zonder duurzaam verblijf* ("people without durable stay") or the widely used *sans-papiers* ("without papers"). By reviewing previous studies, we learned about the critical importance of such labels and their political connotations (Mistiaen, 2021). In this respect, Balty and Mistiaen (2022) have demonstrated that such terminology and denominations are objects of conflict in discourse on migration in Belgium.

The population of undocumented migrants is heterogenous and notably difficult to represent with straightforward demographics, as they are typically absent from or

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underrepresented in official statistics (Nicaise et al., 2019). Researchers and NGOs have estimated that there are between 100,000 and 150,000 undocumented migrants in Belgium, and the majority live in Brussels. Policies in recent years have been far less favorable to undocumented migrants, as chances of regularization on the basis of mere "integration" have become scarce for non-EU citizens following regularization campaigns in 2000 and 2009 (van Meeteren & Sur, 2020). Currently, regularization is reserved mostly for humanitarian and medical reasons. Studies on undocumented migrants in Belgium have exposed crucial humanitarian issues, such as problems with healthcare provision (Lafaut et al., 2019). At the same time, the individual stories of undocumented migrants reveal a plethora of trajectories, survival tactics, and aspirations amid a largely hostile environment (Adam et al., 2002). Despite calls from NGOs and international legal pressures to address the situation of undocumented migrants, it has been low on the political agenda except when highly mediatized as a result of hunger strikes, such as in 2021.

## Methodology: participatory, visual, and spatial

This project was conducted together with a group of undocumented migrants in Brussels. The node of this collaboration was an association that provides social assistance and support, such as legal advice, workshops, and social cohesion projects, to "societally vulnerable" groups. The core participant group (i.e., those who spent a significant part of the research trajectory with us and provided input at all the stages of the project) consisted of four men and two women between 35 and 55 years of age. Their countries of origin were the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Cameroon, Guinee, and Niger, which reflects the diversity of undocumented migrants in Brussels. French was the lingua franca and the native or second language of all participants as well as both researchers. The participants had been in Belgium for an average of 10 years at the time of the research. Their family situations varied, but in most cases, their families (including their children) were still in their countries of origin. The research process followed the rhythm of the participants in terms of their availability and motivation. With each participant, we met an average of twice per month in one-on-one or group meetings to build rapport and trust. This research process also included participatory observation in activities organized by associations and participants.

Given the risk of data extraction among marginalized communities (Benjamin, 2021), we aimed to assure that all steps of the research followed the PAR approach described above, especially regarding the dissemination of the project. We implemented strict ethics measures as advised by the host institution's ethics committee and gave particular attention to the dissemination and the protection of identities. In our case, these measures involved working with layered consent, which permitted participants to opt in or out of, for instance, audio or video data. Although both researchers and the ethics committee insisted on using pseudonyms and blurred images, not all of the participants agreed with these measures, as using their real names and clearly showing their faces would ensure their visibility and recognition. Therefore, we aligned the study with this explicit request from the participants.

Together with the participants, we decided to produce a short video to achieve the goal of raising awareness. Previous research with participatory video-making has demonstrated the epistemic potential of this approach to reveal the experiences and stories of migrants (Fernández Labayen & Gutiérrez, 2022; Lin et al., 2019). Many projects have also yielded encouraging results with regard to the possibility of visual participatory methods to contribute to solutions and policy change (Swanson & Ardoin, 2021). Using simple technical equipment, we made audio and video recordings that centered on the daily life of the participants during the 2020–2021 COVID-19 lockdown in Brussels. Given the criticality of the editing phase in participatory video methods (for a critical reflection, see Sarria-Sanz et al., 2023), we included the participants in this process through multiple rounds of feedback and co-editing. This participatory construction of the end product deliberately contrasted with the rather negative experiences of earlier extractive journalistic practices among some participants, notably Lucinne, who is quoted at the start of this article. The result—a video of 6 minutes and 36 seconds—was circulated via social media channels, institutional newsletters, and websites and by a Brussels public broadcaster, thus reaching a non-academic audience and sharing participants' rarely seen or heard lockdown testimonials. The video is currently still available on Vimeo.[2]

While we initially planned to continue the video-making as a series, we changed our strategy once the sanitary situation worsened and lockdown measures escalated. Even though the participants remained highly motivated, physically gathering became difficult, which was especially problematic since we intended to develop the screenplay and editing as a group. Given the precarious legal situation of our participants, we would not risk organizing a gathering that exceeded the legal size limit. Instead, we conducted visual walking interviews, which is an approach inspired by both participatory visual research (Delgado, 2015) and walking-along interviews (Lenette & Gardner, 2021). While these methods are less common in traditional media and communication studies, they have proven to be highly effective for documenting participants' experiences, generating new multisensory knowledge, and developing horizontal research relations (Lenette & Gardner, 2021; O'Neill, 2018). Moreover, walking as a "subaltern design tactic" can be a stepping stone to claiming political participation and belonging in the city (Huss, 2023).

The visual walking interviews took place during five afternoon walks, during which the participants showed us meaningful places in a neighborhood of their choice. The walking conversations were recorded with a small clip-on microphone, and we encouraged the participants to take photos or make short videos along the way, which provided rich and multimodal data (Pink, 2007). The combination of transcripts, our own notes, and the visual materials captured during the walks were analyzed thematically to map the participants' experiences with major topics, such as belonging, hospitality in the city, intercultural dialogue, migration policies, and societal (including media) representations of migrants. While borne of pragmatism, this walking approach effectively enriched our conversations. In fact, spontaneous or banal events allowed us to address more abstract topics; for instance, during our walk with Appollinaire, jaywalking at a red light prompted a serious conversation about patience and the mental burden of waiting for regularization.

At the same time, walking interviews come with specific ethical challenges (Kinney, 2018). We were deeply aware of our own privilege as university employees and Belgian citizens and that we experience the city very differently from the

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participants. Therefore, we were wary of the potential risks for them, especially the possibility of encountering police controls. To mitigate this risk, we only walked in neighborhoods that participants knew well and in which they felt safe. We were also aware of the limited "empowering" effect of the visual/participatory approach, as even if it was a meaningful experience for the participants, it did not radically change power relations or the overall precarity of their lives, especially during bleak pandemic times. In a few cases, we were able to support the regularization applications of participants by providing letters acknowledging their work. In most cases, however, we emphasized that their participation was a small step in a longer trajectory of progressive social change through the PAR approach.

In the following sections, we discuss three distinct counter-documentation tactics that emerged during this year-long project. We draw on the combined data from the video-making, the visual walking interviews, and all notes and visual materials gathered throughout the research process.

## Counter-documentation tactic I: personalization and place-making

The first tactic concerns the personalization of "abstract" phenomena (e.g., inequality, belonging, identity) by not only giving them a literal face but also expressing belonging to a particular space. Throughout the production of the short video, participants emphasized the importance of visualizing the story of undocumented migrants—which explains why an initial idea to produce podcasts was quickly abandoned—and of telling their personal stories even when it meant revisiting their personal "wounds," as Appollinaire put it.

When deciding on key locations to shoot the video, the participants opted for mundane scenes. They wanted the video to show their beds, the salon, or their kitchen and how they shared small spaces with many people, which was particularly challenging during the pandemic (Figure 1). The assumption of participants was that visual "evidence" would make their situation tangible for policymakers and the broader public, who they believed were unaware. Besides the visual evidence, participants shared personal stories in the video and in multiple conversations. A key scene in the video shows Hadiza doing dishes, which provides a mundane backdrop as she talks about her struggle for legal recognition. In many cases, these stories served as a juxtaposition to what was regarded as the hegemonic discourse on (undocumented) migration. Participants underlined their search for belonging, thus countering the notion of "unintegrated" migrants, and their desire to work and contribute to the local economy, which contradicts the mainstream discourse of migration as an economic burden or of migrants as "unproductive" (see, e.g., De Coninck, 2020).

These stories were further concretized during the visual walking interviews. Each time participants showed a neighborhood in Brussels, they stopped at places that represented these personal counter-discourses—for instance, a vocational school where they had followed trainings, an association where they had built intercultural solidarity networks, or a cultural center where they had met visual artists and musicians. Yet, the place-making could also be more subtle, as we saw on our walk with Appollinaire. At one point during the walk, he stopped to take a picture of a group of pigeons on a square (Figure 2). This moment of the pigeons being on *this* part of the square prompted him to share his knowledge of the ongoing construction works on the square, which illustrated his deep familiarity with and connection to the neighborhood. As a tactic, these communicative practices enable the development of messages about migration at the human scale. The personal stories and images convey a "realist aesthetic" (Jaguaribe, 2005) through which global audiences can connect with the situation of the participants and of undocumented migrants in general. These deeply personal, tangible, and realistic representations are anchored in the urban environment, which offers a range of possibilities to show how migrants find forms of dignity and recognition through education, solidarity networks, and connections with their neighborhood, particularly when nation states deny such recognition (Georgiou, 2018).

## Counter-documentation tactic II: universalization and politicization

Some participants had previously been involved in NGO awareness campaigns and were clearly mindful of the limits of the personalization tactic described above. Indeed, they found that merely being a face of a structural phenomenon was only part of the work. In many of our conversations, participants expressed a much more holistic and politicized view of migration. On the one hand, this tactic occurred through universalization, whereby participants emphasized the need for human

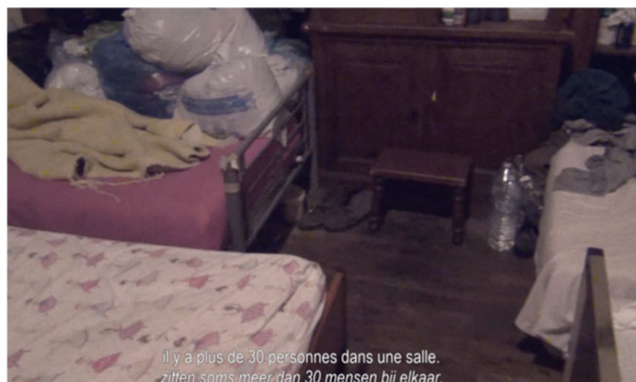


**Figure 1.** Screen capture of a panning shot from the participatory video visualizing the crammed space in which some of the participants were living during the pandemic.

**Figure 2.** Picture taken by Appollinaire during the walking interview.

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dignity, recognition, and solidarity at the global scale and not just for (particular) migrants. In the conversations, they, for instance, alternated between remarks about specific housing problems in their neighborhood and the difficult circumstances of people across the world or between their own dire employment situation and the right of every human being to develop their talents and skills. On the other hand, their discussions of media representations became much broader critiques of essentialization, stereotyping, and simplification. In this regard, in a group discussion during the video preparation, Ibrahim expressed the need for a "new civilization" based on universal respect and asserted that, for him, media was an essential tool to achieve that.

This holistic counter-documentation tactic also assumed a more overtly political tone, especially during the walking interviews, which generally afforded more time for in-depth reflection. The phenomenon of migration was overturned by participants framing it not as a "problem" of Western societies but as the unavoidable outcome of global inequalities. These discussions ranged from critiques of cultural imperialism connected to the history of colonial domination (e.g., Fortunat talking about the "imposed language and culture" coming from European colonizers) to Western companies extracting natural resources (e.g., cobalt, coltan, copper) in those former colonies. Many participants came from regions where mineral resources are extracted, and they frequently mentioned how these economic structures will benefit anyone but the local communities, who then resort to strategies such as emigration to secure better opportunities. According to the participants, this asymmetry explains global migration patterns, which Delya aptly summarized with "follow the wealth." Circling back to media representations of undocumented migration, participants pleaded against approaching migration from the point of view of a particular city or state and instead encouraged efforts to make the public much more aware of global economic inequalities and extraction capitalism as catalysts of migration aspirations, especially in Central Africa.

## Counter-documentation tactic III: deconstruction and irony

The third and final tactic was more implicit yet highly significant with respect to communicative practices. The ways of constructing media messages—including our own video—were a recurrent conversation topic; for example, the labels applied to groups of people, the framing of societal issues, terminology, and even cinematographic strategies were all discussed at one point or another. The participants emphasized the need to deconstruct the message to fulfill the project's goal of raising public and policy awareness about the situation of undocumented migrants. Labels are not what they seem, terms are sometimes just words, and what we see may not always correspond to "reality."

Absurdity, irony, and a degree of playfulness provided a tactic to deal with this fabricated reality. During one of the first brainstorming sessions about the project's aims, Appollinaire joked that even though he is a person *sans-papiers*, he has *cent papiers*, which sounds the same in French but literally means "a hundred papers." The papers he has are just not the *right* ones. Such remarks were sometimes facetious and sometimes more bittersweet, but they always echoed the perceived absurdity of asylum and migration procedures from the perspective of the participants. In the video, the participants further developed a striking visual tactic to reflect these deconstructions and ironic plays on the harsh reality. It was decided that sections of the video would be presented in "slow motion" images that seem to freeze the movement of the participants within the frame. Besides being a creative aesthetic choice, this effect symbolized the experience of the participants feeling "frozen in time" while waiting for legal recognition and societal acceptance. Figure 3 contains a screenshot of one of these scenes, where Ibrahim's portrait is deliberately "frozen" as an ironic play on movement and dynamism.

## Conclusions

The three counter-documentation tactics described above have a clear disruptive potential when it comes to the (mediated) communication practices that influence societal acceptance and recognition of migrants. They personalize and politicize, and they deconstruct established ways of communicating about undocumented migrants as well as the phenomenon of migration more broadly. Furthermore, they deliver lived perspectives of the city from the standpoint of those who are often marginalized in these spaces. While our project initially aimed to develop recommendations for professional media makers, the participatory approach enabled us to go further and think in a more encompassing way about epistemology, power relations, and alterity. We believe that the power of these tactics lies in their immediacy and link with lived realities, as these forms of social critique usually do not come directly from the people who are concerned with their (in)visibility in the mainstream media. Moreover, thinking through counter-documentation tactics highlights how a qualitative, thoughtful reflection on media production and media representation with research participants can extend beyond the discussion of media logics to touch on issues ranging from social inequality to the effects of global capitalism. This inquiry, we argue, can be vigorous in the fields of media and migration research as well as (self-)representation research, which were two pillars of our literature review. Our findings suggest that (counter-)documentation may be used for critical analysis at a larger scale than particular migration-related case studies in order to address how different people envision the (ideal) role of media in creating a more just world.

While we aimed to develop this study as a participatory trajectory that centered the experiences and analyses of

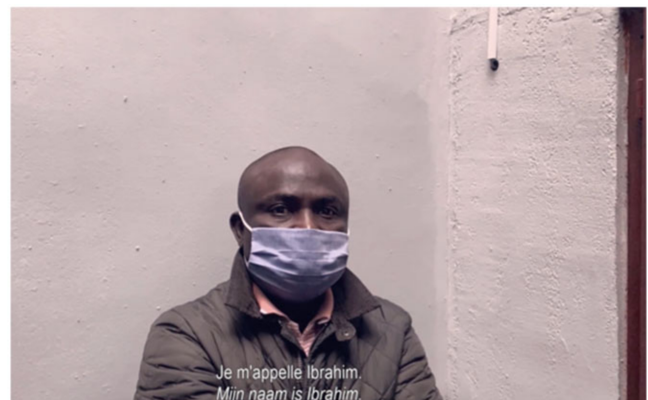


**Figure 3.** Screenshot of Ibrahim's portrait in the participatory video.

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undocumented migrants, the emancipatory potential of the participatory and inductive approach was sometimes limited by power imbalances between ourselves, as privileged university researchers working in an established institution, and the participants, who were undocumented migrants living in fear of repressive migration policies and social exploitation. Thus, our work is not considered complete but merely a necessary first step in thinking more creatively and democratically about knowledge production and the uses of that knowledge. At the time of writing this article, we are developing follow-up projects that build on the participatory research process—for instance, a potential database of stock images for communication and media reports on (undocumented) migration that is partly curated by the participants themselves.

As Pink (2007) has argued, combining visual and walking approaches in qualitative research "can generate a more involved approach to the question of how place and identities are constituted" (p. 250). We found that combining various participatory, spatial, and visual approaches allowed not only for a degree of pragmatism and flexibility when working together with a precarious group, which was much needed during the COVID-19 pandemic, but also for navigating between the concrete (personal) and abstract (general) dimensions of specific social phenomena. Life in the city during a global pandemic was the stage for this exploration of how undocumented migrants think about belonging and identity. Pandemic politics, which clearly accented inequalities from the perspective of undocumented migrants (e.g., housing precarity, lack of social protections or regular employment) in this particular time and space, offered an unexpected but unique occasion for making observations about societal structures and alterity. Through the three counter-documentation tactics, we believe that we have gone well beyond the idea of "illustrating," "documenting," or "making palpable" those problems and criticize them in a more fundamental way. By making visible how undocumented migrants observe and analyze societal problems and propose solutions, we believe that this research can contribute to their gradual recognition as full citizens.

## Data availability

The data underlying this article cannot be shared publicly due to privacy protections for individuals who participated in the study. The data will be shared on reasonable request to the corresponding author.


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## NOTES

1. Other Talk' is a program of 11.11.11 and Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen. More information on: https://11.be/other-talk/about-other-talk.
2. Full video available via Vimeo: https://vimeo.com/812695219.

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