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PRACTICE-BASED ARTICLE

'Histórias do Kakwaku', An Experience of Collective Documentary Film-Making in the Periphery of Luanda, Angola

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Abstract

This article reflects on *Histórias do Kakwaku*, a documentary film about social activism in the urban margins of Luanda, produced as part of a partnership between myself, an academic working on urban citizenship, and an Angolan political youth organisation, Projecto AGIR. The article details the whole process of collective film-making and questions the impact of this method on the film-makers, both individually and collectively. From our initial brainstorming sessions to our final editing decisions on the computer, I show how we slowly drifted away from the initial political objectives dictated by the organisers of Projecto Agir and opened unexpected spaces for engagement that allowed us 'to see together without claiming to be another' (Haraway 1991).

Following the chronological steps of collective film-making, we used practice as a point of departure from which to approach storytelling more broadly. Although I provide practical details about our logistics, our equipment and our working documents, this is not a one-size-fits-all recipe for collective documentary film-making. Rather, the focus is on what can be described as an exercise in intersubjective writing, neither entirely under control nor totally serendipitous.

I argue that telling a story in images, words and sounds is a dynamic process, open to constant reinterpretation. Combining the unpredictability of collective writing with the somewhat narrow imperatives of audiovisual storytelling creates an opportunity to question participatory research beyond the binary of the researcher and the researched.

Keywords

Collaborative Film-Making; Intersubjectivity; Storytelling; Youth; Community Politics; Angola

Introduction

Tuesday 11th of May – The session started with the ‘usual suspects’ with whom I start to have a good relationship but bit by bit, more people arrived. At noon, there were two dozens of young people under the shade of the big acacia. I was quite unsettled. From the start, I made it clear that I would not be able to train more than 8 to 10 participants. The discussion I hoped to have turned into a one-way class. Anyway, we still managed to come up with a few key points to help us define the objectives of the movie.

Thursday 20th of May – Only five people showed up today. The long introduction I gave about ethics of research and the importance of detailed writing before pressing any recording button must have deterred most of those who came last time! Those who came today were more engaged though. They liked the idea of interviewing people in their neighbourhood even if it is still not very clear what they will be asking. It is not easy for them to move beyond the official motto of the organisation.

Tuesday 1st of June – Writing session with the group who will work in bairro Bate Chapa. The initial idea was to investigate what is going on with the water plant that causes regular flooding but other topics came up: the street fights that burst out almost every night, the abandonment of the cultural centre, the small businesses launched by the youth. Nelo is excited to interview the local administrator but Sambongo is skeptical the man will speak to us. Branca and Yepuka seem more interested in getting footages of daily life.

This article reflects on the creation of a documentary film made in 2021–2022 as part of a three-year political ethnography I led in Luanda, Angola. The general objective of the research was to document the emergence of new spaces for political expression in the context of the transition away from José Eduardo Dos Santos’s long-standing regime (1979–2017). Projecto AGIR is one of the organisations I have been following closely since its informal beginning in 2017. It reached a political climax in 2020 when it headed a strong lobbying campaign for the adoption of the legislative framework that would allow the organisation of local elections. At the time of writing, it is one of the leading organisations in a broad movement of community-based political organisations in Angola. The political work of Projecto AGIR is beyond the scope of this article, but it is important to note that the method I present here was developed not only as part of my own academic research project, but also as part of the effort of my partner in developing its skills in terms of communication and marketing. The individual motivations of my co-film-makers also shaped our collective engagement and opened the film up to horizons beyond the organisation’s general objectives.

In discussing our film, *Histórias do Kakwaku* (the film is available in English at: <https://youtu.be/1jcQnFcQdM>), I do not offer a replicable model of collaborative film-making, nor do I advocate for a specific school of Participatory Visual Method (for a critical overview of these methods, see [Pauwells 2015](#)). More humbly, I want to uncover the different phases of this work and the multilayered questions raised along the way. I argue that the obstacles we faced obliged each participant to try and think through the position of others, eventually opening up what I call a ‘space of intersubjectivity’.

Some obstacles were primarily practical and technical and were resolved with some adaptive bricolage. Others related to the underlying power dynamics that exist in any participatory project. Our take on these followed the principles of feminist epistemologies. We approached the film as ‘a dialogic process [that could] enable communities to critically analyse their own “realities” and to explore the construction of meaning’ ([Kindon 2001](#), p. 143). In order to interrogate the ‘transformative potential’ of this work, the article focuses

on the key exercise of film-making, namely how to tell a story with sounds and pictures. Whose story are we telling? How do we make sure we will be heard? And by whom?

Those questions are, of course, difficult and will probably not be fully answered, but they are an invitation to think of our film as a reflective device, i.e. a tool that allows us to look at ourselves in a mirror, but also to reflect on our impact beyond the movie itself. I contend that because we had to navigate multiple authorial intentions and face multiple practical limitations along the way, we eventually shifted our initial viewpoints and ended up creating a story that none of us would have been able to write on our own. In *Histórias do Kakwaku*, we bring together forms of expression that are usually disconnected from each another. The result is a documentary that is inspired by the approach of Rouchian direct cinema, but also embraces a broad spectrum of audiovisual forms, from classic political interviews to dance videos, to self-promotion videos and eye-to-eye testimonies. We intend to speak to the constituency of Projecto Agir and also send our film to Indie film festivals.

Admitting to this fairly loose framing is also to acknowledge that the reflective potential of our film is still very much unfolding. At the time of writing, *Histórias do Kakwaku* premiered during a small ceremony we organised in Cacuaco (December 2021). It was a finalist in one of the very few film festivals in Angola (CineFest Viana, July 2022). More screenings are programmed, mostly in the various communities with whom *Projecto AGIR* works regularly.

The paper is organised in three sections, corresponding to the three phases of production of the movie. The first covers the training workshops we held in May and June 2021, during which we established the main objectives of the movie and wrote our synopsis. This phase was dedicated in part to technical training, but mostly involved discussions about the ethics of fieldwork and the difference between propaganda and documentation.

The second section focuses on the actual making of the film, both on-site (shooting) and on the computer (editing). Contrary to common belief, holding a camera, managing the record levels of a microphone and using editing software are not straightforward technical tasks. They imply choices that eventually affect the narration, and thus the story itself.

The third section questions the impact of this process. *Histórias do Kakwaku* stands between the two ‘strands of participatory media projects’ identified by [Luttrell and Chalfen \(2010, p. 197\)](#). It belongs to projects in which ‘image-making and specific images [...] represent a mid-point rather than an end-point in knowledge production, interventions and social action’. The process is as important as the result. This is true not only for me, who, as an academic, gained precious insight to the politics of community organising, but also for each participant who was introduced to the world of film-making and now will take her learning to the next level. In interrogating the field of social action, our work eventually led to the question of listening. Making a film together taught us to listen to one another and, more radically, to listen to new opportunities, beyond what we thought we knew about ourselves, and Luanda and Angola in general.

Finding our story, or the slow process of writing a film collectively

The decision to make a documentary film with the members of Projecto Agir was two-fold. On the one hand, understanding popular politics is at the core of my research interests, and film-making is one of my preferred research methods for it allows me to contribute concretely to the needs of the people I work with. I adhere to the idea that sharing the tools of my research is a way to de-centre my own gaze while giving others a direct entry into the research. As [Luttrell and Chalfen \(2010, p. 198\)](#) attest:

There is a ubiquitous invocation that participatory visual research is valued for its ability to ‘give voice’ to marginalised, less powerful people. The tacit assumption is that putting cameras into the hands of participants is a resource for having ‘a say’ in public discourse and decision-making.

On the other hand, the very creation of Projecto Agir came from the realisation by Angolan grassroots activists that they needed to market their political work in a more media-friendly way and to ground their action in the daily life of their own communities rather than in the competition between political parties. My concern to 'give voice' to the activists quite naturally met their own strategic objectives.

However, this natural meeting of interests is not to be taken naively. Luttrell and Chalfen, cited above, continue: 'Yet, how is "voice" being conceptualised, produced and analysed through these different collaborations? With what certainty can we attribute whose voice is whose?' Although I prefer the word 'story' for it better conveys the narrative dimension of a movie, these questions about 'whose voice is whose' were very much at the core of our project from the start.

By the time COVID-related restrictions eased enough to allow the workshops to begin, I had been following the organisation for more than a year, and I knew it had been through some serious internal turmoil. The new leadership was lacking in multimedia skills and the lobbying campaign was losing its momentum as the local elections, initially planned for 2020, had been shelved. Projecto Agir was now focusing on outreach programs. It needed to demonstrate its electoral credibility, should the elections finally happen, while trying to convince the ruling party that they could be viable partners in the meantime. In that context, Projecto Agir's executives saw our collaboration as a means to legitimate their work and their agenda. 'The film must serve to present the actions of Projecto Agir to social networks and to the Angolan political authorities in order to re-assert the role of Projecto Agir in the struggle for the implementation of elected local governments' was their wording.

I shared their diagnosis of the Angolan state as being excessively centralised and systematically biased to favour the ruling party. However, my observation of Projecto Agir had also made me realise that the organisation reproduced some of the malfunctions it criticised. It was quite hierarchical. Its leaders were dedicated and charismatic, but they were more at ease showcasing their academic eloquence than engaging in mundane community work. I had hoped that making a movie together would help me scratch off the varnish of formalism and empower them to find new ways of engaging with their public. This was certainly naive of me, but all in all, I can affirm that we started the project on the basis of genuine respect and reciprocal curiosity about what would come out of our collaboration.

We agreed that Projecto Agir's leaders would select up to 10 participants to work with me and that they would be in charge of circulating the information internally. After our second workshop, the terms of engagement were clear to everyone. I was the coordinator of the project; I decided on the content of the training, managed the calendar and kept track of our conversations via a PowerPoint document that I updated after each session. The participants committed to identify the key themes of our film, the people we should interview, the places where it was safe and interesting to film, etc. A clear mistake I made was that I assumed that the participants had a common idea of the film they wanted to make. Moreover, I took for granted that the official discourse held by the board members of the organisation was what our movie was meant to be about.

Although two board members actively contributed to writing the movie, they did not participate in the 'making phase', probably because they saw it as a training reserved for the foot soldiers. In fact, the seven grassroots members chosen for the project did not hold a formal position in the leadership of the organisation. While the board members held formal jobs as teachers in local high schools, the foot soldiers were either high school students, self-employed or unemployed. I must admit that I had not anticipated this implicit hierarchy and, more problematically, I did not allow much space for the expectations of those who would eventually become the actual film-makers in this project. Felix, Yepuka, José, Ivonny, Nelo, Albano and Branca were present and active during the first sessions, but they only took ownership of the film when we started working in smaller groups and focusing on the documentary aspect of the movie, rather than on its propaganda objective (see [Figure 1](#)).

OBJECTIVES of the MOVIE	SYNOPSIS sequences to be shot as planned on 20th May – in bold what was actually shot
1. To present the actions of PA	1a. Seminar about National Reconciliation and Autarquias 1b. Litter-Picking up activity > to be organised 1c. Soup kitchen > using archives from PA
2. To present the general context of the citizens' struggle for the implementation of <i>autarquias</i>	2a. Pictures from the protest 2b. Scans of the docs produced by PA during the lobbying campaign 2c. Interview with Spokesperson and/or President of PA
3. To show PA's capacity to participate in parliamentary debates	**this objective does not require a specific sequence, it will be reflected in 1a, 2b and 2c**
4. To explain what is at stake with the legislative package	4a. Interview with a law specialist from PA 4b. Reproduction of key documents (pieces of legislation)
5. To document Cacucaco's social and environmental realities	5a. Problem of the water in bairro Bate-Chapa: How an infrastructural problem ends up causing social problems 5b. Problem of the fallen bridge in bairro Paraíso: Connect local problems to broader urban failures at the scale of Luanda **1b will also respond to this objective**
6. To present the solutions developed by the citizens	6a. Short documentary about a community project that is not a direct initiative from PA **this objective will also come through seq. 5a and 5b**

Figure 1. From general objectives to synopsis (adapted from the notes taken during the writing sessions in May 2021)

Figure 1 shows the progressive refining of our synopsis. Over the course of four weeks, we focused on the script, alternating between formal lectures and hands-on practice. The first day, we discussed the main objectives and arrived at a list of six key themes, four of which were dedicated to the internal life of Projecto Agir (objectives 1 to 4). This shows how strong the initial impetus was to produce a propaganda film of the organisation rather than a documentary. The last two objectives, however, attracted most of the attention of the participants. José and Nelo, in particular, were eager to make sure that their neighbourhood would be represented in the film, so both of them took responsibility for coordinating the shooting phase, respectively in Paraíso and Bate Chapa. Only Sambongo volunteered to develop the first four objectives.

The objectives (numbered 1 to 6) were then broken down into thematic sequences – or secondary stories (1a, 1b, 1c, 2a etc). It was only then that we established smaller groups to list more precisely the audiovisual materials to be collected for each sequence. Filming the internal life of Projecto Agir did not raise much enthusiasm. The team filmed only one seminar and shot two interviews.

The groups in charge of collecting materials outside the organisation were much more dynamic. They decided to start in bairro Bate Chapa. After two hours of discussion, what was initially numbered 'sequence

5a' had transformed into a little documentary on its own (see [Figure 2](#)). New themes appeared: criminality, failing cultural institutions, youth entrepreneurship. Undoubtedly, these themes echoed the personal concerns of the participants who came that day. They mirrored the challenges faced by young people rather than the rhetoric of a political movement. I think it was at this stage that I realised there were several stories in our film and that my job would be to somehow reconcile them. I had no idea how to do so.

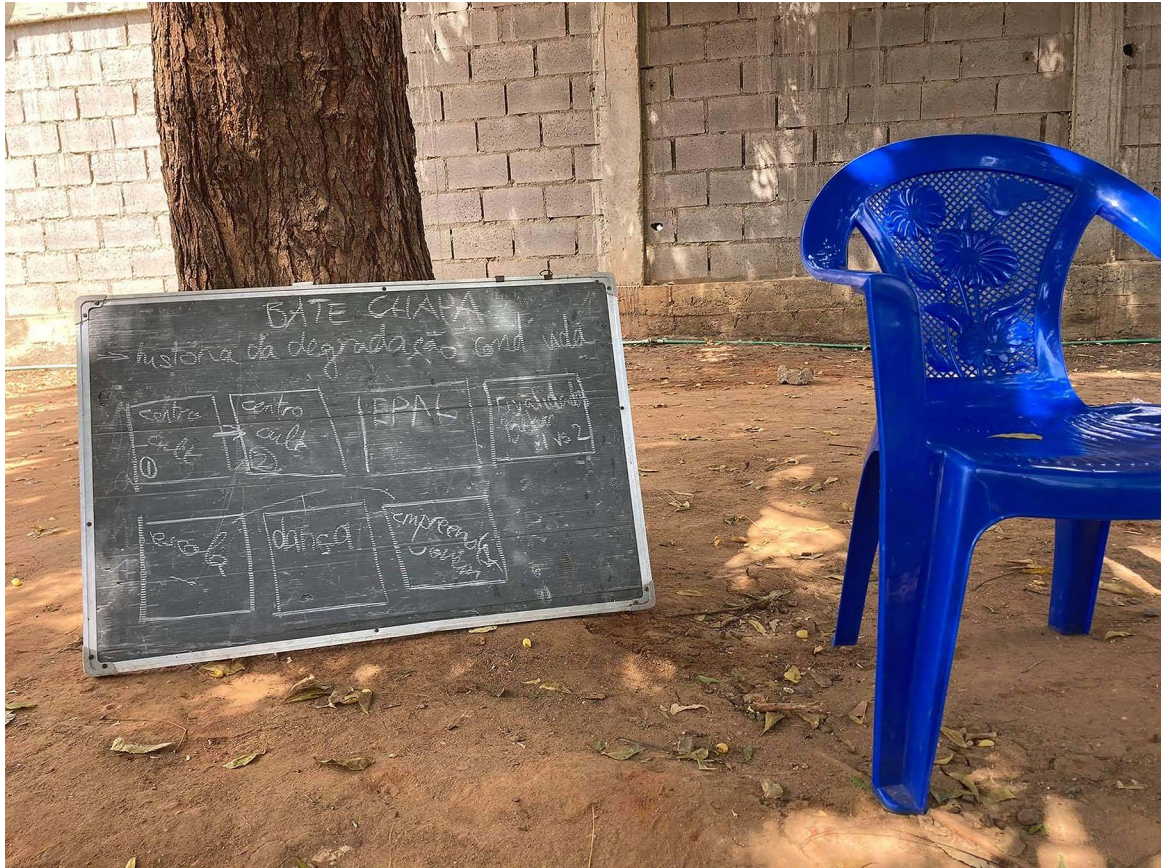


Figure 2. The blackboard summarising the synopsis of the sequence dedicated to bairro Chapa. The themes defined on that day were also used to guide the second team in bairro Paraíso. Photo by the author, 01/06/21

During these first sessions, I introduced the team to the equipment. This included two 'Pixel 4' smartphones, two external microphones (Rode VideoMic Me) and two tripods (one standard and one tabletop). We made various tests of video and sound recording. I also demonstrated how to use a semi-professional audio recorder (Zoom H4n) and a small lapel microphone (Rode SmartLav). It was crucial for me that the team realised the importance of capturing clear sounds to ensure the movie's success.

The time spent using the equipment contributed to building our team. Because all of them were members of Projecto Air, I thought they were used to working collaboratively, but I soon realised that they expected to execute tasks, rather than take decisions on their own. We had lots of fun rehearsing various shooting situations, such as a group discussion on the street or a portrait of someone at work. We spoke about the beauty and challenges of natural light, and I called their attention to the importance of bringing the camera to the eye level of the person we were interviewing. From this rose discussion about the ethical and political implications of our work.

We therefore debated whether or not we would show the faces of children. Our decision was to remain true to what we saw on the street. If children happened to be there, we would ask their permission, and if an adult related to them was there, we would double-check this oral consent. We would neither lie on our purpose nor self-censor. The bottom line was never to capture anyone’s image without their permission. In Angola, filming on the street is still generally perceived as a risky endeavour that can be interrupted by the police at any time. For most activists, hidden cameras remain the safest way to produce images.

Another debate arose about the ubiquitous presence of dumpsites. Lack of garbage collection was an important item on Projecto Agir’s agenda and, as shown in [Figure 1](#), we had initially planned to shoot a litter collection activity. But during training, we discussed the delicate balance between denouncing the hardships of the people and building a positive image of Cacucaco. Some participants were very reluctant to show dirty streets, antisocial behaviour or signs of poverty. Others envisioned the film as a provocation addressed to the government and wanted to amplify everything that was wrong in Cacucaco. I tried to frame the debate by recalling that fiction and documentary are on the same continuum. No documentary ever represents ‘the untouched reality’. Even the most controlled propaganda film always tells us something beyond the utopia imagined by the film-maker. In the end, we did not shoot the sequence about rubbish but included various views of sandy roads full of litter.

The training phase was therefore not just about learning where the rec button is on the camera, but included broader reflection on where, how and why we would film one thing in preference to another. Writing is never a straightforward process. In the context of collective documentary film-making, it is primarily about building a triangulation that includes everyone’s individual expectations, the constraints of the particular field about to be documented, and the untold expectations the project reveals. In our case, the elephant in the room was the idea that the board of Projecto Agir had a specific idea of what the film should be about. [Figure 3](#) summarises this triangle as a dialectic between three kinds of stories: the stories we imagine for ourselves, those we think others have in mind, and those that are dictated by the environment.

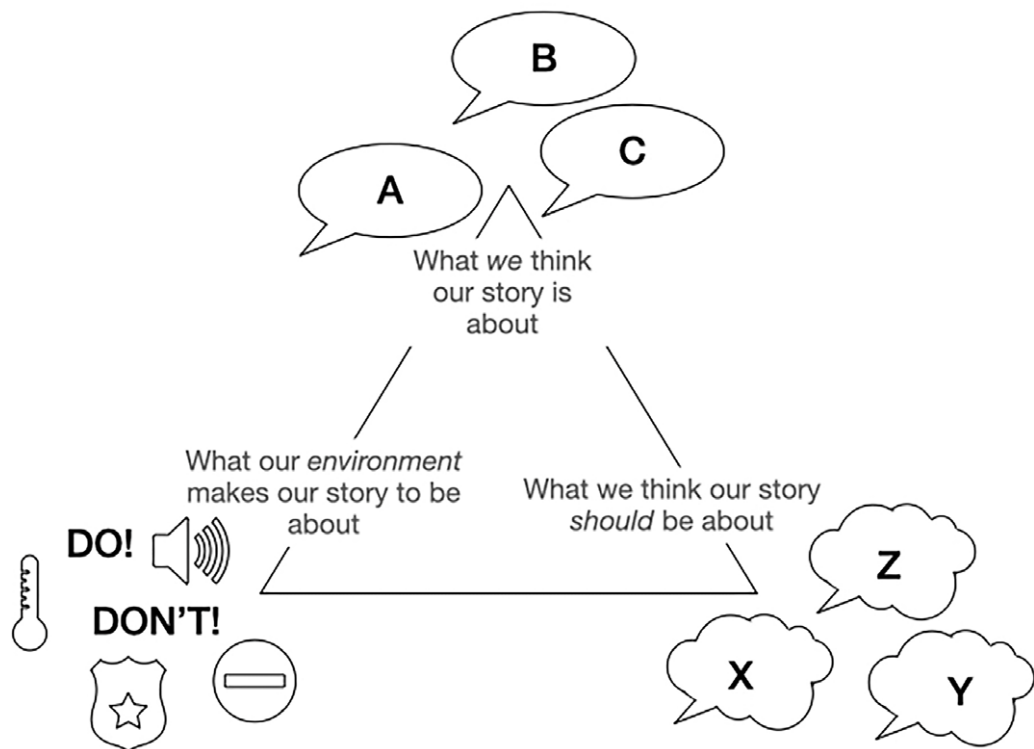


Figure 3. The triangulation of collective film writing: creating a space for intersubjectivity

The triangle is useful as it captures the idea of intersubjectivity by materialising the ‘space-in-between’ that does not belong to anyone but can be seized by everyone. It helps to move beyond the common description of the participatory approach as a binary relationship between the researcher and the researched (usually called ‘the participants’ in the plural form but imagined as a uniform partner).

[Sara Kindon \(2003\)](#) does not speak directly about intersubjectivity, but her focus on the multiple relationships at play in her research is very close to my argument here. Quoting from Donna Haraway’s famous essay about situated knowledge, she contends that ‘participatory video demands critical attention to the exercise of power within research relationships, it challenges us to explore reflexive ways that enable us to “join with another, to see together without claiming to be another”’ ([Haraway 1991](#), p. 193; [Kindon 2003](#), p. 146). I like very much the cautious phrasing borrowed from Haraway. In the process of making *Histórias do Kakwaku*, we were indeed often tempted to ‘claim to be another’. When we watched the footage to select what would eventually be included in the film, we often had lively discussions about what people actually wanted to say in their interviews and whether that was relevant to us at all.

In the next section, this process is presented in more detail. How did we actually *make* the movie we wrote? What practical solutions did we develop to allow a fairer distribution of power amongst us? Here again, [Kindon \(2003, p. 149\)](#) provides an important background to the discussion: ‘The challenge, as I see it (!), is to be more explicit about the power involved in how we work with video, to democratize its use in ways that embrace multiple and partial ways of looking and open up new possibilities for knowledge.’ So, how did we create a movie that reflects our ‘multiple and partial ways of looking?’

Making the film or how practical constraints are also a part of storytelling

The phase of shooting on the streets of their neighbourhoods and in the houses of their friends and relatives was undoubtedly the part that raised most expectation and enthusiasm from my fellow film-makers. Yépuka, Ivonny and Albano already had a bit of experience in music video making. Felix knew from the start that he wanted to develop film-making as a professional skill and he has since been extending his training with other workshops across Luanda. However, I was pretty insecure in my position, so instead of assisting them on the ground, I decided to just accompany them to each neighbourhood on the first day and then let them get to work. The idea was that they would not be dependent on my schedule to plan their interviews and could be spontaneous and record whatever occurred that fit with our script. It is important to emphasise that the pedagogy was to be mundane and practical. It takes me thirty to forty minutes to come to Cacuaco, I am not able to navigate the sandy streets of a remote neighbourhood like Paraíso alone. Having to wait for me is clearly a burden. More importantly, as a white woman, my presence on the street always raises interrogations or even concern. Ordinary residents fear that I represent a private company seeking to evict them from their home. Official representatives fear that I come to spy on their work. They are also more likely to report my presence to their superiors than to monitor a handful of young residents playing around with smartphones. And, of course, for my partners, having me around when they had to frame their images and set their microphones up added a lot of pressure since I would inevitably made them feel as students under the scrutiny of their professor.

Initially I thought that we would be able to screen the footage after each shoot, but it proved logistically impossible as most ended up being collected over three to five days. Nelo, who was responsible for the filming in Bate Chapa, explained to the team in Paraíso that it was better to work intensively: ‘Stick to the people you already know, you don’t need to go and interview strangers, speak to your family, your friends and in a few hours it’s done!’ This comment unsettled me as I thought it was important for them to approach outsiders. I later realised that it was the familiarity between them and their subject that made our film unique.

My stepping out of the filming process was thus extremely important to allow our intersubjectivity to grow in new directions. Each participant used these moments of filming differently but creatively. For example, José woke up at 4 am to film the tuktuk that supplies fresh bread to his corner store. He did this on his own and did not hesitate to include himself in the movie using the ‘selfie’ mode on the camera. While the footage was shaky and partly unusable, we managed to secure enough images to introduce our movie with a dynamic early-morning bike-ride on the streets of Paraíso. Another good example of creativity beyond the script was Yepuka’s interview. Yepuka was the only member of our team who also appeared as a character in the movie. We initially planned to film him during a dance class in Cacucaco, but his classes were suspended due to COVID restrictions. Instead, Yepuka performed a solo dance and delivered a very short monologue, his eyes centred on the lens of the camera.

Retrospectively, I realised that only Felix and Branca closely followed the directions given during the training phase. Their footage focused on the gestures of their subjects. Felix interviewed Elisa for about 20 minutes, but spent the whole afternoon with her in order to collect footage of all aspects of her work as a stylist, from cutting the fabric to improvising a catwalk in her living room. Branca very patiently filmed the students in the modest classroom of *Cantinho do Saber*, a community project set up by Nelo’s brother in response to the lack of public schools in his neighbourhood. In both cases, the footage is technically quite rich. They give our film a solid backbone in terms of documentary value. They also convey a sensibility and a certain sense of propriety that a professional camera operator might not have captured.

These examples suggest that logistical autonomy resulted in stylistic freedom. This of course didn’t come without downsides. The fact that I couldn’t check the footage in real time meant that recurrent technical mistakes were made. We only noticed them afterwards, when it was not possible to repeat the filming. Collecting such diverse and technically different materials also forced us to reconsider our synopsis quite

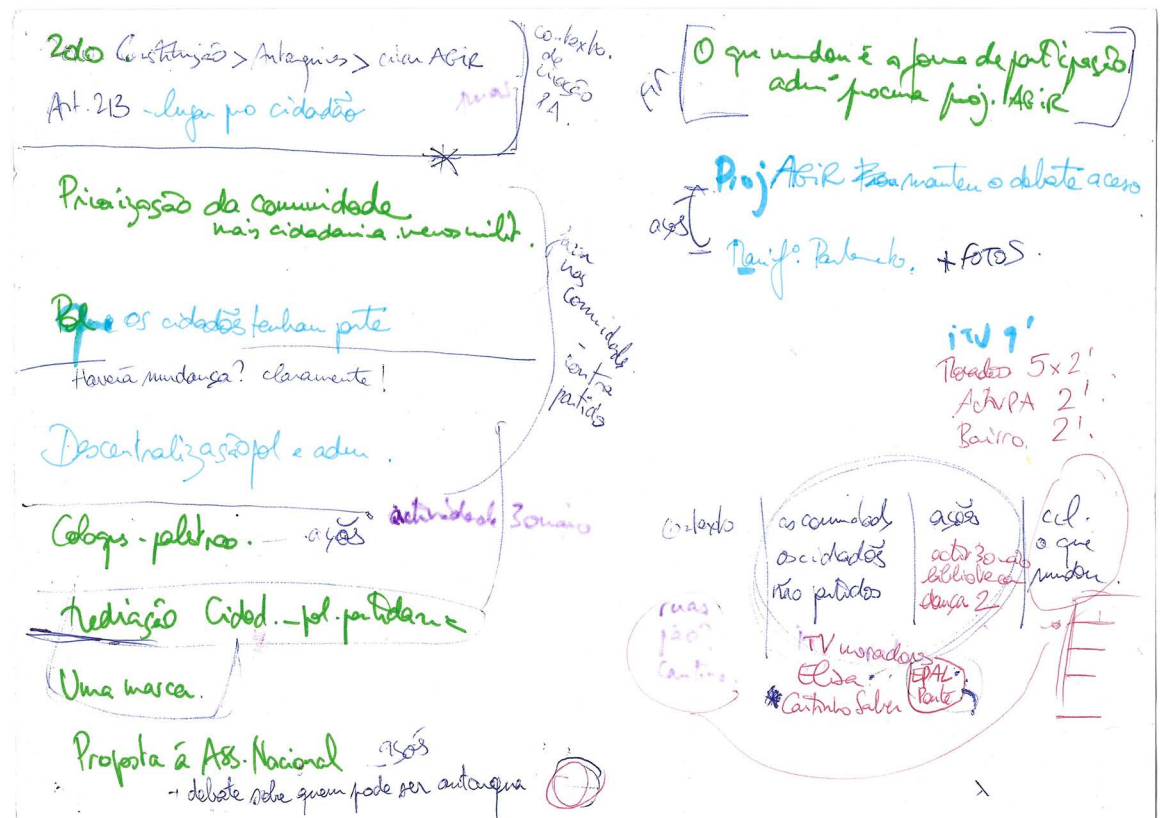


Figure 4. Rewriting scenario 1: Organising our footage around the themes raised in the interviews

radically. [Figure 4](#) is a reproduction of the notes I took during a session with Felix in July 2021. After listening carefully to Bengue and Sambongo’s interviews, we realised that we would need to break them up into thematic sequences and build a dialogue between the two. We used a colour code to distinguish between our different materials: green, the interview with Bengue; light blue, the interview with Sambongo; purple for the ‘documentary’ parts; dark blue for our rephrasing of the sequences.

A few days later, we presented our ideas to the rest of the team and that led to another document ([Figure 5](#)). This time, the presentation was closer to an editing plan, i.e. a chronological presentation of the themes covered in the film. In this document, the four sections are entitled ‘Context’, ‘Projecto Agir’s Philosophy’, ‘Projecto Agir’s Actions’, ‘Impact and Perspectives’. We later used this four-part structure to organise our workflow on the editing software, where we re-named them ‘Context’, ‘Solutions’, ‘Actions’ and ‘Conclusion’.

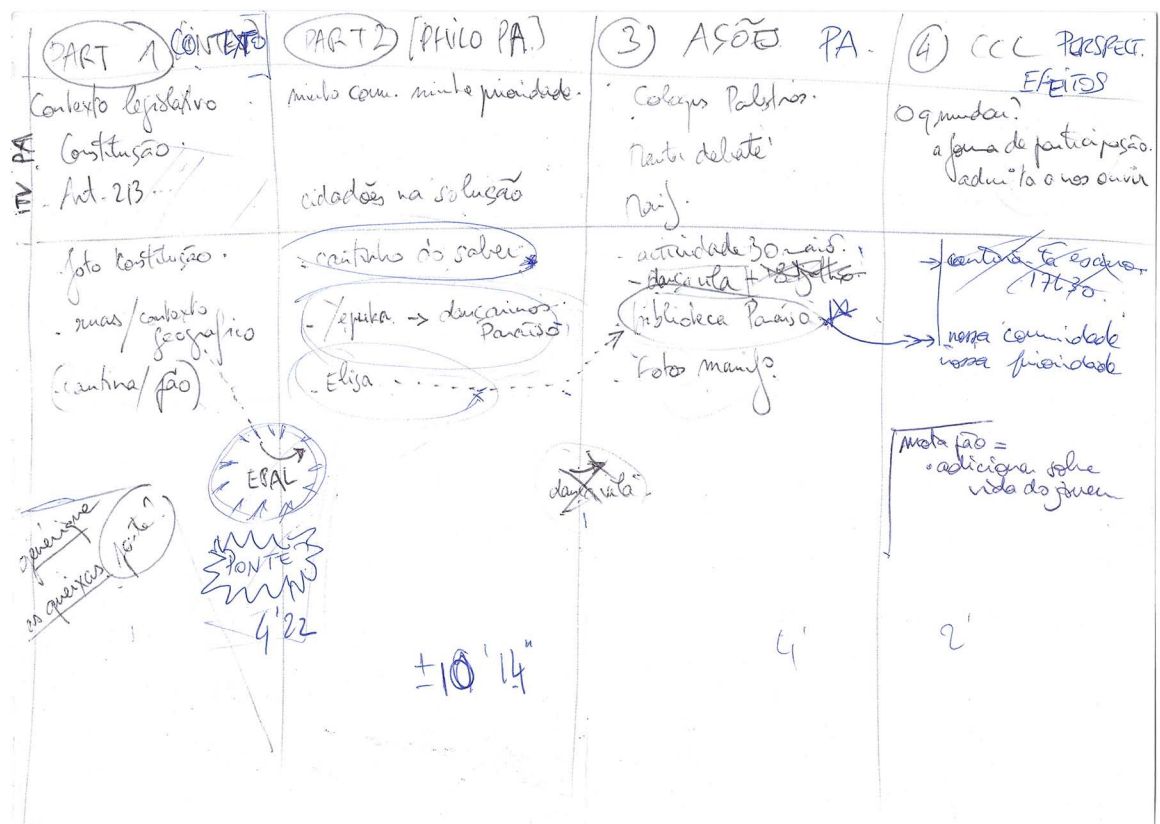


Figure 5. Rewriting scenario 2: An editing plan in four sections

[Figures 4](#) and [5](#) illustrate the power balance that was created during this last phase of editing. I was the one holding the pen and took the lead in defining the narrative backbone of the movie. I was cautious not to foreclose alternative ideas, but I must acknowledge that I did not anticipate how challenging the editing phase would be. It was virtually impossible for my fellow film-makers to make counter suggestions since they had no experience in preparing an editing plan.

We collected more than 20 hours of video, including ten interviews, two seminars, two dance sessions and one long motorbike ride, in addition to numerous improvised recordings on the street. As we reviewed the material, we found that many files were unusable, either because of the quality of the video (too shaky, too much movement, low light), or of the audio (microphone plugged in incorrectly, background noise), or

simply because they were too short or unrelated to other footage. Although no-one complained, I believe this assessment was not welcomed by my partners who had spent a lot of time organising interviews only to find that we could not use them for the film. Another technical problem was that the smartphones turned out to be very sensitive to heat, requiring them to stop recording to let the phones cool down. Here again, they didn't want to inform me about this difficulty as they didn't want to be seen to be complaining, as they considered it a privilege to use the equipment.

In the editing phase we also faced more structural obstacles. In terms of logistics, we now had to work in an office space in town. Instead of going to Cacucaco in my private car, they had to commute by public transport. Financial costs could be compensated but not the hour-long trip to the city. Still today, I wonder whether this physical distancing from Proyecto Agir's territory played a role in the progressive loosening of our narrative. Compared to the story we had written in Cacucaco, the movie we edited in town amplifies the life, creativity and entrepreneurship of the youth in general while downplaying the political discourse of the organisation itself.

Last but not least, our collaboration, which had been pretty hands-on so far, took quite an academic turn when we started working on the computer. Firstly, each film-maker roughly transcribed a couple of interviews and identified the bits that echoed each other. [Figure 6](#) shows how much this exercise relied on the writing capacity of the transcriber.

Secondly, we discussed whether the messages conveyed by the people interviewed corresponded to the political vision of Proyecto Agir. For example, many young people interviewed on the street complained about the lack of state intervention but did not suggest any solutions. Should we retain the complaints (for they reflect a common stance) or should we instead focus on those who offered solutions (which was the position of Proyecto Agir)? In other instances, interviewees emphasised their entrepreneurship mindsets and encouraged others to follow their steps, but tended to evade structural difficulties and systemic obstacles. Should we encourage their optimism or balance it with our perception of the challenges they faced?

Once again, not all of us were interested in unravelling the 'hidden scripts' in our interviews. Nelo and Albano were overtly skeptical when they realised we could spend a full hour discussing which of three sentences we would keep. Felix and José, on the other hand, were delighted to bring the rhetoric of Proyecto Agir into question. Do we have to include those lengthy legal explanations about the constitutionality of local elections? Can we just say that Proyecto Agir is a 'citizens' organisation' without referring to the debate on registration as an NGO versus a political party? Yepuka and Ivonny, who were more familiar with the aesthetics of music videos, were instrumental in creating artistic sequences based on performances rather than speeches.

We spent a full month finalising the first version of the movie. I felt sometimes profoundly challenged by our discussions. The neat division of labour between facilitator and participants was long gone, and I felt insecure giving my own interpretation on some topics that touched directly on the political strategy of Proyecto Agir. However, I believe that, when filming or editing, we somehow found a balance between following our initial script and exploring new directions, between building a solid sense of common purpose and allowing free space for individual visions, and between 'doing the job' and having fun.

Taking a step back from the film-making process itself, I believe this experience, as a whole, sheds new light on the question of 'co-authorship'. In making *Histórias do Kakwaku*, different people were involved in different ways at different times. The film reflects this diversity and certainly delivers a multi-layered message. Those who are familiar with the political agenda of Proyecto Agir might feel that the message of advocacy for local elections is too enmeshed in the stories of ordinary citizens. On the other hand, a young man who saw the movie when it premiered in Cacucaco in December 2021 expressed a certain disappointment for he had expected a proper socio-political diagnostic. To him, our documentary failed to

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0'17. 33 - o bairro passava corvo* ✓
 33. 34 - Tinham um belo centro cultural q' já n' funciona* ✓
 34. 46 - se maravilhavam com as coisas boas do centro ✓
 46. 55 - o estado meteu a epal* ✓

55. 01'09 - a epal veio pra os ajudar e prejudicar } -01'52 |
 01'09 à 18 - a vala e prejudicial f'ndo chorre
 01'18 à 24 - a casa todo fica alado.
 01'24 à 34 - as crianças e as jovens são levados pelas águas
 01'34 à 40 - quando a epal faz limpeza no tanque o bairro fica mal
 01'40 à 50 - a população (crianças) brincam nessa água e criam parvitas
 01'50 à 58 - Criam se os mosquitos que criam paludismo
 01'58 à 02'08 - Temos um hospital municipal q' n' ajuda a população } -02'08 |
 02'08 à 17 - o centro cultural esta todo estragado
 02'17 à 24 - não vão com a cara dos que vivem no bairro
 02'24 à 45 - tem ideia q' o estado tem q' ver o problema deles
 02'45 à 03'04 - o estado tem de ver a situação
 03'04 à 28 - o centro cultural em 2009 foi um centro de verdade } -03'28 -
 03'28 à 40 - centro hoje esta muito estragado dentro e fora* } -03'57 -
 03'40 à 57 - sonho para melhoria do centro cultural
 04'11 à 35 - 2009 tinham um campo onde os jovens se ocupavam
 04'35 à 40 - quem o capta todo vendido. (campo)
 04'40 à 05'00 - quem que o estado ve o problema da parvita (argoto)
 05'00 à 06 - fala sobre os caminhos de acessos.
 05'06 à 29 - quem que o estado ve o problema da parvita (argoto)
 05'48 à 57 - quem que o estado ve o problema da parvita (argoto)
 05'57 à 06-8 - quem que o estado ve o problema da parvita (argoto)
 06'06 à 18 - quem que o estado ve o problema da parvita (argoto)

Figure 6. Hand-written transcription of the interview with João Muimba Mukongo by Felix and Nelo – in red the first selection of relevant extracts, in blue the timecode used for final editing

reflect on the key question of unemployment, for example. This testimony opens an important question: What happens next? Once the movie is finished, once it has its own autonomous life through public screenings here and there, the collective dynamic of our film-makers' team comes to an end. Each one of us now has to use this experience to build his or her own 'next step'.

'And now that we've made the movie, what does it make us?'

A few months after we released the film, Felix sent me a message: 'Now that we've made a movie, what does it make us? Are we journalists? Film-makers? Sociologists?'. The question was put jokingly, for Felix knows how uncomfortable I am with giving titles to people, but it says something of the professional expectations that his participation in the project had raised. When [Luttrell and Chalfen \(2010\)](#) stress that, in the more academic strand of participatory visual methods, the final product is only a portion of what matters, they do not only refer to the benefits of the approach for the academic facilitators but also insist on the notion of 'voice' for everyone involved in the research. They contend that by 'lifting up voices', participatory visual research enhances 'a capacity for reflection, commentary, perspicacity, creativity and reflexivity about oneself in relation to one's social context' ([Luttrell & Chalfen 2010](#), p. 199). I'd like to dedicate the last section of this article to a few hypotheses about how *Histórias do Kakwaku* might contribute to lifting up the voices of those who made it.

Although we did not conduct specific sessions about our introspective journeys, each of us testified to our individual transformation at one stage or another. Nelo, for example, told me that he now watches the news differently. He has noticed that many interviews are heavily edited and that what he thought were neutral reports are always the product of storytelling. His criticism goes beyond a mere denunciation of state-owned media propaganda. He explained that news reports include illustrative shots that are not related to what people say. We discussed the difference between mere cutaway shots and more problematic trends of manipulation.

I had many moments of reflexivity myself, but the one that struck me most came in November 2021, when Felix and I presented the first five minutes of our 'almost-done' film to an academic audience (mostly architecture and planning students). When asked about what we learnt during the experience, he said that he had met new companions. From the beginning, I had taken for granted that they all knew each other from their common engagement in Projecto Agir. I had not realised how much their friendship actually came from participating in the workshop. Worse, I had assumed that because they were part of one particular youth political movement, they were automatically friends and somehow all thought alike. When Felix highlighted that these new friendships meant new horizons, I realised how much our workshop had been a social and personal journey, a discovery of the power of our voices.

More pragmatically, making this movie provided us with a 'first experience' that opened up new spaces of engagement. Although I had conducted participatory visual research before ([Buire, Garçon & Torkaman-Rad 2019](#); [Buire 2021](#)), I had never made a collective documentary. In December 2021, I had an opportunity to organise another workshop, in partnership with Ingrid Bamberg, a sociologist specialising in participatory visual methods. The four-day workshop culminated with an exhibition that can be consulted online: <https://microlab.hypotheses.org/678>. On this occasion, I discovered the principles of PhotoVoice, developed by the Centre for Visual Methodologies for Social Change (University of the KwaZulu-Natal) and had the privilege to share the training space with famous South African photographer Cedric Nunn, who used documentary photography as a weapon against apartheid in the 1980s. The film-makers of *Histórias de Kakwaku* participated in the workshop alongside nine other young audiovisual creatives, amongst whom several had won prizes for their photographic and/or filmic work, and two were enrolled in a university course in cinema and television. The encounter between those 'informed amateurs' and the freshly proclaimed film-makers from Cacuco was spectacular. I was deeply touched to witness how the novices I had met a few months earlier had grown into confident film-makers able to converse about the politics of representation, typologies of visual activism or dialectics of the self and the other.

The experience of film-making changed from being a personal education opportunity to being a common language for thinking about social change (the theme of the PhotoVoice workshop led by Ingrid). [Sara](#)

[Kindon \(2001, p. 143\)](#) describes this ability of participatory video to move past the individual in order to unsettle structural inertia as its ‘transformative potential’.

Such a dialogic process can enable communities to critically analyse their own ‘realities’ and to explore the construction of meaning. This collaborative and negotiated use of video has considerable transformative potential, not only in terms of the action it may generate, but also in terms of the structure of relationships between the researcher and research participants.

New collaborations developed after this workshop. Felix currently works on a music video with one of the ‘artists’ he met there. Another participant, specialised in sound-editing helped me finalise the post-production of *Histórias do Kakwaku*. It is of course impossible to quantify the bonds we created with each other, but these friendships constitute a real social capital and translate into concrete opportunities.

If I was far from confident that I would be able to meet their training expectations when we started the film, I was finally reassured: the young men and women who worked with me have the resources to craft their own platforms. Of course, they gained new technical skills in film-making and discovered the arcane of storytelling. They also engaged in difficult discussions about deontology and made their own choices between political marketing, cultural mediation and sociological exploration. Interestingly, these outcomes are quite remote from the initial objectives we had imagined. I opened this article with three short summaries of my field notes in May 2021. At the time, I imagined that our film would help me access the political imagination of Projecto AGIR and the leaders of the organisation hoped that they would train their media team in the art of political marketing. A year later, we’ve grown into a bunch of film-makers who are engaged, curious and critical of ready-made solutions. We built our movie as a careful navigation among various viewpoints. *Histórias do Kakwaku* is probably too many things (a documentary, a music video, a student project ...), but it cannot be accused of being a mere mouthpiece for Projecto Agir. As far as I’m concerned, I feel that it eventually conveys a veiled critique of Projecto Agir.

As film-makers in charge of editing the interviews of two leaders of the organisation, we could not fail to notice that part of their discourse loops on itself. We had to cut out the intricate digressions about legal considerations for they were demonstrations of eloquence rather than clear explanations for the neophytes. We also realised that many propositions merely paraphrased the official motto (‘My community, my priority’) without fleshing out how this ideology translates in the community. A few spectators confessed that they wished to see more of the work of Projecto Agir on the ground and suggested we add footage. In fact, *Histórias do Kakwaku* already covers the whole range of the organisation’s activist routine. It includes the interviews and political analyses provided by the leaders of the movement to local media, the seminars organised in their headquarters, and the more informal talks given to community members (often associated with a ‘cultural event’, such as a talent show or an ephemeral street library). The power of documentary film-making resides precisely in its capacity to contrast verbal claims (Projecto Agir presents itself as a champion of community empowerment) with effective actions (Projecto Agir works mainly as a promoter of political debate and cultural entertainment).

The discrepancy between what spectators expected to see and what we actually captured on the ground links the question of voice to the reception of the film. Who does *Histórias do Kakwaku* speak to? Who will see it and what will they make of it? To borrow the concept developed by [Tiffany Fairey \(2018, p. 122\)](#), who will *listen* to it?

The promise of participatory photography projects lies not only with who is taking the pictures but also with the people who are looking at them and who take them seriously. ‘[...] If we are to adequately listen to marginal voices we have to learn to listen to stories that might sometimes be unsettling or painful, histories that are uncomfortable, perspectives that are critical, told in

languages that are not familiar or easy to understand. [...] The need is for projects to not only support communities to negotiate their voice but to work to ensure that those voices are listened to.

Fairey speaks here in the context of institutional participatory photography projects where ‘the images produced hold a communications currency that the NGO inevitably needs to control’ (2018, p. 121). In our case, the fact that the film did not respond exclusively to *Projecto Agir*, but also followed my own academic questions, probably made it easier for us to tell a story that is open to multiple interpretations. [Fairey \(ibid., p. 122\)](#) calls the facilitators of participatory visual projects to ‘commit to being transparent about their production processes and to creat[e] multiple sites and ways for representing and understanding the issues at stake’. I hope the present article is a first step in that direction.

Conclusion

In this article, I intended to reflect on participatory film-making, not only as a practical tool for engaged scholarship, but more fundamentally as a method of storytelling that opens unpredictable spaces of intersubjectivity. From framing our initial narrative intentions to making our final editorial choices, we juggled between multiple expectations and sometimes contradictory narratives. As the facilitator of the project, I maintained a certain power over the whole process. I was the one who knew what a synopsis is and how to import, cut and edit footage on the computer. I did impose minimal aesthetic choices (such as avoiding camera’s movements or shooting interviews on a tripod). But I did not choose the people we interviewed, nor did I conduct the interviews or intervene in the transcription and summary coding of the interviews. All of this resulted in our movie being a *de facto* experimentation in what could be called ‘intersubjective writing’. None of us really made the movie he or she had imagined. But neither did we merely enact what we thought others were expecting from us. The fact that we were working with audiovisual material brought its own challenges, and we had to make adjustments to our story depending on the quality of our footage. This was difficult to accept at first, but eventually helped us to narrow the story and keep our focus on what really mattered. The working documents presented throughout the article are testimony to how we achieved this.

As a result, *Histórias do Kakwaku* is best described as a documentary collage rather than a film. We even sidelined our initial political objectives by giving a voice to artistic performances, accounts of self-entrepreneurship and records of daily life. In Donna Haraway’s words, our film experiments with what it means ‘to see together without claiming to be another’.

Histórias do Kakwaku is not tailored to be shown in film festivals. Its technical profile is too low, its narrative frame too loose, its production context too vague. Tiffany Fairey’s reflection on listening provides an interesting counterpoint to our endeavour. Borrowing from [Dreher’s \(2010\)](#) reflection on the politics of listening, Fairey insists that in facilitating participatory photography projects, learning to listen is a whole process in itself. How do we listen to each other, and how do we listen to what unsettles our certainties? This deserves an article of its own, but I hope I have provided a few answers by reflecting on how each of us who participated in the making of *Histórias do Kakwaku* took this experience further.

The impact of our work can be felt on both a personal and an interpersonal level. We slightly derailed the expectations of *Projecto Agir* and we played with the rules of academic engagement. By doing so, we grew confidence in our capacity to build our own voice and we started to listen to others. We also acquired new vocabularies that will allow us to reach out to other partners.

I do not claim that collective film-making grows the seeds of revolution, but our experiment shows that it does allow a partial rewiring of social relations that extends beyond the binary coupling of researcher and researched. I can only hope for more projects to develop, for spaces of intersubjectivity to grow bigger and

for researchers to keep losing control in order to challenge the boundaries of what can be heard, in academia and beyond.

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