Transgressing borders with participatory video technologies

Reflections on creative knowledge production with asylum seekers in Australia

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Abstract

In this article we ask: how might the significant turn towards creative modes of knowledge production bring together researchers, participants and audiences to disrupt bordering technologies that dehumanise asylum seekers? We focus on videos taken by asylum seekers in Darwin who express their everyday experiences of encountering and transgressing borders. As researchers, we use experimental editing techniques to make these transgressions visible in a society with a white majority culture. We argue, however, that these video techniques often work to privilege our creative agency as researchers, even though the aim is to illuminate different temporalities and visualities of the global refugee crisis. This article problematises this agency and attends to ethical dilemmas by revisiting the juxtapositions, montages, fades, distortions and vortexes we use to centre asylum seeker lives. These visual techniques are an attempt to respond to xenophobic nationalism and racially discriminatory immigration policies through forms of digital activism that transgress standard 'borders' of representation and the self/other borders of public debates. In our demand for social and cultural justice, we are inspired by work that uses the affordances of digital technologies to dismantle the rigidity of sovereign borders.

Keywords: Darwin, knowledge, video, borders, refugees

Introduction

Media representations of the 'global refugee crisis' often rely on a universalised aesthetic of 'waves', 'flows', 'surges' and dangerous border crossings that focus on the EU and US/Mexico (Bleiker et al 2013; Pallister-Wilkins 2019). Within this 'global' representation, the everyday experiences of those seeking refuge in Australia are rendered invisible by racially discriminatory immigration policies that criminalise those who arrive by boat. These institutional practices dehumanise individuals and censor the public's engagement with asylum seekers, through physical borders at onshore and offshore detention centres. These borders solidify when the media circulates pervasive toxic atmospheres of xenophobic nationalism that fix those seeking asylum as illegals and potential terrorists. Given the emergence of these carceral sites that fuel despair, fear and anxiety, this article highlights the role that city spaces play in dismantling physical and metaphorical borders. We argue that public spaces such as parks, beaches, football ovals, and exchanges that occur across the fences and borders of mandatory detention centres produce sparks of hope that can be creatively captured and used to create new messages of conviviality, care, welcome and responsibility. In this article we develop conceptual and empirical insights on bordering that respond to the call for critical thought and interventions that can expand the realm of the political and undo neat segregations of carceral and non-carceral spaces (Gill et al 2018; Lea 2014; Mountz 2011; Mountz 2017).

This article focuses on creative collaborations with people of asylum seeker and refugee background in Darwin, northern Australia, who used videos and

photographs to express their everyday experiences of encountering and transgressing borders. We argue that the experimental and collaborative process of editing these videos of public spaces taken by racialised, vulnerable bodies, presents ethical challenges even though our aim is to adopt a visual and aesthetic gaze that opens up different perspectives, temporalities and visualities of bordering. These challenges relate to the framing of creative knowledge produced, and our artistic licence that regulates decisions about what footage should be included, and what should be edited out. In attending to minor, mundane, and perhaps unappealing shots of everyday actions that do not fit with the overall visual aesthetic that the final film or video artwork was working towards, we consider whether we unintentionally also transformed the narrative being told by putting up new barriers and borders.

These challenges that highlight ethical considerations when conducting participatory creative research are just emerging in scholarship within geography, mobilities, and migration studies (Barry 2019; Barry & Keane 2019; Basnet et al 2018; Boyd & Edwardes 2019; Castro et al 2016; Lobo forthcoming 2020; Lobo 2019; Longhurst et al 2008; Myers 2011; Rose & Bingley 2017; Tolia-Kelly 2008). Feminist and cultural geographers, in particular, continue to draw attention to the potentialities as well as the risks of collaborative knowledge scholarship with marginalised, vulnerable and racialised communities (Askins & Blazek 2017; Askins & Pain 2011; Basnet et al 2018; Darling 2011; Fincher et al 2019). The ethical dilemmas are addressed, to some extent, through academic reflexivity in the research process. Askins and Blazek (2017), however, argue that such reflexivity is often a practice of individual introspection and is less attentive to emotion, affect and embodied experiences. Their research calls for 'caring with' projects in the neoliberal academy through a political stance that is 'embodied, emotional and thoughtful' (Askins & Blazek, p. 1086, p. 1103). This approach resonates with the broader feminist literature on carceral spaces that centres the politics of the body (Mountz 2017). In this article, we build on this research by presenting collaborative creative interventions with asylum seekers as performances of 'caring-with' that transgress imbricated global and local bordering technologies.

We are inspired by the creative work of artists who use the material things of

migration or digital/photographic media of risky journeys to embody the 'cry' for empathy and cultural justice. While there are numerous examples of participatory research with refugee and asylum seeker communities that embrace storytelling and more traditional forms of creativity in writing, music, and fine arts, our exploration in this article is to show the complications and ethical dilemmas when using experimental forms of creative practice. Specifically, our exploration focuses on a series of experimental video artworks that embrace creative techniques to follow the sensory attunements and push beyond representational forms. The polyvocal, multi-sensory and more-than-representational aspects of the creative work is powerful and enable us to think anew about how our digital practices might create new knowledge that momentarily dissolves brutal hierarchies in 'fortress' nations with white majority cultures such as Australia—self/other, white/non-white, citizen/stranger, life/non-life, human/nonhuman, material/symbolic, as well as land/sea. We follow Mignolo and Walsh (2018, p. 109) in using the '/' to refer to a complex concept that is both divided (a dyad) as well as united or connected.

The article unfolds in three sections. First, we survey literature and recent innovations in participatory and creative modes of engaging with people of migrant, refugee and asylum seeker background to highlight the issues and ethical dilemmas of academic collaborations. Second, we give context to the experimental project that enabled us to engage with these new settlers in Darwin, a small tropical city in northern Australia. We explore the process of collaborative editing that we (Michele and Kaya) engaged in as a mature-aged female migrant Australian of Indian heritage and an Australian-born white female. We engage in this learning process to shift rigid self/other, disciplinary and methodological borders that fix ways of seeing asylum seekers. Fincher et al (2019, p. 12) remind us that such learning is often a process of 'lengthy negotiations' across differences that calls for trust, flexibility and openness. In this collaborative learning process, we learn from asylum seekers as well as each other. As the discussion of our artistic editing style unfolds, we conclude with a discussion of the swirling vortex, a concept from the natural sciences that pushes us beyond ocular sensibilities and attempts to translate affective registers of turbulence that are central to asylum seeker lives.

Transgressing borders using creative participatory methods

Creative methods, such as participatory photography and video provide the opportunity for urban citizens of migrant, refugee and asylum seeker background to frame and position their own narratives and perspectives of everyday life in the city. These perspectives are necessary in the Australian context given a universalised aesthetic framed by media coverage and reporting on the European migration crisis in 2015-2016 that racialises and dehumanises asylum seeker bodies, but has cumulated into a global leitmotif of the refugee experience (Bleiker et al 2013; Burrell & Hörschelmann 2018; Pallister-Wilkins 2019). By positioning newcomers to Australia as urban citizens we intervene in these debates that focus on refugees and asylum seekers as people with no rights to dignity in a new country. More specifically, we are interested in how participatory methods seek to challenge dominant stereotypes and aesthetics of migration. These types of visuals and aesthetics, we argue, have facilitated the metaphorical borders in public debates, which in turn reinforce the very real physical borders of Australia's hard-line and inhumane detention processes.

Using methods that move beyond textual description, as Caroline Scarles describes, can allow a 'bridge that connects researcher's and respondent's experiences' (2010, p. 912) in unexpected ways. These creative modes of engaging, cut through language barriers to open perspectives and platforms that activate ways of seeing the city that highlight the lives of asylum seekers. There has been a plethora of innovative and powerful studies in the past few years that have mixed modes of participation through visual, multi-sensory, embodied, performative, and affective reflections on migration experiences (Basnet et al 2018; Frazier 2019; Lenette 2019; O'Neill 2018; Ní Laoire 2016). Basnet et al (2018, p. 12) argue that these experimental approaches that incorporate the unplanned and unexpected in the research process provide fresh insights into collaborative research with vulnerable participants; the risk, however, is the temptation to '"tidy up" the messiness of our own, and our participants', lived experiences'.

The messiness of participatory methods fits within a long history of visual and non-textual methods used in geographical and social science research. The

recent growth in research that has employed and facilitated participatory and video-based methods (for example, Frazier 2019; Lenette 2019; Ní Laoire 2016) is evidence of the ability for researchers to move beyond purely textual accounts and instead offer genuine modes of engagement and collaboration with participants. However, the use of participatory approaches that blur the lines between documentation (as ethnographic traditions) and the more creative and experimental practices (artworks or allowing participants more agency in the creation process) raises several ethical questions. This type of research necessitates further scrutiny of the agency of the researchers, the contributions of participants, and the representational and aesthetic decisions that are made when presenting or disseminating the outputs.

Insights from the creative arts are crucial in illuminating everyday struggles and the transgression of borders in ways that can seed critical thought and political action (Gomez-Barris 2017; 2018; Paparstergiadis & Trimboli 2019). Looking at examples from contemporary creative work, however, sheds further light on the types of aesthetic and ethical considerations that visual methods, in particular using video, may raise when engaging with, or reporting on, refugee and migrant experiences. Prominent artists and activists draw our attention to the ways that visual and video documentation traverse the role of artists (or researchers) as reporter and documenter of current situations, and the problems with agency and aesthetics used in re-presenting such material. For instance, the prominent artist Ai Weiwei's recent critically acclaimed art film, *Human Flow* (2018), is positioned, rather uneasily, as a merger between an artistic portrayal of refugee journeys and a documentary film. The film relies on a certain aesthetic built through 'prominent visual motifs that saturate the screen with colour' (Barry 2019, p. 211). The aesthetics that Ai Weiwei's art film and his body of work around the European refugee 'crisis' facilitate are stylistic devices—colours, textures, materials—that operate within an established aesthetic realm of creative practice and representation (Barry 2019; Tzanelli 2017). But it is this dual role of the artist that Ai Weiwei's film, and his larger body of works on the global refugee crisis, bring into question, raising issues about the agency of the artist as author, and the liberties and barriers that fall under what could be termed 'artistic license'. Reflecting on this, Ai Weiwei has said: 'I don't care what people think. My work belongs to the people who have

no voice' (2018, p. 88). At the same time, he advocates that: 'It is the duty of an artist to connect himself or herself to social change, to bear responsibility, to be part of the change' (Weiwei 2018, p. 89).

Ai Weiwei is an exiled person himself, but his prominent and profitable international arts career and personality means that any dialogue or creative process he contributes to the public arena quickly becomes subsumed into, and arguably emblematic of, the 'global' representations of migration. However, a recent exhibition Ai Weiwei had in Sydney, opened fierce public debate on the representations of refugee and asylum seekers here in Australia, and the national politics of 'offshoring' persons arriving via boats (see Albert 2018; Barry 2019; Davidson 2018). To this end, the merger of artistic, commentator, and political activist roles that Ai Weiwei's artworks bring to the surface, are potent explorations on how representation is still a critical and challenging issue on both local, national, and global terms.

There is a plethora of prominent work that traverses this uneasy line between artist, documenter, researcher and participant in Australia that seeds our critical thought and reflection on collaborations with asylum seekers. For example, the indigenous Australian artist Vernon Ah Kee's recent work *The Island* (2018), a three-channel video installation narrates the lived experiences of two refugees who struggle with incarceration in Australia's asylum seeker offshore detention centres. Ah Kee's 2010 video work, *Tall Man*, which brings together news footage, mobile phone video shot by community members, and video extracts from police officer's body cameras, depicts the story of the infamous Palm Island riots in Australia, in which a police station was set alight in response to a death in custody of a young indigenous person. Ah Kee's skilful crafting and editing of the footage collates and combines the various forms of recordings into a new narrative of the situation, in which the different viewpoints (of community members, the police officers involved, and the Australian media), are brought together to re-tell the story. 'The footage is raw, out-of-focus and jerky, signalling the chaotic confusion and profound urgency of the event' (McDowell 2018). Split across four large projections, the *Tall Man* artwork moves between chaotic, shaky video that is difficult to discern what is occurring, to moments of clarity in which community members give public talks and calls to action.

Unlike Ai Weiwei's smooth camera footage, long aerial shots, and slow pans of the landscape, Ah Kee's *Tall Man* and *The Island* bring together narratives of individuals through more experimental, confronting editing decisions in their depiction of events. While these two examples of artistic use of video, by Ai Weiwei and Vernon Ah Kee, both narrate specific instances of migration, what is of interest, in our study, is how they theoretically utilise video editing as a powerful representational tool to re-tell stories of refugee and migrant experiences. Through the merging of artistic agency, mixture of video materials and sources, and the choice of display and dissemination (for instance, as a documentary 'film' screened in cinemas, or a video artwork on display in a public gallery), the ethical decisions about what to include, which perspective to take, and how to, as a creative process re-tell and represent such instances, become the questions at hand.

What is missing, however, in these artworks is the capacity of exiled bodies of asylum seekers to lead and shape the process of video storytelling and performance. In Darwin, Michele had the opportunity to see an exhibition of these artworks at the 'Rights on Show', the annual Human Rights Art Award and Exhibition that includes entries from asylum seeker detainees who are unnamed. More recently, Behrouz Boochani, a Kurdish-Iranian incarcerated in Manus Island under Australia's offshore detention policy collaborated with Arash Kamali Sarvestani to produce a documentary film titled *Chauka, please tell us the time* (2017). The film clandestinely produced through videos taken by a mobile phone and shared by Whatsapp focus on dehumanisation and brutality symbolised by high security fences, but also the hope for freedom expressed through shots of beaches, birds and butterflies (Doherty, 2017). In 2018, Boochani collaborated with artist Hoda Afshar to create the video artwork *Remain*, which is a stylised performance recorded on the shores of Manus. The video merges narratives, song, and performance as Boochani and fellow asylum seekers depict their sensory experiences of waiting on the island, as they are seen moving through the dense vegetation and across the sandy beachfronts. Similar to *Chauka*, *Remain* merges self-directed video documentation, performance, and narratives into a creative depiction of their experiences.

At the *Technologies of Bordering Conference* in Melbourne, July 2019, we had the opportunity to see and listen to the creative writer and film-maker Behrouz Boochani (2018), following the publication of his award-winning autobiography *No Friend but the Mountains: Writing from Manus Prison* translated by Omid Tofiaghan. Another recent example is the exhibition at Counihan Gallery, Melbourne, titled *Video Echoes: Waves from the Eastern Mediterranean* curated by Victor Griss, where contemporary video artists from the region emphasised the 'political nature of images' (2019, p. 1) that travel, connect and transform us so that borders can be erased, played with and mocked for their absurdity. Such collaborative work inspires us when we revisit the videos taken by asylum seekers in Darwin who live in community detention on bridging visas. These visas were held by asylum seekers who had arrived by boat before 19 July 2013 and once lived in the carceral spaces of mandatory detention centres at Christmas Island, Airport Lodge and NIDC, Darwin. Community detention did not provide lawful status or the right to work but enabled them to reside in Australia temporarily while their claims for refugee status were processed (Parliament of Australia 2012).

Using digital technologies in Darwin

In this section we situate the city of Darwin and describe how we negotiated participation by asylum seekers who were living in community detention. This discussion is informed by the larger research project that focused on multi-sensory experiences of belonging and engaged approximately 200 participants who were Indigenous or of ethnic-minority background. We discuss the collaborative learning process of editing participant-led videos as a 'caring with' project that aimed to centre the lives of asylum seekers but raised ethical challenges. As an early career researcher and geographer, Michele engaged in a research project that focused on belonging in Darwin that aimed to highlight the experiences of racialised bodies of colour (including Indigenous peoples, ethnic-minority migrants, refugees and asylum seekers). She asked participants (including asylum seekers who are the focus of this article) to use a video camera in public spaces such as beaches, parks, bus stations, shopping centres, community centres as well as streets and express how they felt. Kaya assisted with creatively editing the footage that opened up questions about the

ethics of representation. The insights and reflections from our collaborative work raise questions about representation, agency, and the creative process of using participatory video as researchers.

Darwin, a tropical city in northern Australia is a place that is 'home' to asylum seekers from war-torn countries such as Iraq, Iran, Syria, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. After long overland journeys, risky voyages across the Indian Ocean and months as well as years of trauma in high security onshore or offshore detention centres, young men in particular, continue to be labelled 'illegals', 'queue jumpers', 'financial burdens' and 'potential terrorists' within public discourse. Michele had the opportunity to visit families, young men and single women who lived in detention centres at Airport Lodge, Northern Immigration Detention Centre, Blaydin Point and Wickham Point in Greater Darwin. She shared public space with them when they visited community centres, arts spaces and places of worship. Since they arrived before Australia's offshore detention policy was introduced in 2013, they escaped the dehumanisation of incarceration that continues on islands such as Nauru as well as Manus Island, Papua New Guinea. Michele also had the opportunity to visit asylum seekers living in community detention in lodges, apartments and suburban units. Living on bridging visas, their days were filled with anxious waiting—they often described themselves as 'hostages' held by the Australian nation-state.

With the support of asylum seeker advocacy networks and faith-affiliated social welfare organisations, Michele listened to stories and shared meals with asylum seekers who lived in community detention. It was in public spaces such as beaches/beach reserves where men took daily walks, streets (outside detention centres) where they kept vigil, football ovals where they played sport and community centres where women cooked or sewed, that Michele asked them to use a video camera and talk about their life in a new country. As they walked along the beach, chatted with Michele after a game of football, cooked familiar dishes that reminded them of home and learnt how to sew clothes for themselves or their children, they used a small video camera to express how they felt. It involved preliminary explanations on how to hold and position a simple video camera which had a side screen rather than the more convenient flip screen that enables the participant to view the framed images. While originally not having cameras with an easy to see viewfinder seemed

inconvenient, in practice this was an advantage in exploring textures of public space and complexities of belonging. The camera focused less on what the eye could see and the footage emerged as an expression of embodied experiences of hope in city spaces.

Michele reflected on participation by people of asylum seeker background who were racialised and so vulnerable, but yet invisible within the frame of the image. Could the collection and editing of their video footage of Darwin be justified in the aims of the research project that sought to question discriminatory bordering practices? How might the use of the participant's videos be a vehicle for communicating back to the public, these communities, or individuals themselves, in order to attempt to quell vitriolic debates on national identity and contribute to socio-spatial justice? These questions, and many more, are not uncommon for researchers, who need to rationalise and justify the benefits and impact of the research. While white gatekeepers in Darwin made Michele aware of the dangers of appropriating and extracting knowledge from Indigenous communities who participated in the project, encounters with asylum seekers were facilitated through asylum seeker advocacy networks, government organisations, NGOs, faith institutions, arts as well as social welfare organisations with whom Michele had developed relations of trust over 3 years.

Witnessing as well as participating in weekly events of cooking, sewing, art, football matches and vigils for those in detention or who had passed away, Michele, was the privileged researcher but made herself vulnerable by sharing emotional stories as a racialised first-generation ethnic-minority Australian woman of Indian heritage. As an academic she exercised power through this subjectivity, but it was the common ground of racialised experiences and her dependence on them for the successful completion of the project that forged collaborations across difference. This position of differentiated as well as 'radical vulnerability' has been highlighted as productive in creating a corporeal politics of solidarity by feminist scholars such as Richa Nagar (2014), Judith Butler (2016), Sara Ahmed (2017) and Laura Pulido (2018). This is the solidarity across differences that enabled Michele to engage asylum seekers in video-photography in public spaces at beaches, football ovals and streets outside detention centres.

Caring with: The collaborative process of video editing

What does one do with the videos and where to start? Michele watched the videos several times wondering how to make sense of the visceral nature of these images taken by urban citizens expulsed from the daily vitality of everyday urban life. Thinking with images enabled Michele (Lobo 2018; 2019) to focus on a multiplicity of forces that increase or decrease bodily capacities to affect and be affected; images move bodies to respond (McCormack 2013). Michele engaged in a collaborative process of affective labour with a team of researchers committed to using film as a medium to bring about social change. She watched these videos in a dark studio room (more than 50 hours of footage watched several times) with Madeline Wilmot, an undergraduate film studies student. Madeline collated and edited all the videos over 2 years to produce high definition 1-hr documentary style films of events that unfolded in public spaces such as afternoon walks along the beach, vigils on the street outside the detention centre and football matches at a suburban oval. As the project unfolded the video editing of shorter 15-minute films, 5-minute films and/or video artworks were done by experienced researchers/doctoral students, Kaya Barry, David Kelly and Johanna Funk who used their creative skills.

Indigenous, ethnic-minority migrants, refugees and asylum seekers who participated in the larger project had the opportunity to comment on the 1-hour documentary-style videos which were edited in accordance with their feedback. This feedback process was facilitated through representatives from government, Indigenous, faith-affiliated, refugee/asylum seeker advocacy and ethnic minority organisations who supported the project. Michele, however, was not present when those who participated watched the films and provided the feedback. Although this barrier to receiving the feedback directly raises other forms of ethical dilemmas in the communication process, the aim was to give an opportunity to individuals so that they could engage and reflect on the documentary-style videos and have the ability to request edits, removal of sections, and so on. These documentary-style videos in the longer 1-hour format aimed to portray their experiences, capture their stories, and be a product that could easily communicate the research to a general audience. In this manner, these videos were productive in transgressing barriers between researchers, the researched and the broader community that may otherwise not have

occurred without the video component of the research. Asylum seekers emerged as knowledge producers within the academy and beyond, rather than shadow citizenry who haunt the city and are expulsed from the vitality of everyday urban life (Merrifield 2015). Listening to their stories of brutal bordering practices that motivated self-harm, which many of the asylum seekers had gone through, Michele began to think about how asylum seekers could have a stronger voice and be heard from this 'participatory twilight zone' (Merrifield 2015, p. 7).

Following the production of documentary-style videos, Kaya came on board, with her expertise as an artist-researcher with specialist video skills. We decided to engage with the original video footage in a more experimental editing process of thinking-feeling-doing. Our collaborative editing process involved lengthy conversations and the exchange of ideas attentive to the multi-sensory textures, atmospheres and material infrastructures (for example, roads, beaches, ovals, and other public spaces) of the city. The outcome was a series of short 5-minute video artworks. These video artworks were mixes of visuals and sounds that foregrounded ambience, human sounds, or more-than-human sounds of landscape, birds and weather. Through long discussions and Kaya's creative video skills, the technical process of editing was experimental and incorporated affects that we each identified through sound, motion and visuals. Thematically, we wanted to explore how the materiality of public spaces (road, beach and oval) manifested through the recorded videos of participants. Some were more convivial, others sombre, as the videos were of various places and situations such as walk-alongs at Casuarina beach with Salman, a young man from Myanmar (Figures 1 and 2); a vigil for Reza Berati (who died in detention in Manus Island) along the road outside the detention centre taken by Mansour from Iran (Figure 3); and a football match at Bagot Park where Arun and Mahinder (asylum seekers from Sri Lanka) played every week (Figure 4).

Figure 1: The beach—A moment of pause during the walk-along with Salman. Video still courtesy of the Authors.

Figure 2: Casuarina beach—Mangroves, sand, sun and a sacred offshore reef captured along the walk with Salman. Video still courtesy of the Authors.

Figure 3: The road outside the detention centre: slow yet shaky handheld video at the Vigil for Reza Berati who died in Manus Island, Papua New Guinea by Mansour. Video still courtesy of the Authors.

Figure 4: Bagot football oval: Arun and Mahinder play football and chat under a shady tree. Video still courtesy of the Authors.

Figure 5: Oval–beach–road: Merging place and experience through juxtapositions.
Video still courtesy of the Authors.

We decided to juxtapose the images, by splitting the screen horizontally and vertically, and putting the videos side-by-side (Figure 5). We played around with enhancing these juxtapositions through varying the thickness of the frames in the videos or altering how the videos were split (for example, a half-half divide, Figure 4, or a third-two thirds division, Figure 3). These editing decisions, by pairing visuals with the movement occurring on screen created new kinds of lines in the videos. They also brought together, in sometimes jarring or unexpected ways, different places or views of the various participants who had taken the original video footage. Although these small black frames that can be seen in the still images (Figures 2-5) might be seen as a type of 'border', when the videos are played, and the visuals are seen in-motion, the effect is less of a border or container, and more of a comparison or contrast between spaces and places. Although we were cautious in exploring our lines of inquiry through creative editing processes, we also retained our agency as artist-researchers. In a sense, every editing decision was imbued with power, but it was ethical responsibility that also regulated our agency in the process and retained the agency of participants who did the original video recordings. It

was more than an act of borrowing the footage and remixing videos to create something that was aesthetically pleasing. Rather, it was 'the act of appropriating and labelling it as 'art' [that] transforms the viewer's relationships and understanding' (Barry 2019, p. 209). Herein lies the ethical dilemma that is brought to the surface when using creative techniques, and especially audio-visual material that was captured by someone else. These ideas of ownership and authorship, of telling stories accurately, which, at times, rub up against our own tendencies to experiment with practices of aesthetics and attunement of our responses and emotional connections to the videos, became a recurring concern in our editing process. The overarching goal was to use these participatory videos to transform narratives, through creative processes, that could be capable of driving social change in a political context where asylum seekers are constructed in images and media as unwelcome 'others' (Bleiker et al 2013). This is how we negotiated the ethical dilemma that surfaces when using creative techniques to edit audio-visual material by racialised and vulnerable participants.

In addition, Kaya edited the majority of creative videos primarily through the audio first paying attention more to how the action was captured through the sounds, such as the ambient noises, the chatter of birds and people, the hum of car engines driving past, the rocking motion of the breaking waves on the shore, or the wind buffering against the microphone. The blending of these audio-visuals, in this way that is not entirely representational, seek to push past any kind of previously imposed borders (public/private space, individual/collective groups, and so on). In this manner, these montages, juxtapositions, fades, and turbulent motions open up ways to move across spatio-temporal borders and instead evoke in-situ forms of attunement to the individual's experience who took the video footage.

In the editing process we decided that Kaya would cut the video by focusing on particular voices and ambient sounds, rather than seeking to maintain a steady framing in a visual sense. We listened to the sounds of the wind, the birds or the sea, to show how self/other, white/non-white, citizen/asylum seeker, life/non-life, human/nonhuman, material/symbolic borders were transgressed. We mixed their images with videos take by ethnic-minority migrants and refugees to produce a 15-minute compilation of affective space-

times. It was more difficult, however, to get feedback on these artistic montages from asylum seekers because they were produced at a much later stage in the project when fieldwork had been completed. These 2-minute artworks compiled into a15-minute video montage were screened at a creative event that engaged stakeholders and participants at Charles Darwin University, Darwin. The asylum seekers who recorded the participatory videos were personally invited but were not present at this event. It is likely that they did not feel welcome in this space or had other pressing responsibilities. If there were asylum seekers present at this gathering, this fixed subjectivity that guided Michele's selection of them as participants was an unconscious bordering practice that was transgressed. Our editing decisions, however, failed to capture the turbulent forces that exceeded the frame, contributed to their daily exhaustion and moved them to cry out for justice.

We began to experiment with the vortex as a form of digital activism that could collapse, spin and intervene in neat juxtapositions of affective space-times (Figure 6, and see an excerpt online: https://youtu.be/Ajmzw6oLFT8). Mapping concepts from the natural sciences on to the social sciences is an emerging practice within geography that enables the translation of affective registers that are more-than-representational and therefore difficult to capture (Boyd & Edwardes 2019; Cresswell & Martin 2012; Lobo 2014; Merrifield 2015). The concept of the vortex emerged as an artistic style of feeling and doing that moved us beyond ocular sensibilities that might be privileged in the analysis of images as representations. It also fits within broader scholarly merges of practice and theory around visual methods and the non-representational that has been embraced within creative arts research (Boyd & Edwardes 2019)

Caring with: the video vortex interrupts dehumanising space–times

We use the vortex as a digital technique or another expression of "caring with" that draws attention to the turbulent dynamics of urban life for asylum seekers who are dehumanised and criminalised but struggle on. Within contemporary research digital activism is enabled through technologies and sharing platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and Whatsapp (Fincher et al 2019). But such forms

of digital citizenship were rarely performed by asylum seekers Michele met in Darwin. A frugal lifestyle (asylum seekers have no work rights), limited credit on mobile phones, weak or no wifi networks meant these technological objects were more likely to be used to maintain connections with friends, family and representatives from social welfare organisations – the posting of photographs and videos on social media sites was not an everyday activity that engaged them. Their videos taken in public spaces using the small camera we shared with them during the project opened a new window of experience into a carceral city and seeded creative thinking on the vortex as a way by which we could highlight and transgress borders.

A vortex draws attention to a 'volatile, intense and centralized dynamics' (Hall & Savage 2015, p. 82) but also the possibilities for disruption and transgression that produce a shifting state of flux and mobility (Cohen & Colebrook 2017; Merrifield 2015). This capacity for transgression was crucial to negotiating the ethical dilemmas we faced in using the vortex as an experimental art practice given the dynamics of swirling winds and watery whirlpools that had affected asylum seekers who had made risky journeys by boat. It was flux and mobility that we had in mind as we swirled the videos taken by asylum seekers and tried to interrupt and reassemble dehumanising space-times. Our videos echoed with romantic yearnings by William Blake (Cohen & Colebrook 2017, p. 129) who used the vortex to express 'something evermore about to be'. For Blake this was a call for a human spirit that surpassed the material limits of the actual earth. For us it was the multiplicity of rigid borders and brutal hierarchies that asylum seekers must surpass: self/other, white/non-white, citizen/stranger, life/non-life, human/nonhuman, material/symbolic, as well as land/sea in 'fortress' nations like Australia with white majority cultures that lured us to using the vortex as an experimental creative practice.

Figure 6: Capturing turbulence in the videos through an audio–visual vortex.
Video still courtesy of the Authors.

To return to our earlier issues and queries of playing with representing the video on-screen, and the problematics of deciding whether to leave the videos on-screen as 'true' representations of the footage (for example, the original footage recorded and unedited), or whether we could be more playful in the manner in which we displayed, mixed, and re-mixed the footage, the notion of a 'vortex' became a way for us to think through these more technical and visual decisions that we were making. Therefore, while these videos with spinning space-times produce a disorienting urban milieu making it hard to follow their meaning and what they show, they animate the vortex through the bodies and worlds of asylum seekers that are absent, yet present through their movements that interrupt dehumanising space-times. Or, could the vortex be an artistic practice of making abstract expressionism concrete, as evident in the paintings of Jackson Pollock highlighted by Merrifield (2013). Reflecting on a painting by Jackson Pollock, titled *No. 32*, Merrifield (2013, p. 921) argues the fusion of two colours: a black canvas and splattered jet-black swirls produces a composition that appears to suck you 'into its spiralling vortex' if you venture too close but also radiates energy through eruptions and explosions. The vortex creates a 'new political space-time' (Merrifield 2013, p. 194) that has no

centre, beginning, middle or end; it is unframed through boundless kinetic energy that emerges from chaotic co-composition.

In this manner, Pollock's Abstract Expressionism paintings, and Merrifield's conceptual scoping of the vortex through analysing Pollock's work, both bring to the surface the complexity of artistic expression, method, and materials. The tensions between representation and creativity are heightened through the notion of the vortex as both a material-corporeal mode of production that opens up alternatives that move beyond representation. One might suggest, it is more-than-representational in that it cannot be configured (or figurative) as a definitive, bordered, expression. Perhaps, following Merrifield (2013, p. 920), the video vortex is a kind of kaleidoscope as well as a 'collideorscape' that enable us to imagine a political reality that focuses on the transgression and fluidity of borders. Cohen and Colebrook (2017, p. 131) echo these thoughts when they describe Blake's vortex: 'the vortex is *both* an infinite force that destroys the myopia and stability of the present *and* or infinite drive that has always imagined itself as self-surpassing'.

The notion of a vortex is not a rigid structure to be adhered to in the creative outputs, to be clear, this is not what we are suggesting. Rather, we came to the notion of the vortex as both a device that moves beyond representative and image-based modes of expression, and instead embraces the ebbs and flows of challenges, concerns, and at times constraints that guide and shape the creative process. The intention from the start was to capture experiences of participants and give them a platform to tell their stories, but in the collaborative process, this is not always easy or straightforward in making the content 'presentable' to various audiences (participants, general public, and scholarly community). It is important that at no point did we want to distort the narratives, and in addition to these more experimental vortex video artworks, Michele maintained and produced documentary style videos with subtitles and transcripts that became a record of the participation and narratives of individuals. However, it shows that creative research that embraces collaboration has an ongoing set of negotiations, experimentations, and at times, compromises, in accepting the multiple versions and visions as people contribute to a project. The vortex in the video artworks that we have discussed here expressed the shape of our hesitant encounters and collaborations—

unsure what would look suitable on screen, but also mindful of being accurate to the sensations that cannot be easily expressed simply through words.

Conclusion: Video echoes

In this article we set out to question how the turn to creative modes of knowledge production do not just bring together researchers, participants and audiences, but also attempt to disrupt the representations of bordering technologies that criminalise and dehumanise asylum seekers. From the context of Australia, the representations of global migration are fuelled by images from the North—refugee and asylum seekers crossing sea and land borders, camped in public squares and places, and housed in detainment and processing centres that are accessible to the public. In Australia, the network of ever shifting 'borders' that segregates asylum seekers are never that clear or easily identified for the lay person—lodges and apartments, even hotels, serve as detainment centres, and the offshoring system of processing means indefinite detention for people who are seeking basic human rights. Boats are intercepted in Australian waters far from the coastline—and only government approved media footage makes it back to shore for public viewing. Therefore, the Australian imaginary of refugee and asylum seekers remains limited, and heavily mediated, with individual narratives and experiences of living in uncertain, turbulent conditions enforced by the Australian government, almost entirely censored and blocked off by media law-driven bordering acts. It is crucial, therefore, that expressions and narratives continue to be articulated in diverse, experimental, and collaborative ways, by researchers, activists, campaigners, and professionals involved directly with people awaiting asylum.

In our ongoing work we continue to think about the ethical dilemmas in the creative and participatory process. We continue to question how creative and participatory aspects might challenge dominant media representations that focus on an aesthetics of breaking waves, annoying surges and dangerous flows. As our examples and collaborative learning experience has shown, our videos that were made by and with consultation with asylum seekers was an embodied as well as sensory experience that aimed to disrupt limiting dominant and mainstream representations; it was more than an intellectual pursuit. Our experience in the Australian context suggests that large, high-profile gallery

and museum exhibits, created by already renowned artists and activists do create publicity and garner media attention—in some ways they also universalise the experiences of refugee and asylum seekers, and cement borders for those already living in detainment, incarceration, and exile in Australia and offshore territories. Although our process was experimental and emergent, collaboration, dialogues, and ongoing exchange between us as researchers, artists, and the participants was crucial but challenging.

The notion of the vortex emerged through the practice-led approach to video production—not as a distortion tool or visual device, but rather as emblematic or attentive responses to the concerns and dilemmas that we faced in the process. Visually, it sets a tone for the murky and turbulent experiences of life in Australia—merging public spaces with private reflection, daylight with shade and darkness, urban with the natural, and paid attention to the sonic, haptic, and unexpected sensations as he participants walked, explored, waited or recounted their experiences. Sometimes this was verbally, other times it was in a shared silence of wandering. The birds, cars, other people, waves, and weight of a sandy footstep on the concrete path merge together into the vortex. At the same time, it is crucial that we remember the agency we have as researchers and artists. While in some moments no singular visual can capture the affective puncture of the situation, addressing what kinds of attentions and representations manifest in the creative process is always crucial and needs to be reflected upon. As Lisle and Johnson question: 'If migrants are already dehumanized and devalued, what is the point in demonstrating how non-human life-worlds constitute even the most precarious and degraded spaces?' (2018, p. 14). It is at this moment when our personal interests and attentions need to be carefully negotiated in the crafting and production of any kind of creative product.

While the process that we have recounted in this article cannot be seen as a model or template for how future research with persons or communities should unfold, we hope that these reflections offer a nuanced recount of the ethical considerations and encounters that often arise through creative and collaborative research. We also respond to the influences that impress upon us; our own tastes in arts, research, and aesthetics influence how we might want to craft a project, or the execution or style of a particular creative product. This

is important, especially for researchers operating within the spaces of migration, refugee and asylum seekers, to be reflective of dominant aesthetics, visuals and narratives that guide public (and global) representations and, inevitably, seep through into our own personal tastes and ideals of how things should look, feel, and present. Although the risk is that these representations can sometimes erect more barriers, only permitting certain kinds of creative works to be expressed and let through the borders—whether this be exhibition in public galleries, museums, or even in academic reporting—our hope is that our experimental creative research practices in this article is also political in the way it produces alternative views of asylum seeker lives.

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